The Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*

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ABSTRACT

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* redefines gender roles in the 20th century. Barthelme retells the original fairy tale, subverting its presentation of stereotypical gender roles to depict postmodern ideologies, particularly feminism. The male voice and its controlling power, embodied within the original narrative, becomes the lost, weak, and subordinate side of his story. The female voice, repressed by social and cultural principles, is reshaped to represent the free, powerful, and dominant figure in his narrative. This novel's presentation of *Snow White's* characters reflects feminist battles, such as the fight for gender equality and women's freedom from patriarchal restrictions or sexual objectification. Adopting a feminist perspective, this study investigates Barthelme's demythologizing approach in *Snow White* to present his new identification of gender roles. Specifically, this study examines the novel as a subversive reworking of Grimm's *Snow White* [the original fairy tale] by analyzing Barthelme's reframing of Snow White, the seven dwarfs, and Prince Paul. The findings of the study will show how Barthelme's text offers a feminist critique of patriarchal dominance to the original Grimm's fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Through a close reading of the text, this study also seeks to highlight the novel's subversive representation of socially constructed stereotypical male and female roles in the fairy tale to challenge the long-standing gender ideologies conceived by the patriarchal society.

Key words: Donald Barthelme, Snow White, Postmodern Literature, Feminism, Gender Roles

INTRODUCTION

Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* is a postmodern rewriting of the Grimm's fairy tale. As a seminal work of the Sixties; the novel received considerable attention, not only because of the wide dissemination of fairy tales, especially fiction of the Grimm brothers which continued to be a staple childhood reading for many youngsters even today, but because of its textual and narrative experimentation. Exploring new narrative strategies and daring capitalist ideology, Barthelme's work was lauded at times, critiqued at others, but often became the wellspring for fictional writing to follow, with writers like Charles Baxter and Padget Powell, who adapted or reworked the textual strategies that he invented. But what distinguished the text, as many critics agreed, was the feminist critique that Barthelme in this text offers of patriarchal institutions and practices. Despite his status as a male author, Barthelme can be considered a fundamental feminist writer in the postmodern times.

Barthelme's rewriting of *Snow White* maintains the feminist prerogatives of the 1960s, marked by the massive growth of radical feminism, to reconstruct the relationship between gender identity and power. According to Judith Lorber, liberal feminists during the 1960s and 1970s focused on presenting the degree to which modernism maintains social differentiations against women. These feminists did not consider the natural differences between males and females and therefore sought to elevate women from their inferior status (Lorber 10). Barthelme presents his attempt to rework stereotypical views of gender as prevalent in the original Grimm's fairy tale through his female and male characters. Barthelme's new identification of Snow White breaks the social and cultural expectations of an ideal fairy tale heroine; he depicts Snow White as independent, powerful, ambitious and in control of her sexuality. This new character adaptation refutes the stereotyping and sexual objectification of women.

In his reworking of Grimm's fairy tale, Barthelme introduces the feminist perspective in order to break free from the sexism, the patriarchal restrictions, and the ideology of the original. Barthelme criticizes Western culture's acceptance of fairy tales as embodying eternal truths rather than recognizing them as products of the human mind that reflect aspects of human experience. His approach involves looking at the literary work as a cultural artifact, one that is not created in isolation but at a specific socio-historical instance and hence is subject to multiple determinants. In Barthelme's version of *Snow White,* the impact of the sexual revolution of the 1960s is evident in terms of the increasing acceptance of sexual encounters outside of marriage, co-habitation, growing

number of non-monogamous relationships, and the greater degree of sexual freedom available to modern women. The novel's representation of the relationship between Snow White and the dwarfs is influenced by these developments in the cultural setting. The decade also saw the emergence of a more complex understanding of gender, examining its constructed nature, reliance on performance, behavior, and questioning of gender demarcated social roles. Barthelme's perspective on gender and sexuality as a cultural variable, neither of which is eternal nor immutable, informs his demythologizing approach, and his exploration of this variable in the malleable form of a fairy tale is a clear way of parodying this cultural form.

Like many postmodern writers, Barthelme challenges the social norms associated with the stereotypical roles of men and women. His retelling of Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* alters the presentation of women as being constantly under the thumb of men's authority and power. This retelling adaptation of the fairy tale was written in the 1960s, during the heyday of the second wave of the feminist movement, a time when women were increasingly becoming a part of the work force, and with the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill, they had access to more reproductive choices and were increasingly interrogating conventional socio-cultural notions of womanhood. At the same time they found themselves caught between the struggles of the home and the workplace. Barthelme's retelling written in the 1960s reflects these developments in contemporary society. His rewriting is a reaction against the male-dominated literary world of the 19th century when the Brothers Grimm wrote *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Barthelme scrutinizes the oppressive nature of the original fairy tale particularly as it applies to the relationship between the two genders. He questions the culturally dictated roles that patriarchal notions have imposed on women as the norm by interrogating the reductionist boundaries forced on women by repressive essentialism and takes an ax to the normalized cultural constructs of "femininity" and "masculinity."

