

THE CLASH OF TWO WORLDS IN DONALD BARTHELME'S *SNOW WHITE*

Alina LEONTE, PhD Candidate, "Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: In this article, we argue that Donald Barthelme's first novel, Snow White, underlines contemporary social problems by placing the well-known characters of fairy-tales in the postmodern consumer society of the sixties. The discrepancy between the two worlds is further emphasized by the general conflict between archaic principles, specifically gender roles, and the contemporary views of the liberated woman of the sixties. Barthelme's narrator is meditative but discontent, and explicitly tempting his readers to become more conscious and cautious about their narrative expectations. He features the dialectic of the ordinary and the extraordinary within the universe of fairytales, bringing to life a Snow White with touches of Rapunzel and Little Red Ridding Hood, but also an emancipated woman, dramatizing thus the clash of the two worlds through the opposition of monotony and excitement, knowledge and confusion, simple and complex, right and wrong.

Keywords: hypertextuality, gender roles, liberated woman, Snow White, parody

In laughter, parody and fantasy, Barthelme both detaches himself from the world and contradicts it, producing marvels of humor and imagination in the process. Skepticism liberates him from the exigencies of the world, whereby this very attitude acquires a positive turn. He makes use of popular tales and legends in order to underline the flaws of society present and past, lost values and outdated stereotypes that still seem to have a hold on the present world of pop culture and consumerism. The use of fairy tales, for example, has provided readers with a great variety of discourses over the past few decades. Although most children nowadays, as well as, much of the adult population, may not be familiar with anything but the Disney versions of such fairy tales as "Snow White", "Rapunzel" or "The Beauty and the Beast", most of us respond to the institutionalized and stereotypical fragments of these narratives, so much so that they become good ammunition for commercials, songs, jokes, cartoons, and other elements of popular and consumer culture.

Fairy tales have also provided a rich reservoir of inspiration and at the same time a rather diverse range of characters and situations for creative writers, supplying them with well-known material pliable to political, erotic, or narrative manipulation. As Bacchilega observes, fairy tales are used to achieve a great variety of social aspects in a multitude of contexts and in somewhat ideological means. One cannot view fairy tales as just part of children's literature, or of childhood, as that would very much limit its potential for growth, its multiple purposes and connotations. The fairy tale "cannot be defined one-dimensionally [...] adults have always read, censored, approved, and distributed the so-called fairy tales for children" (Bacchilega, 3). Made for, and read by, children, fairy tales offer great possibilities and examples of ordinary characters that manage to surpass their condition and thrive against all odds reaching a happy ending and resolving several issues which some modern-day children might confront. At the same time these particular narratives provide socially suitable restrictions and quite often illustrate the civilizing goals of men and women, as well as their

roles in society, their strengths and weaknesses. Under the disguise of fantasy and make-belief this genre grants writers and readers alike the possibility of a fictional past and social standards, a re-creation of a 'once upon a time' mystical land, which permits its reader to write it off as children's fantasy and just enjoy it as a gift.

When it comes to connections between texts, Gerard Genette proposed the term 'transtextuality' as a more inclusive term than 'intertextuality' (Genette, 2). He divides it into five subtypes, namely, *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, *hypertextuality* and *architextuality*. We might identify in Barthelme's work the presence of "architextuality," related to "the reader's expectations, and thus their reception of the work" (Genette, 5). The architextual character of texts also incorporates thematic and figurative anticipations as regards to the texts. Genette's fourth subdivision, "hypertextuality," which deals with the relation between a text and a preceding 'hypotext' namely a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends, is also evident in Barthelme's *Snow White*. As Genette notes, Barthelme's texts are not just reproductions of old stories but rather their transformation, even extension, what is generally referred to as parody. According to Genette, all texts are hypertextual but occasionally the presence of a hypotext is too vague to be the foundation for hypertextual interpretation. For this reason, Genette warns the reader that a hypertext can be studied either for its own individual significance or in connection to its hypotext. Barthelme's characters are plucked from their familiar environment of fairy tales land and transported to a fresh new set of modern-day society, causing them to adapt to a new law order of things, creating thus amusing turn of events, and underlining at the same time the obsolete nature of old principles and values in a world of modern thinking and expectations.

