

# Showing through the Known: Problematizing Gender Identity in “Snow White & The Seven Microaggressions”

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## *Abstract*

*The power of fairy tales to pass on values and traditions has been discussed by many scholars – frequently in terms of the imposition of behavioural norms on the readers. However, the popularity of the genre also allows contemporary authors to pass on new messages by re-writing the stories. Laura Lane and Ellen Haun’s re-writing of Snow-White called “Snow White & The Seven Microaggressions,” unsurprisingly, deals with microaggressions and gender expectations. This paper addresses how the authors use the well-known premises as a tool to enlighten their readers about the changing perception of gender, identity and sex-based stereotypes in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** *Snow-White, gender, gender norms, microaggressions, re-writings.*

## **Introduction**

Fairy tales and stereotypical depictions of gender, especially of women as passive and weak characters, are a very popular and well-known topic. These stereotypes have been discussed in the works of scholars<sup>1</sup> for decades, and many contemporary writers have addressed or even subverted the stereotypes in their re-writings of fairy tales. Most of these re-writings are “preponderantly concerned with gender roles and the female point of view” (Kawan 2008: 341). However, some authors add another layer by also discussing other issues that plague contemporary society. The aim of this paper is to analyse one such re-writing, specifically a contemporary version of the popular fairy tale “Little Snow White” called “Snow White & the Seven Microaggressions” by Laura Lane and Ellen Haun. Making use of close reading and fairy tale criticism, it will be shown how gender stereotypes and the microaggressions that stem from them are depicted in the story. The paper will focus on how the authors use the familiar characters to bring the issue of microaggression closer to the attention of readers and to enlighten readers about the harmful effects these may have. Lane and Haun illustrate this using the figure of the Evil Queen who is the main source of microaggression and only slowly starts to learn how to avoid hurting others with the way she speaks. Although her progress is slow, she makes an important first step – she learns to recognize the problem.

The paper shall be divided into three sections. The first section will discuss the issue of choosing a “traditional” version to represent “Little Snow White” and two character stereotypes that are present in the traditional version of the story – the angel and the monster. The second section features a definition of microaggression along with information about why microaggressions are such a problematic issue. The last section is dedicated to the analysis of Lane and Haun’s “Snow White & the Seven Microaggressions” in terms of how the authors depict gender and the related microaggressions in the story.

## **Traditional Version and the Issue of Female Stereotypes**

Firstly, it is necessary to establish what is meant by the traditional version and what stereotypes can be found in such versions. As is the case for many folk fairy tales, establishing what a traditional version is, is somewhat challenging because of the intricacies of the literary history of this fairy tale<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, the story “Little Snow White” by the Brothers Grimm shall be referred to as the traditional version since it is likely the best-known literary version of the story: “best known nowadays in its Disney movie version and the Grimms’ nineteenth-century printed text” (Bacchilega 1997: 29).

The traditional “Little Snow White” is defined by the dichotomy represented by the two main female characters. Princess Snow White could be described as a paragon of femininity. She is the “fairest of all” (Grimm and Grimm 2014: 171), even though she is still just a child. She is also very passive and helpless and has to rely on other, specifically male, characters in order to survive. Once she reaches the dwelling of the dwarves, she also takes on the role of the housekeeper, a traditionally feminine role: “[Her] life with them is an important part of her education in submissive femininity, for in serving them she learns essential lessons of service, of selflessness, of domesticity” (Gilbert and Gubar 2000: 40). Snow White’s cohabitation with the dwarves can be seen as an episode in her life when she has the opportunity to “practice” the housekeeping duties she will be in charge of in the future in a miniature household. Beyond becoming their housekeeper, Snow White does not seem to have any intentions to become active and change the situation she has found herself in because of the Queen’s jealousy.

