



ALEXANDRA RODZANOVSKAYA

NEIL GAIMAN'S

"SNOW,  
GLASS,  
APPLES"

HOW THE "SNOW WHITE"  
FAIRY TALE TURNED  
INTO BLOODY AND GLOOMY  
DARK FANTASY STORY

2020



ISBN 978-5-93883-419-4



9 785938 834194

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**University of Hertfordshire**

Alexandra Rodzanovskaya

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"Snow, Glass, Apples":**

How the "Snow White"  
Fairy Tale Turned into Bloody  
and Gloomy Dark Fantasy Story



Moscow

Publisher A.V. Vorobyev

2020

UDC 82.09:76  
LBC 83.3(0):85.15  
R60



**[www.schola.su/book-alexrodzanov-snow-white-2020](http://www.schola.su/book-alexrodzanov-snow-white-2020)**

Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours)  
13 January 2020

RODZANOVSKAYA A.A.

**R60 Neil Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples": How the "Snow White" Fairy Tale Turned into Bloody and Gloomy Dark Fantasy Story.** Moscow: Publisher A.V. Vorobyev, 2020. — 108 p.

**ISBN 978–5–93883–419–4**

This degree essay, written by Alexandra Rodzanovskaya, University of Hertfordshire's BA (Honours) Illustration student, aims to research Neil Gaiman's story, "Snow, Glass, Apples", where he re-interpreted world well-known fairytale, understand which elements of the original tale prompted him to remake "Snow White" into an adult dark fantasy story and examine the methods by which he achieved it. The essay will also consider the controversial elements of the original tale, try to explain the bases on which Gaiman built a new narrative and explore how he managed to breathe life into the old fairy tale, leaving its familiar origin. Additionally, this essay looks into Colleen Doran's visual adaptation of the story, presented in a form of a graphic novel. To sum up, the author touches a bigger question: why the phenomenon of fairy tales' dark versions yet remains attractive for the audience throughout the ages.

With the assistance of the **Technology Foundation // revolution.ru**

**ISBN 978–5–93883–419–4**

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**Scientific publication**

Signed to the press 24.02.2023. Book format 60x90/16. Sh. 6,75. Circulation 500 экз. Order № 61  
Publisher A.V. Vorobyev. 7720376@mail.ru. Moscow, Profsoyuznaya st., 140–2–36

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# Abstract

Fairy tales have always been not only an integral part of human culture and history but also an inexhaustible source of inspiration for writers, scenarists, directors and other artists. Nowadays, numerous variations of well-known fairy tales appear every year, and the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White" is no exception. One of such version, Neil Gaiman's 1994 "Snow, Mirrors, Apples", repeatedly occurs in various anthologies.

This essay aims to research Gaiman's story, understand which elements of the original tale prompted him to remake "Snow White" into an adult dark fantasy story and examine the methods by which he achieved it. The essay will also consider the controversial elements of the original tale, try to explain the bases on which Gaiman built a new narrative and explore how he managed to breathe life into the old fairy tale, leaving its familiar origin. Furthermore, the essay will focus on three major changes Gaiman contributed in this process and will consider small but key details and clues that connect the new version with the original.

In the end, the essay will conclude with how the fairy tale has turned into a Gothic story and which prerequisites were there for it.

# Introduction

Fairy tales are an integral part any culture's folklore that accompanies a person from childhood to adulthood. These tales last throughout centuries. Fairy tales serve not only as a way to preserve and impart wisdom but also to establish communication. A well-known tradition is when unfamiliar travellers gather around a fire and share stories, building positive relationships and making new acquaintances.

Storytelling is an important element for creating warm and friendly bonds between a child and parent. Through fairy tales, the child gets acquainted with the outside world and people's behaviour patterns. The child also develops imagination, but more importantly, attachment to the parent (or other storyteller) occurs at this time (Killick and Boffey, 2012: pp. 19–33).

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote in 1949 (p. 3), “The history of fairy-stories is probably more complex than the physical history of the human race, and as complex as the history of human language”.

This essay aims to examine Neil Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples" both as a violent and sexual adult-oriented retelling of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale and as a work in the dark fantasy genre. Moreover, this essay will try to determine which elements of the original tale prompted the author to rethink it gloomily and how he transformed an instructive children's story into a chilling work of modern literature.

The first part examines the Brothers Grimm fairy tale itself, its controversial and questionable elements and Gaiman's thoughts on why this folktale intrigued him.

The second part concentrates on the Evil Queen as the central figure and protagonist in the Gaiman story and argues the precariousness of her story.

The third part focuses on Snow White's image as a monster and a vampire, explores the essence of vampires and other supernatural creatures in Gaiman's world and discusses the meaning in the colour scheme Gaiman used to describe the heroine.



The fourth part examines the issue of the tale's sexualisation, including taboo topics and sexual deviations.

The conclusion summarises the research and outlines the methods by which Gaiman turned a children's fairy tale into dark fantasy. It also explains why the Brothers Grimm's "Snow White" is an ideal fairy tale for such a transformation.

For a better understanding of the fairy tale and its interpretations' texts, the essay will be supplemented by illustrations for "Snow White" from various artists throughout the body part. Especially, the accent will be made on Colleen Doran's illustrations from her "Snow, Glass, Apples" work, a graphic novel based on Gaiman's story.

# I. Fairy Tale Reversal and Its Controversial Elements

In “Snow, Glass, Apples”, Neil Gaiman reinterpreted the “Snow White” tale in a limited-edition booklet supporting the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund<sup>1</sup>. In retelling the Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale, Gaiman broke not only the numerous canons of the folklore genre but turned “Snow White” into a much more Gothic, cruel and bloody story. The author himself acknowledged that after re-reading the original tale a hundred times, he decided to think about it “all back to front and wrong way around” (Gaiman, 2009: p. 42). Finally, he compared the resulting text with a viral story that completely changes the audience’s perception of “Snow White”, so they would never treat the original version the same.

Before starting a thorough analysis of “Snow, Glass, Apples”, it is essential to look at the original 1812 Brothers Grimm story in the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* book. The aim is

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<sup>1</sup> The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund defends the US First Amendment rights of comic creators, publishers and retailers. Neil Gaiman not only often writes scripts for comic books and collaborates with comic authors but also often transfers his books and short stories to the graphic novel format.

to understand why this tale attracted Neil Gaiman's attention and why he decided to shift it into a dark fantasy story.

Without any doubt, "Snow White" is one of the most popular fairy tales nowadays (Zeitlin, 2018). "Snow White" touches on such topics as the death of a close relative, the abusive relationship between a parent and a child (albeit adoptive), growing up, avoiding death and good prevailing over evil. However, the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale has many controversial, frightening moments hardly suitable for children. For example, the Queen asks the huntsman not only to kill Snow White in the forest but also to cut out her liver and lungs. Then, "she [the Queen] boiled them in salt, ate them, and thought that she had eaten Little Snow White's lungs and liver" (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: p. 180). This act is a witch's ritual, performed either to "cure" the witch's body, that is, to obtain the victim's youth and beauty, or to enhance magical abilities (Washington, 2012). It is noteworthy that in his works, Gaiman has an interest in addressing the topic of cannibalism as part of witch rituals. In his 1997 fantasy novel *Stardust*, three witch sisters chase a young girl, a fallen star, to cut her heart out and eat it (Figure 1). The heart represents a source of health, youth and beauty (Gaiman and Vess, 1997).

The smallest, oldest, most tangle-headed of the women, rocking back and forth in a rocking chair, said "Might as well."

The first old woman picked up the stoat by the head, and sliced it from neck to groin. Its innards tumbled out onto the cutting board, red and purple and plum-coloured, intestines and vital organs like wet jewels on the dusty wood.

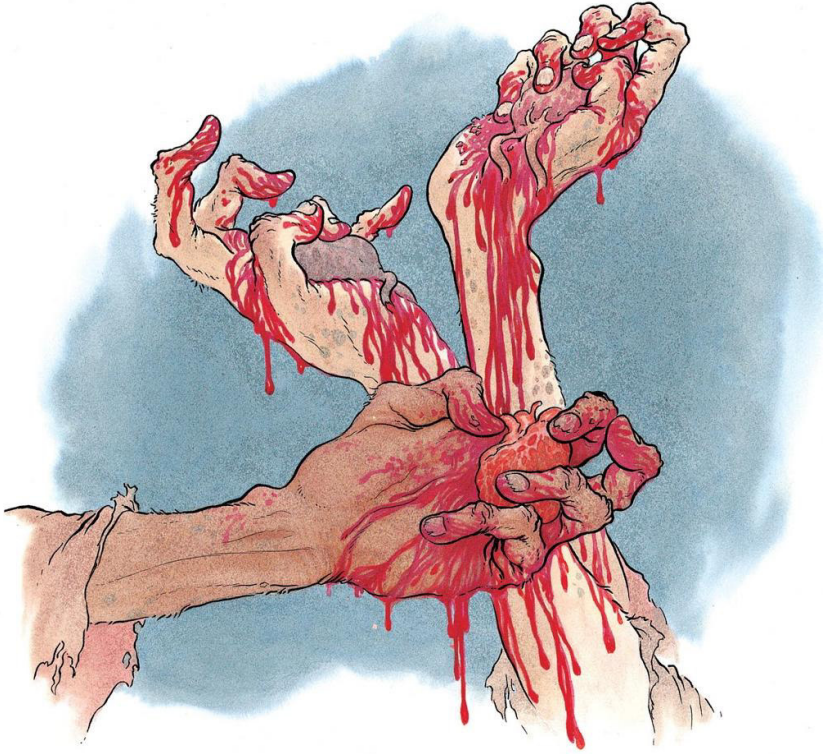
The woman screeched "Come quick! Come quick!" Then she pushed gently at the stoat-guts with her knife, and screeched once more.

The crone in the rocking chair pulled herself to her feet. (In the mirror, a dark woman stretched and rose from her divan.) The last old woman, returning from the outhouse, scurried as fast as she could from the woods. "What?" she said. "What is it?"

(In the mirror, a third young woman rejoined the other two. Her breasts were small and high, and her eyes were dark.)



(Figure 1) Vess, C. (1997–1998). *Stardust: Book 2. Being A Romance Within The Realms Of Faerie*. Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess' *Stardust*. Issue 2, 1998, p. 14.



“Look,” gestured the first old woman, pointing with her knife.

Their eyes were the colourless grey of extreme age – the oldest of them was half blind – and they squinted at the organs on the slab.

“At last,” said one of them, and “About time,” said another.

“Which of us, then, to find it?” asked the third.

The three women closed their eyes, and three old hands stabbed into the stoat-guts on the board.

An old hand opened. “I’ve a kidney.”

“I’ve his liver.”

The third hand opened. It belonged to the oldest of the Lilim. “I’ve his heart,” she said, triumphantly.

(Figure 1) Vess, C. (1997–1998). *Stardust: Book 2. Being A Romance Within The Realms Of Faerie*. Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess’ *Stardust*. Issue 2, 1998, p. 15.

The following elements raise questions in the adult audience related to Snow White's relationship with men. The fairy tale describes Snow White as the most beautiful girl in the world. Moreover, she is the ideal beautiful princess: obedient, calm, economic and passive. Did the huntsman just leave the unbelievably beautiful princess in the forest without taking advantage of her? Snow White's relationship with the seven dwarfs is no less questionable. Did they simply live with a girl whose fate was entirely at their disposal? Did they demand anything in return other than food and a clean house? Vladimir Propp (2009) believes this plot represents polyandry<sup>2</sup>, and also deals with the topic of male initiation, when young men live in a special men's house to study hunting and tribal rites.