In addition to the subversive description of the female identity, Barthelme simultaneously subverts ideal notions of patriarchal heroic figures through his portrayal of the male figures. Barthelme draws out the negative aspects of patriarchal dominance. The dwarfs, whose smaller stature makes them "lesser" men physically are also portrayed as weak and lacking confidence because they isolate themselves socially and psychologically. Despite access to wealth and privilege their sense of alienation diminishes their gender power further, altering the perceived social assumptions of male dominance, which is typically identified with authority, power and control. Paul, the other figure of masculinity in the tale, does not exhibit a real personality with true emotions or ambitions. Through Paul, Barthelme subverts the Grimm's presentation of Prince Charming by transferring his attributes of strength and independence to Snow White as a manifestation of gender equality. This subversion is carried out through re-appropriating gender roles and redistributing traits of characters as assigned to them by the original

fairy tale. The said inversion appears in the text at the level of characterization and through certain formal techniques such, for instance, by lending Snow White's character a narrative voice. Such interventions help reduce the gender bias of the original story, and enhance the egalitarian perspective of Barthelme's reworking of the story. This study considers these distinct departures from the original story to analyze the feminist aspects of Barthelme's construction of Snow White. While revealing how this novel employs a counter the representation of Snow White's passive role under patriarchy in the original fairy tale, the study also considers the ways in which Barthelme has subverted the portrayal of the dwarfs to reveal how patriarchy makes victims out of men, too. In this respect, an exploration of the nuances and gender conservatism that the original text demonstrates becomes important in order to understand the influence on its readers. The study's main objective, thus, is to explore Barthelme's *Snow White* as a subversive text that makes use of the original fairy tale to deconstruct stereotypical gender roles perpetuated by the traditional cultural views. The study will evince how Barthelme's *Snow White,* not only critiques the patriarchal aspects found in Grimm's fairy tale to develop an understanding of the ways in which the social norms related to gender roles have been perpetuated through this genre.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Barthelme's novel can be interpreted as a literary resource for new writing styles, linguistic terminologies, and social ideologies. One of the deeply explored aspects in Barthelme's novel is its unconventional narrative techniques. M.L. Eileen Brisha analyzes Barthelme's use of postmodern narrative elements, such as fragmentation and parody, to depict the contemporary world. She argues that women who fight for liberation from men's authority, such as Snow White, end up living in a "helpless" situation since hope and power exist within the shadow of a male figure (Brisha 13). Nicholas Sloboda explains how Barthelme's narrative structure violates the classic linear narrative style of the fairy tale and aims to change the conventional narrative as well as the characters' self-understanding associated with this legitimacy.Sloboda also notes that the two postmodernist writing styles employed in this novel—heteroglossia and collage—extend the traditional boundaries of a novel. For Sloboda, these techniques help in understanding the psychology of the novel's characters. The openness of these narrative techniques fragments the storyline to suspend the characters' consciousness of certainty and self-progression. Ultimately, this fragmentation subverts the meaning of a character's self-understanding in systematic discourses.

The novel's language has been analyzed in Shaghayegh Mohammadi's "Language and Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*." Mohammadi argues that Barthelme's language and diction deny the coherent and central meaning of the text. She considers the playfulness of the narrative's language to be a means of creating a sense of uncertainty or a lack of a "transcendental" meaning in the text, an emphasis of the "nothing world" of the novel wherein the individual lacks self-identification (22; 23). The findings of Mohammadi's

study address the individual's ideological understanding of their gendered social roles, which is another significant aspect that the novel interrogates.

The variations in gender roles raised in Barthelme's version have been the focus of studies like Cristina Bacchilega's "Cracking the Mirror: Three Re-Visions of "Snow White," which examines the retelling of Snow White's myth in Barthelme's novel in relation to other rewritings of the original fairy tale. Bacchilega underlines the changes of Snow White's character by comparing the texts, using the reading of the mirror as the organizing principle of her study. Bacchilega extends her analysis of Barthelme's framing of Snow White through his narrative structure in *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. This analysis argues that the "externalization" employed to provide a non-linear narrative has parodic effects (43). For example, it rejects the "objectification" of Snow White by externalizing her female potential and raising her voice (45). In Alina Leonte's study, "The Clash of Two Worlds in Donald Barthelme's Snow White," the representation of Snow White's character in Barthelme's story is also examined, but Leonte investigates Snow White's recognition of her social role in relation to stereotypical perceptions of females in the 1960s. Leonte claims that Barthelme's story portrays Snow White as a typical female in the 1960s who struggles to escape the era's social values and expectations but ultimately fails to achieve her goal. According to Leonte, Snow White's restlessness reflect the social problems of the time as well as existing cultural conflicts over modern views of the emergence of the "free" woman (1117-20).

Barthelme's demonstration of new stylistic techniques, linguistic elements, and social ideologies in his postmodern novel has been a significant approach to critique. It presents the novel as a literary groundwork to change traditional narrative techniques and to give new perspectives to understand the individual and his/her social role. This study, however, provides a thorough analysis of Barthelme's parodic interpretation of traditional gender-role and imagery in many respects along with his contributions in drawing a new male and female's identity.

BARTHELME'S *SNOW WHITE*: A SYNOPSIS

The postmodern narrative of Barthelme's work does not lend itself to an easy summary, as it is characterized by literary techniques such as the pastiche, the absence of a linear coherent narrative and undeveloped characterization. The narrative unfolds in the form of disconnected episodes rather than a conventional plot. It is interspersed with blank pages, digressions and commentary on the idiosyncrasies of modern life, about history, and on the original story. Most of the original characters are recast in contemporary terms; the dwarfs from the original are given modern day names such as Dan, Clem, Hubert and Kevin. In this version, these seven men with whom Snow White cohabits and has sexual relations, work in the Chinese baby food manufacturing industry and wash buildings. The prince from the original tale is revamped as a dejected, identity conflict-ridden artist named Paul who midway through the narrative decides

