

A Feminist Reading on Sleeping Beauty

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Abstract

The fairy tale is usually regarded as children's literature. It shapes the characters through rich fantasy and exaggeration. The story reflects every aspect of our life and has an educational effect on readers, especially on children. Originated from the folk lore, fairy tale is one of the most important materials for the research on local conditions and customs at that time as well as its function of moral education. However, feminists analyze it from a brand new perspective. As most of the fairy tales are written or edited during the period when men hold the leading role in society, it is unavoidable that they contain the ideology of patriarchy to some extent. The paper will focus on one classic fairy tale in *The Grimm Fairy Tale -- Sleeping Beauty (Briar Rose in Grimm's book)* and try to analyze the contexts from the angle of feminism. The purpose is to reveal the patriarchy hidden behind the seemingly romantic story. What's more, it is also helpful to put forward the depth and scope of the research of feminism to improve and develop the women's liberation, and enrich the diversification of the methodology and perspective of research. From the angle of feminism, it can be concluded from the fairy tales that in patriarchal society, women are in the position of "the other" and totally dependent on men, mentally and financially. They have to obey the social rules set by men and meet men's pleasure for the seemingly happy ending. There are so much left for us to accomplish in the purpose of changing this situation.

Keywords: The sleeping beauty; Feminism; Patriarchy.



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, fairy tales are usually taken as reading materials especially for children and most of the popular ones have been simplified for children to read. Originated from the folk lore, classic fairy tales deserve deeper research from different aspects. In the past, scholars at home and abroad try to analyze them from the perspectives of their influence on the development of children or analyze their writing background, socially or culturally. However, they neglect that most of the traditional fairy tales are written by male writers and once target on woman's moral education. The crystallization of humanity's collective intelligence and the ideology of that specific period concealed in tales have a great value for analysis and research.

1.1. Study Abroad

The western feminist movements go along with social revolution. After three high tides, feminism now has different categories. The French writer Simone De Beauvoir is one of the most important women in the 20th century and brought existentialist feminism into our eyes. Her representative work *The Second Sex* is a milestone on the development of feminism and recognized as the women's Bible. She deems that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (Beauvoir, 1953). She also points out that women belonged to "the other" in the relationship with man. Other famous feminism work includes Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Women Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literacy Imagination* (1979) written by Gilbert and Gubar (2000), etc.

As feminism has become an important theory and critical method, its objects involve more and more aspects. Western feminist monographs on fairy tales are including *Feminist Fairy Tales* (1996), a book written by the feminist author Barbara Walker who has revamped, retold, and infused with life some of people's favorite classic fairy tales. No longer are women submissive, helpless creatures in need of redemption through the princely male. Instead they are vibrantly alive, strong women who take fate into their own hands; another is *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004) written by Haase (2004). The book contains eleven feminist fairy tales which challenge and reconsider conventional wisdom about the fairy-tale heroine and offer new insights into the tales produced by female writers and storytellers. Resisting a one-dimensional view of the woman-centered fairy tale, each essay reveals ambiguities in female-authored tales and the remarkable potential of classical tales to elicit unexpected responses from women; Veronica. L. Schanoes' *Fairy tales, Myth, and Psychoanalytic Theory: Feminism and Retelling the Tale* (2014) is also an example. The book posits a new model for understanding both feminist psychoanalytic theory and feminist retelling, which emphasizes the interdependence of theory and art and challenges the notion that literary revision involves a struggle with the writer's artistic forbears. Journal articles and thesis are including *No Fairy Godmothers: Essays on Life, Love and* by Behnken (1998), which is an "examination of our acculturation toward heterosexual romance and marriage, which is based upon a 500 year old fairy tale—or myth—that we are expected to seek and live as truth" (Behnken, 1998). *Show and Tell: Sleeping Beauty as Verbal Icon and Seductive Story* (2014) by Tatar (2014) gives a profound feminist reading on the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*.

Moreover, some feminists also analyze fairy tales in their books, such as in the first chapter of *The Woman in the Attic*, the authors talk about *Snow White* and her step mother with feminism.

1.2. Study at Home

The development of feminism in China is much later than in the western countries, thus the focus is on translation and research on the results of the western theories or using the established theories. Popular books on feminism are including *What is Feminist Critics* (2011) by Cheng and Fang (2011). It is a concise introduction on history, categories, representative authors and works of feminism, which is very helpful for those who were not familiar with the critics. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (2012), written by the American writer Moi and Wang (2012). In the book Moi challenges the dominant trends in contemporary feminist and cultural thought, arguing for a feminism of freedom inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The thesis and journal article on feminist analysis about fairy tales are including *An Interpretation of Grimm's Fairy Tales from the Perspective of Feminist Criticism* (2010) by Yu Jianhong and Liu Fenglin and *A Brief Interpretation of Female Images in Western Fairy Tales: and Their Influence on Children* (2011) by Ma Jinfen (2011).

