



### The true colors of care through the eyes of Paula Rego

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#### Snow White and her Stepmother

**Artist:** Paula Rego, 1995  
Pastel on paper mounted on aluminium,  
178 x 150 cm

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## Introduction

Snow White and her Stepmother (1995) is a painting by Paula Rego which depicts the relationship between these two popular characters, and it is striking in having abundant possibilities for psychoanalysis and for neuropsychology interpretations. In

extending that analysis to apply it to the subject of caregiving, we look at the painting as a possible metaphor for the relationship that may, sometimes, be unduly formed between the healthcare provider and the patient.

Over the past ten years, we have used this

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painting in undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs at our Medical School to introduce clinical communication lessons. We have invited students and professionals to reflect on the painting, and also on the doctor-patient relationship, while highlighting the use of art in learning about clinical interactions. As a result of years of common reflections, we share our personal views on this painting and on its relevance in capturing some of the underpinnings of interpersonal relationships.

## The Artist

The artist here is Paula Rego, a Portuguese painter who became a renowned figure within the British art world in the 80's.[1] She is known for appropriating stories from literature, myths, fairy tales, cartoons and religious texts, in order to create a new narrative, filled with a perhaps harsh but honest perspective on reality, having a particular sensibility to personal tensions and social conventions.[2] Her working method attempts to capture the undirected imagination, being sometimes associated with the Surrealist movement.[2]

The process of creation of this painting, when viewed through the lens of neuropsychology, is intriguing. Neuropsychology, an interdisciplinary field which resorts to neuroscience to study aspects of the mind that are central to psychoanalysis, has aroused considerable interest among researchers.[3-6] According to neuroimaging work, when someone is in an improvisational state, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which is continuously suppressing information, has a decreased activation. On the other hand, there is an increased activation of the medial prefrontal cortex that is involved in the creation of new ideas. There is, thus, the emergence of unconscious processes, and it creates the possibility of the formation of new connections and of displaying therapeutic results.[3] Taking into account the methodology of her creative work, Paula Rego can be seen to be expressing - through her genius, and with a reduced suppression from the dorsolateral prefrontal

cortex - what lies beyond the stories she appropriates.

## Interpreting the Painting

This pastel belongs to a series of four paintings where Rego reinterprets a popular Disney motion picture. It was first presented in the Spellbound: Art and Film exhibition held in the Hayward Gallery in London and later included in the retrospective of the artist, first in the Tate Gallery and then in the Centro Cultural de Belém in 1997.[1]

In Snow White and her Stepmother, the focus is on the battle between the two female characters, and it leads us to dwell on what is being revealed. It can be said that both the characters have gruesome appearances that match the true colors of their relationship.[2,7] As the knickers are being inspected by the stepmother, caring for someone younger or dependent seems to be an act of humiliation and abjection, especially when the latter exposes Snow White's particularly white knickers without ever having had physical contact with her.

In his essay, The Uncanny, Freud refers to the sensation that one can have when something familiar that was repressed reappears, or when what ought to have remained hidden is shown.[8]. In this case, the white knickers are a symbol for repressed sexual rivalry.[2] According to psychoanalytic theory, every repressed emotional affect is transformed into morbid anxiety.[8] This is reflected in the dynamics of rejection displayed in the painting.

When approaching Rego's interpretation of Disney characters from a psychoanalytic perspective based on neuropsychology, art can be seen to contribute to an enlightened therapeutic attitude. This painting invites us to think about the circumstances and feelings that are part of the relationship between these two characters but that are not usually conceivable. It encourages us to look for the hues that a relationship can have, rather than assuming that situations are defined merely by mechanical actions. Being part of the healthcare system includes the

responsibility to embody an empathetic attitude and the sensitivity to understand the different interpretations that actions can have and what these may subjectively represent for the care takers.

The setting of this artwork is also relevant to the discussion. It is indoors, in a confined space with a blank wall, in a moment of intimacy between the two characters. The moment is frozen, and it invites us to take a closer look at the way the characters embody the experience. It is a frame in time that stresses on emotional anatomy. Here the facial expressions are constricted, while the moment is of vulnerability or openness. Snow White is being assisted, yet, though they are physically very close together, they refrain from touching or any other form of contact. Snow White stands on one foot, keeping her balance, while there is an inherent submission in the act of receiving assistance. Whether she feels humiliated or not by this situation is left for the reader to determine. The stepmother's posture is rigid and retracted from the subject she is meant to be caring for. Even leaning forward in dressing Snow White, her neck is elongated as though to keep a distance, and the face expresses some kind of repulsion, either from the situation or from the person. Her hands seem tense, and her focus appears to be on avoiding physical contact.

The current analysis allows us to draw some parallels between the painting and the relationship between doctor and patient.

For patients, the moment can be either more or less comfortable depending on the position of vulnerability at which they lie, considering that they do not know with certainty what to expect. They will, like Snow White, be in a confined space, with the doctor assisting them, and this situation can lead to a moment where physical exposure and contact is necessary. The doctor's posture will also reflect an attitude, but this should not be one of repulsion and rigidity but instead one of genuine caring. Only then can the relationship be grounded in respect and trust.

## Conclusion

In clinical practice, doctors are faced everyday with moments where patients can feel vulnerable, or have even more complex feelings of humiliation, and where the doctor's attitude will determine the type of relationship established. Caring can involve the act of respecting privacy by keeping a reasonable distance, but a constricted face, rigid body, and avoidant hands have an emotional impact for the patient that can, in fact, represent neglect. It is only by being aware of the importance of their own attitude and of the emotional dimensions of the patient in front of them can the doctor engage in caring. Through paintings such as this one, there seems to be an opportunity and a space to discover the true colours of the relationship between the patient and the healthcare provider.

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