Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* in a New Aspect

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**Abstract** In the populated ‘far away, long ago’ land of fairy tales, hands and pens seem to be working far stronger than witches flying upon their broomsticks. It is an unfortunate outcome that all those powerful witches became the permanent nightmares of many adults long after childhood because of being some puppets to articulate the shalts and shalt-nots of the reigning culture. As time goes on and in different cultures, one single story undergoes radical changes which make it appropriate to the taste of the target societies or, to be honest, to the taste of the puppeteers of those societies. Under the impression of these changes, Snow White, before and after, is presented in this study to claim a point along the gender paradigms of time. Barthelme’s version in 1967 has been known as the postmodern version of Snow White and has been considered in many aspects in view of postmodernism. However, the present study aims to read the story in respect to its appeal of gender issues of its time. Accordingly, the precepts of gender identity, feminine, masculine, and androgynous are assayed under the definitions of Judith Butler to revert the paradigm of change from Grimm’s version to Barthelme.

**Keywords:** Gender; 1960s; femininity; masculinity; androgynous; fairytale.
Introduction

When Barthelme wrote his novel in 1967 people were already familiar with the story through the two older versions namely the Brothers Grimm and that of Walt Disney. The first version has German roots in the early 1800s and was meant for adult audience. “The political and economic situation in Germany during the early 1800’s influenced the darkness of the tales used for recreation and a need for nationalism through the German folk tales.” (Saunders, 2008, p.142). The Disney one, inaugurating in 1930s addressed a younger party and changed its medium. As Saunders puts it “The Depression and the emerging medium of animated film established a need for memorable and enjoyable entertainment for all Americans who were struggling to regain their control over their political and economic footing” (2008, p.142).

However, Zipes believes that "it is particularly impossible to determine what direct effect a fairy tale will have of an individual reader in terms of validating his or her own existence"(2006,p. 68). What happens in the process of coming to terms with a story revolves around the kind of identification with the characters. In this respect, the work becomes a medium through which some constructs furnish the mind of the reader; and depending on whether the reader is a resisting reader or a yielding one, the result changes radically. Upon this guideline many writers have decided to use fairy tales as a means to re-view the changes in the whole social constructions in the course of time.

Discussion

One of the interesting sub-versions of the old fairy tales is that of Snow White written by Donald Barthelme in 1967, whose reflection on the old subject has reestablished the sense of historical moment and gender-based social construction of its time. The story reads the old version in the reigning constructions of the 1960s; therefore, the author remains loyal to the main structure of the story and awaits the result. Butler remarks that “construction not only takes place in time but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this construction” (2006, p.136). What makes the new version of Snow White a subject of study here is the novel way in which the concepts of sex and gender are renewed to serve the time.

In the structure of the old version, namely that of Brothers Grimm, the interplay of these matters have been disguised in the simple narratology in which the focus of attention have been the not the play of sexuality but the interplay of power in the patriarchal domain. The active agent of the story is not Snow white, but the prince\step-mother who kills/rescues her. Bottighheimer remarks that many fairy tales “conclude with a prince coming upon a sleeping young woman, a subject that has been a magnet for discussion of gender roles in passivity and sexuality” (1987, p.164). The reader along with the characters awaits a coming for the change for the better.

In the original version, when Snow White reaches the house of the Dwarves "because she was so hungry and thirsty Snow White ate a few vegetables and a little bread from each little plate, and from each little mug she drank a drop of wine, afterward, because she was tired, she lay down on a bed, but none of them felt right . . . until finally the seventh one was just right (Grimms, 1811)". For the original readers her behavior seems to be appropriate, especially when the beds and plates are those of seven small men. One may remember Gulliver's Travels first book when the court of women including the Queen were nude in the presence of Gulliver, but it did not matter because they were doll-sized.
Although she is not naked in the accompaniment of seven men, her way of persuading them can represent a situation. The fact is that she sleeps in their beds and drinks from their mugs which chronologically do not happen at the time of their presence; in other words it never happens simultaneously with their doing the same thing. No one ever asked why those seven Dwarves were so kind to a stranger who intruded their home. Unless one has identified himself with the dwarves seeing a beautiful female who sleeps in one's bed, or better say shares one's bed and wine. In this anomaly of deeds, time, and subjects the sexual tension must be resolved somewhere else. Bettelheim made a Freudian analysis “These ‘little men’ with their stunted bodies and their mining occupation—they skillfully penetrate into dark holes—all suggest phallic connotations.” (1984, p. 210). Nicely renewed by Barthelme, Snow white is a tall dark beauty with dark spots (1967, p. 3). The workings of gender have never been absent from the text but concealed to appeal to context and purposes of the story.

