

The Radical Feminist Interpretation of the Jilting of Granny Weatherall

Xueming Li^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of Foreign Languages, Guangdong University of Finance & Economics, Guanzhou Street,
Haizhu District, China*

a. xuemingli@student.gdufe.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* is one of the classic short stories of the famous American writer Katherine Anne Porter. The short story expresses women's liberation through the protagonist Granny Weatherall's attitude in the face of frustration. Some scholars focus more on analyzing the techniques used in the stream of consciousness used in the short story; some compare it to other similar works, while others provide a broader interpretation from a feminist perspective. However, this essay tends to make a tentative analysis of the interpretation of the masculinity displayed by the protagonist from the perspective of radical feminism and probe into the relationship between sex and gender temperament in a patriarchal society. In this way, it is shown that under the patriarchy, women are able to choose whether they show masculinity or not of their own free will. Furthermore, they will be more conscious of the significance of improving their self-awareness as economic, social, and ideological growth continues.

Keywords: Feminism, radical feminism, femininity, masculinity

1. Introduction

For centuries, Feminism and its related topics have been discussed, written, enriched and developed. Today, it remains a global issue, waiting for more exploration. As time evolves, and human civilization progresses, an increasing number of modern women are realizing consciousness of self-awakening. Equipped with more prominent abilities and personal charm, they not only have more freedom and space than traditional women, but also progressively realize the significance of rising in society and playing an increasingly important role in both family and society.

Taking disparities in social class, life experience, and cultural background into consideration, various people have diverse understandings of Feminism. Then a wide range of feminist concepts appeared. Furthermore, the advancement of the feminist movement is also a process of ongoing. After the end of World War II and the normalization of economic and social life, women's empowerment is gradually expanding, as in France women had the right to vote in 1945. The Civil Rights and Anti-Slavery Movements, as well as the rise of anti-mainstream thinking in Western societies, led to the second wave of Feminism. During this period, radical feminism emerged as a criticism of liberalistic feminism that rationalized to a certain extent the status quo of the uneven distribution of human resources. Despite the subsequent emergence of post-modern Feminism, which had somewhat

alleviated the contradictions between the two school, its position could not stand steadily and was halfway crumbled.

Therefore, from a radical feminist perspective, not only can we better understand the feminist positions that they promoted at the time, but we can also gain a deeper understanding of the social settings of the day, specifically, the gender identity under the structure of social patriarchy and family. In this way, it is clear that improving women's self-awareness and gender awareness in the society at the time is paramount.

2. Literary review

Katherine Anne Porter is an eminent American novelist, short-story writer, and a master stylist. As a Southern female author, Porter, whose works distinguish from that of American Southern male authors like Faulkner, examining history on the basis of the writing style of former authors and portraying the picture of a southerner in adversity. That's simply because she excels at drawing information from personal experience, highlighting issues in the context of a specific era through letters, and concentrating on the theme of the protagonists in works geared toward women in the conflict of the new and the old, fantasy and reality, losing self, finding self, and realizing self.

Nevertheless, since Porter's works primarily focused on the decline of the first wave of Feminism and the rise of the second wave, along with her own cautious attitude towards the women's movement at the time, Porter herself refused to identify as a feminist. Furthermore, she was cautious about the women's movement at the time--supporting feminist advocacy for women's rights but opposing the framework of the feminist theory, disapproving of the monotony of women and the dual opposition model that divides the sexes. Hence, there was a heated debate over whether she was a feminist. However, she could not ignore the radical feminist standpoints that were presented in her works, such as the idea of "androgyny" and female roles with masculinity.

Praised and admired by readers, critics and writers, *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* [1], one of her famous short stories, which are exquisite in wording, delicate in description and profound in connotation, is a vivid example. It follows the three stages of development of the story's protagonist, the 80-year-old grandmother, and reveals the path of a woman's self-loss, self-search and self-realization.

Wangjuan Liu [2], examining the author's context setup and clues while focusing on its interpretation mechanism from a correlation theoretical perspective. Through a comparative analysis of the female image of the work with other works, Haixia He [3] mainly explores the impact of women's social status on their emotional attitudes, aimed at creating a resonance with the readership. According to the statistics, the majority of scholars, such as Xiaofeng Wang [4], Yuting Liu [5], Qionghua Li and Zhongqing Hu [6], utilize feminism as their starting point to explain women's situation of "the Other" in patriarchy. But other scholars, such as Juan Du [7] and Ying Yang [8] mainly make a contrast analysis of several literary works from a narrative perspective, appreciating their respective characteristics. Also, a small group of researchers, including Junwu Xin [9], Lianghong Wu [10], is more interested in the methods and techniques of the work's consciousness flow. In addition, Becker [11] describes the content and writing patterns primarily from a teaching perspective.