In contrast to the stereotypical angel as represented by the passive Princess, “stands the female monster, the woman who is active, aggressive, and unfeminine” (Joosen 2011: 216), represented by the much more assertive character of the Queen. At first, “the mirror ... calls the queen the fairest” (Joosen 2011: 218), and as long as this keeps happening, the Queen seems to be satisfied. However, once her stepdaughter surpasses her in her beauty, the Queen immediately decides to get rid of the Princess. Although the Queen’s motivation to hate her stepdaughter sounds questionable at best<sup>3</sup>, there is no denying that the Queen is a woman who is willing to do anything to get what she wants, which makes her – as a female fairy-tale character – a textbook villain.

## **Defining Microaggressions**

As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, microaggression is “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group” (Merriam-Webster). These groups can be defined by “sexual orientation (gay/lesbian/bisexual), disability, class (poverty), and religion (Islam and Judaism); are confined to the edge of a system (cultural, social, political, and economic); and may experience exclusion, inequality, and social injustice” (Sue 2010: 14). Microaggressions are typically unintentional, or they can be even meant as compliments, but the underlying messages of microaggressions can frequently be hurtful or insulting to the recipient or the whole group that is denoted.

On the surface, this might seem harmless. However, as Sue (2010) notes in his analysis of micro-aggressions, they affect not only the psychological health of the person, but they also “affect the quality of life and standard of living for marginalized groups in our

society. Microaggressions have the secondary but devastating effect of denying equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care” (16). As such, microaggressions are an inconspicuous yet problematic issue that the general public should be made aware of to reduce unintentional microaggressive behaviour.

### **Gender, Microaggressions, and “Snow White & the Seven Microaggressions”**

Connecting microaggressions and fairy tales might sound like an unusual combination at first. However, choosing fairy tales as the space where issues of contemporary society are discussed actually makes perfect sense for several reasons. One of them is the popularity of the genre. Fairy tales “are found universally, wherever there is language” (Tolkien). Although there might be some regional differences, the general outlines of the fairy tales and the symbolism remain. They “offer ... archetypal stories available for re-use and recycling by different ages and cultures” (Sanders 2006: 82). Therefore, fairy tales are the perfect option to serve as a premise where the authors can discuss the issues that plague contemporary society because it will make the contemporary version accessible to mass audiences.

Another reason why traditional fairy tales are very well-suited for this kind of re-writing is that, as was mentioned in the introductory part, they are frequently criticised for the way female characters are depicted, which allows for a combination of criticism of contemporary issues with a feminist twist to appear in these re-writings.

As is suggested by the title, this re-writing differs from the traditional fairy tale significantly. The story is told in a very parodic as well as feminist way. The two authors use the familiar premise of the fairy tale to address the issue of microaggressions and the effects these can have on people; however, at the same time, they ignore some aspects of the traditional story, such as well-known tropes that are associated with “Little Snow White” or the romantic plotline and happy ending.

As it was mentioned, behaviour or stereotypes play a quite important role in the story. A good example can be found in the relationship between Snow White and the dwarves – or in this case, roommates. In the best-known versions of the story, Snow White “[rescues] the dwarves in a traditionally feminine way, by cooking and cleaning and acting as their surrogate mother in order to stay with them” (England et al. 2011: 563). However, Lane and Haun’s protagonist is not willing to put up with behaviour like that. Right at the very beginning, the reader is informed that princess Snow White moved away and is living with seven male housemates who “left their dishes in the sink and assumed Snow White would deal with the mess. But Snow White put a quick kibosh on that sitch by making a chore chart” (Lane and Haun 2020: 22). While in the traditional version, Snow White’s being left to take care of the whole household is depicted as good or even praiseworthy, in the contemporary re-writing, it is seen as old-fashioned, and the housemates’ expectation that she will take care of all the cleaning could be seen as a microaggression. As Nadal (2014) asserts that one of the examples of microaggressions is “when an individual assumes that a woman needs to uphold traditional gender roles” (71). Therefore, the behaviour of the roommates can be seen as a microaggression on two interconnected levels. Firstly, they assume that Snow White will take care of the whole household based solely on her biological sex. Secondly, the roommates fail entirely to acknowledge Snow White’s gender identity because Lane and Haun’s protagonist is depicted as a non-binary person, unlike her traditional counterpart. This

example shows how subtle microaggressions can be, which makes it more important to enlighten people about them.

