

When the clock strikes essay sample



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“ Cinderella” is perhaps the most recognized fairy tale in history, one of the few that spans across generations and cultures. Every prominent culture in the world tells some similar version of this story of a poor girl going from rags to riches; over 700 versions have been accounted for worldwide. In America, numerous authors have penned their own version of the classic folktale. One of these is Tanith Lee, a prolific writer of stories for young adults. Lee cleverly found a way to include all of the traditional elements of the classic “ Cinderella” tale, but added a new twist: Cinderella, or the character similar to her in this story, had malicious intentions for the prince, and her purpose throughout the tale was a malevolent one: revenge.

The story is cleverly related through a first person narrator, who is supposedly retelling the story to a person waiting for a carriage, the reader. Lee cleverly has the narrator pause throughout the story, commenting on the tale so far or asking the reader questions. He begins the story by describing a classic ebony grandfather clock, with porcelain figures replacing the numbers on the face. The characters aged as you went clock-wise around the face, ending with the figure of Death at the top. The narrator explains how people thought the clock unlucky, and that death would truly strike someone one day along with the clock. He goes back 200 years, explaining how there was much intrigue and suspicion in the Duke’s court. Rumors swirled that he had obtained his title and the city by treacherously having those who were in line to the throne murdered by assassins. However, additional rumors claimed that he had neglected to find one last heir, a woman, who was a descendant from the rival noble house. The

narrator goes on to confirm the rumor of the descendant, and he states that she was “ seething with bitter spite and a hunger for vengeance.”

Long ago, this descendant had wed a wealthy silk merchant in the city for her safety and disguise, and bore him a daughter. But the woman, unbeknownst to her husband, had sworn allegiance to Satan, and took part in the Black Mass. She would often go up to a tower adjacent to her house and practice witchcraft against the Duke. The Duke, in a constant state of agony and fearing death near, named his 16-year-old son his heir, whom he loved very much. The witch knew this, and plotted to eliminate the prince, preferably in the presence of his loving father.

At this time, the narrator adds that the witch was not alone in her plotting. Indeed, she had a helper in her black magic, her own daughter, who became well versed in the Black Arts. The narrator then goes on to describe the beauty of the daughter, and her closeness to her mother.

At this point, the plot thickens when the narrator explains that the silk merchant began to mistrust his daughter, for she was very different from other girls, always reading and never concerning herself with marriage, clothes, or jewelry. Though being illiterate, the father was very suspicious of the books that his daughter was constantly reading. One night, he followed her up to the tower, and after spying for a few moments was surprised to hear his wife’s voice as well, and was absolutely astounded by what he heard next. The narrator then relates how the husband downed a few glasses of wine to calm himself, and then proceeded to rush to the neighbors. The witch, realizing that the neighbors were gathering below, shouting and

wielding torches, knew the penalty for witchcraft in those parts. When she grasped a knife from her altar in order to escape the certain torture of burning at the stake, her daughter cried out in alarm.

The witch comforted her and explained the importance of her daughter carrying on her own malicious intentions, saying she would leave her daughter “ my vengeance and the witchcraft to exact it by”. She reassured her daughter by stating that she would beg her lord Satan to leave her daughter stronger powers than herself. The witch then drove the knife through her heart, and as the men pressed into the chamber, the girl stood there, blank-faced, and fainted. She feigned memory loss, and those gathered were sure that her mother had bewitched her. She was questioned by a priest the next day, and was even made to kiss a holy cross, which, amazingly enough, she was able to do after praying to her dark lord. Her mother’s ashes were buried in an urn in unconsecrated ground, and her evil intentions were never revealed, for her daughter had hidden the wax image that her mother had used to exact torture upon the prince.

After an extended period of mourning, her father asked her why she would not remove her veil, for surely “ the woman...led you into wickedness. How long will you mourn her, who deserves no mourning?” to which the girl replied, “ It is my own...sin that I mourn.” From then on she slunk about in rags and with ashes covering her face, forgotten by most everyone, and always sitting by the hearth, refusing to wash up, for she was “ glad to be humble before God and men.”

Years passed, and the silk merchant married a widow with two daughters, whom the girl snubbed and refused to respond to, despite their pleasantness. All she ever spoke of was penance and humility, and for this the second wife and her daughters began to spite the girl, begging the merchant to do something with her for fear that the townspeople might blame them for her condition.

More time passed, and the narrator reveals that her power was rising “ like a dark moon in her soul.” Three days after her seventeenth birthday, the narrator asserts, she wandered to the outskirts of the city, dug up the clay urn containing her mother’s ashes, and proceeded to take it home and bury it, uttering unholy magics over the grave. She then planted the sprig of a young hazel tree on the grave.

