

The Snow Queen Short Guide

The Snow Queen by Joan D. Vinge

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Characters

Arienrhod, Moon Dawntreader, and Sparks Dawntreader are three of the more important major characters in *The Snow Queen*. Moon Dawntreader, Arienrhod's clone, has been raised by her unwitting host-mother, a fisherwoman of the Summer People. As a result, she does not share Arienrhod's love and need for technology. Moon sees herself in the future as the wife of her maternal cousin, Sparks Dawntreader. Moon is a determined young woman who also wants the privileged position of a sibyl, a person who can communicate directly with a higher power when asked the right question.

(The higher power is a computer of some sort). Would-be sibyls must make a pilgrimage to a designated spot where they are mysteriously tested and chosen or rejected. Sibyls travel with impunity throughout Tiamat but are specifically banned from Arienrhod's city of Carbuncle. When Moon and Sparks arrive at the test site, Moon is chosen and Sparks is rejected. In a fit of pique, Sparks demands that Moon abandon her calling, and when she refuses, departs for Carbuncle. In Carbuncle, Sparks attracts the attention of Arienrhod and quickly rises to the position of her official lover and merkiller. Soon after this, Sparks begins to despise himself for killing the mers and for being Arienrhod's toy. When Arienrhod discovers that Moon is Sparks's former lover, she sends for Moon in his name. She soon discovers that Moon has left Tiamat involuntarily, a fact that enrages her. Moon journeys to the Hegemony where she begins to discover what a sibyl really is — a human interface with a computer.

Moon returns to Tiamat to save Sparks because she still loves him. In the course of her journey to Carbuncle, she uncovers the true nature of the mers and determines to make Arienrhod conform to custom and die at the end of Carnival. Of course, such a determined woman gets what she wants.

Arienrhod dies, and Tiamet gets high technology without the Hegemony.

Social Concerns

Tiamat, the world ruled by Arienrhod, the eponymous Snow Queen, is technologically backward. Although it is clear to the reader that Tiamat was, at one time, a high tech world, it is equally clear that Tiamat must now purchase its high tech equipment from the off-world Hegemony. The Hegemony extracts a high price for its high tech wonders — it demands payment in a fountain-of-youth extract made from the blood of an indigenous species, the mers. Arienrhod will do anything to preserve her access to the high tech wonders of the Hegemony: She plans to subvert the succession to the throne by both artificially prolonging her life with the youth preserving elixir and by making an illegal clone of herself whom she hopes to control. She allows the wanton slaughter of the mers, despite the protests of those who argue that the mers may be sentient, to expand production of the elixir. Arienrhod's actions raise questions about the worth of technology as well as its cost.

These questions are valid in today's society as well as Tiamat's society: Even if it were possible to preserve one's youth and life indefinitely, what limits should be placed on access to such technology? Even if cloning of a human being becomes possible, should it be allowed? Even if slaughtering animals benefits humans, when and where should the line be drawn? Is it ethical for a high tech society, such as the Hegemony, to extract unreasonable payment for its wares? In *The Snow Queen*, Vinge tries to show the disastrous consequences to a society whose ruling class values technology over ethics.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

The Snow Queen is more or less a straightforward third-person narrative, although the author occasionally uses italics to set off her characters' thoughts from the narrative.

Vinge says in the foreword that *The Snow Queen* is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale of the same name. She also acknowledges a debt to Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948). There is also an overlay of Celtic mythology, mostly evidenced in the names of some of the characters: Arienrhod, Blodwed, and Herne among others. The basic plot is a twist on the usual rescue of a damsel in distress by the fair young knight. In this case the evil ruler is a woman, not a man, who figuratively locks up a young man, not a young woman, in her fairy tale castle.

The rescuer is the princess, not a prince. All the sub-plots are basic science fiction: the mysterious voices that turn out to be a computer, the heroic smugglers defying the powers that be, and the genetically engineered, angelic race.

