

# Yeh-Shen

## A Cinderella Story from China

Retold by Ai-Ling Louie

In the dim past, even before the Ch'in and the Han dynasties,<sup>1</sup> there lived a cave chief of southern China by the name of Wu. As was the custom in those days, Chief Wu had taken two wives. Each wife in their turn had presented Wu with a baby daughter. But one of the wives sickened and died, and not too many days after that Chief Wu took to his bed and died too.

Yeh-Shen, the little orphan, grew to girlhood in her stepmother's home. She was a bright child and lovely too, with skin as smooth as ivory and dark pools for eyes. Her stepmother was jealous of all this beauty and goodness, for her own daughter was not pretty at all. So in her displeasure, she gave  
10 poor Yeh-Shen the heaviest and most unpleasant chores.

The only friend that Yeh-Shen had to her name was a fish she had caught and raised. It was a beautiful fish with golden eyes, and every day it would come out of the water and rest its head on the bank of the pond, waiting for Yeh-Shen to feed it. Stepmother gave Yeh-Shen little enough food for herself, but the orphan child always found something to share with her fish, which grew to enormous size. **A**

### Analyze Visuals ►

This painting shows a scene and its reflection in the water. **Identify** where the water begins and ends.

- A UNIVERSAL THEME**  
Reread lines 11–16. What do you learn about Yeh-Shen from the way she treats her friend? What kind of person is Yeh-Shen?

1. **Ch'in (ch'ín) and the Han (hän) dynasties (dī'nə-stēz):** groups that held power in China. The Ch'in dynasty ruled from 221 to 206 B.C., and the Han dynasty ruled from 206 B.C. to A.D. 220.

Detail of *The Moonlight* (2001),  
Chen Jia Qi. Watercolor. Red Lantern  
Folk Art, Mukashi Collection.  
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Somehow the stepmother heard of this. She was terribly angry to discover that Yeh-Shen had kept a secret from her. She hurried down to the pond, but she was unable to see the fish, for Yeh-Shen's pet wisely hid itself.

20 The stepmother, however, was a crafty woman, and she soon thought of a plan. She walked home and called out, "Yeh-Shen, go and collect some firewood. But wait! The neighbors might see you. Leave your filthy coat here!" The minute the girl was out of sight, her stepmother slipped on the coat herself and went down again to the pond. This time the big fish saw Yeh-Shen's familiar jacket and heaved itself onto the bank, expecting to be fed. But the stepmother, having hidden a dagger<sup>2</sup> in her sleeve, stabbed the fish, wrapped it in her garments, and took it home to cook for dinner. ❶

When Yeh-Shen came to the pond that evening, she found her pet had disappeared. Overcome with grief, the girl collapsed on the ground and

30 dropped her tears into the still waters of the pond.

"Ah, poor child!" a voice said.

Yeh-Shen sat up to find a very old man looking down at her. He wore the coarsest of clothes, and his hair flowed down over his shoulders.

"Kind uncle, who may you be?" Yeh-Shen asked.

"That is not important, my child. All you must know is that I have been sent to tell you of the wondrous powers of your fish."

"My fish, but sir . . ." The girl's eyes filled with tears, and she could not go on.

The old man sighed and said, "Yes, my child, your fish is no longer

40 alive, and I must tell you that your stepmother is once more the cause of your sorrow." Yeh-Shen gasped in horror, but the old man went on.

"Let us not dwell on things that are past," he said, "for I have come bringing you a gift. Now you must listen carefully to this: The bones of your fish are filled with a powerful spirit. Whenever you are in serious need, you must kneel before them and let them know your heart's desire. But do not waste their gifts."

Yeh-Shen wanted to ask the old sage<sup>3</sup> many more questions, but he rose to the sky before she could utter another word. With heavy heart, Yeh-Shen made her way to the dung heap to gather the remains of her friend.

