

Snow White and the Seven Complexes

Joseph Dutton

IF DR. BRUHN'S students had seen him standing in line outside the movie theater, jostled by a swarm of excited, shouting children, they would certainly have laughed. The dignified old professor was not the type of man one would expect to see in such a place; he belonged irretrievably to the oak-panelled study or to a secluded nook in the library. And towering above the little people around him, Dr. Bruhn himself was well aware of the fact. The expression on his face was one of conscious aloofness, but tiny lines at the corner of his mouth revealed his embarrassment.

Beside him stood a pink-cheeked little girl with one of her gloved hands held firmly in his. In the other hand she clutched a crumpled sack of candy. Faint smudges of chocolate could be seen on her chin and on the tip of her turned-up nose. A straw bonnet covered with spring flowers sat primly upon her head, and from under the bonnet long brown pigtails extended to her waist. The shiny little face looked up at the old man. "Grandpa," she said, "will I like this movie?"

Dr. Bruhn was not prepared for the question. He hesitated. "Yes, I think you will like it, Janie. It's a very good story." The answer was not a good one, he realized, but he hoped that Janie would be satisfied.

"What's it about?" the little girl asked. She was still uncertain.

"Well, it is the story of a girl named Snow White who . . . I shall spoil the movie for you if I tell you all about it. Wait and see. I'm sure you will like it."

Janie looked at her grandfather doubtfully and probably wished that the movie would be about Hopalong Cassidy; but instead of asking another question she pacified herself by selecting another chocolate from the sack and popping it into her mouth.

When Dr. Bruhn had bought the tickets he hurried Janie into the theater and chose seats on the aisle so that she could see the screen. For a few moments Dr. Bruhn watched the movie with interest, but gradually the colors became liquid and melted into each other. Soon all he could see were shapeless masses of color, and finally he could see nothing at all.

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"Myth-makers would have you believe that Snow White was a perfectly healthy, well-adjusted young woman," Dr. Bruhn said, "but we must admit that in reality hers was a mind tragically diseased." The tall old man was standing on the platform before his class, and for the first time during the semester the face of every student was alive with interest. "To thoroughly understand Snow White we must investigate her background and we must recognize the fact that the girl's excessive desire for purity and virtue was an abnormality. Perhaps in her childhood she was severely punished for some misbehavior; the punishment was unduly harsh, and the girl came to believe that she was more sinful than the people around her. A guilt complex developed. She was driven to purge herself of sin, and thus began the fanatic quest for purity, leading her to create the name of Snow White, which, of course, any thinking person would realize was not her true name."

Dr. Bruhn paused so that the students could comprehend what he had said. Eyes sparkled with eagerness and hands scribbled rapidly across open notebooks. A blush crept slowly over the face of a pretty coed sitting in the front row, obviously suffering from a Snow White complex herself. Dr. Bruhn coughed and continued. "Unfortunately, the complex had more serious effects than would seem evident at first. Because she believed herself superior to other women, she could not find a suitable mate. Through a withdrawal mechanism, she formed a dream world for herself in which she created a Prince Charming, the only single individual whom she felt worthy of her. The later disappearance of Prince Charming must certainly have been due to some masochistic quirk in Snow White's psychological make-up.

"Once Prince Charming was gone, Snow White was forced to compensate for her loss. In her fancy, no single man could satisfy. Thus she created seven, each of whom represented a characteristic her ideal man must possess. And think of how typically feminine it was of her to create men so much smaller in stature than she." Dr. Bruhn paused and smiled while his students laughed at the clever remark. "I am certain you will have no trouble discerning the characteristic which each dwarf represented," he went on. "Doc is, of course, intelligence, and Grumpy is virility. Happy stands for exactly what his name implies. Sleepy is serenity and peacefulness, while Bashful represents a shy sort of servitude. Dopey may be explained by the fact that most women desire husbands with some inferiority, in order to gratify their repressed sense of superiority."

Several students raised their hands when Dr. Bruhn did not continue. It gratified the white-haired old man to see the intense interest they manifested. Even Mr. Blunt, who seldom attended class and invariably slept through those he did attend, seemed interested.

