



# Selfie Tales

## How Modern Ed & Media Are Ruining Our Stories

by Noelle McEachran

**T**he study of literature pivoted drastically in the 20th century. Historically, literature was studied for its own sake. Lessons revolved around understanding plot, characterization, symbolism, and metaphor. By contrast, modern education largely emphasizes practical applications. For example, a study of Jane Austen, instead of delving into character foils, patterns, and themes, might become a discussion about gender inequalities, racism, or just about anything else.

In her *Substack Pens and Poison*, Liza Libes discusses how studying English at Columbia University “poisoned her love of literature”:

Instead of appreciating the great works of literature in their entirety...Columbia students and professors alike seemed to have made

it their mission to put down the great writers of the Western canon.... And, if on the rare occasion, you were allowed to enjoy Shakespeare and his brilliant company of poetic masterminds, you could only do so through the lenses of Marxist, postcolonial, or gender theory.<sup>1</sup>

This is the result of an intentional educational shift toward student-response-centered classrooms, in which teachers are encouraged to use children’s natural reactions to guide questions, prompts, and future reading experiences. They argue that when teachers focus too heavily on the texts themselves, they risk overlooking the value of students’ voices and interpretations. One advocate of this educational style even argued that students should drop Shakespeare and instead “go to football stadiums, look to grime music and graffiti artists.”<sup>2</sup>

There has been a growing push to align language arts curricula with the digital world, encompassing a focus on “media education” at the expense of any literature.<sup>3</sup> “Old” books often don’t even make the cut, or when they do, students learn nothing, or very little, about the books themselves. Literature in particular is no longer regarded as a source of authority but has instead become an excuse to discuss current affairs or social problems arising at lunchtime in the school cafeteria.

The desire to make learning applicable is natural. Perhaps a more important question is what this approach accomplishes. It used to be that “the purpose of education [was] to push students forward in the world rather than making them static,” but some argue that this goal of making lessons “relatable,” rather than opening new worlds to students, “smothers children’s aspirations.”<sup>4</sup> They are not encouraged to fully absorb all that a book might reveal. Rather than stepping beyond their own era, cultural norms, and limited perspectives, they are kept tethered and constrained. Instead of experiencing the world through a different set of eyes, they remain locked within the confines of contemporary viewpoints. Books are no longer windows to a bigger world but instead serve only as mirrors,

reflecting back the myopic view of one’s own face.

### “Using” Instead of Receiving

In his book *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis addresses this dramatic shift in education, pointing out that students are no longer encouraged to “receive” books simply as they are. Instead, they are taught to “use” them as you might use a bicycle or a train ticket—take what you need and then toss it. “Hence literature becomes for [modern teachers] a religion, a philosophy, a school of ethics, a sociology—anything rather than a collection of works of art.”

Lewis refers to this as “mirroring,” when readers look inside the pages of a book and only see their own selves reflected back. The books become small and the reader, big. The net result is that both the books and the students become small. As a result, the entire world becomes small, flat, uninteresting, and irrelevant.

### The Paramount Self

This shift in literature studies is but one aspect of a broader focus on “self” in today’s classrooms through a hyper-preoccupation with self-esteem and inner feelings. In her book *Bad Therapy*, Abigail Shrier cites multiple stories demonstrating how public schools have basically become therapy centers in which school counselors hold all the authority, often completely shutting parents out. In many cases, entire lessons and curricula train students to think of “inner happiness” as their highest goal. Setting aside the fact that

such a goal is unattainable, there is a far greater problem occurring across classrooms today.

### Snow White Goes Woke

In March 2025, Disney released a live-action version of *Snow White* that was a colossal failure. It seems the creators wanted to somehow not offend conservative-leaning American families while also ditching “regressive” sex stereotypes and smuggling in plenty of feminism and Marxist undertones. These conflicting goals generated many controversies leading up to the film’s release, as well as many rewrites and reshoots. The result became a botched, hacked, mutilated recipe of vague, woke goo.

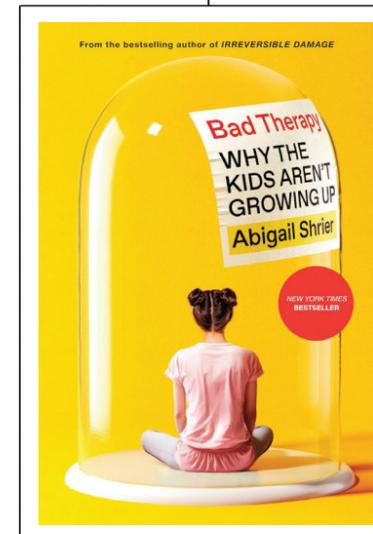
Throughout the film, Snow frequently gazes at her reflection in the well while her stepmother the queen likewise gazes at her own reflection in the magic mirror. Snow’s reflection harkens back to her memory of her father, however, capturing her desire to be like him one day—which sounds nice until you discover that her goal of being like her father has less to do with filial loyalty than might appear. Instead, the film

portrays Snow as almost constantly focused on “self.” She is ostensibly portrayed as a victim at the start

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of the story when she is forced to be a servant in her own house (as in many other fairy tales). Yet this motif conflicts with her own words, such as those in her opening solo in which she declares herself “someone no one needs to save.” This dependence on self builds up to her pivotal moment, when, on the cusp of returning home and reclaiming her throne (after her forgettable, non-threatening love interest *sort of* saves her), she proclaims: “Time to rise and lift my head, time to lead and not be led.”