50 Time went by, and Yeh-Shen, who was often left alone, took comfort in speaking to the bones of her fish. When she was hungry, which happened quite often, Yeh-Shen asked the bones for food. In this way, Yeh-Shen managed to live from day to day, but she lived in dread that her stepmother would discover her secret and take even that away from her. ❷

❶ **UNIVERSAL THEME**  
Why does the stepmother kill the fish?

**collapse** (kə-läps') v.  
to fall down

❷ **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**  
Like other folk tales, the Cinderella story contains recurring stylistic elements that serve an important function in the story. One recurring element in folk tales is the magic helper. Who is the magic helper here? How is this magic helper different from the ones in the Cinderella stories you know?

2. dagger: a short, pointed weapon.

3. sage: someone known for his or her wisdom.

So the time passed and spring came. Festival time was approaching: It was the busiest time of the year. Such cooking and cleaning and sewing there was to be done! Yeh-Shen had hardly a moment's rest. At the spring festival young men and young women from the village hoped to meet and to choose whom they would marry. How Yeh-Shen  
60 longed to go! But her stepmother had other plans. She hoped to find a husband for her own daughter and did not want any man to see the beautiful Yeh-Shen first. When finally the holiday arrived, the stepmother and her daughter dressed themselves in their finery and filled their baskets with sweetmeats.<sup>4</sup> "You must remain at home now, and watch to see that no one steals fruit from our trees," her stepmother told Yeh-Shen, and then she departed for the **banquet** with her own daughter. **D**

As soon as she was alone, Yeh-Shen went to speak to the bones of her fish. "Oh, dear friend," she said, kneeling before the precious bones, "I long to go to the festival, but I cannot show myself in these rags."  
70 Is there somewhere I could borrow clothes fit to wear to the feast?" At once she found herself dressed in a gown of azure blue,<sup>5</sup> with a cloak of kingfisher feathers draped around her shoulders. Best of all, on her tiny feet were the most beautiful slippers she had ever seen. They were woven of golden threads, in a pattern like the scales of a fish, and the **glistening** soles were made of solid gold. There was magic in the shoes, for they should have been quite heavy, yet when Yeh-Shen walked, her feet felt as light as air.

"Be sure you do not lose your golden shoes," said the spirit of the bones. Yeh-Shen promised to be careful. Delighted with her transformation, she bid a fond farewell to the bones of her fish as she slipped off to join  
80 in the merrymaking. **E**

That day Yeh-Shen turned many a head as she appeared at the feast. All around her people whispered, "Look at that beautiful girl! Who can she be?"

But above this, Stepsister was heard to say, "Mother, does she not resemble our Yeh-Shen?"

Upon hearing this, Yeh-Shen jumped up and ran off before her stepsister could look closely at her. She raced down the mountainside, and in doing so, she lost one of her golden slippers. No sooner had the shoe fallen from her foot than all her fine clothes turned back to rags. Only one thing remained—a tiny golden shoe. Yeh-Shen hurried to the  
90 bones of her fish and returned the slipper, promising to find its mate. But now the bones were silent. Sadly Yeh-Shen realized that she had lost her only friend. She hid the little shoe in her bedstraw, and went outside to cry. Leaning against a fruit tree, she sobbed and sobbed until she fell asleep. **F**

**banquet** (bǎng'kwǐt)  
*n.* a dinner honoring a particular guest or occasion

**D COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

Reread lines 55–66. Why doesn't Yeh-Shen's stepmother allow her to go to the festival?