According to Cristina Bacchilega though the known versions of *Snow White* vary a great deal in details and themes, the structure has stayed the same, and perhaps that is why it has gained a place in our collective memories to this day. Its fundamental themes throughout time have also been kept in all of the diverse interpretations, namely female development and female envy (Bacchilega, 31). She further notes the different ways in which *Snow White* has been interpreted by various authors through the passing of time, for instance Bruno Bettelheim who sees in *Snow White* the daughter's triumphant resolution of the oedipal conflict (31). She further provides the examples of N.J. Girardot, who focuses on the ritual and sacrificial structure of initiation *Snow White* must endure in an effort to rejoin her society as an adult, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who underline the limitations that patriarchal visuals such as the "angel-woman" (*Snow White*) and the "monster-woman" (the Queen) put on female characters' and women readers' potential (31). In a reasonable synthesis based on substantial comparative research, Steve Swann Jones concludes that *Snow White* is "a metaphoric representation of the types of problems a young woman is likely to encounter", while Shuli Barzilai reads *Snow White* as the story of "a mother who cannot grow up and a daughter who must" (in Bacchilega, 31).

Donald Barthelme's adaptation of *Snow White* does not entail resolution of conflict or any type of insight into the mind of a young woman on the path to adulthood. In fact his novel might be viewed as an attempt to break free of any social frame of values and expectations as his narrator, pensive but discontent, constantly hints for the readers' benefit, that one should become more conscious and cautious as far as narrative expectations are concerned. Barthelme features the dialectic of the ordinary and the extraordinary within the

universe of fairytales, and brings to life a mature and modern version of the classical Snow White, nevertheless still in contact with her fairytale past, evident in some of her behavior, making metatextual allusions to *Rapunzel* and *Little Red Ridding Hood*. By placing its well-known character on the stage of the contemporary world of America, Barthelme parodies the traditional story by use of incongruity, at the same time making the characters very much aware of their out of place status.

Barthelme dramatizes the conflict between the two worlds through the opposition of monotony and excitement, the quotidian and the visionary, calmness and interference, knowledge and confusion, the simple and the complex, the right and the wrong. These oppositions are present in all of the characters, preventing them from achieving an individual psychic self and placing them on a more general thematic level. The layout of the novel is not dominated by the linear experience of characters but by an extraordinary event, namely the arrival of Snow White in the life of the seven dwarfs. This event turned everybody's world upside-down as it removed all familiarity and pushed everybody, including Snow White, to adapt to the given circumstances of the situation. The adjustment, or lack of it, shapes the "plot" which becomes a whole, following the already established outline of the fairy tale.

Before we found Snow White wandering in the forest we lived lives stuffed with equanimity [...]

We were simple bourgeois. We knew what to do [...]

Now we do not know what to do. Snow White has added a dimension of confusion and misery to our lives. Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity. We circle it wearily. (*Snow White*, 87-88)

Snow White's arrival brought about a spark of mystery, complexity, and at the same time 'misery' as the dwarfs are now confronted with the unknown, with a new future that is no longer the same old boring existence with which they had grown accustomed. The event is viewed more or less as a disturbance of the natural order of things, both in the hypotext and in the hypertext. A first distinction between the hypotext and the hypertext might be observed in the general development of the dwarfs. Originally they were portrayed as isolated individuals, pure of heart, working in a mine, something that represented for them joy and satisfaction, a satisfaction greater than anything else. Barthelme's dwarfs seem to share some of their hypotext counterparts' passion for work, prior to the arrival of Snow White, but generally speaking they are the representatives of a simple mundane existence surrounded by monotony, the kind that is felt every day by the 'simple' worker of the sixties. While they are preoccupied with the success of their jobs, they are also interested in women, or in this case woman, from a physical point of view, and are even perplexed as to what women really want, in an attempt to satisfy that need. While in the hypotext they had no interest in women in general, be it as sexual objects or simple house-maids, in Barthelme's version, the seven little men are more in touch with the 'man' aspect of their character. In the original story the beautiful and pure Snow White managed to change the lives of the dwarfs by essentially taking care of them, from bathing to cleaning and cooking. In the hypertext, Snow White, while maintaining her original role of keeper of the house, takes on the bathing and cleaning

attributes of her role to new heights, as the shower becomes a place for more than just cleaning.

