The Face in the Cloth Short Guide

The Face in the Cloth by Jane Yolen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

Contents

Overview

"This is a story about daughters carrying their mothers' images through their lives, something they feel (even if unconsciously) they have to live up to," says Yolen. "The Face in the Cloth" is a symbolic tale of a daughter carrying the burden of her dead, much-loved mother and how she sets aside that burden to claim her own life.

About the Author

Born on February 11, 1939, in New York City, Jane Yolen showed early promise as a writer; she wrote a play for her firstgrade class, and a piece on pirates written in the eighth grade was likely the source for her first published book, Pirates in Petticoats (1963).

Yolen wrote avidly while attending Smith College, producing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. She graduated in 1960 and took jobs with publishers, while still writing. Her success with books for young adults and younger children enabled her to move on to graduate school, earning a Master's in education in 1976 from the University of Massachusetts. She eventually returned to Smith College to teach. She has become one of America's most esteemed experts on literature for young readers. Amid the vigorous activity of her writing career, Yolen has married David Stemple, a college professor, and the two have three children, a daughter and two boys. Yolen's experiences with her family have inspired much of her writing, including her fantasies. In the case of "The Face in the Cloth," Yolen says that the story is a working out of the burden her daughter carried after she realized her mother was a famous author.

Many of Yolen's books have made recommended-reading lists such as the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults. Among these books is Here There Be Witches (1995), the volume in which "The Face in the Cloth" is to be found.

Setting

"The Face in the Cloth" features the ambiguous setting typical of most fairy tales.

Events take place in a land with a medieval culture, ruled by a king who lives in a castle surrounded by servants and courtiers. The land is a place where magic is real and interaction between people and magic, if not frequent, is at least not rare. When the King brings his daughter to the hut in the forest, he is well aware that magic is a possibility.

Social Sensitivity

The central issue of "The Face in the Cloth," the carrying of the mother's image by the daughter, is more a personal issue than a social one, and it transcends topicality— it is a universal issue that crosses cultures and social classes. That Yolen has chosen a princess to bear the burden of her theme rather than a commoner is more a result of her interest in fairy-tale king and queen figures than any reflection of social distinction. In fact, the symbolism of the story is such that every daughter is a princess to her father, and every mother a queen to her daughter. This generalization may not truly stretch to cover everyone, but it is likely that young and old readers alike will tacitly recognize these relationships. Further, it is typical of fairy tales to cut wide swaths of generalizations with their symbolism, and it is typical of their audiences to be intelligent enough to recognize that there may be exceptions to these generalizations.

The motivation of the Queen that moves her to set off the chain of events that lead to her death and to her daughter's burden is one of considerable social interest. She and her husband yearn to have children. Even though they are in love and happy with each other, they feel unhappiness at their lack of offspring. It worth noting how the grownups regard children as wanted, even necessary parts of their lives, and how the Queen's desperation is motivated by a love of children. When she enters into her agreement with the three sisters, even though she does not know what she must give to have a child, it is with the hope for a child for the child's sake, without hint of wanting any particular kind of child. In an era in which science offers ways for women to become pregnant that had not existed even a generation ago, with women willing to risk their own health for the prospect of having a child, the Queen stands as their representative, selflessly seeking to have and to love new life, a product of her and her husband's love.

Literary Qualities

According to Yolen, "I had begun this story because I loved the old fairy tales that open with a king and queen who want a child, tales like 'Snow White.'" The pattern and tone of "The Face in the Cloth" are those of a fairy tale. Fairy tales offer the opportunity to deal with broad human issues concisely, pulling together significant elements for close examination. Where a scholarly disquisition might take volumes to cover the issues related to a daughter carrying the image of her mother with her or a novel covering the same issues might be so long and diffuse as to bog down in its ideas, a fairy tale allows for the use of commonly recognized symbols that carry the burdens of large ideas. For instance, the daughter carrying an image of her mother around with her is a very big idea—images can reproach, criticize, encourage, confuse— and a daughter's life can be shaped by the image of her mother—affecting her relationship with her father, her friendships, and even who she chooses to love, yet in "The Face in the Cloth" the broad issues of the burden of the image are symbolized by a sewn image on a piece of cloth. The cloth is sewn on the Princess' cloaks, and she wraps those cloaks around her, trying to stay warm, but always being cold. There, in a sharply depicted image, all the aspects of the daughter's image of her mother are summarized, allowing the author to work with them in a manner that can be plainly understood by her audience without as much long-winded explanation as is found here.

Themes and Characters

"The Face in the Cloth" is written in graceful language and tells a simple tale, and it may be enjoyed for those reasons alone. But if one is to understand what the tale is about, one must recognize that it is almost entirely a story of symbols, with the action existing primarily to move the symbols from one place to another.

Yolen writes of the Princess: There was never a time that the bloom of health sat on her cheeks. She remained the color of skimmed milk, the color of ocean foam, the color of second-day snow. She was always cold, sitting huddled for warmth inside her picture cloak even on the hottest days, and nothing could part her from it.

The Princess was not brought to this state by cruelty or hatred, but by love.

