

## Analysis of Death and The Maiden by Elfriede Jelinek from The Prospective of Gender Poetics

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### Abstract

Feminist literary criticism began in the 1960s. Till now, the research has entered its third stage. As a major theory put forward in this stage, “gender poetics” has been widely recognized by litterateurs for being more objective and theoretical than traditional feminist literary criticism. This paper selects *Death and the Maiden*, a mini collection of plays written by Elfriede Jelinek as the research object. Some scholars define Jelinek as an “extreme feminist writer”, but this conclusion is not accurate. Therefore, from the perspective of “gender poetics”, this paper will deeply analyze this work to prove that the theme of *Death and the Maiden* has surpassed the traditional feminism to reach the height of gender poetics.

### Keywords

Elfriede Jelinek; *Death and The Maiden*; Gender poetics.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction of Elfriede Jelinek

Elfriede Jelinek, recipient of the 2004 Nobel Prize in literature, has been acknowledged as a distinguished female writer in world literature of the 20th century. Born in Mürzzuschlag, Austria in 1946, Jelinek intensively spent her adolescence on learning various sorts of music instruments, including piano, organ and recorder, which eventually sent her into the Vienne Conservatory of Music for further education. There, although majoring in composition, Jelinek also minored in theater and art history, contributing to her later success in literature.

Elfriede Jelinek’s works features challenges for her contemporaries with strong color of feminism against gender oppression and criticism of patriarchal society. In the mid 1960s, Elfriede Jelinek, a rising star in the literary firmament, made her literary debut with a collection of poems named *Lisa’s Shadow*, followed by other novels and plays. In the 1970s and 1980s, Jelinek conquered the Germany literature market with three published novels—*Women as Lovers* (1975), *The Piano Teacher* (1988), and *Wonderful Times* (1990). Among them, *The Piano Teacher*, which tells a story about the love affair between a 38-year-old female piano teacher and her 17-year-old student, exposes a searing portrait of a woman struggling between social repression on women and her innate human desires. There is no doubt that this provocative work aroused fierce debate at first but was ultimately proven to be instructive to the gender relations by being adapted into film with joint efforts of Germany, Poland, France, Austria. Besides, the novel *Lust* went viral in Germany soon after being published in 1989, preserving her stability as a best-selling author. She has been awarded the Heinrich Böll Prize, the Büchner Prize, and the Kessing Prize for Criticism, while it was the Noble Prize of literature that truly attracted global attention to her fantastic works.

“I feel very happy to receive the Nobel Prize, but also feel despair for becoming a known, a person of the public,” said Elfriede Jelinek. With such a low profile Jelinek has kept for years, we have failed to peek into her minds through interviews. In a long period, even till now, the

outside world is holding distinctive attitudes towards Elfriede Jelinek and her works. Communist Party chairman Walter Baier hailed Jelinek as “a feminist and one of the most important voices of ‘the other Austria’”. At the same time, numerous literary critics, especially phalocrats, distained Jelinek as nothing but a “deviant” and her works as “heresy”. Despite of those continuous debates, the answer to the characteristics of Elfriede Jelinek and her stance at gender issues could only be probed in her works.

## 1.2. Introduction of Death and The Maiden

Death and The Maiden, a play collection written by Elfriede Jelinek, was published in 2005, shortly after she won the Nobel Prize for literature. The title, Death and The Maiden, comes from Franz Schubert’s Fourteenth String Quartet which produces a sombre atmosphere in the presence of death. The collection is made up of 6 short chapters with 7 typical female figures, including two princesses in fairy tales (Snow White and Sleeping Beauty), Ancient Cyprus princess (Rosamunde), two writers (Ingeborg Bachmann and Sylvia Plath) and contemporary model women (Jackie Onassis and Princess Diana). These characters, no matter fake or dead, now have been re-endowed with breath and voice by Elfriede Jelinek to express their inner thoughts. Different from traditional plays which feature turbulent plots, well-designed conflicts and distinct characters, Death and The Maiden simply applies dialogue and monologue to bring their reckless and ruthless analysis of men and self-analysis on the stage, manifesting protagonists’ philosophical attitudes towards gender and death.