There is a sentiment of absurdity of life present in Barthelme's texts, a result of the unlikely combination of denial, recognition, and conformity, together with the abstract division of intricacy and plainness. The break between mixed elements and various forms of language make possible a multitude of viewpoints which include irony and parody, and allow for the presence of uncertainty. Barthelme's characters are living in a constant state of uncertainty as they no longer have literary pointers on what to do and how to act, struggling with their past roles of heroes and their current roles of nobodies. By making use of his favorite technique, collage, Barthelme manages to break down the narrative's transparent unity in a number of ways. There is no linear course of the events, but as Bacchilega notices, we can see that *Snow White* has three parts, perhaps reproducing on a narrative plane the "three-fold nature and three-part initiation process (separation, liminality, and aggregation)" (Bacchilega, 42).

The first part of the novel ends in a self-parodying questionnaire which offers no real direction but gives however the impression one might actually be interested in the reader's opinion providing the illusion that we are to some extent involved in the making of the story. At the end of the second part, dissatisfied with the world in general, Snow White is once more hanging her now longer beautiful hair out the window, as she was seen at the beginning. She is making herself part of another fairy tale, Rapunzel, given that her own story seems not to be working for her, letting the reader know that fairy tales no longer apply, that is if they ever did, to the world we are now living in, as there is no such thing as prince charming, happy ending or happily ever after. She feels the world has failed her and her fairy tale by not being able to provide her with a prince and thus with a happy ending. The final part provides no clear ending, but rather a list of possible ones, mocking any prospect of a conclusion. In a parodic reversal of traditional endings, Barthelme leaves the possibility for the readers to choose the ending they see fit, be it happy, sad or nonexistent, refusing thus to fulfill the traditional role of a classical fairy tale.

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE
 REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE
 APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE
 SNOW WHITE RISES TO THE SKY
 THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF
 A NEW PRINCIPLE
 HEIGH-HO

(*Snow White*, 181)

While there is clear evidence of transtextuality, namely hypertextuality, even from the title of the novel itself, the story does not have much in common with the classical tale it references. Barthelme alters much of the story as he parodies the modern woman of the sixties and the principles once held high by society. Barthelme preserves some of the old features of the hypotext, as Snow White is still named Snow White, and she resides with seven dwarfs while she awaits her prince charming to come to the rescue. However the story deviates from the original and brings to life the plight of the woman of the sixties,

her loss of identity and rejection of socially imposed duties and attributes. The narrative and mimetic unity of *Snow White* is fragmented into multiple voices which almost never interconnect. Despite Bill's and Paul's ultimate sacrifice, there is no real happy ending, or any recognizable ending at all. It is rather challenging to find a narrative or psychological development given that nothing much really happens, as the language of comic books, politics, technology and slang gives life to images and substitutes the narrative of action.

Barthelme places great emphasis on one detail of the traditional tale, namely, the heroine's residence with the dwarfs. He adds to the traditional cooking and cleaning activities present in the hypotext, an explicit and primary element of sexual nature. In accordance to her role of liberated woman, Snow White thus is versed in all the arts of modern womanhood, and this, given the times, must include that of intercourse. Nevertheless, this type of interaction between male and female characters that is not present in the hypotext, is taken to the extreme in Barthelme's version. While in the past there was a greater value placed on the element of love and the waiting for a soul mate, the hypertext seems to ignore the matter completely and focus solely on the physical aspect of human interaction. Perhaps this is the reason why Snow White is discontent of her interactions with the male actors in her play, as while she might care for them on some level she fails to connect with them on the spiritual one. This connection once the key to happiness is the one that prevents her perhaps to reach pure joy and fulfillment. No longer the innocent and subservient chaste girl of the hypotext, Barthelme's Snow White is capable and has in the past satisfied the needs of the dwarfs on numerous occasions. Nevertheless she eventually becomes discontented of her situation or status, parodying in a way the 'never-satisfied' character of women in general. She no longer finds any pleasure in her relations with the dwarfs and desires new lines for her role. Lines which if not provided by society or life in general, she chooses to provide herself.

