

# **Fairest of All: A Tale of the Wicked Queen Study Guide**

**Fairest of All: A Tale of the Wicked Queen by Serena Valentino**

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# Plot Summary

"Fairest of All" is an adaptation of the classic Disney story "Snow White", which itself is an adaptation of a Grimm's Fairy Tale. In this novel, the reader follows the story of the classic evil queen but is given insight into her psychology and what motivates the queens in her wicked ways.

The novel opens on the day of the King and Queen's wedding. The Queen is overwhelmed with happiness: she is marrying the man of her dreams and becoming the mother to his beautiful four-year-old daughter, Snow White. She is surrounded by a country of people who admire her beauty and adore her as their Queen. The Queen grew up in a unloving home. Her mother died in childbirth and her father seems to have hated her since the moment she was born. He despises the Queen for killing her mother and he has reminded her how useless, ugly, and horrible she is every day of her life. Her father was a respected mirror maker, and when the Queen is married, the King arranges for a beautiful mirror from her father's shop to be presented to the Queen as a wedding gift: a beautiful memory of her now deceased father. Even though the Queen is overwhelmed by happiness, the mirror gives her an uneasy feeling of dread that threatens to ruin her day.

In the days that follow, happiness fills the castle as the new family enjoys their lives together. The Queen wholeheartedly embraces her role as Snow White's stepmother and the two form a loving, supportive relationship: they truly act like mother and daughter. Their happiness is shattered when their land goes to war and King must support his troops in battle. He comes and goes in and out of their lives during the first few years of marriage, until one horrible day when he doesn't come home at all. The news of her husband's death shatters the Queen. Initially, she and Snow White cling to each other: the only family they have left. The Queen becomes fiercely protective of her daughter, refusing to let anyone upset her. When the King's three strange cousins come to visit, the Queen banishes them from the castle for teasing Snow White. The cousins speak cryptically, as if they are cursing the Queen and her household.

Around the same time, the giant mirror the Queen had hidden away after her wedding day reappears at the foot of her bed. When the Queen unwraps it, she sees a familiar face swirling in the glass: her father's face. Her father, who calls himself as the Queen's Slave, says that he can see throughout the entire land and can answer any of the Queen's questions. He is bound to tell her the truth, regardless of how painful it may be for him. Distraught, the Queen clings to the only thing she knows to be true. That she is beautiful. She has never heard her father say that he loves her or that she is beautiful and she is desperate for affection. She stares into her father's eyes and asks, "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Bound to tell the truth, her father must admit that the Queen is the fairest in the land. Each day the Queen wakes and asks the mirror who is the fairest in the land, and each day, the mirror replies that she is. Even though hearing her father admit that she is beautiful should please the Queen, she becomes obsessed with the question, obsessed with the new control she has over her father.



And then one day everything changes. The mirror answers that Snow White is the fairest in the land. The Queen is crushed. She has lost everything good in her life: her mother, her husband, and now, her beauty. It is the last thing she can control and her obsession has hardened her heart. Using black magic that she learns from the King's strange cousins, the Queen poisons an apple and feeds it to Snow White, sending her into a deep sleep that can only be broken by love's first kiss. Seeing her daughter lying close to death on the floor threatens to break the Queen's heart. She sees that love for her daughter is more valuable than her beauty. Devastated, she runs into the woods and jumps off a cliff. In the days that follow, Snow White's prince finds her, kisses her, and wakes her from her curse. The two are married and Snow White inherits the Queen's enchanted mirror. When she gazes upon it the first time, the face of the Queen appears. "I love you, my beautiful little bird," the Queen says to her daughter. "I always have, and I always will" (Pages 249 - 250).



# Chapters 1 & 2: Rose Petals, Kisses & Cake, Dragons and Knights

## Chapters 1 & 2: Rose Petals, Kisses & Cake, Dragons and Knights Summary

The novel opens on the scene of the King and Queen's wedding ceremony. Flowers are draped over the stone well and the castle's grand staircase in celebration. Hundreds of attendants help dress the beautiful bride who seems to have come into the King's life by magic. The bride stands alone in her room admiring herself in the mirror. She cannot believe how happy she is: she's marrying the man she loves, becoming a mother a beautiful little girl, yet there's something in the mirror that she cannot shake, a negative feeling threatening her happiness. Her lady in waiting, Verona, and the bride's new daughter, Snow White, enter the room to tell her stepmother how beautiful she looks. The new Queen's heart melts at the sight of Snow White, only four-years-old, her perfect little daughter. Bringing her eyes back to the reflection in the mirror, the Queen thinks about her own mother and how nice it would have been to have her here.

The Queen remembers the first time she set eyes on the King. He had visited her father's mirror making studio to purchase a new piece. He saw the Queen and immediately fell in love with her beauty. His first wife had passed away unexpectedly and now he needed a new wife to help him raise his beautiful daughter, Snow White. In the days after the King's visit, the Queen's father suddenly died. In what appeared to be homage to his work, the Queen brought out every one of his mirrors and hung them in the trees reflecting light upon the leaves. Travelers came from far and wide to see this beautiful display, including the King. After that, the King visited regularly and soon, asked the Queen for her hand in marriage. Today is the day the Queen has been waiting her whole life: her wedding day. The entire castle is filled with well-wishers, including the King's remaining family. Three of his cousins, strange, old women who complete each other's sentences and lurk about like gargoyles, have come to join in the celebration. Throughout the ceremony, the Queen tries to calm her insecurities: these people are here to rejoice with her, not to ridicule her. When she and the King share their first married kiss, the Queen feels nothing but bliss. True love and true happiness overwhelm her. She reaches out for her new daughter and embraces her.

After the evening celebrations are complete, the King and Queen walk to their bedroom where the King has a beautifully wrapped gift awaiting his new wife. It is a stunning, ornate mirror from the Queen's father's shop. A terrible sense of fear coils in the Queen's heart, but she refuses to let it ruin her day. She thanks her new husband for the gift and kisses him passionately. In the days that follow, the Queen wholeheartedly embraces her new role in the family. She adores planning meals for her husband and entertaining their beautiful daughter. The King entrusts the Queen with a heart-shaped box continuing all of his first wife's letters to Snow. He asks her to share the notes when



Snow is old enough to understand. Their lives are complete bliss: no one could be happier. Every night before Snow goes to bed, the Queen tells her fantastic stories of a beautiful, misunderstood woman who could turn into a dragon. Although the family enjoys peaceful happiness in their lives together, it soon comes to an abrupt end. Even though he has just gotten married, the King must leave for battle. He doesn't know how long he'll be away, but he promises to return safely to his family.

## Chapters 1 & 2: Rose Petals, Kisses & Cake, Dragons and Knights Analysis

In the opening section of the novel, many readers will be surprised to see the Queen from Disney's classic tale, Snow White, portrayed in a sympathetic light. Generally considered to be one of the most villainous witches of all time, the Queen is portrayed here as a loving, doting mother. Already in the first scene, foreshadowing to the Queen's obsession with her reflection is created. The ominous feeling that overtakes the new Queen as she gazes at her reflection is likely due to the fact that throughout her entire childhood, she was told she was ugly and worthless. Even though she sees a beautiful woman staring back at her in the glass, the Queen doesn't believe that she is truly beautiful, so why should the King love her? On her wedding day, the Queen thinks about her deceased mother and how wonderful it would have been to share this moment with her. In a way, the Queen and Snow White are kindred spirits for having both lost their mothers in childbirth. While the Queen hopes to break the cycle of emotional abuse and depression by acting as a doting, loving mother to her new daughter, readers familiar with Snow White's story already know that it will be impossible. Fairest of All promises to be an intense psychological study of the Queen and her wickedness. From the opening section, it seems clear that most of the Queen's evil stems from her broken relationship with her parents.

It is interesting to note that when the Queen's father died, she hung all his mirrors in the woods. While many visitors assumed it was an homage to her father's fine work, the Queen admits that it was the first time she felt in control of her own life. For the first time, she controlled the way light played off the beautiful glass. For the first time, she saw beauty in her own reflection. As a wedding gift, the King arranges for one of the mirror makers most beautiful mirrors to be brought into the castle as a memory of the Queen's father. Although she has no idea what the mirror contains, the Queen is filled with a sense of dread. Rather than explain her discomfort with the gift, the Queen pushes her emotions aside. It is also interesting to note that the King's three strange cousins, Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha are present at the wedding. They seem to have the ability to see into the Queen's soul, a magic that will deeply affect the Queen later in life.

