A Wild Swan: And Other Tales Study Guide

A Wild Swan: And Other Tales by Michael Cunningham

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of this book was used to create this Study Guide: Cunningham, Michael. A Wild Swan and Other Tales. Illustrations by Yuko Shimizo. Paperback edition. Published by 4th Estate, London, 2015.

A Wild Swan: And Other Stories is a short-story anthology by best-selling author Michael Cunningham. The stories in this collection are retellings of many popular fairy tales with a modern twist and a unique perspective.

In “Dis. Enchant.” the first-person narrator assures readers that they are safe because they can blend in. It is those who do well in life who are at risk of being cursed, and indeed they claim it is understandable as they arouse jealousy and resentment. They claim that there are spells which can be learned easily for those who wish to take down such people.

In Cunningham’s retelling of the Hans Christian Andersen story “A Wild Swan,” twelve princes are transformed into swans by their stepmother, who spares the girl because she assumes they will bond, but they do not do so. The girl manages to create a spell to undo the curse but she is interrupted when trying to carry it out, so one of the princes is left with a swan's wing. The other princes go on to lead normal lives except for the prince with the swan's wing, who ends up leaving home and trying to fit in elsewhere. He attracts attention initially but he is ultimately lonely. He tries to think of ways he can make the most of his predicament but settles for resignation. His brothers end up having troubles of their own despite being normal again, while the prince with the swan's wing spends time with those who are cursed like him. He realizes that he is lucky compared to many of them, and that the wing might, in the end, be a good thing.

In the story “Crazy Old Lady,” the Crazy Old Lady leads an unconventional life from the beginning, taking many lovers and marrying three times before deciding that she would rather be alone. She loses touch with her friends who end up leading conventional married lives, and when she comes into wealth she buys a plot of land and builds a house made of candy. She takes great care of her home but soon becomes lonely again, waiting for visitors to come by. Eventually a boy and a girl come along and start eating the house, and when the Crazy Old Lady tries to stop them, they throw her in the oven.

The story “Jacked” focuses on Jack, a highly unreliable boy who sells his family’s last cow for a handful of beans which he is told are magic. His mother is angry with him for doing so until the beans grow overnight into a giant beanstalk reaching into the sky. Jack climbs the beanstalk and sees a giant's castle. He knocks on the door and a giantess lets him in. When the giant comes home sensing Jack, the giantess hides Jack and he steals the giant's gold and escapes back down the beanstalk to his home. He keeps going back up the beanstalk to be invited in by the giantess and he keeps stealing things, one by one, including the giant's prize hen who lays golden eggs. Soon the house is empty except for a self-playing harp which Jack then steals too, and the

giant catches him this time and chases him down the beanstalk. Jack cuts the beanstalk down, killing the giant, and Jack only feels slightly guilty as he and his mother continue to live a prosperous life.

In “Poisoned,” a conversation between Snow White and the prince takes place. The subject of jokes about apples comes up, and it emerges that the prince wants Snow White to re-enact the moment he discovered her in the coffin. Snow White recounts how she used to live with the dwarfs and how much they probably miss her, and the prince expresses regret. He still encourages Snow White to undertake the request, telling her what he loves about her, before she finally relents. They agree to do the act for twelve minutes, and he tells her to position herself exactly as she was in the coffin. She positions herself the way she was at the time, and the prince continues his inner monologue, speaking to her, reminiscing about when he saw her and kissed her for the first time.

In “A Monkey's Paw,” the White family is a normal family that lives in a remote cottage, with the son working at a local factory. One day a friend of Mr. White returns from travelling with a monkey's paw which he wants to get rid of immediately. He warns them to make modest wishes only. Mrs. White wishes for two hundred pounds and the next day they receive news that their son has been killed in an accident and they will receive compensation of two hundred pounds. Mrs. White wishes for her son back and he returns as a walking corpse to the house. They try to accept him and to live life as normal but the son wants to be released eventually and Mr. and Mrs. White begin to resent each other's presence. They are all aware that the monkey's paw remains somewhere in the house, with one more wish ready to be granted to whoever is first to make one.

In the story “Little Man,” the Little Man lives alone in a secluded area, and begins to want a child more than anything. One day he learns that a miller's daughter has been tasked by the king to turn straw into gold or face execution, and he goes to her aid, helping her to turn all the straw into gold. The king orders her to do it again with more straw and she and the Little Man do the same thing again. The king orders her to do it again with even more straw, and promises to marry her if she does it this time, and she and the Little Man manage to do it again. The Little Man asks for the miller's daughter's firstborn child as compensation and she agrees, and then she marries the king. A year later the Little Man requests an audience with the king and queen and he reminds her of the promise she made. She agrees to give him her firstborn child if she can guess his name in three days' time and he agrees. The night before he is to take the child he says his name out loud, and he is overheard by one of the king's servants. The next day the queen guesses his name correctly and in a fit of anger he splits himself in half, and is forced to spend the rest of his life that way.

In “Steadfast; Tin,” a young man and young woman fall in love one night at college. He reveals to her that he is missing a leg and she still accepts him the way he is. They get married and have children, but they grow increasingly tired of each other, each planning their eventual separation. When the children are grown they take a vacation in order to

save their marriage and a terrible accident brings them back together again. They grow old together, leading a new contented life.

In the story “Beasts,” Beauty is tired of her current life. Her father asks what she wants brought back from his travels and she asks only for a rose. He tries to take a rose from the garden of the Beast, who catches him and then threatens to kill him if he does not return to be punished the next day. When Beauty learns of this she goes to the Beast's castle in her father's place, and she and the Beast live a normal life together, with him showing her gentleness and courtesy. One day he releases her and she returns home, only to find that she is no longer welcome in the village. Soon she returns back to the castle to find the Beast in a bad way. She promises to marry him and then he turns back into a man.

In “Her Hair,” the prince who found Rapunzel by climbing up her hair was cut down by the queen causing him to fall into the thorns below the castle which took out his eyes. He then traveled the world upon his horse searching for her, knocking on all doors and enduring ridicule from many. He finally found her in the place where she had been abandoned by the queen. She recognized him despite his bedraggled state and he said only her name. Before leaving for the castle she went to take out her hair from a drawer, where she had been saving it since it was cut off. She was scared it would have lost its luster but it still looked as good as it did before. He enjoyed her hair from then on but Rapunzel hid from him the fact that her hair was no longer attached to her head. She wondered why he did not seem to know but she allowed him to believe it to be.

In “Ever/After,” a prince in a prosperous kingdom is betrothed to marry a princess from a nearby poorer kingdom and at first it seems like a mismatch. She is assertive and confident while he is shy and passive, but eventually they work together as a team and she advises him on the things to do to be a good king. They have children, whose abilities to reign they do not have much confidence in, and they each have affairs but eventually return to be faithful to each other from then on. The king passes away and the children grow up to be successful in their own way, and years later the queen dies, leaving the eldest son king. Despite there being problems it is a mostly peaceful reign.

”Dis. Enchant.”

Summary

The narrator begins this story by assuring the reader that "most of us are safe" (3) because it is rare to affect those with power so much as for them to want to cause harm. He lists the various types of "mediocre" character types who will not attract unwanted attention. The narrator asserts that those who seek vengeance only go after those who attract attention for being outstanding in some way, or being better than everyone else.

The narrator claims that it is entirely understandable that demons and wizards can be understood in their bid to take down those who make everyone else feel inferior. They say that the world would be a better place for everyone, where everyone will more easily meet the standards of beauty and grace. The narrator then prompts the reader to make present-day comparisons, asking if they might wish ill upon their contemporaries who make them feel "less-than" (4) or hard done by. The narrator concludes that those who do not are well and good, but for those that do there are plenty of spells that can be learned with ease.

Analysis

In this introduction to the fairytale collection, the narrator immediately begins to divide characters into two sides: the normal people (including the readers, given the confidential tone of speaking) and the elite.

The narrator strongly implies that those who are the subjects of curses largely bring it upon themselves, either due to their arousal of jealousy or some other failing. This is reminiscent of the real world, in which those who are disproportionately successful often find themselves on the receiving end of bitterness and resentment, with attempts to "put them back in their place," and evidently the fairy-tale world is much the same. In the latter world, they simply have the advantage of magic and spells to make this happen more easily. However, presumably karma is also a factor in such a world, as the narrator warns that “most of us can be counted on to manage our own undoings” (3), alluding also to the presence of human nature in this alternate world. The narrator even goes as far as to question, rhetorically, whether this jealousy might, in such a skewed and unfair world, be even a reasonable reaction.

The narrator elicits sympathy for those who would be, in the real or fictional world, pushed into demanding democracy. The narrator posits that “if certain manifestations of perfection can be disgraced, or disfigured, or sent to walk the earth in iron shoes, the rest of us will find ourselves living in a less arduous world; a world of more reasonable expectations; a world in which the appellations ’beauty' and ‘potency' can be conferred upon a larger cohort of women and men” (4), demonstrating a belief that a state of grace should be conferred upon the many rather than merely the few.

The author encourages the reader to think of himself as being on the side of the traditional antagonist, rather than that of the protagonist, or the "hero" of the tale. Furthermore it opens up the possibility that the antagonist is, more often than not, simply misunderstood, and does not have the chance to tell his side of the story.

Discussion Question 1

Is the narrator meant to represent any particular character, or is their voice synonymous with that of the author? How is this indicated?