Snow White is not the only character to break away from the hypotext stance, as we have mentioned the dwarfs themselves are no longer miners but rather alienated bourgeois who work in the city, washing buildings and making Chinese baby food. While their hypotext versions were preoccupied with Snow White's safety, quite aware of her naïve and innocent nature, the new versions of the dwarfs are more concerned with pleasing Snow White, on more than just the physical level. They are the representatives of male figures in the sixties, confused in a way by the rebellion of women for independence and equal rights, perplexed as to why women are unsatisfied by that which they already possess, and intrigued at the same time as to how they might remedy the situation and still maintain their dignity and power.

All of the characters seem to be in a constant struggle with their roles and their purpose in the story. While the dwarfs are more concerned with women passing under their feet like little targets to be struck by their metaphorical arrows, Jane, the evil queen is in love and reminiscent of the days she was "the fairest of them all." She is aware however that she is not fair anymore and the only thing left for her is to cultivate her 'malice.' While very much aware of their traditional roles or heroes and villains the characters seem to have understood that modern society is not place for fairy tale figures. The once valiant prince charming, also aware of his princely duties, is depressed and conscious of his inability to fulfill the role others, including Snow White, are expecting of him. Paul,

Barthelme's prince figure, is an unemployed poet and rather confused as to his role in this new version of the story.

SHE is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down. (*Snow White*, 3)

Snow White's beauty, which in the hypotext is a sign of inner attributes and kindness, is referenced here so literally that virtually any symbolism is lost. Her black hair and moles are defined as literal landmarks of her beauty, and shortly after Barthelme provides us with a graphic illustration of those beauty spots on the same page. And the merely suggested activity of going "up and down her body" (*Snow White*, 9) turns the human spots in some sort of landmarks of a place to be visited which naturally dehumanize her. It is somewhat unclear whether the beauty spots are what make Snow White beautiful or if they are 'beauty' spots simply because they are part of the "tall dark beauty." What is more their location on her body is indicative of known erogenous zones providing thus a sort of map to guaranteed pleasure, only logic given one of Snow White's roles is to provide, and not necessarily receive, physical pleasure. Barthelme manages to transform Snow White through this rather literal description of her beauty into an object, rather than a narrative re-production of *Snow White*, therefore being able to provide his novel with a new framework, mirroring from afar some of the traditional elements we as readers are familiar with. This objectification of Snow White, traditionally achieved through the mirror element, is further evident in the detached analysis of one of the dwarfs:

Now, what do we apprehend when we apprehend Snow White? We apprehend, first, two three-quarter-scale breasts floating towards us wrapped, typically, in a red towel. Or, if we are apprehending her from the other direction, we apprehend a beautiful snow-white arse floating away from us in a red towel. Now I ask you: What, in these two quite distinct apprehensions, is the constant? The factor that remains the same? Why, quite simply, the red towel. I submit that, rightly understood, the problem of Snow White has to do at its center with nothing else but *red towels*.... We can easily dispense with the slippery and untrustworthy and expensive effluvia that is Snow White, and cleave instead to the towel.

(*Snow White*, 100-101)

Through this parody of identification with *Little Red Riding Hood*, Dan sees Snow White, in her entirety, as a red towel which can be owned and possessed as one pleases. She is reduced to a pair of breasts and a 'snow-white arse' wrapped nicely, like a present, in a red, color of passion and violence, towel. This sort of crude analysis is indicative of male mentality at the time, as even these originally pure of heart little men, are more focused on the physical pleasure a woman's body can provide as oppose to her personal desires. Yet another this time more direct sexual objectification is provided in Chang's reply: "I don't want a ratty old towel. I want the beautiful snow-white arse itself!" (*Snow White*, 101). The analysis the dwarfs provide is indicative of the loss of innocence, or righteousness, once

encountered in the traditional version of the fairy tale where the seven dwarfs were the protectors of good and fighters of evil. While once righteous they have now transformed into small chauvinist men following the concept of the woman as an object to be used and 'apprehended' as one pleases. Barthelme's use of 'snow-white' as both subject and attribute provides additional emphasis on the devaluation of the characters, later on further highlighted by the evaluation of yet another dwarf, who associates Snow White with a shower, for their sexual activities occur in the shower.