Returning to the beauty topic, it is noteworthy that Snow White's exceptional beauty is the factor around which the whole story revolves. Because of Snow White's beauty, her stepmother wants to kill her. Because of Snow's beauty, the huntsman has mercy on her. Because of her beauty, the dwarves help her. Be-

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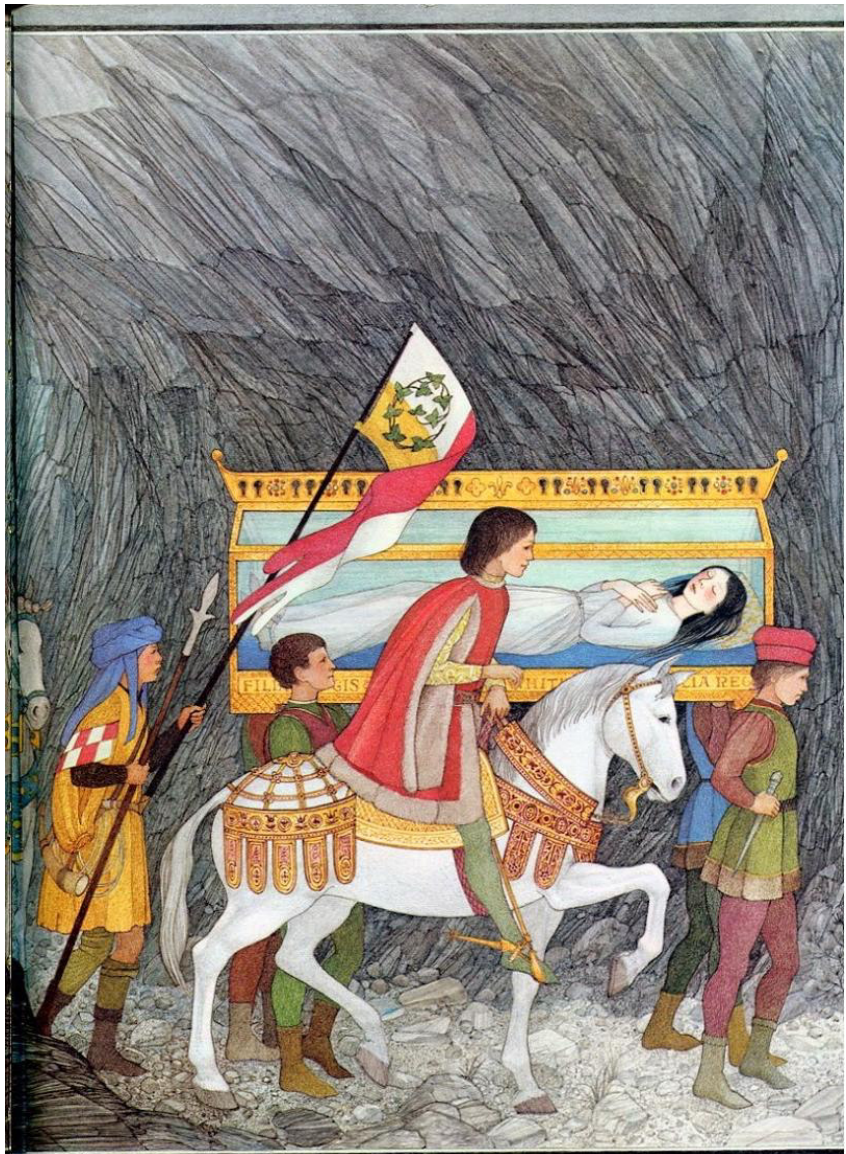
<sup>2</sup> Polyandry is a form of polygamy when woman can officially have two or more husbands at the same time.

cause of Snow White's beauty, the Prince saves her. Because of her beauty, she comes back home and reclaims her throne. On the one hand, this is not surprising. If male characters in world literature become the main characters because of their personalities, women protagonists fall into the epicentre of events purely because of their beauty (Wolf, 2002: pp. 59–61). Naomi Wolf discusses this issue in the example of Tess, the heroine of Thomas Hardy's 1891 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "She was seen and found beautiful, so things happened to her" (Wolf, 2002: p. 61). Yet it is hard to imagine any other folk tale as focused on the importance of main character's appearance; Snow White's beauty enchants people as bad as the Evil Queen's magic. Modern readers may find such an obsession annoying if not alarming.

Mocking logic, the next element concerns the crystal coffin (Figure 2, 3, 4) and the handsome prince. Snow White was not Sleeping Beauty; no one knew about the curse, and everyone considered her dead. But the Prince was so fascinated by the corpse and wanted at all costs to kiss the dead, lifeless body (Figure 5, 6), which for several months lay in the coffin







(Figure 2) Burkert, N.E. (1972). *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



(Figure 3) Heinrich Lefler and Joseph Urban, 1905, *Schneewittchen / Snow White*, part of a fairy tale calendar.



(Figure 4) Alexander Zick, n. d., *Schneewittchen*.



(Figure 5) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.  
(1937). By Walt Disney Productions.



(Figure 6) Gilbert, A.Y. (1951). *Snow White*.

and could already be decomposing. Gaiman himself in a 1999 interview says so about it: “All of a sudden I saw it. There was this moment when I said to myself, ‘What kind of prince sees a corpse in a glass coffin and says, “Oh boy, I’m in love, I’m gonna have her, I’m taking her back home with me.”?’ This is seriously kinky. This is rather depraved”. He also adds what intrigued him about this certain moment in the folktale: “She ages from being a girl to coming into her sexual bloom in the coffin in this old folk story” (Gaiman, 1999).

Among other things, Snow White’s story contains a dense, impassable forest (Figure 7, 8, 9, 10) and a medieval castle. Gloomy castles and abandoned thickets recall “a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear” (Botting, 1996: p. 2), adding even more of a Gothic halo to the story. It is not surprising that such a writer as Gaiman, greedy for the ironic rethinking of widely known fairy tales and myths, decided to work with this story.

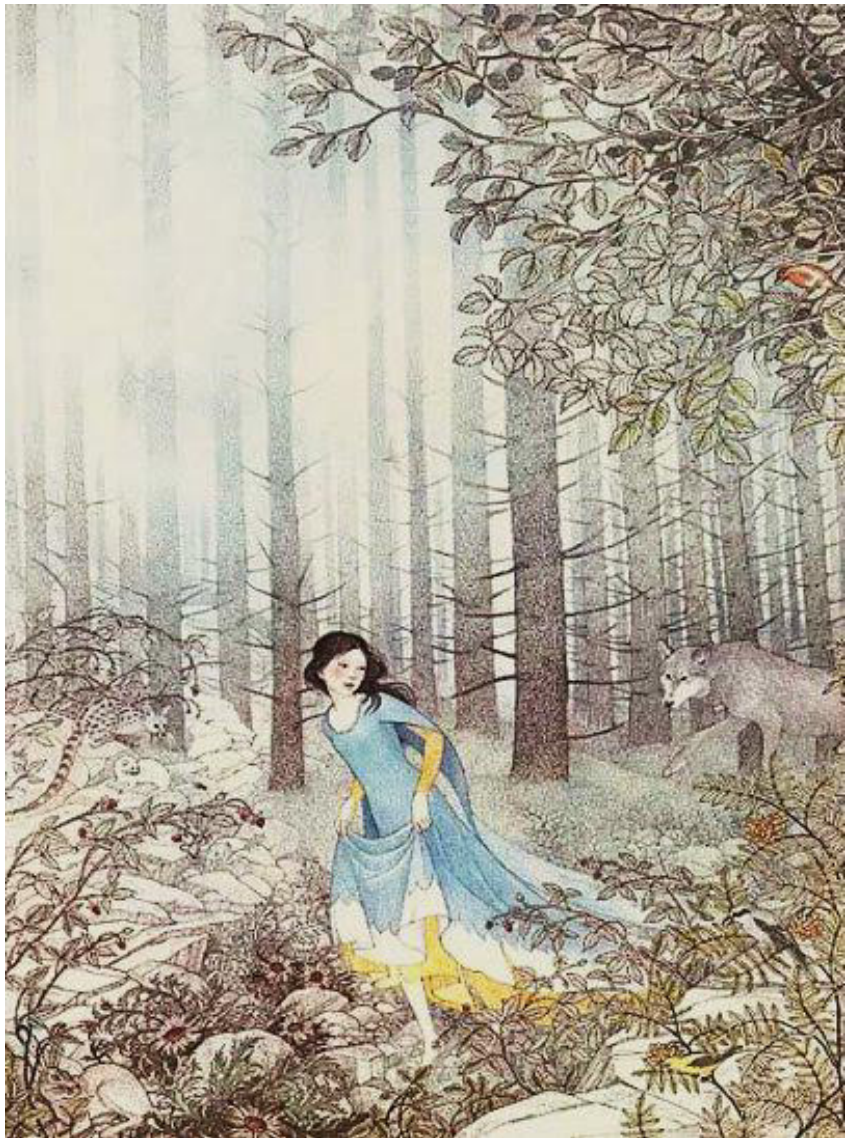


(Figure 7) Schart Hyman, T. (1974). *Snow White By the Brothers Grimm*.

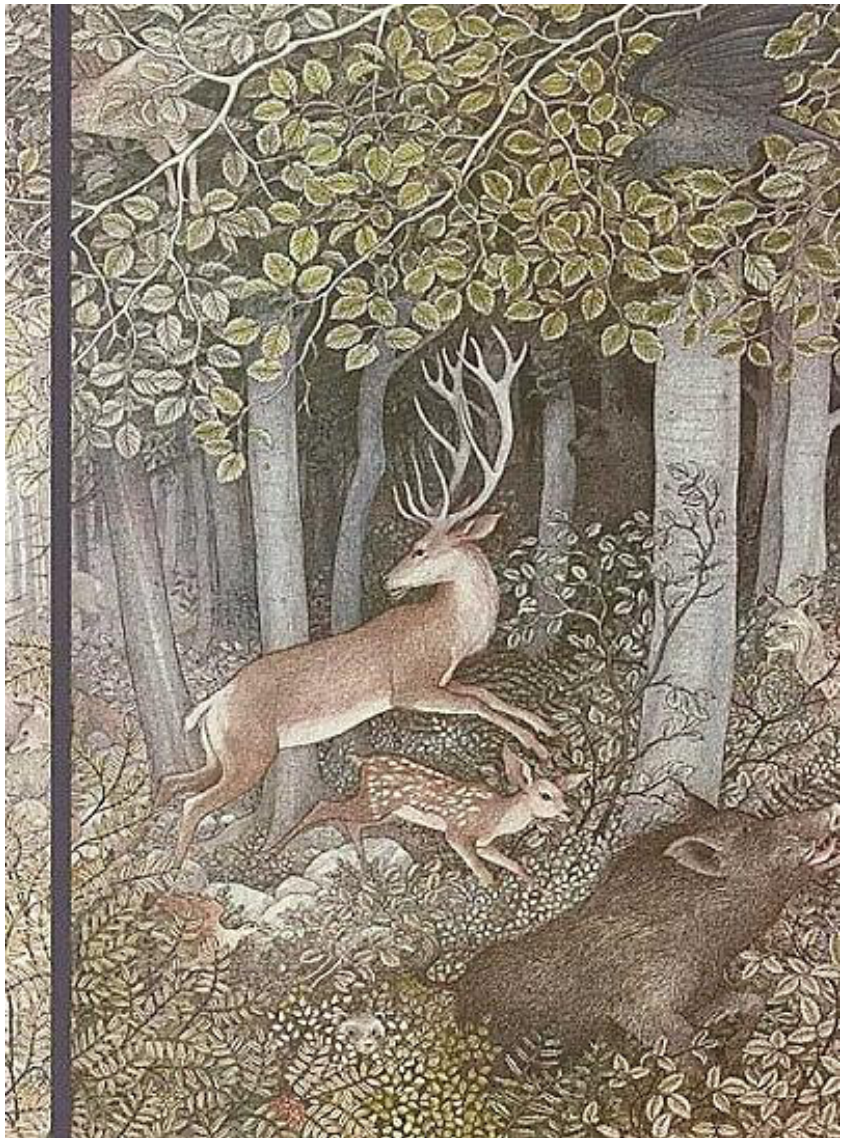


(Figure 8) Gilbert, A.Y. (1951). *Snow White*.





