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One woman's villain is another woman's hero

It is difficult to imagine the tales we have heard so many times in their traditional forms as something other than what they are. There are heroes, obstacles, magic and triumph. And just as so many stories begin with their “once upon a times” there is a requirement for their “happily ever afters”: victory over the forces of evil.

In Jack Zipes' summary of Vladimir Propp's functions of fairytales he mentions the presence of that familiar need, “the villain is punished or the inimical forces are vanquished” which, in turn, leads to the rewards achieved by the protagonist, whether by marrying, surviving or gaining something. And yet, in Neil Gaiman's *Snow, Glass, Apples* the traditional functions and tropes are reversed, not just in the landmarks of the story itself, but on the role played by its characters.

While the reversal of roles is common in retellings of traditional tales, Gaiman didn't change the core elements of the more well known *Snow White* story: the king still remarries and dies, the princess still goes out to live in the forest, she is still hunted down to have her heart cut out, the Queen still dies, the princess still lives, the prince still marries her. The order of the tale still happens much like we expect it to, but by telling (or hearing) the version of the vanquished instead of the victorious, Gaiman challenges the notion of evil being black and white and introduces us to a protagonist with very different motivations. All that changes is the perspective.

She goes through the opposite journey of the traditional hero: instead of temporary setbacks, the Queen has temporary victories and she spends most of the story convincing us that the tale we, as an audience, have heard is nothing but the lies perpetrated by a villain who has survived. Giving the Queen the opportunity to narrate the story is, in Gaiman's universe, all it took for the story to take on an entire new shade. We no longer see her as a

jealous Queen bent on murder, but as a young woman thrust into a position of power with an impossible challenge ahead of her. The flatness and detachment of the character is replaced by deep introspection and complexity.

The intimacy with which the tale is told gives it an air of accepted defeat, of retrospection, of someone looking back on mistakes they cannot fix. The “Evil Queen” transforms - upon the revelation that we are in fact reading about Snow White when she mentions the cut out heart - into a young royal who, despite her power, endowments and cunning, cannot defeat the evil that has been introduced in her life. In many ways, she stands alone, incapable of voicing her fear or dislike for the young princess even if, according to her, the kingdom seems to agree.

The perspective achieved by watching her mistakes is not enough to save her from the kiln which creates a very large departure from traditional folk tales. The wisdom may be gained, but the moral isn't learned for what could anyone have done against an evil that can't be killed? The protagonist can't be rewarded for his behavior because this isn't a character being punished for challenging prohibitions or by not being morally correct but one caught in a much larger story, one that will be morphed and changed to be told in the complete opposite way of the “reality” of Gaiman's universe.

Part of the strength of this particular retelling is that it could be argued it reflects the nuances of personalities in the real world much more effectively than it's traditional counterparts, resonating much better with modern audiences. Rarely do we recognize evil instantly through the warts and evil laughs, but rather it is often the more innocent looking of people who reveal the darkest truths.

It isn't about the behavior of individual people and their journey through set goals like traditional folk tales, but about the very malleable nature of truth and the importance of a

reliable narrator when it comes to defining the nature of a villain and, by extension, its defeat or triumph. The Queen dies, but more than that, the truth of the story dies with her.