to become a monk instead of undertaking the heroic task of rescuing Snow White. The characters are identified by various quirks and abnormalities. For instance, Bill— who is the "leader" of the men—is experiencing withdrawal symptoms and has an aversion to being touched. As Larry McCaffery notes, "Barthelme's characters are typically shown not only to be painfully aware of their own personal and sexual inadequacies but more generally, to be disgruntled or bored with the systems they rely on to deal with their fragmented, meaningless lives" (79). Snow White and her prince express this awareness, producing a reworking of their functions in the classic text. In one instance, Snow White expresses her disappointment on discovering that Paul is purely "frog through and through" with no "hues of princeliness" (Barthelme 175). Her disappointment stems from the realization that Paul is not the traditional fairy tale hero that has been defined historically; she claims that "Either I have overestimated Paul, or I have overestimated history" (Barthelme 75). The villainous stepmother is recast as Jane in this version, and the denouement of the narrative involves Paul drinking the poisoned drink that Jane had intended for Snow White.

BARTHELME'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Barthelme's *Snow White* received robust attention in the mid- to late twentieth century. The novel's rhetorical strategies, along with its inventive narrative techniques, aim to change many significant aspects of fairy tales that have been adapted over recent decades, such as the typical happy endings. Divided into three parts, the novel is a formal and thematic experimentation that offers a succession of collaged scenes narrated from different points of view. To compliment the thematic concerns of consumerism, oppressive patriarchy, alienation, and uncertainty, the author, in these scenes, explores different textual formats and typographies, juxtaposing ideas that produce an apparently incongruous discourse to parody diverse systems:

> BEAVER COLLEGE is where she got her education. She studied *Modern Woman. Her Privileges and Responsibilities:* the nature and nurture of women and what they stand for, in evolution, in history, including householding, upbringing, peace-keeping, healing and devotion, and how these contribute to the rehumanization of today's world. (31)

This hybrid character of the work, as well as its intention to disturb traditional epistemological models, fits perfectly with the author's own description of his writing. Nicholas Sloboda notes in his study "Heteroglossia and Collage: Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, that while interviewing Barthelme he described his writing as an attempt to pull together noise into "textual collages or mosaics" as "all this noise pulled together and then turned up very high - increase the volume" (117).

The combination of textual formats—which include titles, enumerations, political discourse, and theoretical essays—break the linear narrative of the story and create a mosaic of perspectives that engage the reader in the text. From the beginning, Barthelme establishes the metafictional character of his work, reinforcing the critical attitude with

which he intends to confront the discourses he uses as an intertext. As Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola notes, reading *Snow White* is in a way de-familiarizing a series of exhausted models from the traditional story that are incorporated into the text in a self-conscious way and that force an analytical reading based on contrasts with the previous model. This defamiliarization operates parodically, transforming Snow White's popular story not only on a narrative level but on the level of interpretation. Herrero-Olaizola explains that Barthelme's text alters the narrative of Snow White's story "while simultaneously revising the interpretation of this narrative by including a wider reflection on literature, language, psychology, history and feminism" (92-93).

The narrative is interrupted by a series of headings—sometimes in uppercase and bold—that gives way to the actual parody of the academic language of psychoanalysis, political discourse, and literary analysis. The responsibility for these interpretive approaches in the creation of sexual stereotypes, both feminine and masculine, are highlighted. The mockery of the psychoanalytic interpretation of traditional tales underscores this reductive view in which the protagonist is defined by her vulnerability: "she fears mirrors, apples, poisoned combs" (Barthelme 23). The reference to Lacanian discourse also questions the default definition as associated with women, and the textual fragmentation of the novel is echoed in similarly fractured characters some of whom demonstrate awareness of their splintered selves and uncertain destinies (Barthelme 175).

The narrative also uses a third-person unnamed narrator whose narrative undercuts any authoritative or monolithic voice to question the underlying assumptions about constructed meanings in mythic stories and literary texts. Apart from the section which are recorded in the first person from the perspective of one of the characters, this unidentified narrator often makes seemingly objective statements about matters unrelated to the narrative. For instance, consider this digression about Russian literature discussed by Charles Cullum in his essay: "IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY THAT RUSSIA PRODUCED A LITERATURE WORTHY OF BECOMING PART OF THE WORLD'S CULTURAL HERITAGE" (Barthelme 149). According to Cullum, the narrator's arbitrary inclusions demonstrate a lack of reliability; his random reportage of events is problematic to say the least and reduces his overall credibility as a purveyor of the truth. This absence of a consistent narrative voice complicates the reader's experience of the text and leads him to rely on her or his own subjective interpretation of events and characters.

ANALYSIS

Female Gender Role Analysis

The work also presents new perspectives on the individual's social roles through the representation of primary characters. Although a variety of work, analyses Barthelme's *Snow White* investigation of gender roles throughout *Snow White*, none deploy a strong feminist perspective. An examination of Snow White in terms of her status as a heroine, as

a parody of a conventional housewife, and the destabilizing nature of her physical appearance each provide avenues for feminist critiques of the text.

Snow White as a Heroine

Barthelme's first portrayal of the feminist perspective comes via his characterization of Snow White's identity as a heroine. He subverts Grimm's depiction of the female as an acquiescent, passive, and submissive woman by adapting two main frameworks upon which his version of Snow White's identity is built. The first framework is the stereotypical role of Snow White as a fairy tale heroine. This approach demonstrates how Barthelme's changes to certain plot arches and twists in characterization contribute to weakening the patriarchal bias and enhancing feminine distinctiveness. The other framework is the sexual objectification of Snow White as a woman. Through the analysis of this framework, Snow White's gender identity is developed to redefine her female richness, raising the feminist potential of the novel.