**glistening** (glī's'en-īng)  
*adj.* sparkling

**E UNIVERSAL THEME**

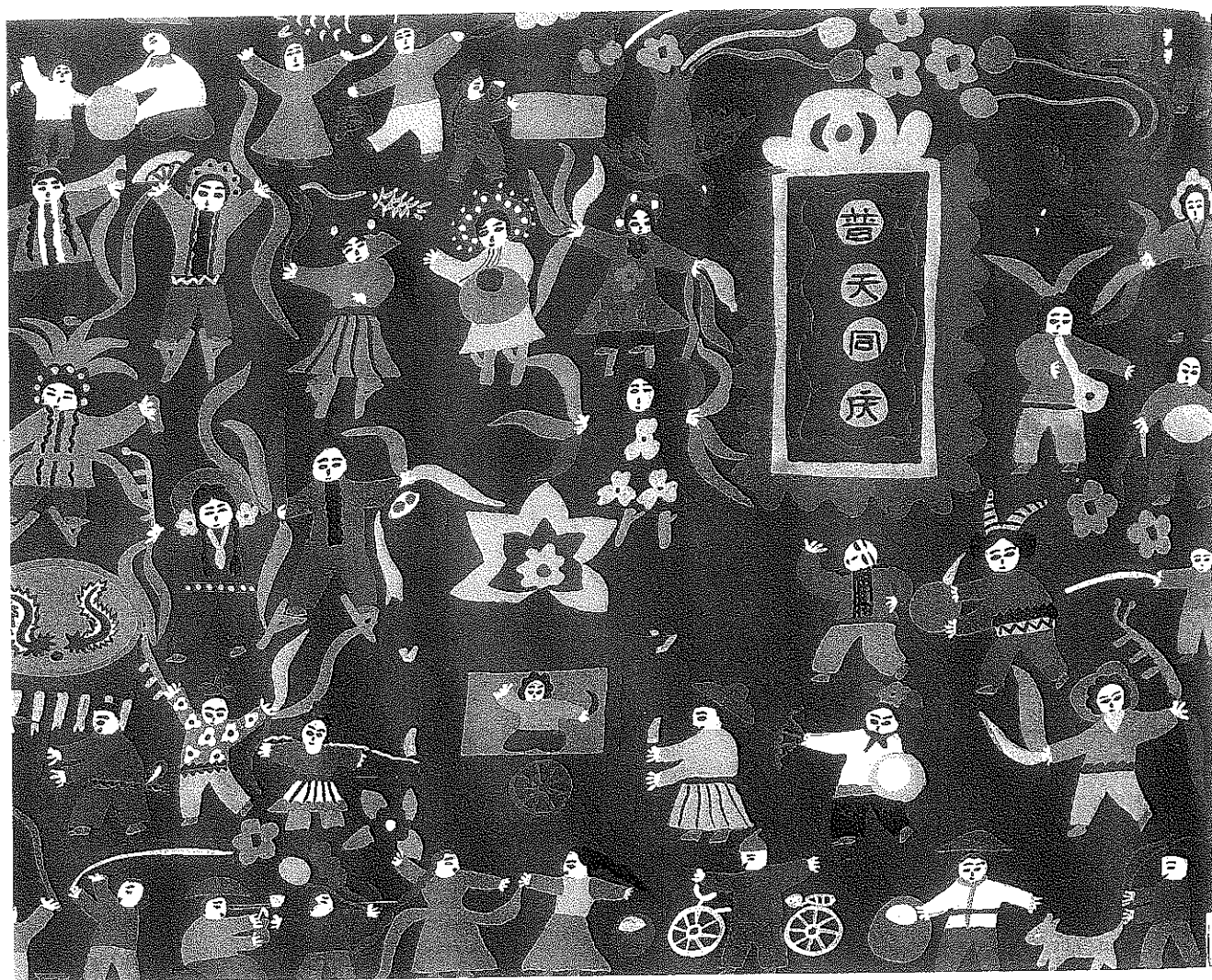
Reread the warning in line 77. What do you predict will happen to the golden slippers?

**F COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

What effect does losing the slipper have on Yeh-Shen? How is this like or unlike other Cinderella stories you have read?

4. **sweetmeats**: sweet food, such as candy.

5. **azure blue** (āzh'ēr blōō): a light purplish blue.



*Celebration* (1996), Pang Gui Chen. Watercolor. Red Lantern Folk Art, Mukashi Collection.  
© The Mukashi Collection/SuperStock.

