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The Secret in the Script – an Analysis on *The Secret in the Wings*

INTRODUCTION

The Secret in the Wings is a one-act play written by Mary Zimmerman. Zimmerman has won many awards including the 2002 Tony Award for her direction of *Metamorphoses* (“Artists Archives”). The original production of the play was directed by Zimmerman herself at the Lookingglass Theatre Company at Chicago Filmmakers in Chicago, Illinois in 1991 (Zimmerman xv).

In the play *The Secret in the Wings*, Mary Zimmerman compiles seven fairy tales into a one-act theatrical extravaganza. The concept of found texts is defined by Paul C. Castagno as “existing works that can be used or appropriated as source materials for new works” (9). In this sense, *The Secret in the Wings* is a play that relies heavily on found texts. Zimmerman stays fairly faithful to the original tales and makes only minor changes to the stories. However, the fairy tales are not presented in a linear order, instead, the play is structured in such a way that, as Zimmerman herself puts it, “the first half of each story is interrupted by the first half of the next story and so on until we reach the central story, which is told without interruption. After that, the second half of each story unfolds in the reverse of the original order” (xi). The only exception to that order is the fairy tale “Stolen Pennies,” which is divided into three segments and scattered in between other fairy tales. Furthermore, Zimmerman uses the story “Left in the Forest,” which is

an altered version of the fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast,” as the framework of the play which glues all the tales together.

This paper will attempt to conduct a thorough and systematic analysis on the play covering, in details, areas of visceral impression, as well as the six Aristotelian elements: plot, character, idea, language, music, and spectacle.

VISCERAL IMPRESSION

Contemplating visceral impressions is a crucial step in developing a holistic understanding of a play; it helps in gaining an outlook from the individual reader’s unique personal background and perspective (Fliotsos 4). At first glance, *The Secret in the Wings* seems to be non-linear in structure and extremely difficult to analyze using traditional methods due to the unique structure and multiplicity of stories. It feels more like a designers’ play rather than a conventional work of dramatic literature. As a matter of fact, Zimmerman imprints a great deal of stage directions and an abundance of design notes into the script itself. The world of the play is a pseudo-reality inside a boy’s dream, in which the events do not necessarily need to adhere to logical or physical rules. Consequently, a lot of the rules set by dramatic theorists such as Aristotle and Stanislavski do not necessarily apply.

The style of *The Secret in the Wings* makes it even more important to start the analysis with intuitive, visceral responses in order to grasp the overall feeling of the play. This section will present the initial imagery and auditory impressions.

Intuitive Image. *The Secret in the Wings* is a play that calls for a great amount of imagination. The short stories all take place in very different locales, and the transitions between them are not realistic, but magical. The dream world is surrealistic. The stories have different sets of characters, however, they are played by the same cast of actors. Despite the vast variety of

locales and characters, this play triggers a unified image in my brain throughout the first reading. I see a dark but colorful world, with fixed spot lights shining at random places. It is familiar, and yet unknown. As a result, it sparks a sense of fear which is felt throughout the play. The space is boundaryless, expanding to infinity in all dimensions like the imagination of an innocent child. Figure 1 in Appendix A provides a good illustration of what this world looks like. The image of the limitless universe in which we all live induces a great sense of loneliness. It is so close to us and yet so far away. The fear of the darkness and of the unknown can be felt intensely in this image.

Intuitive Sound. The sound of the music box is the first that comes to mind when reading the play. It is naive, childish, and dreamlike. It is both a toy and a musical instrument. The music box makes its unique sound by setting thin metal strips in vibration, thus creating a purer timbre in which there is little harmonic content. This is opposite of more sophisticated instruments such as the piano which is so rich in harmonics and has a fuller sound. This very simplicity in the sound quality of the music box spawns a sense of boundarylessness that goes hand in hand with the visceral image. The music played on the music box is in a minor key. The notes are disjunct, making the melody fragmented, just like the fairy tales in the play. Due to the common imperfections in the mechanical constructions of the music box, two important characteristics of the sound of the music box are its unsteady tempo and its slightly detuned pitch, both making it sound distorted and at times even eerie. All these qualities of the music box contribute to the surrealism in the play.

Alongside the music box, I can hear children's laughter, and gushes of wind whistling in and out of the soundscape, both of which build up the emotion of fear. All sounds are heard with

a great amount of unnatural reverb as if they come from a strange acoustic environment that is not of this earth.

