Once Upon a Time… in a land of pain and suffering…

Once upon a time, long before Walt Disney cartoons, long before even the Brothers Grimm—and their Victorian notions of morality—fairy tales bewitched captive audiences across northern Europe. Orally transmitted literature, in the form of folktales and ballads, beguiled young and old alike with haunting visions of a grotesque world. To suggest that this world, fraught with peril and ghouls, differed radically from the everyday of these people, denies, at least in a metaphorical sense, a collective sense of pain in the human experience. Metaphorical and symbolic representations of suffering characterize the earliest forms of northern European folktales. While not all fairy tales arose out of concern for the welfare of children, a genre of developmental tales, designed to instruct adolescent, did gain a particular following. One such story, “Snow White,” circulated in a number of forms throughout Europe. The popularity of the “Snow White” tale suggests its use a model for how a child should best confront terrifying prospect of beginning adulthood.

As such, the “Snow White” story provides a useful framework for careful consideration of how fairy tales employ elements of the grotesque that symbolically mirror the adolescent’s dilemma. “Snow White” further illustrates how a young person cannot perceive, in any retelling that omits these haunting images, recognition of the impediments one encounters while asserting an adult identity. Reading the Grimm “Snow White” provides continuity with the old, folkloric traditions of northern Europe. While not entirely faithful to the “Snow White” of oral condition, the Grimm “Snow White” largely preserves the horrific elements of the tale that frighten children, provoke sparks of bewildered curiosity. Censoring grotesque details from the Grimm “Snow White,” evident in the Disney cartoon musical of 1939, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, delights young people with the portrait of an artificial, pristine world, where the evil queens, scheming in her dungeon of sorcery, appears infrequently in the film. One doesn’t find the witch given the
degree of importance she receives in the Grimm tale. This censoring of horror undermines the moral implications of punishing forces opposed to the hero’s growth.

The process of maturation and discovering a social identity fascinates psychologists concerned with the cultural significance of fairy tales. For instance, Freudian analyst Bruno Bettelheim explores the meanings children take from fairy tales in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*. He suggests that the haunting visions of the Grimm “Snow White” represent a child’s secret wonderings and inner anxieties—the child’s sense of uncertainty in a baffling and often incomprehensible world (Bettelheim 25). When the Disney cartoon glosses over the grotesque—substituting horror with a show tune—a child loses the image of growing up as a painful series of trials. Cartoon happiness deceptively suggests that children will encounter pain and suffering briefly, if at all. The hero’s triumph arises, not from a jarring or crippling trial, but with abrupt introduction of song—taking a child’s mind away from the serious implications of the Grimm tale. Although Snow White strikes as an unwitting heroine, a passive victim of circumstance and her stepmother’s sorcery, she represents the indirect manner in which purity—mirrored in her naïveté—ultimately wins out over cruelty and deception.

Although the Brothers Grimm present this adult world in an unrealistic fashion—in a manner both illusory and unsettling—the immediacy of their tales shocks the reader or listener into attention. For instance, the Grimm “Snow White” opens as the princess’s birth mother pricks her own finger with a needle. The blood she notices on her hand—far from repulsing her—fascinates her. She dreams that one day her daughter will possess an equally captivating blood-red beauty (Zipes 196). Bettelheim suggests that the opening to the Grimm fairy tale, excised from the Disney film, establishes the story’s central preoccupation with “sexual innocence” (Bettelheim 202). Bettelheim perceives in the snow falling outside Snow White’s mother’s window “whiteness,” a purity “contrasted with sexual desire, symbolized by the red blood” (Bettelheim 202). In this
abrupt manner, an uncensored fairy tale subconsciously awakens a child, encourages unexplored imaginative powers, and suggests that blood, envy, and uncertainty prick us all at some point.

Moreover, “Snow White” outlines the struggle of growing up into a mature, socially responsible person. “Snow White” explores “origin, jealousy, expulsion, adoption, renewed jealousy, death, exhibition of corpse, resuscitation” (Oxford 478). These complex themes require the alarming imagery of the Brothers Grimm. However, like most stories from the Brothers Grimm, “Snow White” suffers from a Disney re-visioning in Technicolor—with singing dwarves who “whistle while they work” and a heroine who bakes apple pies. The cartoon dreams up a harmonious setting for children who warm to the idea of little men named “Grumpy” and “Sleepy.”