One symbolic attitude that Barthelme adopts in order to reframe Snow White's identity as a stereotypical fairy tale heroine can be traced through the subversion of the submissive role she must play. In the Grimms' tale, the heroine's identity has been associated with negative concepts, such as "non-agency" and "passivity" that make the heroine a "victim" (Ortner 9). Snow White's submissive attitudes and her inability to control her own life force her to experience several severe circumstances in order to be worthy of marrying the Prince, or even to deserve any man's company or love (Ortner 9). Snow White tries to be a good housekeeper and to be subordinate to maintain the dwarfs satisfaction with her: "Snow White's ability to do the household chores pleases the dwarfs who tell her that if she will take care of their house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, and knit, and will keep everything neat and clean, she can stay with them and shall want for nothing (Grimm & Grimm 221). Barthelme alters the heroine's attitudes of passivity and submissiveness though Snow White is still doing her job as a homemaker and is haunted by her stepmother, the dwarfs do not consider her as merely someone who cooks and cleans for them, but rather treat her as privileged woman. Instead of exploiting the heroine as a worker, they fight to please her, using every possible means at their disposal: "Men try to please their mistresses when they, men, are not busy in the counting house, or drinking healths, or having the blade of a new dagger chased with gold" (Barthelme 21).

This change can be described as a transformation in the hierarchy of privileged men and women. This transformation mobilizes, and therefore problematizes, socially perceived notions about ordered systems of gender role and identity. According to Mary Eagleton in an analysis of the deconstructive theory's positive influences on feminism, deconstruction involves a tool exposing facts regarding the binaries of opposition between male and females, such as social definitions of "men" and "women." Eagleton explains, "[D]econstruction sets up the possibility that the supposedly fixed opposition of masculine/feminine might lose its social prominence because we could recognize that there is

no necessary connection between anatomical sexuality and gender stereotypes or roles" (264). The fact that Snow White maintains a superior position in the social hierarchy of gender power transforms her passive identity into a secure and independent one.

In Barthelme's story, Snow White has a new outlook that redefines her situation of independence through the word of a woman rather than a man. Snow White expresses her autonomy in her desire to be free from the dominant patriarchal society. In the prison-like dwarf house, a male-centred society, Snow White's life feels lonely and discontent. Being with the dwarfs, she feels "[m]ost life is unextraordinary;" nothing interests her, as she maintains greater ambitions than a man's recognition (Barthelme 27). As opposed to the original story, Snow White does not avoid her loneliness by being with a man; she finds other ways to avoid isolation since the "not-with" can be more worthy of her than the "being-with" (Barthelme 76). In terms of romance, Snow White sits at home with her "long black hair hanging from that window" (Barthelme 19). This image brings to the fore the autonomy and self-subjectivity of Snow White's identity. She looks through the window, expressing her freedom from her captive life with the dwarfs. Just as her "long" hair is falling from outside the window, her expectation of self-sufficiency is liberated from the inside. This act is also reflective of Snow White's exercise of personal agency, showing how she has also redefined the perception of romance in itself – which she recasts into her own sense of freedom from her captive life.

Snow White as a Parody of a Conventional Housewife

The second symbolic reference that Barthelme uses to subvert the stereotypical role of the heroine in the fairy tale is expressed in his descriptive parody of Snow White as a "horsewife" (Barthelme 66). Barthelme's satirical description of the "horsewife" is present in an interlude in part one where he lists many possible interpretations that can be extended to wider discourses of Snow White as a "horsewife": "THE HORSEWIFE IN HISTORY/FAMOUS HORSE-WIVES…" (Barthelme 67). This notion is extended in a lecture by Edward, who states, "The very base bone of the American plethora! The horsewife! Without whom the entire structure of civilian life would crumble!" (Barthelme 105) This speech shows the shifts in female identity from being just a housekeeper to representing her status as the basis of a socio-cultural institution. The "horsewife" becomes the "base bone" on which an entire society's civilization relies.

Barthelme attacks the stereotypical identification of the heroine as an obedient "horsewife" by giving Snow White a contradictory description. While a "housewife" denotes the devoted woman whose job is to stay at home and perform household duties such as cleaning, washing, and cooking, the "horsewife" in Barthelme's text denotes the free spirit of Snow White. She has a passionate and ambitious spirit, one of personal drive and desire for life. One instance clearly demonstrating Barthelme's parodic depiction of the housewife's social role is when Snow White complains with an authorial voice, "I am tired of being just a horsewife,"

redirecting the term used previously by other characters (Barthelme 49). Barthelme's representation of Snow White using the label "horsewife" identifies the heroine as a working maiden, offering room for a critique. The concept "horsewife" emphasizes that women are continuously trapped in the ruin of domestic household labours with little room for escape.

Snow White's Appearance as Destabilizing

Another code that is subversive to the female identity in Barthelme's version is demonstrated through the various feminine potentials other than beauty that Snow White maintains. In the original fairy tale, although Snow White does not actively rely on her beauty as a mechanism to save herself from difficult situations, it motivates the Prince to take the coffin because he "cannot live without looking upon" the "beautiful Snow White within it" (Grimm & Grimm 225). However, in Barthelme's story, beauty is the source of misery, not only for Snow White, but for the men around her. For example, the dwarfs dream of burning Snow White, with each one participating by adding more wood to the fire. Since burning can distort any feature of beauty, the act of wanting to burn Snow White emphasizes the influence of Snow White's beauty over the dwarfs. Although the dwarfs strongly scrutinize Snow White's attractive features—"We regarded Snow White, her smooth lips, her womanly figure swaying there, at the window"—later they find her physical attractiveness intolerable and demonstrate hostility towards it (Barthelme 27). In this context, Sigmund Freud's dream analysis can offer some interpretation. Freud explains that dreams can be the dreamer's "continuation of thinking in sleep" and can play a part in their "wish-fulfilment" (73). Therefore, the dwarfs' dream of burning the pretty Snow White demonstrates their wish to weaken and diminish the power that Snow White's physical attractiveness lends to her personality.