Before Snow White falls asleep each night, the loving Queen sits by her bed and tells her stories. In an act of clear foreshadowing, the Queen creates a tale of a beautiful woman who one day turns into a terrible dragon. The woman, who is "sad, lonely, and greatly misunderstood ... enchants a young princess into a deep sleep for her own safety" (Page 27). This story is a direct parallel to the classic Snow White story and offers hints into what will later be the Queen's madness. In the story, the Queen claims



the woman transforms into a terrible dragon because no one loved her. No one loved her because "she didn't love herself. She feared rejection ... [and] was so full of fear that she sequestered herself away" (Page 28). Readers familiar with the classic Snow White tale will recognize these traits in the evil Queen as well.



# Chapters 3 & 4: Mirror Mirror & Apple Blossoms

## Chapters 3 & 4: Mirror Mirror & Apple Blossoms Summary

With the King gone, the Queen dedicates all her time to caring for Snow White. She organizes picnics in the woods and breakfasts in bed. The pair spends a good amount of time visiting Snow White's mother's grave, as the Queen is conscious of Snow White losing a connection to her birth mother. At every turn, the Queen's lady-in-waiting, Verona, seems to anticipate the Queen's needs: drawing her a hot bath, laying out her favorite clothes, preparing the perfect meals to cheer her when she misses her husband. One afternoon after taking a long, hot bath, the Queen emerges from the tub and is startled to see a man's face reflected in her mirror. She tries to convince herself that it's a trick of the light, but when the man's face speaks, the Queen nearly passes out with fear. She screams and knocks the mirror from the wall, smashing the glass into a thousand pieces. Verona rushes into the room but the Queen cannot admit what she's seen: surely Verona will think she's insane. Attendants come to clean up the mess.

A few days later, the Queen takes Snow White to the Apple Blossom Festival in town, hoping to cheer the sullen girl's mood. Surrounded by the beautiful flowers, the Queen notices what a truly beautiful child Snow White is: "The Queen notices how striking the light pink petals looked in Snow's dark hair, and noted to herself that she should have a dress of the lightest pink made for Snow" (Page 46). At the festival, the Queen receives the wonderful news that her husband will be returning home from battle today. She rushes home to prepare an elaborate meal in celebration. When the King returns home, jubilation resounds through the castle walls, yet the Queen notices that her husband has returned a changed man: scars have marred his once handsome face, his beard is ungroomed, and his eyes are weighted with sorrow and confusion. Still, the Queen views her husband as the most handsome man on the planet and she embraces him in true love. The young family embraces but their happiness is suddenly shaken when an explosion blasts through the walls of the castle. Screams of terror erupt in the halls as the enemy army gallops into the hall. The King does his best to hold the men at bay, but soon grabs his wife and daughter and rushes through the castle's secret passageways and thrusts them onto a small boat. He rushes back into the castle to fight off the enemy, leaving the Queen and Snow White shaking and crying on the water. Hours later, the King returns, battle-worn and solemn. The attack is over and he brings his family back to the castle. When they return, the Queen finds, to her horror, that the broken mirror has been repaired and returned to her chamber.





## Chapters 3 & 4: Mirror Mirror & Apple Blossoms Analysis

In this section, the Queen continues her role as a doting, loving stepmother to Snow. One of their favorite activities is visiting the grave of Snow's birth mother and reading letters the deceased woman wrote to Snow before her passing. These visits are therapeutic for Snow as well as the Queen, who feels a strong emotional connection to the letters herself: she never met her own mother and feels sure that had she lived, they would have shared an unbreakable bond. The Queen hopes to recreate this bond with Snow White and giving her full access to her birth mother is the first step. The Queen so embraces this new role that she keeps the letters - stored in a wooden dowry box - under lock and key.

At the apple blossom festival, the Queen notices for the first time how truly beautiful Snow White is. At this time, the Queen isn't jealous of that beauty but seeks to enhance it with flattering shades of cloth in the girl's clothes. This is an important distinction because it shows that the Queen's jealousy is not innate. It isn't until the introduction of the face in the mirror that the Queen becomes obsessed with comparing other's beauty to her own. This distinction can also be seen in the Queen's relationship with Verona. Later in the novel, the Queen sends Verona to a distant land to erase her beauty from the kingdom. Now, the Queen adores her new best friend and, like with Snow White, seeks to enhance her friend's beauty.

When the King returns home, the Queen notices how different her husband appears. Again, the Queen is not distraught by his haggard appearance (later in the novel she would likely be disgusted by it) and embraces him for his true beauty - the beauty in his soul. The King's drastic change in appearance depicts the wear true life has on one's looks. Once a handsome, dashing man, the King is now battle-worn, scarred, and solemn. His character change highlights the attributes that should be truly valued in a person: their loyalty, honor, and dedication, certainly not their beauty.

Also in this section, the Queen's mirror is broken and then miraculously repaired. It had been shattered into a thousand pieces and would be impossible to repair without magic. This is the first ominous clue that dark forces have and black magic surround the mirror.



# Chapters 5 & 6: A Trick of the Light & The Odd Sisters

## Chapters 5 & 6: A Trick of the Light & The Odd Sisters Summary

The King announces that he must once again leave the castle to join his troops in battle. The Queen is terrified not only by her thoughts of the King's death but by terrible nightmares of the face in the mirror. Although she knows she should be able to tell her husband her worries, she doesn't know how to explain her aversion to the mirror without sounding crazy. When the King departs, the Queen covers the mirror with a heavy curtain. Still, the Queen is plagued by nightmares - in some, a man climbs from the mirror and lies in a blood-covered pool of broken glass. In others, she sees her reflection "not like her beautiful self, but haggard, wart-covered, and aged" (Page 61). She fears that demons have invaded her soul. Verona begins to worry about the Queen and urges her to leave her chambers, to sit in the sunlight for once. Boldly, the Queen tells her lady-in-waiting about her nightmares, bracing herself for Verona's look of shock. But it never comes. Verona embraces the Queen and tells her not to worry. She's not going mad, she's probably just exhausted.

That same morning, a messenger arrives with a note announcing the arrival of the King's three distant cousins: Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha. The Queen remembers meeting the sisters at her wedding, and remembers how uncomfortable their stares made her. She is not looking forward to their visit. When they arrive, the sisters take the Queen's breath away: "The indistinguishable triplets exited from a black horse-drawn carriage. Their long faces were painted a ghastly white, their cheeks were blushed with the brightest pink, and the center of their lips were painted a vivid red, which created a tiny bow-like effect. They resembled broken dolls, once loved but long forgotten. Their hair was glossy black streaked with white and adorned with red feathers. They looked like the oddest of beasts, and they walked in a way that brought to mind pecking birds" (Page 66). As soon as they arrive, the sisters request to have tea with Snow White and barrage her with questions about her new mother: Do you like her? Does she lock you away? Does she shield you from your own beauty? Their conversation turns dark as the sisters cackle and say that if they were Snow White's mothers, they'd chop her up into little pieces and make a potion out of her. Snow White runs from the room with tears in her eyes as the sisters make a chilling plan to lure the little girl into the woods. When the Queen hears of how upset the sisters have made her precious "little bird," she demands that they stop teasing her. The sisters immediately apologize and ask to take Snow White into the woods for a picnic to apologize. The Queen accepts their offer.



## Chapters 5 & 6: A Trick of the Light & The Odd Sisters Analysis

In this section, the man in the mirror continues to haunt the Queen even when she cannot see his face. Throughout the novel, the Queen has a variety of nightmares foreshadowing the events of the final chapters - when the Queen tries to kill Snow White. There is a constant question raised in the novel: is the man in the mirror real or is he a figment of the insane Queen's imagination? In this, the early stages of his presence, the Queen is obviously exhausted and emotionally fatigued. Her husband has once again left for battle. Her family has been under attack. She is the sole guardian for a four-year-old child and temporary ruler of the entire kingdom. Certainly no one would blame her if she began seeing things in her delirium. The fact that the man in the mirror will later be revealed to be the Queen's father only supports this theory: the emotional damage of her childhood, which she has spent many years trying to suppress, now manifest themselves as a "ghost" in her adulthood. Psychologically speaking, this is a realistic representation of an emotionally scarred woman. The presence of the three sisters, however, exacerbates the Queen's problems as they manipulate her emotional vulnerability for their personal pleasure. In this section, the sisters taunt Snow White, cruelly teasing the girl for their own amusement. It's unclear whether the sisters' words directly foreshadow the novel's plot - as if the sisters can see into the future - or if they are planting seeds in the Queen's mind, which her madness will later manipulate into the scheme to kill Snow White.