Barthelme's version tries to turn this failure in recognition of the concepts of sex and gender into a well-said story, wiping the cultural barriers and taboos from the text and leaving the body of the text subjected to the reader's gaze. This version fashions the nudity of the original one by spotlighting the latent bisexual content. "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 at the back of neck" (Barthelme, 1967, p.3). The writer manages to take the readers' eyes voyaging on her body discovering the spots, mainly the erotic zones. And then manipulates the process of imagination presenting them as a series of black spots or holes through the sketch he provides the text with. However, Jeffrey T. Nealon trying to help the reader to understand the beauty of Snow White declares that "there's a helpful representation provided in the text. However, this series of bullets on the left side of the page manages only to disrupt or frustrate the reader's representational desire and, in the process, links this frustrated desire to the failure of the category beauty . . . " (2005, p.124). Beauty has always been a hot subject on the market; who knows?!

The way she is presented to the reader in the very first pages is a pornographic sketch, appealing to the desire of both sexes; the "tall dark beauty" is a phallic symbol, which here does not refer to Snow White's hair but to herself although her hair is later dangling from the window. The question is whether she is the signifier of the phallus identified with that in their (dwarfs) minds which as Butler considers it" to be the phallus is to be its object and its instrument, in structuralism terms, the 'sign' and promise of its power" (2006, p.42); or she is referred to as a feminine body bearing masculine aspects as well. If so, why those beauty spots are just like six holes on the page, and it is followed by the continuation of her beauty aspects in its phallic traits, "the hair black as ebony" (Barthelme, 1967, p. 3). She is conceived, and as a matter of fact pictured, in terms of masculine and feminine attributions simultaneously. This blurred picture continues throughout the story touching the reader's imagination here and there by means of these attributions, trying to ponder upon the taste of the time, namely the 1960s and the blatant change of attitudes towards women and their new gender roles and the forthcoming guy movements of 1970s.

If Snow White is a being in which both feminine and masculine aspects are working, she becomes androgynous. In fact "her anatomy does not fall outside the categories of sex, but confines and redistributes the constitutive elements of those categories; indeed the free paly of attributes has the effect of exposing the illusory character of sex as an abiding substantive substrate to which these various attributes are presumed to adhere" (Butler, 2006, p.137). The given picture already contains a phallus (at work) described as hanging from the window, which carries the attributes of a feminine body as well. Under this impression, the validity of her presumed gender role is distrusted in retrospect. Because such a being "is not
outside the laws of culture but culturally outlawed" (Butler, 2006, p.113). The reason why she is not to be working in that society, as she remarks is that "maybe she is in the wrong time and place" (Barthelme, 1967).  

1960s is pregnant with nascent second-wave feminism. The word “gender” was first used in 1963 as a social term rather than a biological one. It was the time when women transgressed their role as the home-keepers and tried to become breadwinners. The Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act belong to this period. The social anomaly caused the story character to carry both attributions respectively. But then there started another abnormality to the current sexual arena. The abortion right made pregnancy a possibility which could be avoided at will. (1960s, wikipedia.org) Therefore sex for pleasure along with what later became the guy movement made the firm ground for what Snow White would look like in Barthelme’s version. A woman of subjectivity in sex and life, who sends the fairy tale stereotype of the subjective, always saves prince to suicide. Liberation of women leads to dissipation of men. Barthelme explores Snow White as an object in the process of current affairs. However, this is Snow White who survives the riots, Barthelme is just repeating what the Grimm Brothers have already said in disguise. “If a performati... [Footnote omitted]. The second-wave feminism was not the start of something in 1960s, it was the result of long story full of sound and fury. 