In the original Grimm's version, Snow White's beauty is demonstrated through the reading of the mirror: "Snow White living in the glen….is a thousand times more fair," a reflection on her outer appearance by which she is judged throughout the story(Grimm & Grimm 223). In Barthelme's version, the narrator describes Snow White's beauty as shallow and unreal in order to give her inner personality more importance than her outer appearance.

Snow White is described as a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: "one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down" (Barthelme 9).This description of Snow White's beauty epitomizes an alternative feminine ideal of beauty, different from the traditional heroine that occurs in fairy tales, who has a skin without flaws. Barthelme's Snow White on the other hand is identified by her dark hair and the many unsightly blemishes that she has. Thus the physicality of Barthelme's Snow White can be understood as subverting derivative notions of beauty that have been affirmed by fairy tales.

In Barthelme's version, Snow White's physical appearance does not garner as much attention as in the original fairy

tale. Instead, one is allowed insight into her interiority, into her fears, thoughts, and preoccupations and interests such as her penchant for writing poetry. On certain occasions, her beauty is framed as ordinary and boring. For instance, Hogo, who appears in this version instead of the mirror of the original version of the fairy tale, comments on Snow White's beauty by saying, "the beauty of a woman" is "the only thing worth a rap in the whole world," but he soon compares its significance to regular habits and interests, such as "certain foods, and possibly music of all kinds, especially 'cheap' music" (Barthelme 79). Other evidence is manifest in Bill's commentary about the dwarfs' shower with Snow White and their moments of erotic fantasy. He states:

> [I]t is a pleasure to please her [Snow White], when human ingenuity can manage it, but the whole thing is just trembling on the edge of monotony, after several years. And, yet… I am fond of her. Yes, I am. For when sexual pleasure is had, it makes you fond, in a strange way, of the other one, the one with whom you are having it. (Barthelme 42)

In this observation, Bill presents a favourable attitude on women's rights to sexual pleasure, thus implying that women and sexuality are often taboo – and the sexual pleasure of a woman is neither discussed nor "permitted" to be accessed. It is thus arguable that Barthelme presents a powerful subversion of the patriarchal notion in recognizing her right to sexual pleasure. The fact that he mentions "It is a pleasure to please her" is indicates that the patriarchal idea of male pleasure, female pleasure is subverted.

Another possible interpretation is that Barthelme destabilizes the pleasure of Snow White's body and physical appearance to the level of boredom so as to raise a feminist critique against the assumption that a woman's body is a source of pleasure. Barthelme diminishes the dwarfs' sense of interest when they try to objectify Snow White as a mere object. For example, when Dan describes Snow White as "a red towel" that can be interchanged with other objects, and when Clem does not take Snow White's feelings into account: "It is not Snow White that I would be being unfaithful to, but the shower" they become apathetic (Barthelme 29). They face a world in which they forget what "interesting things" are; nothing to them is "interesting" at the experiential level, only hypothetically (Barthelme 24).

The absurd grotesqueness of the dwarfs' psychological definition of "interesting things" reflects their boredom not only with these sexual habits but also with everything else they may encounter. This is manifest in the first- person plural narrative, confronting the dwarfs' reactions toward their father's advice on how "to be a man about whom nothing is known," stating,

> "He was not very interesting. A tree is more interesting. A suitcase is more interesting. A canned good is more interesting. When we sing the father hymn, we notice that he was not very interesting. The words of hymn notice it; it is explicitly commented upon, in the text" (Barthelme 25)

Barthelme redefines Snow White's inner richness by using a variety of concepts that deny her an objectified female role. One significant approach is giving her a language of her own (i.e. a voice). Barthelme employs language to reshape Snow White's gender identity, which occurs because her voice "sets Barthelme's fragmentary plot in motion" (Bacchilega *Gender and Narrative Strategies* 45). At a deeper level, Barthelme heightens the level of interest in Snow White's identity; Snow White's inner richness, her mind, thinking, and personality, are elevated over her body. Snow White is no longer the conventional silent beautiful woman of the fairytale but a rebel who is given her own narrative and a voice. She has her own narration, a poem, and she emphasizes her point of freedom by making it free of rhythm: "We said, '[I]s it rhymed or free?' 'Free,' Snow White said, 'free, free, free'" (Barthelme 65).

Snow White's poem is a demonstrative rejection of the objectified role to which she is assigned because of her gender, which presents her as a concrete person. Snow White's poem makes her an active agent who has a plot or a voice through which she can express her personal experiences of womanhood in a patriarchal society. In an analysis of women's narrative voice in literature, Susan S. Lanser notes a "voice," as a humanist feature in fiction, becomes the image through which "identity and power" can be depicted for those who have been silenced personally or as a group (3). In other words, if the silenced side finds a "voice," then he or she finds the way to make a claim for agency and power (3). Considering Lanser's suggestion, Snow White's poem can be described as a means of maintaining her self-agency through language.