The stepmother left the gathering to check on Yeh-Shen, but when she returned home she found the girl sound asleep, with her arms wrapped around a fruit tree. So thinking no more of her, the stepmother rejoined the party. Meantime, a villager had found the shoe. Recognizing its worth, he sold it to a merchant, who presented it in turn to the king of the island kingdom of T'o Han.

- 100 The king was more than happy to accept the slipper as a gift. He was entranced by the tiny thing, which was shaped of the most precious of metals, yet which made no sound when touched to stone. The more he marveled at its beauty, the more determined he became to find the woman to whom the shoe belonged. A search was begun among the ladies of his

### ▲ Analyze Visuals

Choose a figure from this painting that reminds you of one of the story's characters. Which character does the figure remind you of, and why?



own kingdom, but all who tried on the sandal found it impossibly small. Undaunted, the king ordered the search widened to include the cave women from the countryside where the slipper had been found. Since he realized it would take many years for every woman to come to his island and test her foot in the slipper, the king thought of a way  
 110 to get the right woman to come forward. He ordered the sandal placed in a pavilion<sup>6</sup> by the side of the road near where it had been found, and his herald announced that the shoe was to be returned to its original owner. Then from a nearby hiding place, the king and his men settled down to watch and wait for a woman with tiny feet to come and claim her slipper. ⑥

All that day the pavilion was crowded with cave women who had come to test a foot in the shoe. Yeh-Shen's stepmother and stepsister were among them, but not Yeh-Shen—they had told her to stay home. By day's end, although many women had eagerly tried to put on the slipper, it still had not been worn. Wearily, the king continued his vigil<sup>7</sup>  
 120 into the night. ①

**⑥ COMPARE AND CONTRAST**

How is the king's plan to find the owner of the slipper similar to and different from the way the prince or king in other Cinderella stories looks for the shoe's owner?

It wasn't until the blackest part of night, while the moon hid behind a cloud, that Yeh-Shen dared to show her face at the pavilion, and even then she tiptoed timidly across the wide floor. Sinking down to her knees, the girl in rags examined the tiny shoe. Only when she was sure that this was the missing mate to her own golden slipper did she dare pick it up. At last she could return both little shoes to the fish bones. Surely then her beloved spirit would speak to her again.

Now the king's first thought, on seeing Yeh-Shen take the precious slipper, was to throw the girl into prison as a thief. But when she turned  
 130 to leave, he caught a glimpse of her face. At once the king was struck by the sweet harmony of her features, which seemed so out of keeping with the rags she wore. It was then that he took a closer look and noticed that she walked upon the tiniest feet he had ever seen. ①

**① UNIVERSAL THEME**

How does the king react when he receives Yeh-Shen's missing slipper as a gift?

With a wave of his hand, the king signaled that this tattered creature was to be allowed to depart with the golden slipper. Quietly, the king's men slipped off and followed her home.

All this time, Yeh-Shen was unaware of the excitement she had caused. She had made her way home and was about to hide both sandals in her bedding when there was a pounding at the door. Yeh-Shen went to see  
 140 who it was—and found a king at her doorstep. She was very frightened at first, but the king spoke to her in a kind voice and asked her to try the

**① UNIVERSAL THEME**

Reread lines 121–133. Why does the king first think Yeh-Shen is a thief?

6. **pavilion** (pə-vīl'yon): a decorated tent.

7. **vigil** (vīj'əl): a period of observing.

golden slippers on her feet. The maiden did as she was told, and as she stood in her golden shoes, her rags were transformed once more into the feathered cloak and beautiful azure gown.

Her loveliness made her seem a heavenly being, and the king suddenly knew in his heart that he had found his true love.

Not long after this, Yeh-Shen was married to the king. But fate was not so gentle with her stepmother and stepsister. Since they had been unkind to his beloved, the king would not permit Yeh-Shen to bring them to his palace. They remained in their cave home, where one day, it is said, they were crushed to death in a shower of flying stones. 150

**UNIVERSAL THEME**  
How is Yeh-Shen rewarded in the story?



*Shadow Puppets*, Chen Lian Xing. Watercolor. Red Lantern Folk Art, Mukashi Collection.  
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### ◀ Analyze Visuals

Notice how the figures in this painting are dressed. Compare them with how you imagined Yeh-Shen and the king looked.

