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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Tepper, Sheri S. Beauty.

Tales Newly Told

a column on CURRENT modern Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

Sheri S. Tepper has, together with Ursula K. LeGuin, emerged as one of the foremost moralists among the writers of fantasy and science fiction today. Her work, like LeGuin's, is fueled by a concern for human suffering (and for the cultural and philosophical models that produce such suffering), and while the scope and inventiveness of her imagination would in themselves be quite enough to attract her a broad readership, it is above all the focused intensity of her moral conviction that makes her stories powerful and memorable. Nowhere is this facet of her talent on better display than in her most recent novel, *Beauty* (Doubleday/Foundation, 1991).

The "Beauty" of the title is, first and foremost, Sleeping Beauty, the heroine of the well-known fairy tale, who is here the narrator. As in Perrault's classic version of the tale, Beauty has, on the day of her christening, been cursed by the fairy Carabosse to suffer an unspecified accident involving a spindle as soon as she turns sixteen. She begins to keep a journal not long before the fatal date. The year is, quite specifically, 1347, the place is England, yet when, early on, we are told of such things as "The Sisters of the Immediate Conception as St Mary of Perpetual Surprise," we realize that this is not intended to be a historical novel written according to the usual standards of the genre. We are in the world of *The Once and Future King*: the Middle Ages are here used as a symbol, and idealized construct designed to exhibit certain aesthetic traits that contrast with the atmosphere of our own period. Tepper's approach is, in a sense, metafictional, and her style will go through several transformations before the novel's end.

Beauty's mother has vanished long ago, her father is perpetually away on costly pilgrimages, the main adult figures in her world are seven maiden aunts who are Peakean grotesques. Like many of Tepper's adolescent heroines, Beauty reacts to the arbitrariness or downright hostility of her family environment by developing a strong internal authority system of her own, which makes her bright, curious, and sometimes rather brash in her dealings with others. She tends to take matters into her own hands, and to foil all attempts to manipulate her. This is to have grave consequences, for she is in fact a crucial piece in a vast and complex scheme that has implications far beyond the human world. Her mother, she discovers, was a fairy, and her disappearance was planned by Carabosse (who is, of course, not the evil hag of the original fairy tale) to eventually lead Beauty herself to the role that was prepared for her from her birth. But as long as Beauty remains unaware of the true nature of the scheme, she resists Carabosse's promptings, and turns the plot into unpredictable directions.

As the fatal sixteenth birthday arrives, Beauty manages to escape the effects of the "curse" by substituting her

half-sister for herself at the last minute, and by using some magic bequeathed to her by her mother. But as she flees the sleeping castle and its rapidly growing wall of roses, she suddenly gets entangled with some time-travellers who takes her back with them to the twenty-first century — and the novel, just as abruptly, shifts from mediaeval fantasy to dystopian science fiction. The future as Tepper sees it is disturbingly plausible: the entire surface of the planet has been sacrificed to food production, people live in cramped and dehumanizing conditions, all concern for aesthetic and moral norms has vanished — and with that, "Magic" (by which Tepper clearly means mythopoeia, and the power of words and images to exercise their subcreating function in the world) has, of course, become extinct as well. Beauty cannot long survive in such a soul-denying environment; but then, neither can many of the natives of that period, who make illegal use of time-travel devices to flee to the preceding century. Joining a group of such fugitives, Beauty finds herself in a large American city during the 1990's. Again the novel shifts to another fictional "genre," this time to the kind of philosophical satire so common in the eighteenth century, in which an outsider is made to comment wryly on the familiar environment of our own society, allowing us to see it from a fresh perspective. We are thus made vividly aware of the tendencies in contemporary culture that will lead to the nightmare of one hundred years later. And we learn — through one of the starkest and most memorable passages in the book — that the human species will come to a horrible end early in the twenty-second century.