# Chapters 7 & 8: Mirrors and Light & The Man in the Mirror

## Chapters 7 & 8: Mirrors and Light & The Man in the Mirror Summary

The Queen receives word that her husband will be home in two weeks' time, just in time for the winter solstice. The Queen arranges a beautiful party to celebrate his return and to celebrate the changing of the season. She knows she has packed a variety of solstice decorations from her childhood home, and begins opening boxes she hasn't even thought of since moving to the castle. Immediately, she is filled with dread as memories of her childhood rush over her. Verona helps the Queen unpack and speaking boldly, says that she doesn't trust the sisters to be alone with Snow White. The two friends laugh about the triplets' peculiarities and continue decorating for the party. On the day of the solstice party, Snow White walks into the woods with the strange sisters. She comes running back from the picnic with tears streaming down her face. She tells her Mother that once again, the sisters threatened to chop her up into little pieces or feed her a poisoned apple that would make her sleep forever. The Queen is incensed, not only that the sisters would disobey her orders, but that they would upset her precious daughter.

The King arrives home and happily embraces his wife and daughter. He admires the beautiful decorations for the winter solstice and compliments his wife for her hard work. Although the King seems genuinely happy, the Queen can't help but notice the way war has changed his demeanor. Suddenly, the three sisters arrive dripping wet and covered in mud. They claim that Snow White tricked them into falling into a well and that she's a horrible, spoiled child. When he hears this, the King grabs Snow by the arm and shouts in her face. Outraged, the Queen pounces on her husband, rescues Snow, and turns on the sisters. She orders them out of the court at once, banning them from the castle for as long as they live. The Queen smiles wickedly at the sisters, orders the King to kiss his daughter and tell her how much he loves her, and spins away, her cape whirling behind her.

That night, the King apologizes for his actions. Now that the Queen has filled him in on the sister's cruel behavior, he agrees with their banishment. The Queen tries to explain her emotional outburst - she knows how painful a father's anger can be - and finally explains her aversion to the mirror citing her father's horrific emotional abuse. The King understands and apologizes profusely. He leaves the Queen alone in her room and goes to tend to Snow. When the King is gone, the Queen is startled by a man's voice in her room: "Good evening, my Queen" (Page 101). The Queen knows immediately where the voice is coming from but she refuses to acknowledge the mirror. The voice continues to taunt her until she is forced to throw back the curtains and start into the face reflecting back at her. The face of her father.



## Chapters 7 & 8: Mirrors and Light & The Man in the Mirror Analysis

In this section, the Queen prepares to celebrate Winter Solstice with Snow White. She readies the castle not only for the King's return, but for the year's celebration when light returns to the kingdom. Winter Solstice, or the time of the year when the sun is at its lowest altitude above the horizon, is meant to be a time when light is victorious over dark and its description in the novel creates a strong parallel to the mirrors hung in the woods after the Queen's father's death (another instance in which good champions over evil) but this time, emotional shadows linger in the castle. The King's second homecoming is not nearly as festive or joyous as his first. The King is an even further changed man: his scars and battle wounds deeper, his mood black and angry. The Queen is overjoyed to see her husband but wickedly snaps at him to protect her daughter. It's clear that the queer sisters have had a dark effect on the castle. Not only have the tormented Snow White and angered the queen, they have physically tracked dirt and mud into the castle, symbolic of the emotional stains of their presence on the royal family's life.

Readers see the first glimpses of the classic "evil" Queen in this section. The first inkling of envy sprouts as the Queen jealously notes how wonderful it would be to experience the winter solstice as a child again. The rage she feels toward her husband, masked as motherly protection, foreshadows the wicked way the Queen can turn on her loved ones. In that moment, she doesn't care who she hurts - physically, spiritually, or emotionally - her message simply must be heard. Later, the Queen apologizes for lashing out and explains why she must fiercely protect Snow White. During this explanation, readers also begin to understand the Queen's obsession with youth and beauty: growing up, her father always told her she was ugly and worthless.



# Chapters 9 & 10: The Maker of Mirrors & The Shattering of a Soul

## Chapters 9 & 10: The Maker of Mirrors & The Shattering of a Soul Summary

Hearing the Queen's scream, the King rushes back into her chambers to find her weeping on the floor. Without admitting that she has seen her father's face in the mirror, the Queen further explains the scars of her father's abuse. Her entire childhood, he told her that she was ugly, worthless, and unlovable. She vowed to forget her past and start afresh with the King but the mirror makes that impossible. Without a word, the King wraps up the mirror and sends it far away from the castle. The King embraces his wife and vows his undying love and affection for her, but a few days later, leaves yet again to join his troops in battle. Months pass and the Queen feels depression darkening her soul. Not even Snow White's sweet laughter can cheer her. One afternoon, a servant girl delivers a letter from the three sisters: "For your hospitality," it reads (Page 119). The servant returns, struggling to carry a large package. Before she unwraps it, the Queen knows exactly what is inside: the mirror. She orders the servant out of her room and unwraps the glass. The face is waiting for her, "Good morning my Queen ... you have been lonely" (Page 120). He claims to be able to see throughout the entire kingdom and into the soul of each person in the land. Tempted, the Queen asks about her husband in battle. The Man in the Mirror recounts a horrific scene of the King with a bloodied face raising his sword in the air: "he is proud but brave. A true warrior" (Page 121). The man continues to describe the scene as an enemy fighter sneaks up behind the King and stabs him in the chest with his sword. The Queen shouts for the voice to stop speaking, but there is no stopping the truth. A few moments later, word from the battlefield confirms what she saw in the mirror. The King is dead.

## Chapters 9 & 10: The Maker of Mirrors & The Shattering of a Soul Analysis

In this section, the reader learns more about the Queen's abusive childhood. Her father hated her from the moment she was born and never wasted an opportunity to remind her of that. He treated her as a slave, telling her that no one would ever love her and that if they did, it was because she had bewitched them. For a reason yet to be revealed, his soul has become trapped in this magic mirror. Although he is cursed to be confined within the tiny mirror, he can travel throughout the land and into the townsfolk's hearts upon the Queen's bidding. It bears mentioning that the Slave's presence in the Queen's life is directly proportionate to her depression surrounding the King's departure. The longer the King is gone, the more frequently the Slave appears in the mirror. It is possible that the entire apparition can be explained away by the Queen's emotional state. However, the fact that the odd sisters send the mirror to thank the Queen for her



hospitality shows that the manipulative sisters are out for revenge. It's clear that the Queen was not hospitable: she banished the sisters from the kingdom, so the thank-you gift is especially menacing. Now that the King is dead, the reader can expect the Queen to sink further into depression and madness, and for the mirror to take on a more vital role in her life.



# Chapters 11 & 12: Farewells & The Queen in Solitude

## Chapters 11 & 12: Farewells & The Queen in Solitude Summary

The Queen feels haunted by her husband's death. In the days that follow, she imagines his hand resting on her shoulder, his voice booming through the hallways, his silhouette in the distance. In the weeks that follow, the Slave has not shown his face in the mirror and the Queen finds herself craving his visit. If the Slave can see into the heart of man, maybe he can see into the netherworld, maybe he can assure her that the King's soul is safe. Despite her desires, the Queen feels utterly alone during the funeral ceremony. The King's relatives attend from far and wide, including his triplet cousins. Too exhausted to remind the sisters of their banishment, the Queen orders a room to be readied for their arrival. After the funeral, the Queen lies in bed for weeks, refusing to see any visitors, including Snow White. She fears that her depression will only frighten the girl. She longs to be happy and bright for her daughter but cannot even bring herself to smile. Verona is particularly worried about the Queen's black mood and urges her friend to take meals in the sunshine. The Queen refuses.

In the days that follow, the triplets make many efforts to visit the Queen. They seem particularly interested in her mirror and whether or not it is performing its duties. Puzzled, the Queen asks what the sisters mean. With a chuckle, the sisters admit the whole story: when the Queen's parents were unable to conceive a child, her father sold his soul to the sisters in exchange for a baby. The Queen's mother died in childbirth and her father spent the rest of his life hating her for stealing his beloved bride. When he died, the sisters trapped his soul in the mirror for all eternity. They teach the Queen how to call the Slave, her father, into the mirror, and how to force the Slave to perform her bidding. With a sneer, the Queen sends the sisters from her room and calls her father into the glass. She has been waiting her whole life to hear her father tell her she is beautiful, after years of his emotional abuse have scarred her soul. Knowing that the Slave must tell the truth, the Queen asks who is the fairest in the land. "You are, my Queen," the Slave replies (Page 149).

## Chapters 11 & 12: Farewells & The Queen in Solitude Analysis

In the wake of her husband's death, it's clear that the Queen is depressed. She rarely leaves her room and refuses all visitors, even her beloved daughter, Snow White. This section sets the stage for when the Queen lives in complete solitude, her mirror her only companion. It's interesting to note that when the man is missing from the mirror, the Queen longs for his presence. Even though her father was a horrible man, there's still a





part of the Queen that longs for his affection. She has no real family of her own, so in grief, it's understandable that the Queen would reach out to her father for support, especially now that he is enslaved to her service. There are many reasons why the Queen refuses to see Snow White during her mourning, not the least of which being that seeing the girl's face reminds the Queen too much of her dead husband. There's a strong bond between the girl and her father - a bond that will later be mirrored by the Queen's unbreakable bond with the man in the mirror - and it is simply too painful for the Queen to bear. Although it's not mentioned in the text, this connection could be fuel to the fire of the Queen's jealousy. By blood, Snow White will always be connected to the King: he will always be apart of her, while the Queen, on the other hand, has nothing but her memories to connect her to the King.