# Sootface

## An Ojibwa Cinderella Story

Retold by Robert D. San Souci

Once, an Ojibwa man whose wife had died raised three daughters alone. They lived in a village beside a lake, deep in a forest of birch.

The sisters were supposed to share the work of gathering firewood, cooking food, and sewing clothes from skins their father provided.

The two older girls, though pretty enough, were lazy and bad-tempered. When their father was away hunting, they gave most of the work to their youngest sister. The flames from the cooking fire singed her hair and burned her skin. Sometimes her sisters beat her and smeared her face with ashes. Then they made fun of her and called her Sootface.

10 Poor Sootface's eyes were always sad and tired, but her sisters only gave her more work. At evening her **eldest** sister cried, "Hurry, lazy Sootface! Fetch some wood to make a fire. Cook the deer meat, for we are hungry."

In the morning, her middle sister said, "Hurry, lazy Sootface! Clean the ashes from last night's fire. Brush the mats, gather berries, and bring fresh water. Our father will soon return from hunting." Ⓐ

### Analyze Visuals ▶

What do the details in this illustration help you to infer about the girl?

**eldest** (ě'l'dýst) *adj.*  
oldest

Ⓐ **UNIVERSAL THEME**  
What terrible situation is Sootface in?

When the hunter returned, he saw poor Sootface and asked, "What has happened to my youngest child?"

The eldest sister said, "That one is so clumsy, she fell over her own feet and rolled through the ashes."

20 And the middle sister said, "We tell her to be careful, not to go too near the fire, but she will not heed us."

Sootface was too afraid of her sisters to argue; she just kept on working. All the while, she sang a little song to herself:

*Oh, I am thinking,  
Oh, I am dreaming,  
That even ugly as I am,  
I will someday find a husband. B*

Her sisters took the best skins to make dresses and moccasins for themselves. Sootface had only scraps to sew into a skirt and a worn-out  
30 pair of her father's moccasins, grown stiff with age. When she walked to the lake to fetch water, the young men would nudge each other and point and laugh.

**N**ow, there was a mighty warrior who lived with his sister in a wigwam across the lake from the village. A great medicine man had given him the power to make himself invisible. No one from the village had ever seen him, though they saw his white moccasins when his sister hung them beside the door flap. They saw the flap rise and fall when he entered or left his wigwam.

The villagers knew he was a great hunter, for they watched his sister  
40 skin and dry all the deer, elk, and other game that her brother brought her. Though no one but his sister could see him, the women of the village were sure that he was very handsome.

One day, the invisible warrior told his sister, "Go to the village across the water, and say that I will marry the woman who can see me. This means that she has a kind and honest heart. Each day I will carry my magic bow. The woman who tells you what my bow and bowstring are made of will be my bride." C

His sister brought this message to the village people. One by one the young women came to visit the lone wigwam. Each carefully  
50 braided her hair, dressed in her softest deerskin skirt and moccasins, and wore her finest necklaces of shells or beads.

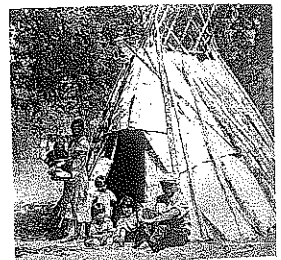
The invisible hunter's sister greeted each young woman kindly. But when she asked them to tell her what her brother looked like,

**B UNIVERSAL THEME**

Reread lines 16–27.

Why doesn't Sootface's father help her?

**VISUAL VOCABULARY**



**wigwam** (wĭg'wŏm')  
*n.* a Native American dwelling, usually having an arched or conelike shape

**C UNIVERSAL THEME**

Reread lines 43–47.

Based on your knowledge of other Cinderella stories, who do you predict will pass this test?



and what his bow and bowstring were made of, each young woman failed the test, and was sent home.