The kind of male gaze Barthelme casts on her body, shows the kind of norms her body has been formed through. Though she is considered a sexual object, the picture the reader is confronted with is not clear enough. The text goes on as "Bill is tired of Snow White now. But he cannot tell her . . . Bill can't bear to be touched. That is new too. To have anybody touch him is unbearable. Not just Snow White but Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Henry, Clem or Dan . . . A withdrawal" (Barthelme, 1967, p. 4). Bill is the leader and every kind of touch means 'touch' to him; does not it change the discourse a bit? If not a total change, it can justify the androgynous attribution of Snow white's body and the homophobia in the air. She is there to appease both the hetero- and the homosexual notions of the community she is living in; she really is "a tall dark beauty" (Barthelme, 1967, p. 3) a representative of 1960s and 1970s. 

However, the dwarfs do not consider her body as a whole, she is summarized into "a tall dark beauty with some beauty spots" (Barthelme, 1967, p.3). They dissect her according to her erotic performative zones appealing to both sexes and then minimize the whole picture into an attribution of a color, red of the towel the signifier of the two most important erotic zones: namely the breasts and the buttock. The fact is that her body has lost its materialization as a whole in effect but is materialization has got a whole brand new aspect. As Butler puts it "the practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining" (1993a, p. 231). Snow White's one is in the situation like that, like Paul, those seven men never had perceived her as a woman, they have just seen the erotic zones detached and through their performativity; that is to appease their wish. Carrying both gendering aspects in her body she is no more a predefined gender, she looks androgynous. 

Though Snow White is one, they are seven which although individuated in names and some characteristics they resemble one. They have the same dream. Maybe they are to be read as a system, the patriarchy that is working through some of its agents. Even one of them quotes their father saying that "try to be a man about whom nothing is known
about”(Barthelme, 1967, p.18) and this was their father who gave them the recipes. Who their father is, is not mentioned, only a "national Park" is named. Whether he is a father or the Father, he prescribes the law of sticking together and not letting anybody to individuate one. For the first advice they found a solution. As a usual way in patriarchal societies "exchange (of women) . . . provides the means of binding men together"(Butler, 2006b, p.55). However, in this case exchange is not exactly that of exogamy, but a pattern of exchange with an ambiguous subject in the sense that, although these men exchange Snow White between themselves, it is Snow White who desires to enter their beds, or share her shower with them. Anyway, Snow White is in fact a Tall dark beauty!

The question to deal with is that who is really being exchanged; are these boys exchanging her as a means of pleasure stolen from her true love, or is it Snow White who is exchanging men in quest for a true love? Symbols speculate the exchange of Snow White in relation to the rules of patriarchy. In this respect these men steel Paul's typewriter. Taylor reflects on the subject of writing, one's pen resembles ones penis (2002, p.86) as their deed attests. In fact "when a boy passed through puberty, he was said to 'write man', and when an adulterer seduced another man's wife, he 'wrote him cuckold' "(Taylor, 2002, p.86). Besides, a typewriter is a mechanical pen which does its job through gentle touches of its buttons. Gentle touch would appeal to innuendo in the given context. So these men are symbolically steeling the fairy tale fiancée of Paul by stealing his typewriter.

Writing has got another aspect in this text. Snow White writes a four page dirty poem. "like the penis, the pen is a long cylindrical object, held in the hand, positioned above the passive white horizontal matter onto which it dispenses a precious fluid"(Taylor,2002, p. 86). So strongly a masculine device, this has been credited to Snow White in writing poetry. The poem seems to be "a dirty great poem four pages long"(Barthelme, 1967, p.11). With a masculine device of such a length, is not she impregnating the whole community of men around herself? Maybe that is the reason it is called a dirty poem in which "bandaged" perceives "wounded"; she wants to cure the wound before its appearance. What the wound would be, is a matter of wonder; the old wound she has gone through with her character throughout the centuries, or the wound she is going to create on the face of the old story by poisoning Paul.

All in all she is impregnating them not in its physical sense but metaphorically, in penetrating their beds and flourishing in their imagination. This can as well signify her being "a tall dark beauty", this is what she stands for, the subject. As Butler confirms, "the recasting of the matter of bodies will be in dissociable from regulatory norms that govern their materialization of significance of those material effects" (2005b, p.130). These norms are that of satisfaction and not of fertility in this sample society. As they express it "there is a river of girls and women in our street . . . we slipped into the facula carrying our baggage in long canvas tubes . . . the girls groaned under the additional weight . . . Bill began to beat time for the rowers"(Barthelme,1967, p.13). The norms of their society consider the population of women as one body wrapped in the attribution of a movement, that wavelike one of the river; through which they row, a rhythmical movement which according to Freud resembles that of intercourse (1953a, p.139). Apparently the 1960s second-wave feminism and the riots of women intervening men’s affairs in the real sense of the word disturbed the male society.

