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English 560

Literary Criticism

Final Writing Task

Three Analyses of “Little Gold Star”: New Criticism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism

New Criticism

One of the main purposes of fairy tales is to convey a lesson, and “Little Gold Star” by Robert D. San Souci follows the pattern of most Cinderella stories, that to be a humble and subservient girl is ideal and will lead to reward in the end. The subtitle of “Little Gold Star” is “A Spanish American Cinderella Tale,” and author provides a note at the beginning that indicates that this is a translation of Spanish language versions that were inspired by European “Cinderella” tales. “Little Gold Star” is full of Catholic allusions and southwestern touches that make the tale come alive. While most Cinderella tales contain magic, this version relies on miracles of the sort endorsed by the Catholic church, making it not just social commentary, but a catechism as well. We can read this version of Cinderella as a religious parable marking out the road for religious salvation. In this reading, we concentrate on the central figures of good and evil, Teresa and the stepmother.

The central conflict in “Little Gold Star” is between Teresa and her stepmother, who guilts Tomas, Teresa’s father into marrying her by weeping when he refuses to marry her. In San Souci’s version, the stepmother remains nameless; she is simply the stepmother or “Teresa’s step mother.” The significance of her namelessness in the religious sense may be that she is the antagonist. The Oxford English dictionary tells us that “satan” comes from the Hebrew for adversary. She also kills the lamb that Tomas brings as a present for Teresa. Jesus is often referred to as “the Lamb of God,” so the stepmother symbolically kills Jesus in the story. According to Americancatholic.org, there are

six saints named Teresa, but the earliest and most prominent is the Spanish St. Theresa of Avila (Rowe). Theresa probably means “to harvest” from the Greek, and towards the end of the story, Teresa must collect birds’ tears, birds’ feathers, and rice and beans, which are provided by the Blessed Mary (the Virgin Mary). Theresa is essentially the harvester and provider as she returns the reapings of her faith back to the family.

After the stepmother kills Teresa’s lamb, she orders Teresa to wash the fleece. Symbolically, she needs to wash her sin from the fleece, but whenever she touches the clean fleece “it turned muddy” (San Souci, *Little Gold Star* 114), which shows the stepmother’s impurity and evil. As Teresa washes the fleece, a fish steals it. The fairy godmother figure in the version is the Virgin Mary, dressed in blue as artistic tradition mandates. The woman, yet unnamed, gives Teresa a task of caring for an old man and a baby. She combs the man’s beard, rocks the baby, and sweeps the hut. For her kindness and obedience, the mysterious woman returns the snow-white fleece to Teresa and blesses her, leaving a gold star on her forehead. The Virgin Mary’s anonymity is important because Teresa must do these tasks out of innate goodness, not because she has something to gain. The gold star probably represents the Star of Bethlehem that appeared on Jesus’ birth while gold is a highly valued object. Because Teresa has been blessed, her angry stepmother cannot remove it, and, in fact, it only “shined brighter” (San Souci, *Little Gold Star* 114).

As foils to Teresa’s goodness, her stepsister’s have the opportunity to do good deeds for the old man and baby. First Isabel goes to the river with the fleece to clean it only to have the fish steal it. When the Virgin Mary appears to her and asks her to care for the old man and the baby, Isabel spansks the baby, pulls the old man’s beard, and spills the stew. This moment of dramatic irony (because the reader knows the man is St. Joseph and the baby, the Holy Child, Jesus) shows the reader Isabel’s true nature, and the Blessed Mary gives Isabel a penance. Isabel grows horns, a

feature usually associated with Satan. Isabel's mother tries to remove the horns, but her evil touch only exacerbates the situation, and the horns grow bigger. The now clean fleece become "dirtier than ever when the stepmother touched it" (San Souci, *Little Gold Star* 115), indicating that her evil influence has increased. Next Inez fails the tasks the Holy Mother gives her, and as penance the Holy Mother makes donkey ears sprout from her head. And again, her mother's efforts to remove the ears only result in their growing longer and shaggier.

The night of the fiesta, the stepmother and stepsisters leave Teresa at home, much like the European story; unlike it, however, her magical guide (the Virgin Mary) does not appear to improve her wardrobe and provide her with transportation. Still, the aura of the gold star makes her appear attractive to Don Miguel, a local aristocrat; he is drawn to the symbol of her saintliness. There are no magic slippers in this version of the tale, but Miguel seeks her out using the memory of the gold star. A magical cat reveals itself as Teresa's helper, telling Miguel that *Little Gold Star* is in the house. The cat also strips the stepsisters of their mantillas, revealing their horns and ears. He proposes to Teresa, but always respectful and obedient, she defers to her stepmother who assigns her three impossible tasks. By miracle, instead of magic (for magic would not be Christian), the Blessed Mary appears and helps Teresa fulfill them.

