

Feminist Image in Grimm's Fairy Tales from the Perspective of Feminist Criticism

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Abstract

Feminist criticism was born in Europe and America in the late 1960s and early 1970s and is still developing. It is the result of the upsurge of Western feminist movement and goes deep into the field of culture and literature, so it has a relatively distinct political tendency. Since its birth, it has strong practicality, political tendency and passion to intervene in reality. It is a criticism centered on women, and its research objects include women's image, creation and reading. Feminist criticism aims at reviewing and revising the concepts which were earlier considered universal but which actually originate in particular cultures and serve particular goals. This paper attempts to use feminist criticism theory to make a new interpretation of Grimm's Fairy Tales from three aspects: the shaping of the mother image, the "absent" father and the "present" mother, and the happy ending, so as to reveal the expression of gender rights and status and the setting of a happy ending in this work produced under the background of patriarchal culture. In essence, they all express the ideology of patriarchal culture and convey the female image stipulated in the vision of patriarchal culture.

Keywords

Feminist criticism; Grimm's fairy tales; Feminist image.

1. Introduction

Feminist criticism began as a kind of revolution against the traditional literary criticism, which was male-centered that considered women's writing as inferior. A feeling prevailed among the traditional literary critics that women were incapable of any abstract thought and theorizing. The feminist critics were aware of the fact that criticism till then had been male dominated and the critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers. Feminist criticism wishes to redefine our concept of human nature and reality and thereby challenge the traditional concerns of literary criticism including established canons and ways of reading. Under the background of western culture, the ideology of women's dependence and obedience to men can be found everywhere. The earliest can be traced back to Genesis in the Bible. According to records, when God created man, he first created man Adam, and then took a rib from him to create woman Eve in order to eliminate his loneliness and loneliness. From here, we can see the ideological root of "men are superior to women": women can only depend on men, and they are "bone in bones, flesh in flesh" for men.

2. An Overview of Feminist Criticism Theory

2.1. The Background of Feminist Criticism

The emergence of feminist criticism was marked by the publication of *The Politics of Sex* in 1970. In this doctoral dissertation, which aims to "dissect how literature and political philosophy have carefully conspired against sexual equality," author Kate Millett argues and

uses literary texts as the basis for her analysis of sexual politics, articulating her understanding of a radical feminist theory of patriarchy. The author focuses on the framework of the theoretical framework in the first and second parts of the book, and the third part, *The Use of Sex in Literature*, is a model of literary criticism. The background of feminist criticism mainly includes the following two aspects. Western feminist criticism can be divided into three schools: British, French, and American in terms of emphasis and methods. British feminist criticism emphasizes oppression and belongs to Marxism; French feminist criticism emphasizes repression, focusing on the study of theory and language, and belongs to psychoanalysis; American feminist criticism emphasizes expression and belongs to text analysis, and its literary criticism is basically based on women. In addition, black and lesbian female criticism also enriches feminist criticism with unique content.

2.1.1. Realistic conditions

Firstly, the rise of feminist criticism is attributed to the emergence, development and expansion of feminist movement. It is generally believed that the birth of feminist criticism is the product of the second climax of feminist movement in the 1960s. The United States has experienced a civil rights movement for blacks to enjoy the same power and equal status with whites in politics. The American women's movement and the black movement echo each other; Women participated in the anti-war movement against American participation in the Vietnam War. In France, the student movement and the workers' movement are changing, and women participate and fight side by side with men. However, when they strive for equal social rights and interests for others, they deeply feel the gender discrimination from male "comrades in arms". Therefore, in order to strive for gender equality, they launched a large-scale "women's Liberation Movement", recognized and evaluated the western culture, society, literature, history, politics and other fields from the perspective of transforming society, and theoretically sought the root causes and solutions of gender inequality.