According to Bettelheim, the title of the Disney cartoon, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” over-emphasizes the dwarves’ particular importance within the larger framework of the tale (Bettelheim 199-200).

Bettelheim further argues that the dwarves’ stunted growth suggests their childlike nature—their inability to grapple with any of the problems that the adult Snow White must necessarily confront. However, where Bettelheim compares the young woman with the little men, he ignores the obvious implications of the Grimm tale. In the older story, the dwarves serve as a foil to the grace and masculinity of Snow White’s future husband, the prince. Clearly, the prince, or phallic-symbol, offers a more alluring prospect to the heroine than her sheltered existence among the dwarves. The dwarves’ home, an asexual representation of domestic security, fails even in this goal when we discover that the little men cannot protect the princess from the queen. The Grimm tale implies that Snow White requires a husband, able to assert his masculinity, to take her away from her troubles.

This denouement raises the central concerns of the Grimm tale’s treatment of socially prescribed roles for men and women—the necessity of reaching sexual maturity and eventually
marriage. Evidently, issues such as parentage, marriage, and childbirth rest outside the dwarves’ sphere of understanding (Bettelheim 200). However, the Brothers Grimm make the dwarves minor figures whose physical appearance contradicts Snow White’s destiny: to transcend childhood, to embrace womanhood and all of the duties it entails. Indeed, the dwarves require Snow White to keep house for them. Even though they pity Snow White, the dwarves force her to enter the working world, a fundamental component of adulthood (Bettelheim 209).

Even with their prescription that she remain indoors and tend to the household chores, the dwarves can’t entirely protect Snow White from the wicked queen. However, the queen’s continual threats to the girl’s life don’t come as much of a surprise. She begins terrorizing Snow White early in the story—commanding her royal huntsman to cut out Snow White’s lungs and liver so she can eat them. Furthermore, in the Grimm version, the queen feasts on what she believes are her stepdaughter’s internal organs, although they really belong to a boar. The Grimm tale embellishes this curious scenario—describing the witchlike queen in detail as she cooks up the boar’s entrails. The queen engages in this ritual because she is “determined to consume her rival’s essence” (Oxford 479)—an element lost in any retelling that depicts the queen neatly storing away the box of intestines. Gruesome scenarios of this nature transport the heroine, with neither her consent nor obvious protestation, from the ease of her girlhood into the cruelty of the outside world. The queen’s attempts to kill Snow White mirror the difficult rites of passage from adolescence into maturity and full socialization, which arise for us all, whether we wish it or not.

Although, these motifs do not speak directly to the modern child, they subtly illustrate that Snow White grows from a young girl—frightened and overwhelmed by the world around her—into a competent woman who loves her work. The heroine’s acceptance of her prescribed role surfaces gradually in the story. Evidently, “it is the years Snow White spends with the dwarves which stand for her times of troubles, of working with her problems, her period of growth"
(Bettelheim 201). Furthermore, Bettelheim accounts for the trials Snow White undergoes as a recapitulation of the “phases of childhood development” (Bettelheim 201). Children find meaning in their own lives when they can identify with a heroine facing a nightmarish set of problems. When Disney glosses over the grotesque, children learn little more than the jingles to popular tunes. In the cartoon adventure, Snow White takes the primrose path, with merry dwarves and friendly forest animals for company. As Disney glosses over the grotesque, children receive a skewed portrait of Snow White—an image concentrated on her beauty and carefree effervescence.

Bruno Bettelheim writes in The Uses of Enchantment, “Contrary to what takes place in many modern children’s stories, in fairy tales evil is as omnipresent as virtue…It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it” (Bettelheim 8-9). “Snow White” contains, like all uncensored fairy tales, disturbing images of the maturation process—replete with all the terrors of society-at-large. In this atmosphere, far from the sheltering palace of the heroine’s childhood, the grotesque reigns supreme—forcing her to accept the responsibilities of womanhood. As such, censored fairy tales lose the moral implications a child gathers from the image of a hero confronting and often prevailing against adversity. A child’s inner questioning is often more complex, and more introspective, than adults care to admit; fairy tales—through their frank treatment of a child’s hidden thoughts—more powerful than we suspect.