What Barthelme parodies here is the relationship between men and women in the seventies, as even though they might consider themselves free and desire equality among sexes men will eventually come to see them as sexual objects to be conquered and possessed. Snow White is therefore seen as a sexual object, no longer the pure and innocent figure reflected in the magic mirror of the hypotext. Still maintaining some of her traditional value, mostly of housekeeper, Barthelme alters her personality to better reflect the woman of the sixties, liberated from a sexual point of view, for the most part dissatisfied with her role and in search of a new identity. She is valued by the seven dwarfs for their sexual encounters, reduced to a sluttish version of her predecessor. Nevertheless she feels at times ashamed of her liberated character and voices her concerns regarding her "reputation," only to be disappointed that "No one cares." This shame she might be experiencing is her connection with the old values and principle of the past, the stereotypical view of the pure and chaste woman, waiting for a prince to come and introduce her to the world of adulthood and romantic pleasure, and most likely to a home where she could cook and clean and raise the children. Given that the novel was published in the late sixties, 1967, subsequent to the women liberation movement of the early sixties, Barthelme was quite aware of the women's desire to be free of man's ruling, to be considered equals and have the right over their own bodies and their income. As Alice Echols notes in her study *Nothing Distant About It*, women were no longer interested in being valued like livestock on account of their looks and even protested against beauty contests that place such value on the female body as opposed to her mind (Echols, 149).

Although Barthelme provides Snow White with the necessary materials to re-educate herself, she seems to be still attached to her traditional role of 'innocent' victimized heroine. Perhaps this reflects the author's own opinion that even though women claim to want equality and independence deep down they still rely on a savior in the shape of a man, on the hero they believe will come to their rescue. As Snow White hangs her beautiful dark hair out of the window, she mirrors yet another imprisoned sister *Rapunzel*, left to hope that society will provide her with a prince capable and willing of climbing it. During her stay Snow White comes to wonder: "Is there a Paul, or have I only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui and pain?" (*Snow White*, 102). Her dilemma might contain the problem of what we might call inadequate expectations in real life, based on obsolete standards and outdated values of women's stereotypical desires in life as well as marital expectations. She has come to question the existence of a prince, as based on her knowledge of fairy tales and their idealized environment of good always prevails and success and happiness are directly correlated with kindness and proper behavior, given that she is the heroine of the story she should be provided with a prince. Nevertheless, as she herself considers the possibility, this prince she has been pre-set to wait for might not exist in reality, and might be in fact just a

projection of her desires. In this way Barthelme parodies the expectation (here literally) some women have for a perfect man, the real life version of the fairy tale prince. But just as Snow White comes to realize, waiting for love to come usually amounts to nothing but the wait. “Have I been trained in the finest graces and arts all my life for nothing but this?” (*Snow White*, 108)

Through her act Barthelme stirs rather intriguing reflections on life from some of the male characters, as the mini sections on the reaction and even lack of reaction to the act, reflect popular forms of analysis at the time of the writing mostly of young intellectuals. As Bill seems to be aware of the possible explanation of the act and the “sexual meaning of the hair itself, on which Wurst has written” (*Snow White*, 92), we come to translate this ‘German philosopher’ Wurst to its English vernacular word for the male genitalia of Sausage. Her act is then reduced to nothing more than a desire for a new lover, a means of sexually enticing the other men of the story, aside from the ones she had already bedded.

