

“Snow White” and “The Paper Bag Princess”: A Comparative Study on the Portrayal of Female Characters in Children’s Picture Books from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

This study aims to compare and analyze the differences in female character portrayal between the classic children’s picture book “Snow White” and the modern one “The Paper Bag Princess” from a feminist perspective, providing references for more contemporary and diverse female role modeling. Utilizing comparative research, textual analysis, and survey methods, the study explores the differences in female characters between the two books, analyzes the socio-cultural factors influencing these portrayals, examines the impact of these images on children’s gender concepts, and offers suggestions for the re-creation of female characters in contemporary children’s picture books from a feminist standpoint. The findings reveal that Snow White in “Snow White” is characterized by passivity and dependency, whereas Princess Elizabeth in “The Paper Bag Princess” embodies independence and bravery. Surveys conducted among children aged 3-6 and early childhood educators show that modern, independent, and brave female images in picture books are more conducive to fostering gender equality concepts in children. Children’s picture books can serve as an important medium for gender equality education, offering references for educators and creators in gender equality education and creation.

Keywords: Feminism, Children’s picture books, Female character portrayal, Gender equality education, Snow White, The Paper Bag Princess

1. Introduction

Picture books are one of the earliest forms of literature that children come into contact with, profoundly influencing their values, gender cognition, and personality development. Under the impetus of feminist thought, societal perceptions and representations of female roles have undergone significant changes, and the portrayal of female characters in picture books has also evolved accordingly. However, there is currently a scarcity of research on female character portrayal in children's picture books, with most studies focusing on the analysis of individual works and lacking systematic comparative research on female character portrayal across different works. "Snow White" and "The Paper Bag Princess," as representative works of classic and modern picture books, respectively, provide a clear contrast between traditional and modern female character portrayals, revealing changes in female roles under different socio-cultural contexts. This study selects the 1938 edition of "Snow White" illustrated by Wanda Gag and the 1980 publication of "The Paper Bag Princess" illustrated by Michael Martchenko as research objects. It will analyze the differences in female character

portrayal between these two picture books from a feminist perspective, explore the socio-cultural factors influencing these portrayals, examine the impact of these images on children's gender concepts, and offer suggestions for the re-creation of female characters in contemporary children's picture books from a feminist standpoint.

2. Differences in Female Character Portrayal between the Picture Books "Snow White" and "The Paper Bag Princess"

2.1 Personality, Appearance, and Behavioral Attitudes

Snow White and the Paper Bag Princess are both the primary female characters in their respective picture books, yet there are numerous differences in their character portrayals. To facilitate a clearer comparative analysis, the author presents a tabulated comparison of the two characters across three aspects: personality, appearance, and behavioral attitudes.

Table 1 Comparison Table of Character Images

Character image	Personality	Appearance	behavioral attitudes
Snow White	Innocent, kind, gullible, gentle (Passive)	Facial Features: Snow-white skin, red lips, black hair (male gaze)	Attitude towards Dilemma: Escaping, depending on others, waiting
		Attire: Princess dress, apron	Attitude towards Self: Self-sacrificing, submissive to fate, lacking self-awareness
			Attitude towards Prince: Obedient, admiring, accepting
Paper Bag Princess	Independent, brave, intelligent (Active)	Facial Features: Messy short hair after fire, skin stained with soot	Attitude towards Dilemma: Proactively dealing with, independently solving, innovative thinking
		Attire: Burnt crown, paper bag worn as clothes	Attitude towards Self: Confident and strong, valuing self-worth
			Attitude towards Prince: Rational judgment, following self

2.2 Visual Symbols

Picture books are primarily visual, making visual symbols an especially crucial element. Differences in visual

symbols also influence character portrayal. The following presents the differences in visual symbols and their impact on character portrayal.

Table 2 Comparison Table of Visual Symbols

Visual symbols	Difference 1: Composition focus	Difference 2: Overall environment	Difference 3: Symbolic props
“Snow White”	 Environment, things she’s doing	 Lush forest, romanticized nature	  Toxic apple, glass coffin etc.
“The Paper Bag Princess”	 Princess Elizabeth herself, her facial expressions and postures	  Rubble, empty scene	 Paper bag, burnt crown
Impact on Character Portrayal Composition	Snow White appears smaller and more passive in compositions that do not focus on the character herself, whereas Princess Elizabeth is more prominently and clearly highlighted.	Snow White is often integrated into natural backgrounds, downplaying her individual presence, while the empty background of Princess Elizabeth accentuates her subjectivity.	Metaphor: Snow White: A beautiful specimen to be admired. Princess Elizabeth: A rebel defining herself freely.

2.3 Plot

Both picture books mainly revolve around the stories of

the two princesses, but their plots, from the beginning, development, climax to the ending, are vastly different. The author has also listed and organized these differences.