Taking into account of the creation background of *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*, this essay is intended to demonstrate the figure of "masculinity" of the protagonist in depth through a radical feminist perspective, discovering social context of gender and the manifestation of different temperament. "Allow everyone to be androgyny, [12]" one of the most remarkable feminists, Tong says, "that is, everyone should be able to fully demonstrate all masculinity and femininity." Ellen Weatherall, as the protagonist of the novel, which embodies distinct masculinity, is in line with the claim of the radical feminist genre, thus being chosen as the object of analysis.

3. Methodology

At the very beginning, the subject of the study focuses on the entire short story. Secondly, the overall analysis of the macro-development and characteristics of radical feminism at the time is given, centering on its main arguments and the environment and discussion of gender. Then, the heroine Granny Weatherall is chosen as the object of analysis as a result of her masculinity widely considered by most radical feminists. After that, by pointing out some of the rhetorical devices that were applied in the novel to reveal and respectively analyze the masculinity manifested in obvious social conventions. Finally, it is concluded that the representation of the Granny Weatherall as a female in the society at the time was partly masculinity. Similarly, to some extent, the essay is a vivid reflection of the radical feminist view of gender.

4. Findings

4.1. Criticism of radical feminism

One of the main arguments of radical feminism is that they are strongly and explicitly opposed to a patriarchy. Radical feminists attribute personal problems to injustice and oppression of women at that time both politically and socially.

4.1.1. Theory of patriarchy

One of the fundamental concepts of radical feminism is that there is class oppression of women throughout society, which is rooted in patriarchy. Besides, it noted that the system operated in all societies, reinforcing and civilizing these means of education, literature, and religion, to internalize them in the depths of the mind. Therefore, some women hate themselves, degrade themselves, deny themselves, and accept the notion that they are second-class citizens. For example, in 1970, Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*, stated that women, under the influence of family and education, began to be violated through patriarchal appropriation and gradually gave up their initiative and autonomy. In the same year, Kate Millett [13], criticized the rationalization of the dominant and subordinate status of women by the patriarchal system in her masterpiece *Sexual Politics* and abhorred the gender system at that time which resulted from it.

4.1.2. Gender

While criticizing patriarchy, radical feminists have re-examined the differences between males and females. They argued that there is no link between a person's sex and its gender (masculinity: competitive, stubborn, planned and so on, or femininity: affectionate, moderate, enjoying life and so forth). Therefore, the traditional female stereotypes should be broken, and the gender system should be abolished, so that a woman could also exhibit "masculinity" and no longer submit to the lower, subordinate gestures and temperaments that women deserve, as explicitly stipulated by the gender system.

4.2. The embodiment of a woman's masculinity

In *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall*, the protagonist, Ellen Weatherall, who epitomized the social status of women in the South of the United States in the early twentieth century, was a victim of traditional customs and oppression in a patriarchal society. Although it was only an encouraging attempt at women's liberation in the end, it was evident that she had shifted from traditional femininity to be responsible, indomitable and independent. This is a vivid example of how women can fully demonstrate masculinity.

4.2.1. A pillar of the family

Granny Weatherall, in her early days, was in charge of the family for a really long time. Since her husband, John, passed away early, she has always looked after her children and the rest of the family. Unfortunately, she had to be responsible for everything in the house, large or small. “Riding country roads in the winter when women had their babies was another thing, (P83)” she recalled her experience in the middle of a chilling winter. As she was the only adult to bring up her children safe and sound, and she shouldered the responsibility for feeding the animals, managing the servants and fixing the pipes. Although she was alone and helpless to some extent, she refused to give up anybody or anything since she had grown into the family’s willing and uncomplaining backbone.

However, it was an extremely challenging circumstance for her to deal with. For example, “...sitting up rights with sick horses and sick negroes and sick children and hardly ever losing one. (P83)” Here, repetition and climax are used so as to emphasize the bad condition of the family and eventually to show her strength in looking after the household conscientiously.

Then, when her children were old enough to form new families, she was still in good health and had a voice in the big family. In fact, her children held her in high regard and often traveled long distances to seek her for advice and help. More precisely, usually, she offered guidance on buying houses, doing business, and making decisions. Jimmy, one of her children, for example, stated that she had a strong business sense. And Cornelia would not know how to move the furniture without asking her. By thinking of this, she enjoyed the respect, need, and dependence of her children and could not help but yearn for the good old days.

Granny Weatherall, when came back to the reality from her vision, was still longing for taking good care of the whole family. When Granny Weatherall lay in bed dozing, her mind did not stop working. She thought of what she had to do the next day, of the pile of letters she had to deal with. “All those letters—George’s letters and John’s letters and her letters to them both...” Here, the term “letters” appeared four times in a single sentence to highlight how much work to be done. More than that, from her slight unease and worry, it is evident that she used to do all kinds of household chores, and she did not want her children to realize that she had been foolish, which would be inconsistent with the steady and dependable image she had created in front of them. Moreover, throughout the entire story, once her consciousness returned to the cage, she flashed back to the days when she used to be a pillar of the family, even though she was around 80 years old and had been lying sick in bed.