A traumatic incident forces Beauty to use the twentieth century's meagre remnants of magic to return to her own time. She attempts to settle into a conventional married life, but the knowledge she has gained from her extraordinary experience — her new perspective on Time, on historical processes that far transcend the preoccupations on any local human culture — make this impossible, and she finds herself compelled (following Carabosse's promptings, at last) to seek out her mother. After a brief sojourn in a literary fantasy world called Chinanga (where Tepper returns to the madcap surrealism of her "Marianne" books), Beauty finally arrives in Faerie, the true wellspring of imaginative power (of imagination as opposed to Fancy, in Coleridge's terms). And here the story turns to high fantasy and myth.

The myth Tepper has chosen to impress Beauty (and ourselves) with the truth about the human predicament is one that has haunted the Western imagination for centuries. It is, in fact, the myth that underlies most of the Inklings' fantasy works. As the story is told here, the Holy One (i.e. God) created the Fair Folk and gave them immortality. When he later created mortal

Men, he asked the Fair Folk to help and protect the younger race. One of the immortals actively rebelled and became the Dark Lord, ruler of forces dedicated to the degradation and destruction of humans. The majority of the Sidhe refused to take a stand: they were unwilling to help humans, but at least promised not to harm them directly. Their magic remained a source of great beauty and empowerment but, because they would not subordinate it to moral principles, they had to “pay a teind to hell” (i.e., occasionally allow the power of mythopoeia to be used for evil ends). Through this they came more and more under the sway of the Dark Lord, until they reached the point of intentionally harming a mortal and thus breaking their agreement with their maker (and forfeiting their immortality). A minority of Sidhe, however, chose to obey the Holy One, and created Baskarone, a realm of archetypal images that bring joy and comfort — a Land of Heart’s Desire.

Through assuming her fairy heritage as a subcreator, Beauty becomes an active participant in the dimension of myth, rather than an unknowing pawn manipulated by images. She awakens archetypal patterns with her actions — becoming, in passing, the mother of Cinderella, the grandmother of Snow White, and the great-grandmother of the Frog Prince! Entering the Faerie realm with all the passion and urgency engendered by her mortal condition, she eventually forces the Sidhe to reconsider their attitude toward the Dark Lord and, at last, encompasses their redemption (albeit a tragic one). And she comes to face her own destiny, which is, of course, embodied in her name.

For Beauty, she discovers (as Tepper means us to discover, too), is not a vague and arbitrary concept linked to physical pleasure (as some philosophers would have it), but a fundamental principle without which there can be no sustained moral purpose in life, and therefore no hope in the future and no will to survive. And our modern culture, by ignoring or denying this basic principle, has begun to dig humanity’s grave. Travelling across the centuries, Beauty realizes that her native time has its full share of evil, but that in the future the *quality* of evil itself has changed because, with the degradation of beauty and the consequent dissolution of moral certainties, no focused sense of good remains to combat it. Beauty must be saved, our collective attitude changed — before time runs out.

It is just this poignancy of the concept of Time as it inescapably affects human life that the novel expresses most beautifully — both on the individual scale and on the scale of the human species. Although Beauty can, when in Faerie, appear as young as she wishes, this has no power to retard the deterioration of her body in the real world, and some of her most urgent and demanding adventures are undertaken in pain-wracked old age. The limitations it imposes demand that Time be used efficiently — that things be done now, while it is possible; that all loose ends be taken care of before the inevitable end. This applies equally well to humanity as a whole, as the cosmic clock of Carabosse — the Fairy of Time — ticks on toward doom.

For a generation writers of imaginative fiction have seen Doomsday mostly in terms of nuclear holocaust — that is, as the result of militarism and the thirst of political power gone mad. Survivors of the holocaust (in the most optimistic scenarios) could hope to restore a wiser and better world. Today, as the threat of nuclear confrontation has lessened, it is becoming evident that we have it in our selves to create a peace far more lethal than any war. The Inklings had already, throughout most of their works, warned us of this threat: Lewis made it the main concern of *The Abolition of Man*, and it is present, articulated in many different ways, in all of Tolkien’s fantasy. It is gratifying to see Sheri Tepper add a vision as strong and vital as her own to this distinguished chorus. Their message is one we must all heed — before the last of the magic fails.