2. Feminism and Fairy Tales

To analyze the fairy tales on the perspective of feminism, it requires some basic knowledge on the theory. As the approach of this research, feminism exists not merely as a critical method of literature but a weapon used by revolutionaries who struggle to make the world a more equal place. Fairy tale, as one literary genre, is in the list of feministic research. Feminists have discovered the patriarchal facts hidden behind the seemingly romantic and simple plots of fairy tales. The findings would not only be a tool of better understanding of the paper, but also a contribution to the feminist movement.

2.1. Feminism

Feminism is a combination of practice and theory study of women's movement. It is equality between men and women in the beliefs and ideologies, aiming to transform the man-centered situation both in culture and society. It also aims at the elimination of the discrimination against women in economy, politics, society and culture. It is essential to have a clear clue about the difference between “feminism”, “femaleness” and “femininity”. Toril Moi pointed out, “We distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (Moi, 1986).

Feminism can be traced back to France before the revolution of the enlightenment. The thinkers of that time begin to be aware about and able to point out the inequality between men and women, especially the suffrage. After the French Revolution, the development of feminism flourishes and puts a deep influence on every aspect of the society. Feminists attempt to arouse our awareness of the value of women by promoting the re-evaluation of women images in literature. Nowadays, there are many researches on feminism at home and abroad. Some are studies of literary works which is feministic or misogynic; others are researches on the origin, development and influence of feminism. Although the branches of feminism are various, they boil down to one word: equality. Equality here refers to equality between men and women in every social aspect. Taking an overview of feminist theory, some are fierce like fire, some are of the still water, some are courageous fighting, and others make concession and compromise. But all feminism has a basic premise—women are in a world of oppression and discrimination.

There are totally three high tides of feminist movements, in which the existentialist feminism is an important school in the first climax. Existentialist feminists emphasize concepts such as freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of living as a human body. They value the ability for radical change, but recognize that factors such as self-deception and anxiety caused by the possibility of change can limit it. Its discourses such as “the other”, “beyond” and “intrinsic” put a great influence on the development of the subsequent feminist schools. Feminist Existentialism emphasizes the transcendence of women's intrinsic and attempts to get rid of “him” or the “subject”, which builds up the independent thoughts of women so that they can realize their own value.

One of the most important works of existentialist feminism is *The Second Sex* written by Simone de Beauvoir in the twentieth century. Her theory is based on the German existentialist Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), and French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*). Their existential philosophy of “the other”, “beyond” and “intrinsic” constructs the framework of existentialist feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir is probably the first one to warn about the deep gender unbalance in fairy tales. She talks about it in her *The Second Sex*:

Woman is the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of a woman; he slays the dragons and giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave, she is chained to a rock, a captive, sound asleep: she waits (Beauvoir, 1953).

Beauvoir's existential feminism also plays an indispensable role in China's feminism development. Although China lacks the traditional movements in the sense of western feminism as a backdrop, with the influx of Western feminist literary theories, Beauvoir's theory also profoundly affected the women's literature in China, which is clearly evidenced on literary creation and criticism.

2.2. Classic Fairy Tales

Initially originating from folk literature, elements of fairy tales are embedded in mythology, legend and fables. Fairy tales are not created for children in the first place, but with adults as the main audience. During the Enlightenment movement, intellectual's discovery of humanity has promoted the discovery that female possesses individual personality as male does. The movement also lays eyes on the growth of children which has enabled fairy tales to develop into an independent literature genre (Ma Jinfen, 2011).

Although there still exist unclear acquaintance between the definition of imaginative works such as fairy tale and folk story, as in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2003), the names of fable story, folk story, imaginative story and fairy tale are used without difference. Fairy tale, as one branch of literature, has its special characteristics.

First of all, it is a story usually within one page or more but never as long as works of fictions. Fairy tales cover almost all acts of imagination. Fairy tale usually contains stereotyped characters (princess and stepmother, elves and giants) and recurring images (key, apple, mirror, ring and the toad). And by a certain contrast, these symbols become lively and fresh which give readers the sense of penetrating simplicity and aesthetic enjoyment. Through the activity of reading or listening, the readers or the listeners get the symbolic meaning of these images from their hearts and pass them down generation by generation.

Then, the fairy tales are similar stories—as they are heritages. Listeners and readers from different periods and areas have disparate infections about the oral-typed stories so that they may transfer one story to various versions based on their regional culture or personal experience and understanding. They can be put together or broken up like the photo montages.

