

# ***An Analysis on the Influence of the Description of Gender Impression in Classic Western Fairy Tales on Children's Gender Cognition from the Perspective of Feminism***

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**Abstract:** Feminism is a theoretical system that has gradually been flourishing in recent years. In the study of fairy tales, many scholars have analyzed the nature of the representation of some classic fairy tales on the hegemonic system of male discourse from the perspective of feminism. However, there is still a lack of unified explanation of the impact of children's readers on the formation of gender cognition. Therefore, this paper will use the implicit personality theory, summarize the cultural motif of western classic fairy tales, analyze the text of classic fairy tales, and analyze the impact of the description of gender impression in western classic fairy tales on children's gender cognition from the feminist perspective. The research shows that western classic fairy tales present a tendency to "filling in implicit personality", imposing "ideal identities" on females, and intensifying the formation of male gaze. All of them are not the embodiment of the solidification of the patriarchal system, which not only aggravates the formation of gender stereotypes, but also suppresses children's opportunities to explore their own possibilities. On the whole, they show a tendency to dwarfing and disciplining females.

**Keywords:** fairy tale, feminism, implicit theories of personality, cultural motif

## **1. Introduction**

Fairy tales, as we all know, are not only treasures in the library of human literature, but also crucial to enlightening children's outlook of the world as they grow up. The way in which those fairy tales tell the stories have a great penetrating impact on the construction of children's set of values as well. However, under the sight of feminism, the impact shows its questionable side. With the rise of feminist theories and campaigns, some scholars have gradually realized that the western traditional fairy tales have imperceptibly solidified the patriarchal system and culture, and the essence of the classic texts as the representation of patriarchal ideology has also been revealed. Up till now, a considerable number of scholars have already criticized the patriarchal ideology of traditional western fairy tales, but there is still a research gap in the impact of such books on the gender cognition of children, the main readers. This paper will carry forward the critical tradition, mainly using implicit personality theory, Beauvoir's theory of "the Absolute" and "the Other" and inducting the cultural motif, and focus on its impact on children's gender cognition as well.

## 2. The Tendency of the Implicit Theory in Fairy Tales

Implicit personality refers to an individual's belief that his or her personality or that of others can be changed. It is also a theory explaining how individuals usually form assumptions about others' psychology and behavior unconsciously. The concept includes two different types: entity theory and incremental theory. Entity theorists believe that human attributes are broad, general and static, and interpersonal relationships are fixed, while incremental theorists believe that human attributes are plastic and dynamic, and interpersonal relationships can be changed [1, 2].

Levy, Stroessner and Dweck confirmed the influence of implicit personality theory on stereotype formation through experiments. Although the experiments prove that there is almost no difference between the two in their mastery of stereotypes, materialists obviously hold a higher trust in stereotypes, that is, materialists will be more likely to form and maintain stereotypes [3].

In the portrayal of characters in western traditional fairy tales, the author's intentional or unintentional stereotyped description will often encourage readers to develop towards becoming an entity theorist. In Grimm's fairy tales, for example, most heroines (especially princesses) often own beautiful, innocent and kind at a time, while female villains are often both ugly and evil. A typical story is Snow White. The beauty of Snow White was envied by the queen, so in the end, the queen turned into an ugly old woman and went to the forest to give her poisonous apples, intending to kill her. What is worth noting is that the malicious queen here did not become another young and beautiful girl to deceive Snow White, but became an ugly (even portrayed as "extremely ugly" in the version of Disney animation). The same situation of "judging people by their appearance" also occurred in the story of Cinderella – the story with the ugly, evil stepmother and the beautiful, kind Cinderella.

Such descriptions show a tendency to fill in other relevant characteristics for a specific personality trait, that is, the "package " of personality.

On this basis, if this kind of character is "packaged " from the perspective of gender, the obvious result is that gender characteristics have been imperceptibly divided long ago, and children's books are an important part of participation - in addition to the influence of families on children's growth, fairy tales symbolize the shaping of children's gender cognition by social culture.