2.1.2. Ideological conditions

In terms of theoretical ideas and methods, feminist criticism has absorbed nutrition from the major turning points of western literary theory and criticism since the 1960s, and widely absorbed and transformed many critical ideas and theories such as Western Marxism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, New Historicism and so on. For example, feminism accepts the viewpoint of Western Marxism, pays attention to the analysis of the reasons why women's creation has been suppressed and buried for a long time from their economic status, and uses the method of class analysis to replace class with gender, and makes a social and historical analysis of it; Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, is not only the target of feminist attack, but also the theoretical source they borrow. Feminist critics broke through the formalist method of new criticism, paid attention to the biographical materials of writers, and paid attention to the analysis of sociology and culture. Deconstruction attempts to dispel all dualism, which provides a methodological basis for feminism to dispel the dualism between men and women in literary creation and works.

2.2. Developmental Stages of Feminist Criticism

2.2.1. The First Stage

It mainly emphasizes the attack on male sexism and exposes the distortion and devaluation of women in literary works, which has played a very important role in the development of feminism. The classic works of feminism at this stage include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in 1929. The former mainly expounds women's rights as rational human subjects, and the latter advocates the economic and artistic independence of women's literature.

2.2.2. The Second Stage

It focuses on women writers and their works, and discusses the plot structure of women's works. During this period, a large number of publications on women's issues emerged, and many works on women's theoretical research were published, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* in 1792, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1970, Simon Beauvoir's *Second Sex* in 1949, etc^[1]. *Second Sex* breaks the traditional view that gender is born. In this book, Beauvoir believes that the so-called physiological gender is given and imposed, which makes people's gender distinction appear. In terms of gender, there are great differences between men and women. Women are regarded as low gender, while men are in a superior position, which fully shows the inequality of society. Although Beauvoir's analysis only stays at the static level, it shows the efforts to combine theoretical elaboration with text analysis, which provides the initial blueprint for the later turn of feminist criticism^[2].

2.2.3. The Third Stage

Critics began to reflect on the purpose and function of literary criticism and re-understand the essence of critical theory. At the same time, they also began to reflect on the indifference, contempt, doubt and even hostility of early feminist critics to literary theory. Elaine Showalter summarized and developed the theories of the 1960s and 1970s and founded the theory of gynocritics. Both Myra Jehlen and Annette Croodney regard diversified criticism as the model of feminist criticism^[3]. Annette Croodney believes that feminist criticism should use diversified ways to freely choose the reading strategies provided by a variety of literary theories. Myra Jehlen proposed that feminist criticism should break out of its boundaries and think about the whole gender issue or the relationship between men and women.

2.3. Claims of Feminist Criticism

Feminists try to challenge and de-construct male dominated ways of seeing. It is for this reason Raman Selden observes that "feminist criticism sometimes summons up the anger of the furies to disturb the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture and to create a less oppressive climate for women writers and readers". The suppression of women does not remain confined to the family structure only. Critics like Dale Spender believe that women have been oppressed by a male-dominated language, and hence it makes sense for the women writers to contest men's control of languages rather than merely to retreat into a ghetto of feminist discourse. The focus of women writers and the study of representation of differences in women's writings is termed as 'gynocriticism' by Showalter which is explained by her as the history of styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual or the collective female career and the evolution and laws of a female framework for the analysis of women's literature and develops new models based on the study of female experience.

Feminist criticism requires a new interpretation of literary works with a female vision, and fiercely criticizes the distortion of women's image in male literature; It tries to explore the female literary tradition different from men and reevaluate the history of literature; It discusses female consciousness in literature, studies women's unique ways of writing and expression, and pays attention to the creative situation of women writers; It denounces the oppression of male centered traditional culture on women's creation and advocates a feminist way of writing. In the process of its development, feminist criticism has extensively transformed and absorbed the critical ideas and methods of new Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and new historicism, which have a great influence in the contemporary west, reflected its openness and enhanced its subversion of patriarchal culture^[4].

