

Viewing Guide for *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*

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Location: <http://clover.slavic.pitt.edu/~tales/terror.pdf>

Directed by Michael Cohn

UK/USA, 1996

With Sigourney Weaver (Claudia Hoffman), Monica Keena (Lilli Hoffman), Sam Neill (Frederick Hoffman), and Gil Bellows (Will)

Based on the Grimms' "Little Snow White"

As indicated on the syllabus, two lecture meetings are devoted entirely to screening this film, to be followed by a recitation session dedicated to discussion from both folkloric and filmic perspectives. Below are some questions to think about as you watch (the numbered questions are listed roughly in the same order as the corresponding scenes occur in the film). We suggest that you print out this viewing guide, read it over, and bring it to class with you. Class discussion in the recitation meetings following the screening will focus on these and other questions.

Film Studies Concepts

Diagetic/Non-Diagetic: The word “diagetic” simply refers to whether an aspect of the film itself is motivated by something in the film’s plot or setting (diagetic) or is part of the filmmaking process (non-diagetic). This term usually applies to sound and lighting, but it can have other applications as well. For example: Candle-light is notoriously weak and almost impossible to film by (although it has been done on several occasions). However, whenever we see a scene in a film with lots of lit candles, the lighting is usually soft and warm, much like the light of a candle. The lights used to light the scene are almost certainly special filmmaking lights, not just the candles, but they are configured in such a way as to resemble candle-light. This is diagetic lighting.

Sound works in the same way. The easiest example of non-diagetic sound is the film’s soundtrack. Whenever you hear spooky theremin music in an old science fiction movie, chances are good there isn’t somebody standing on-screen playing a theremin, and as such the music is non-diagetic. However, at the ball scenes in *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* we hear Claudia singing and hear the band playing, both of which are portrayed on-screen. This is diagetic sound, as it has a source on-screen.

Smart filmmakers (especially horror filmmakers!) use, and often blur, the lines between diagetic/non-diagetic lighting and sound to heighten suspense and atmosphere. The most classic example is the shower scene in *Psycho*. Herrmann’s score of shrieking stringed instruments is definitely non-diagetic, but it is executed so perfectly it seems almost as if the music is created by Norman Bates’s knife and, as such, it adds a great deal of impact to the scene. If you doubt this, watch the scene muted sometime and see if it feels at all

the same! Lighting can work in the same way. For example, the heroine is being stalked by some unknown horror through a dimly lit house in a thunderstorm. The only glimpse of the stalker we see is when lightning strikes outside and the room is momentarily illuminated. Unlike Herrmann's score, the lighting in this case is diageitic, but it is still manipulated to serve the same purpose.

General Things to Watch For

- Foreshadowing (examples: the raven in the first scene; young Lilli picks an apple in the cemetery)
- Parallel action (when the film cuts back and forth between two scenes that are happening simultaneously)
- Similarities and differences between this film and other versions of the Snow White tale (Disney, versions described by Bettelheim, Gilbert and Gubar, etc.)
- Father and mother figures
- Birds and other images of flight (angels, ravens, falcons, "little bird," doves, sparrows)
- Other animals (wolves, horses, dog, pigs, snakes)
- Weather (compare/contrast to Disney version)
- Mise-en-Scene (take a look at the notes for *Morozko* for a refresher)
- Issues related to religion (Frederick's "crucifixion", Claudia's witchcraft)
- Diageitic/Non-diageitic lighting and sound and how they assist/detract from the film's atmosphere and suspense
- The roles played by male/female characters. Any relation to the Jungian concepts of anima/animus?

Specific Questions to Think About as You Watch

1. The title of the film clearly suggests that it is not a typical fairy-tale adaptation. In what ways does the opening scene also do this? What is the first sound in the film? What are the first images? From whose point of view are the opening shots of the carriage traveling through the forest?
2. The story Lilli's nanny tells about Lilli's mother (blood, snow, window frame) is straight out of the Grimms' tale. How else does the film link Lilli's (Snow White's) birth with blood and snow?
3. It is clear from the onset of the film that Frederick is a very devout Christian, how does this affect the rest of the film?
4. Upon their first meeting, Lilli shows a caterpillar to Claudia, who asks "what will you do with her when she grows wings?" What is Lilli's reply? How does this suggest that Lilli is unlike her new stepmother?
5. How does Claudia's reflection look in the first mirror she looks in? What image comes next? Why?
6. Do you think little Lilli treats her stepmother fairly?
7. Note the visual transition between the Lilli-as-a-child portion of the film to the next part, nine years later. What does it suggest?

8. The scene at the ball is a pivotal moment in the film. Lilli's dazzling entrance interrupts Claudia's song. What happens next? How is the relationship between Lilli and her father represented in this scene? How does the camera move? What sounds do we hear? From whose perspective do we seem to be watching? The image of people whirling around will be repeated several times later in the film.
9. How does the magic mirror in the film differ from the mirror in the Disney version? Whose voice speaks to Claudia from the mirror? How does this affect the reading of this film from the perspective of Gilbert and Gubar? Also notice the cabinet in which the mirror is located; what shot do we see every time the doors are opened? Are there any feminist interpretations implicated here?
10. What is the significance of Claudia's statement that she never noticed how lovely Lilli is "until now"?
11. Bettelheim writes that the huntsman sent to kill Snow White is a father figure. Who is sent to kill Lilli in the film? Is he a father figure? How does Lilli's avoidance of death differ from Snow White's?
12. Lilli falls into a hole as she escapes. How might Bettelheim interpret this detail? How does the forest change visually after she falls?
13. As Frederick searches frantically for Lilli, what is Claudia doing back in her room?
14. Who are the "dwarfs"? What kind of abandoned building do they live in? Why do they live in the forest? Do they have anything in common with Lilli?
15. How does the film suggest that Claudia may have been responsible for Lilli's mother's death?
16. Twice one of the "dwarfs" calls Lilli "my child." What does this suggest about their role in the film? Does it apply to all of the "dwarfs"?
17. Lilli learns of Will's (the attractive "dwarf") tragic past from another one of the "dwarfs." What happened to Will? How does the story of his past add a dimension to the film that is not present in traditional Snow White-type tales? How is this relate to Frederick's religious views at the film's onset?
18. In the falling tree scene, Lilli tries to save one of the "dwarfs" but fails when Will pulls her to safety first. What does this episode suggest about Lilli's maturation process? How does Lilli make up for her failure to save the "dwarf" at the end of the film?
19. In the same scene we see trees being felled and statues being felled at the same time. What might a Freudian critic see these as? Why?
20. Claudia seduces Frederick to "steal his seed," while in parallel shots Lilli seduces Will. What does this suggest about the two women? About women and men in general? Any implications of anima/animus?
21. The episode with the old crone echoes the Adam and Eve story in several ways. How? How does it also echo the previous scenes of Lilly with the apple in the film's beginning?
22. Lilli expresses her fear of the dwarfs' physical ugliness several times, yet she is not afraid of the old crone at all. Why not?
23. How might a feminist critic interpret the climactic rescue sequence in the film? How would you describe the actions of the female characters in this sequence? The male characters?
24. When Lilli accuses Claudia of having no heart, Claudia responds, "that's too simple." What does she mean?

25. Lilli is able to defeat Claudia because Claudia is distracted by a sound across the room. What is the sound? What does it indicate about Claudia? How does it parallel the first scene of the film (Lilli's birth)?
26. What is the significance of the bloody slash on Lilli's face at the end of the film?