In traditional western fairy tales, the images of adventurers, heroes, rescuers and other intelligent and brave people are mostly male characters, while the images of the rescued who are pious, beautiful, hardworking and willing to endure pain and wait are often female characters. For example, in Sleeping Beauty, the princess fainted after touching a cursed spindle. Later, after a passing-by prince kissed her affectionately, she woke up. Finally, she got married to the prince and lived a happy life. In Rapunzel, Rapunzel experienced the redemption of the prince after being imprisoned and abandoned by a witch. Finally, the prince married Rapunzel and lived happily.

From such a setting of characters, it is not difficult for us to see that although Green's fairy tales advocate that good and evil will always be rewarded, this proposition advocated by the authors of Green's fairy tales actually contains certain limitations of the male perspective, that is, the authors consciously or unconsciously strengthens the ideology of transforming women in a male dominated society, warns young girls who have just entered the world with the tragic ending of the "evil" women: only taking their "angelic" natural mothers as an example can they obtain "permanent happiness", thus imperceptibly transmitting to readers the necessity of growing up according to the "female standards" expected and stipulated by the patriarchal society[4], intensifying the formation and transmission of gender stereotypes.

### **3. "Cultural Motifs" in the Western Fairy Tales**

#### **3.1. Society Imposing "Ideal Identities" on Females**

—telling girls that the eventual goal for females is to become mothers because they were all Oedipus girls who wanted to become mothers.

The culture of our society often exploits the Oedipus complex of females around the age of 4 to emphasize or even exaggerate gender differences to them, deliberately de-emphasizing the importance of independent development and in contrary stressing the necessity of becoming a mother, that is, all the efforts of females in their growth are to prepare for combination with the other half and raising offspring in the future.

In fairy tales, it is embodied in the singleness of the happy ending of female characters[5] - the female protagonist and the male protagonist fall in love, get married, and live a "happy life", that is, the female characters who managed to get a happy ending are always those who tend to present a submissive attitude towards the patriarchal system, while those male characters ending up with a comedy own more diverse storylines, which are not limited to loving relationships, marriage and having children.

Typical examples include not only the series of "princess" tales, but also stories about ordinary people, such as Thumbelina.

In this way, the fairy tales imperceptibly convey a message to the readers that woman cannot achieve happiness unless she gets married to a man. And at the same time, those stories also preach the mothers' selfless maternity, implying that "becoming a true mother" is the correct destination for young girls.

#### **3.2. The Absence of the Roles of Father**

In the popular stories, the author spends very limited words on writing about the role of the father. In the story of Cinderella, the father of Cinderella stayed in the main story only before the stepmother appeared; The king in Snow White has no other mission except to marry a new wife. But as Juliet Mitchell, a famous British psychoanalyst, said, whether the father is present in the world or not, it will not affect the long-term existence of patriarchal cultural values in personal psychology. The father always owns his upper status, whether present or absent. In addition to the foreshadowing of plot development such as the interpretation that the absence of the father gives the wicked stepmother the opportunity to abuse or retaliate against her daughter, what it reflects more is that the male characters with the same ambitious, controlling and strong characteristics can easily become the commander without playing the villain roles as such women, that is, no matter how the story develops, the "absent" fathers are always the winners and, according to Freud's logic, the reason for which is that he has the organ that women have long been "jealous" of.

Furthermore, once the patriarchal cultural foundation laid by such "inborn" gender advantage is threatened and awakened by aggressive women, those women are bound to end up with a failure. Therefore, the demonized stepmothers, as well as the image of "absent" fathers, emphasize the principle of a patriarchal society [6].

#### **3.3. The Strong Limitations of the Occupational Types Given to Female Characters**

In western classic fairy tales, female characters are mostly mothers, princesses, fairies and other characters with little social significance, while males have a series of social occupations such as carpenters, ministers, students, painters, teachers, and rich men. It reflects that men have successfully formed a complete patriarchal system that completely excludes women from the social system, and forcibly endows women with marginalized roles such as mother and Princess and

forcibly place them in the cracks of the system to subordinate to and serve men. It first excludes the whole gender of women from the life of the main body of society, and then resets women in their own order in a way that conforms to the ruling principle, that is, "to wash away the essence of women's dissidents and otherness and transform them into acceptable things, such as into tools of family succession or functions of wife, mother and woman, so as to be included in the order" [7].