(Figure 9) Burkert, N.E. (1972). *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



(Figure 9) Burkert, N.E. (1972). *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*.



(Figure 10) Santore, C. (1996). *Snow White*.

## II. The Evil Queen: The New Protagonist?

The first major change that radically transforms the well-known fairy tale is the Evil Queen's position and her role in this story.

### *Point of View Personalisation*

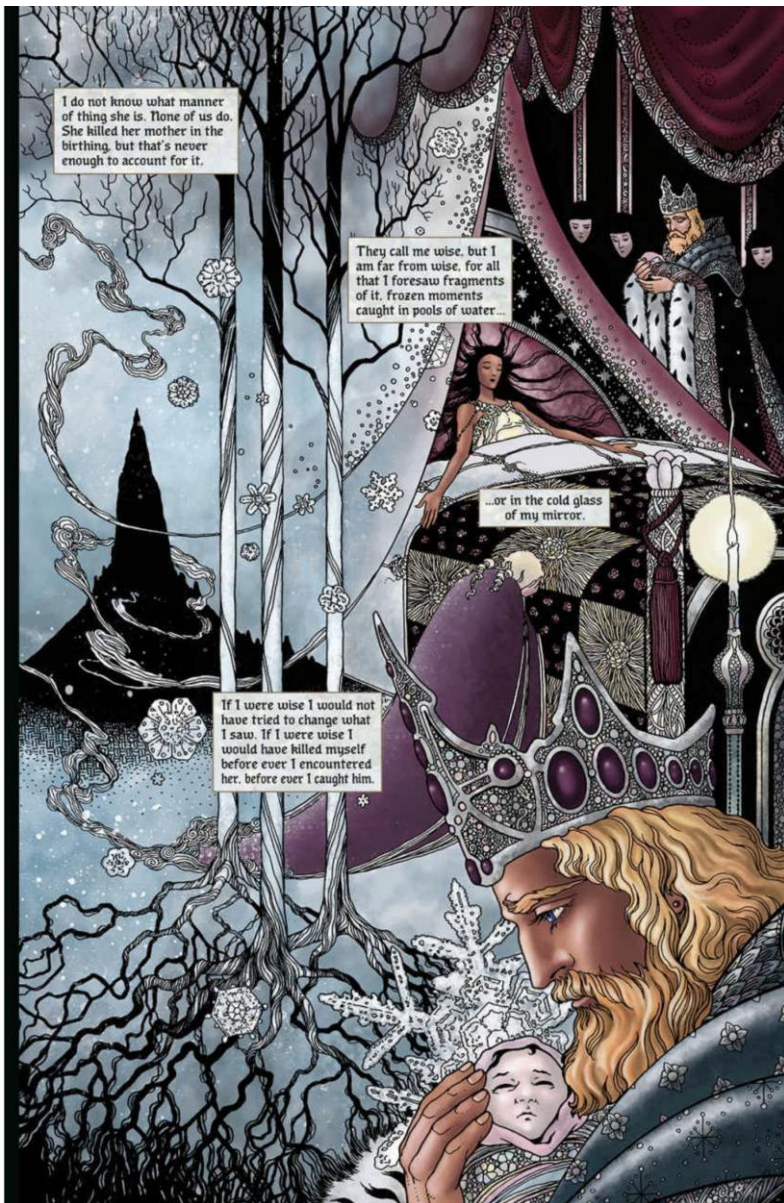
Readers beginning “Snow, Glass, Apples” immediately come upon a crucial difference between Gaiman's story and the folktale. For his story, Gaiman chooses the first-person viewpoint<sup>3</sup> for the storyteller, whereas usually traditional tales take place in the third-person point of view<sup>4</sup>. Snow White's story also begins with third-person narrative in the retelling of Brothers Grimm: “Once upon a time, in the middle of winter...” (Grimm and Grimm,

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<sup>3</sup> The first-person point of view is a type of storytelling when narrators tell the story from their own point of view, sharing inner thoughts and perceiving the world and events subjectively and one sided.

<sup>4</sup> The third-person point of view is a type of storytelling when the narrator tells the story “from above” without specifying who he or she is. This method of writing allows telling the story objectively, observing it in different times and places and from various angles, and showing some of the characters' thoughts.

2014: p. 179). However, Gaiman's story immediately transports readers to the centre of events with the help of the Queen's voice: "I do not know what manner of thing she is..." (Gaiman, 2009: p. 372), which immediately shows the heroine's reasoning (Figure 11).



I do not know what manner of thing she is. None of us do. She killed her mother in the birthing, but that's never enough to account for it.

They call me wise, but I am far from wise, for all that I foresaw fragments of it, frozen moments caught in pools of water...

...or in the cold glass of my mirror.

If I were wise I would not have tried to change what I saw. If I were wise I would have killed myself before ever I encountered her, before ever I caught him.

(Figure 11) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 12.

The main difference between the points of view is that objective stories use third person for certain events, a global view of the entire picture and a listing of actions. In contrast, first person is more limited and better suited for stories in which the hero's emotional state is extremely important (Rog and Kropp, 2004: p. 78). Traditional fairy-tale characters represent certain images, well-established archetypes such a charming prince, an innocent young maiden, an evil stepmother or an ugly witch. Yet these archetypes are neither personalities nor individuals, and modern fiction readers do not want to see faceless heroes, claims teacher and writer Marion Dane Bauer (2003). Through using the first-person point of view, the author shows the character's hidden thoughts, fears and experiences, pain and happiness, flashbacks of his or her life, and innermost desires.

The Queen's subjective narrative allows us to penetrate both the walls of the palace and the Queen's life, to observe her growing terror and panic upon discovering the true essence of her stepdaughter (James, 2018). Nevertheless, due to the use of the first person, the subjective narrator causes a paradox. Although

the Queen can watch Snow White through the magic mirror, she openly admits that many parts of the story remain dark for her. She cannot confirm the accuracy of the events' sequence. The Queen says, "I imagine; I do not know" (Gaiman, 2009: p. 387) and "Lies and half-truths fall like snow, covering the things that I remember, the things I saw" (Gaiman, 2009: p. 376). Collin James notes that the Queen "takes advantage of her narrative voice, framing the mutiny involved in her capture and usurpation as a witch-hunt in both senses of the term" (2018). That is, she openly identifies those responsible for her tragedy.

The Queen's multiple thoughts on how things actually happened add an air of mystery and understatement to the story. In Gaiman's story, she says, "If I were wise I would not" (p. 372). Elsewhere, the Queen admits, "I do not know. I was not there; I was not scrying. I can only imagine..." (p. 385). In another spot, she asks, "Did he take her there, in front of them all? Or did he have her carried to a secluded nook before he mounted her?" (p. 387). These passages intrigue readers and encourage them to form their own thoughts about what happened. Conversely, third person tends to rep-



resent “an external or impersonal narrator whose straightforward statements carry no explicit mark of human perception” (Bacchilega, 1997: p. 34) and leaves practically no room for imagination. Due to the first person viewpoint, we begin to sympathise and empathise with the Queen, the main antagonist according to the inhabitants of the kingdom. However, the Queen merely wanted to save her family and her people, only to suffer a fiery death.

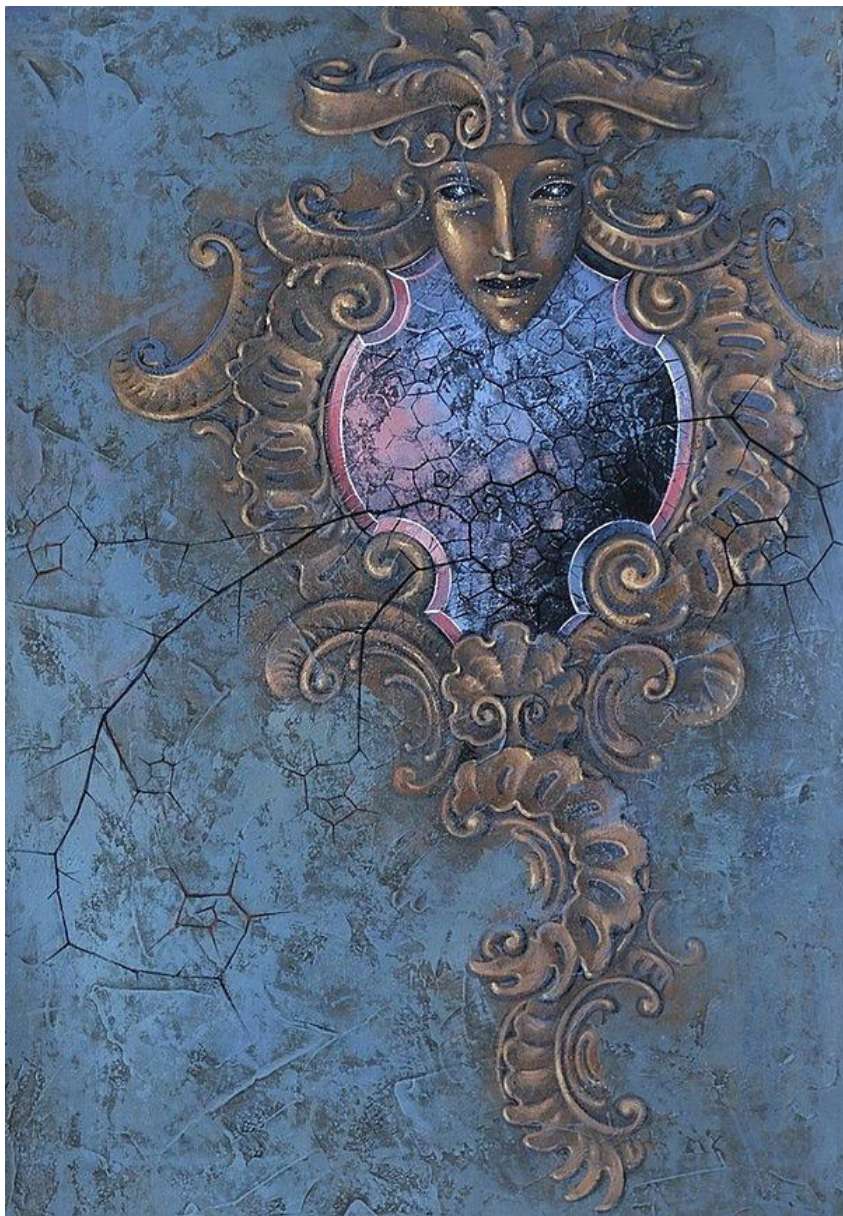
## *The Queen’s Witch Nature*

Unlike the original fairy tale, Gaiman’s version victimises not Snow White but her stepmother. Moreover, the main reason for the Queen’s downfall is not her obsession with the beauty and not even her position at court as the ruling monarch, but her magical abilities. These make her opposition to Snow White possible. The Queen is a witch; however, she uses magic for good, trying to help her subjects. “‘I come to you because you are wise,’ he continued. ‘When you were a child you found a strayed foal by staring into a pool of ink; when you were a maiden you found a lost infant who had wandered far from her

mother, by staring into that mirror of yours”” (Gaiman, 2009: p. 378). In the original tale, the mirror (Figure 12, 13) fuelled the Queen’s greed, narcissism, envy and anger (James, 2018). Here it acts as a silent magical attribute for fortune telling, precognition and the search for answers (Figure 14).



(Figure 12) Lynch, P.J. (1993). *The Candlewick Book of Fairy Tales* by Sarah Hayes.



(Figure 13) Anna Sorgan, *“Magic mirror”* illustration for *“Snow White”* fairy tale, 2018.



(Figure 14) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 29.