After weeks of weeping, the Queen finally brings herself to gaze upon her reflection in the mirror: "She stared at herself, broken and numb. She looked ragged and haggard. Her swollen eyes and puffy cheeks accentuated her blemishes and other imperfections" (Page 139). For the first time, the Queen sees herself as her father had represented her all those years: as broken and ugly. Fearing that no one will ever love her or find her beautiful again, the Queen begins to obsess over her relationship with her father. She washes her face and applies make-up. She washes her hair and braids it beautifully. When she looks her best, she calls her father's reflection into the mirror and asks to know who is the most beautiful woman in the land. As the novel progresses, the role as the land's most beautiful woman will become an obsession for the Queen. Not only does it reconnect her to her father, it gives her a sense of control in what must feel like an out-of-control existence.



# Chapters 13 & 14: Envy & Innocence Charmed

## Chapters 13 & 14: Envy & Innocence Charmed Summary

With a spectacular return to the public eye, the Queen dresses in her finest clothes, embraces her daughter, and throws a massive party. In the days that follow, the Queen enjoys her newfound confidence, but finds herself ornery and quick-tempered on days when she forgets to consult the mirror. And so it becomes a ritual that each morning when she wakes, the Queen demands to hear that she is the fairest in the land. All goes well until one terrible day when the mirror admits that the Queen is no longer the fairest, Verona is. Unfiltered rage boils in the Queen's veins and she feels an impulse to kill her best friend. During her breakfast that afternoon, the Queen glares at the rest of the servants, wondering if they, too, find Verona more beautiful. In a desperate bid for her father's undying approval, the Queen sends Verona to a faraway land, banishing her from the kingdom. Both Verona and Snow White are heartbroken by this sudden order. They don't understand what Verona has done wrong and the Queen refuses to answer their questions. The Queen waits until the carriages have long pulled away before once again consulting the mirror. The Slave admits that once again, the Queen is the fairest in the land, and it is as if the weight of the world has been lifted off her shoulders.

A few weeks later, the triplets send the Queen another gift: an old trunk filled with spell books. Intrigued by the power of the magic mirror, the Queen begins spending a few hours a day in the dungeon working on rudimentary spells. Her first incantations are clumsy and have disastrous effects on her good looks (she accidentally dyes her hands green and causes her hair to sprout feathers) but she manages to reverse her accidents before being discovered. When not in the dungeon, the Queen spends her time surveying the kingdom from her balconies. One afternoon, as the Queen surveys her kingdom, she sees a young man flirting with Snow White near the well. Envy fills the Queen as she watches the two brazenly falling in love with each other. That afternoon, the Queen orders for Snow White to wear only rags and to work much like a servant, washing walls and scrubbing the stone well. Seeing the sadness in Snow White's eyes, the Queen is reminded of her daughter's favorite childhood story - the woman who turned into a dragon - and for a moment cannot balance her emotions. She quickly retreats from the room and back into her dungeon.

Weeks pass, and the Queen seems to spend all her time hunched over the spell books. One afternoon, the new lady-in-waiting, Tilley, rushes into the dungeon shouting that Snow White has fallen into the well. Devastated, the Queen rushes to the well, her heart already breaking with the thought that her precious daughter might be dead, and is shocked to see the same young boy pulling Snow White's body from the water. The Queen immediately recognizes the boy as the prince from a nearby land.



## Chapters 13 & 14: Envy & Innocence Charmed Analysis

After hearing her father admit her beauty, the Queen emerges from her chambers feeling more beautiful, more regal, more in control, than ever before. She realizes for the first time that she must rule the land without her husband; her people need a Queen. However, the positive effects of the mirror are short-lived, and the reader gets its first real glimpse into the Queen's obsession. What started as a self-esteem boosting hobby has now morphed into an all-encompassing addiction. Verona is the first causality of the Queen's obsession. The fact that Verona was once the Queen's best friend and closest confidant shows how much her father's approval means to her. For the Queen, it's not a competition of beauty. She longs for her father's affection. After growing up in an abusive household and having recently lost her husband, the Queen is desperate for attention. Often, individuals suffering from extreme trauma will revert to childlike behaviors - having a desire to be cared for by others - and it appears as if the Queen is suffering from this particular element of depression. Her sadness over the King's death has emotionally transported her back in time to her last bout of terrible sadness, when she was a child. Subconsciously, the Queen is looking to rectify the wrong grief. She focuses her energy on repairing her relationship with her dead father rather than her relationships with her living loved ones. Suddenly, nothing is more important to the Queen than her father's refusal. Her cold dismissal of Verona foreshadows the way she will coldly turn against her beloved daughter as well.

The three sisters appear once again with a "gift" for the Queen. It's clear that the gift of the spell books is just another way to manipulate the Queen's depression. Mastering spells gives the Queen another feeling of control in the world even though her emotions are spinning wildly out of control. She refuses all visitors and holds everyone, even Snow White, at arm's distance. The Queen reasons that her heart is simply too fragile to love again: it would never withstand another heartbreak, so she lives her life in complete isolation. The Queen's self-imposed isolation no doubt affects her descent into madness. She has imprisoned herself in the dungeon fooling herself into believing that through magic she is still involved with the world. In truth, she is only involved with her own insecurity and vanity. Each excuse she makes is self-serving. When she should be looking out for Snow White's best interests, she can only look out for herself. The three sisters are only too happy to contribute to the Queen's madness, perhaps because they would inherit the kingdom if both the Queen and Snow White were out of the picture.

Also in this section, Snow White begins to fall in love. It's clear that some time has passed since the King's death (Snow White is now at least fourteen years old, and possibly older) which highlights the amount of time the Queen has wasted pouring over spell books in the dungeon. It's interesting to note that when the Queen witnesses the innocent flirtations between Snow White and the Prince, she is reminded of the dragon-tale she used to tell Snow White before she fell asleep. It's clear that the Queen has transformed into that dragon, which fulfills all of her personal insecurities about losing love and feeling misunderstood. Rather than rectify her broken relationships, the Queen dedicates all her time to magic, as if that will repair what love cannot.



# Chapters 15 & 16: A Return & Torment

## Chapters 15 & 16: A Return & Torment Summary

Months pass after Snow White's accident and the young Prince continues to visit. The Queen sees that he is in love with Snow despite the fact that the Queen has tried to hide the girl's beauty. The Queen realizes that the Prince will soon ask for Snow's hand in marriage. Telling herself that it is for Snow's own good, the Queen confides the Prince that Snow White does not love him. She advises that it would be best for him to leave and never come back, to find a young woman capable of loving him in return. The Prince looks crestfallen but returns to his kingdom without another word. After, the Queen rushes to her chambers to raise her self-confidence. As usual, the Slave agrees that she is the fairest in the land. The Queen's heart soars. Looking out the window, she notices a party approaching in the distance. Verona has returned to the castle to announce her wedding. She hopes to share her joy with the Queen, whom she still views as her best friend and sister. Leaving her chambers, the Queen delights in Verona's return and orders the chefs to prepare a banquet for her arrival. Despite her joy, the Queen feels jealousy sneaking its way into her heart: why should Verona find love while the Queen remains lonely? Over dinner, the Queen advises Verona to prepare herself now for her husband's death. She warns her not to cling to love because love can be snapped away at a moment's notice leaving her with nothing but loneliness. Verona is unwilling to accept the Queen's advice. She is clearly worried by the Queen's icy, cold demeanor, especially after hearing the news of how the Queen treats Snow White: they had once been so close, and now the Queen goes weeks without speaking to her daughter. That night, the mirror confirms the Queen's greatest fear: Verona is once again the fairest woman in the land. The Queen feels painfully divided: she loves Verona and yet she loves her vanity as well. She tears the mirror from the wall and orders the huntsman to bury it in the woods: "Leave no marker to its whereabouts, and never, no matter how I implore you, never tell me where you have buried it" (Pages 187-188).

