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SYMBOLISM OF THE SNAKE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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SUBJECT:

ABSTRACT

In Giovan Francesco Straparola's telling of "Biancabella and the Snake" and the 'snake' has a rather important role in the story.

It is interesting to note that the snake has an important role in many culture's legends and fairy tales, but also in religious matters in the West, as well as in the East. Not only is the creature itself described in detail in these stories and ceremonies, but so are its characteristics, such as the coiled body, the association with trees as in the Genesis story, the servant of Satan in the story of Adam and Eve. Snakes appear in a number of different religions, taking on the roles of good and evil depending on the circumstance. In Judeo-Christian writings, the serpent has a famous role in the Garden of Eden. It is used as an instrument of Satan, sent to tempt Eve and encourage her to disobey God. The serpent reappears in the Bible in the Book of Numbers, this time on a more positive note. God has Moses create a statue of a snake and erect it atop a pole. Those bitten by a venomous snake would be healed upon looking at the statue. Due to its dynamic characteristics, the snake plays an important role in almost every fairy tale.

The snake is also an important symbol of transformation in fairytale and elsewhere. Its image conjures up images of sexuality, fertility, and also spiritual transformation. One sentence in particular stands out and that is when the snake tells Biancabella "If you will obey my commands, I'll make you happy, but if, on the other hand, you disobey me, you'll be the most unhappy and dissatisfied maiden the world has ever seen." Whether raising itself in masculine authority or encircling the Earth in a motherly fashion the snake symbol is highly regarded; utilized in ritual to invoke an element of pointed focus and weighty influence. This statement signifies a lot, especially later on in the story. When she disobeys the snake's wishes she ends up having her arms chopped off and eyeballs gouged out. She is left in immense pain till someone finds her. She tries to repeatedly call out to her sister but gets no response. Her pain and suffering at this point hints the fact that she should have listened to the snake's instructions and what it was trying to get Biancabella to focus on. One of the reasons why I feel this statement has been said was so that the reader/listener would be subtly told that listening to what others tell them (especially family i.e. sister) to do is supremely important. I guess that's what the true moral of this particular story is that listening to family is imperative.

There is a time in the story when the snake helps restore Biancabella's body. "Samaritana, when she heard her sister's woes set forth in this pitiful story, and witnessed the cruel wrongs that had been done her, spoke some comforting words, and then, having gathered divers medicinal herbs of wonderful power and virtue, she spread these over the places where Biancabella's eyes had been. Then she brought to her sister two hands, and having

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joined these on to the wounded wrists, at once made them whole and sound again. And when she had wrought this marvellous feat Samaritana threw off from herself the scaly skin of the serpent, and stood revealed as a maiden of lovely aspect." The ancient Celts were extremely nature-wise too, and approached snake symbolism from the behavior and life cycle of this magnificent creature. From the Celtic perspective, the snake was a symbol of secret knowledge, cunning and transformation. In the keen Celtic mind, snake symbolic meaning of transformation came from the shedding of its skin. Physical evidence of leaving its form behind (casting off the old self), and emerging a sleeker, newer version made the snake a powerful symbol of rebirth and renewal.

As a Native American Indian symbol (depending on the nation/tribe) the snake can be a masculine symbol, associated with the phallus of lightning which is considered a medicine staff of tremendous assertive power. Other tribes lean in the direction of feminine attribution for the snake and pair it with mothering (creation), and lunar (moon) symbolism.

"...when the old man with anxious hasty steps returned to the wood, where he found Biancabella sitting beside a maiden well nymph as lovely as herself. And he gazed steadily into her beauteous face, standing the while like to a man struck with wonder, and could scarcely believe it was Biancabella he looked upon." In Eastern Indian myth the Sanskrit word for snake associated with the element of water. Picking up water's symbolism of emotion, love and motion, snakes in this light are considered a feminine aspect and embody nurturing, benevolent, wise qualities. This is very similar to how Biancabella's feminine qualities are portrayed in the story.

"And when she had wrought this marvellous feat Samaritana threw off from herself the scaly skin of the serpent, and stood revealed as a maiden of lovely aspect." The serpent sheds its skin to be born again, as the moon its shadow to be born again. That's an image of life. Life sheds one generation after another, to be born again. The serpent represents immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again. There is something tremendously terrifying about life when you look at it that way. And so the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and the terror of life.

"Then, to prove the truth of her words, Samaritana gave the word to the three daughters of the old man that they should forthwith, in the presence of the king, begin to comb Biancabella's fair and wavy hair, and scarcely had they begun when (as has been told before) there fell out of her tresses many very precious and exquisite jewels, and from her hands came forth roses exhaling the sweet scents of morning, and all manner of odoriferous flowers." In Hinduism, the god Shiva is thought to be the most powerful of all the gods. He has many different attributes, all of which have special meaning, but the most impressive is the snake around his neck. It is known as nāga, which is the Hindi word for cobra. He is depicted in many different ways, but most often the nāga has three coils, which represent the past, present, and future. Some say the nāga displays Shiva's power of destruction and recreation, while others think it denotes wisdom and eternity. The snake's wisdom come light to when Biancabella is revealed to the king.

Comparing other stories, Jean De Mailly wrote "Blanche Belle" which follows the storyline of Giovan Francesco Straparola's "Biancabella and the Snake" however instead of a snake

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there is a 'sylph' which impregnates the protagonist. The sylph follows similar characteristics of the snake.

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