Discussion Question 2

How does the implication that the heroes of fairytales are merely a chosen lucky few shape one's perception of the main characters in the following tales?

Discussion Question 3

The narrator claims that there are spells which can be used against such fortunate people. Is magic used to make the fairytale world fairer for everyone, or is it simply pointing out the possibility of fairness? Why?

Vocabulary

ruination, swains, deities, incantations

“A Wild Swan”

Summary

In the city in which this story is set there lives a prince whose right arm is in the form of a swan's wing. Earlier he and his brothers had been turned into swans by their stepmother who did not relish the task of raising twelve adolescent boys who were not hers to begin with. She did not cast the spell on the thirteenth child, the princess, because she was a girl and she therefore felt more of a bond with her, but attempts to bond with the girl were in vain.

The boys/swans went to live out at sea and were able to return to their home once a year but the visits were not greatly anticipated due to their being swans rather than boys. After many years, the spell was broken by the princess who had learned from a beggar woman that the cure for the spell put on them was coats made of nettles. However the nettles had to be collected from graveyards after dark and if caught the princess risked being executed by her stepmother so she had to be careful not to be caught. She set to work and had almost finished when she was caught by the archbishop who turned her in. The queen used this as confirmation that she was right about the girl and the king gave in to her will, preferring to be seen as strong rather than protect his own daughter. Just as she was about to be burned at the stake the swan-brothers came down from the sky and the princess cast the nettle coats over them transforming them back into boys/young men.

All of the princes were transformed fully except for one whose right arm remained that of a swan's wing because the princess had been unable to finish making the coats and missed a sleeve. The other eleven young men ended up settling into happy lives, getting married, having children, and throwing parties, and the stepmother retreated to a convent with the king, taking the side of his sons. The swan-winged brother had a more difficult time, as did his extended family and associates in accepting him due to it being a reminder of what had happened. People began to mock the prince, as he became clumsy and prone to accidents due to his ungainly wing, and even the cats were wary of him. The prince eventually packed his bags and left home but found just as much trouble fitting into the real world, having no marketable skills being a prince and having the use of only one arm. Women were briefly interested in him but usually more out of curiosity so nothing ever lasted long. His wing turned out to require high maintenance care, although he loved his wing. He just wished he could see it as more of an advantage and to be able to market it in a better way. He continued to fail to live up to himself throughout his life, and entered middle age in a state of resigned acceptance.

It is stated that the prince is still in existence. He realizes that he needs to "own" what he is in order to get by. His brothers have ended up with failed marriages and spoiled children, whereas the twelfth brother spends his time hanging out with those who are partially cursed like him, who have had spells put upon them seemingly forever. This is where the prince is considered to be one of the lucky ones and that his life isn't the

worst. The prince learns that he can always rely on his wing to put a type of shield over him when he wakes in the morning.

Analysis

The allegory of an incomplete "transformation" from boy to man is conveyed strongly in this tale. The partial reversal of a curse, for one of the princes, leads to him leading only a partial life.

Until the princes were struck with the curse, they were on track to leading the type of blessed lives that the narrator outlined in the first chapter—the type of life which would arouse negative feelings in others who are not so lucky. The loss of part of their formative years to the curse would have had a profound effect on them; however the reversal of the curse by their sister means that they were able to continue their path to adulthood with little interruption. The exception to this is the prince who has been left with a swan's wing, which would remain with him for the rest of his life. The tale follows his struggle to cope with this unexpected and permanent change, one which is presumably unprecedented, with no-one else sharing quite the same experience. He tries, alternately, to see his condition as a blessing and as a curse.

In periods of self-assurance he tries to present his wing as a curiosity, but it turns out that this is more difficult than it seems: “unless it (the wing) was washed daily, feather by feather, it turned from the creamy white of a French tulip to a linty, dispiriting gray" (11), which would have been time consuming. This irreversible deformity affects his ability to continue to associate with his own family, with his family members beginning to treat him like an amusing novelty rather than a member of the family, and it causes his path to divert from theirs. The diversion of his path from his family’s can be seen in the literal sense, as he exiles himself from the kingdom to make a new life for himself. However even in the outside world he cannot blend in any more easily, and is treated much the same way—either as a freak or a curiosity.

The struggle to come to terms with himself is what comes to define his entire life, and his eventual reaching out to the local "community" of cursed people leads him to put things in better perspective. He concludes that he is still, compared to many others, lucky, and that “maybe that’s what there is to hope for – that it merely won’t get any worse” (13) - a modest but realistic approach to life.

Discussion Question 1

The author asks if we can really blame the stepmother for transforming the boys into swans, using the sympathy of the reader to allow them to understand her actions. Why might what she did be understandable?

Discussion Question 2

In the conclusion of this story, the author writes, “End of story. 'Happily ever after' fell on everyone like a guillotine’s blade” (pg 10). How might the story have ended differently for the prince if the spell to reverse the curse had been complete?

Discussion Question 3

Does the fact that the prince is royalty affect his ability to cope with his new condition, and if so, how?

Vocabulary

vituperative, rapacious, crownletted

“Crazy Old Lady”

Summary

“Crazy Old Lady” is author Michael Cunningham’s twist on the classic “Hansel and Gretel” and is related from the second-person perspective by the “witch” from that tale. In the opening of this story, the "Crazy Old Lady" first states how solitary her existence has become. She tells how she grew up very fast, started hanging out in taverns, and experimenting with random men. She'd had three husbands, all of whom served to further lower her expectations, and decided to pre-emptively forego husband number four and embark upon "a career of harshly jovial sluttishness" (15) while her friends were all married off to "tolerable" (15) men, gradually losing touch with her friends through the inevitability of married life.

She began to realize that she had maybe ended up lucky, not being tied down by the mundane nature of life tending to a husband and children. Instead of this fate she clung to her youth even more, presenting herself in an ever-more attention grabbing way. She maintains that she was "undeluded" (16) about the way things were and that she was secretly the envy of everyone else. She imagined the good she'd be doing in the town, expecting to have young men come to visit late at night in order to receive "instruction" (16) and encouraging them not to stay, complimenting their technique the whole time. She was sure that she was "seeding (the) town with suitable husbands" (17) for which the young women would be grateful even if they never knew that she was the reason.

It emerges that the future she imagined did not happen that way; she had sustained a leg injury and been forced to move into an apartment which was barely livable. The young men of today, she found, were not the same as the young men of her day, like "alarmingly well-behaved man-children" (18) who were not as inclined to seek out older women. She bought a piece of real estate and decided to build her house out of candy, conducting in-depth research in order to make it a reality. She took care to maintain the home, and then waited for young people to come.

She was surprised at having to wait such a long time and started renovating the house more regularly just for something to do, and wondering how to make the house more noticeable and appealing. Two visitors finally arrive, a young boy and girl, who immediately begin eating the house with abandon. They ransack the house, complain that there is nothing but candy, and shove the crazy old lady into the oven.

Analysis

"Crazy Old Lady" is a tale of transformation from the hyper-social to the fully-solitary lifestyle of one woman who is distinctly out of keeping with the social mores of society. Her internal progression is not quite as even, as she veers back and forth between longing for company and longing for solitude.

As a young girl/woman it seems that she is trying to gain as much experience of everything as humanly possible, dallying with every young man she can find and frequenting all the taverns that other girls her age most likely would not visit. In this life she is not conventional but the extent of what she shares with other girls is her unmarried status. On the surface it might appear that she finds conventionality by marrying, but her subsequent three divorces allow her to resume the unconventional title. Reaching an age when there is little chance, in the type of society she lives in, to return to a state of grace, she opts for the other direction to the extreme. She wears the most outrageous things possible, using the outfits themselves to reclaim an identity. They are her only form of support - “it seemed as if the dresses themselves held you upright on the bar stools; that if they were cut away, you’d spill onto the floor and lie there, helpless, a pink-white muddle of overused flesh” (16) - which perhaps leads her to seek out a more solid structure in the form of a house. Retreating from society, she is determined to take full advantage of not having anyone to pass judgment on her, and building a house of candy is perhaps as unconventional as it is possible to be.

Ironically, when finding solitude at long last, she begins to long for companionship, or simply anyone to pass by her house. However, enough time must have passed for her to be resigned to the likelihood that this will never happen. In a cruel twist of fate –she thinks of her first visitors in years and she wonders “were you relieved, maybe just a little, when they lifted you up (you weighed almost nothing by then) and shoved you into the oven?” (20), showing that she has tired of life in society, no matter what role she chooses to play.

The Crazy Old Lady in this tale lives at both extreme ends of the scale of social acceptability, and at neither end does she find herself accepted into society. In either case she is perhaps destined to lead a solitary life.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author's use of the second person - addressing the reader directly as if they were the main character - influence how the Crazy Old Lady is portrayed throughout the tale?

Discussion Question 2

The Crazy Old Lady describes how her friends are married off to "tolerable" (15) men. In what way does her behavior and lifestyle express how intolerable she finds everyday life in the society she lives in?

Discussion Question 3

Does the trajectory of her life - from "girl about town" to lonely old lady - reflect the protagonist's inner feelings and personality, and if so, how?