Table 3 Comparison Table of Plot Elements

Plot Elements	Beginning	Development	Climax	Ending
“Snow White”	Persecuted for her beauty	Passive escape and waiting for rescue	Saved by the prince	Marriage to the prince
“The Paper Bag Princess”	Taking the initiative to take responsibility in the face of disaster	Proactively tracking and devising strategies	Self-rescue and saving the prince	Rejecting marriage, choosing freedom

3. Socio-Cultural Influences Behind the Differences

The 1938 edition of “Snow White” illustrated by Wanda Gag was created during a unique historical period in the United States, following the Great Depression and on the eve of World War II. During the Great Depression, with an unemployment rate as high as 25%, men’s ability to support their families was greatly weakened, yet society more stubbornly emphasized the traditional division of labor of “men as breadwinners and women as homemakers”—the government even banned married women from employment to preserve jobs for men. Under the economic crisis, society reinforced the “functional necessity” of traditional gender roles, which is well reflected in the picture book: Snow White is portrayed as the perfect housekeeper, cooking and cleaning for the seven dwarfs, with her domestic skills being romanticized, but in essence, it is a conservative coping strategy to confine women to the private sphere. At the same time, facing the social turmoil before the war, the mainstream American culture chose to maintain stability by reinforcing traditional family values. The huge success and attention of the 1937 Disney animated version of “Snow White” also provided Gag with a definitive narrative of “the princess being saved by the prince and marriage.” The passivity of Snow White can be seen as a projection of society’s expectation of women as “stabilizers” at that time, using seemingly harmless fairy tales to alleviate the public’s fear of change.

“The Paper Bag Princess” was born in the 1980s, a period when the second wave of feminism was at its peak. Influenced by the feminist thought of the time, author Robert Munsch consciously changed the conventional fairy tale pattern of “princesses waiting to be rescued” in his picture book creation: Elizabeth faces difficulties without fear, rescues the prince through her wisdom, and turns away from marriage due to the prince’s shallowness. This plot setting is actually a critique of the traditional patriarchal notion that “marriage is the ultimate destination for women,” and it also resonates with the demands of women at that time to strive for economic independence and social equality.

The differences between “Snow White” and “The Paper Bag Princess” are essentially a microcosm of socio-cultural changes. The United States in the 1930s still followed the Victorian-era gender division of labor, with fairy tales serving as tools for children’s socialization, reinforcing the traditional concepts of female passivity and marriage supremacy. In contrast, the feminist movement of the 1980s gave rise to subversive works like “The Paper Bag Princess,” which portrayed women as agents of action, striving to break free from the “dilemma of others” they

were in and criticizing the hypocrisy of traditional marriage narratives.

The comparison of the two reveals how socio-culture uses fairy tale picture books to convey gender ideologies and demonstrates the significant impact of feminism on the portrayal of female characters in children’s literature.

4. Impact on Children’s Gender Concepts

4.1 Children’s Perspective: Analysis Based on Play-Based Interviews

Picture books are primarily aimed at children. To study the impact of different female character portrayals in picture books on children’s gender concepts, this research selected 30 six-year-old children from a kindergarten’s senior class and conducted play-based interviews with them. In the study, the children were divided into two groups for reading and then reenacted the picture book content through role-playing. During the process, the author focused on observing and recording the children’s imitation of character behaviors, choices of language expressions, and differences in interaction patterns. It was found that in terms of character behavior imitation, children who read “The Paper Bag Princess” were more inclined to imitate proactive behaviors, such as standing with hands on hips, running, and making fire-breathing gestures, while those who read “Snow White” tended to imitate more passive behaviors, such as looking in the mirror, pretending to faint, and waiting for rescue. In terms of language expression characteristics, the frequency of using proactive vocabulary like “I can” and “I want” in the Paper Bag Princess group was 2-3 times that of the Snow White group, while the proportion of using help-seeking expressions like “help me” and “what should I do” in the Snow White group was significantly higher. Regarding interaction pattern differences, during group performances, children in the Paper Bag Princess group more often took turns leading the development of the plot, while the interaction in the Snow White group showed a clear “rescuer—rescued” fixed pattern.

It is also worth noting that in the Paper Bag Princess group, four boys voluntarily chose to play the princess role, while in the Snow White group, all boys refused to play the princess and insisted on choosing the prince or dwarf roles. In subsequent interviews, when asked “What should a princess be like?” children in the Paper Bag Princess group gave more diverse answers, such as “can wear whatever you want” and “it’s important to be brave”; while those in the Snow White group gave more tradition-

al answers, such as “has to be pretty” and “has to be with the prince.”

These findings indicate that the portrayal of female characters in picture books can influence children’s gender role cognition and behavioral imitation to a certain extent. Breakthrough female images can expand children’s imagination of gender possibilities, while traditional passive images may reinforce gender stereotypes.