Another dwarf, Dan, does not discuss the hair directly in his speech within the section “Lack of reaction to the hair,” although the prospect of revealing its significance continues to be a concern (*Snow White*, 96). He commences by citing another German philosopher, this time the mark of a popular speaker brand during the sixties: “You know, Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the ‘blanketing’ effect of ordinary language, referring as I recall to the part that sort of, you know, ‘fills in’ between the other parts” (*Snow White*, 96). To his opinion the focus should not be placed on the obvious symbol of the hair but rather the flood of language “stuffing” that has overwhelmed it as a symbol. As he notes, “The ‘endless’ aspect of ‘stuffing’ is that it goes on and on [...] and I can’t help thinking that this downwardness is valuable, although it’s hard to say just how, right at the moment” (*Snow White*, 97).

In the end Dan comes to the conclusion that we cannot deal with stuffing therefore we must come to accept it and believe there must be some significance to it even though not immediately apparent. Coming from this stuffing of language Dan concludes with “the per-capita production of trash in this country” (*Snow White*, 97), deducing that trash must in turn be reconsidered as valuable, as possessing “qualities.” Dan seems to be advocating that any endeavor to interpret the hair as a conventional sign, be it sex, femininity or desire, is useless as language has a tendency to change rather than maintain its original qualities. He makes here clear reference to the failure of language in the postmodern world, the uselessness of traditional interpretation of a text that belongs to an era of inconsistencies and transformation. Barthelme’s consideration for language as trash is evident in “After Joyce” where he sees Beckett’s method of “combinations of all words in all languages,” as a “celebration of life” (*Not Knowing*, 9). The novel itself can be used as proof for the ability of trash to be reborn into something of value if we are to interpret *Snow White* as a humorous mishmash of cultural trash from fairy tales, newspaper headlines to commercial advertising. This presence of trash as culture is representative of the time the novel was written and the general mentality of the younger generation of the time, willing to accept such trash as magazines and advertisements as a form of literary art and expression.

Becoming aware of the limited literary lines in which she has been placed, perhaps even those of on-line hit commercials, Snow White decides to produce new ones, namely a poem whose beginning is “bandaged and wounded” (*Snow White*, 59) exploring the theme of

loss. The description of the poem alludes to the differences in perception concerning Snow White's character. While the dwarfs see it/her as "a dirty great poem four pages long" (*Snow White*, 10), she sees herself or rather desires to be "free, free, free" (*Snow White*, 10). This difference of interpretation might be read as a reflection of the mentality of the times, as women wanted to be free, to vote, work and even have rights over their bodies, while the male population was still stuck to the evaluation of women from a physical point of view, not considering their intellect and personality. As a new component in their lives, for the dwarfs the poem hints that "something was certainly wrong," whereas for Snow White it is an indication that her own "imagination is stirring" (*Snow White*, 59). She realizes that she does not desire the universe of the dwarfs, that she is "tired of being a horsewife" (*Snow White*, 43), and at the same time that she is angry at the "male domination of the physical world" (*Snow White*, 43) and of language. No longer confined by the male discourse, Snow White finally breaks out of her rigid given role, and expands her complaint past words and language to heterosexuality as procreation, which she compares with a different type of satisfaction.

The ending of the novel provides no concrete conclusion to the story, no traditional happy ending or happily ever after, as the two so-called pre-destined lovers never really come close to being together and the final scene of alleged confrontation between the beautiful Snow White and the evil Jane results in the death of the unemployed prince. The final death scene introduces a rather misogynistic act of protecting of the frail woman, reminiscent of the old role played by Snow White, in this case from alcohol poisoning, once more made literal in Barthelme's ironic turn of events. As we have mentioned, the novel's focus is on the plight of the woman of the sixties still haunted by past stereotypes, faced with pre-determined roles and expectations, struggling to break free but failing to achieve her goal as in the end, most likely out of fear or insecurity, she returns to the safety of the male-guarded imprisonment. In the end Barthelme's novel surrenders to the ironic insight that the text has regularly confronted namely, "what is, is insufficient" (*Snow White*, 135).

Bibliography

Barthelme, Donald. *Snow White*. New York: Atheneum, 1967.

———. *Not-Knowing*. New York: Random House, 1997.

Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Echols, Alice. *Nothing Distant About It*. New York: Harper & Row, 1994.

Genette, Gerard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.