

# Proppian Analysis of The White Duck

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Upon first examination, fairy tales seem to be nothing more than something that parents read to their children before bedtime. Sometimes they have morals to them, but most of the time they are just written for entertainment. Fairy tales come from a variety of places. Sometimes the author comes up with them off the top of his head and other times he will go to a village and ask the local people to tell him a story, thereby collecting a lot of them. The point that will be argued is that there is more than meets the eye when it comes to fairy tales. They all have a structure to them, as illustrated by Propp. Proppian analysis entails a closer examination of fairy tales. He studied hundreds of tales to come up with a comprehensive analysis of structure. In the following pages, this paper will illustrate how “The White Duck” follows this form.

In addition to this analysis, this paper will use some other critics to better explain what is really at stake in this tale. In particular these are the feminist criticisms and Bettelheim, who, like Freud, relates to the Oedipal complex.

Propp states that there are many parts to a given fairy tale. “The White Duck” is no exception. Propp argues that every fairy tale starts out with a “Preparatory section” (Propp, Pg 150). This is needed to set up the situation. Basically it’s an introduction so that the reader can become familiar with the characters and the given situation.

*“A certain prince married a beautiful princess, but before he had had time to feast his eyes upon her and listen to her sweet speech, he was compelled to separate from her go, on a far journey, and leave his wife in the hands of strangers...” (Afanas’ev, Pg. 342).*

This is an interesting first line for a few reasons. First it sets up the story but it

does so in a most peculiar way. Normally in fairy tales the prince starts off on a journey, and by the end his prize is a wife. This is not the case here. He is already married but gets a wandering eye by the first line!

Most feminist critics would debate this as being extremely sexist. One woman isn't enough to satisfy our fair prince and therefore he is compelled to look elsewhere for satisfaction. It's obviously the woman's fault if he is leaving.

*"...being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of the home, an excruciatingly painful experience fraught with many psychological dangers"*  
(Bettelheim, Page 79).

Bruno Bettelheim, a Freudian scholar, would also find this extremely interesting. According to Bettelheimien analysis our hero is dealing with leaving home. He's leaving all that's secure to venture into a new world of adventure. It's the first step toward him becoming a *real* man.

*"The princess wept a great deal, and the prince comforted her a great deal, admonishing her not to leave the women's apartments, not to keep company with evil people, and not to listen to evil words"* (AA, Pg. 342).

Feminist critics would again find this line of particular interest as; obviously she can't be trusted on her own. She's not allowed to leave the women's quarters or talk to 'evil people.' This is obviously a reference to other men that may live in the kingdom.

The next section of Proppian analysis is Villainy (pg. 151). Every story has to

have something go wrong so that the hero/heroine can resolve the conflict in the end.

In the case of “The White Duck,” a witch invites the princess out into the garden where she sees a beautiful spring. It’s a hot day so she decides to bathe in it. No sooner had she removed her clothes and stepped in than the witch turned her into a white duck. Then she took the princess’ clothes and went away to await the prince’s return.

The specific type of villainy in this story resides in Propp’s *All the casting of a spell; a transformation* (Pg. 150). By the witch’s presence, we already notice the villainy in this tale. Her action in this section shows us what the prince will have to conquer in order to save his wife.

*“It is hard to see how children could be ‘prepared’ for women’s liberation by reading fairy tales; an analysis of those fairy tales that children actually read indicates instead that they serve to acculturate women to traditional social roles”* (Lieberman, pg.185).

From Marcia Lieberman’s standpoint, this shows how naive women tend to be shown in fairy tales. They lack the common sense that men have and do things impulsively. The fact that she was even tempted to go outside after her husband expressly told her not to AND even after her conscience told her not to jump into the spring she still does so shows how stupid women can be. This implies that if the prince would’ve been tempted to jump into the spring, he would’ve been intelligent enough not to do it. This argument is a fallacy. The women’s movement in the 50’s proves that, none the less, these are the types of things we inject into our children’s minds at a young age.

*Commonplaces of culture such as the desire for silence in women determine the events of fairy tales, which as a stripped down genre must negotiate with social realities in order to make sense to their readers or hearers* (Bottigheimer, Pg. 119).

In Ruth Bottigheimer's article, she points out the moments in which women are silenced in Grimm's fairy tales. However, it can be transferred into an argument for the princess in "The White Duck." In this case the woman is silenced twice.

Sometimes there is an "imbedded tale" (Propp, 19-24) inside of a fairy tale. When this happens Propp requires that the process begins again. In the case of the White Duck, she lays three eggs, a "magical number" in all fairy tales (Bettelheim, 106). Two are handsome ducks and the third is ugly. All of them are male, another gripe that people such as Ruth Bottigheimer and Marcia Lieberman would have with this tale.

If Propp says that the order must start over than the Preparatory section here is when the kids wander off. She explicitly tells them that they are not allowed to leave but they do anyway, despite her. The kids come across the witch who puts two of them to sleep. The third stays awake and every time she asks if they are asleep he answers that they are awake because they are afraid that someone wants to kill them, thereby saving their lives.

The villainy in this section is the witch killing two of the sons. She kills the two handsome brothers and spares the young one. In Bettelheim's argument about The Three Feathers, he states,

*"On the simplest and most direct level, fairy tales in which the hero is the*

*youngest and most inept offer the child the consolation and hope for the future he needs most” (Pg. 104).*

Here Bettelheim offers a reason for why the witch does not end up killing the youngest son.

As in the age old tale of the Ugly Duckling, one day he'll turn into a beautiful animal and everyone will change their minds about him. The duck laments and the prince understands that this is no ordinary duck. He orders that that a “white birch tree stand behind me, lovely maiden stand before me” (Afanas'ev, pg. 344). In that instant his wife is transformed to her former state.

This is interesting to note, as Propp wants the imbedded story to be finished first. Here it isn't resolved until the original story is dealt with. Then the prince orders that a ‘magic helper,’ the next section of Proppian analysis, in this case a magpie, be sent with two bottles “fill one with the water of life and the other with the water of speech” (Pg. 345). She does this and the children come back to life. Of course the witch must be dealt with so he orders that a horse drag her. She dies and they live together in happiness.

Now a Sheldon Cashdan scholar would argue that the witch has to die to resolve any impending Oedipal conflicts the child reading this would encounter. In Cashdan's article entitled Envy, he states that

*“Children's lives are filled with envy, and stories that include it as a major dynamic help them find ways of dealing with their own jealous urges...conquering jealous urges is a laudable objective and holds out hope for more satisfactory relationships” (Cashdan, Pg. 105).*

In this case, we see that children associate all that is bad about the witch with their feelings (in this case envy). The witch has to die so that the child can overcome these feelings and realize that it is normal to feel this way. It's all part of growing up.

In conclusion, we have seen how a tale can follow a narrative form. Propp shows us that every tale, while vastly different in the stories they tell, is none the less the same structurally. We have also seen that critics such as Bruno Bettelheim and Cashdan view fairy tales. They are tales of maturation and leaving one's home. We have seen how feminist critics, such as Ruth B. Bottigheimer and Marcia Lieberman, see the role of women in fairy tales. They are to be "silent" (Bottigheimer, Page 115) creatures who obey their husbands at whatever cost. They are also submissive.

"The White Duck" is no exception to the age old tradition of treating women like secondary persons and showing how heroes define themselves by the end of the story. If Propp has taught us nothing else it's that every narrative has a form and if there is an act of treachery it will be dealt with in the long run. If only real life were that simple.

## **Bibliography**

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