This represents a dramatic departure from the Grimms’ version of *Snow White*. The contrast provides striking insight into our times and is especially ironic in that the original *Snow White* spoke with scathing insight against this very thing. In the beginning of the Grimms’ version, Snow White’s mother looks through a window and wishes for a daughter with a pure soul. In fairy tales, a character looking through a window encapsulates wisdom. It embodies someone who can “see” with greater



perception out into a wider world. By contrast, Snow's stepmother, the queen, looks at her own reflection in a mirror. When most people read *Snow White* or watch the film, they assume that this older woman was simply vain—today's version of a washed-up, botched, Botox babe. While she certainly is that, there is far more going on.

Classicist and literature teacher Angelina Stanford notes that Snow's stepmother looked at herself at appointed times. She spoke to the mirror in a call-and-response pattern. In other words, she conducted a sacred liturgy. She was in love with her image, ceremoniously uniting herself to it.<sup>5</sup> When the wicked queen looked at the world every day, she saw only herself reflected back. Life, in all its fullness, for her, only offered a mirror. As a result, she courted and eventually succumbed to death.

The story echoes that of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image reflected in the water, and, in his desire to unite with it, fixated on it and drowned.

But it goes even deeper. Stanford explains that the Grimms' version is actually a retelling of the fall of mankind, recalling the garden narrative. It represents a love of one's own image, a love of self. God made man in his image, but Adam and Eve fell in love with and worshipped their image instead of the Creator. The proffered apple in Snow's temptation was intended to represent an image of herself with its "red cheeks." In taking it, Snow was committing the same sin as her stepmother—and as Eve. C. S. Lewis says, "This perversion arises when a conscious creature becomes more interested in itself than in God, and wishes to exist 'on its own.'"

By setting "true love" as the

only standard for breaking the curse, Disney's 1937 version didn't get this right either. When Snow falls into a deathlike sleep, she pictures all of us in our state apart from Christ. She needed saving—not by a hot guy followed by a Pinterest wedding, but by a sacrificial Christ figure.

*Snow White* (2025), far from retelling the original version, might be considered as directly



Snow White (2025)

flipping it on its head. Instead of maintaining the original themes intended to warn against the worship of self, it was rather a celebration of me-centered self-adulation taken to its fullest extent.

### iPhones & Magic Mirrors

For many children today, their daily lives involve an almost constant fixation on self. iPhones, parents, teachers, and even many churches curate the world such that it continually, morbidly places the child at the center. Children are encouraged to look out at the world and, like the wicked stepmother, only see themselves reflected back.

This self-fixation has not created an emotionally sturdy, confident, or happy generation. Teachers and professors everywhere are crying out against the effects of cell phones and "me-centered" education. As one

frustrated teacher put it, today's students

have no ability to be bored whatsoever. They live on their phones. And they're just fed a constant stream of dopamine from the minute their eyes wake up in the morning until they go to sleep at night.... When you are standing in front of them trying to teach, they're vacant. They have no ability to tune in.... They're not there. And they have a level of apathy that I've never seen before in my whole career. Punishments don't work because they don't care about them. They don't care about grades. They don't care about college.<sup>6</sup>

A record number of students are checked out, stressed out, and disconnected. Perhaps this is no great surprise. A life centered in the self is vain, circumscribed, and one-dimensional. Old stories tell us that this kind of life is a chasing after death. When we simply, as Lewis said, receive books just as they are—when we stop using them or trying to do something with them—the world transforms from a mirror to a window.

When we leave books alone, miracles occur. The world becomes rich, broad, dangerous, sublime, and mysterious. When books are big and we are small, the result is that the world becomes bigger... and we become bigger people. ☺

### Notes

1. Liza Libes, "The Year I Quit Reading," *Pens and Poison* (Feb. 27, 2025).
2. Tomiwa Owolade, "'Relatable' Curriculums Smother Aspiration," *The Times* (Nov. 24, 2024).
3. "Media Education in English Language Arts" (Position Statement), National Council of Teachers of English (Apr. 9, 2022).
4. Owolade.
5. "How to Read Fairy Tales: A Mini-Class by Angelina Stanford," House of Humane Letters.
6. Ted Gioia, "What's Happening to Students?" *The Honest Broker* (Mar. 21, 2025).