Feminist criticism is, indeed a critique of the sex-gender system. While sex is biological-given gender is a social construct, constructed so as to satisfy the male flair for domination. As John Stuart Mill observes the generality of the male sex cannot tolerate the idea of living with equal

people. The construction of gender signifies men attempt to secure control over biological reproduction. Here lies an explanation for the construction of femininity patriarchy with its twin images of women as, on the one hand the sexual property of men, and on the other, the chaste mothers of their children. Male and female are biological categories masculinity and femininity is social definition. Michele Barrett argues that so far as gender is concerned "it is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning as not simply difference but as division oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women". Feminist criticism is a protest against the fact that women are considered inferior and they are devalued as the second sex.

3. Feminist Images in Grimm's Fairy Tales

3.1. Image of Mother

In Grimm's Fairy Tales, there are generally two extreme types of mother images, either cruel and evil, or gentle and kind. These two images respectively symbolize the duality of demons and angels. The women in the story, such as stepmothers or witches, often have the characteristics of the devil and are classified as the first category. They are active in the story, and it is their sharp conflict with the heroine that drives the development of the story. While beautiful and kind mothers often have angelic features and are classified as the second category, they usually recede to the edge of the story, or even disappear completely. And the heroines in these stories are often pure and kind teenage girls. Under the persecution of their devil-like mothers, they turn to seek the protection of more powerful men, the so-called "prince charming", so that they can make themselves escape from the "weak" demon mothers compared with men, and finally obtain their functional identity-wife and mother.

In most stories of Grimm's Fairy Tales, there are many fierce and hateful devil images of stepmothers, who persecute the heroine, and these devil mothers will always fall into the terrible fate of betrayal and separation. The stepmother in Cinderella tries to make her own daughter the prince's bride, but the two bad sisters, whose behavior is comparable to her mother, are blinded and punished "justly"; the abuse in *The Juniper Tree*, the terrifying stepmother, who was killed by her stepson and who tricked her husband into drinking soup, was crushed to death by a grinding wheel; in *Snow White*, the princess came back to life and held a grand wedding with the prince, while the vicious stepmother was forced to dance in fiery iron shoes until he fell to the ground and died^[5]. The author of Grimm's Fairy Tales used the male discourse advantage to scold the stepmothers to warn their daughters who had just entered into society, so that they would be more willing to accept the "education" of the patriarchal culture and develop towards the "female standard" accepted by the male society. That is, Beauvoir proposed that women are not born but formed.

However, angel mothers are always short-lived in stories, as they have to be prearranged to be "out" by the author to ensure their patriarchal arbitrary imaginings. Although angelic mothers have receded or died in the story, they have risen to exist as abstract symbols of kindness, purity, and selflessness. The functions of angel mothers in the story are as follows: firstly, in contrast with devil women, they provide positive models for their daughters and establish a code of conduct for them. Secondly, complete the mission of having children, so as to remove another obstacle for their daughters to enter the male society.

Both devil mothers and angel mothers are all designed by patriarchal culture. The purpose is to demonize and code the image of the mother, to warn the heroines to take the devil stepmother as a warning, to educate them to follow the example of the angel mother, and to ensure the transformation of the male-dominated society and the right to shape women.

3.2. The "Absent" Father and the "Present" Mother

In many stories of Grimm's Fairy Tales, the father is often absent, and only the mother (here refers to the devil mother active in the story) is present. The "absence" of the father forms a sharp contrast with the "presence" of the mother. The father's authority in the story is only because they have male identity: they don't have to worry about using all kinds of deception to become the authoritative image of giving orders. Even some useless or derelict fathers, although they did not discover or stop the stepmothers' conspiracy in time, they were always loved and respected by their children and became a symbol of good and excellent men, thus escaping any investigation and criticism due to dereliction of duty.

But why do writers in a patriarchal culture portray fathers as incompetent or absent? In fact, these absent fathers play an important role in the narrative. If patriarchy is too powerful in the story, it is impossible for stepmothers or witches to take advantage of their influence. It is the temporary silence, powerlessness, and absence of the fathers that make the evil stepmothers temporarily threaten the weak, helpless, and innocent girls. Therefore, the absent father image, like the demonized mother image, reinforces the ideology of patriarchal culture in the same way. In the story, although the mothers are "present", they are doomed to aphasia compared with the absent fathers who always manipulates the right to speak. In the patriarchal culture, women's right to speak is always deprived. They were told from an early age that only silent, passive, submissive and implicit women can be accepted by the society.