## 1.3. Literature Review

Unlike Jelinek’s literary hits, like *The Piano Teacher* and *Lust*, *Death and The Maiden* has not drawn a huge readership and fierce discussion among western literary critics since its publishment, and even has not been translated into English version. The sinking of this collection can be partly attributed to the obscurity of its language and the monotonousness of its narration form.

Despite of its little-known situation in western countries, in recent years it has aroused Chinese readers and scholars’ interest since the emergence of its Chinese version translated by Wei Yuqing and Wang Binbin in 2013. From the prospective of dramatic aesthetics and linguistics, Jiang Shanxiu (2010) interpreted the migration process from fairy tale to the stage as a construction process of semantic space where characters re-experience the past situation, or the previous life with modern consciousness. From the prospective of literary rhetoric, Li Xiaoling (2012) analyzed irony Elfriede Jelinek used in *Death and The Maiden* which ensures the writer a detached, objective and even joking posture. Accordingly, based on her awareness of irony, Jelinek was defined as a woman wandering in the “grey zone” between a feminist, an erotic writer and an existentialist who struggles for individual freedom. Besides, most literature analysis are centered around feminism views of Jelinek implied in *Death and The Maiden*. As illustrated by Shen Qingli and Shang Yufeng, throughout this play, Jelinek exposes the slavish ideas in women’s subconsciousness and modern women’s conflicts and dilemma. Even though Elfriede Jelinek is widely acknowledged as a feminist writer, controversy over her stance as a radical feminist or a postmodern feminist has not died down till now.

## 2. Theoretical Development

### 2.1. Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminism literary criticism, also called feminist criticism and feminist literary theory, is a literary form of criticism that gives an analysis of writing through the feminist perspective. According to Barry (2010), the feminist literary critic of today is the direct product of the women’s movement of the 1960s [1]. Feminism literary criticism basically aims at investigating and tracing out how female characters have been positioned in literature compared with male

characters in terms of social and biological factors of different ages of the past started from antiquity [2].

Contrary to being invariable, Feminist literary criticism has endured for hundreds of years through ceaseless fights with patriarchal consciousness and internal reforms. The process of development could be generally divided into three main stages. The first stage, also called “women’s image criticism”, lasted from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. In this short period, the awakening of female consciousness pushed some early works onto the literature stage, which mainly focused on how the female images are distorted in traditional literature and the patriarchal consciousness in traditional literary criticism, including *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf and *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett. It was in Virginia Woolf’s typical book *A Room of One’s Own* that she cited from a poet Coleridge to illustrate that “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly [3].” This marked the first time to put forward the concept of “woman-manly” and “man-womanly”, accounting for Woolf’s superior ideology beyond the time to be appreciated as what later discussed as “gender poetics”. The second stage was called “women-centered criticism” from the middle 1970s to the middle 1980s. Compared with works in the former “women’s image criticism”, works in this stage paid more attention to the female image in works written by women and the differences of female characters written by men and women, including *A Literature of Their Own* by Elaine Showalter, *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar and *Literary Women* by Ellen Moers. In the book *The Madwoman in The Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar masterly analyzed the similarities and differences of 8 writers in England and America to illustrate the challenges brought by Victorian patriarchal society. The theme of imprisonment and escape in their work also reflects the confinement women experienced in Victorian times. One typical example is the analysis of *Jane Eyre*, in which women’s characteristics are divided into “angel” and “monster” [4] — two concepts seemingly contradict but factually concomitant in a woman’s body. The period from the late 1980s to the present is the third stage called “Identity Criticism”, which intends to develop feminist literary criticism into an interdisciplinary and transgender culture. It was in this period that a hot subject named “Gender Poetics” emerged.

## 2.2. Gender Poetics

Gender poetics origins from Virginia Woolf’s theory of “woman-manly or man-womanly” and is largely influenced by Western Philosophy like Marxism. Marx pointed out it in *Theses on Feuerbach* that “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations [5].” Since the beginning of the 21st century, many Chinese scholars have put emphasis on the studies of gender poetics. Lin Shuming(2000) depicted gender poetics as a kind of tolerant eclecticism in feminist literary theory and criticism [6]. Another scholar Wan Lianzi(2005) compared traditional feminist literary criticism with gender poetics and recognized gender poetics as a more objective standard for academic research and literary criticism [7]. Besides, Ren Yiming(2004) raised two objects of gender poetics studies — One is the issue of gender in literary creation, regardless of the gender of the writer; the other is the complexity and contradiction between gender roles and their identities affected by gender, race, class, era and economy<sup>[8]</sup>. Based on these founded theories, this essay will mainly analyze *Death and The Maiden* by Elfriede Jelinek from the prospective of gender poetics.