Gaiman draws a rather interesting parallel in completing the Queen's story. At first Snow White and the Prince slandered her: "They have told the people bad things about me; a little truth to add savour to the dish, but mixed with many lies" (p. 387). They then kept her in the dungeon: "I was bound and kept in a tiny stone cell beneath the palace, and I remained there through the autumn" (p. 387). Later, they ordered burning her in a kiln, which the whole kingdom celebrated: "They closed the kiln-door behind me. It is getting hotter in here, and outside they are singing and cheering and banging on the sides of the kiln" (p. 388). In the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale, the queen "had to put them [iron slippers heated over a fire] on and dance in them, and her feet were miserably burned, but she had to keep dancing in them until she danced herself to death" (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: p. 185). Slander, imprisonment and subsequent burning (Figure 15) are direct references to the Salem witch trials<sup>5</sup> as well as to the infamous

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<sup>5</sup> The Salem witch trials are one of the saddest events in American history. These hearings and prosecutions took place against people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts from 1692 to 1693. Unlike the European tradition of burning witches alive, people found guilty in Salem were drowned or hanged.

medieval witch-hunts<sup>6</sup> when inquisitors burned hundreds of innocent girls and women alive (James, 2018).

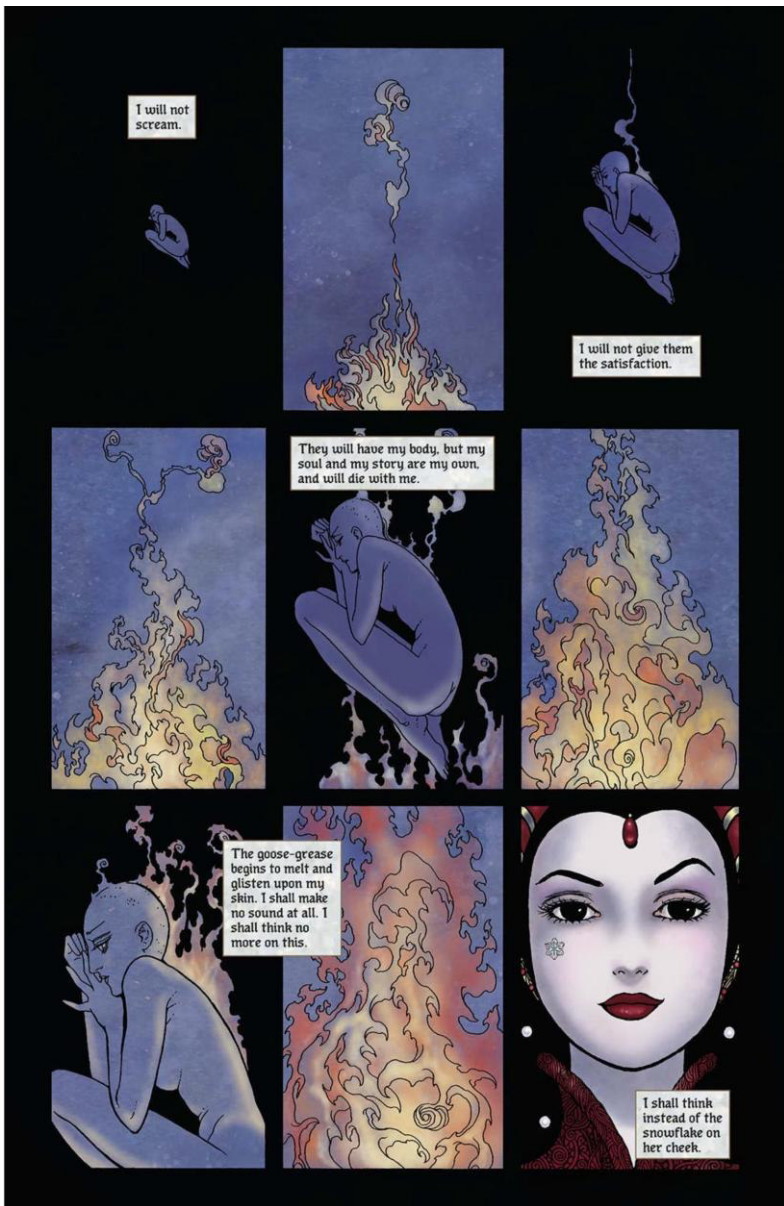
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<sup>6</sup> Witch hunting reached its peak in medieval Western Europe from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century. The Catholic Church's "Holy Inquisition" hunted people accused of witchcraft and afterwards burned them alive. Usually denunciations came from neighbours who wanted to acquire property of the accused or because of jealousy, envy or simple hatred towards poor innocents.



(Figure 15) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 58.





(Figure 15) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 59.

Arthur Miller's 1958 play *The Crucible* deals with the Salem witch trials. A similar situation happens in which a young girl had a romantic relationship with a married man. She starts to pretend divine providence condoned her actions and blames innocent victims, including her former lover's wife. In both *The Crucible* and "Snow, Glass, Apples", the witch-hunt begins because of a personal motive for revenge.

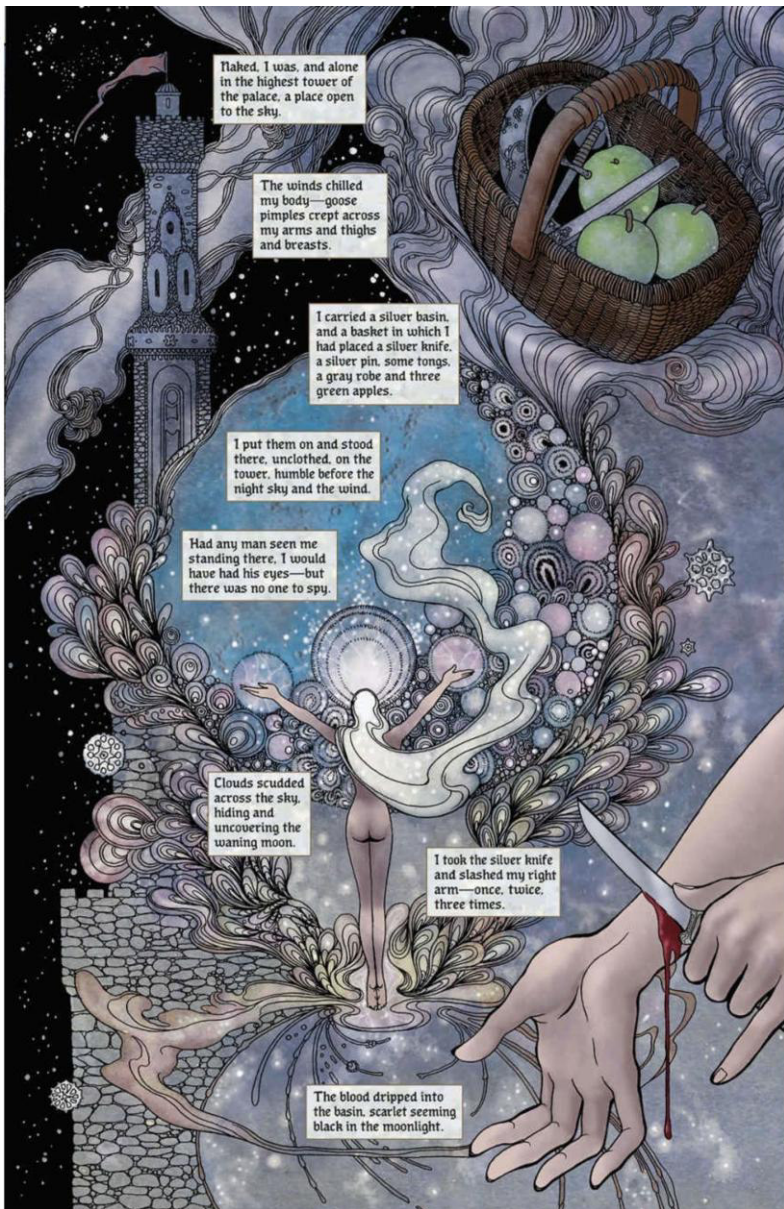
### *The Narrator's Unreliability*

So does Gaiman justify the Evil Queen by representing her as a victim of her villainous stepdaughter's intrigues? Rather, he leaves this vague for the reader, giving the opportunity to decide whether the Queen is telling the truth or her monologue is full of fabrications and embellishments. When the Queen doubts her own truthfulness, she admits the glamoured apples intended for Snow White (Figure 16) were not her first enchantment attempt. "Then I cast a glamour on the apples (as once, years before, by a bridge, I had cast a glamour on myself)" (Gaiman, 2009: p. 381).

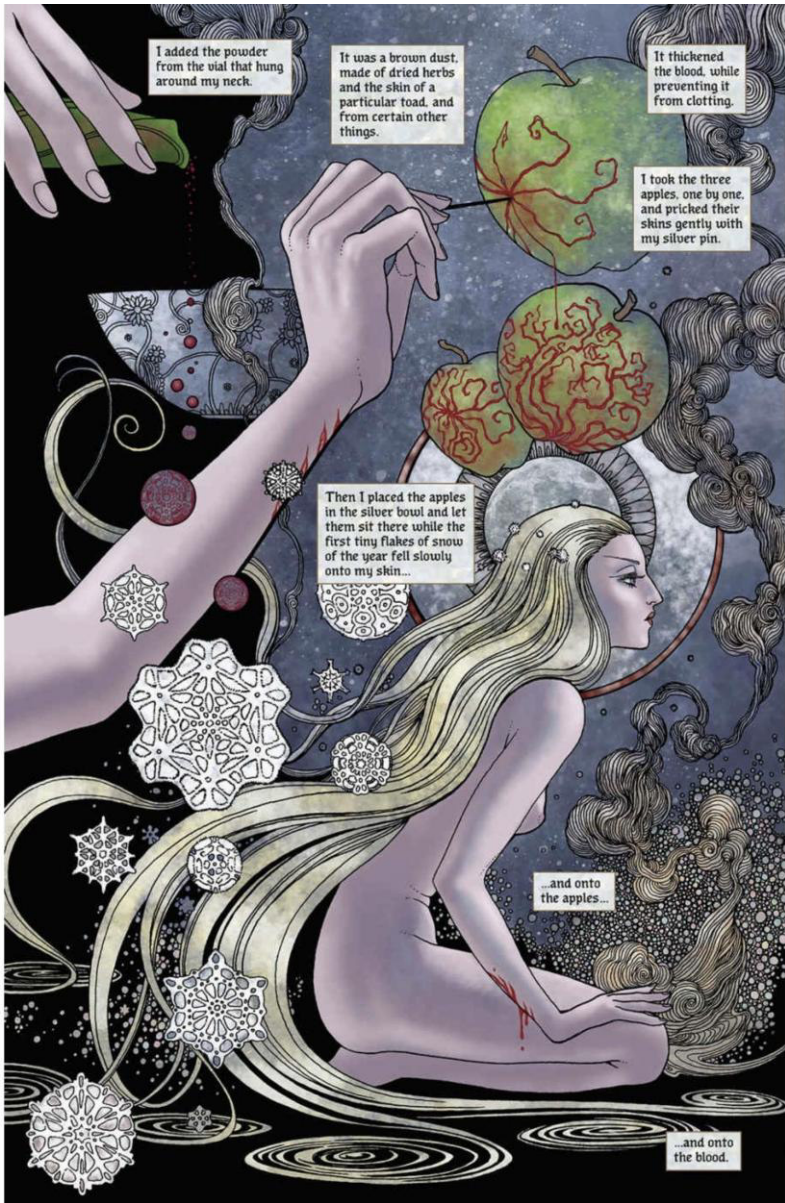
Black and white switch places, but the world Gaiman presents is not a typical portrayal of good and bad as in the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales. The characters are complex and multi-layered. They are generally more likely to inhabit a grey area, forcing readers to re-evaluate their actions and recognise the ambiguity of the story (Paugus, 2013: p. 39).



(Figure 16) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 29.



(Figure 16) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 30.



(Figure 16) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 31.