ELEMENTS

Traditional Aristotelian theory states that a play depends on six fundamental elements: plot, character, language, idea, spectacle and sound, and it argues that, of all six, plot is of utmost importance to a play (Aristotle 10). While plot is indeed essential in *The Secret in the Wings*, especially considering the unique plot structure of the play, elements such as character and music play equally, if not more, essential parts due to the surrealist nature of the play. This section will discuss all of the elements with emphasis on plot, character, and music.

The World of the Play. The play takes the audience on a voyage to vastly diverse locales in various time periods with different sets of characters. However, in reality, everything merely exists in a little boy's dream, and happens in the boy's head. Because of this very nature of the play, the locale and the time period in which any of the fairy tales happens is of little importance to the play. It is reasonable to believe that an actual production may set the play or the fairy tales in the play in any locale and during any time period, without significantly compromising the idea and the effect of the play.

Before the start of the play, an important background story is that the little boy, Tony, falls asleep wearing his father's old glasses after reading a book. This is revealed at the end of the play, however, it happens before the start of the play in chronological order. The direct cause of the dream may seem to be the book Tony has been reading before falling asleep, but it can be inferred that the deeper cause for the dream or nightmare is Tony's fear of not being loved by his parents.

Character. In order to conduct an effective action analysis, the play in question must have a single protagonist pursuing an objective with a through-line of action (Fliotsos 70). However, each fairy tale in the play has its own set of characters and events. Therefore, the protagonist of the play in its entirety has to be the center character in the framing story who appears throughout the play and whose decisions and actions drive the overarching plot forward. This narrows down the choices for the protagonist to Ogre (Fitzpatrick), who fits all the above descriptions and initiates all major events in the play. Although Heidi is likewise a very important character in the framing story, she does not initiate the actions and merely reacts to Ogre's actions and generates the conflict of the play, making her the antagonist. In addition, it is revealed at the end of the play that the whole play has been a dream of a boy named Tony. Tony, after waking from his dream, explains that in his dream, he becomes the Ogre, thus making it more understandable that Ogre is the real protagonist of the play. It is also plausible that Tony is the true protagonist of the play, but it does not make much of a difference in terms of the theme of the play, and is thus not further discussed.

Castagno's new playwriting theory is also reflected in the construction of the characters of the play. For example, interruption is defined as "used to break continuity, impede the easy access of form and content. A character changes into another character, interrupting the previous character's 'through line'" (Castagno 10). At the end of the scene "Allerleira: Part One," Zimmerman writes in the stage direction, "HEIDI places the book and sweater on a chair. MR. FITZPATRICK comes up from the trap. He is not wearing his tail. He goes to the chair, puts on the sweater and a pair of glasses. He sits and opens the book. He is now FATHER OF SEVEN SONS" (42). Here, the character Ogre (Mr. Fitzpatrick) becomes Father and the scene shifts abruptly.

In general, the characters in *The Secret in the Wings* are constructed theatrically rather than psychologically. All the characters in the play are based on characters in the original fairy tales, in other words, they are drawn from “a number of source materials, not simply imitations of life” (Castagno 60). Most of the characters do not have a name. They are denoted simply by their role, for example, First Prince, Second Prince, and Third Prince. A single actor plays one character in one fairy tale, and suddenly another character in the next fairy tale or even within the same fairy tale. This fulfills another one of Castagno’s twelve tenets of theatrical characters which states, “characters transform, change, fragment, or deconstruct” (61). In addition, Ogre is apparently nonhuman, which also fits in Castagno’s description of the theatrical character.

Plot. The structure is a very important and distinctive element of *The Secret in the Wings*.

Zimmerman keeps the fairy tales pretty much in their original forms and brilliantly constructs the play in its unique structure to increase the appeal and complexity of the play. However, as a result of that, the fairy tales are not written with causal plots. In other words, one event in a fairy tale does not necessarily trigger the next as it would in a traditional dramatic plot. Furthermore, in the context of the whole play, all fairy tales appear to be parallel and do not interact or affect one another. In other words, the order in which they are told does not affect the progression of the plot. Moreover, the number of fairy tales used in the play does not affect the overall plot either. Ogre can read to Heidi from his book six fairy tales, and he may as well read only two, as long as the action of telling the fairy tales changes Heidi’s mind and wins her love. With that in mind, it would be redundant to list the segments of the fairy tales as external events of the play in the order they are presented. Additionally, as James Thomas suggests, the list of external events should only include “the most important events in their original order” (4). Thus, it is reasonable to treat the entirety of all the fairy tales as one meta-event – Ogre reads fairy tales to Heidi.