Vocabulary

lascivousness, lewdness

“Jacked”

Summary

In this take on “Jack and the Beanstalk,” the narrator introduces a boy, Jack, who is not at all reliable and sells his mother's cow, their only remaining asset, for a handful of beans which the buyer says are magical. Jack is portrayed as the type of person who just expects things to happen without putting effort into doing anything. Jack's mother is furious when he tells her about selling the cow for beans when he gets home and she berates him for being cavalier and unreliable. Meanwhile, he inwardly criticizes her for being a spend-thrift with a "poverty of imagination" (24) that is stuck in a limited way of life. Jack's mother throws the beans out the window and sends Jack to bed without supper, at which point the narrator points out that in traditional versions of the fairytale the outcome would be a lot darker, and that the implied lesson is for mothers not to be misled by their "blind desire" (25) to see their handsome sons as automatically reliable.

Jack awakens the next morning to see that the beans have grown into a giant beanstalk stretching into the sky. He does not even think before climbing the beanstalk and reaches the clouds, where he sees a giant's castle. He makes towards the castle when he hears his name being spoken by an "angel of the mist" (26), who tells him that his father was killed by the giant and Jack was only spared by his mother's pleading. The angel also tells Jack that everything the giant owns belongs rightfully to him but he has assumed that already. He knocks on the door and it is answered by the giant's wife. She invites him in gladly and feeds him but the giant comes home early, forcing the wife to hide Jack in the saucepan. The giant smells Jack but the wife tells him that it's the cooking; she feeds him and he starts counting his gold. She considers telling the giant about Jack's escape with the giant's gold, but changes her mind. Jack returns home and he and his mother are now wealthy. They renovate their house and buy all new things but eventually they want more so Jack goes back up the beanstalk to steal more.

The giantess is once again taken with Jack's charm and the same scene with Jack, the giantess, and the giant plays out once again. The giant demands to see the hen that lays the golden eggs to be reassured of his riches once again. Jack makes his escape, and the giantess allows him to flee once again. Jack and his mother reach the limits of how much they can buy, but Jack still goes back up the beanstalk a year later. He finds that the giant and giantess are now a lot poorer than before. All they have now is a self-playing harp, which the giant summons and then orders to play. Jack makes to steal the harp with the giantess wondering if she should stop him, but it is the harp who calls out to the giant that it is being stolen. The giant pursues Jack down the beanstalk; Jack then chops the beanstalk down and it falls to the ground along with the giant. Jack and his mother continue to prosper and Jack only develops the smallest of consciences about everything that he has done. The hen lives contentedly laying eggs and only the harp still misses its home.

Analysis

Jack, in this tale, is portrayed as the living embodiment of opportunism and living without regard for consequences. This story can be seen as a parable describing the road which this personality type can take one down.

From the beginning it is clear that Jack is irresponsible to the point of endangering both his own and his mother's livelihood; already in poverty and down to their last cow, Jack seems to have no grasp of the gravity of their situation. Indeed while the narrator states, “the implication of this particular tale is: Trust strangers. Believe in magic” (pg), this is clearly the perspective of things according to Jack. He truly believes that the beans are magic and it is indeed only sheer unlikely luck that they actually are. The narrator even goes as far as to acknowledge that both Jack and his mother would have starved in another version of the tale. In a humbler person, being so admonished by his mother and then seeing the beans turn into a giant beanstalk might have encouraged a desire not to take anything more for granted, but Jack does the opposite. He climbs up to the giant's castle in the sky, and his very first action is to steal whatever he can. Even when his very life is threatened by the giant he cannot help making his escape with something he has stolen. Jack certainly suffers from “a self-devotion so pure it borders on the divine” (31), which is a strange expression as it implies there is something religious about his tendencies. However, in terms of commitment to being this type of person, it seems to be an apt description.

The self-devotion is what Jack and the giant seem to have in common as well as a commitment to what they have or can acquire—which might explain the receptiveness of the giantess to Jack. Her devotion to her husband, the giant, has endured for so many years that it has seemingly worn her down, and her permitting Jack to enter the castle might well be borne out of habit than anything else. The giant and giantess are shown to be greatly at odds with each other, with her being little more than a slave, and their exchange is apparently so predictable as to be "too absurd even for farce” (31) when the giant senses Jack's presence.

Therefore the devotion of Jack's mother to Jack, and the devotion of the giantess to the giant, shares some parallels and implies that Jack and the giant have much in common. When regarded in this way, it is one "taker" taking from another "taker" and to such personality types, consequences are not for them to take into consideration.

Discussion Question 1

How does Jack's perception of his mother compare with his mother's perception of her son Jack?

Discussion Question 2

What statement is the author trying to make, if any, about the relationship between the giantess and the giant? What past is implied that they have shared which has led to the discrepancy between them in this tale?

Discussion Question 3

What motivation does Jack have, other than the pursuit of riches, for continuing to raid the giants' castle until there is nothing left?

Vocabulary

apex, incarnate, corpulent, postprandial, avaricious, voracity, stripling

“Poisoned”

Summary

In the opening of “Poisoned,” a conversation between Snow White and the prince takes place. The prince is trying to encourage Snow White do something which she does not want to do again, and she tries to explain this to him. The subject of jokes about apples comes up and the prince tries to rationalize her reluctance as being a result of a joke. It emerges that the prince wants Snow White to re-enact the moment he discovered her in the coffin.

The prince claims that she used to do the same thing for the dwarfs and Snow White implies that he is exaggerating. She recounts how she used to live with the dwarfs and how much they probably miss her. The prince reminds her of the time they had the dwarfs over as guests and it is implied they carried out the same act as he is referring to now. He still encourages Snow White to undertake the request, with Snow White first insisting that he tell her what he loves about her. He tells her he loves the way she expresses herself and has an astonished look about her in the morning. They agree to do the act for twelve minutes, and he tells her to position herself exactly as she was in the coffin.

She positions herself the way she was at the time, and the prince continues his inner monologue, speaking to her, reminiscing about when he saw her and kissed her for the first time.

Analysis

"Poisoned" is a tale about the conflict between one person who wishes to return to a particular moment in their history, and the other person's wish to avoid it wherever possible. The tale is one of negotiation.

There is a confusing exchange of words which appears to diverge from the actual, ultimate request initially. The prince is trying to get Snow White to do something which she is clearly unwilling to do again, with the implication being that she has already unwillingly participated in what the prince is asking her to do several times before. The prince tries to reason with Snow White and dig into any possible reasons she might not want to do what turns out to be the re-enactment of how he found her in the coffin. Snow White uses this opportunity to tell the prince that she has never really liked doing it and that she has only been pretending. This is clearly an issue for the prince and has been for some time, and the reference to a therapist hints at even more underlying issues that have most likely affected the relationship between him and Snow White. The dwarfs are seen as "competition," people that Snow White has been "taken" from and are therefore deserving of sympathy.

The deep-rooted conflict is very easy to see the more the conversation goes on, and Snow White is systematically coerced into carrying out the act, eventually relenting when he gives her a compliment. The relationship they have is blatantly unhealthy and Snow White's reasons for continuing to go along with it, apart from being complimented every so often, are never made clear. This is ultimately a tale of negotiation which becomes increasingly one-sided, and one which, it is implied, is likely to happen over and over again.

Discussion Question 1

Is it immediately clear why the reference to an apple joke might make sense to the average reader? Does the reader need to be familiar with the context of the original tale in order to understand? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

To what extent does the prince use Snow White's past as "leverage" in order to get her to comply with his desire?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the prince seem so willingly oblivious to Snow White's reluctance to perform this act? Why does the "lure" of Snow White in the coffin provoke in the prince?

Vocabulary

displacing, squinchy

“A Monkey's Paw”

Summary

In “A Monkey’s Paw,” the White family is introduced, a "modest but happy family" (47) consisting of a mother, father, and son. The son works in the local factory, and has many things to potentially complain about but never does and accepts his lot in life. They live a modest life in a remote cottage, yet they all get along. They remind themselves of how things could be worse. An old friend of the father visits, having returned from India, and presents them with a monkey's paw which grants wishes. They are repelled by the gift but are too polite to refuse. The monkey paw moves and the visitor reveals that he has been trying to get rid of the paw and then he bids them farewell, warning them to only make the most modest wishes. The mother wishes for two hundred pounds which is just enough to pay for what they owe for the cottage. Nothing happens and they go to bed, with the mother wondering how she ended up leading such a poor lifestyle.

The son goes to work the next day, and then a representative shows up at the house to inform the mother and father that the son was killed in an accident and that they will pay them two hundred pounds in compensation. The mother, in a state of grief, grabs the paw and demands that her son be brought back. Later that night, the walking corpse of the son makes its way back home, and despite being terrified they let him inside. The family returns to a normal routine, and makes attempts to arrange the house to feel more like things were before. The son begins to wonder why he is being held captive there.

Mr. and Mrs. White grow increasingly unhappy and resentful of each other, but they keep things going for the sake of their son. As they start to harbor wishes that the other would go away, they all know that the monkey's paw can grant one more wish to whoever wants to make the last one.

Analysis

The monkey's paw, initially, comes to represent a change in the lives of the White family, who have led an unremarkable, even disappointing, life until now. Yet it merely seems to make their current circumstances even more pronounced than ever before—with a great element of horror thrown in.

The Whites live in a secluded cottage in the middle of nowhere, which the narrator claims is actually inaccessible for much of the year. The narrator also outlines how the son never complains about his position in life, the injuries from working a mundane job at such a young age, allegedly from how good a son he is and his duty to his family. Mr. and Mrs. White, however, appear to have resigned themselves to this lifestyle much earlier on, with the son simply being born into his circumstances. The fact that the

monkey's paw is met with such suspicion has possibly as much to do with the shock of novelty as it has to do with the warning that it carries a great curse. Still, they adhere to the warning to be modest in their wishes, but even then they have no way of predicting how badly wrong the wish can go. Even when the son returns, as a lifeless walking body, to the house, having been summoned by his mother's wish, there is a vain attempt to return to normal. Even so, it is clear from their thoughts and habits that maintaining normality has been difficult for some time, and that this event is merely adding to an already existing situation.