This will impress the children with the fixed social mode of "male dominating the outside while female dominating the inside", suppressing the opportunities for female children to explore their own possibilities, and intensifying the solidification and continuation of the patriarchal system.

#### **4. Formation of the Male Gaze - the Stereotypes in Fairy Tales Paving the Way for the Bifurcation of Children's Growth in the Future**

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, masters of American feminist literary theory, gave an innovative interpretation of the famous Snow-White story in Grimm's fairy tales in their critical Book *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (1979). The article analyzes the male position represented by the magic mirror on the wall and its dominant role in the relationship between the characters in the story. Since then, the mirror has become a famous symbol for men to reshape women's personality and force women to look at themselves from a different perspective, which embodies Michel Foucault's so-called "disciplinary gaze" [7] (for example, the mirror man in Maya Dylan's *Meshes of the Afternoon* which acts as a key clue throughout the film).

In the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir mentioned that "Men establish themselves as subjects, objectify women, and subordinate women to themselves. " "He is the Subject, the Absolute, while she is the Other" [8].

These women often have to be not only beautiful but also show ignorance of their beauty, deliberately shielding their own feminine characteristics and de-sexualizing their bodies, that is, the "active castration" mentioned in sadistic women. Therefore, such a "beautiful but ignorant" trait has created an easy to control image of the other.

According to Beauvoir, "Women are not born, but rather gradually formed" [9]. The patriarchal society symbolizes women as a collection of certain typical characteristics, so in the process of growing up, women have to demand themselves with higher and more restrictive standards, live under the gaze of another gender, and constantly examine themselves under the pressure of "having to find a spouse for the future", gradually forming a recognition of the necessary conditions for "becoming a woman" and thus completing the internalization of the concept of the Other.

As Chizuko Ueno said in her *Misogyny*, "the hegemony struggle in the women's world will not end only in the women's world. There will be men's evaluation to intervene and separate women" [10].

#### **5. Conclusions**

To sum up, through the use of implicit personality theory, Beauvoir's theory of "the Subject" and "the Other" and the induction of cultural motifs, we can draw a conclusion that, although the classic western fairy tales play a positive role in promoting the just values of punishing the evil and promoting the good on one hand, on the other hand, their essence also largely includes the characterization of patriarchal ideology - whether it is their implicit personality filling tendency, or the social identity kidnapping of women. The weakening of the necessity of the presence of the father's role, the role types that give women limited roles and other cultural motifs, as well as the important influence that aggravates the formation of male gaze, are the epitome of the misogyny culture under the patriarchal system. Therefore, to re-examine the classic text from a new

perspective reflects its importance: only based on the criticism of the shackles of traditional culture can we break away from the original extremely unfair and oppressive cultural system, strive for women's own voice, inject new ideological sources into our culture, and achieve real gender harmony.

This research is just for this purpose, starting from the influence of traditional texts on the early thoughts of the new generation of mankind, to promote the change of the traditional and biased gender concept's educational role and the mode of transmission from generation to generation, and to fill the research gap of the practical influence of the text type "fairy tale" on its main readers.

However, because researchers only analyzed the gender bias of the author when portraying the characters in the text, and did not do long-term follow-up experiments on children, it is impossible to estimate the long-term impact of these texts on the growth of readers and even the life of adults. Therefore, the future research direction can focus on tracking the readers of traditional fairy tales represented by western classic fairy tales, and observing and summarizing the process and laws of their long-term development of gender cognition. In addition, we can also explore the way to write feminist fairy tales and the translation of them, so as to make theoretical preparations for the rise of marginal sexism and power and the construction of a new cultural system under the gender model.

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