

12-1-2013

Under the Queen's Throne: Analysis of *The Lily of Life*

Seung Yeon Lana Lee
Marquette University

A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

Lana Lee

English 4710

Primary Research Paper

10/15/2013

Underneath the Queen's Throne

Albert Einstein once said, "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairytales." It is fair to say that fairy tales are more than stories that parents read to their kids before bedtime; there are deeper meanings to these stories than an objectified happy ending that everyone can predict. One can find long-lost artifacts in an attic that hold deep meanings and memories for the previous owners. Beneath the roots of the fanciness of the settings and dramatized words, fairy tales also have hidden meanings and values that are very significant. Marie, the Queen who was the consort of Ferdinand I, King of Romania, wrote [*The Lily of Life*](#), published in 1913. [*The Lily of Life*](#) is a perfect example of a long-lost artifact; it is not a very well-known fairy tale, but there are hidden messages that the Queen wanted to convey to the readers. Through this heartbreaking love story, the Queen emphasizes the romantic fantasy of being in love, terrifying fear of death, and radically reversed gender roles; these specifically explain the naïve, romantic, and rather idealistic side of the Queen that has been hiding underneath the formal sovereignty.

Fairy tales are known to fulfill many children's fantasies. Many of these fantasies evolve from various fairy tales that suggest colorful and vivid imagination for the children. For instance, the fairy godmother from *Cinderella* gives younger kids a sense of hope; it creates a fantasy that someone will come save them from such devastating situations. In

[*The Lily of Life*](#), the Queen's fantasy can be detected from many different areas, starting from the word choices; she chooses the words that tend to be more romantic and tender. For example, the story starts with, "In a beautiful castle by the sea, a castle all of golden tiles, so worked that it looked as if it were made of solid, beaten gold—a gold which had taken the wonderful tint of autumn leaves—there lived a king and queen—a happy king and queen" (4). She uses words such as "beautiful," "gold," "wonderful," and "happy"; these are all in the same register of words that evokes pleasure from the readers. The word choices by the Queen are the fundamental foundation for the rest of the fantasy she expresses throughout the story. It leads to describing the inseparable relationships, longing for love, and courageous, yet sorrowful, sacrifice.

Specifically, the fantasy of love has two parts in this fairy tale: love between the sisters and love between the sisters and the prince. First, the twin sisters, Mora and Corona, are described as entwined beings that have a magical relationship as sisters. In reality, this relationship is rather hard to achieve; the reason that this relationship is classified as fantasy is that whoever has siblings all wish for this perfect bond. The Queen writes, "Then they would feel how they loved each other, and they would tighten the grasp of their hands, for fear of any shadow coming between them" (5). Again, the carefully chosen words by the Queen elaborate on the wishful desperation of this perfect sisterhood. Seth Lerer, the author of *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*, writes in the chapter "Straw into Gold": "We lived with the fairy tale to make these frightening, unhappy lives as magic. We tried to imagine ourselves as a family of princes" (210). Lerer specifically touches on the subject of how fairy tales work as a medium to replace one's disagreement in life with fantasies. This perfect bond between Mora and Corona is an illusion of the

Queen's that she explicitly describes with words that are romantic and disguise unhappiness.

The darkness settles in as Mora and Corona meet Ilario, a handsome prince that takes both of the sisters' hearts. This is the first challenge the twins face; both of them are infatuated with Ilario and ultimately question how strong their relationship is. The Queen describes the pain that Corona goes through briefly, yet strongly. Instead of long and sad descriptions of how Corona felt, the Queen gets to the point, making it more heartbreaking for the readers to feel her resilient pain; the shortness of the description implies the fact that Corona had to hide her feelings and congratulate Mora and Ilario on the new chapters of their lives together. The Queen describes Corona's pain as, "... Corona arose from her bed, which was close to her sister's, and, going to the window, sat down beside it, and looked far out over the moonlit sea" (6). In this short description, it has a doleful tone that guides the readers into Corona's lugubrious night beside her festive sister, Mora. This is not exactly a love fantasy that people daydream about. However, it is a fantasy of how people, especially females, would like to mend their broken hearts. The Queen was rather realistic in this description of fantasy, because it cannot always be a happy ending for everyone. Sometimes bad things happen, but it is important to take those into account and brush them off; at times, it takes a long night of thinking to finally come to peace with certain situations. The Queen captured the sadness but also the willful mindset of Corona very well. The descriptions were not lengthy, which leaves the readers with waves of unfortunate and empathetic feelings for Corona.