The son appears to suffer the most in this new "life," with still the capacity to wonder in his half-dead-half-alive state, “what crime has it committed? Its jailers are kind enough, they make their attempts at offering comfort, but why do they keep it here, what exactly did it do that was so wrong?” (54). This is what the son might have wondered, in his previous life, if he had not been so committed to maintaining the familial structure.

Discussion Question 1

The monkey's paw is accepted, mostly, out of politeness. To what extent has a willingness to not "rock the boat" contributed to the way the family has chosen to live?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator build up the expectation that something very bad will come out of Mrs. White's first wish despite taking great care to make it a modest one?

Discussion Question 3

How does the son express his desire to end his experience of being not truly alive?

Vocabulary

taciturn, exotica, opalescent

“Little Man”

Summary

The narrator of “Little Man,” the titular character, speaks in the second-person in this tale. In the opening of the story, he imagines what it would be like to have a child, and suggests that he now wants one more than anything else. However, he realizes that the chances of him being accepted as a "two-hundred-year-old gnome" (60) are remote. He feels envious of how much easier it is for others to produce children while he is unable to do so.

He hears a rumor that a miller whose business is struggling has just promised the king that his daughter can turn straw into gold. The Little Man wonders what drove the miller to make such a claim. The king calls his bluff then locks the daughter into a cellar with the threat of execution if she is unable to turn the straw into gold. The Little Man then realizes that, being descended from a family line of wizards, he might be able to help the girl. The Little Man manages to find a way into the castle, claiming that they are not as difficult to gain access to as they seem. The girl is not even very surprised to see him appear in the straw room as so much else has been very strange. They do not have much luck spinning the straw at first but eventually all the straw is turned into gold. The girl gives him her necklace as thanks, and the king makes the girl do it all again with more straw this time. They are successful again and she repays him, and the king makes her do it again with more straw, promising to marry her and make her queen if she does it again. They manage to spin the straw into gold a third time, but she has nothing more to give so the Little Man finds himself demanding her first-born child, to which she agrees. He does not want to make such a demand but it is now done.

The Little Man forces himself to retreat and observes as the girl marries the king then bears a son a year later. He considers letting his request for the child pass but he goes to seek an audience with the king and queen. The Little Man waits his turn and then reminds the queen about her promise, and the king does not seem surprised. The queen asks him to reconsider and while he does consider this he instead offers the compromise that he will reconsider if in three days she can guess his name. The Little Man finds himself more sympathetic than he wants to be, and concludes that this must be a result of his love. The queen sends messengers out to seek out the Little Man's name, and he is confident that it will never be discovered because he is so obscure. On the second night, when imagining what it would be like to have the child, he lets his guard down by dancing round a fire and singing his name. He returns to the castle and the queen starts trying to guess his name, with him imagining very briefly that she might leave it all behind; then she guesses his name correctly. In a fit of disbelief he stamps each foot into the floor and tears himself in half. The queen summons the guards to take the pieces of the Little Man back to his home. He tries to adapt to being two different pieces from then on.

Analysis

The Little Man, the protagonist in this tale, appears to move from a state of being complete to suddenly incomplete—not just once but twice. The aspiration to having, or being, something out of reach has a profound effect on all the main characters in this anthology.

Having lived a largely solitary life, there is no explanation given for the Little Man's sudden and overwhelming desire for a child, but it is powerful enough to motivate him to carry out his subsequent deeds which remove him from his solitary life into a world where he does not belong. Clearly the desire is just as much a surprise to him as to anyone: “imagine reaching the point at which you want a child more than you can remember wanting anything else” (59)—but it still compels him regardless. Likewise, the miller is motivated by a desire, upon hearing that the king is looking to marry, to put forth his daughter as a candidate. It is implied that for most people of his station the chance to have royal connections can be vastly life-changing and therefore worth the risks involved in lying about his daughter's capabilities. Unfortunately, the king calls his bluff and then the miller's daughter's very life depends upon proving the miller's lie to be true. By this stage she has only two options: marry the king or face execution. Therefore she is automatically compelled to give the Little Man whatever he asks of her, and his overpowering desire compels him to demand what many would find impossible to follow through with. This leads to a very strange situation, all as a result of people trying to achieve what they are normally very unlikely to.

The miller's daughter, now queen, offers the three day rule simply to buy some more time, yet it is only by chance that the Little Man is overheard saying his name. When he literally splits in half it is a poignant symbol of his incompleteness which will remain forever so, not only because he cannot have a child, but now because he himself is incomplete.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author make it seem like the Little Man wanting a child is such an impossible wish?

Discussion Question 2

Is it possible that the Little Man does not fully mean his request to the miller's daughter to give him her first-born child? What motivates him to stick to this unreasonable demand?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the number three, and doing things three times, in this tale?

Vocabulary

scrofulous, sonorous, garnets, capricious, capitulation, dowager, sarcophagus, millimoment

“Steadfast; Tin”

Summary

In the story “Steadfast; Tin,” a girl has her eye on a boy at a frat house party. After being aloof for two years she decides to approach him at the insistence of her friend, and as part of her bid to get over her previous boyfriend. He is drawn to just such a type of girl and is himself a beautiful man. They get together and he is surprised at how matter-of-fact she is being, then he reveals that he has a prosthetic leg. They find then that they are a mutual fit and soon get married. Before long they start to see the flaws in each other—her brutal honesty and lack of sentimentality, and his hold on his boyish personality which remains as he begins to age. They grow increasingly irritated by each other but find reasons not to leave the marriage, such as the house and the children and being too scared to walk away.

The wife reads her daughter a story about a soldier with one leg who thinks he only has one leg but has two. The daughter does not like the story and does not like how he describes being different: "You make it sound like some kind of prize" (. 92). Years later the couple takes a vacation in order to save their marriage; they are on a boat with other people and the boat explodes, leaving the wife floating in the water in shock until she is rescued. She and her husband are reunited and are closer than ever from then on.

The wife reminds her daughter of the story while they are packing for her to leave for college and the story ends up relating to the husband and wife and their renewed destiny. The couple grows old together, settling into the pattern for the rest of their life.

Analysis

On the surface this seems like a simple tale: boy and girl meet, fall love, start a family, and live happily ever after. What the author draws attention to, in this tale however, is what happens in between and makes it a rather more complicated story.

At the beginning there is not much to suggest that the infatuation between the boy and girl will lead to anything long term, and indeed the first potential "obstacle" is thrown in early on. The boy is missing a leg and is long since accustomed to girls reacting in the same way to this—to either be repelled or to pretend like they do not even notice. The refreshing reaction this girl has, to simply acknowledge and accept the boy’s condition, is a sign to him that this girl is the one. Certainly the beginnings of love, rather than simple infatuation, are established here, but this is shown to not necessarily lead to an untroubled life.

The couple goes on to have children and what seems to be a stable family life, yet mutual discontent begins to show for no apparent reason. It is not clear whether their irritating habits have always been there or have recently been acquired but in either case the "romance" has long since disappeared and they are beginning to question their

choice to spend the rest of their lives together. The fact that it takes a life-threatening accident to bring them back together again—and to make them appreciate what they previously found off-putting in each other—shows that it is key events, whether overt or subtle, continually testing the marriage which lead to the happy ever after in this tale.

Discussion Question 1

What does the girl's reaction to the boy's missing leg say about her character?

Discussion Question 2

What parallels are there between the soldier, the ballerina, and the married couple?

Discussion Question 3

Given the pattern of their relationship from the beginning to the present, what difference did the accident make in saving the couple's marriage?

Vocabulary

aberration, cantankerous, litigate

“Beasts”

Summary

In “Beasts,” Beauty sees an intimidating-looking man at the checkout counter in the convenience store and ponders what he may be like—probably very different from the boys she is used to—and she feels that she is capable of taming bad boys and men.

Beauty was the eldest of three sisters and when their father asked what they wanted when he came back from his business trip they all asked for luxuries except for Beauty who only asked for a rose. Her reason for this was that she wanted something which could be obtained from home because for her it was the "effort, not the object" (102) which mattered to her. She also realized that finery would not compensate for the mundane future she was likely to have.

The father did not understand why Beauty only wanted a rose but respected her wish. He picked a rose from a garden on the way home, which turned out to be that of the Beast. The Beast pounced on him and was about to kill him when the father protested that he was only picking a gift for his daughter. The Beast allowed him to go home but ordered him to return to face punishment or he would kill all of them. The daughters told the father that the Beast was bluffing and they enjoyed their gifts, except for Beauty who thought the Beast really would follow through. She made her way to the castle, not so much out of self-sacrifice but as a way to escape her current life.

She wondered, along the way, if and how her father might rescue her from the Beast. She was treated very well at the castle and the Beast was always "courtly and gentle" (110), thinking that she did not see him going hunting, and she was surprised at the regularity of the days. One day the Beast finally told her she was free to go home, and Beauty wished that he had been more forceful in compelling her to stay, but she returned home.

