

Arthur Rackham's illustration
to Hans Christian Andersen's
Snow Queen (1932).



My Favourite Story when I was Young

Diane Purkiss

My favourite story when I was young was *The Snow Queen*, by Hans Christian Andersen. I have always loved ice, cold, and snow; when you grow up in Sydney, Australia, such things are rare and exotic. The idea of being able to see a beautiful woman made of ice through the window, and then being able to fly away with her into a world of deep cold enchanted me. I wasn't interested in character, and I didn't notice the Christian morals with which the story is top-dressed. I fell in love with the cold itself.

Later, when I discovered the winter goddess Perchta, and realised that she was the basis for Andersen's Snow Queen, I appreciated immediately that my longings and loves were ancient, a potent mix of fear and desire.

When A.S. Byatt writes about this in her brilliant essay 'Ice snow glass', she equates the splinter of ice in Kai's heart with the necessary coldness and detachment of the writer. To me, this makes no sense; to me, the whirling flakes of snow that envelop Kay are a loving and generous embrace, an embrace that allows him to escape from his cloying family into a wilder world of mathematics and eternity. Only with the Snow Queen can Kay be truly himself.

Dotted throughout the journey are encounters that teach Gerda that the true self can be found only at great cost. Second to Kay and the Snow Queen herself, I loved the morbid stories of death and desire told by the flowers in the witch's garden. I especially liked the way most of the girls in the stories die. One of them, terrifyingly, is a woman voluntarily committing sati; as she burns in agony, the risks of fire and of the fire of passion come to seem far greater than the risks of ice and snow. Yet it is her coolness in the face of the fire, her chill resolution to die, that allows her to become a story.

For me, C.S. Lewis's white witch was more anodyne and safe than the Snow Queen. Nobody truly desired her, not even Edmund, and in the event she was easily destroyed, unlike the Snow Queen who survives her story, as winter must.

No wonder I too headed north, looking for somewhere harder and more painful than the easy warmth of my suburban home, somewhere that could really challenge me.

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