A key point is that Gaiman achieves a shock effect by re-thinking a fairy tale through “mirroring” it. First, in retelling a fairy tale following its basic chronology, he completely changes its meaning by interchanging not only the characters but also altering their motivation (Hatfield, 2011). This helps the reader shift the perspective for perceiving and analysing the tale. The Evil Queen’s desire to kill an innocent girl turns into a logical and understandable wish to defeat the vampiric, monstrous creature and prevent its victory. Snow White’s motivation changes from “talking with the birds, spreading good and happiness” to an animal urge for drinking blood and killing.

Since Gaiman is cardinally changing the foundation of such a well-known and familiar tale, it may be difficult for the audience to accept the new version and Snow White as an antagonist in particular. Mathilda Slabbert believes that the Queen’s recognition that she was neither wise and nor utterly innocent in this story helps us get used to the negative view of Snow White as a “cold, cruel and calculated character” (2009: p. 1255).

### III. Snow White: The New Villain of the Story

If the Queen is the first major change in Gaiman's story canvas, the second significant difference is Snow White.

#### *Vampires in Gaiman's World*

Gaiman introduces such creatures as vampires to the story. In classic stories such as *Dracula*<sup>7</sup>, *Interview with the Vampire*<sup>8</sup> or *Carmilla*<sup>9</sup>, the heroes know myths about vampires in one form or another. Yet in the world of "Snow, Glass, Apples", the concept of "vampire" does

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<sup>7</sup> *Dracula* is the 1897 cult Gothic horror novel by Bram Stoker, which tells the story of Count Dracula and his deeds. *Dracula* is one of the most famous works in the vampire genre and is a classic example of Gothic literature and vampire fantasy.

<sup>8</sup> *Interview with the Vampire* is the 1976 Gothic horror novel by Anne Rice. It is one the most famous works in the vampire genre and is an example of Gothic literature and vampire fantasy.

<sup>9</sup> *Carmilla* is the 1872 Gothic novella by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and is one of the first works in the vampire fiction genre. *Carmilla* tells the story of the vampire woman Carmilla who seduces young girls and drinks their blood, eventually causing their deaths. It is a classic example of Gothic literature and vampire fantasy.



not exist. The Queen herself begins her story with these words: “I do not know what manner of thing she is. None of us do” (p. 372). Readers can recognise Snow White as a vampire (Figure 17, 18) only based on their own knowledge of vampires, but the vampires Gaiman gives us are quite different from the classic image of these monsters. For example, Snow White was born a vampire, not turned into one, and her heart beat and pulsed even after its removal from her chest. “They brought me her heart. I know it was hers – no sow’s heart or doe’s would have continued to beat and pulse after it had been cut out, as that one did” (p. 376).

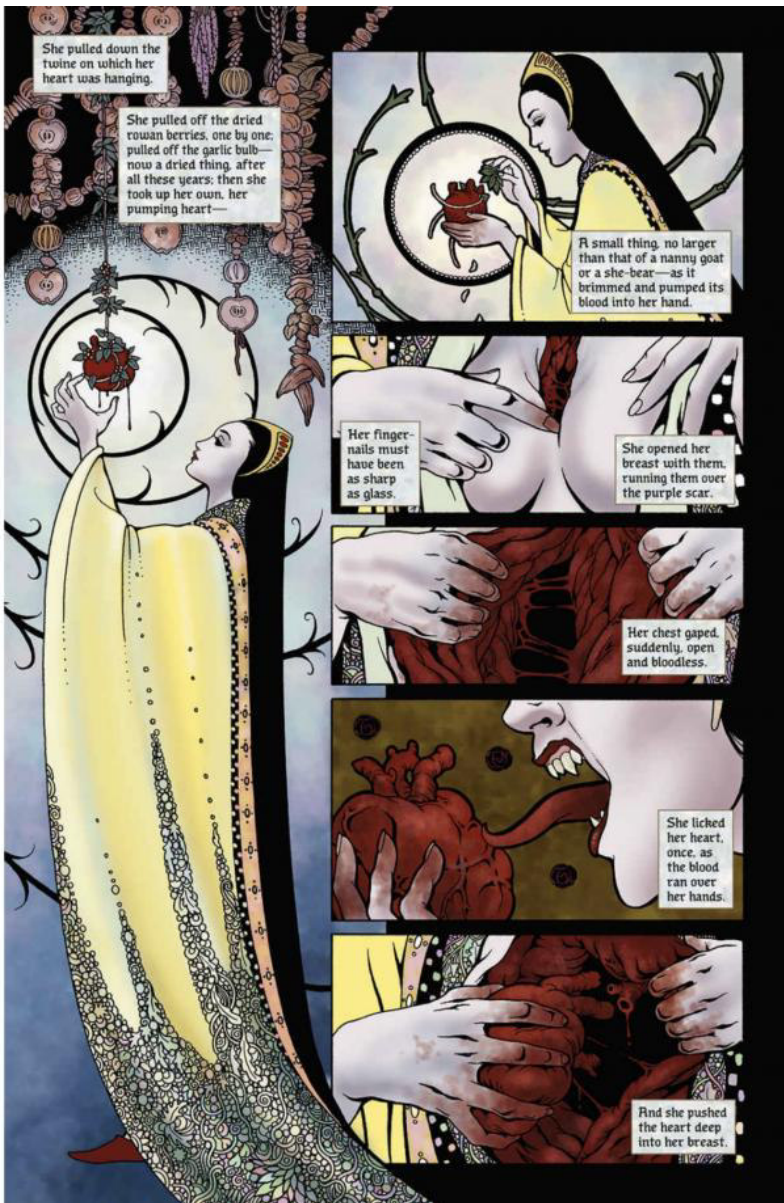


(Figure 17) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 19.



(Figure 18) Dillon, J. (2008). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, book cover.

However, a deeper delve into mythology indicates a vampire can indeed be born. The causes vary from a birth during a new moon and a birth from the seventh son of the seventh son to a mother who did not eat enough salt during pregnancy (Bunson, 2000: p. 20). This also explains why Snow White continued to live after losing her heart. To destroy a vampire or similar creature, one must stake, pierce or burn the heart. The heart is the “source of power for the undead, and its removal or destruction will do much to slay the vampire” (Bunson, 2000: pp. 118–119). Snow White thereby needed to recover her heart, without which she could not fully use her supernatural abilities (Figure 19).



(Figure 19) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 55.

Bethany Alexander argues that “Neil Gaiman borrows rituals, deities, tricksters and fairy tales from under every stone, roof or teacup” (2006: p. 139). However, he masterfully and elegantly borrows folklore details piece by piece, creating an eclectic, painfully familiar yet fresh and intriguing character images.

Before modern legends about vampires, much more ancient legends describe creatures such as *wurdalacs*<sup>10</sup>, *oupyrs*<sup>11</sup> and *navs*<sup>12</sup>. Gaiman allegedly refers to such ancient evil forces, incomprehensible to the human mind and defeated neither by ordinary means nor by magic. It is worth noting the Queen’s thoughts before the burning about what she would have done if she could have seen the future. “If I were wise I would not have tried to

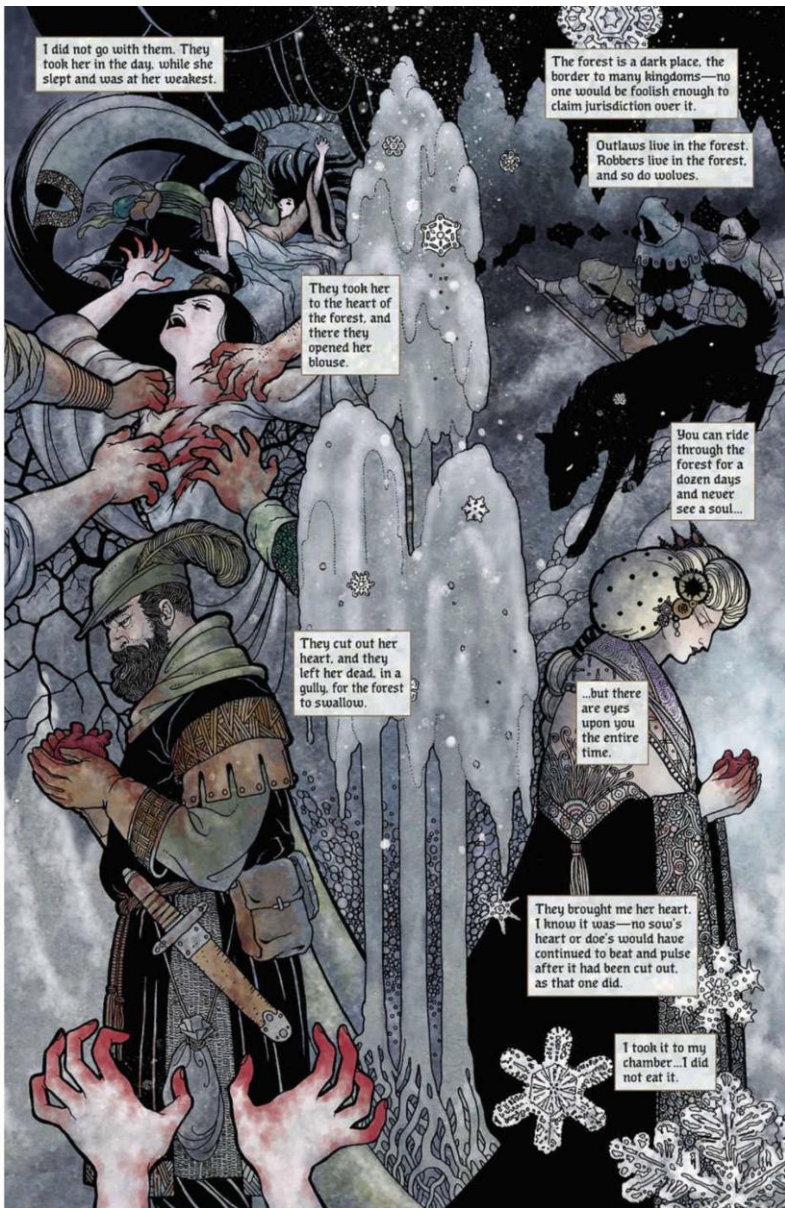
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<sup>10</sup> *Wurdalacs* are vampires in Slavic mythology. Tradition holds that a *wurdalac* is a kind of a vampire who must drink the blood of his loved ones, transforming his whole family into other *wurdalacs*.

<sup>11</sup> *Oupyrs* are Slavic mythological creatures, living dead who rise from the grave at night. They harm people and livestock, drink their blood and vandalise households, causing hunger, pestilence and drought. Some claimed they were former witches, werewolves or nasty sinners. They were most common in southern Russian and Ukrainian mythologies.

<sup>12</sup> *Navs* are dead souls, the living dead and evil spirits in Slavic mythology.

change what I saw. If I were wise I would have killed myself before ever I encountered her” (p. 372). The Queen does not even consider the possibility of killing and defeating Snow White (Figure 20).



(Figure 20) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 27.





(Figure 20) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 25.

Victoria Nelson explores this topic:

What does it mean to become the monster? In part it means identifying with the dark and rejected aspects of the self that exist in every person, including the taboo primal energy around violence and sex. That is the classic Gothick, and by extension Goth, connection. (2012: p. 133).

Since Snow White was already born a monster, she is the firstborn embodiment of lust, desire and passion, and her thirst for blood often be mixes with a thirst for sexual satisfaction.

## *Supplementary Supernatural Creatures*

The vampire Snow White is not the only evil spirit Gaiman introduces into the story. He also familiarises readers with other fantasy creatures:

They would come out, some of them, for the Spring Fair: a greedy, feral, dangerous people; some were stunted – dwarfs and midgets and hunchbacks; others had the huge teeth and vacant gazes of idiots; some had fingers like flippers or crab-claws. (p. 376).

Although the Queen can name some of these creature types, the forest folk remain unknown, unfamiliar and unexplored (Figure 21). Either the witch herself or the peasants at the fair are terrified because they cannot even understand who these representatives are. The same situation happens with Snow White: the Queen is at a loss to grasp who her stepdaughter is.