Last but not least, the genre of fairy tales is within the scope of popular folklore. As it was told and passed down generally by ordinary people in the society rather than those highly educated elites, it is also considered to be vulgar. Almost all the classic works such as *The Grimm's Fairy Tales* or *The Andersen's Fairy Tales* are actually collections and editions of the oral folktales.

The standard for distinguishing between folklore and fairy tales can be that the former is usually anonymous and not dated, while the latter has signature and date. However, the history of the spread of the two types shows that they are inextricably linked with each other. But on the other hand, it makes our investigation have wider clues.

3. A Feminist Reading on Sleeping Beauty

Although the classic fairy tale is written in a completely different social condition from nowadays, as *The Grimm's Fairy Tale* first published almost two centuries ago, the effect on literature and other areas like women liberation cannot be simply ignored. It cannot be denied that as the bed-time reading material, it influences the younger generation quietly with both the moral rules and the patriarchal ideology behind the simple but romantic plots. Furthermore, readers are attracted by the imaginary but fantastic world of fairy tales so much that the fact most of them are created by the male who takes the leading part of the society and tries every method to control the world.

Brother Grimm like to use the names of the heroines as the title, such as former mentioned *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. *Sleeping Beauty*, also known as *Briar Rose* in Brother Grimm's edition, is also one of them. With her passivity and helplessness, she is deemed to be the ideal woman image from the perspective of man. However, the story is slightly different from the former two as the binary opposition exists not between two women but the hero and heroine. As fairy tales indicate the social background with or without purpose, this kind of narration gives readers more specific and clear clue about the patriarchy at that time. All a woman need is to be beautiful, paralyzed and then she will get what she wants most—a happy marriage.

Beauty is essential for all the heroines in fairy tales. Snow White is so pretty that the prince “cannot live without seeing” her (Grimm and Grimm, 2006). Cinderella is so gorgeous that the prince “would dance with no other maiden, and never let loose of her hand.” (Grimm and Grimm, 2006) And it goes without saying that Sleeping Beauty is so enchanting that “from time to time Kings' sons came and tried to get through the thorny hedge into the castle” without scaring of dying “a miserable death” (Grimm and Grimm, 2006). As Maria Tart puts in her essay, “the very name Sleeping Beauty invokes a double movement between a passive gerund (sleeping) and a descriptive noun (beauty) that invites a retinal response. Beauty may be sleeping, but we want to look at her to indulge in the pleasure of her visible charms” (Tatar, 2014). Imagine after one hundred years, the lucky prince finally gets into Sleeping Beauty's room and only finds out an ugly woman who may be as old as his great-great-grandmother lying on the bed, comatose, waiting for his kiss to wake her up—romanticism suddenly turns into hallucinatory realism. It inspires some relationship experts nowadays. They proclaim in every woman's magazine that perfecting your appearance is the first step for the pursuit of a prince charming. Julie Behnken points it out sharply in her thesis: “Emphasis is placed on beauty and becoming the woman he desires, essentially constructing oneself for male attention” (Behnken, 1998). It shows the shadow of patriarchy at present. Women are told to behave properly and take strategies to catch a man's heart. Men have become the active “bearer-of-the-look,” whereas women have been relegated to the position of objects on display (“to-be-looked-at-ness”) (Mulvey, 1975).

Edward Burne-Jones also has a series of painting named (*The Legend of Briar Rose*, 2016). They are now exhibited at Buscot Park in Oxfordshire, England. Beneath every panel is an inscription of a poem written by William Morris. Below are two of them. Fig.1 is *The Rose Bower* where the sleeping beauty is lying on her bed surrounded by her attendants, sleeping peacefully. The rose thorns can be seen in the background. Under the painting the inscription reads, “Here lies the hoarded love, the key/ To all the treasure that shall be; / Come fated hand the gift to take/ And smite this sleeping world awake” (Morris).

Fig-1. Edward Burne-Jones, The Rose Bower from *The Legend of Briar Rose*, 1885-1890

Sleeping Beauty is a specific representative of the passive victim in patriarchy. Other heroines are trapped in traditional conventions and only lose their discourse while Sleeping Beauty has been slumbering on her bed for one hundred years, losing all her right of action and waiting with her whole heart for her rescuer. However, “when the King’s son came near to the thorn hedge, it was nothing but large and beautiful flowers, which parted from each other of their own accord, and let him pass unhurt.” The prince does nothing to get to her chamber only because “by this time the hundred years had just passed” (Grimm and Grimm, 2006). The author wants his readers to know that everything is meant to be in fairy tales. The prince needs to do nothing to get the princess because his fate is destined. The princess also needs to do nothing to be saved because there is always a god-mother or a twelfth Wise Woman who waves her wand or bestows her magic gifts to ensure perfection, as long as the princess behaves properly and meets men’s desire.