Having Verona once again in court should have pleased the Queen, but she feels a constant nagging, questioning the whereabouts of the mirror. She feels lost without it, desperate for its reassurance that she is beautiful, that she is worthy. She passes the days in complete agony. One evening, she has a nightmare that she crawls from her bed and dug the mirror up from the ground with her bare hands. When she wakes, mud is caked under her fingernails and she discovers, with horror, the mirror lying against her bed. Without bothering to wash the dirt from her face, the Queen demands to know the truth from the mirror: who is the fairest of them all. When the mirror once again answers that it is Verona, the Queen's lips curl into a sneer: "Perhaps then it is time for her to go" (Page 193).



## Chapters 15 & 16: A Return & Torment Analysis

In this section, the Queen is forced to accept that life goes on after death. In her heart, the world stopped evolving after the King's death, which is why she's always shocked to see how Snow White has aged. She simply cannot accept that Snow White would marry, or that Verona could find love. Because she lives in such depressed isolation, she has lost contact with the outside world, full of love, happiness, and joy. Any glimmer of delight, and tinkle of laughter is a direct offense against the King's memory. How can anyone experience joy when the Queen's heart still mourns? The Queen cannot comprehend that Verona would be happy about her new marriage. Love is a double-sided sword for the Queen, she is desperate to feel love yet she is terrified of having her heart broken again. Fear wins over her desire and she allows it cloud her view of other's relationships. She feels justified in sending the Prince away from Snow saying that she is protecting her daughter from the worst pain a woman can suffer: losing her husband. She also feels justified in lecturing Verona about death. She feels as if she doing her friend a favor, preparing her for mourning. Verona is startled by the changes her friend has undergone since losing her husband. She worries about the Queen's mental state and her fragile relationship with Snow. It seems as if Verona's words reach the Queen's heart for the first time in months. She realizes that love is more important than beauty, and she orders the Huntsman to bury the mirror in an unmarked grave. What is interesting about the Queen's nightmare is that the voices in her head - recognizable as the voices of the sisters and of her father - tell her where to find the mirror. When the Queen wakes, she has mud caked under her fingernails signifying that the conversation must have taken place outside of her dream as well. It's possible that the sisters somehow cast a spell on the Queen and were able to direct her body through her sleep, which begs the question: would the Queen have sought out the mirror without the sisters' influence?



# Chapters 18 & 19: Dream Sickness & A Foul Possession

## Chapters 18 & 19: Dream Sickness & A Foul Possession Summary

The Queen dreams of Snow White running through the woods, escaping the Huntsman who has been sent to kill her. In the dream, Snow White screams in terror for her mother to help her, but there is no help to be had. The Queen wakes with a start, covered in sweat. She looks out the window to see Snow White diligently scrubbing the well, the meddlesome Prince nowhere in sight. A few nights later, the nightmare returns, except this time, the Queen imagines Snow White's corpse in the woods, and her heart hanging from a tree branch. For days, the Queen is bedridden, exhausted by her continued nightmares. Voices in her head demand that she kill Snow White if she wants to retain her title as the fairest in the land: "If Snow White lives, it will be a slow painful death, daughter. You would linger into death for many years, your soul rotting away within you, withering your body to a husk; everyone will look upon you with pity and disgust" (Page 203).

A few days later, the Queen finally rouses herself from sleep feeling stronger, more regal than she has in months. Immediately, she rushes to the mirror and repeats her practiced incantation. To her horror, the mirror finally admits what the reader has known would come: Snow White is the fairest in the land. The Queen rushes to the window and is outraged to see that the Prince has returned. He sings to Snow White below her balcony, and the Queen is reviled to see Snow White join him, singing in perfect harmony. Outraged that her daughter would dare to love, dare to find happiness when she should still mourn for her father's death, she whirls around to confront her. Standing in her room are the three sisters, grinning anxiously, as if they had been waiting for this moment. In tandem, the chant that the time has come for the Queen to kill the girl. They say that it is the Queen's duty to punish the girl for rebuking her father's memory. When the Queen refuses, they hand her a cup of hot tea and demand that she drink it. The liquid fills the Queen with blind rage. Yes, she decides, now is the time.

## Chapters 18 & 19: Dream Sickness & A Foul Possession Analysis

The Queen's nightmares continue, mapping out recognizable elements of the Disney Snow White story: the Queen sees the hills where the dwarves live, sees the hag and her basket, sees the beautiful poisoned apple that will send Snow White into eternal sleep. It's unclear whether the author is nodding at the classic tale, or if the reader is to believe that these images are genuinely appearing in the Queen's mind. Given that the three sisters seem to have some control over the Queen's thoughts, it should come as



no surprise that in the final chapters of the novel, the put everything in place for these nightmares to become a reality: they teach the Queen how to disguise herself as a hag, tell her about the poisoned apple, show her the way to the dwarves' hut. It's interesting to note that these elements all appear in dreams long before the Queen desires to kill her daughter. This blunt foreshadowing has caused many critics to complain that the novel is heavy-handed.

In an interesting twist, the voice in the nightmare, which seems to belong to the Queen's father, says that even though the Queen will beg to die as age steals her beauty, the magic of the mirror will keep her soul alive. He says, "You have always been like me. A part of me lives within you: you share my blood. We are bound by that and the magic of the mirror. Part of my soul is in you" (Page 204). This is a terrifying thought for the Queen because she has always despised her father, yet the truth in his words is unshakable. Her father insinuates that wickedness is in her blood. No matter how she tries to hide it, she is her father's daughter. When she dies, it will be her turn to take the place in the mirror. The curse will be handed down because the Queen has been hated since the moment she was born: she does not deserve to die in peace.

Despite these fears, the Queen is still shocked when the mirror finally admits that Snow White's beauty has surpassed her own. To add insult to injury, the Queen looks out her window to see Snow singing in perfect harmony with the Prince. Feeling ousted by Snow's beauty and new love, the Queen's anger boils over. Just as she is about to confront her daughter, the three sisters appear as if on cue. They seem to know exactly when the Queen is at her most vulnerable, when she is most likely to be swayed by their evil plans. What is interesting about this meeting is that for the first time, the Queen is hesitant. Is she really that vain that she would kill her own daughter? In her trepidation, the sisters give the Queen a cup of hot liquid, likely a potion of some kind that intensifies her anger. Without the potion, it's likely that the Queen would have made a different decision, would have let Snow White live. This section highlights the strange hold the three sisters have over the Queen, and it's a shame that this fascinating relationship is somewhat neglected in the text.



# Chapters 20 & 21: The Huntsman & The Hag and the Apple

## Chapters 20 & 21: The Huntsman & The Hag and the Apple Summary

The Queen paces her chambers waiting for the Huntsman to arrive. She longs to approach the mirror again but she knows his answer will remain the same until Snow White is dead. When the Huntsman finally arrives, she quickly launches into her plan: the Huntsman will take Snow White into the forest to pick wildflowers. While the girl's back is turned, he will kill her. To be sure the Huntsman has done his job, the Queen hands him a wooden box - the same box that once contained Snow White's letters - to bring back the girl's heart. The Huntsman is horrified but knows that if he disobeys the Queen, it will be his own heart in the box. As the Huntsman lures Snow White into the woods, the Queen again paces her room. Hours pass. The sun sets, and finally, the Huntsman returns. He cannot look the Queen in the eye as he presents the box. A perverse thrill jolts the Queen as she gazes upon the bloody heart. With a thrill, she dismisses the Huntsman and turns to the mirror. With a smirk on her lips, the Queen calls out in incantation and is horrified when the mirror announces that despite her best efforts, Snow White is still the fairest in the land. The mirror shows her the cabin in the woods where the girl hides with seven dwarves. The Huntsman dared not kill a Princess, so he brought back the heart of a pig in the box. The Queen rushes from her chambers, slips a dagger from her pocket, and disembowels the Huntsman in the hallway.

With blood still on her hands, the Queen marches to her dungeon and begins concocting a new plan. She searches her spell books and finds just what she's looking for: a spell to poison an apple so that whoever takes a bite will fall into eternal sleep. She also concocts a disguise for herself: turning her beautiful face into that of a haggard peddler. Her chin sharpens. A wart protrudes from the tip of her nose. Her face ages a hundred years: "Her eyebrows had grown thick, black, and bushy. And her ragged yellow-grey hair blew in her face ... She was no longer dressed in her regal gown, but in an old black sackcloth with a hood to cover her ratty hair" (Page 228). When the apple is made and her disguise protected, the Queen quickly flips through the spell book to see if her perfect plan has an antidote. She is disappointed to find that it does: love's first kiss can awaken the accursed, but who could fall in love with a dead girl? The Queen cackles wickedly and sets off into the woods.