(Figure 21) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 30.



(Figure 21) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 32.

Snow White not only annihilates the happy union of the royal couple but also the moral and economic stability of the kingdom. When she lives in the forest, she even affects the wealth of the forest folk (Slabbert, 2009: p. 1265). In the original fairy tale, Snow White's return to the throne represents hope and an approaching bright future with a fair ruling monarch. Conversely, in Gaiman's story, Snow White is a catalyst for all kinds of misfortunes and troubles, both personal and global. Snow White's vampirism is precisely the reason she is able to commit her atrocities – the monster nature requires blood, killings and power.

## *Interpretation of Snow White's Appearance and Colour Scheme*

To emphasise the supernatural, lifeless descent of Snow White and visualise her as a terrifying undead figure, Gaiman uses the famous colour scheme (Figure 22) that describes the heroine in the Brothers Grimm's original version. She "was as white as snow, as red as blood, and her hair as black as ebony" (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: p. 179). The

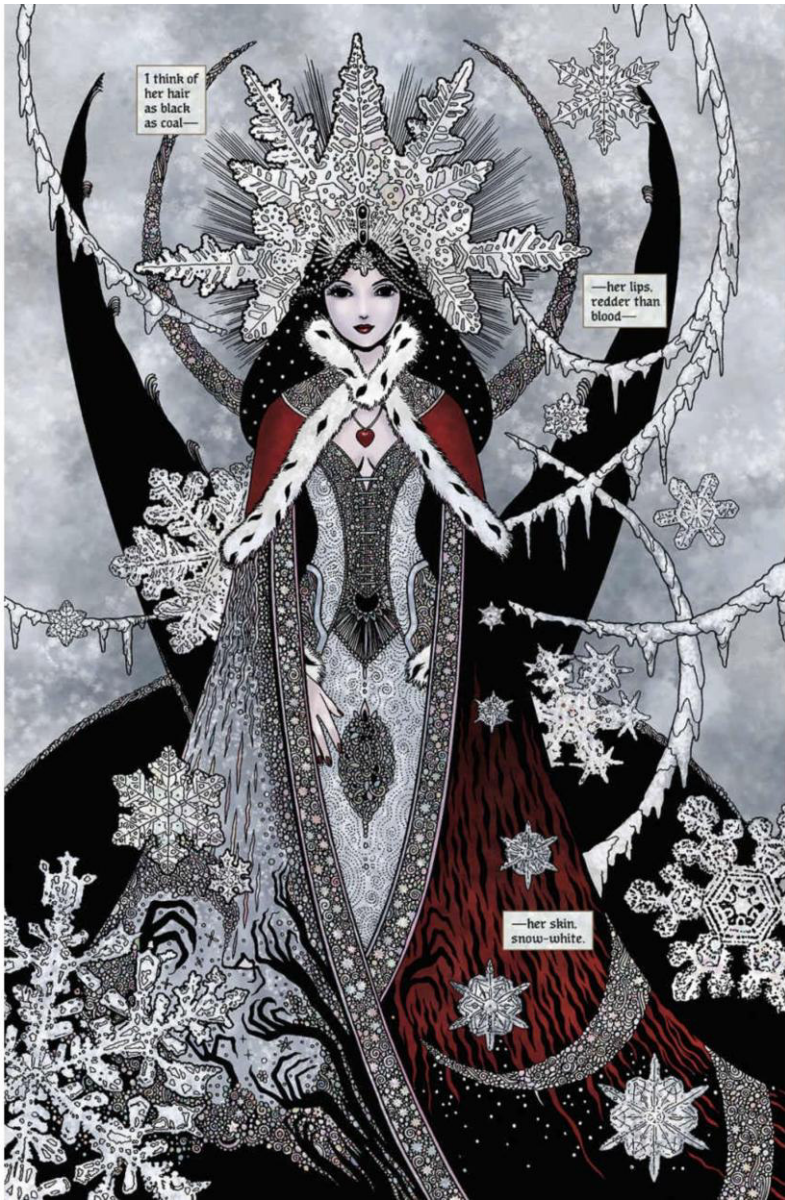
only difference is that Gaiman uses “black coal” instead of “ebony” (pp. 372, 379, 388). In this version, white skin, the designation of aristocracy (Montgomery, 2016), red lips and black hair are signs of Snow White’s exceptional beauty. In Gaiman’s story,

Red symbolizes the blood that is on her lips following feeding, the white fairness of her skin is the pallor of the undead, and black may be linked to either death, her sexuality (through the black hair between her legs), or her propensity to operate under the darkness of the night. (James, 2018).



(Figure 22) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 17.





(Figure 22) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 60.

In addition, the tale has a symbolic interpretation. White, red and black indicate the stages of *magnum opus* or the “great work” – the alchemical process of creating a philosopher’s stone, an elixir of eternal life (Burensteinas, 2009: pp. 71–75, 78). One notable characteristic of vampires is their eternal life (Bunson, 2000: p. 131).

## *Adding Gothic Elements Through the Theme of Monsters*

The vampirism theme has strong ties to Gothic literature and commonly gives a “Gothic mood” to the stories. Nikolaj Gedionsen writes on the place of vampires in Gothic and modern literature. “Gothic fiction has certain features that embodies cultural anxieties, often via fragmented narratives that relay mysterious events, wild and mountainous terrains, and monsters of different kinds”. He also adds that “gothic narratives violate the proper limits of social order as well as sexual propriety, and promote violence, selfish ambitions, and a free reign of sexual desires” (2018: p. 9).

However, Gothic literature depicts not only single representations of various kinds of

mythological monsters. The Gothic narrative is full of tension and frequently contains decadence and crime (Botting, 2013: p. 2). Moreover, Gothic literature aims to scare, strike fear, tickle nerves and convey a chilling effect.

In his book *Gothic*, Fred Botting defines Gothic horror as irrational, superstitious beliefs in monsters, demons and evil spirits. Supernatural creatures display “the uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversions and obsession” (2013: p. 2). Botting states that “a negative aesthetic informs gothic texts” (p. 1), and Gaiman fully uses these negative aspects. He not only hyperbolises sexuality in *Snow, Glass, Apples* and directly connects it with Snow White’s beast nature, but he also touches on such themes as necrophilia and incest. In some ways, Gaiman also romanticises the vampire and witch themes, but this is not unusual. Romantic and Gothic directions in literature commonly go hand in hand. In Gothic works, a dramatically tense novel often puts the presence of evil, unnatural strength and deadly danger in a central place, and as a result, these two genres begin to resemble each other (Nelson, 2012: pp. 2, 4).

## IV. Aggressive Sexualisation of the Fairy Tale

The sexualisation of the tale and the monsters is the third major change to the fairy tale. Gaiman transforms “Snow White” from a children’s story to a bloody, adult-oriented narration.

### *Other Sexual and Violent Depictions of Snow White*

Neil Gaiman is not the first author to present a mature and brutal “Snow White” interpretation by adding themes of sex and sexual abuse. Andrzej Sapkowski’s 1990 story *Mniejsze zło* (*The Lesser Evil*) portrays Snow White as Renfri (Figure 23, 24), an assassin and the leader of a robber gang, a *knyazhna*<sup>13</sup> in the past. Renfri is well aware of her sexuality and uses it successfully, but her past is

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<sup>13</sup> *Knyazhna* is a historical Slavic title equivalent to the English title of princess, a daughter of a king, duke or count. When Sapkowski wrote *The Last Wish* and other stories from *The Witcher* series, he relied heavily on Polish history and Slavic mythology and culture, which is why some of his terms are hard to translate directly.

sorrowful. When Renfri was a little girl, her stepmother Aridea learned from the magic mirror that Renfri would be the ruin of her. Aridea ordered the huntsman to take her stepdaughter into the forest and kill her. However, the huntsman pitied the little *knyazhna*, who begged him for mercy. He raped the girl before leaving her alone in the dangerous forest. For several years, Renfri had to vagabond, panhandle, eat leftovers and engage in prostitution (Sapkowski, 2012).



(Figure 23) Tony Sart, *Gang of Renfri (Shrike)*, 2018.



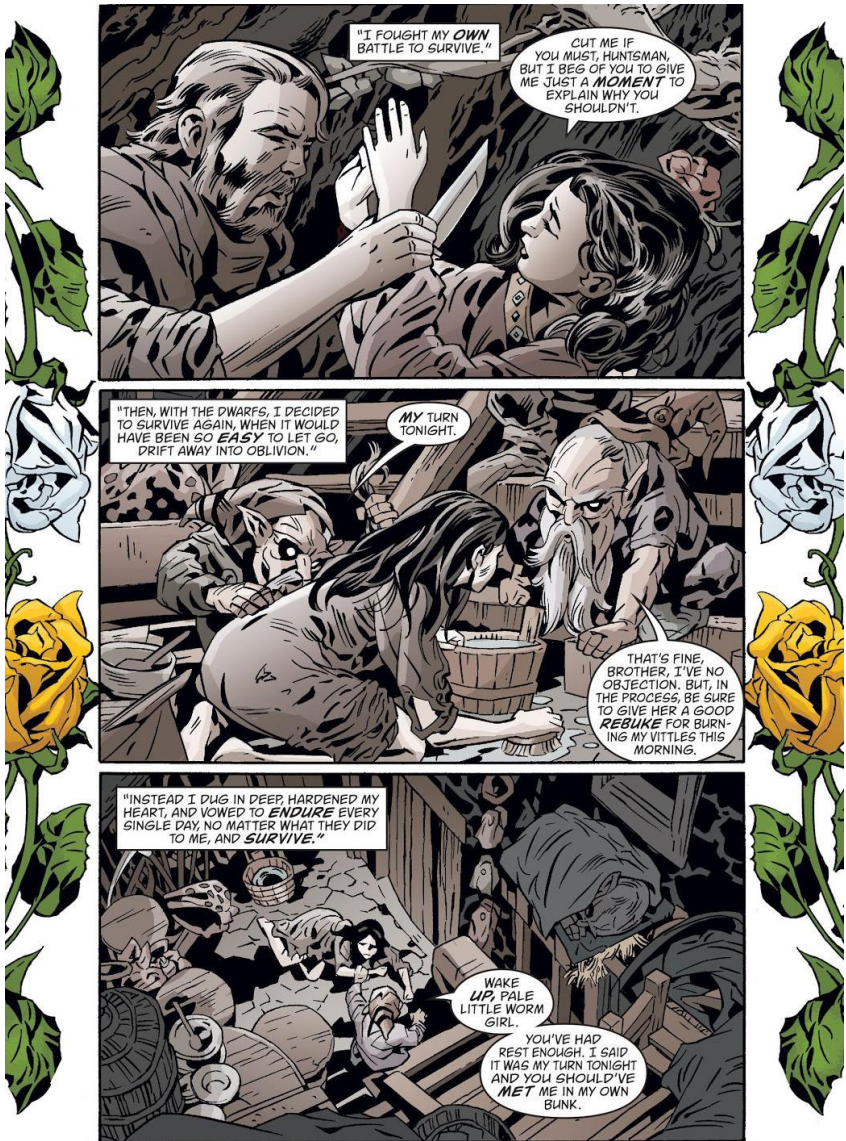
(Figure 24) Barbara Gołębiewska, *Renfri/ Dzierzba* – Gwent card contest entry, 2019.

A similar situation occurs in Bill Willingham's comic book series *Fables*. Here, Snow White is a surviving victim; seven paedophilic gnomes kept her as a captive and a slave and constantly sexually assaulted her (Figure 25, 26) for several years (Willingham et al., 2010). Afterwards, Snow White took her revenge on the dwarves and killed each of them (Figure 27) with her own hands (Harris, 2016).





(Figure 25) Buckingham, M. and et al. (2010).  
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: Chapter  
Three of Rose Red. *Fables*. Issue 96, Aug.  
2010, p. 16.