Acceptance of this precondition makes the plot of the play linear, and is crucial to further analysis.

Figure 2 in Appendix A is a concept map developed by the student group in class. The graphical representation of the shape of the play serves as a good starting point for further analysis of the play. The green line represents the framing story “Left in the Forest.” It starts off shaky and wavy indicating the play begins in an emotionally heightened state. Although it is not revealed to the reader until the very end of the play that the whole play happens in a boy’s dream, the dreamlike reality and the distortion of time and space are felt right from the very beginning. As it progresses, the red curves representing the other fairy tales join in to elevate the tension and emotion. The blue dots represent the fairy tale “Stolen Pennies,” and are scattered in between other tales. The dots also appear to be decorative gems adding variety and interest to the overall appearance of the concept map. The whole concept map resembles a fan, which coincides with Zimmerman’s description of the structure of the play.

The form and the content work exceptionally well together in this play. The unique fan-like structure does not only make the play more interesting, more importantly, it greatly increases the sense of fragmentation in time and space, which is essential in constructing a dream world. It adds strengths to the resolution of the play when it is made explicit to the reader that the whole play has been a dream.

The play begins with Mother and Father going out for dinner and leaving Heidi alone with Ogre, revealing to the audience that the parents love themselves more than they love their child. This is listed in Appendix B as the first external event in the play which serves as the inciting incident of the plot. Note that this event does not make the event immediately following it, Ogre proposing to Heidi, absolutely inevitable, but it is acceptable considering the fact that the

play is inside a boy's dream. Although it is revealed at the end of the play that the real triggering event of the whole play is Tony's falling asleep after reading his father's book, the actions of reading the book and falling asleep do not take place on stage. As a result, they are excluded from the list of external events because "the inciting incident must occur within the plot itself, not before the play starts" (Fliotics 46). The list does not include the incident of the rose stolen from Ogre's garden because it is not significant in the plot of this play even though it is important in the original fairy tale.

Next, Ogre asks Heidi to marry him, expressing his love for Heidi. This is the second external event in the plot. Ogre's marriage proposal to Heidi is identified as the rising action of the plot, because this action increases the tension and introduces new complications. Now that Ogre has asked the question, Heidi has to give him an answer. The plot is pushed forward.

The crisis of the play is identified as when Heidi refuses to marry Ogre, commenting on his appalling appearance as a monster. At this point, Ogre realizes that Heidi does not love him simply because he is ugly. Now he is at the point of no return. He has to prove to Heidi that he is lovable despite his looks. In trying to change Heidi's mind and win her heart, Ogre subsequently starts to read fairy tales about love from his book; this is the fourth external event in the play.

After hearing the fairy tales, Heidi remembers the words of a prince in her dream and decides to kiss Ogre. This is the highest point of emotion in the play. Heidi finally decides to love Ogre although he seems unlovable on the outside, and without fully understanding who Ogre is, which brings out the theme of the play – blind love.

After the kiss, the play resolves as Tony wakes up from his dream, and the audience finds out that the whole play has been Tony's dream. It may not seem obvious, but with this newfound knowledge, it can be inferred that Tony is afraid that his parents do not love him enough, which

is why at the beginning of his dream, Father and Mother leave Heidi. The seed love links all the actions of the play and is “the essence of the play” (Fliotsos 67). Appendix B provides a list of the external events, internal events, seed, three major climaxes, theme, super-objective, statement of through-action and statement of counter through-action of the framing story.

Aristotle argues that a play must have three distinct stages: a beginning, a middle and an end (11). Thomas also states that, “regardless of its complexity, simplicity, or style, the plot of every successful play goes through three stages in which it emerges, develops, and concludes” (16). As fragmented and disjointed as the fairy tales in *The Secret in the Wings* are, the overarching plot does have all three stages that are clearly identifiable.

According to Thomas, “the first stage dramatizes the overall goal of the main character” (16). In the beginning of the play, Heidi’s parents leave her alone at home with Ogre. Ogre’s goal is revealed – to win Heidi’s love. This goal sets the main conflict of the play in action.