In effect, Barthelme tries to liberate Snow White through the language of the text. One linguistic method employed to convey the breakdown of social boundaries in Snow White's world is present through the fragmentary narratives used as preludes, interludes, and postludes throughout the text. For example, in one interlude, Barthelme directly comments on the different social status that Snow White maintains as a house maiden or as a woman with whom the dwarfs enjoy sex: "SNOW WHITE THINKS: THE HOUSE… WALLS… WHEN HE DOESN'T… I'M NOT… IN THE DARK… SHOULDERS… AFRAID… THE WATER WAS COLD… WANT TO KNOW… EFFORTLESSLY…" (Barthelme 171). Breaking the norms of textual language to present a new social identification of Snow White's personality is predicted from the start of the novel as Snow White explains her dissatisfaction with the language, which she uses to articulate: "OH I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (Barthelme 12). Much of this language, which is used to express a woman's cultural status concerning a fairy tale that has shaped a persistent view of gender differences present Barthelme's Snow White as an archetype of a liberated woman. She becomes the epitome of the "transgression of all barriers," as suggested by Zuzanna Ladyga (79). Charles Cullum, in his analysis of the work discusses how by the third part of the novel Snow White begins to move towards an authentic self unlike other male characters who demonstrate no such growth, although according to him this movement is never completed in the text. He traces this evolution from her original objectified and sexist role as fairy tale character to a self that begins to make her own choices and aspires to become an authentic

being at the conclusion with her "apotheosis" or "ris[ing] into the sky" (26).

Analysis of Male Gender Roles

Barthelme's second feminist critique of gender role differences in the fairy tale is evident in the way he portrays men. To subvert the perceived assumptions about male gender roles, Barthelme destabilizes many practices, attitudes, and perceptions that present males as powerful, authoritarian, and domineering. This section is an examination of the subversive aspects of male characterization in the novel; it will scrutinize the isolated and anxious masculinities of the dwarfs in context of patriarchal authority and will also include a discussion on Paul's character as a departure from the conventional fairy tale male protagonist.

It is important to consider how Barthelme parodies masculinity in *Snow White*, by depicting the dwarfs as figures of the patriarchal society, as their acts and thoughts offer insight into the male-dominated world. Similarly, Prince Paul is portrayed in a way that draws out the points of weakness in men, contrasting with the ideal presentation of the male figure in the fairy tale. Paul's doubt about his heroic role in saving Snow White, his inability to recognize the role of a prince, and his fatal end all subvert the ideal hero figure that completes the heroine.

The dwarfs represent Barthelme's subversive depiction of the fairy tale's assumptions about men, patriarchy, and masculine power. Through the dwarfs' acts and beliefs, Barthelme questions their patriarchal dominance, agency, and authority. First, the dwarfs have no possibilities for growth, personally or collectively, as they unconsciously isolate themselves socially in a closed, and limited world. This is partly due to the alienated nature of their work in a capitalist world where they propagate worthless consumerist activities and items like gourmet food for babies. They are not identified with any collective socio-cultural activities either; J. Montresor discusses in his essay how the dwarfs demonstrate an antagonism to art and intellectual pursuits. According to him this is evident in how they are disgusted by Snow White's poem, her reading of Mao Tse Sung's works and their plan to steal Paul's typewriter in order to curb his artistic ambitions (77). Additionally, they cannot demonstrate any sense of communality among themselves either and lead anxiety-ridden lives with not much scope for change or growth. Dan and Henry reflect this in their words when they discuss "an interrupted screw," stating, "You live in a world of your own Henry." "I can certainly improve on what was given,' Henry said" (Barthelme 36). Except for Dan, who thinks Bill's tiredness is due to "a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition," the dwarfs believe that the "anxiety theory" suspends their ability for personal growth or sociable communication (Barthelme 10). An obvious instance of the dwarfs' reluctance to escape their isolation is evident in Bill's behaviours and thoughts. Henry describes Bill as someone of great potential: "We are little children compared to him, in terms of possibility" (Barthelme 26). Bill, however, cannot bear being touched due to his sense of anxiety: "He doesn't want to be involved in human situations anymore"

(Barthelme 10). Bill is unable to act upon his agency to access social power, and he is unable to make use of his role as a leader or make any "powerful statement" (Barthelme 57). By stressing how isolation causes the dwarfs' sense of self-doubt, which problematizes the ordered systems of patriarchal power, Barthelme thus reveals how patriarchy victimizes men, and pathologizes any non-conformity with a singular notion of masculinity – which is not healthy construct for a gender-equal society.

Alienated men hide their feelings and needs from each other and women. They practice their masculine power in isolated spheres. Feminist discourse, on the other hand, deconstructs and critiques these narratives of masculine power. Michael Kaufman describes men's sense of isolation and weakness despite their potentials and privileges as "men's contradictory experiences of power" (59). Kaufman suggests that this pain and alienation is caused by the practices of "men's power" and men's beliefs represent the core of their masculinity (67). For instance, men become alienated because they detach themselves, their feelings, and their needs from other men and women, believing that any practice of power that constitutes their masculinity necessitates being detached or isolated (67). Consequently, repressed emotions and needs raise "self-doubt about failing to be a 'real' man," causing a rapid shift in the balance of men's power and their sense of pain (68). This shifted the balance of power and is a "pro-feminist" enterprise in which many feminist agendas are involved in reshaping the ideology of power between men and women (71). In this case, the dwarfs' isolation and detachment from each other lead to a lack of self-confidence and self-assurance. For example, Henry notes "his weaknesses on a pad" and confronts Dan about his weakness in hope for a clarification (Barthelme 35). However, Dan does not recognize the other dwarf's need for a psychological examination of his situation. Dan coldly demonstrates an analysis of a different field of study: "An interrupted screw… is a screw with a discontinuous helix, as in a cannon breech, formed by cutting away part or parts of the thread, and sometimes part of the shaft" (Barthelme 35) The speech presents one demonstration of the dwarfs' ignorance of each other's feelings and needs, which leads to their hesitation to take control of their masculinity. In other words, each dwarf detaches himself from the rest and becomes blind to identifying his own self-doubt about his masculine ability.

