The Feminist Criticism and Value of the Female Figure Hermina in Der Steppenwolf

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Abstract: After the World War II, the novel *Der Steppenwolf* makes Hermann Hesse's works go viral. *Der Steppenwolf* has a profound influence around the world. Till now, the research related to Hesse's works is quite fruitful. However, there's still inadequacy when discussing about female images in Hesse's works. This paper is mainly based on a feminist interpretation of Jungian Psychology. Through textual analysis, this paper makes feminist criticism toward the female character Hermina of the book *Der Steppenwolf*. This paper at the same time, discusses the feminist value of Hermina, thus to have a more vivid interpretation of the figure Hermina. The female character Hermina presents female's being confined under the masculine discourse, and its position as the other in *Der Steppenwolf*. On the other side, the character Hermina also realizes the breakthrough against the opposition between traditional binary gender, and shows the complexity of gender.

Keywords: Der Steppenwolf, Hermina, feminism, Hesse

1.   Introduction

Der Steppenwolf is a work of Hermann Hesse, first published in 1927. *Der Steppenwolf* describes a spiritual crisis of the middle-aged intellectual Harry Haller. Harry employs the name "Steppenwolf" to call himself, for he is ill to the morally collapsed world. Bearing the conflict between the "human nature" and "wolfish nature", Harry finally reconciled with the civil life under the influence of Hermina and Pablo. Due to its innovative and experimental narrative structure, *Der Steppenwolf* is highly appreciated as the German Ulysses by Thomas Mann. After the World War II, *Der Steppenwolf* highly arose the resonance among Americans, and resulted Hesse's works in sensation. *Der Steppenwolf* has the tendency of autobiographical to some extent. It contains Hesse's consideration and reconciliation toward the society whose value is opposite against Hesse's. *Der Steppenwolf* provides us a possible way to get along with different values in this society with gradually increasing diversity of values. This endows *Der Steppenwolf* the contemporary analysis value.

Researches related to Hermann Hesse done by Chinese scholar, can be vaguely divided in to two categories. Part of them is macro interpretation, that is analyzed based on more than one works of Hesse. For example, *Names and the Creative Process: A Study of the Names in Hermann Hesse's "Lauscher," "Demian," "Steppenwolf," and "Glasperlenspiel"* [1]. The rest researches focus on one single piece, for example, *Hermine and the Problem of Harry's Failure in Hesse's "Steppenwolf"* [2]. These three pieces *The Glass Bead Game*, *Siddhartha*, *Der Steppenwolf* are

comparably high-frequently discussed by Chinese Scholar. Analyzing Hesse's works, Chinese scholar mainly focus on these directions: "eastern element" "The way to the self" and "psychoanalysis". And the discussion related to the theme of Hesse's work is rather complete. As for theme analysis toward *Der Steppenwolf*, "salvation" "loneliness" are hot words. This paper focus on a single work, *Der Steppenwolf*, in order to make a detailed analysis of the textual. In *An analysis of gender narratives in Hermann Hesse's novels*, He Xinyi chose seven works of Hesse for analysis, however, each of them is roughly mentioned, which leading to a conclusion too one-sided.

When it comes to character image analysis, there's still some work to do to supplement the interpretation toward female images in Hesse's work [3]. Until now, analysis related to female images in Hesse's work is mainly confined to anima archetype, and their significance as a female character has been ignored. Sun Nana points out. In Sun Nana's paper *On Female Inspirators in Hermann Hesse's Middle Period of Creation*, overcoming the over-dependence toward anima archetype, she analyzes female figures as inspirators in Hesse's middle period work. Among these female figures, Sun nana take Hermina as: a magic mirror leading Harry to understand himself, a dancing girl guiding Harry to integrate into the crowd and a bridge connecting Harry to those immortal people.

Moreover, the analysis about female images in Hesse's work is a generalized interpretation based on more than one work for the most time. The lack of attention to the single female character, sometimes leads to a conclusion far more one-sided. The third wave of feminism challenges the grand narrative, points out the diversity within women, and highlights the significance of discussion specific to a smaller scale. Thus, it's meaningful to analysis a specific female character in Hesse's work and this paper chose Hermina as analyzing target.

It's rare that the research related to Hesse's work based on feminism perspective. In An analysis of gender narratives in Hermann Hesse's novels, He Xinyi notes that, female figures in Hesse's work are fully products of patriarchal culture and male narration. He Xinyi further criticizes Hermina's death in *Der Steppenwolf* as the obliteration of female object done by male subject. This interpretation might be too aggressive and one-sided. However, Beauvoir once points out that "On ne nait pas femme, on le devient." which means one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. This emphasizes the influence of culture and male discourse. For any one of widely influential work, their containing construction of gender hidden in the words and sentences, jointly shapes readers value and cognition towards gender, female, man. So, it's necessary to point out the influence of male discourse on Hermina, to notice readers the containing stereotypes against female. However, while criticizing, Hermina shows feminist value as well.

This paper aims to solve these questions: What does Hermina's death means? Should Hermina be merely interpreted as one of Harry's characters? What feminist criticism and value Hermina presents? This paper is based on feminism theory, a feminist interpretation of Jungian Psychology, and focus on the female role Hermina in *Der Steppenwolf*. In order to make a feminist criticism against the character, also dig out its feminist value.