Instead of a cruel domineering mother, she had one who wanted to love her and who loved her father. Her father had the magical portrait of her mother sewn into her cloak out of grief and out of love for both mother and daughter. She wears her cloak out of love for a mother she has known only through the portrait. It is important to the development of the story's unifying theme that the suffering of the characters was not motivated out of hate, cruelty, or bitterness, but out of enduring love. The Princess bears a burden no one actually meant for her to have; she bears it because she must.

What is the unifying theme? This is summed up in the image on the cloth but is not so easily explained. One of the reasons that fairy tales endure in popularity for authors and their audiences is their ability to sum up significant ideas in symbols, a kind of shorthand that renders an abstract idea concrete, enabling people to visualize it. The theme, to borrow from Yolen's own words, is "daughters carrying their mothers' images through their lives." Yolen explains that she sees this as an issue in her own life, with her carrying her mother with her, and her own daughter carrying her image.

In the context of the story, the carrying of the mother's image can be a great burden, especially if the mother was much loved and esteemed, as the Queen was. When the Princess was born, the mother died, and "no one in the kingdom knew whether to laugh or cry except the babe, who did both."

Innocent of her mother's premature death, the baby is oblivious to the loss, but as she grows up the Princess cannot escape the presence of her mother. Even without the magical image, she would find her mother in her father's grief and in the kingdom's remembrance of her. Joy and sorrow all at once is a difficult burden indeed to bear.

The idea of carrying the mother's image is enriched by the sewing motif: Needles and scissors, Scissors and pins, Where one life ends, Another begins.

This refrain, repeated through most of the story, captures nicely the notion of death and birth: the Mother's death—the daughter's birth; and it is echoed in the daughter's journey to the forest hut: life at court ends— life at the hut begins; and it is echoed again

at the story's ending: the life carrying the image is over—a new life for the Princess begins. It also indicates a unifying factor in the story, the stitching of lives together. The stitches in the cloth appear as the Queen's life ebbs: "As he [the King] looked at it [the cloth], his wife's likeness began to appear on it slowly, as if being stitched in with a crimson thread." Crimson thread, life's blood, the daughter and mother are linked at the moment of birth and death. The second sister insists upon the image: "Our lives have been sewn together by a queen's desire," she declares. The stitching includes not only mother and daughter, but mother and husband, father and daughter, and those whose lives have touched theirs, including the three sisters.

In "The Face in the Cloth," the task facing the Princess is a solitary one. Her father "thought of his daughter asleep like a waning moon, and wept," but he cannot be the instrument of her freedom. When he leaves his daughter at the hut "Behind him the briars closed over the path, and the forest was still." He is cut off from his daughter. Although the hut seems to be the same one where the Queen found the sisters, they are not there. The Princess "wondered that she was not more afraid, and tried out different emotions: first fear, then bewilderment, then loneliness; but none of them seemed quite real to her."

In this state of isolation and emotional uncertainty, the daughter finally faces the issue of her mother, whose image has been her constant companion throughout her life. As in the refrain, she has "needle, scissors, and pin," and with these, without at first realizing it, she begins to remake her life, one that is better proportioned, where country, home, and family share her attention. Her first effort brings an unconscious sigh of relief from her. Gradually unstitching her mother's image, she sews new ones of home and countryside, and "Beneath the hut, as she sewed, letters appeared, though she did not touch them"—the refrain appears, a reminder of the interconnections, and the cutting of them.

In sewing, scissors are an important tool; thread never uncut would unravel through cloth, tying pieces together and perhaps making it impossible for people to move about. The scissors are also a necessary part of the daughter's coming to terms with her relationship to her mother. "She had to use up the rest of her mother's thread before she was free"; the Princess must remake her life, must take her mother's image into her hands and refashion it into a life of her own. Her doing this in solitude may represent the psychological aspect of her freeing herself from her burden; this is, the story implies, something a daughter must do for herself, others cannot do it for her.

Another motif of the story, one that binds the ending to the beginning, is that of having to give up what one least wishes to part with in order to get what one most wishes to receive. What that would have been had the three sisters been allowed to wait on the Queen during childbirth—"Beware, O King, of promises given," a warning intended more for the audience than the King, who has no idea what it means. In any case, the consequences of the birth of the daughter— that which the Queen most desired—results in the Queen's death—perhaps her own life was what she least wished to give.

In order to make his daughter healthy— that which he most desires—the King must give her up, which he does. In order to free herself, at the end the daughter must surrender that which she least wishes to part with, the burden, symbolized by the cloak, that she has wrapped herself in for all her life, which has given her comfort: "she would give them the cloak. She knew that once it was given, she could go." She cherished her mother's image, but had to free herself from its dominance of her life in order to be independent, to be her own person and not a sickly reflection of another. Carried to its logical conclusion, the story indicates that for a woman to be healthy, she must free herself of the burden of trying to be someone else.

Topics for Discussion

1. What was it that the Princess least desired to give?

2. What does the carrying of the image of the mother on every cloak worn by the Princess represent? Why does the image grow larger as the Princess grows and the sizes of her cloaks grow?