The most significant source of microaggressions in Lane and Haun's re-writing is the evil Queen. At the same time, the role of the mirror in the story changes from a mindless magical item that provides the Queen with information about who the fairest is into a teacher of sorts. The mirror has a will of its own, and it seems to be aware that "[the] more people are aware of the term and concept, the less likely they will be defensive when confronted about their behaviors" (Nadal 2014, 75). Therefore, the mirror tries its best to teach the Queen how to avoid microaggressions. The story starts in media res when the Queen addresses the magical mirror and asks who is the fairest. However, the mirror immediately criticises the queen's question because "[beauty] is a subjective social construct, the use of the word 'fair' is problematic because it means both 'white' and 'beautiful,' and [the mirror] terribly [hates] casting judgment on appearances" (Lane and Haun 2020: 22) foreshadowing that it will serve more like a moral guide to the Queen rather than an object that would cause her to become violent like in the traditional story.

While the mirror may be against the idea of judging people based on their appearance, as it is very problematic and individual, the Queen is not. The readers learn from the Queen that Snow White has expressed her wish to be regarded as a non-binary person rather than a woman, and the Queen does try to honour that wish. "Snow White explained to me that they identify as nonbinary and prefer the pronouns 'they' and 'them.' They aren't a maiden, like I thought. So I say 'them' to make sure you include Snow White when I ask who is fairest in the kingdom. Because I'll murder hims, hers, xems, zes, hirs, theys, them. Really anyone who is hotter than me" (Lane and Haun 2020: 23). However, like in the traditional story, the Queen's behaviour towards Snow White changes. The breaking point comes when the Queen learns that she is no longer the fairest in the kingdom. Up until this point, the Queen has been successful in being respectful towards Snow White's wishes to refer to her by *they* however, once she learns that Snow White has surpassed her in her beauty, she reacts:

"Dammit!" the Evil Queen shouted as she took off her tiara and threw it across the room. "Now I have to kill her."

"Hold up," said the Mirror. "You mean you have to kill them. You were doing so well."

(Lane and Haun 2020: 23)

The moment the Queen starts to feel threatened by her stepchild, who has surpassed her in beauty, all her efforts to be respectful go out the window, and she ignores Snow White's identity and their wish to be addressed as a non-binary person. The Queen asserts that she is too upset to pay attention to details like that, but the mirror is adamant that she has to be respectful towards Snow White's wish to be addressed as a non-binary person. Thus, the Queen should adapt to the cultural standards as her behaviour and tendency to say things that are considered microaggressions is "a problem" (Lane and Haun 2020: 24). As the mirror points out, even the language has changed to accommodate to make it possible for non-binary people to be addressed by a gender-neutral pronoun rather than with a pronoun based on their biological sex, and there is no excuse for her to be disrespectful.

The Queen tries to prove the mirror wrong by calling in her henchmen to show how nice she really is, but it has the opposite effect, and she comes to realise that she commits microaggressions quite frequently. As she talks to the henchmen, she learns more about what microaggressions are, that they can be unintentional or even meant as a compliment but have