## Chapters 20 & 21: The Huntsman & The Hag and the Apple Analysis

In a novel that has taken its time developing the Queen's anxieties and insecurities, this section has the biggest leap in her mood. Her decision to kill Snow White is not unexpected, certainly not for those familiar with the classic tale, but it doesn't ring true to her complicated character. Her first act of jealousy was to send Verona to a faraway land, so it seems a big leap that her next move would be to kill her daughter. Although Valentino has made a valiant effort, there simply isn't enough time in the text to further develop the Queen's character. There was a definite end point the narrative has been working toward since the first page: the scene with the huntsman in the woods. Most readers would expect a glimmer of guilt or doubt in the Queen's heart - only a few chapters earlier, she was heartbroken at the thought of Snow's death in the well - but there is none. The elixir given to her by the sisters, it seems, has completely calloused her heart. All she cares about now is her own beauty and she will stop at nothing to ensure that she is the fairest in the land. Ironically, in her pursuit for external beauty, the Queen has allowed her internal beauty to fade. She is now ugly inside, matching her external disguise.



## **Chapters 22 & 23 & Epilogue: The Crone, the Clearing, and the Cottage & The Cliff**

### **Chapters 22 & 23 & Epilogue: The Crone, the Clearing, and the Cottage & The Cliff Summary**

The Queen sneaks out of the castle and rows a boat into the swampland surrounding the forest. She climbs the Seven Jeweled Hills to the dwarves' home and while making the long hike, is greeted by the three sisters, ominously waiting for her in the road. They shout words of encouragement and announce their pride as the Queen hastily makes her way to the cottage where Snow White now lives. She knocks on the front door and is immediately filled with hatred with the beautiful young girl answers. The Queen uses all her charm to convince the young girl to take an apple by convincing her that they are magic: whatever the girl wishes for will come true when she takes her first bite. Snow White smiles and takes a bite of the poisoned apple. Immediately, she falls into a deep sleep, like death. Looking down at her daughter's body, the Queen sighs deeply. This new body is old and achy and the Queen longs to be back in her young, beautiful body. The three sisters appear once again, cackling to themselves. "Apologies, my Queen," they say with a sneer referring to her horrific disguise, "but there is no antidote" (Pages 241-242). It had all been a cruel trick. The Queen realizes that it had all been for nothing. She had killed her daughter and would never be beautiful again. Just then, the dwarves come crashing back into the cottage. When they realize that Snow White is dead, they chase after the Queen threatening to kill her themselves. Reaching a fork in the road, the Queen must decide: an ugly life filled with guilt in the woods, or certain death by jumping off the cliff. With a deep breath, the Queen hurls herself off the cliff welcoming the sweet release of death.

In the epilogue, Snow White awakens to love's first kiss. The handsome Prince has found her and woken her from the curse. The two are quickly married and with the news that the Queen is dead, Snow White takes over the role as ruler of the land. On her wedding day to the Prince, Snow White is gifted with a large mirror, the same mirror that her stepmother had spent hours gazing into. As the girl gazes into the mirror, a face appears in the glass: the Queen's face. Snow White is startled but her mother's gaze is soft, loving: "I love you, my beautiful little bird," she says. "I always have, and I always will" (Pages 249-250).

### **Chapters 22 & 23 & Epilogue: The Crone, the Clearing, and the Cottage & The Cliff Analysis**

In the final section of the novel, the classic scene of the hag and poisoned apple is depicted without any variation or change. In the Queen's mind, "Snow White was a selfish wench who cared nothing for her father's memory and was plotting to surpass



her mother in the only thing the woman had left in the world - her beauty" (Page 235). With this motivation, the Queen gives Snow White the poisoned apple. Critics have complained that the Queen's plan has a fatal flaw: sending Snow White to sleep won't kill her. If she were to return to the mirror, Snow White would continue to be the most beautiful in the land as long as she was living, so this plan doesn't make narrative sense. In the story of the woman who turns into a dragon, the dragon woman also sent her daughter to sleep with a poisoned apple, but did it to protect her. There are hints of the Queen wanting to protect Snow from the pain of a broken heart, but that is not what motivates her today. It seems unfortunate that in this scene, Valentino would adhere so closely to the Disney tale. Doing so leaves a gaping hole in the narrative.

Just as the Queen drastically, and without emotion, decides that now is the time to kill Snow White, so too does she make the decision to kill herself on the cliff. The readers are expected to accept that suddenly, the Queen feels overwhelmed with guilt and fears that her vanity is out of control. Unfortunately, the novel doesn't support this sudden change in character, which leaves many readers unsatisfied. It's unclear whether the Queen believed that her soul would be sentenced to a lifetime in the mirror, but she is certainly motivated when she leaps off the cliff. In the epilogue, it is revealed that Snow White has married her Prince and now rules the kingdom. Parallels are drawn between the Queen's wedding ceremony in Chapter One and Snow White's marriage in the epilogue, including both brides desperately missing their mothers. The Queen's reappearance in the mirror, and her happy words to Snow White suggest that the cruel curse has finally been broken. Love is more important than beauty, and when one lives in love, they will live happily ever after.



# Characters

## The Queen

The Queen is the protagonist of the novel, which focuses on her descent into vain madness after losing her abusive father and loving husband. When the Queen was a child, she lived alone with her widowed father, who despised his daughter for taking his wife's life during childbirth. He never missed an opportunity to tell the girl that she was ugly and useless. When the King visited the man's mirror making shop, he fell in love with mirror maker's daughter, the woman who would become Queen. Moving into the castle, the Queen never felt such love and adoration. She enjoyed being a wife to the King and a mother to his four-year-old daughter Snow White. Since her father had died, she was now surrounded by those who truly loved her, who found her beautiful, and who respected her wishes. The Queen was deeply in love with her husband and together, they adored their Snow White. When the King left home to support his troops in battle, the Queen clung to their daughter, fiercely protecting her from all harm. All that began to change, however, when a mysterious gift was delivered to the Queen's door: a magic mirror enchanted with her father's spirit. The spirit in the mirror could answer any question the Queen posed, and the Queen embraced the opportunity to hear her father admit the truth: that she was the most beautiful woman in the land. She became obsessed with hearing these words from her father's lips, so when another woman's beauty threatened to take that away from her, the Queen lost her mind with jealousy. By the end of the novel, the Queen had tried to kill her own daughter by feeding her a poisoned apple. In the epilogue, the reader sees that the Queen is redeemed when she jumps off a cliff and her spirit is sent to enchant the very same mirror so she can tell the new Queen, Snow White, how beautiful and loved she is, every single day of her life.

## Snow White

Snow White is the innocent daughter of the King who unexpectedly becomes the source of the Queen's jealous rage when she ages and becomes the most beautiful woman in the land. Although "Fairest of All" is a retelling of the classic Snow White story, Snow White herself is merely a secondary character in this novel. At the opening of the tale, Snow White is four-years-old: lovely, innocent, and desperately in love with her new stepmother. The pair are inseparable as the new Queen dedicates her life to loving and protecting the small girl, whom she calls her "little bird." When the King dies, Snow White becomes especially bonded with her stepmother and is disappointed when she notices the woman pulling away from her. In an attempt to slow Snow White's beauty, the Queen forces her to dress in rags and clean the castle like a servant, but there is no hiding Snow White's pristine beauty, both inside and out. No matter how terribly the Queen treats Snow White, the girl continues to love her and respect her wishes. She reaches out the Queen in an attempt to show her love, to pull the woman who once read her bedtime stories and showered her with kisses out of this terrible depression. Even when the Queen tears Snow White from her beloved, the Prince, and tries to kill



her, Snow White forgives and forgets, embracing the apology and emanating pure love at the end of the novel.

## The King

The King is a good, faithful man whose life is dedicated to his beautiful wife and their daughter, Snow White. When the King's first wife unexpectedly passes away, he marries a beautiful young woman from his land, whom he hopes will help him raise his daughter. Although the King is fully dedicated to his new family, he must frequently leave the home to support his troops in battle. He dies supporting his troops, leaving his family grief-stricken.

## The Queen's Father / The Slave

The Queen's Father / The Slave is the Queen's last remaining relative. Like the King, the Queen's father was dedicated to his beautiful wife and would have done anything to keep her happy. When his wife begged him for a child, he sold his soul to the witches in the woods in exchange for his wife's pregnancy. Unfortunately, his wife died during childbirth leaving him alone to raise the child, whom he always resented. The Queen grew up in a loveless household under the tyrannical reign of a father who hated her. When the Queen's father died, his soul was sent to haunt the Queen's mirror driving her further into madness. Inside the mirror, the Queen's father referred to himself as "the Slave" and was bound to answer any question the Queen posed for him.

## Verona

Verona is the Queen's lady-in-waiting and best friend at the castle. Verona has been a trustworthy friend to the Queen since the moment she became royalty, and has been a constant companion to Snow White. The Queen feels that Verona is indispensable until the fateful day when the mirror proclaims that Verona's beauty now surpasses the Queen's. In a rage, the Queen deports her best friend from the land and lives the rest of her days in miserable loneliness.