This went on for a long time. At last, Sootface's eldest sister said that she was going to visit the invisible hunter.

She brushed her hair until it gleamed, and had Sootface braid it for her. Then she went on her way, wrapped in her best deerskin robe and wearing  
60 her finest beaded moccasins. She met the hunter's sister beside the lake. Soon they saw white moccasins approaching.

"Can you see my brother?" asked his sister.

"Oh, yes," lied the eldest sister.

"Of what is his bow made?"

"Birch."

"And with what is it strung?"

"Rawhide."

"You did not see my brother," the other woman said.

The eldest sister went home in a bad temper. She yelled at Sootface  
70 and gave her more work to do.

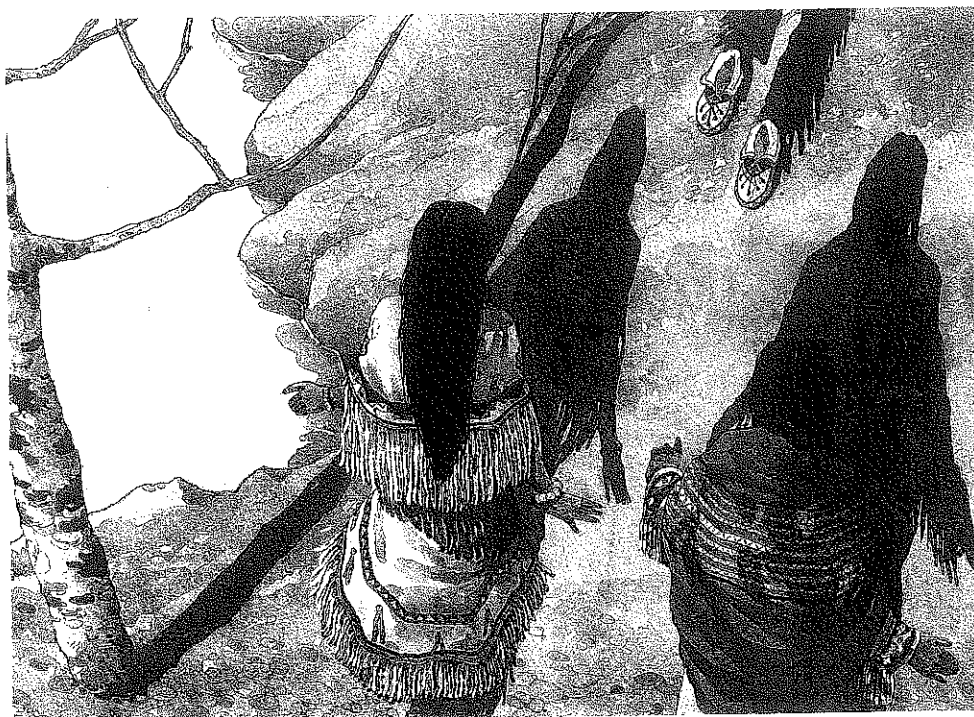
The middle sister, who thought herself clever, decided to try her luck. She hung strings of pale shells at her throat and had Sootface weave some into her long braids. Off she went, sure she would become the lucky bride.

As she walked with the hunter's sister, she saw the white moccasins approaching. Quickly, she said, "Here comes your brother now."

"Of what is his bow made?" asked the hunter's sister.

### Language Coach

**Speaker Tags** Notice that in some lines of dialogue, the speaker is not directly identified. In dialogue, *he said*, *she yelled*, *the eldest sister asked*, and other identifying phrases are called speaker tags. Speaker tags tell you immediately who is talking. At times, though, too many **speaker tags** in a running dialogue become repetitive and annoying, so the writer leaves them out. Reread lines 62–68. Who is speaking in the lines without speaker tags? How can you tell?



### ◀ Analyze Visuals

What do you notice about the shadows in this illustration?

"Horn," said the middle sister, thinking of the finest bow she could imagine.