She found that she did not feel that she was returning home, and that her family did not really feel her absence while she was gone. Her father was the same and her sisters had married local men and had had children. Beauty discovered that she had developed a "reputation" (113) within the village; everyone believed that she had been up to no good and even the least desirable men in the village were reluctant to marry her now. She fled back to the castle, found it empty, and discovered the Beast in the garden. She declared her love for him and was proud to reject those in the village. Upon hearing that Beauty would be his bride, the Beast instantly transformed into a handsome man and he looked at his reflection to be sure of his transformation. However Beauty could still see traces of the Beast in him and began to wonder if the spell had been put in place for a reason.

Analysis

From the beginning, Beauty appears to feel as if she only has certain choices in life and that she is only able to choose the least bad one. She appears to realize that she does not have so much a choice as a path which forks into one of two directions and that she must choose one.

Beauty is portrayed as an unconventional girl in her desire for the unconventional boy over the local village boys who she supposes all want the same predictable thing. Yet she feels the pressure to choose something: “You’re starting to worry that a certain train is about to leave the station; that although you’ll willingly board a different train, one bound for marriage and motherhood, that train may take its passengers to a verdant and orderly realm from which few ever return” (101-102). Beauty’s father’s news that the Beast is coming to get them (and that the Beast exists in the first place) is the sign which Beauty uses as a reason to make her choice.

While initially seeming content to remain with the Beast, despite his beast-like ways, she eventually goes at the Beast's behest back to the village to see what life is like there now, and it is not welcoming. She soon realizes that she made a mistake and doubles back on her decision, returning to the castle to make her final choice. The implication that her choice was, ultimately, the wrong one, with the Beast actually becoming more of a beast after his transformation back into the form of a man, shows that she could never have been sure of the right choice in the first place.

Discussion Question 1

How does Beauty's request for a rose, as opposed to finery, shape her "destiny" of meeting and falling in love with the Beast?

Discussion Question 2

What do the Beast's attempts to conceal parts of his character, such as his hunting, from Beauty, say about his inner humanity?

Discussion Question 3

Beauty's father appears indifferent to his daughter's disappearance when she returns home. Does this decision not to pursue her affect, in any way, the choices she ends up making?

Vocabulary

sinewy, paucity, crinolines, crepuscular, vulpine

“Her Hair”

Summary

The narrator of “Her Hair” states in the beginning of the story that the prince who found Rapunzel by climbing up her hair was cut down by the queen, causing him to fall into the thorns below the castle which took out his eyes. He then travelled the world upon his horse searching for Rapunzel, knocking on all doors and enduring ridicule from many. Some helped him, being mindful of his blinded state.

He finally found her in the place where she had been abandoned by the queen. She recognized him despite his bedraggled state and he said only her name. He acknowledged how far he had fallen from being a prince of high ranking to being reduced to climbing up a rope of hair for a princess, and he expressed joy at meeting her now.

They live together now in their own home. Before leaving for the castle she went to take out her hair from a drawer, where she had been saving it since it was cut off. She is scared it will have lost its luster but it still looks as good as it did before. He enjoys her hair from then on but Rapunzel is keeping it from him that her hair is no longer attached to her head. She wonders why he does not seem to know but she allows him to believe it to be.

Analysis

This tale is essentially one of how far two people will go to be with the one they love, each having to carry out different tasks to do so.

The prince pursues the princess, culminating in the famous scene in which he climbs up her long rope of golden hair, but in this version the queen cuts Rapunzel's hair, sending him falling to the ground. The cruel twist, that he loses his eyes in the process, however, does not deter him. In fact, it makes him even more resolved to return to Rapunzel. Bad fortune appears to even strengthen his resolve, which makes it all the more poignant when he is reunited with Rapunzel.

However, she in turn has her own task to carry out—that of maintaining the illusion that she still has her long golden hair. The fact that the prince must have realized that she no longer has this hair, due to being cut down along with it from the tower, is disregarded, and she keeps the hair accessible so that she is ready to allow him to feel the hair and keep his illusion of her intact.

It is not addressed why this maintenance of such an illusion is so important, but it reflects, in a way, the lengths which each is prepared to go to in the name of love.

Discussion Question 1

What does it say about the prince's character that he would continue to pursue Rapunzel for so long after being cut down and blinded in his first attempt?

Discussion Question 2

Is the prince the only character who has fallen from a state of high ranking, as a prince, to a lowly position, in his pursuit of what he wants in life? If so, why? If not, what are other examples?

Discussion Question 3

How does the deception of having to pretend she still has hair affect Rapunzel?

Vocabulary

shanty, sallow

“Ever/After”

Summary

In “Ever/After,” the narrator describes a prince who lived in a prosperous kingdom, the castle overlooking a pleasant town where people seemed to be happy and successful. When he turned 18 the prince married a princess from a nearby, less well-off kingdom where everything produced there was inferior compared to the kingdom of the prince. The princess's father had arranged the marriage in order to prevent the soldier from the other kingdom invading this more abundant one. The princess was only married to the prince because she had had no offers by that stage and the king wanted to get his other daughters married off. The prince and princess did not have a good marriage at first, both simply performing their duties, and the princess soon learned that the prince was not as confident as he seemed to be.

The prince had also been deceived by the bride, seeing her less-than-attractive appearance on their wedding day, but he was pleasantly surprised by her on their wedding night. He was glad to have her making decisions and being assertive, while he had anticipated the rest of his life having to be the one to make decisions and give orders. The king died suddenly in an accident and the prince was made king just before his 19th birthday. The couple became close and confided in each other in bed at the end of each day, and she was surprised at how faithful he would turn out to be. They made decisions together at night which the king would then put forth as his own the next day. They had children and they faced continual issues throughout their reign and their marriage. Their daughter jumped out of a window at the age of 12, their son tried and failed to make a life for himself in another kingdom at the age of 17, and the other son was untroubled but the king and queen did not see him as being fit to be king.

The children grew up to have moderate success and the king and queen encountered some troubles of their own later on. The king had an affair with a duchess and the queen started to have affairs with young men again. They returned to each other with a newfound mutual respect. Years later the king was dying and the queen sang a song from his childhood to him in bed, and they were able to be themselves with each other before he died. Years later the queen was dying surrounded by her pets, children, and staff. The room was lively while the queen looked on and took account of them all. The grandchildren debated what she looked like just before she passed away. The kingdom continued to prosper with the queen's children living good lives and the eldest son being a good king. There was some unrest but overall there was peace.

Analysis

"Ever/After" is another tale of the effects of long term marriage within the collection, which adds the complication of being royalty. The insight into what a royal marriage

might be like behind closed doors and away from prying eyes is what makes this tale unique.

Because the prince and princess are brought together so suddenly, and through obligation rather than true love, there is not much promise of a happy ever after at the beginning. They are of such opposing personalities that it seems destined to be an unhappy and short marriage. The prince appears weak and cowardly to the princess and she appears imposing and forceful to him, but eventually they grow used to each other and even manage to make their personalities work together. They use their strengths to benefit the other and their marriage—and the kingdom they rule is all the stronger as a result. They have children who initially seem like they are not at all suited to take over their reign but again, in time, they prove themselves to be capable in their own way.

That their destiny is, at least at the beginning, out of their control does not mean that they cannot control their future. The quote, “She fell in love with a strange sense of powerlessness, as if she and her husband had contracted the same disease at the same time” (128), shows that the situation they ended up in as equals in their helplessness eventually becomes their advantage. Their marriage, despite their troubles, only grows stronger until the end, and they leave behind an admirable legacy which is conducive to peace.

Discussion Question 1

How does the fact that the prince and princess were thrown together out of obligation to the kingdom and royal family affect the outcome of their marriage?

Discussion Question 2

Does one particular member of the couple hold more power than the other, taking their respective roles and personality traits into consideration? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How do things ultimately change from the beginning of the couple's marriage, and the king's reign, to the end of their marriage, and the queen's reign?

Vocabulary

perfunctory, ephemeral, propriety, sarcophagi

Characters

Unnamed Narrator of “Dis. Enchant.”

The narrator in the first story appears as nothing more than a disembodied voice, inviting the reader to ponder the motives behind those who cast spells and curses upon the few blessed and gifted people in the world. Setting a rhetorical and analytical tone from the beginning, the narrator prompts the reader to question his own assumptions and innermost thoughts.

The narrator is unique in this story in that his voice is the sole pervasive one throughout each tale, observing without participating in the stories and lives of all the other characters.

Prince with a Swan's Wing

In the story “A Wild Swan,” this prince is one of twelve brothers who had a spell cast upon them turning them into swans. When his sister tried to turn them all back into human form she only partly succeeded with this prince, who retained a swan's wing in place of his arm because she was interrupted when trying to cast the reversal spell. Despite having all the makings of a fairy tale character, the prince appears to be an otherwise normal and unremarkable character, which in fact makes him stand out all the more in the "world" of fairytales.

His adaption to a life with a swan's wing also closely matches that of a "normal" person, going through the phases of denial and acceptance much as anyone might in his position.

The Crazy Old Lady

The "crazy old lady" in the story with the same name reveals simply through telling her story that she was not always such a thing, and that she was once young and not unlike anyone else. From a young age she has been assertive and interested in experiences with men, soon becoming weary of that lifestyle after deciding not to get married for a fourth time. However, despite getting older she is determined not to fade into obscurity, prompting her to undertake her most "famous" act of building a house made entirely out of candy.

Indeed she is not, in the end, so much "crazy" as simply out of sync with the world she is living in. She simply wishes to enjoy things in life and to have basic respect shown for her home.