Everything seems to go well for the sisters and Ilario, but then another tragedy faces them: Ilario's illness. Right before the wedding, the prince becomes violently ill, which

tramples the joy and happiness. This is where Puritanism is indirectly portrayed; the fear of after death and death itself can be seen amongst the characters in [The Lily of Life](#). The Puritans valued family and authority very highly. Even in their children's books, they exposed to kids the brutality of consequences following from disobeying the adults. They were very strict with kids and rules. The children learned that for their misbehaviors, they would be punished even after death. Although this indirectly affects the characters in [The Lily of Life](#), one can assume that death is what triggered Corona to go out on an adventure by herself to the woods to find the cure for the prince. That explains the passionate love Corona has for Ilario, but also the fear of punishment seems to overwhelm her sense of judgment. According to Puritanism, if the rules are followed and the elders are treated with respect, then the lives will have happy endings. To the twin sisters and the prince, they did not have any problems while growing up, and that is why they were able to continue with their comfortable and peaceful lives. Even though they had happy lives, death is a topic that they have yet to discover. The fear of death and what happens after death, just like Puritanism, is hiding underneath the courageous acts of Corona.

This is apparent in other characters as well; everyone is worried sick about the dying prince, and the Queen's description of the worried royal family is extraordinarily fearful. The Queen describes, "One day a gipsy came to the castle and begged leave to enter. At first they would not give her admittance, but the Queen, who was looking from the tower window, saw her, and had her led up the great staircase to her own chamber" (30). This explains the urgency of these characters; not many have the grace from the Queen (character) to allow them in her own bedroom. The Queen (author) wants to emphasize the seriousness of death and its consequences. Nowadays, death is portrayed as somewhat of a

lighter subject—there are deaths in the movies, video games, books, and even in children’s literature. There are countless instances of people dying in video games, and kids kill innocent victims without any remorse, but with pride and rewards. To Puritan children, books were necessary life guidelines; “The Puritans were always making up receipts and recipes from the account books of their moral lives to their textbooks for good behavior...”(Lerer 102). These books are so essential to shaping kids’ lives that they grow up to fear death as not losing someone significant in their lives, but as a punishment. To look at it one way, the Queen describes this royal family as perfect, but the death of Ilario would bring sadness, devastation, and troublesome times for the princesses, which would clearly impact the family as a whole, not to mention the unsolved mystery of where Ilario would be after he dies. This reflects on herself more than anything; she shows how she is scared to lose her family, her throne, and happiness. As the story progresses, the Queen has a chance to reflect upon her own life and think about the possible punishments and consequences.

Lastly, [*The Lily of Life*](#) contains radical ideas, specifically about gender roles. Usually, the heroes of fairy tales are male characters. Their masculinity is challenged by obstacles that they face in these fictional stories, but always at the end they return home safely to their loved ones. The Queen does recognize the masculinity in Ilario in the beginning when he competes against other brave young men. Ilario is described as “He was braver than them all, stronger than them all; none could keep pace with him, none could overcome him” (9). Ilario is a brave but stereotypical character that many fictional stories tend to have. Even Mora and Corona are symbols of femininity because the Queen describes them as two flawless, beautiful girls; they both have gorgeous eyes, silky hair, and perfect skin that