Grimm's Fairy Tales not only show women's forced aphasia, but also record the failures and frustrations of female characters trying to express themselves. Rapunzel's mother lost her daughter because she wanted to eat delicious wild lettuce; Snow White, eager to take the brightly colored apple from the village woman disguised as the bad queen, was poisoned and died. In Grimm's stories, women's desires lead to either their own death or the suffering of others. These stories imply that women must suppress their desires and impulses in order to be a "good woman." And only good women are eligible for a perfect marriage to "live happily ever after" as the end of the story says.

3.3. Happy Ending

The story of Grimm's Fairy Tales often have a "happy ending", which also shows the cultural connotation of belittling women, because this ending is at the cost of excluding other women. Finally, only one woman is allowed to enter the "eternal happiness" expected by male culture. In order to enter such a realm, the heroine is forced to separate from the female world and compete with other female characters in order to hunt the dream lover. The desire to please men alienates friendly relationships between women, so that women in Grimm's Fairy Tales have nothing but rivalries. The heroine cannot obtain warmth and affection from her mother and other female companions, and there can be no other women in the blueprint for her future happiness, whether it is an angelic mother or a demonic mother, sisters or friends. Because all she needs is a handsome and noble husband.

Snow White, Rapunzel, and Cinderella not only "lost" their mothers at birth, but also received no comfort from other women without exception. Cinderella's sisters are not only involved in the persecution of Cinderella like their mothers, but they are also the enemies of Cinderella's love; Snow White is even more lonely, and she can only get protection from the Seven Dwarfs; After the witch was driven away, she could only live alone in the wilderness, with two babies, and her connection with human society was cut off. In Die zwölf Brüder and The Juniper Tree, brother and sisters endure hardships together, but ultimately love and support each other.

These stories seem to tell readers that only men are the heroine's reliable allies, that there is only competition and fraud between the same sex, and that the diversity of relationships between women (including warm family affection and friendship) is thus simplified into a single antagonistic relationship. The concept of permanent happiness is essentially a

conspiracy of patriarchal culture, that is, to systematically eliminate the deep and powerful ties between women, so as to bring them into the male world and become the second sex. Therefore, the repeated happy endings that deeply affect women's images in the story make them blindly wait for the occurrence of miracles and the emergence of rescuers, and do not hesitate to cut their feet like Cinderella's two sisters.

Therefore, using the feminist criticism theory to analyze the image of the mother in Grimm's Fairy Tales, the "absent" father and the "present" mother, the setting of happy endings, etc., we can see that although the Grimm's Fairy Tales preach that good and evil are rewarded, in reality, the author of Grimm's Fairy Tales consciously or unintentionally strengthened the male-dominated society's ideology of transforming women, warning the tragic end of "evil" women to young girls who have just entered the society. Only by taking angelic mothers as an example can they achieve "permanent happiness", so that they grow up according to the "feminine standards" expected and regulated by male society.

4. Comment on Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism was officially born in the climax of the Western women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s. So far, it has a history of more than 30 years. It is not only widely popular in the majority of western countries, but also spread all over the world. It reflects and modifies step by step in its development, becoming more diversified and perfect, which has brought vitality to literary criticism. From the perspective of gender differences, through the feminine interpretation of social texts, it makes people see that literature and art is not an isolated academic and appreciation activity. The author's creation, reproduction and readers' reading experience have a strong social and political color. This form of criticism breaks the history of men monopolizing the center of literary criticism, makes gender, race and stage identity win a place in the field of literature and art, and especially makes women's gender consciousness manifest and carry forward. Feminist criticism has gradually awakened the sleeping female consciousness in some countries and served as the pioneer of female enlightenment. Indeed, its enlightening encouragement promoted the women's Liberation Movement and deconstructed the traditional male centered values to a certain extent. However, as a form of literary criticism, feminist literary criticism has obvious deviation.