3. Why does the King not take the image of the Queen from his daughter? Would he be helping her? How would she react?

4. Why was the Princess always wearing the cloak, even on hot days?

5. Would the Princess know how to bake bread?

6. "She had to use up the rest of her mother's thread before she was free."

From what would she be free?

7. What was it that the Queen least desired to give?

8. What was it that the King least desired to give?

9. Why do fairy tales often deal in absolutes such as having to give what one least wants to give in order to receive what one wants most? Why is there not room for negotiation?

10. What does the second sister mean when she says to the King, "Our lives have been sewn together by a queen's desire"?

11. If the King and Queen are in love and happy with each other, why are they unhappy about not having children?

12. What might have happened if the King had allowed the three sisters into his castle to attend to his wife?

13. The magic of the sisters seems to result in the death of the Queen. Does this make them evil? They seem to be instrumental in liberating the Princess.

Does this make them good?

14. If the Princess were to be in a childless marriage, and like her mother she wanted children, would she go to the three sisters for help as her mother had?

15. In what ways does modern technology parallel the magic in "The Face in the Cloth"? Is the technology viewed by people the way the characters in "The Face in the Cloth" view the magic?

16. When the Princess returns to the castle how will her life change? What will her relationship with her father be like?

17. In the end, is the image of her mother forever banished from the Princess' life?

18. As the King watches the Queen's face appear in thread on the cloth, what is happening? What does the thread represent?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Needles and scissors,/Scissors and pins,/ Where one life ends, /Another begins. This verse appears often in the narrative of "The Face in the Cloth." What does it represent in the story? What are the various ways in which it is worked out in the action and the characters?

2. Fairy tales often are intended to portray a truth about human nature. What do psychologists say about the motherdaughter relationship symbolized in "The Face in the Cloth"? How do daughters typically respond to carrying the burden of their mothers?

3. Sewing is a motif used throughout "The Face in the Cloth." What are the ways in which it is used? What are sewn together? How does the sewing motif help unify the narrative?

4. What figures in Ancient Greek mythology sew images into cloth? How many are there of them? What happens when they sew? Does the sewing in "The Face in the Cloth" have similar effects?

5. What message does Yolen have for daughters in "The Face in the Cloth"?

How does she build this message through images and action?

6. Is it easy for a daughter to free herself from her mother's image? Is it desirable? What are the consequences of doing so?

7. Yolen has published a book containing several stories of witches titled Here There Be Witches. What are the different kinds of witches she includes? How are they distinct from one another? What characteristics do they share that make each a witch? Does Yolen have a consistent vision of what a witch is?

For Further Reference

Hutt, Karen. Booklist 92, 4 (October 15, 1995): 397. If not enthusiastic, Hutt at least likes Here There Be Witches.

"Jane (Hyatt) Yolen." In Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series. Volume 29.

Edited by Hal May and James G. Lesniak.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1990, pp. 463469. A summary of Yolen's publications, with a brief interview of Yolen.

Scanlon, Donna L. School Library Journal 41, 12 (December 1995): 110. A review of Here There Be Witches that praises its poetry as well as fiction.

Telgen, Diane. "Jane Yolen." In her Something about the Author. Volume 75. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp. 223-229. A list of Yolen's publications, with a short biography.

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." Children's Literature in Education 8 (1977): 2129. Yolen discusses the history of the Cinderella fairy tale, explaining that she prefers the strong character of the original tale to the weakened versions in modern retellings.

——. "Jane Yolen: The Bardic Munchies."

Locus 26 (January 1991): 4, 78. Yolen discusses why she thinks writing for children is challenging, as well as what she regards as important elements in her fiction.

——. "Jane Yolen." In Jim Roginski's Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985, pp. 224-238. In an interview with Roginski, Yolen explains why she writes what she does.

——. "Jane Yolen: Telling Tales."Locus 39 (August 1997): 4-5, 72. In an interview, Yolen talks about the creative process involved in composing her works.

——. Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood. New York: Philomel Books, 1981. Yolen explains why she prefers tough characters, noting that they help to clarify the differences between good and evil by defying evil.

——. The Writer (March 1997): 20. Yolen is interviewed by John Koch. She explains her views about style, as well discussing why she enjoys writing.

——. Writing Books for Children. Boston: The Writer, 1983 (revised edition). A discussion of how to write books for children, emphasizing technique.

Related Titles

Yolen has written many fairy tales that feature dragons, unicorns, and even angels.

In many of these, family relationships are emphasized. In her witch stories in particular, issues of central interest to women abound. In these stories, the witches themselves are usually not the main issue, a deviance from typical feminist writing in which witches represent women persecuted for their power to give life (through childbirth) by patriarchal culture. Instead, the issues tend to be intimate ones, as found in "The Face in the Cloth." On the other hand, Yolen is willing to tackle broad social issues in stories such as "The Woman Who Loved a Bear" (please see separate entry).

In that story, the witch-figure is actually male, and the story is about a woman overcoming the oppressive forces of an alien society with the help of a sensitive man.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996