express femininity, at least back in the nineteenth century. Mora and Corona would perform womanly behaviors, such as sitting quietly, enjoying each other's company by telling stories, and working on embroidery. Up until now, it seems like the conventional gender roles that everyone expects from both sides. However, once Ilario gets sick, it is Corona who decides to go out into the wild, by herself and without any hesitation. The gender roles here are completely swapped; it is always the male characters with physical talent and courage who go and successfully achieve the missions given to them and prove their manhood. Without any doubt, they are the heroes of the story, who end up marrying the female characters after they return from the quests. However, [*The Lily of Life*](#) takes a different approach that reveals the Queen's underlying and hidden intention; the fantasy of love and fear of death sum up to this courageous act. First, Corona's love for Ilario, as well as the Queen's fantasy of this passionate affection, leads the footsteps into the dark and dangerous forest and into a strange old woman's house to find a cure. In the fantasyland, anything is possible and everything can come true. Secondly, the terrifying fear of death overwhelms not only Corona but also the Queen, which leads them to act upon it and go against the social norms of gender roles and disguise themselves in masculinity to block the upcoming tragedy of death. When Corona tries to leave for the forest, Corona's page, Yno, wants to come with her to protect his lady. However, Corona insists on going alone. Her reason is, "I must go alone; make not my task more hard! I am weary, and the heart within me weighs me to the ground" (Queen 30). She feels the responsibility of saving Ilario's life due to not only the love she has for him, but this also suggests the masculine side of her. Yes, she is not a man, but the Queen conveys the message that it is not just men that have this courage but women have it as well. To elaborate further, the queen seems like she has

the power, because she sits beside the King, ruling under his reign. However, she is still powerless and voiceless compared to her husband. This is a way for her to incorporate her voice into Corona and take the underlying meanings out in the open radically.

All three of these themes that are found important in [*The Lily of Life*](#) guide the readers to think about the culture back in the nineteenth century. First, love seems to be a more conservative topic. Now people throw the word around for anything and everything, but back then love was more of a sacred interconnection between two people. The whole process and descriptions of Ilario and Mora's relationship let the readers know that the family was especially important to the man and woman's relationship. It seems significant for the families to approve the bond and once they have established this, no one is an outcast; they are part of one big dynasty.

Secondly, the fear of death and Puritanism explain the culture in the nineteenth century. Fear of death is still apparent in today's society, but it is not viewed the same. Just like the idea of love, death is taken lightly and it almost lost the value of word itself, "death." In nineteenth century, children were taught that death is a punishment for misbehaviors. It helped them to obey their parents and other authorities and do good things in life that would lead to other people's goodness and happiness. That is what Puritanism taught, and that is what Corona practiced in [*The Lily of Life*](#). Corona's courageous act led her to death but also to the "sweetest moment of her life" (122). At last, Corona's tragic love for Ilario has been recognized. The ending of the story— "Then the wise woman returned slowly to her boat, to await the day when her soul also would be home upwards, washed of its sin—redeemed by the help she had brought unto others" (124) —exactly supports the sacrifice

that she made for her love, but the goodness was recognized and now she is in the hands of God, where she is safe, at last.

The gender roles between men and women are still controversial in today's society. Feminists continuously fight for their rights and try to get rid of stereotypes. There are multitudes of women still getting unequal treatments and abuse. Rape, battery, and such crimes against women are still prevalent throughout today's society and have been since before the nineteenth century's society. Queen Marie was underneath the protection of the throne, but still she, through Corona and a fairy tale, taught younger generation that they could change for the better. It is hard, she recognizes that, but it takes sacrifices to enhance unhappy lives. Ultimately, there are no absolute gender roles; masculinity and femininity are only objectified words that hide the true colors of individuals.

[*The Lily of Life*](#) contains honest opinions from the author. She disguises herself as Corona and speaks to the readers about her fantasies, fear, and feminism. This is a fairy tale with a tragic ending that brings tears to children's eyes; the Queen hopes that the tears mean something more than just sadness. Underneath the fancy dress, hair, and make-up, the Queen has her sufferings, dreams, and needs that are portrayed in these beautifully crafted words. She chose the words that would successfully hide the messages, but these lessons are also peeking out from the corner, waving to be noticed. As the readers go through the adventures with Corona with her broken heart, they can also make conclusions about the nineteenth century which help them to understand the fairy tale better. [*The Lily of Life*](#) concludes with a melancholic ending that leads the readers to reflect on their lives.

Work Cited

Lerer, Seth. *Children's Literature: A reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.

Queen, Marie. *The Lily of Life*. New York, London: Hodder and Stoughton,

1913. Web. <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/marie/lily/lily.html>>