### 3. Work Analysis

#### 3.1. Trans-Century Battle between Genders

Different from former feminist works which mainly focus on the psychological states of men and women, *Death and The Maiden* bravely starts from the physical imbalance between male and female in sexual intercourse. In Chapter 2, *Sleeping Beauty* features what Darwin called "inferior women" who have little self-consciousness and try to prove their worth through catering to male's sex demand. As narrated in the dialogue between *Sleeping Beauty* and the Prince, "He put on a fluffy costume with a large penis on it, then handed *Sleeping Beauty* a white fluffy rabbit costume with a prominent pubic." Here, sex no longer serves as a symbol of love, but the simplest and roughest tool men use to suppress women. By clearly adopting sensitive vocabulary about sex, like "penis" and "pubic", Jelinek cruelly exposes the advanced position of male at the starting line and the bloody sexual battles between genders ending up with female's surrender.

If male wins a complete triumph in the natural sexual battle, then a few women perform remarkably in the arduous battle of social status, like *Jacqueline* and *Princess Diana*. Nevertheless, Jelinek indicates that it is how they get social proof rather than their identity that determines the conclusion of the battle. *Princess Diana*, protagonist of Chapter 6, is appreciated by Jelinek as a woman who gains her reputation with her personal charisma. As Jelinek said, "She brings darkness and light together by allowing the men and women, the human beings, to know themselves in some way, perhaps for the first time, and at the same time letting everyone know that she has the power over the power." Unlike, in Chapter 4, *Jacqueline*, who has gained the identity of "first lady" in American, still fails to be recognized as the winner of this battle, since she defines herself as an appendage of her husband *John F. Kennedy* and struggles for higher status by pleasing a man with power. This coincides with Milton's lines that "He for God only; She for God in him". Considering that the nature of high social status has transcended exalted positions to how powerful influence a person exerts on the public, only women independently standing on themselves have the power to win this battle.

With the awakening of female consciousness, the battle of social status has been further promoted to the battle of ideological emancipation. In this period, the long-term oppression of the patriarchal society has made a view deeply rooted in most women's hearts that they have no possibility of escaping from men to be absolutely independent unit. Fortunately, female writers like *Sylvia Plath*, largely influenced by preceding literature, valiantly resisted the social restraints men had imposed on women. In Chapter 5, Jelinek shapes *Sylvia* and her mate as priests, an identity used to be only accessible to men. They kill rams and smear the blood on their body as a means of challenging males. Indeed, they make progress in this long-term battle, but pitifully, there still exists a high wall between them and what they desire for—love, power, freedom and equality. As a result, advanced women like *Sylvia Plath* have been reduced to an embarrassing and lonely position where they suffer both the isolation from traditional females and the agony from males. Despite of the miserable fate of the pioneers, this ideological battle still marches intensely in the contemporary society and appeals for more human beings to fight for a balance between the genders.

#### 3.2. Disintegration of Women

For women repressed by the patriarchal society for centuries, "servility" has melted into their blood as a basically common characteristic. At the very beginning of *Death and The Maiden*, Jelinek mercilessly reveals this phenomenon by exposing the mental activities of *Snow White*, a household fairy tale character, before the pubic. *Snow White* defines herself, "I'm beautiful, so I'm always successful." Here, "success" refers to neither high social status nor fulfillment of personal value, but the possess of the unreliable admiration of men. Men tend to utilize

knowledge and strength as their weapon while women have nothing but their appearance. And according to Snow White's description, "My stepmother is always made for someone else." Although Snow White and her stepmother are distinctive in terms of characteristics and destiny, none of them has escaped from the restraints of their inborn "servility" to male. Generally speaking, all the female characters reshaped by Jelinek are not divided up to traditional standards like appearance, political status, and fictional or not, but to what extent they have find themselves as a female.