Anyhow, Paul is said to have a typewriter in comparison to Snow White's pen. Both of them have got the ability of impregnating a white paper. However, their definitions of work explain their difference in reference. Where the pen's length adds to the pleasure in its reference to long production, gentle touches of its buttons will makes a typewriter dispense
its fluid. Buttons playing the role of stones, are the signifiers of testicles in this matter, which considering their number in a typewriter leads to the idea of fertility, not that one of pleasure. The birth control pills and abortion rights of the time affirms the performativity of this assumption. Reconsidering this part of the frame, Paul is supposed to be a prince who rescues Snow White and marries her, that he has no hurry doing that, he is not in the mood of heroism, he just wants to have a beloved and does not dare/care approaching her. He adores her through his mirror.

Not only Snow White, other girls and women are also considered unattainable by them. One makes a remark that "more peacocks walked through the yard in their splendid plumage"(Barthelme, 1967, p.67). Peacocks have been considered to have hundreds of eyes on their plumage and the myth logically reminds one of Medusa's head. In this respect Freud also mentions about the use of this picture, Medusa's head, on Athena's dress and she becomes a "woman who is unapproachable and repels the terrifying genitals of the mother"(1974b, p. 213). That is the whole story; Snow White has got the privilege of individuation and is not going to be approached in the real sense of it anymore. She has internalized her role to marry a prince so she rejects all other lovers, she has poisoned her royal prince (through her subjectivity) so according to her internalization of her role she should wait for another prince, and she is not the working performativity the society asks her to be. Although she has an androgynous body to fill the place of the subjective object in that community, this very adaptation bereaves her of her practical identity.

What Barthelme puts into inquiry in his novel is not only the old characters of a fairy tale and their significance and validity, or the linguistic puzzles, but the performativity of their gender roles in time; Butler says that such "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names" (1993a, p.130). In fact this is the reiteration that makes Snow White a phallic appropriation of the body and prevents her fertility in that society.

Part of Snow White's appropriation for her role pertains to her studies about "Modern Woman" concerning ‘the nature and nurture of women and what they stand for’"(Barthelme, 1967, p.25). It seems that a simple misconception in the phrase 'stand for' has made Snow White, in the name an attribution of a part of her beauty or eroticism, stand for an individual woman. Unlike her falling long dark hair that hangs down as a fallen phallus and it seems that "there is probably some girl attached to it, at the top" (Barthelme, 1967, p.14), the most favorite pornographic view of all, she is described to be "a tall dark beauty"(Barthelme, 1967, p.3) a standing subject, though not a woman. The consequence of her description has the effect of negating the affirmation which in fact signifies the change in the performativity of a gender in relation to its body. Freud declares that "emancipating woman means emasculating man"(qtd. in Taylor, 2002, p.116). The subjectivity of Snow White in sleeping or refusing to sleep with different characters makes her emancipated, but the total emancipation of her comes the moment she causes the death of the old myth's ultimate subject. There comes the time when Snow White's poem, "a dirty long poem", succeeds to emasculate the old fairy tale and end it in its exhausted tail.

**Conclusion**

Every story is meant for a special reader. Although there is never that guarantee that the target reader be the addressee, the content seeks the receiver. The Grimm version of Snow White was meant for adults as they were trying to preserve the oral folklore of their country.
They were full of violence and cannibalism. The first version was dark where the mother herself tries to kill the daughter and eat her organs to gain her beauty. This darkness presents as, “Essentially, the Grimm Brothers contributed to the literary “bourgeoisification” of oral tales, which had belonged to the peasantry and lower classes and had been informed by the interests and aspirations of these groups” (Zipes, 1991, p.47). But the second version of Grimm story was more appropriate for children and the stepmother steps forward to take the task. In Disney version Snow White is not seven but fourteen or so to signify her marriage and eroticism. It is more a love story since Snow White sings of her love for the prince from the very beginning of the story. Barthelme stuffs the disputatious spirit of 1960s into the story and anticipates the next decade gay movement by emphasizing the masculine traits or even speculating the shared sexual aspect between heterosexuality and gay by wrapping a red towel round it and letting it dance its dance.

Works Cited