## The Huntsman

The Huntsman is a tall, handsome man who has sworn his allegiance to the King and Queen. When the Queen has descended fully into her jealous madness, she asks the Huntsman to take Snow White into the woods and cut out her heart. Rather than kill the princess, the Huntsman brings back the heart of a pig to fool the Queen.



## **Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha**

Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha are the King's three strange cousins. The women are inseparable from each other and share the same odd mannerisms and behaviors. The three women are undoubtedly evil although they hide their wicked ways under the ruse of innocent misunderstandings. They take great joy in frightening Snow White and creating mayhem in the castle. It is the three sisters that cast the Queen's father's soul into the magic mirror and ensure that his words drive the Queen into madness. It is also the three sisters that introduce the Queen to witchcraft and the dreaded spell that poisons Snow White's apple.

## **The Prince**

The Prince is Snow White's true love. Although he only appears briefly in the novel, it is clear that Snow White loves him, and that this innocent young love is returned. When Snow White is poisoned by the Queen's apple, it is the Prince's kiss that wakes her from her accursed slumber.

## **Tilley**

Tilley becomes the Queen's new lady-in-waiting after she sends Verona away.



# Objects/Places

## The Castle

The Castle is where the King and Queen are married, and where the Queen rules over the land after her husband dies. The castle is a massive, cavernous building once filled with warmth and love of a beautiful new family. After the King dies and Queen descends into madness, the castle's description changes into a cold, hollow cave, reflecting the love lost.

## The Woods

The Woods surrounds the castle, separating it from the rest of the land. When the Queen first arrives, she regularly takes Snow White on picnics in the woods and it represents a lovely, happy place for the girl. When the three cousins take Snow White into the woods, it suddenly becomes a dark, frightening place that Snow White dreads.

## Apple Blossoms

Apple Blossoms are some of the most beautiful flowers that bloom in the land, and are especially revered because they are the only flower to bloom in autumn. Every year, a massive Apple Blossom Festival is held to appreciate the flower's beauty. The apple blossoms are symbolic of Snow White - both bloom into beauty when surrounded by death (autumn is traditionally thought of as the time when nature dies).

## The Magic Mirror

The Magic Mirror is the most important object in the novel. On their wedding day, the King purchases one of the Queen's father's beautiful mirrors and presents it to his new bride. The mirror is massive and elegant, but leaves the Queen with an uneasy feeling. One afternoon, she is shocked to find a man's face reflected in the glass, and even more surprised with the man's face addresses her. Although the Queen breaks and buries the mirror many times, it always finds its way back to her chamber as if enchanted. The face in the mirror belongs to her deceased father, who now refers to himself as her "Slave." He is able to see into the hearts of every person in the land and can answer any question the Queen desires, yet the Queen only wants to hear her father admit her beauty. Everyday she asks the mirror the same questions, "Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" Eventually, this question drives the Queen insane as she fights to retain her title as the most beautiful woman in the land.



## The Queen's Chambers

The Queen's Chambers are the Queen's favorite room in the castle. Her chambers include a bedroom, bathroom, and the dressing room where her beloved mirror is hung. As the Queen descends into madness, she rarely leaves her chambers and even begins taking meals there to avoid leaving the constant company of the mirror and its reassurance that she is still the most beautiful woman in the land.

## The Seven Jeweled Hills

The Seven Jeweled Hills are where the seven dwarves live and where Snow White goes into hiding after the Huntsman warns her that the Queen wants to kill her.

## The Spell Books

The Spell Books are a gift from the three wicked sisters Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha. When she receives them, the Queen spends all her spare time pouring over the spells searching for ways to retain her beauty. When she decides that it's time for Snow White to die, she finds the curse for the poisoned apple in these books.

## The Hag

The Hag is the disguise the Queen wears when she brings the poisoned apple to Snow White's cottage in the woods. Disguising her beauty from the world, the Queen's appearance morphs into an old, crotchety hag. Everything from her voice to her posture changes as she is transformed into the hag. After Snow White is cursed, the Queen realizes with horror that there is no antidote to her disguise. She will be forced to live as the ugly hag for as long as she lives.

## The Poisoned Apple

The Poisoned Apple is how the Queen curses Snow White. The Queen, while disguised as a hag, promises Snow White that when she eats the apple, all her dreams will come true. In truth, the apple places Snow White in a deep sleep that can only be broken by love's first kiss.

## Love's First Kiss

Love's First Kiss is the antidote to the poisoned apple's curse. Snow White's spell is broken when her beloved Prince kisses her lips to say goodbye when he hears she is dead.





## The Dowry Box

The Dowry Box is where the King keeps all of his first wife's letters to Snow White. When he marries the Queen, he entrusts her with the box knowing how important family ties are to his new wife. When the Queen descends into madness, she gives the Huntsman the dowry box telling him to bring back Snow White's heart in it.



# Themes

## Beauty

The most obvious theme in the novel is the emphasis placed on external beauty. Beauty is the Queen's most prized attribute and one that she will fight to the death defending. All throughout her life, the Queen has been told that she is ugly, meaningless, and worthless. Because of these years of abuse, she cannot comprehend why anyone would love her, let alone a King! When the Queen realizes that she is truly beautiful, she clings desperately to this fact, hoping the King will always love her for it. When the King dies, the Queen feels as if all control has been taken from her. Once again, she feels worthless and meaningless without his love. When she discovers that the face in the mirror is her father's, the Queen begins to subconsciously take control of her life again: "All those years ago, after her father's death, she had thought she had exorcised his ghost from her mind. But it wasn't so. Not until she watched his face tell her how beautiful she was - the fairest in the land, in fact - did she feel such a weight lifted. She had power over him now, the way he'd had it over her for so many years. And she was going to exercise it" (Page 151). What the Queen doesn't realize, however, is that beauty is not just skin deep. Ruthlessly, she lashes out at those she once held closest: her best friend and her daughter, in her constant search of ultimate beauty. At the end of the novel, the Queen has been transformed into a ugly, old hag, symbolic of the ugliness in her soul. It is only in death, when the Queen realizes that love is more important than beauty, that her youthful face is once again restored.

## Good Versus Evil

In most fairy tales, there is a clear divide between the "good" characters and the "evil" characters. In this modern rewrite of the classic Snow White tale, author Serena Valentino blurs the lines between good and evil with a complicated wicked queen. In the classic Disney tale, the battle of good versus evil is waged between Snow White (good) and her wicked stepmother (evil). In this tale, however, the battle takes place almost entirely within the Queen's psyche. The Queen is ultimately good, and ultimately loves her daughter Snow White, but vanity and jealousy possess her, warping her interpretation of the events around her. The broken heart she suffers at her husband's death turn her temporarily insane leading her to believe that Snow White is her enemy, that Snow White represents what is evil in the world. The only characters depicted as categorically evil are the three sisters Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha. Their back story is unclear and their motivations for manipulating and tormenting the characters of the novel remain unclear. What is gathered, however, is that the triplets experience perverse thrills in other's suffering. They curse, torment, and manipulate just for the fun of it. Their favorite target, it seems, is the Queen, and they regularly provoke the Queen's obsessions when she is emotionally weak. The Queen's descent into madness can be attributed, almost 100%, to the triplet's influence. It can even be argued that her madness is a direct result of their curses. The tea the Queen drinks, for example,



seems to have been spiked with a potion to increase the Queen's rage. The triplets seem to have found a way to haunt the Queen even in her sleep, speaking to her through haunted nightmares, making the Queen feel as if she's going insane. As a result, everything good about the Queen eventually morphs into evil.

## Parental Love

Parental love is depicted as more important than romantic love in "Fairest of All". The Queen is particularly tormented by the lack of parental love in her childhood. Her father, who blamed her for killing her mother in childbirth, has hated her from the moment she was born and embraces any opportunity to remind her of that, even after his death. As a direct result, the Queen is adamant that she will be the perfect mother to Snow White, that she will always love and protect her "little bird," and that no one will harm her. After the King's death, however, the Queen is desperate to fill the empty space in her heart, the space that has, arguably, been empty ever since her father first proclaimed his hatred. The mirror, enchanted by her dead father's soul, is the perfect opportunity for the Queen to relish in parental love, however superficial. Unfortunately, she relishes at the cost of her maternal love toward Snow White. In the Queen's mind, nothing is more important than her father's approval, not even her daughter's life. At the end of the novel, the Queen realizes the error of her ways. She sees that the living are far more important than the dead. She understands her mistake: she should have embraced Snow White instead of pushing her away. The rewards would have been far greater. In her final act of motherly love, the Queen hurls herself off the cliff, resigning her soul to the position in the mirror. At least now, in death, the Queen can tell Snow White what she couldn't tell her in life: how deeply she is loved. With this admission, the spell will hopefully be broken.