4.2 Teacher’s Perspective: Analysis Based on Questionnaire Survey

Teachers are one of the important leaders in children’s gender equality education and gender concept shaping. To collect and analyze teachers’ views on the impact of the two picture books’ character portrayals on children’s gender concepts and their understanding of gender equality education, this study selected 22 head teachers from two kindergartens in Nanjing, sent them electronic reading materials of the two picture books, and conducted relevant questionnaire surveys.

The questionnaire covered four dimensions: picture book cognition and evaluation, specific views on character portrayal in the picture books, current educational practice, and gender education concepts. In terms of picture book cognition and evaluation, 95.5% of teachers recognized the educational value of “The Paper Bag Princess,” but at the same time, 40.9% of teachers still recommended “Snow White” due to its classic nature; in terms of specific views on character portrayal in the picture books, all teachers chose to highly or fairly appreciate the independent and autonomous female protagonist in “The Paper Bag Princess,” and believed that such a female character image helps break gender stereotypes. However, 50% of teachers also expressed concerns about whether parents would accept such a subversive image; in terms of current educational practice, 86.3% of teachers chose to use “The Paper Bag Princess” in future picture book teaching, and 55% of teachers said they would actively guide children to discuss gender issues in it; in terms of gender education concepts, all teachers agreed that children should be taught gender equality awareness, but 59% of teachers were unclear or only generally aware of how to effectively carry out gender equality education in teaching.

From the analysis of the above data, it is not difficult to see that teachers can identify the differences in female character portrayal between the two picture books and recognize the educational value of “The Paper Bag Princess” in children’s gender cognition and gender equality concepts. However, there are still some difficulties in converting this understanding into action, such as concerns about parents’ acceptance, lack of relevant picture books,

and insufficient support from kindergartens. Gender stereotypes and gender equality issues in picture books still need more attention in the field of education, and a consensus on home-school cooperation in this direction needs to be established. Picture book creators should strive to create more excellent picture book works with gender equality concepts and ideas to provide teachers with picture book teaching media for gender equality education.

5. Suggestions for the Re-creation of Female Characters in Contemporary Children’s Picture Books from a Feminist Perspective

5.1 Breaking Traditional Role Stereotypes and Creating Diverse Female Images

In contemporary children’s picture book creation, it is advisable to boldly attempt to break through the traditional “princess-prince” narrative model and strive to create female characters with rich personality traits and diverse occupational identities. “The Paper Bag Princess” is a successful example of this, as it makes the female character the core of the story, actively solving problems instead of passively waiting for rescue. In the creative process, it is also important to avoid simplistically dividing female traits into binary oppositions. Female characters can be brave and decisive, as well as gentle and delicate. These qualities are not exclusive to gender but are possessed by everyone. Through such character portrayal, picture books can present a more three-dimensional and realistic image of women to children, promoting the formation of correct gender cognition in early childhood.

5.1 Reducing Physical Descriptions and Highlighting Inner Qualities

Overemphasizing the appearance of female characters can detract from attention to their personality and abilities and may lead children to form one-sided views like “the most important thing for a princess is to be beautiful.” Therefore, in picture book creation, it is suggested to reduce detailed descriptions of female characters’ attire and avoid linking appearance with character value. In the illustration design of female characters in picture books, a more diverse range of clothing and styling can be adopted, not limited to beautiful and gorgeous ones. The focus of picture book creation should be on the character’s thinking process, decision-making ability, and action, showcasing their personalities through specific plots. In this way, children can pay more attention to the inner qualities of the characters rather than their appearance.

5.3 Building Equal Interaction Relationships

In character relationship settings, the traditional pattern of “male superiority and female inferiority” should be broken. It is possible to design plots where females help males or show male and female characters cooperating based on their respective strengths. Avoid portraying male characters as inevitable rescuers or decision-makers and female characters as inevitably weaker parties. Establishing equal interaction relationships between characters allows children to form correct gender concepts subtly through gender-equal picture book ideas.

6. Conclusion

Comparing the portrayal of female characters in “Snow White” and “The Paper Bag Princess,” there are significant differences in the personality, appearance, attitude towards action, visual symbols in the picture books, and the plot of the stories. From the former to the latter, it is a process from passivity to activity, and it is also a reflection of the expectations of female roles in different socio-cultural contexts. The influence of feminist thought on children’s literature can be seen in this process. Through play-based interviews with children and questionnaire surveys with teachers, the study found that modern, independent, and brave female images in picture books are more conducive to fostering gender equality concepts in children and breaking traditional gender stereotypes. The majority of teachers also agree that the differentiated character portrayal in the two picture books can have different impacts on children. This also provides us with insights and suggestions for the re-creation of female characters in con-

temporary children’s picture books from a feminist perspective. Contemporary children’s picture book creation should break traditional role stereotypes, create diverse female images, appropriately reduce physical descriptions, highlight inner qualities, and build equal interaction relationships. This will help teachers obtain excellent picture book media for gender equality education and promote the formation of correct gender cognition in children.

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