As a kind of literary criticism, what we see from feminist criticism is more the political nature of its theory. It seems to be a social trend of thought or feminist literary criticism movement that publicizes women's liberation. Feminist literary criticism focuses on criticizing women as male appendages or "others". From the perspective of transforming society, feminist literary criticism re understands and evaluates the western culture, society, history, politics and other fields, theoretically seeks the root causes and solutions of gender inequality, and tries to serve the cause of women's Liberation in the way of literary criticism. As a way of literary criticism, it should be literary criticism first, and then "feminism". The order of the two cannot be reversed. After reversing, the realm will be very different, and what we are facing is the order after reversing. Throughout the feminist criticism theory, without exception, the word "feminism" is everywhere. Almost every article is full of bloody and tearful complaints. It is difficult to find the discussion on literature and art. It focuses not on "literature and art" but "political attitude". Just as the mainstream research on "feminist" literary criticism is undoubtedly a kind of political or ideological criticism, "I am not very interested in whether feminism can sidestep academic criticism; I am very concerned about whether feminist critics can play a role in women's activities," Sherry, a feminist critic, stressed in her article. Therefore, the essence of political priority in feminist criticism is obvious.

Feminism holds the view that women have always been relegated by men to subordinate and subordinate positions, and have always been under the domination of men. They do not enjoy

equal rights with men in politics, economy, culture and social activities, but are subject to endless and domineering restrictions, even in areas closely related to women's reality and human life, such as marriage, family and childbirth. There is no equality. This kind of analysis shows that women have a low status in reality and can only obtain dignity in their illusory imagination. Feminist criticism mainly uses the viewpoint of Marxist historical materialism to analyze the history of male oppression, and points out that the development history of human society is the history of male oppression of women. Here, they take some of Marx's theories as the arguments of feminist literary criticism. Marx said that "social progress can be accurately measured by the social status of women (including ugly ones)", but we should find out the connotation of this sentence. First of all, the "female" here is a general and abstract concept, rather than the female in the binary opposition between men and women as feminists say. Which women's social status should we take as the standard to measure social progress? Secondly, the so-called "measured by women's social status" should not mean that women's social status is the only yardstick to measure social progress, but can only be an important factor to characterize social progress.

Feminist criticism creates a new poetics of poetry about thought, language, and art to reveal the uniqueness of the long-hidden female experience. In the process of searching for the tradition of women's literature, women's loneliness, contradiction, madness, anxiety, and duality have become the center of attention. For example, Gilbert and Gerba read and sketched Jane Austen with a new attitude in a new style. Stories of 19th-century women writers from Mary Shelley to George Eliot and Emily Dickinson, empower women to read with a unique perspective. However, after the development of feminism, they gradually realized that only emphasizing the equality of men and women, as a result, inevitably agreed with the exclusion and devaluation of women by the patriarchal culture, and unconsciously fell into the ideological model of traditional patriarchal theory. Some power, but inescapably at the expense of serving male culture, denies the uniqueness of the female self. Therefore, feminism believes that it is necessary to explore the uniqueness of women as a group and an individual. From the perspective of women, the female existence and empiricism, which are different from male existence and experience, are endowed with new values and meanings.

5. Conclusion

The form of feminist criticism breaks the history that men monopolize the center of literary criticism, makes gender, race and stage identity win a place in the field of literature and art, and especially makes women's gender consciousness manifest and carry forward. Feminist criticism has gradually awakened the sleeping female consciousness in some countries and served as the pioneer of female enlightenment. In addition, it also promoted the women's Liberation Movement and deconstructed the traditional male centered values to a certain extent. However, with the continuous development of feminist criticism, we find that it also has some shortcomings, which need to be improved in the development. From matriarchal society to now, the development of society is inseparable from women, so the banner of feminism should not fall. However, we must face up to its immature and biased places, so as to make it embark on a healthier and more vigorous benign development path.

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