4.2.2. Tenacity

The woman, Granny Weatherall, never gave up and remained really tenacious throughout, although she was abandoned three times in her life. The first time by her first love George, the second time by the religion, and the third time by the God she believed in.

At first, her lover betrayed her, and then her husband died young, but she was unflinching and fearless in the face of life’s setbacks and hardships, plowing the land and bringing up her children on her own. As Father Connolly who usually talked about the original sin spoke to her, she just felt easy about her soul with no guilt more or less. This raised some doubts about the religion she had always believed in. It was useless. It did no aid to her anguish. Even so, she managed to support her self-consciousness and life with her own will instead of submitting to the forces that were about to overthrow her.

In her eighties, she believed that she was capable of doing more things, but both Doctor Harry and her children held that she could not do anything further. She insisted that she could still hear their voices since she still had ears. “Her thoughts ran round and round, (P88)” for instance, by improving the rhyme utilizing Alliteration technique, illustrates the depth and vivacity of her current psychological activity. She was fading, and in the meantime, she convinced herself it wasn’t time,

continued to roam in her thoughts, and argued that God could not easily take her away. Suffering from endless pain, she still relied on her own inner strength to support the last breath of life, did not give in to the indifferent God, did not yield to the cold death, and fought with fate to the end.

4.2.3. Independence

It was self-reliance that had enabled Granny Weatherall to pull herself up by her bootstraps. Trapped in her bed, “when she thought of all the food she had cooked, and all the clothes she had cut and sewed, and all the gardens she had made, (P83)” she would remind herself in her memory, apparently, of how hard she had worked on numerous tasks in one of the hardest times she had gone through by herself. Parallelism, the figure of speech used here, aims to point out the consequences and importance of her efforts. Besides, the consistent structure emphasizes how much she has done for her children and for the whole family.

In terms of love, she was an excellent example of an independent woman who faced life’s loneliness. Compared to a large number of women who obeyed patriarchal traditional rules, she was the one who had courage to make a change. Despite her longing for love, she was capable of living without it. On one hand, it’s simply because loads of work were left to be done. During the long years of raising the children, she had a hand in everything from preparing food to mending clothes, clamping the wires, building fences, digging holes, and to making the garden. On the other hand, many years of experience had witnessed that a woman was able to lead an enrich life. After her children grew up and left home, she lived on her own with composure as well as tranquility. And it was her independent personality that prompted her to prepare for death prematurely, allowing her to fight stubbornly through the gradual passage of life.

What’s more, it was self-reliance that had enabled Granny Weatherall to raise awareness of self-awakening. As a matter of fact, after being abandoned one after another, she could have remarried and found another love of her own. But she didn’t. Why? I’d like to quote Porter’s saying as response--“All life worth living is difficult, nobody promised us happiness; it is not a commodity you have earned, or shall ever earn. [14]” All these things made her realize that everything in the outside world is unreliable. And it was the most secure thing for her to rely on herself and to firmly hold life in her own hands. That is, be her own master. Instead of waiting for her first love or getting sucked into an endless whirlpool of sorrow and inferiority, in the following years, she transformed chaos into order. And this change essentially showed her gradual awakening of female consciousness. For example, “That’s not everything (P88)”, indicated a further awakening of Grandma’s self-awareness. Unfortunately, her epiphany occurred just as the lights of life went out. Even though the God did not give her a sign at last, she made her last endeavors--stretched herself and blew out the light which symbolized life, on her own.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Granny Weatherall’s demeanor with masculinity perfectly captures the perception of female variety under radical feminism. For a long time, patriarchal societies have restricted women to femininity through the gender system that should be abolished so that women can also behave masculinely and everyone can have opportunities to choose their gender socially within discretion.

The main contribution of this paper is to provide the short story with a new analytical perspective on radical feminism. This paper improves not only the understanding and interpretation of the work but also helps future researchers with more in-depth analysis. However, radical feminist schools differ or even contradict their points of view on the meaning of the masculinity and the femininity in terms of “androgyny”. Unlike the study above, some radical feminists argue that there are no so-called “masculinity” or “femininity” in a certain degree. It is highly likely that these definitions, in particular

“femininity”, are the products imposed by patriarchal societies and therefore ought to be rejected. Although “androgyny” was appealed, she undermined the traditional characteristics of masculinity. In the meantime, she focused more on reinterpreting traditional femininity and rejected the androgyny diversification pattern. Hence, there is a distinct possibility that the diversity of perspectives within radical feminist schools can lead to a variety of interpretations and opinions of the work.

Furthermore, the radical feminist genre encompasses a broad range of topics, including biological, political, social, sexual, psychological, reproductive, and maternal concerns. Due to space constraints, this study, using *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* as an example, solely discusses the pertinent ideas of radical feminists on gender and how inferences are shown in literary works, not addressing other fields. As a result, there are some limitations that require in-depth research.

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