Snow White Short Guide

Snow White by Donald Barthelme

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Characters

There are no characters as such in Barthelme's fiction. Instead, there are names, voices, words. The characters in Snow White appear shallow, like the characters in a fairy tale. Even their psychologies seem to be lifted from a basic psychology textbook.Snow White, for example, is an updated urban version of the Grimms' Brothers figure, with more than a dash of the Walt Disney animated version tossed in for intertextual (as opposed to psychological) depth. She is known chiefly by her long black hair, which she likes to hang out the window, by her dissatisfaction, and by her longing to be something more than the "horsewife" she has become in her menage a huit with the seven men with whom she lives and who, she claims, add up to only "two real men."

When not washing the windows, tending the vats of Chinese baby food, or manufacturing plastic buffalo humps to get in on "the leading edge of the trash phenomenon," the men — Bill (the withdrawn leader, later executed for "vatricide"), Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Henry, Clem, and Dan — contemplate their loss of equanimity since Snow White's arrival and more especially since the onset of her bout of longing to be something other, something more. Paul is the novel's "prince figure," torn between acting in a princely manner and eating "a-duckwith-blue-cheese sandwich." After a brief stint as a monk, he performs his own parodically princely deed, drinking the poisoned vodka gibson which the novel's wicked stepmother figure, Jane, intended for Snow White, because her lover, the "Loathesome" Hogo de Bergerac, nee Roy, has taken a fancy to Snow.

Social Concerns

Snow White, Barthelme's second book and first novel, brilliantly combines metafictional techniques with a highly refracted critique of contemporary culture. Approached one way, the novel is about democratization in all its manifestations — political, sexual, economic, literary, and above all linguistic. Equality may be the novel's subject, perhaps even its aim, but it is an equality that invariably becomes reductive, in which nothing and no one is any better than anything or anyone else. The desire for equality may easily degenerate (just by substituting and deleting a few letters of the alphabet) into a low-grade longing for equanimity. In the world of Snow White, which is the world of consumerism, dissatisfaction is omnipresent. The characters yearn not only for commodities but for romance.

In its own peculiarly perverse way, the novel attempts to affirm an individualism that has been all but lost to modern society. Snow White's twin longings — for sexual equality and romantic adventure — take the form of neither a feminist tract nor a Harlequin romance but of a desire to be other than a "horsewife." Playfully yet insightfully, the novel depicts a world rapidly moving toward pure noise and complete trash, a world of "dreck" and "blague." By exploiting language, the novel calls the reader's attention to the fate of words and of word-users in a consumer society that manipulates language and people as if they were commodities. Snow White startles the reader into an awareness that the novel itself is an object that is both familiar and strange. As a short book about a familiar fairy tale, the novel should be eminently consumable, yet it resists the reader's efforts to understand and thus dispose of the text. Like a trash heap or a Calder mobile, it is simply there, a source of wonder and anxiety.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Snow White is one of several works of the 1960s and 1970s that recycles myths and fairy tales: John Gardner's Grendel (1971), John Barth's Chimera (1972), Robert Coover's Pricksongs and Descants (1969), and Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber (1979). In defense of James Joyce's high-modernist novel, Ulysses (1922), T. S. Eliot defined what he called "mythic method" — "the drawing of a continuous parallel between the ancient and the modern in order to make sense of the enormous panorama of anarchy and futility which is contemporary life." The postmodern writers are interested less in a continuous parallel (and the depth and resonance it implies) than in the factitiousness of the original story as a convention worthy of exploitation as well as exploration, a semiotic code worth cracking in order to sift through what Coover has called the "mythic residue." What results is not so much parallelism as anachronism, divergence, discontinuity, and intertextual play. Even the novel's "source" begins to blur as the fairy-tale Snow White merges with the Disney character, as well as with Rapunzel and Little Red Riding Hood.

Barthelme's novel bears a certain similarity to the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, and the French New Novelists, but also to the kind of books that the dwarfs prefer, "books with a lot of dreck in them."

Snow White proceeds not in terms of its attenuated plot but through accretion, combination, and collage. Not only are the chapters exceptionally short, they are often stylistically and typographically distinct. At times they read like nothing more than summaries, captions, and headlines in boldface. Following a principle of more or less free substitution, the novel mixes a wide variety of opposing languages — high and low, old and new, standard and slang. The reader cannot with any assurance claim that the author speaks any more clearly in the chapter, "ANATHEMIZATIO N OF THE WORLD IS NOT AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO THE WORLD," than in the questionnaire situated between the first two of the novel's three parts, which mocks the reader in his or her efforts to understand the novel according to interpretive conventions which no longer apply but which cannot be forgotten or easily replaced.

Adaptations

A "rehearsed reading" of Barthelme's then in-progress "play" of Snow White took place at The American Place Theatre, New York, on June 10, 1976, with Wynn Handman, director and Julia Miles, associate director.

Related Titles

Barthelme's allusive postmodern style also plays an important part in "A Shower of Gold" (1964) and "The Indian Uprising" (1965). An early story, later retitled "Me and Miss Mandible" (1961) makes use of comic disparity (an adult misassigned to an elementary school classroom) in a way that anticipates Snow White (modern characters attempting to live out fairy tale roles). "The Balloon" focuses on the interpretive indeterminacy which characterizes so many of Barthelme's stories and novels, especially the summarily ended Snow White.

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