"And with what is it strung?"

80 "Braided horsehair," said the middle sister, pleased at her own cleverness. But the other woman shook her head. "You have not seen my brother." ❶ The middle sister arrived home in a fury. She scolded Sootface and smeared more ashes on her face.

The next day, Sootface decided to visit the hunter's lodge as her sisters had done. She begged her eldest sister, "Sister, let me wear your white shell necklace, softest skirt, and moccasins. I want to go and seek a husband."

But her sister refused, saying, "You would only make my clothes as sooty as yourself."

Then Sootface begged her second sister, "Sister, help me wash and braid 90 my hair, so I may go and seek a husband."

But her sister said, "The fire has burned your hair too short to braid. And I do not want my hands dirtied by the ash that clings to you."

Sootface was stung by their unkindness. But she was determined to present herself to the warrior and his sister. She went alone into the woods. There she said, "Sister birch tree, share your soft white skin with me. Then I can wear a new skirt when I go to seek a husband."

Sootface took strips of birch bark and sewed them together to make a skirt. She wove herself a necklace of wildflowers, and soaked her old, stiff moccasins in a spring until they grew softer. Next, she washed her 100 face and hair as best she could. Her hair was too short to braid, so she added flowers to it, all the while singing:

*Soon, I am thinking,  
Soon, I am dreaming,  
That I will find a husband.  
I am sure it will be so.*

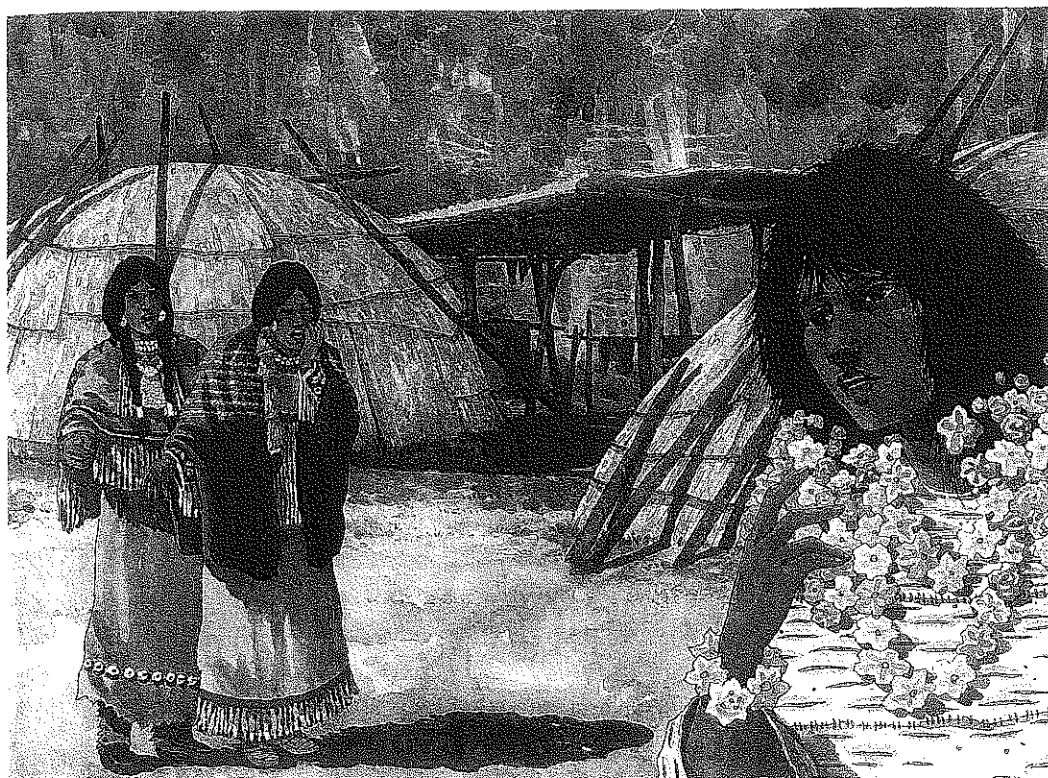
But when she passed through the village, dressed in the finery the forest had provided, her eldest sister cried, "You are so ugly and foolish-looking, go inside at once!"