The second stage of the play shows “the hardships encountered by the main character in pursuit of this goal” (Thomas 16). Ogre tells Heidi fairy tales about love in order to change Heidi’s mind. As time and space gets more and more distorted, the tension in the play increases. When the princess in “The Princess Who Wouldn’t Laugh” laughs at Ogre’s love for Heidi, Ogre’s pursuit of love encounters the greatest challenge and disdain. This greatly dramatizes the conflict of the play.

The last stage of the play should reveal “how the main character comes to terms with the play’s particular reality” (Thomas 16). After all the fairy tales are resolved individually, the overarching plot of the framing story reaches the moment of truth. Inspired by the fairy tales, Heidi finally decides to love Ogre, and this leads to the final resolution of the play.

Idea. Zimmerman quotes Rainer Maria Rilke writing, “perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just one, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love” (Rilke). Zimmerman also explains, that the most profound lesson of all fairy tales is that “you must love a thing before it is lovable” (xi). In this world, everyone co-exists with his/her own secrets and internal darkness. How one deals with such secrets and darkness is what this play discusses. The fear of being rejected and unlovable is another essential idea that is explored throughout the play.

The theme of the play is the consequences of blind love – to love a thing without fully understanding the nature of it. The word *love* in the theme can refer to romantic love, familial love and even incestuous love. In the framing story, Ogre falls in love without even knowing Heidi very well at all, and Heidi eventually loves Ogre in spite of his looks and without seeing his true characters. This blind love leads to a positive consequence: Tony wakes up from his dream, and his mother reaffirms her love for Tony by comforting him and whispering a story to help him get back to sleep.

The various blind loves in the other fairy tales lead to different consequences; some are good while others bad. Due to the fact that the fairy tales make up a significant portion of the play, they need to be studied and analyzed in greater detail too. Appendixes C through H list the external events and internal events of all fairy tales except the framing story. All fairy tales conform to the seed and the theme of the play.

Language. The language of *The Secret in the Wings* is highly stylized. It is simplistic, poetic and highly musical in many occurrences. As a matter of fact, some dialogues are sung – effectively making them lyrics. The rhythm of the dialog is often times written into the script itself with

clear instructions on how the actors should deliver them. For instance, in “The Three Blind Queens: Part One,” Zimmerman writes, “text that shares the same line on the page is meant to be spoken simultaneously. The centered, capitalized text is meant to be spoken simultaneously by all three” (16). Below is the scene that follows:

FIRST PRINCE:	SECOND PRINCE:	THIRD PRINCE:
Once upon a	Once upon a	Once upon a
time	time	Time
There were	THREE	But the king was
	Sons of a king	dead
But the king		
	Like the queen	
The king was dead. (16)		

This stylized form of language serves the setting of the world well – it is a dream world after all. The chanting and the singing compliment the fragmented structure of the play and bring out the surrealist aspect of the play without having to be explicit.

Several concepts from Castagno’s new playwriting theory are prominent. For example, Castagno defines riffing as “repetitions, embellishments, or variations derived from a word or phrase of dialogue” (12). In *The Secret in the Wings*, Ogre asks Heidi, “will you marry me?” at

the end of each scene, and he then continues to introduce the next scene by saying, “once upon a time.” The riffing of these lines throughout the play serves as the center of gravitation of the plot and holds the disjointed pieces together. It helps pull the audience back to the center idea of the play.

Music. In its broader definition, music can be defined as “not just literal music, but all aural elements in production. The rhythm of a dialect, the lyricism of a speech, the clashing of swords and the staccato barking of a dog” (Fliotsos 57). However, since music as the rhythm of the dialogue is already discussed previously in the Language section, the music in this section refers to only literal music.

The fundamental function of music that is uniquely different from most other elements is that it directly stimulates the area of the human brain that is responsible for emotions, and thus triggers emotional responses in the audience. Naturally, in any play, establishing the mood and emotion of a scene is always the most significant effect that music will have on the audience, intentionally or not. In *The Secret in the Wings*, music inevitably serves this purpose. Music is called for explicitly in the script sixteen times, and is implicitly intended numerous times. There is no other element that can infuse the whole play with intense emotions on such a subconscious level.

On the other hand, music is heavily used in *The Secret in the Wings* not only as a tool to provoke emotions, but as a structural device as well. This is because the human auditory system is directly linked to the memory center in the brain. By careful composition and purposeful sequencing of the music, the fairy tales that are broken in halves and separated in time can be subtly connected in the subconscious minds of the audience members. For example, “The Three Blind Queens: Part One” and “The Three Blind Queens: Conclusion” are presented nine scenes

apart in time, but if the music underscoring the two parts are out of a continuous piece with similar instrumentation and style, the two parts will become a cohesive whole regardless of how far apart they are chronologically separated. This utilizes another fundamental function of music – the manipulation of time.