Jack

In the story “Jacked,” the protagonist Jack is portrayed immediately as an unreliable and flaky character, with absolutely no common sense or regard for the consequences of his actions. He exhibits almost magical thinking in his assumption that good fortune will come from no effort, and so it is only a stroke of luck that the beans, for which he traded in his and his mother's last cow, becomes the fortune maker that it turns out to be.

As he grows older (and richer) Jack grows not at all wiser, and appears to learn no lessons of respect or humility, which fairy tale characters are usually prone to doing in the traditional versions.

Snow White

In the story “Poisoned,” the character of Snow White is portrayed purely through her dialogue with the prince who discovered her and brought her back to life. She is now, or has become, more skeptical of "true love" when the prince tries to persuade her to re-enact the moment when he found her in the coffin and gave her the kiss of life.

She reluctantly agrees but with limitations, which shows that she is still willing to indulge the strange whims of her partner.

Mr. White

Mr. White is a mild-mannered man with a simple life, living in a cottage which he shares with his wife and his son who works at a nearby factory. One day his friend appears out of nowhere, having traveled extensively, and presents him with a magic (or cursed) monkey's paw. He is uncomfortable with the offering but is too polite to decline it, which turns out to be his biggest mistake. When things go horribly wrong, Mr. White still takes the feelings of his wife into consideration and cares for his son who has become, effectively, a zombie.

Little Man

The Little Man, a dwarf and an outcast, has much revealed about his personality in his tale, being perhaps the least similar to the "traditional" version of his character of all the modernized characters in the novel. He expresses, contrary to his hostile counterpart in other versions, a strong longing for a child for the sake of having a child, rather than wanting to steal one out of malice. His interaction with the miller's daughter, when helping her turn straw into gold, is almost accidental, and he does not even initially plan on asking for her firstborn child.

Much hesitation is conveyed before his actions are carried out, despite acting out the "traditional" role on the surface. He reveals a love for the miller's daughter which he never reveals out loud and one mistake leads to his eventual downfall.

Unnamed Young Man in “Steadfast; Tin”

There is little which stands out about the unnamed young man who is the focus of this ”Steadfast; Tin” except that he falls in love with a girl one night during college and that is the night he reveals that he has a prosthetic leg. He is a character who simply wants to be loved and understood and at least finds that in the girl, who does not react in the same way as all the other girls who came before her did. They eventually marry and have children and lead an otherwise normal life, with little changing except for the material of his prosthetic leg. Indeed the fact that little appears to stand out about this tale of a very typical marriage apart from the leg draws attention to how much he feels defined by the leg, and that perhaps it is one thing which he dwells on more than he lets on.

Beauty

In the story “Beasts,” Beauty is made out to be an unusual girl from the beginning. Not only is she not attracted to the "typical" boys in her village, but when her father asks her what she wants brought back from his trip, considering she can have anything at all, she asks for only a rose. This sets her apart from her sisters immediately and her father acknowledges how unusual she is. When aware of the Beast's existence, and his threatening of her father, it is telling that instead of being afraid she runs directly in the direction of the Beast's castle in order to escape her life. She is clearly looking for somewhere she can fit in, feeling so different from everyone else.

Rapunzel's Prince

The prince who manages to climb up Rapunzel's hair to the top of the tower is the focus of ”Her Hair,” primarily due to his determination to find her, the object of his fascination and love. Despite his being blinded when cut down from the tower by the queen, he is set on being with Rapunzel, and also due to his blindness, is spared the knowledge that Rapunzel no longer has her characteristic long hair.

The Prince/King in “Ever/After”

The prince in this tale is not very dissimilar to the "typical prince" presented in many of the fairytales, at least at the beginning. He comes from a prosperous kingdom and is forced to put aside his own wishes and marry out of obligation. He is not the best candidate for being king, however, and lacks assertion and the capacity for decision making. Who he marries makes all the difference, as the pairing brings out the best in his character. He is ultimately stronger as part of a couple than on his own.

The Princess/Queen in “Ever/After”

The princess in this story is the bride, from the less prosperous neighboring kingdom, brought in to marry the prince, and she is expected to play the part of dutiful wife. However she also defies expectations by being strong-willed, experienced, and able to "manage" the prince behind closed doors. When he becomes king, her opinions clearly matter enough to him for his decisions to be almost entirely influenced by her advice. She takes to her role naturally and enjoys a long and mostly successful, if not entirely untroubled, reign.

Symbols and Symbolism

Missing Body Parts

Missing parts of the body symbolize the deconstruction of the self, and the preoccupying concern with being seen as less than human.

In "A Wild Swan," the spell placed upon one of the princes is not fully reversed so that instead of an arm he has a swan's wing. From then on he is trapped in a cycle of rejecting, and then reluctantly accepting, his new condition. At one point he tries to see it, in a fit of optimism, as being like "a compelling mutation; a young god, proud to the point of sexy arrogance of his anatomical deviation" (11). In contrast, the young man in "Steadfast; Tin" has had his own affliction—a missing –leg—for much longer, if not his entire life; his main challenge is in getting others to accept his difference. When he finally does meet the right girl, the one who "falls in love with the gap between his physique and his affliction" (88), he is on course for a happy ever after (for the most part) for the remainder of his life.

Indeed the most extreme manifestation of the concept of falling from grace due to a severance of part of oneself is in "A Monkey's Paw," in which the paw, having been "stolen" from the monkey, promises to bring bad luck to anyone who takes advantage of it by making a wish. The still "living" paw, which moves when touched, is immediately seen as deeply unnatural, yet the appeal of its dark magic is enough to encourage the White family to take chances with their fate. They do most explicitly when the son returns from the dead, only partly alive, with much of him missing, and is therefore seen as not their real son.

Animals

Animals symbolize the stories of humans, and rarely if ever exist in their own right. They are primarily employed to convey some aspects of a human character's personality.

The princes in "A Wild Swan" are turned into swans, which can be seen as not exactly a coincidence given the association of swans with royalty, and their being synonymous with grace and beauty—characteristics which the princes would at least have been seen to embody. That one of the princes was never turned fully back from his swan-like state implies that he has not ever really recovered from the curse put upon him, and instead copes by trying to assimilate part of the swan's character into his new body.

The most obvious case of animal/human hybridization is in "Beasts," in which the titular Beast who talks, wears clothing and is sometimes capable of being gentlemanly, is otherwise a wild animal. Again his condition is the result of a curse, which Beauty is eventually able to lift due to her unwavering commitment to who she believes he is inside. The animal state can then be seen, in the context of the anthology, as a challenge for either the afflicted or those they know and love to overcome.

Sweets

Sweet things symbolize both temptation and indulgence, a common theme in both traditional and modern fairytales.

The clearest example of this is in "Crazy Old Lady," which sees a young, vibrant and rebellious woman defy social expectations and grow old disgracefully. After three husbands, numerous lovers, and an influx of wealth, instead of retreating into the dignity of old age, she buys real estate in order to fulfill the bizarre fantasy of building a house made entirely of candy.“It was, in fact, possible to construct bricks – out of sugar, glycerine, cornstarch, and a few unmentionable toxins – that would stand up to the rain” (18). However, assuming she will not eat her own house because she has to live in it, she will have to make sure that the temptation of the candy does not overpower anyone else, so she builds her house in a secluded part of the forest. Yet she bides her time waiting for other people to visit, which implies that a part of her wants to remain in the role of inciting temptation in others. Perhaps she wants it to be consumed sooner rather than later because “What could be more depressing than elderly-looking candy?” (18).

When the house is finally visited by a young boy and girl who start eating with total abandon and disregard for the Crazy Old Lady, it shows that youth will usurp the older generation, sometimes in a harsh fashion.

The Beanstalk

The beanstalk symbolizes the possibility of ascending above one's station in life.

When Jack trades his and his mother's last cow for a handful of beans, they are in a dire financial position, but their fortune literally changes overnight as the giant plant sprouts up, seemingly endlessly, into the sky. Of course this is a one-off opportunity, which happens entirely by chance and made far more likely by Jack's personality. As the narrator states, “There are any number of boys like Jack. Boys who prefer the crazy promise, the long shot, who insist that they’re natural born winners” (23). In this case, the risk pays off against all odds. The sudden social mobility might be, for most people in a similar situation, difficult to adapt to, but Jack assumes the role of newly affluent young man with almost too much ease. That he thinks nothing of stealing all the contents of a giant's castle, piece by piece, as opposed to simply being amazed at the existence of a giant's castle in the sky in the first place, shows Jack's innate sense of entitlement to this enriched lifestyle.

At the end, the beanstalk is cut down just as rapidly as it grew, which adds the cautionary addendum that fortune can disappear just as quickly as it appeared, especially if has befallen the individual only through a random twist of fate.

The Harp

The harp symbolizes the otherworldly victim of theft from one world into the other.

The harp is said to play music unheard of on earth, and by man, and even has a head, arms, and a voice with which to express itself, play its own music, and call out to its master, the giant, when it is being stolen. This is similar to the employment of animals to portray human characteristics, but the harp would otherwise be an inanimate object which one would be required to play.

It also symbolizes the final loss of the giants to Jack, who has by then taken everything they once had, enriching his own world at the expense of theirs.

The Coffin

The coffin symbolizes the possibility of returning to a previous state in a person's life; in this case, that state is death.