"Please," said Dr. Bruhn, "don't ask me about Sneezzy. His appearance in the group I cannot explain. A colleague of mine at the University of Guatemala is doing research on the problem at the present time, but as yet I have heard nothing of the results. His theory, one borrowed from Dr. Freud incidentally, is that Sneezzy has something to do with sexuality, but I don't believe we need concern ourselves with that question now."

"Dr. Bruhn, how did Snow White's step-mother, the wicked queen, become involved?" one of the students asked.

Dr. Bruhn smiled. "As long as we rear our children in the make-believe world of fairy tales, step-mothers can be nothing but cruel and wicked. In this case, however, the step-mother represents something of more importance. She is a part of Snow White's persecution complex. Imagining herself to be the possessor of unbelievable virtue and beauty—although in reality Snow White was probably rather plain and unattractive—she believed that all other women in the world were antagonistic toward her. Her step-mother became the symbol of this antagonism and persecution; whereas the Magic Mirror was the spokesman of Snow White's ego."

Miss Grimm, certainly the brightest psychology student in the university, raised her hand. "Is it not possible, Dr. Bruhn," she said, "that the cruelty of the step-mother might be explained by an Oedipus complex, working in the reverse, of course, which Snow White developed concerning her father?"

Dr. Bruhn pondered the question several moments before making his reply. "It is possible," he finally answered. "But unfortunately we know little about Snow White's father. I don't believe it would be wise to form that assumption without more evidence, and information about the father seems to be hopelessly lost." Although he did not agree with Miss Grimm's idea, he could not help admiring the agility of the young woman's mind.

He glanced at his watch and saw that the period would soon be over. "The return of Prince Charming," he said, "who may have been little more than the local garbage collector, and the death of her step-mother acted as a temporary solution to Snow White's problems, but . . ." Dr. Bruhn had planned to close his lecture with a comment on the value of institutions for the mentally ill in connection with cases like Snow White's, but his words were interrupted by a slight tugging which he felt on his arm.

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"The movie's over, Grandpa," Janie whispered.

Dr. Bruhn jumped up quickly and ushered his granddaughter out of the theater. With one of his large hands he shielded his eyes

from the bright sun. Then he looked down at the little girl and said, "Well, Janie, how did you like 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs?'"

The little girl's eyes twinkled mischievously. "I didn't understand it," she giggled, thinking of how she had caught her grandfather napping.

Dr. Bruhn frowned. "Your mother will explain it to you," he said rather quietly. The irritation in his voice was scarcely discernible.

Portrait

B. E. Vanderbilt

I SAW her standing on the ruined wall of the old mill site. She wore black slacks and a plaid shirt. One hand was in the pocket of the slacks, the other touched the white bark of a bending sycamore for balance.

For minutes she stood motionless looking along the winding stream as though to remember for always the bare white branches interlaced above it. I looked at the slow-moving water below and saw on its dark, clear surface, framed in rich brown sycamore leaves, the wall and the girl mirrored against the deep sky, white clouded. There was no sound save the small breathings of the woods and the invisible birds twittering somewhere in its vastness.

The girl moved slowly along the mossy wall and back onto the overgrown trail from the mill site. Both hands were in her pockets and her head and shoulders were bent forward. What did she see among the ferns and old ginger leaves? Searching and halting she turned toward a large oak where earlier I had seen an owl sleeping. She saw it now and straightened, both hands retrieved from her pockets and tensed slightly away from her. She stepped toward the owl and stood rapt with the discovery. An instant, then she laughed a low soft laugh. With her foot she turned a lichen-covered stick and started again more quickly along the trail.

She came quite near me and I saw a radiance in her upturned face that puzzled me, a something delicate yet strong. Her dark shining eyes looked up at the sky. They seemed to gather all the world in that sweeping gaze, uniting the far high ridge with the thickets beyond the stream.

She passed with an easy measured rhythm in her noiseless motion which belied the swiftness of her walk. Softly she sang a marching tune, so softly, so clearly, I could scarce believe I heard it. Away down the path a flock of tiny birds rose in front of her to the tree tops. One hand tensed away from her side, the other rose half-way in greeting to them. She smiled but never broke the cadence of her song, "Semper Fidelis."