The second sign of Barthelme's subversive identification of the male role is present in the dwarfs' lack of real experiences. In the fairy tale, they are autonomous and hardworking; they represent a real manifestation of a man's authority, and they never show any sign of doubt about themselves or their work. In Barthelme's retelling of the story, their power diminishes to a point that they symbolize an artificial image of a man's power. The dwarfs work at a Chinese factory making baby food, amassing a fortune and maintaining privilege; however, they are identified by Snow White's words as unreal and inexperienced. This is evident when Snow White expresses her dissatisfaction with being with the dwarfs, looking forward to being with her individual self which "is experienced as stronger, more real, at this particular instant in time" (Barthelme 76). Furthermore, Hogo iron-

ically reflects on many characters' situations in the novel as being non-referential or substituted by unreal image: "But, my point is that you should bear in mind multiplicity, and forget about uniqueness" (Barthelme 81). Hogo denotes a code of randomness or indefinite signifiers that are evidently meant to be referenced by the dwarfs, as they "keep looking out of the window" to determine what constitutes their real "existence" (Barthelme 81).

One clear example of the dwarfs' lack of authentic existence is manifest in the execution of one dwarf, Bill, for being a failure. When Bill approaches being "doubtless one of the skyheroes," he is almost able to "govern the orderly rush of virgins and widows through the world;" in other words, able to have dominance over women, he is accused of being "guilty" (Barthelme 185). Bill who is often represented as someone who is unable to act on his agency as a leader, makes the other dwarfs feel threatened when he does make the prerogative to act and as a consequence, the rest of the dwarfs, together with Hogo, collaborate to hang him. More importantly, the dwarfs explain that after Bill's execution they have a sense of stability and calmness: "But the loss of equanimity was serious. We prize equanimity" (Barthelme 118). Since the first-person plural narration of the novel indicates that each dwarf's voice speaks on behalf of the other dwarfs' voices and vice versa, Bill's execution symbolizes the collapse of any patriarchal dominance. The dwarfs, as wealthy and privileged men each born in a different National Park, represent a diminished archetype of American patriarchal society (Weisenburger 115). Barthelme depicts them as lost, aimless, and doubtful figures distanced from the institution of patriarchy.

The dwarfs are aware of their psychological status, and they admit their emptiness and weakness as if to express the modern perception of feminist men. For example, Kevin and Hubert converse about their "fragile" status: "Kevin spoke to Hubert. 'There is not enough seriousness in what we do,' Kevin said. "Everyone wanders around having his own individual perceptions;" the characters experience a sense of dissonance from a larger group (Barthelme 135). Barthelme questions men's deluded sense of certainty and power; the conversation between the dwarfs makes evident that they cannot maintain resolute beliefs or ideologies about themselves or a sense of solidarity from having shared experiences hence reducing the power that the structuralist paradigm of patriarchy has endowed upon them because of their gender.

Prince Paul is the other male figure through which Barthelme presents a feminist critique of male power. At one point, Paul's doubt concerning his role as prince becomes a sign of his rebelliousness against patriarchal thinking. He resigns traditionally privileged positions of masculinity, such as royalty. This reveals Paul's awareness of the oppression of the patriarchy associated with old fairy tales rather than its privileges. He has trouble realizing the role of the prince that he must play, even though he is aware of his royal status: "[M]y blood. It is blue, the bluest… so royal," (Barthelme 33). Paul's inability to exploit his royal or high status re-establishes new aspects of men's power:

> "Paul stood before a fence posing. He was on his way
> to the monastery. But, first, he was posing in front of a

fence. The fence was covered with birds. Their problem, in many ways a paradigm of our own, was "to fly." "The engaging and wholly charming way I stand in front of this fence here," Paul said to himself, "will soon persuade someone to discover me." (Barthelme 84)

Paul's inaction as illustrated in this episode from the narrative may be understood in terms of the larger argument about gender and literary role models that Barthelme illustrates through the text. Sloboda provides an argument for reading these restructured characters that Barthelme creates. According to him, Barthelme's rejection of literary prototypes and structures such as the idea of masculinity endorsed by traditional tales is an incorporation of polyphony and dialogism in the novel, a rejection of the notion of finalized pasts and self-enclosed, complete heroic figures that has been handed down by these narratives (113). On the other hand, Paul appears in the narrative as an uncertain and vaguely rendered shadow of a character, instead of the finished traditional persona in the original tale.

The problematic issues with masculinity depicted in Barthelme's novel can be traced to Paul as a heroic figure as his presentation subverts the characteristics of the fairy tale's hero. However, the prince or hero in these tales does not have a real personality as he never shows emotions or reflects on any kind of passion or ambition (Tatar 2). The Prince Charming in Barthelme's story is characterized by uncertainty and incompleteness. The first indication of this is that Paul aspires for qualities that do not seem real for him, such as heroic prowess, that would make him come to the rescue of Snow White—but instead of playing the role of the rescuer, Paul becomes a ''monk'': He chooses to be a monk in the hope that he can find other qualifications that will be recognized by "someone" else in the event of his lack of heroic fortitude (Barthelme 61; 84).