Themes

One major theme of *The Snow Queen* is that the indiscriminate pursuit and use of technology is immoral and can be disastrous. The other major theme is that wanton slaughter of any creature diminishes all humans and can also be disastrous. At the beginning of the book, Arienrhod subverts Hegemony technology to obtain an illegal clone of herself. Her goal is to use the clone to continue her own life once the fountain-of-youth elixir ceases to work on her original body. Arienrhod is also determined to make sure Tiamat becomes and remains a self-sufficient high tech world, a goal the Hegemony is equally determined to thwart since its rulers are dependent on the fountain-of-youth elixir. To obtain her goal, Arienrhod also plans to defy the traditions of her world as well as its natural laws. Tiamat's orbit between twin suns and a black hole causes major climatic changes every century and a half.

When the planet is in winter phase, the black hole can be used by Hegemony traders as a gateway to Tiamat. During winter phase, Tiamat is ruled by the Winter People and enjoys a high tech lifestyle centered on its main city, Carbuncle. During summer phase, the black hole is unusable as a gateway, and the planet reverts to a low tech lifestyle ruled by the Summer People.

At the juncture of the two phases Carnival is celebrated. The Winter queen goes voluntarily to her death, and a new queen is chosen from the Summer People. Arienrhod is determined not to die, but to live on in the body of her clone. She also plans to use a genetically engineered virus to kill off the Summer People. To maintain her high tech city, Arienrhod has been stockpiling high tech goodies which she obtains by selling the elixir to the Hegemony. To keep the elixir flowing, she encourages the slaughter of the mers despite objections by many who have begun to suspect that the mers are not animals but sentient beings. Ironically, Arienrhod does not know that the mers are genetically engineered sentient beings that are the one link to the knowledge of the ancient rulers of the universe, knowledge that would change Tiamat to just the sort of world she desires. Arienrhod's indiscriminate slaughter of the mers could damage the entire universe. Ultimately, Arienrhod is killed, and her plans are thwarted by her own clone, Moon Dawntreader who understands the relationship between the mers and the ancient knowledge — which will give Tiamat high tech without the Hegemony.

Key Questions

Vinge has opened up a great many concerns about ethics that are reflected in today's society. Some of these concern the ethics of bio-engineering.

Among the questions are: How far should bio-engineering be allowed to advance? Should a procedure, such as cloning, be performed simply because scientists are able to perform it? How ethical is bio-warfare? Other ethical questions focus on economics: Is it morally right for a high tech society to impede a low tech society's growth for its own economic gain? Can the lower tech society justifiably rebel against this economic oppression? Other moral questions are echoed today by animal rights groups: Can the killing of animals for the benefit of humans ever be justified? If so, under what circumstances?

1. Do you think the Hegemony has the right to keep Tiamat in a low tech state by withholding certain high tech items and by building obsolescence into others?
2. Do you think that killing the mers can be justified in any circumstances?
3. Do you see any parallels between current concerns about the perils of science run amok and the situation on Tiamat?
4. Do you see any parallel between the Hegemony's trade relationship with Tiamat and the U.S. trade relationship with underdeveloped countries such as Mexico?
5. What major points about technology and society do you think the author is trying to make?



Related Titles

In *World's End* (1984), a former Hegemony lawman and would-be lover of Moon Dawntreader, BZ Gundhalinu, journeys to a frontier-style planet to search for his lost brothers. While there, he uncovers a ruined city which may hold the key to interstellar travel by a means other than a gateway — and a future in which Tiamat no longer need to depend on Hegemony technology.

The Summer Queen (1991) continues the adventures of Moon Dawntreader and Sparks Dawntreader. Moon becomes the Summer Queen with Sparks as her consort. All is not smooth, however; the Summer People resist Moon's attempts at reform, and the Winter People plot to kill her. Even Sparks reverts to his previous vices learned while he was Arienrhod's lover. BZ Gundhalinu turns up also with news of his technological find. Moon ultimately through self-sacrifice and personal bravery resolves all problems — for now.



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