(Figure 26) Buckingham, M. and et al. (2013). Straight Through The Heart: Part Three of Camelot. *Fables*. Issue 96, Aug. 2010, p. 13.



(Figure 27) Buckingham, M. and et al. (2013). Straight Through The Heart: Part Three of Camelot. *Fables*. Issue 96, Aug. 2010, p. 14.

Nevertheless, in these versions, the tale's sexualisation leads to the victimisation of the main character, Snow White; she may be a survivor but still a miserable victim. Authors only develop ambiguous moments from the original tale related to the moment when men are alone with "the fairest of them all"<sup>14</sup>. Neil Gaiman goes the other way.

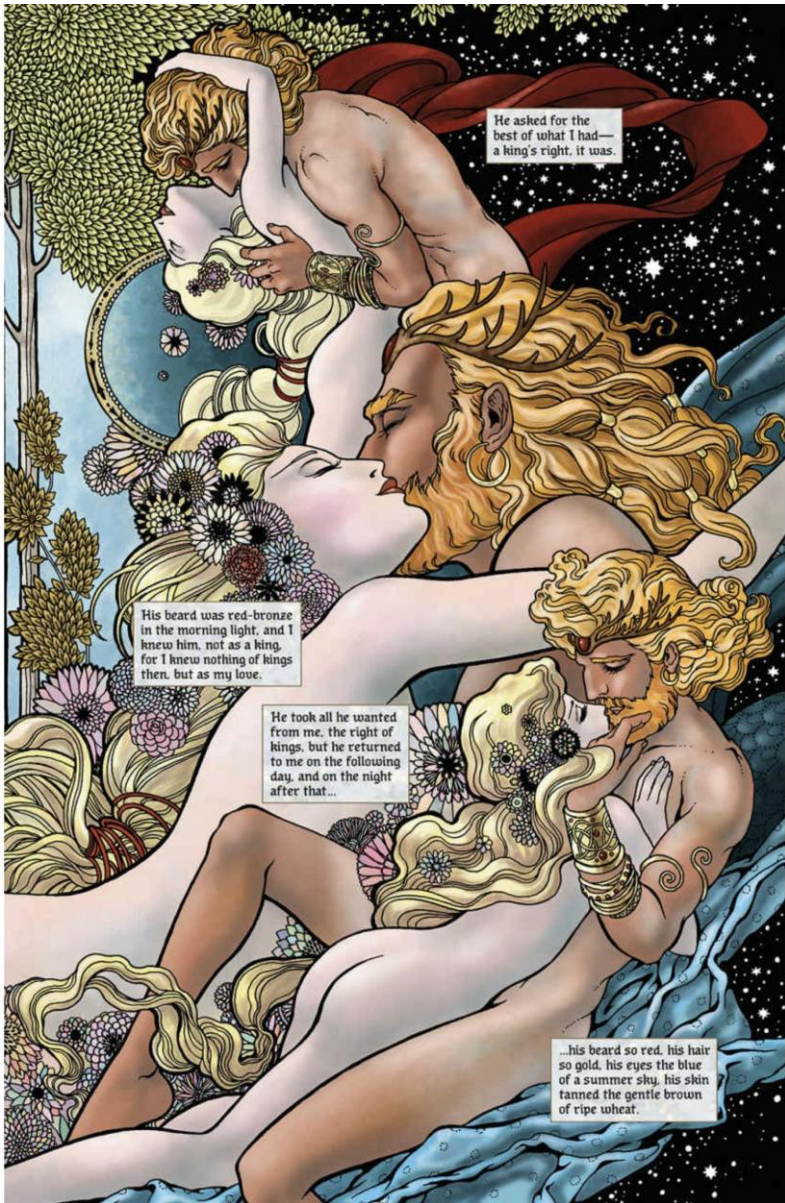
## *Sex as Pleasure*

Gaiman initially introduces the theme of sex as something positive, connected with a mutual love relationship between the King and the Queen (Figure 28). The Queen confesses that sex brought her pleasure, and she enjoyed it: "...and I would go to him, and pleasure him, and take my pleasure with him" (p. 372). Gaiman further paints the sex theme in sad tones. Tormented and crippled by his own daughter, the king "...sent for me [the Queen] less and less, and when I came to him he was dizzy, listless, confused. He could no longer make love as a man makes love..." (p. 374).

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<sup>14</sup> "The fairest of them all" or "the fairest of all" describes Snow White and part of the queen's spell she addressed to the magic mirror and asked it who the most beautiful woman in the world was.

Gaiman not only brings in the sex theme and speaks openly about it, but he also specifies the sexual actions occurring between the characters. Thus, he mentions oral sex: “he would not permit me to pleasure him with my mouth” (p. 374).



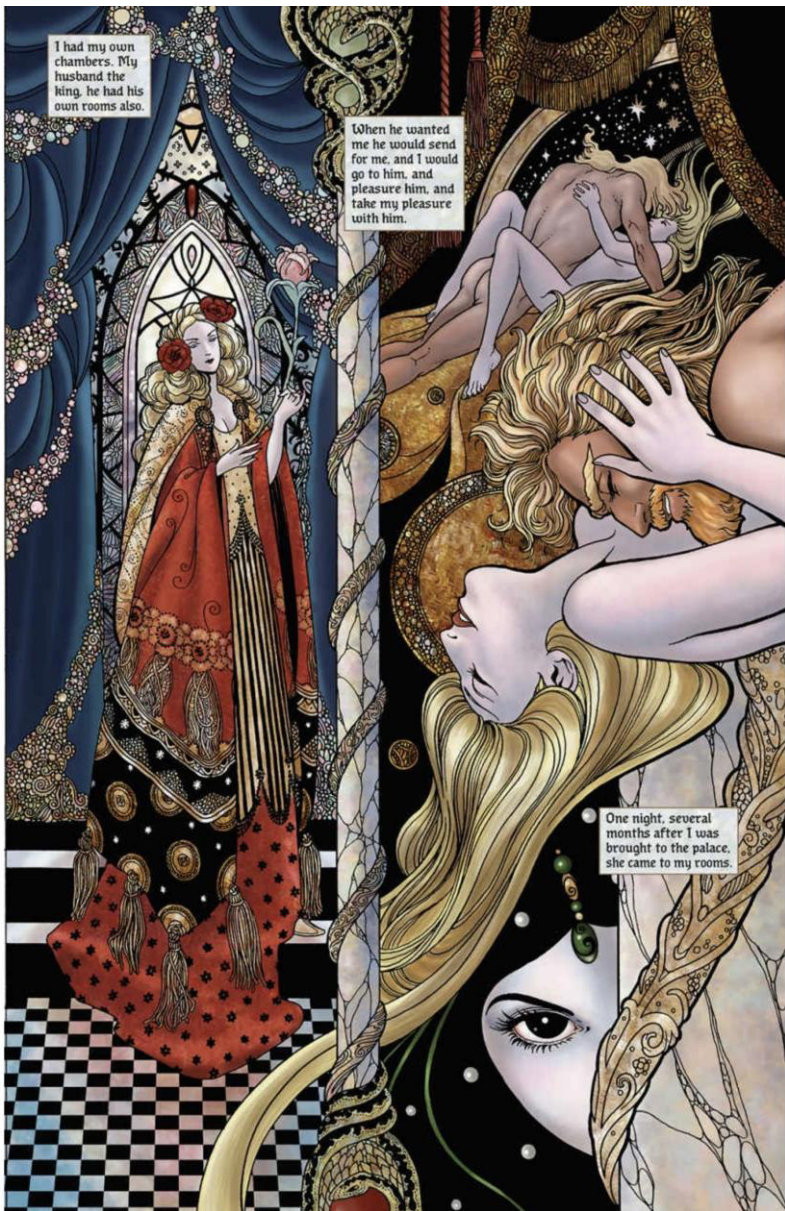
He asked for the best of what I had—a king's right, it was.

His beard was red-bronze in the morning light, and I knew him, not as a king, for I knew nothing of kings then, but as my love.

He took all he wanted from me, the right of kings, but he returned to me on the following day, and on the night after that...

...his beard so red, his hair so gold, his eyes the blue of a summer sky, his skin tanned the gentle brown of ripe wheat.

(Figure 28) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 14.



(Figure 28) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 16.

## *Tabooed Themes and Sex as an Instrument of Power*

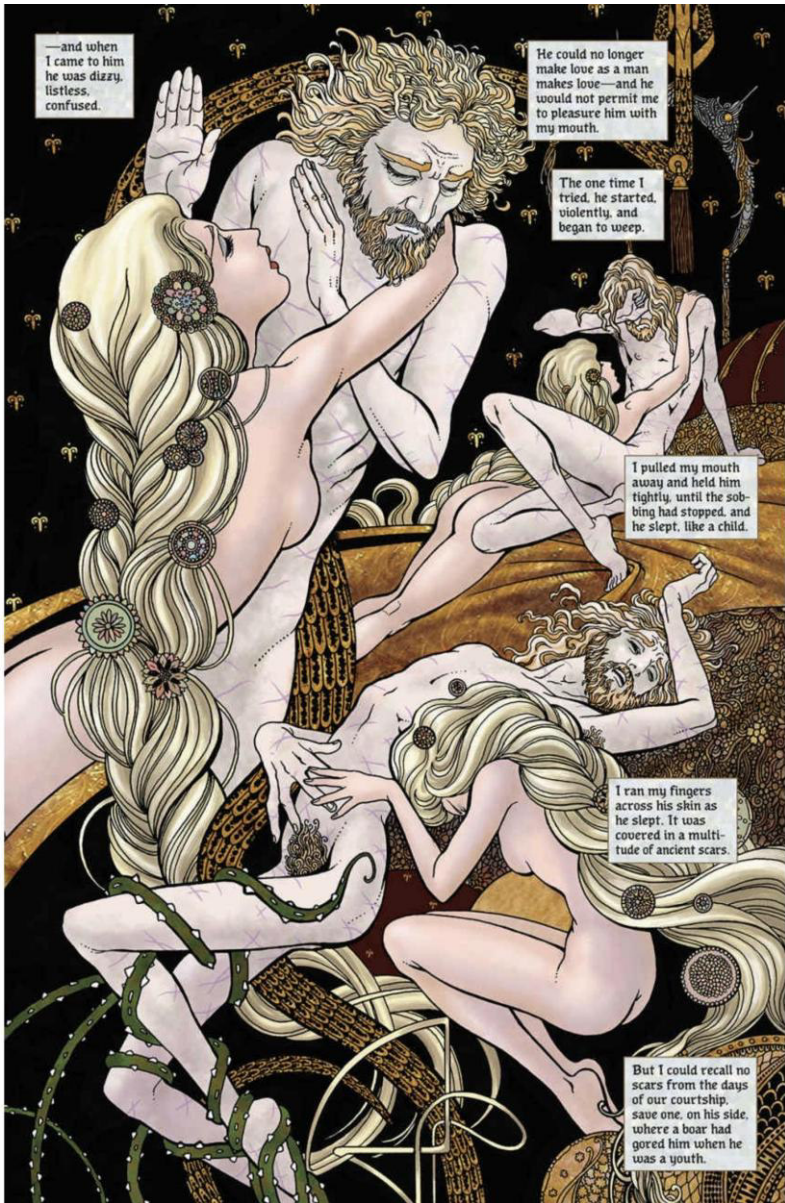
Gaiman continues to delve deeper into the sexual background and begins to talk about taboo topics. The Queen notices that the King is languishing and turning pale; his veins protrude, and numerous old scars cover his body. The Queen realises her stepdaughter made these scars, but she cannot prove anything (p. 374). Mathilda Slabbert (2009: p. 1271), Collin James (2018) and Marilyn Paugus (2013: pp. 41–42) unanimously agree that in this scene, Gaiman makes unambiguous references to incest between Snow White and her father (Figure 29).