a negative effect on the recipient. As she gets more enlightened about the topic, the Queen comes to realise that she has experienced similar behaviour – a microaggression committed against her – as well. In her case, the microaggressions were based on her gender. “[Gender-based] microaggressions [towards women] occur frequently, and they devalue their contributions, objectify them as sex objects, dismiss their accomplishments, and limit their effectiveness in social, educational, employment, and professional settings” (Sue 2010: 12). The Queen experienced microaggressions in the workplace when she attended an event for evil leaders: “That time I was at the Convention for Evil Leaders and I was the only Evil Queen at the table. The Evil Kings wouldn’t listen to me! I had this great idea about how to steal a cyclops and one of the kings pretended it was his idea. So annoying” (Lane and Haun 2020: 27). This is a typical example of an act of microaggression based on gender that happens in the workplace. As Sue (2010) notes: “During team meetings in which a female employee may contribute an idea, the male CEO may not respond to it or seemingly not hear the idea. However, when a male coworker makes the identical statement, he may be recognized and praised by the executive and fellow colleagues” (12). Where a man would be praised for his ideas, a woman is frequently ignored, and her work can be even stolen from her because of her gender, like in the case of the evil Queen. Once she realises how it feels when an act of microaggression is committed against somebody, she decides to listen to the mirror and become more respectful. She puts more effort into referring to Snow White by the gender-neutral pronoun *they* and be more polite towards her subjects. She does not, however, give up her decision that Snow White needs to be killed because they are more beautiful than the Queen. This section shows how important it is to enlighten people about this issue. The Queen employs microaggressions toward her people all the time because she does not think about the effect these might have on her subjects. Nonetheless, when she realises how hurtful and uncomfortable it is to be on the receiving end of a microaggression, she decides to be more careful about what she says to avoid hurting people.

As it was mentioned in the beginning, the mirror does not want to judge people based on their appearance, but the Queen insists that it does. It is not surprising as beauty tends to be the most significant source of power for female protagonists in fairy tales. The emphasis on women’s beauty in the fairy-tale genre and the jealousy the Queen feels towards anyone who is more beautiful than her as described by Marcia Lieberman in her well-known paper “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale”. The villains “are jealous of any woman more beautiful than they, which is not surprising in view of the power deriving from beauty in fairy tale” (Lieberman 1972: 392), while the female protagonist has a “special destiny” (Lieberman 1972: 385). It is interesting that the mirror does not address this, as this concept is very outdated, beauty can also be a source of microaggressions. Even though the mirror points out how problematic it is to judge the fairness of somebody because it is subjective, it does not point out that it is how the views of the society have changed when it comes to the ideals of female beauty and the notion that one has to be the fairest at all costs. Neither does the mirror address the microaggressions that are frequently used in connection to somebody’s appearance and the ideal of feminine beauty. Microaggression masked as compliments often appear in relation to women’s appearance or the way they dress, and it is interesting that the authors did not include examples of these gender-based microaggressions as this could be connected to the story of “Little Snow White” very easily and it might be easily relatable to the Queen. Taking this into consideration, it is somewhat surprising that the connection between beauty and

microaggressions is not explored further in the story, and it would suit well the mirror's aim to make the Queen more tolerant.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Haun and Lane make use of the familiarity of the fairy tale "Little Snow White" to address the problem of microaggressions. The story is seen through the eyes of the Evil Queen as she learns about the effects microaggressions have on the people who are on the receiving end. With the help of the magical mirror, she learns that microaggressions can be committed against people who belong to a marginalised group based on various criteria, including gender. The mirror helps her realise that ignoring Snow White's wish to be referred to by the non-binary *they* is a problem as it is based on the idea that people have to fall into one of the male/female categories, which, as the mirror suggests, is no longer valid. The Queen also realises how harmful gender-based microaggressions can be as she has experienced them herself when her idea was stolen by one of her male colleagues only because as a man, he could afford to steal it. As her own experience and the mirror's help her to understand microaggressions, the Queen decides to mind more about how she treats others, though ironically, she does not get over the idea that she has to kill her stepchild and the huntspeople. This might be partially attributed to the story being a parody of earlier versions of Snow White. However, it could also be attributed to the fact that the Queen has just started to realise how her behaviour might be harmful to others and therefore, she has not progressed to the point where she would be able to give up on her fixation on being the fairest yet. Just like they would in real life, changes come slowly, but they do come once one learns how to recognize the problem and is willing to do something about it.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Some oldest and best-known include Marcia Lieberman's article on depiction of female characters in the best-known fairy tales "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale", Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's section on female characters in the story of Snow White in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

<sup>2</sup> For details see, for example, Christine Shojaei Kawan's article "A Brief Literary History Of Snow White".

<sup>3</sup> The author of this text discusses her interpretation of the Queen's behaviour in the article "Mirror, Mirror: Framing the Modern Adaptations of Little Snow-White".

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