# Style

## Point of View

"Fairest of All" is told in through in third-person limited omniscience narration from the perspective of the Queen. Told in past tense narration, an unnamed narrator tells the story but remains very close to the Queen's thoughts and actions. The narrator has full access to the Queen's emotions and the Queen's alone. Because most readers will already be familiar with the Snow White story, the novel's point-of-view is completely reliable. What makes "Fairest of All" unique is that the point of view tells a familiar story from a different perspective. Because the reader is held close to the Queen's perspective, readers are given unprecedented access into the thoughts and emotions of a notorious villain. Rather than create the familiar Disney monster, this narration creates a complex, even sympathetic character in the "evil" Queen. Starting with the Queen's childhood, the reader learns of the horrific emotional abuse the Queen suffered which eventually led to her low self-esteem and desperate desire to be seen as beautiful. The reader also learns why the Queen felt justified in separating Snow White from her Prince and even in her attempt to kill her stepdaughter. The novel's clever retelling of the familiar fairy tale creates a complex, rich understanding of Snow White's history. This would not be possible without point of view narration that aligns with the Queen.

## Setting

"Fairest of All" is set in an unnamed land governed by a King and Queen. The novel does little to create a world outside of the classic Disney film's setting, and it's almost as if Valentino relies on the readers' knowledge of the film to orient themselves within the novel. The novel opens on the scene of the King and Queen's magical, fairytale wedding. They wed outside a gorgeous castle framed by blossoming apple trees. Garlands of wisteria and gardenia are draped around the stone well. Inside the castle, where the Queen spends most of her time, the rooms are vast and cavernous, yet she does her best to make them feel homey for the King and their daughter, Snow White. The Queen's favorite room is her dressing chamber where she has complete privacy with her magic mirror. Here, the Queen toils away the days staring at her own reflection, contemplating her fading beauty. Although the Queen's mirror has the ability to see all around the land, thus giving the reader a detailed description of the castle's surroundings, she never uses this power and the setting remains relatively stark. What the reader does know is that the castle is surrounded by thick woods - where the cousins frighten Snow White - and that further a field lies the Seven Jeweled Hills where the dwarves live. Somewhere between the Seven Jeweled Hills and the castle, a forked road divides travelers between the woods and the waterfall cliff where the Queen eventually meets her demise. In a story rich with imagination, the author has skimped on setting, which only would have benefited the novel.



## Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to understand. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also so they gain momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, with many chapters ending in a cliffhanger, and often this structure works. Adult readers should be able to finish the entire novel in one or two sittings. Because *Fairest of All* retells a classic Disney fairytale, many readers will already be familiar with its premise and basic storyline. Valentino cleverly plays against traditional fairytale clichés - such as the handsome prince, the fair maiden, and the idea of "happily ever after" - within the language. Readers with a deeper understanding of fairytale clichés will be delighted to find that Valentino's symbolism is well-researched and creatively intertwined with the storyline. This dual-action symbolism (nodding to the tradition while casting the elements into a new, unexpected light) presents a deeper level of meaning for some readers, while those who simply skim the surface of the religious themes will not be lost in the story's main plot. At times, however, the language comes across as a bit simple. Because readers already have a basic understanding of the story and its relationships, they don't need the emotional elements explained to them. Valentino repeats many of the same lines over-and-over, like the fact that the Queen feels tormented by her jealousy toward her "little bird" which leads to an oversimplification of characters and a somewhat annoying repetitiveness for readers outside of Valentino's target audience age-group.

## Structure

"*Fairest of All*" is comprised of twenty-three chapters averaging ten pages in length. Each chapter has a name that refers to some action or event within the novel that foreshadows what the reader is about to read. The chapters tend to be short and full of action, which propels the reader through the novel. The plot of the novel is fairly simple with no subplots of back-stories to distract the reader. The story surrounds a Queen whose insecurities lead to an obsession with her beauty and a crippling jealousy that threatens all of her relationships, including her relationship with her beloved stepdaughter, Snow White. The novel follows the traditional structure of rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. The first half of the novel establishes the complex relationship the Queen has with her stepdaughter and includes the rising action of her growing obsession with beauty. The novel's climax occurs when the Queen kills Snow White with a poisoned apple prevent her from overshadowing the Queen's beauty. Immediately after, the Queen feels guilty for her crime and throws herself off a cliff as punishment for her vanity. The novel ends with an epilogue tying together the story's loose ends and showing how the Queen's love for Snow White eventually wins over her evil.



## Quotes

"As she took Snow in her arms, she was filled with a love she had never known. She though the weight of that love might cause her heart to burst, and in a secret place buried deep within her heart she wished somehow she could absorb the beauty of this child, so she herself would truly be beautiful" (Pages 4 - 5).

"She had never had a reason to come into this room, and truth be told, she had tried to avoid it. It was full of fragments of her old life. And now, it felt as if she were stepping into a cold, dark crypt" (Page 82).

"The Queen had stopped celebrating the solstice after her mother had died. How lovely it would have been to experience this as a little girl. Part of her envied Snow, really" (Page 89).

"Before I met you, my lord, I dreaded visiting my father in his workshop. Seeing my face reflected back at me again and again only reminded me of how unsightly I was - a fact of which I didn't need reminding. A day of my childhood didn't pass when my father didn't tell me how unattractive I was, how ugly, and this is how I saw myself" (Pages 106 - 107).

"She despaired over what she'd become. Perhaps her former beauty was simply an enchantment after all ... one cast by her husband. And when he died, her beauty - her false beauty - died with him. How could she have ever thought herself to be beautiful" (Page 139).

"All those years ago, after her father's death, she had thought she had exorcised his ghost from her mind. But it wasn't so. Not until she watched his face tell her how beautiful she was - the fairest in the land, in fact - did she feel such a weight lifted. She had power over him now, the way he'd had it over her for so many years. And she was going to exercise it" (Page 151).

"Happiness is beauty, and beauty is happiness. Beauty brings joy whether possessed by man, woman, girl, or boy" (Page 159).

"Sometimes she felt she had to look in the mirror simply to reassure herself she was in the world. That she was human and not simply a floating gray mist haunting the walls of the castle. She felt real and alive when she looked into the mirror; she felt empowered by her beauty. No, not just empowered, but invincible" (Pages 160 - 161).

"She had done the right thing, even if it meant lying to them both. Even if it broke their hearts now, it was nothing compared to losing each other to tragedy, betrayal, or death" (Page 177).



"Everything in her life seemed to be tangled up now - dreams and reality, fantasy and nightmares. She felt that she had become something other than human, something completely alien to herself" (Page 200).

"Madness is in the mind of the beholder, Queen" (Page 216).

"The Queen knew better. Snow White was a selfish wench who cared nothing for her father's memory and was plotting to surpass her mother in the only thing the woman had left in this world - her beauty" (Page 235).

"I love you, my beautiful little bird ... I always have, and I always will" (Pages 249 - 250).



## Topics for Discussion

What is the value of beauty in "Fairest of All"? What is the difference between inner and outer beauty? Which is more important to the characters in the novel? Why? How does it affect their lives? Does the message of the novel always coincide with the Queen's beliefs? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

In a nightmare, the Queen's father says to her, "You have always been like me. A part of me lives within you: you share my blood. We are bound by that and the magic of the mirror. Part of my soul is in you" (Page 204). In reference to the plot, what does he mean by this? How does this statement affect the Queen? In the end, is the Queen's father right? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Much of the novel is focused on obsession. Choose two characters from the novel and compare / contrast their obsessions. What are they obsessed with? How do these obsessions shape their lives? Based on these characters' experiences, are obsessions dangerous? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Describe the three sisters Lucinda, Ruby, and Martha. How are they related to the Queen? What effect do they have on her life? In your opinion, are the three sisters truly evil or are they misunderstood? Can you blame the Queen's madness on the sisters' influence? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

"Fairest of All" is a modern retelling of the classic Disney tale, Snow White which is itself a retelling of a Grimm tale. What liberties has Valentina taken in rewriting this story? How does her novel compare / contrast to the Disney's version of the story? In your opinion, which version is more believable? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare / contrast the three important men in the novel: The Queen's father, the King, and the Prince. How are they characterized? What role do they play in the overall plot of the novel? Are the male characters more complex / simpler than the female characters? Does this surprise you? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the Queen's relationship with Snow White. How does she feel about Snow White when she is a child? Do you believe the Queen's emotion? Why or why not? What major event causes the Queen's opinion of Snow White to drastically change? Toward the end of the novel, the Queen calls Snow White "a selfish wench who cared nothing for her father's memory and was plotting to surpass her mother in the only thing the woman had left in the world - her beauty" (Page 235). Is the Queen justified in this rage? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.