Here, Gaiman once again departs from the Brothers Grimm's original tale, but he skilfully brings to light the hidden elements the Brothers tried to hide or encrypt. The theme of incest in Indo-European tales is not new at all. Professor D. L. Ashliman writes that oftentimes a conflict between a daughter and a father "is presented in a manner that suppresses virtually all remnants of the incest taboo" (1997). Maria Tatar (2003) states that the Brothers Grimm were strictly against incestu-

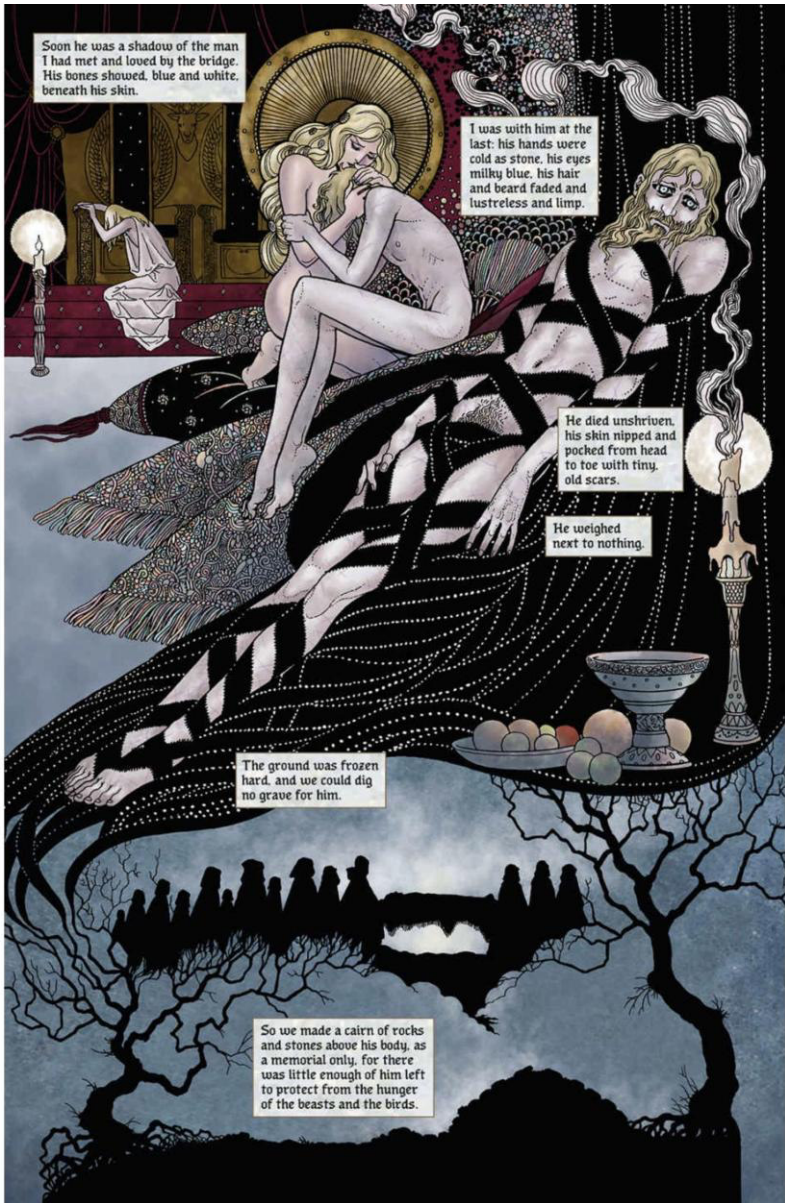


ous desires in tales (p. 8), and Wilhelm Grimm carefully edited stories to remove themes of sex, violence and child abuse (p. 10).

Gaiman also uses the topic of sexuality to narrate the growing-up process. While living in the forest, Snow White meets a wandering monk who offers her a coin to have sex with him (Figure 30). Snow White complies, but the action does not lead to copulation. As a vampire, she sinks her teeth into the man's body and drinks his blood (p. 380). Meanwhile, a thin blackish liquid dribbles between her legs, possibly symbolizing menstruation and maturation (James, 2018).



(Figure 29) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 22.



(Figure 29) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 23.



(Figure 30) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 36.



(Figure 30) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 37.

Merilyn Paugus argues that Gaiman “resexualises the tale rather aggressively” and “the strain of sexuality runs through the whole tale and cannot really be separated from the characters’ motives, desires and actions” (Paugus, 2013: p. 41). Indeed, the Queen uses her sexuality and sex as a tool, intending to persuade the foreign prince into marriage (Figure 31). For this, she not only dares to seduce him but also agrees to fulfil his vulgar requirements, such as pretending to be cold, silent, passive and unalive (Gaiman, 2009: p. 385).

Yet Snow White behaves similarly, and an obvious parallel arises between her and the Queen: living in a patriarchal society, both of them cunningly use their sexuality to achieve their goals. Moreover, “both the king’s and prince’s positions of power and masculinity are undermined by the female[s] characters’ perverted sexual behaviour” (Slabbert, 2009: p. 1281).

If the Queen intends to secure an alliance beneficial for the kingdom with her body, then for Snow White, the connection with the prince-necrophile becomes a “trip home”. It is an opportunity to return to her native castle and de-

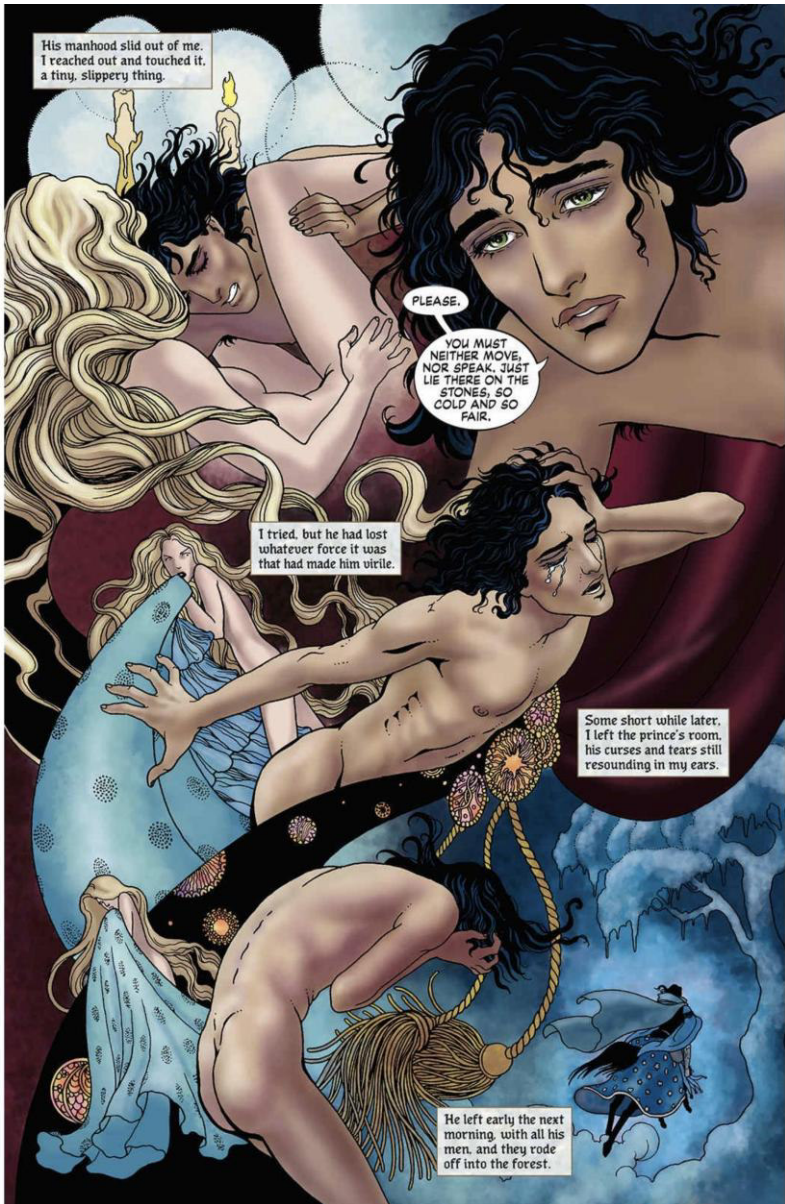
pose the usurper on her throne, to win a triumphant victory (Figure 32). Both the Queen and Snow White dominate the Prince not through trust but through the bed.

Gaiman broaches the necrophilia topic with a significant intention. By introducing the Prince's sexual deviations, Gaiman casts doubt on the nobility of Snow White and the Prince characters. He also offers his own explanation for the Prince's illogical craving for the girl in the coffin and turns the passive role of Snow White in the original fairy tale inside out (Paugus, 2013: p. 43).



(Figure 31) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 50.





(Figure 31) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 51.



(Figure 32) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 52.



(Figure 32) Doran, C. (2019). *Snow, Glass, Apples*, p. 53.

# Conclusion

Any author takes a big risk when interpreting well-known and universally beloved fairy tales. People have become accustomed to their favourite characters and their logic. For the most part, the first acquaintance with fairy tales happens in childhood, when parents read books with children before bedtime or during family evenings. These happy and warm memories link readers to the bright image of a traditional fairy tale. Readers may thus perceive its radical rewriting and transformation into a dark, gloomy story extremely negatively. So why is Gaiman's work so successful, and why do so many love it?

The enigma is that the original Grimm Brothers' tale is already dark and gloomy. It features powerful witches, big black woods, a death curse, a coffin and encrypted sexual subtexts. The tale is full of scary motives and adult themes presented to children in a "lite" form; it is a true Gothic work.

Gaiman discovers such clues and unwinds a ball of yarn, thinking up and developing new and existing topics. Necrophilia comes from

the prince's desire to kiss the corpse in the coffin. Incest arises from Snow White's close relationship with the King. Supernatural beings convey the theme of the dwarfs' presence in this world. Sexual deviations show the world's depravation. Vampires indicate the world is cruel and full of monsters. The Queen's unjust death and the conversion of her magic against her show the consequences of a lynch-mob trial and lack of justice.

Gaiman turns the tale inside out, forcing readers to look at it from a completely different angle. Yet he leaves the foundation while only telling the Queen's version. The well-known Grimm version of "Snow White" continues to exist, and Gaiman's story thus becomes believable. Readers have already known one version for a long time. Now the author simply provides them with another version that allows them to decide who is the unfortunate victim and who is the villain.

Gaiman finishes his story with the perverted couple's victory. The monstrous vampiress and the necrophilic Prince care only about power and satisfying their desires but not about the kingdom. The Queen's last thoughts

add a note of hopelessness: she refuses to present her story to the world, taking it with her to the grave.

Evil defeats good, but for the kingdom and the whole world, everything happened just the opposite. Once upon a time, the legitimate beloved princess returned home with the Prince, overthrew the usurper, and now she will rule – a princess whiter than snow, with lips redder than blood and hair blacker than the blackest coal.

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# About the author

**Alexandra Rodzanovskaya** (b. 1999) is a Russian illustrator, ceramist and engraver. She studied Illustration at Hertfordshire University and graduated in 2020. Her main field of interest includes fairy tales, magic, legends, myths and fantasy worlds. Alexandra’s final major project consisted of two parts: first – this degree essay, second – the giant textile stained glass, where she depicted an old Gaelic goddess of winter and snow, Cailleach Bheur. Additionally, Alexandra wrote a short story about Cailleach and her legacy, and produced an audial version of Jane Yolen’s poem “The Song of the Cailleach Bheur” (music was written by Anastasia Mikhaleva).

In free time, Alexandra likes to write fantasy stories, walk through the hills and woods and draw Tarot card decks.

You can find more about Alexandra on her website: [alexrodzanov.wixsite.com/portfolio](https://alexrodzanov.wixsite.com/portfolio), [schola.su/book-alexrodzanov-snow-white-2020](https://schola.su/book-alexrodzanov-snow-white-2020).