The second indication of Paul's lack of the characteristics of a conventional fairy tale hero is when Snow White doubts Paul's active existence: "Snow White regarded her hair hanging on the window. 'Paul? Is there a Paul, or have I only projected him in the shape of my longing, boredom, ennui, and pain? Have I trained in the finest graces and arts all my life for nothing but this?' " (Barthelme 108). Paul never existed as an active human before Snow White; he is always presented as a mere abstract, a notion of an ideal man formed by the historical and social legacies of society. This is manifest in the author's last words at the end of the novel when he comments on Snow White's feelings towards Paul's death, that she felt affection not for him but rather for some ''abstract'' construction of him that she harboured: "She was fond not of him but of the abstract notion that, to her, meant 'him'" (Barthelme 186). Even the idea of him drinking the poison instead of her is "too exciting" to her as it bears semblance to the notion of self-sacrificing heroic figure that Snow White has been imagining Paul to be (Barthelme 180).

Paul's representation in the narrative and his unfortunate end add to the crisis of masculinity in the text—and hence can be read as a pro-feminist reading of the text (Messner 2; 9). Paul indicates he has "loftier ambitions," but he does not comprehend "what they are, exactly," which explains his lack of self-recognition in terms of masculinity

and masculinity's power (Barthelme 33). This problematic concern relating to Paul's masculinity is one of the changes to men's masculine potentials in the social system of gender historically.

The other point that raises the feminist potential of the story in relation to Paul's character is the questioning of his relationship with Snow White. Paul never consummates his relationship with Snow White and dies before accomplishing his goal of satisfying her. Paul is described by other men in the novel as the ideal figure of a heroic man and as someone who has the potential to satisfy Snow White, stating they need "Paul or a Paul-figure for that sort of activity" (Barthelme 95). However, it seems that Paul must wait hesitantly as he always retracts from his heroic role to be accepted by Snow White. Paul adopts the act of waiting, which had been assigned to Snow White in the original Grimm's tale when she was the one who willingly waited before marrying the Prince. The King's son said "…come with me to my father's castle and you shall be my bride," and Snow White was willing, and went with him (Grimm & Grimm 226). Nonetheless, Paul's waiting becomes worthless; he dies before getting close to Snow White, emphasizing his failure to consummate the relationship. In a commentary to further emphasize this failure to consummate the relationship with Snow White, the narrator explains that "it is too exciting" for Snow White to see Paul dying from taking the poison instead of her (Barthelme 180).

Paul's death transforms the Prince from the active role of the heroic character in the fairy tale to a passive role. Unlike the usual occurrence in fairy tales in which Snow White is finally rescued by the prince and guarantees her social and financial security by marrying him, Snow White and Paul in Barthelme's version never reach this stage of being engaged in the first place. This emphasizes the novel's anti-patriarchal, feminist concept further: that a woman does not need a man's social security to maintain a stable life; she is able to be secure and independent without subscribing to roles defined for her by patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to demonstrate how Barthelme's *Snow White* provides a feminist critique of patriarchal dominance to the original Grimm's fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Through close reading and analysis of the text, this study sought to evince the novel's representation of new ideologies relating to conventional figures like the housewife, women as sexual objects, men as heroic figures, is primarily to question gender stereotypes and formulaic gender roles and differences to support feminism. Each characterization reworks or alters aspects of patriarchal dominance or feminine weakness prevalent in the original fairy tale. Through the female character, Snow White, Barthelme provides a prominent example of the free, independent, and strong woman of great potential who denies the stereotypical submissive role of the female heroine in the old fairy tale. Her powerful existence not only frees her from the strict barriers that limit her world to one of male dominance, but she also develops the social and cultural expectations of a

fairy tale's heroine and of a woman in the 1960s. By having the privilege of satisfaction, Snow White problematizes the socially ordered systems of gender and the schism between the two sexes. This critique provides Snow White new ways to redefine her female identity. The way she expresses her longing to free herself from the patriarchal society, as well as the different languages she uses to articulate her independent identity, help raise the feminist voice that indicates the new social and cultural identification of a woman. Barthelme reshaped Snow White to maintain an inner richness rather than an abstract physical appearance in the process of denying the symbolic references used to sexually objectify her or dehumanize her to the level of an exchangeable, lifeless object. His new identification of Snow White raises the novel's feminist potential as it ingrains, in many respects, the quotidian concerns of the modern woman.

Through his representation of the dwarfs' sense of isolation and anxiety, Barthelme also exposes the weakness of patriarchy; the dwarfs are unable to be conscious of the power they maintain despite their wealth and privilege. Instead of making use of their masculine power, their identities diminish and vanish into nothingness, enhancing the feminist aspects of the story. Furthernore, Barthelme includes a new feminist perspective to subvert gender identity in the Grimms' fairy tale with the construction of the character of Prince Paul with his embodiment of the negative characteristics of the ideal heroic man in the fairy tale who always solves problems. Paul cannot recognize his social status as a prince and does not recognize himself any further than his role as a man seeking Snow White's admiration. He takes the passive role of waiting instead for Snow White, and he subsequently dies before getting any closer to her. His new identity is doubtful and hesitant, embracing a novel idiom of the fairy tale hero who is unable to recognize his own power of agency or heroism. Together, these aspects of characterization, the exchanging roles of power and dominance between males and females in Barthelme's text raise the novel's feminist potential and reflect the new postmodern frameworks that establish gender discrepancy.

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