Partially for the emergence and development of women's movement, conflicts in the female group have been unprecedentedly escalated. According to Jelinek, the first conflict is the complexity and struggle of feminine ethics [9] lying in each woman. For Sleeping Beauty, dignity submits to existence. For Sylvia Plath, love and companion gives way to the emancipation of female. The second conflict appears among servile women who fiercely fight for the attention and affection of men. As to Kennedy's infidelity, Jacqueline blindly vindicates her husband and admires him at "a drug with great attraction". Rather, she attributes all the faults to Marilyn Monroe and scorns her as "a vulnerable light". The third conflict put forward by Jelinek is the one between feminists and traditional servile women. In Chapter 4, Jacqueline also comments on female writers like Sylvia Plath. "Women like Plath can never be an icon, and if she can, it's only by silly women who think she has a peculiar rationality. It is absurd." For women like Jacqueline who achieve "success" by catering to men, the struggle of feminists seems like nothing more than a waste of time. Such view comes from the early family education from Jacqueline's mother and will be passed on to the next generation. Hence, no matter in which period, the inner conflicts of female group are more likely to reduce feminists into predicament than male's suppression.

### 3.3. Tragic Androcentrism of Men

Gender poetics advocates the analysis of gender relationships from the prospective of both men and women. In *Death and The Maiden*, by designing dialogues between the two genders, Elfriede Jelinek attaches great essence to not only feminism but also androcentrism, which refers to the tendency to place the masculine viewpoint and experience at the center of a society or culture. In Chapter 2, the Prince compels Sleeping Beauty to sex to reinforce his position as "the God" who abrogates time and uses a kiss to endow her with life. It reflects that the main male group have become extremely self-centered and overstate their superiority in the gender relationship. In the long term, the distorted self-cognition may result in not only conflicts between genders, but also a sense of unevenness in their own destiny.

The other trans-gender dialogue created by Jelinek is the one between Rosamunde, a fictional Princess of Cyprus, and her husband Fulvio. In this chapter, Jelinek involves herself into the body of Rosamunde and directly dialogues with Fulvio, a representative of Androcentrism. When Rosamunde frankly discloses her identity as Miss. Independent and a staunch feminist, Fulvio gradually loses his mask of detachment. "Oh, if only you didn't get well-known. It sucks! You focus on fame and boast that it smiles on you. You ignore me and announce my insignificance since you're always chasing something else!" Accustomed to being surrounded and revered by women, men like Fulvio find it absolutely unacceptable to lose the attention of women. However, the trend of feminism has brought more women like Rosamunde into reality and has intensified the anxiety within androcentrism and patriarchalism. The question has been raised that how to bring men out of this awkward position. In Chapter 5, Jelinek gives her answer by shaping a boy called Cronus who cut off his father's genitals. The sarcastic description of the son's unethical behavior happens to reveal Jelinek's appeal for the awakening of consciousness and self-revolution in the male group to save the future of both men and women.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Elfriede Jelinek's Attitudes Toward Gender

In *Death and The Maiden*, Elfriede Jelinek's discussion of gender problems goes far beyond the dilemma of females and their rebellion in the patriarchal society to involve the tragic situation of male into consideration. Despite of her extreme plot design and rough language, Jelinek has reached the level of gender poetics higher than mere feminist literary criticism. To deeply dig out her attitudes towards the two genders, we find that she has exploded out of her natural identity as a female to be what Woolf appreciated as "woman-manly". Hiding behind the stage, sometimes she rigorously satirizes or criticizes *Sleeping Beauty* and *Jacqueline* for their "servility" and hostility towards feminists; sometimes she sympathizes the Prince and Fulvio for their confusion over self-image and self-value. From these details, Elfriede Jelinek cannot be defined as a radical feminist who put male at the opposite.

### 4.2. Elfriede Jelinek's Interpretation of Death

It is inaccurate to discard *Death and The Maiden* into the ocean of feminist works and inaccurate to attach the label of "feminist writer" to Jelinek. In Huang Ruhui's words, she is a warrior instead. [10] In addition to gender relationship as its primary theme, Elfriede Jelinek brings other life issues into the creation of *Death and The Maiden*, including "love and responsibility", "interpretation of success" and the most important one, "life and death". All the characters in this collection, male or female, noble or humble, fictional or real, become powerless in front of death. All the life issues humans struggling with for centuries become insignificant faced with death. "Death is the ultimate truth." This short sentence is not only what the hunter advised Snow White, but also the profound life truth of life Elfriede Jelinek manifests before us.

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