"You will shame us before the hunter and his sister," called Sootface's 110 middle sister.

But Sootface walked on as though they were no more than chattering birds in the trees. ❷

❶ **UNIVERSAL THEME**  
Why can't the two sisters see the warrior's bow and bowstrings?

❷ **COMPARE AND CONTRAST**  
Reread lines 93–112. Based on what you have read so far, how would you describe Sootface? How is she similar to and different from other Cinderella characters you know?



### ◀ Analyze Visuals

Based on her facial expression in the illustration, how would you describe Sootface's reaction to her sisters' comments?

When her sisters saw that she would not listen to them, they began to laugh at her. To friends and neighbors, the eldest sister said, "Come, see little Sootface. Her clothes are birch bark and weeds. Her moccasins are stiff and cracked. Yet she goes to find a husband!"

Next the middle sister shouted, "Look at little Sootface! Her hair is burned too short for braids. The smell of cook fires clings to her. Still she hopes to find a husband!"

120 Soon all the village was laughing at her. But the young woman continued on her way, never once looking back. **1**

**A**fter a time Sootface met the hunter's sister, who was drawing water from the lake. She greeted Sootface kindly, and they began talking.

Suddenly, Sootface said, "There is a handsome man walking toward us. Do you know him?"

The hunter's sister said, "You can see him?"

"Yes, he is carrying a beautiful bow."

"Of what is his bow made?"

"A rainbow!"

### **2** COMPARE AND CONTRAST

What stylistic elements—such as the magic helper, the rule of three, and supernatural transformations—have you seen in this Cinderella story so far? What elements have you not seen?

130 "And how is it strung?"

"With white fire, like the Milky Way, the Path of Souls."

The hunter's sister **embraced** Sootface, crying, "You are going to be my brother's bride and my own sister!"

She led Sootface to the wigwam. There she poured water into a big pot and mixed in sweet-smelling herbs. Sootface found her hurt and sadness washed away as easily as the ashes from her face.

The hunter's sister gave her a dress of soft white buckskin decorated with beads and quillwork. Then she combed Sootface's hair with a magic comb that made it long and thick and shiny as a blackbird's wing. This  
140 she plaited<sup>1</sup> into braids.

"You have made me beautiful," said Sootface when she looked at her reflection in the pot of water.

"Your beauty was merely hidden beneath the scars and ashes," said the other woman kindly. Then she called her brother into the lodge.

"What is your name?" the young man asked gently.

"Sootface," the girl said, blushing.

He smiled and shook his head. "Your eyes shine with such joy that I will call you Dawn-Light. Today I will carry a gift of game to your family as a sign of our betrothal."<sup>2</sup>

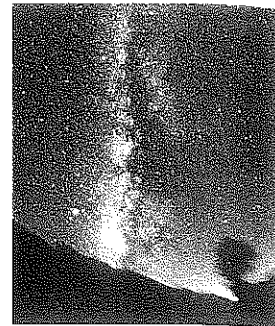
150 Then his sister said, "Come, radiant Dawn-Light, and sit beside my brother. Claim the wife's place by the door flap. From now on this is your home."

At these words, Dawn-Light exclaimed:

*Now, I am happy,  
Now, I am certain,  
That I have found my husband,  
My new sister and new home.*

They were married soon after. Everyone was pleased, except Dawn-Light's two older sisters, who had to do all the cooking and  
160 cleaning themselves now. ❧ ❧

## SCIENCE CONNECTION



The Milky Way is the galaxy that contains our solar system. In the night sky, it can be seen as a broad band of light.

**embrace** (əm-brās') v.  
to hold close

❧ **CINDERELLA STORY**  
How is Sootface rewarded in the story?

1. **plaited**: folded or braided.

2. **betrothal**: a promise to marry.