Snow White, according to the traditional fairytale, was awakened from her death-like state by the prince with a kiss which symbolized true love. Presumably the coffin in which Snow White was lying was to be left behind, not to be returned to at least for a very long time. In the tale "Poisoned," Snow White and the prince are having a conversation in which the prince is trying to convince Snow White to re-enact the moment when he discovered her in the coffin and brought her back to life. She only agrees to this reluctantly, which is perhaps understandable, but the question is why the prince would want to re-enact this particular moment. It almost seems to trivialize the idea of death, as if it is something to be stepped into and out of at will, going against the traditional blueprint of a fairy-tale which typically only allows one resurrection.

Also returning to a previous state, with uncertain consequences, is the son from "A Monkey's Paw" who returns to "life" after having been killed, albeit in what can barely be called an existence. Apart from being able to move there is no real sign of life, which indicates the tendency for states of death to be more permanent than they seem to be in this story.

The Nude Body

The nude body symbolizes a return of humans to their state of nature.

In "Steadfast; Tin," the main moment of revelation is when the young man undresses and shows himself in his real state. He was “one of those exceptional beings, who wear their beauty as if it were a common human state, and not an aberration” (84), thus appearing to be at ease with his natural self—at least on the surface. In contrast, the return to an almost too natural state is visited upon the prince in "A Wild Swan" who is permanently burdened with a swan's wing. He also attempts to take pride in his body,

"ninety percent thriving muscled man-flesh and ten percent glorious blindingly white angel wing” (11), as if the wing is simply a part of him being a man, but the process of self acceptance is slow and never appears to be complete.

Neither man ever seems to be fully comfortable in their natural state, without the assurance of another, no matter how they appear on the surface.

Gold

Gold symbolizes the material wealth which will change a character's fortune for better or worse.

It features most prominently in "Little Man," playing an important role in the fate of the miller's daughter. The king demands that straw be spun into gold overnight or he will execute her. The Little Man employs an old inherited magic to carry out this seemingly impossible task, which shows how things can manifest in reality if the will is strong enough in the individual.

Gold also represents the material wealth which Jack steals from the giants in "Jacked," wealth that is taken from others this time instead of created. The hen who lays the golden eggs and the harp promise an unending supply of good fortune to their owner, and their disappearance from the giant's home is shortly followed by the giant's demise.

Children

Children symbolize the cycle of one generation taking over another.

Children feature most prominently as characters in the tales "Ever/After" and "Steadfast; Tin." In the former, the tradition of accession is most literal in the context of the children, princes and princesses, taking over the positions of the king and queen, reigning the kingdom, and having children of their own who will do the same thing one day. The latter takes place in a lower-key setting, in a normal domestic home, where the children begin to challenge their parents and become more aware of themselves as independent people. The father observes how the daughter is already, at a young age, becoming aware of "the terrible clarity of beauty, for the first time" (99).

The challenge which the younger generation presents to the older one takes a more sinister turn in "Crazy Old Lady" when the children, bordering on young adulthood, emerge from the woods ready to consume the house. The Crazy Old Lady observes how "They were sexy, the girl as well as the boy, with their starved and foxy faces" (19), indicating that they already pose a threat to her attempts to hang onto her youthful position.

The Rose

The rose symbolizes the innocence and simplicity of the person who desires to have one.

"Beasts" introduces Belle as being a simple girl with simple wants and needs, in contrast to her two more "worldly" sisters who are more interested in material objects which will elevate their status. She wants a rose precisely because of how easily it is acquired: “I’m moved by the effort, not the object; a demand for something rare and precious can only turn devotion into errand” (102), which shows her prioritization of meaning over the actual object. The one notable exception to this attribution of innocence is shown in the Beast's equal, if not stronger, desire for the rose which the father attempts to take from his garden. The Beast is surely far from innocent but the rose clearly has a powerful effect on him. The fact that the only two to value the rose are Beauty and the Beast shows that they perhaps have more in common than one might realize: “Only Beauty understood what a single rose might signify, what acts a rose could inspire, if you lived without hope” (106).

Their mutual unhappiness is, then, what most evidently draws them to the rose.

Hair

Hair symbolizes an asset of beauty which is lost all too easily.

"Her Hair" takes the value of physical attributes quite literally, as the queen’s act of cutting off Rapunzel's hair is what sends the prince falling down from the tower and losing his sight. Yet the hair has already had a sufficient effect on the prince to prompt him to seek out Rapunzel again and to make him determined to be with her. The fact that she no longer has this asset is something which Rapunzel feels the prince will take too hard so she pretends that it is still attached to her head, taking advantage of his blindness.

That he was able to see the (golden) hair just once is evidently enough for him to continue to pursue this asset even after he can no longer see what he is pursuing.

The Castle

The castle, as a home, symbolizes the human nature of a royal family despite their public image.

The castle is a place where affairs of national importance are debated and settled, and courtly parties held, but it is also the home of the king and queen and their children. The very normal marital struggles which take place behind closed doors also happen within the royal chambers and the narration of these serves to normalize an otherwise exclusive place.

Settings

The Royal Courtyard

The royal courtyard is the space where the twelve princes—transformed into swans by a curse—are still welcomed into the presence of the royal family. The prince-swans descend upon the courtyard once a year in order to see their family again, but this reunion is continually interrupted by the chaotic nature of their arrival. Being wild animals, they flap wildly and make a mess everywhere so they are perhaps not as welcome as they might have been otherwise.

The courtyard is also the setting for the redemption of the princess, who is about to be executed when she releases her reversal spell on the prince-swans just in time.

The Giant’s House

The giant's house becomes a place of unlimited indulgence, but only for Jack, the uninvited visitor to the house. Discovered purely by accident when climbing the beanstalk which magically appeared overnight in Jack's garden, the house is modest but huge, a giant's size, and holds enough within to pique Jack's interest. Despite being invited in by the giantess, he is not satisfied and the sheer novelty of the house compels him to steal and run away with whatever he can.

The house becomes increasingly impoverished for the giants whilst fueling Jack's lavish lifestyle, but eventually the house runs out of riches to offer. It is only when Jack steals the very last –thing—the –harp—that he runs out of the house and down the beanstalk for the last time.

The Lone Cottage

The cottage is the scene of the isolation of the family who live within it, Mr. and Mrs. White and their son. They are described as being close but insular, having rare contact with the outside world except when the son goes to work every day. It is also the setting for the symbol of danger coming into their –lives—the monkey's paw—along with the later arrival of terrible news of their son's accident and death, and then later on, the arrival of the son in the form of a walking corpse, returning to the cottage to continue a half-life.

The cottage is the place where the family attempts to live a normal and well-adjusted family life, but where this proves to be a facade for the trouble emerging.

The Spinning Room

The spinning room is where the miller's daughter is given a chance to save herself from the king's punishment for failing. She has been told that she will be executed if she does not manage to turn a room full of straw into gold, and she is locked in a room overnight with only a spinning wheel and a huge pile of straw for company. She has no hope of succeeding until the Little Man appears in the room, applying his magical knowledge to the task and helping her turn all the straw into gold; then the room turns into a scene of hope.

The spinning room is also the setting for the Little Man's unexpected and fate-sealing demand that the princess give him her firstborn child as payment for his assistance. Therefore, it becomes a setting of negotiation, compromise, and the revelation of the inner desires of the Little Man—both for the miller's daughter and for the child he expects to take.

The Beast's Castle

The castle of the foreboding creature is where Beauty seeks refuge from her unfulfilling village life. It is where her father first has an encounter with the full fury of the Beast on the outside of the castle, and where Beauty discovers more about the Beast's personality, just within.

In this setting, Beauty learns that she does not have to settle for the first man who will marry her and the Beast has company for the first time in a long time. It is also the setting for the ultimate transformation of the Beast back into a young man.

Themes and Motifs

Transformation

The theme of transformation is prevalent throughout the entire anthology, and is a metaphor for the capacity for anyone, real or fictional, to evolve throughout their life.

The most literal form of this theme can be found in "A Wild Swan," when the princes are all transformed into swans by a curse. The undoing of the spell—by turning them back into young –men—is traditionally when the cycle of returning order is complete. This is achieved except for one thing; one prince's arm remains a swan's wing, and as he struggles to adapt to this new form it becomes clear that this change of –form—from "normal man" to "man with swan's wing"—is a permanent transformation. It becomes his "dreadful familiar. His burden, his comrade" (13), and is symbolic of a new kind of manhood, albeit one which he did not anticipate.

Other clear forms of transformation include the dead-brought-back-to-life son in "A Monkey's Paw," the changing of the prince into the Beast (and back again) in "Beasts," and "Her Hair," in which Rapunzel is transformed from the girl with the famous long hair into just a girl who wants to be with her prince.

In fact, in "Dis. Enchant.," the narrator warns that the only way to remain free of magical transformation in the fairy-tale world is to be unremarkable: "If you're not a delirious dream the gods are having, if your beauty doesn't trouble the constellations, no-body's going to cast a spell on you" (3). However, transformations have a way of happening in some form anyway.

Marriage

The institution of marriage is portrayed in a consistently negative light in the novel, showing that adherence to tradition for its own sake does not necessarily lead to a happy life.

Two tales in particular, "A Monkey's Paw" and "Steadfast; Tin" portray marriage as being, if not a terrible thing, then at least one detrimental to the pursuit of one's true destiny. Mr. and Mrs. White appear to be content in their untroubled existence and their seclusion in a cottage in the woods, but underlying resentment begins to show here and there. Mrs. White wonders, “Should she have guessed, when he appeared at their marriage ceremony in his father’s moth-balled suit, when he insisted that a carriage was a needless expense?” (50), when she is pondering how she ended up in such an austere existence, hinting that she would have liked more excitement in her life.