Teresa lives a long blessed life with her husband Miguel as a result of her stepmother witnesses the miracles. The gold star remains as reminder that she was anointed by the Virgin Mary. In her goodness, Teresa changes her stepmother and stepsisters, who grow kinder. The physical manifestations of their sin decrease in size inversely proportional to their growing kindness. This highly religious parable sends the message that God will reward the penitent, obedient person and punish those that are avaricious, vain, and prideful.

Feminism

“Cinderella” is a fairy tale that girls have found romantic and modelled their make-believe lives. The moniker “Cinderella Story” has found its way into American jargon of sports as a team that overachieves against stiff odds. In both senses, we celebrate hard work and humble character like the title character of the fairy tale who submits to all sorts of abuses from her step-family. The southwestern Catholic-influenced version, “Little Gold Star, A Spanish American Cinderella Tale,” is a highly moralistic tale that touts the virtues of the penitent and martyrdom. The Cinderella character suffers abuses from her stepmother and stepsister, but remains earnest in her Christian faith and kindness. In reality, this is a dangerous message to send to girls—to be selfless and meek—because it teaches them the false value of passivity. While this character might benefit the dominant patriarchy, which includes the Catholic Church, it teaches girls to accept abuses and allow others to control their fate. The stepmother, the proactive woman, who takes control of her life is portrayed as evil.

The stepmother, who is not named, is a widow with two children. In an assertive move, she proposes to Tomas, a widower and father of Teresa, the Cinderella figure. The doubtful Tomas at first dissents, but gives in to the woman’s tears. If a fairy tale is a model for acceptable manners, the description “haughty” indicates that she is a figure not to be emulated by little girls. After all, pride is a deadly sin according to the Catholic church. The stepmother is such a nag that she drives poor, harried Tomas to the far hills with his herd of sheep. The message is that a strong, powerful woman will drive away a good man. Clearly, he is good because his daughter is dutiful, taking over the role of woman of the house upon the death of her mother, whereas the stepdaughters are vain—another deadly sin—reflective of their haughty mother.

The negative characterization of the stepmother does not stop at simple sinning—a characteristic all humans have. Tomas, the generous yet beleaguered husband, brings home gifts for the family. He gives his wife and stepdaughters flowers and oranges, but gives Teresa a lamb. She slaughters the lamb that Tomas brought his daughter. In Christianity, the lamb represents Jesus and his sacrifice. A line from the Catholic liturgy, the *Agnus Dei*, is “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.” The stepmother symbolically slaughters Jesus. When she touches the fleece cleansed by the Virgin Mary, it is immediately sullied. When the Virgin Mary blesses Teresa, she leaves a gold star on her forehead. When the stepmother attempts rub the sign of God of her forehead, it grows brighter. If Teresa is blessed, surely the stepmother is a curse. If she were good, these sacred objects would not react opposite to her will. Even her offspring are evil.

Both sisters, Ines and Isabel, attempt to clean the sacred fleece. Unlike the selfless Teresa, who nurses St. Joseph and the Holy Infant, the stepsisters are mean, disrespectful, and messy. The Blessed Virgin gives Isabel horns and Ines donkey ears. The text doesn’t indicate what type of horns, sheep, goat, or cow, but they are nevertheless a penance for their sins. When their mother tries to ride her daughters of their animal growths, they only grow larger, indicating that evil begets evil. The stepsisters do not accept their penance with humility; instead, they harass Teresa even more. Their poor behavior is indulged by their mother. Even when Don Miguel seeks Teresa’s hand in marriage, the stepmother cruelly gives her three impossible tasks. It is only through divine intervention, a *deus ex machine*, that Teresa completes them. In the end, the selfless Teresa forgives her step-family. Her good nature rubs off on them. The stepsisters lose their devilish appendages, and the stepmother became kinder.

We need to question the characterization of this fairy tale, given its origins in the male-dominated hierarchy of published European folk tales on which it is based. In addition, Catholic

allusions and images dominate the text. The Catholic church is another organization that has devalued women. Although the Church has made some progress recently, women still cannot be priests. Succumbing to the tendency of Western hegemony that only sees the world in binary opposites, the church sees sinners or saints, virgins or prostitutes. The two famous Marys of the New Testament are the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. One was a virgin, the other a prostitute. It wasn't until 1969 that the Catholic Church righted this misconception—two millennia (Gier). So, is this fairy tale, heavily laden with Catholic imagery, a vision of the family from the point of view of the dominant male patriarchy? Could the stepmother have slaughtered the lamb because the family needed food? The author of the story is a white male (San Souci, A Brief Note About Myself). According to the Author's Note at the beginning of the story he developed this version of "Little Gold Star" from previously translated versions, including a 1937 and a 1953 collection, as well older texts in Spanish, a European language from a country dominated by patriarchy. While correlation is not causation, it is important to question the influence of these white male hegemonies.