As with paralysis, women are deprived of the autonomy of their bodies and losing the ability to move freely. Patriarchal society sorts out women to the category of “the other” by the powerful and omnipresent incantation which safeguards the interests of the male effectively. Misogyny spreads over different areas and periods. The hate and scare of the power of women pushes men trying every method to weaken it. As early as fourth century BC, Aristotle believes that male by nature intends to be lord and master while female is a subject and a slave in *The Politics* (Aristotle, 2000). Genesis of the Bible claims that the Lord takes a rib from man and makes it woman (The Holy Bible, 2011) (New International Version Bible, Gen. 2.22). Moreover, woman shall desire her husband and be ruled over by him (Bible, Gen. 3.16). Sigmund Freud’s “penis envy¹” theory takes female as the emasculated or mutilated male. The Physiology represented by Aristotle, the theology represented by the Bible, the psychology represented by Freud and the literature represented by fairy tales all play the role of accomplice of the violence on women.

The most distinctive feature of *Sleeping Beauty* is the visual contrast between dynamic and static state. The princess lies quietly with all the others in her castle just like a photograph. The spell breaks when the lucky prince comes into the photo and devastates the tranquility. He wakes up the princess, later the whole castle,

And the horses in the courtyard stood up and shook themselves; the hounds jumped up and wagged their tails; the pigeons upon the roof pulled out their heads from under their wings, looked round, and flew into the open country; the flies on the wall crept again; the fire in the kitchen burned up and flicked and cooked the meat; the joint began to turn and sizzle again, and the cook gave the boy such a box on the ear that he screamed, and the maid finished plucking the fowl (Grimm and Grimm, 2006).

Fig.2 is another painting in the series of *The Legend of Briar Rose* named *The Briar Wood*. The all-armed prince discovers the sleeping soldiers who are completely entwined by the thorns. The contrast between the living prince and slumbering soldiers leaves wide imaging space for the viewers. The poem beneath goes, “The fateful slumber floats and flows/ About the tangle of the rose; / But lo! The fated hand and heart/ To rend the slumberous curse apart” (Morris)!

¹ It is first appears in Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, which generally means the first transitional stage when the attachment to mother turns into the competition with the mother for the attention and affection of the father.

Fig-2. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Briar Wood* from *The Legend of Briar Rose*, 1885-1890

The prince is always dynamic. He wears his brand-new armor, holds his sharp sword, rides on his white horse, kills the villains and dragons, looks for his stunning bride and sings the triumph song. “Waiting” seems never occurs in his mind. Ironically, all that a girl needs to do is waiting. She waits for his father to bring her the first branch which knocks against his hat (Grimm and Grimm, 2006); she waits for the prince to recognize her with her glass shoe; she waits for her rescuer to break into the still picture and turn her life from a pool of stagnancy to a spring of freshness. The sharp contrast not only leaves a feeling of aesthetics on the ordinary readers, but also evokes the opposition of feminists. They express their dissatisfaction through revealing the writers’ ill-disposed intentions and re-writing the fairy tale. In Card’s *Enchantment*, Sleeping Beauty gets the initiative of choosing to marry a stranger and save her people (Card, 1999).

4. Conclusion

Feminism has been talked about frequently through all social media, which means that it has aroused our awareness to lay more attention on the group of “the other”. Feminists have also tried their best to carry forward to the feminist movement on every aspect of society including on literature. To deepen and widen their research, feminists exam all kinds of texts, among which the fairy tale cannot be ignored.

Readers will find out that fairy tales reflect the crucial reality and female’s status when removing their mysterious veils. And the access to the revealing is through a feminist re-reading and re-writing of the fairy tales. Patriarchy wants us to believe that there is such a thing as the essence of femaleness, called femininity. Feminists, on the contrary, have to disentangle this confusion, and must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are *female*, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine (Moi, 1986).

As the precious spiritual wealth of human, the classic fairy tales holds a irreplaceable status on the stage of literature. But the way of reading them needs to be guided correctly with selection so that the quintessence are absorbed while the dregs can be abandoned. It will not be achieved without the full awareness of the masses and the determination of feminist revolution. By writing the thesis it is realized that only if more readers notice the unbalance between men and women will the equality pursued by feminists come sooner; only if more girls quit the dream of waiting for the rescue of a prince charming will the female finally have the courage to seek their own happiness.

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