Another significant presence of music in *The Secret in the Wings* is in the form of sung dialogues. The First Queen’s monologue at the end of “The Three Blind Queens: Part One” is sung, and both parts of “The Three Snake Leaves” are entirely sung. This diegetic use of music greatly increases the theatricality of the play, making the dream world more believable to the audience.

Spectacle. Spectacle contributes significantly to the overall effect of the play. One of the major uses of spectacle is the bold costume changes on stage. Every time the play transitions from one fairy tale to the next, the same actors will change into the costumes for the next fairy tale and assume the new characters. This signifies the theatrical basis of the construction of the characters of the play as discussed in a previous section of this paper, as well as creates an astonishing spectacle on stage.

There are a lot of on-stage violence in the fairy tales that constitutes the spectacle as well. Zimmerman treats them in a way that departs drastically from realism. For example, in “The Princess Who Wouldn’t Laugh: Part One,” the cruel decapitation of one of the suitors who fails to make Princess laugh is described as:

The two other LADIES-IN-WAITING pull SUITOR NUMBER ONE off to the side. The FIRST LADY-IN-WAITING places a cone painted like the sky over his head. One of the other LADIES-IN-WAITING drops a red ball on the ground.

Blindly, SUITOR NUMBER ONE gropes around for the red ball, catches it, and goes off to sit, beheaded, on the ground. (Zimmerman 30)

This stylized treatment of on-stage violence creates a highly dramatic spectacle and at the same time serves as an integral part of the dream world and the surrealist idea of the play. It works well with the styles of all other elements.

CONCLUSION

How do human beings co-exist with their own secrets and internal darkness? Can or should one really love a thing before it is lovable? What makes something lovable anyway? Although the major dramatic conflict is resolved, the world of the play still feels unsafe and full of tension at the very end. The fact that the play begins in the dream of Tony and ends as Tony falls asleep again allows for a great amount of space for the audience's imagination and interpretation. *The Secret in the Wings* seems to be a play that raises more questions than it answers. However, after this analysis, it is clearer that the dialogic juxtaposition of the different aspects of blind love, together with the unique styles of the six elements of the play, and the somewhat absurdist ending will have the members of the audience contemplating these questions long after they leave the theatre.