Postcolonialism

“Cinderella” is a fairy tale conceived as an oral tale of common folks, appropriated by the bourgeoisie after the advent of the moveable type printing press, and spread through colonialism across the rest of the world. “Little Gold Star, A Spanish American Cinderella Tale” by Robert D. San Souci has its roots in New Mexico and the desert southwest of the United States. Previously, most of this territory belonged to Mexico. The United States annexed the area as a result of the Mexican-American War which spanned 1846–1848. Before the Spanish conquered much of South American, Central American, and Mexico, the land was inhabited by indigenous tribes. This version of “Cinderella,” has layers of oppression. It can be read as a religious parable as Catholic imagery runs throughout the story. Spanish Catholics oppressed the native tribes, forcing Western culture and religion on them. Then, Americans invaded, taking Spanish language away, separating families with a border created by American surveyors in the 1853 Gadsen Purchase Treaty.

Contrary to European tellings of “Cinderella,” the main character of “Little Gold Star,” Teresa, is from a family of very modest means; her father, Tomas, is a sheep herder. They are Roman Catholics, but they could also be of indigenous background as well, as many Spanish-speaking in the Southwest are. Teresa’s stepfamily comes from similar means. Only the prince role, Don Miguel, who is from the local wealthy family, is of a gentrified class. While the “Little Gold Star” tale does not portray as many class layers as the original, we could also look at the Cinderella family composition as representative of the conquerer and the conquered people paradigm. We can look at Teresa and her nuclear family as a native population; then, the stepmother’s family is the intruding culture. Don Miguel represents the ruling home government, what the colonial governors aspire to return to when their stint in the colonies is complete.

The stepmother commandeers Tomas's family. Tomas at first declines the future stepmother's proposal, but she manipulates him with tears. Beaten down, without alternatives, he complies quietly and marries her. He keeps to himself as a good colonized subject should. Despite the fact that the stepfamily mistreats Teresa, he does not defend her. He slips away into the hills with his herd of sheep. When he expresses his preference for his daughter with a gift of a lamb, his generosity is met with violence. The stepmother slaughters the lamb. The stepfamily treats Cinderella as a subhuman servant. "She had no choice but to obey" is powerful language describing a master-slave relationship. The stepfamily casts out Teresa as an Other to justify their abusive treatment of her.

The tension in this postcolonial reading of "Little Gold Star" stems from the apparent benign assistance from the fairy godmother figure, the Virgin Mary, and the message that this *deus ex machine* sends to the reader. The message is that compliance and passivity will be rewarded. In its missionary colonization of the Southwest, the Roman Catholic Church imposed its hegemony upon indigenous tribes. The Church teaches compliance and obedience with salvation in the afterlife as a way of controlling its followers. Such teachings create acceptance of oppressive conditions as Teresa accepts abusive treatment from her stepmother and stepsisters. It is a similar lesson as European Cinderella sends. Be sweet, selfless, and invisible and your prince will come to sweep you off your feet.

The last third of this Cinderella story involves a fiesta (the ball), Don Miguel, and a happily ever after. Don Miguel, the rich local man, holds a dance on evening of the feast day of the town's patron saint. Clearly he accepts the dominant paradigm the Catholic Church has created. The gentry and the Church generally had a symbiotic relationship. The wealthy landowners gave money to the church, convents, and monasteries, while the Church preached a hegemony that demanded

obedience from the poor to the Church and the gentry. Miguel, Spanish for Michael, named for the Archangel Michael, who defeats Satan in Revelations 12:7–9. St. Michael has the task of rescuing souls from evil (Holweck), which is exactly what Miguel does for Teresa—save her from her evil step-family.

Teresa, blessed by the Virgin Mary, has a gold star on her forehead—a mark that is the physical approbation of the Church’s delight in her submissiveness. Miguel only sees the gold star, not her shabby clothes. When Miguel finally finds Teresa after her removal from the dance by her step-family, he proposes to her. Ever obedient, Teresa says she must get permission from her stepmother, who gives her three impossible tasks. Being blessed as she is, divine intervention saves the day. The Virgin Mary appears to tell her that if she only touches her gold star, “the birds of heaven” (San Souci, Little Gold Star) will help. And so they do. The goodness of Miguel and Teresa even corrects the sins of the step-family.

The message in this story is that you bend to the will of your higher power, worldly or heavenly, you will be rewarded with salvation. There are two modes of colonial oppression at work in “Little Gold Star”: the missionary oppression of the Catholic Church and metaphorical colonial takeover of Teresa’s family. In either case, what is valued in this hegemony is someone who blindly follows rules and doesn’t question authority. From his own example of non-violent resistance, Mohatma Gandhi showed the world that it is possible to push back colonial oppression without compromising goodness. In my opinion, this is a much better model than waiting for gold stars.

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