The unnamed young couple in love, at the beginning of "Steadfast; Tin" initially show no sign of being headed for a lackluster future, and indeed seem like the epitome of the "happily ever after" theme characteristic of the traditional fairy-tale. They begin to find

each other irritating, increasingly so over time, and they even find themselves thinking things like, “They can separate after the kitchen is finished; after the kids are a little older; after they as a couple have finally passed through the realm of irritation and bickering and reached the frozen waste of the unbearable” (pg 89). Indeed it is only after a dramatic event that they rekindle their marriage.

The one exception to the negative portrayal of marriage appears in "Ever/After" when, after an initially rocky start, the marriage only strengthens over time.

Nature

In many of the stories from A Wild Swan: And Other Tales, a return, or a retreat, to nature is closely associated with a return to a simpler way of life, one free of the demands of urban life.

In "Crazy Old Lady," the titular character begins life amid the turmoil of village/town life, trying to fit in, albeit in her own unusual way, and even marrying a series of local men. But it is only when she decides that she has had enough of this lifestyle that she takes to the seclusion of the woods to build a house made of candy before it is intruded upon by the children. The Little Man, of the tale of the same name, likewise lives a solitary existence in the peace of his well-hidden home, away from the kingdom. He emerges only when his desire to have a child requires him to leave, and again the seclusion of his home is intruded upon by someone seeking to learn his name.

One exception to this "return to nature" is the beanstalk in "Jacked" which in fact leads, literally, from a life of sparseness and poverty to one with material riches and, subsequently, prestige. It seems irrelevant in the tale that this newfound wealth was all stolen, but it could perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the growing and harvesting of plants being the path to bounty and prosperity in life.

Royalty

Many of the tales are centered around members of a royal family, not unlike traditional fairytales, and in this anthology royalty serves as a symbol and recurring motif representing those who are set apart from regular people in some way.

"A Wild Swan," "Poisoned," "Little Man," "Beasts," "Her Hair," and "Ever/After" all feature main characters who are of royal heritage, all of which face challenges that are particular to their situation. The princes who are transformed into swans, it is implied, are "chosen" for the curse due to their being handsome young princes who receive disproportionate favor in life.

The miller's daughter in "Little Man" only attracts the attention of the king by chance, but the –king—having the capacity to control the fate of those in his kingdom, sets in motion the events which lead to the Little Man turning straw into gold. The miller's daughter's new position as queen means that the Little Man's demand for her child is even less

likely to be fulfilled. The power of the king to send out a servant to uncover the Little Man's secret—his name—undermines his erstwhile power over the newborn child, and the royal family resumes power once more.

Being royal, in this case, can be claimed to be a substitute for possessing magic as it carries as much potential to change one's fortune.

Inner Monologue

There is a continual inner monologue, the presence of an "all-seeing" narrator, who alternates between detached observer and "inner voice" in a fluid style throughout the novel. Thematically, this omnipresent narrator shows that there is always a "presence" overseeing everything which is taking place, and characters are never truly alone, even if they seem to be.

The introductory chapter, "Dis. Enchant.," introduces this "presence," who in talking in the second person, appears to be directly addressing those reading. Several of the tales are told in the second person, which leads to two possibilities: either the reader is being positioned as the main character, encouraging him to assume the role, or the narrator is actually the inner monologue of the main character, addressing the reader as if he were a sort of "conscience" and advising what to do and what not to do.

This narrative style also has the purpose of giving some form of "supervision" to the characters when they are alone. In "Crazy Old Lady," the first line is "It's the solitude that slays you" (15), which is ironically no longer the case with this all-seeing presence.

Styles

Point of View

The collection of tales is told from what appear to be multiple points of view initially. The diverse range of characters, in each separate tale, does not typically lend itself to an atypical method of narration. However the recurring point of view employed by the author is of the narrator speaking in the second person, as if he is speaking directly to the reader, who is presumed to be the character in question reading.

Switching between the omniscient, observant narrator of the characters in the tales, and direct address to the reader offers a sufficient contrast of points of view to ensure that the reader realizes that the characters could be anyone and anywhere.

Language and Meaning

The tales are laced with metaphor and allegory from beginning to end, but in a way which is not incomprehensible to the average reader who is not well versed in theory.

The language used is descriptive but not overly complex, despite there being a propensity for sly word-play throughout each tale. The language is markedly modern, which initially seems out of place for a recounting of fairytales which greatly precede the "modern" era, but the application of this type of language soon becomes natural-feeling as the characters are brought out from stiff caricature to almost real-seeming people.

Structure

The anthology takes the form of a collection of separate tales, which seem to be neatly compartmentalized on the surface. However the narrative style of the author, switching between first, second and third person almost at random, makes it more difficult upon reading to determine whether it is the same "person" narrating more than one of the tales with seemingly different characters.

The foreword, in the form of the chapter "Dis. Enchant.," helps to serve as a chapter which will "frame" the others by shaping the expectations of the reader. By encouraging the reader to consider the possibility that the good characters might not be all good and that the bad characters might in some way be relatable, the existing structure of preconceptions the reader might have had otherwise have been deconstructed so that they are prepared for the tales which are to come.

Quotes

Most of us are safe. If you’re not a delirious dream the gods are having, if your beauty doesn’t trouble the constellations, no-body’s going to cast a spell on you.
-- Narrator (Dis. Enchant.)

Importance: The narrator immediately tries to reassure the reader that they are not in danger by using an unusual tactic, by reminding them of their relative mediocrity. This turns out to be a blessing in disguise.

End of story. “Happily ever after” fell on everyone like a guillotine’s blade.
-- Narrator (A Wild Swan)

Importance: There is a strong implication that one person's "happily ever after" does not mean it is so for everyone. That happy ending could be a sad ending for someone else.

You imagined, in the long run, a perversely glorious, housebound lasciviousness; a reputation for insanity among the zealots who worshipped banal virtues as if they were glory incarnate.”
-- Crazy Old Lady (Crazy Old Lady)

Importance: After a lifetime of rebellion, the Crazy Old Lady does the opposite of what she is expected to do and instead becomes even more outrageous. She seems to enjoy the shock which her lifestyle is causing the more pious and self-disciplined people.

The second exchange between giant and giantess… is too absurd even for farce.
-- Narrator (Jacked)

Importance: The author makes a knowing allusion to the fact that the famous utterance of the giant is so familiar that the characters merely appear to be going through the motions to be doing it all again.

I love it when I wake up before you do, and then when you wake up you have this kind of pure astonished awed expression, like you can’t quite believe you’re… where you are.”
-- Snow White's prince (Poisoned)

Importance: The prince is referencing the fact that Snow White is lucky to be alive considering she was dead for some time and was only brought back to life by chance. He also appears to be admiring the innocence for which she was so widely regarded, and which the queen resented in her in the original version of the tale.

He could swear he felt the paw clench when it was given to him. He’s holding it again, and it’s inert as death itself.”
-- Mr White (The Monkey's Paw)

Importance: This serves as a powerful foreshadowing of the curse which is about to befall the White family. Mr. White already knows that the monkey's paw is a bad thing to keep in the house but ignores this instinct and keeps it anyway.

But you find – surprise – that you like this capitulation from her, this helpless acceding, from the most recent embodiment of all the girls over all the years who've given you nothing, not even a curious glance. Welcome to the darker side of love."
-- Little Man (Little Man)

Importance: This offers the first hint at the Little Man not being as honorable as he is trying to make himself out to be. He does not wish bad things upon people, or the miller's daughter, but a part of him also wants payback for a lifetime spent being ignored and cast aside.

They can separate after the kitchen is finished; after the kids are a little older; after they as a couple have finally passed through the realm of irritation and bickering and reached the frozen waste of the unbearable."
-- Narrator (Steadfast; Tin)

Importance: This shows the couple as being at the stage when they have finally had enough but are too scared to part ways, so they postpone the inevitable until they are both more ready.

She was sorry about forsaking him, but could not bring herself to embrace such a maidenly future, bored, unchallenged, sequestered in a castle"
-- Beauty (Beasts)

Importance: Although she was originally happy to leave her old life behind for this one, Beauty soon feels just as trapped as she did before. She did not expect the Beast to be so gentlemanly which she finds strangely disappointing.

Every night the prince lies beside her and caresses her hair, which she keeps by the bedside...
-- Rapunzel's prince (Her Hair)

Importance: This single sentence reveals a twist in and of itself; a normal scene of closeness turns out to be a deception. The idea that Rapunzel's hair might not be the same as it was before may be too much for the prince to handle.

When she first appeared to him, on their wedding day, her bridal finery, however artful, could not disguise her heftiness, the great dome of her forehead or the stunted apostrophe of her nose. She might have been a barge, steered by her father with the steady determination of commerce along the cathedral isle."
-- The princess/queen (Ever/After)

Importance: Her lack of physical attractiveness initially seems like a disastrous start to

the marriage, and reminds the prince that this was intended purely as a marriage of convenience.

They found, to their mutual surprise, that they seemed to love each other more rather than less for having shown, rather late in the game, this capacity for their blood to rise." -- Narrator (Ever/After)

Importance: What might have signalled the end of a marriage in other circumstances proves to be the thing which the king and queen in fact have in common.