The story continues that late one winter night, a scream came from the Duke’s room, for he felt as if a sword was “ transfixing his heart.” Just as the prince ran into his father’s chamber, he spasmed horribly and died; mysteriously, no marks were found on his body. The prince wept, and was given the seal of the city. Later on, the ex-Duke’s funeral cortege passed along the city streets, witnessed by the entire town, and also by one unnoticed soul, whose ominous gaze seemed to pierce through the prince as he passed.

As spring returned, a great banquet and ball were planned in the new Duke’s honor. All “ men of influence and their families” were to be invited. Again, the narrator brings up the controversy surrounding the clock, and the menacing aura it put off on people. When the merchant and his

stepdaughters heard about the ball, the house was sent into an uproar in preparation for the event. He purchased lavish dresses and jewelry for his two daughters to wear, all the while mulling over his forgotten daughter and how she would have reacted to such an invitation. When the family set off for the ball, most of the servants behind them, the girl rose from the ashes, laughing softly to herself. She went out to the now fully-grown hazel tree, and chanted prayers to it. From the tree arose a thin black bird that perched on her shoulder as she ascended the stairs into the tower, where she commenced practicing her witchcraft.

Just before 10 O'clock, the hour of the magician on the enchanted ebony clock, a late-coming solid gold carriage arrived at the palace courtyard. Out stepped a woman clad in a cloak of white fur, who entered the palace just as the hour of the magician struck. She was so beautiful that no one spoke. The prince rose from his chair, walked towards the girl and asked her name. The girl replied that he was actually interested in her rank, and declared that it was similar to his, or would be had not an unscrupulous man caused the downfall of her house. He begged again her name, informing her that he would right the wrong done to her. She replied that he would right the wrong soon enough, and that he could call her Ashella. They began to dance, and the narrator emphasizes how men seemed to gaze after her when she was gone, wishing to tie her to themselves, the prince included. She danced like fire. The prince, tiring of losing her to other men, lured her out to a terrace, where he had small tables filled with delicacies and wine brought out to them.

Meanwhile, amidst the murmur of those still inside the ballroom, the merchant sat, pale as a ghost, the only one who knew the strange woman's true identity. An awful foreboding weighed him down, sending him cold and dumb.

Back on the terrace, as the hour of midnight drew nearer, the prince questioned what Ashella was saying beneath her breath. She answered that she was saying a spell to bind him to her. He replied that she need not cast a spell, for he was already bound to her, and proposed to marry her, if she wished it, and regain the rights that she had lost. She smiled and said, "If it were only so simple. But the debt is too cruel. Justice requires a harsher payment." Back in the ballroom, Death struck its first note on the bell of the clock. "I curse you in my mother's name." The second stroke of the clock. "I curse you in my own name." Third stroke. "And in the name of those that your father slew." Fourth stroke. "And in the name of my Master, who rules the world." As the fifth, sixth, and seventh strokes passed, the prince stood bewildered. At the eighth and ninth strokes, his blood curdled.

At the tenth stroke, the figure before him began to transform. At the eleventh stroke, he beheld a familiar creature in a tattered black robe. It grinned at him. On the twelfth stroke, the prince saw Death and knew him. The gears of the clock grinded to a halt, and Death vanished from the terrace, leaving behind only a glass woman's shoe. The prince lost his mind, exclaiming that Death had borne away this girl Ashella, but that he would recover her from Death with the help of her glass slipper, which she had surely left behind as a token of her love, or so he thought. Obsessed in his quest for Ashella, he rode throughout the streets of the city, forcing every

woman to try the shoe on, young or old, maid or married. A lunatic who was truly insane, he struck out at those who protested, and at times, drew his dagger and killed without noticing what he had done. But the shoe was sorcerous, and constantly changed shape so that no one could fit it, save one.

One summer day, the merchant was found and brought before the prince. The merchant had unburdened himself by confessing his story to a priest, but the dishonest priest had him turned in to the Duke. He related the entire tale of his first wife and daughter, finishing his story by claiming that she had not returned home since the night of the banquet, and had taken only a hazel tree from the garden beneath the tower with her. He leapt from his chair and immediately set out towards the house, without any guards or attendants. As he passed by the road, treacherous intriguers summoned by the black magic of the witch's daughter slew him on the spot. As he fell from his horse, the glass slipper shattered into a thousand fragments. Those who usurped the city were villains and fools, and ran the city into the ground. Within a year, external enemies were at the gates. A year later, and the city was ransacked and half-burnt to the ground in ruins.

The narrator wraps up the story by laughing at the idea that the reader might assume that he himself was Death. However, he is quick to reply that though he does not seem to resemble Death as the clock depicts him, the story was not as the reader had heard it either...

Thus, Tanith Lee concludes a brilliant re-telling of the classic tale of “Cinderella.” Though not traditional in any sense, it does contain many of the

common elements that each version of the “ Cinderella” story has been known to have. Adding her own dark twist to the tale, she succeeds in creating yet another addition to the library of “ Cinderella” stories around the globe.