Appendix A



Figure 1 *Illuminating the Dark Universe*

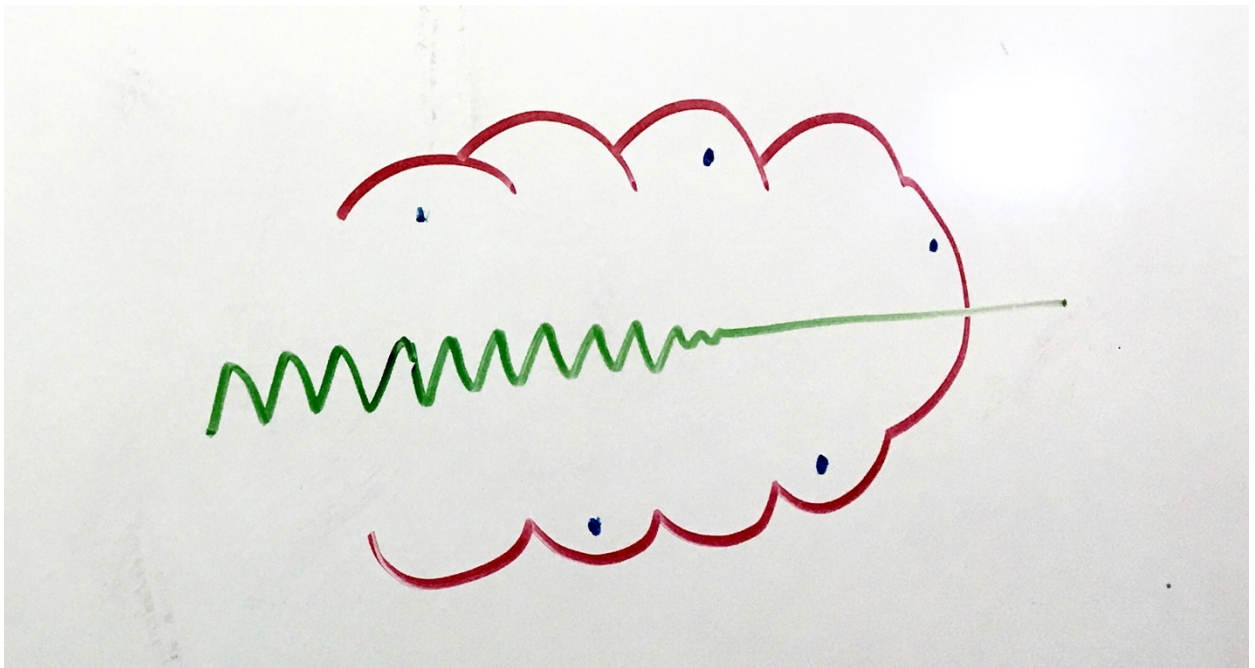


Figure 2 Concept Map

Appendix B – The Framing Story “Left in the Forest”

Fact: the world of the play is the pseudo-reality inside a little boy’s dream.

Seed: Love.

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 Mother and Father leaves Heidi with Ogre.

Heidi needs more love from her parents.

1.2 Ogre asks Heidi to marry him.

Ogre reveals his love for Heidi.

1.3 Heidi refuses to marry Ogre.

Heidi does not love Ogre due to his looks.

1.4 Ogre reads fairy tales.

In trying to make Heidi love him, Ogre reads stories about love to Heidi.

1.5 Heidi kisses Ogre.

Ogre finally wins Heidi’s love.

Three major climaxes:

1. Ogre proposes to Heidi.
2. The “Princess Who Wouldn’t Laugh” laughs at Ogre.
3. Heidi kisses Ogre.

Theme: the consequences of blind love.

Super-objective: to win Heidi’s blind love.

Through-action: Ogre reads fairy tales about love to Heidi in order to win her love.

Counter through-action: Ogre’s appearance as an old monster with a tail makes it difficult for Heidi to love him.

Appendix C – “The Three Blind Queens”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 Princes marry girls.

Princes find the girls they love.

1.2 Princes go to war.

Princes have to leave their loved ones behind giving the Nursemaid an opportunity.

1.3 Nursemaid orders Ambassador to kill Queens.

Nursemaid's love for power drives her to do an evil thing.

1.4 Queens escape to the mountains and feed on their children.

Queens love themselves more than they love their sons.

1.5 Son escapes and feeds the starving monster in the castle.

Son saves the life of a monster because of his innocent love for all beings.

Appendix D – “Stolen Pennies”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 Mother gives two pennies to a poor man and frees her child’s spirit.

Mother’s love for her child drives her to understand and free the spirit.

Appendix E – “The Princess Who Wouldn’t Laugh”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 King proclaims that Princess will marry anyone who can make her laugh.

King and Princess set out to find love for Princess.

1.2 Princess laughs at Ogre (from framing story) for proposing to Heidi (from framing story).

Princess despises Ogre’s love for Heidi.

Appendix F – “The Three Snake Leaves”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 Princess proclaims that her future husband will be buried alive if she dies first.

Princess declares her decree for love.

1.2 After getting married, Princess dies, and Boy is sent to the tomb.

Boy loves Princess and is willing to abide by the decree.

1.3 Boy cuts snake in halves.

Boy defends his lover's dead body.

1.4 Boy heals Princess with three leaves

Boy resurrects his lover.

1.5 Princess murders Boy with Captain.

Princess does not love boy anymore and wants to elope with her newfound love.

1.6 King sends Princess out to die.

King's integrity outweighs his love for his daughter.

Appendix G – “Allerleira”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 King asks Allerleira, his daughter, to marry him.

King's love for the late Queen transfers to their daughter Allerleira.

1.2 Allerleira runs to the woods.

Allerleira escapes from incestuous love.

1.3 King of the woods and Allerleira marry.

Allerleira and King of the woods fall in love.

Appendix H – “Seven Swans, or Silent for Seven Years”

List of external & internal events with the seed underlined:

1.1 Sons turn into swans.

Father loves himself more than his Sons and is punished.

1.2 Daughter decides to save her brothers.

Daughter loves her brothers.

1.3 Daughter marries King.

Daughter falls in love with King.

1.4 King's Mother accuses Daughter for eating her babies.

King's Mother is jealous because Daughter has stolen King's love.

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