2. Hermina should be Interpreted as an Independent Character

It's controversial that whether Hermina should be interpreted as an independent character. He Xinyi takes Hermina as merely a piece of Harry's character. She uses "female character of male subject" to describe Hermina [4]. Chukovsky's attitude toward Hermina is exactly the opposite. In *Hesse Studies*, Zhang Peifen mentions Chukovsky's opinion toward Hermina [5]. "Hermina is absolutely a courtesan or a call girl." Chukovsky considers Hermina's death as Harry murdered Hermina in reality, for Harry found that Hermina is only "flesh and blood" instead of Harry's ideal image which presents in the world [5]. Sun Nana takes rather a neutral attitude, and she comments Hermina from her function as an inspirator. All these interpretation about whether Hermina should

be taken as an independent character can't be simply criticized as right or wrong. Because in the Author's Postscript of the *Der Steppenwolf* written in 1941, Hesse said, "Works of literature may be understood and misunderstood in many a different way.……Of course I cannot dictate to readers how they should understand my tale, and I have no desire to. May everyone make of it whatever strikes a chord in them and suits their needs" [6]. As for this paper, the idea Hermina should be interpreted as an independent character is adopted. In *Hermann Hesse: Leben und Werk im Bild*, there's a post of Hesse's dancing partner Julia, also sentences describing his dancing class and dancing teacher [7]. All these female images in Hesse's life finally concentrate and present as a single unit, a female called Hermina in *Der Steppenwolf*. Similar with it is mentioned by Iris Young that the word "women" should still not be abandoned while discussing feminist question for it's a basic unit of discussion [8]. In the novel *Der Steppenwolf*, Hermina is the single unit of a female figure, so Hermina should be taken as an independent character for discussion instead of merely a character of Harry's.

3. The Shaping of Male Discourse toward Female Figure Presents on Hermina

3.1. Hermina as "The Other"

3.1.1. "The Other" Under the Male First-Person Narration

According to the switch of narrative perspective, *Der Steppenwolf* can be divided into three narrative dimensions. This paper focuses on the third dimension, Harry Haller's self-narration, in which Hermina shows up. In this dimension, the male first-person narration perspective is adopted and Harry Haller is established as a gazer. The appearance and every action of Hermina is presented by the gaze of Harry. In the discussion of gaze, Sartre points out that "I" am the master of the world while gazing at it, and "I" am established as "the subject" [9]. Thus, as a gazer Harry is the subject, and Hermina becomes the object and the other. This narrative perspective unavoidably contains the trait of male-centered.

3.1.2. "The other" as Anima

According to C.G. Jung's psychoanalysis theory, Hermina owns some characteristic of anima archetype. Archetype is a kind of "collective unconscious" which contains memories, imprints, and modes of human development and behavior conditioned by mankind's entire history [10]. Anima is the personification of feminine psychological patterns within a man. The name "Hermina" is exactly the feminine form of the writer's name "Hermann". When revealing her name, Hermina said, "Who knows? Perhaps I am a boy, only in disguise". It is important evidence of Hermina being the anima that her name comes from "Hermann".

   The presentation of anima archetype lies in the casting of archetype toward a specific object [11]. It is Hermina that becomes the casting object of Harry's anima archetype. "you've taken a liking to me and feel that I matter because I'm like a kind of mirror for you". This shows that what Harry really discovers is the projection of anima rather than discovering himself in Hermina. Out of this kind of casting, the character Hermina's figure is predominantly consisted of her own characteristic and mixed with a small portion trait from Harry. Also, the projection of anima imposes Harry's imagination toward women on Hermina. This aggravates the establishment of subjective position of male character Harry, the subordinate status of female character Hermina. The projection again reinforces the androcentric color presented on Hermina. However, noticeably, before she is projected the anima image, Hermina is initially an "object", a female character. Thus, it's inappropriate to simply take Hermina as one of Harry's personalities, but a female character being cast part of Harry's personality.

One of the ways of archetype's cast is metaphor [12]. Anima archetype could also be presented by metaphor. It can be presented as mother, maiden, angle, demon or other animal images commonly unconsciously associated with "women" by the crowd [11]. After meeting Hermina for the first time, Harry dreamed a scorpion. The scorpion climbed up Harry's leg, and disappeared. Then the scorpion appears in Goethe's hand as an image of women leg. As the anima, Hermina is described as a scorpion, and women is compared to lure and danger.

Being seductive is also a trait of Hermina as a dancer in the pub. She taught Harry dancing, and introduced Maria to Harry. Hermina leads Harry to enjoy the joy of sensual, "After all it's my job: I earn a living by being able to make men fall in love with me". The "worldly" enjoyment of jazz, foxtrot and sensuality which Hermina represents, stands in opposition to the "elegant" classical music and classic books Harry sticks to. It's the contrary of "desire" and "logic", the opposition of "self" and "ego", also the conflict of "women" and "man" [13]. These opposition implies the traditional binary opposition of gender. Also, women are degraded as indulgent, lustful and worldly to some extent.

3.2. Maternal Mythology

In *Le Deuxième Sexe I* Beauvoir notes that behind the sanctified mother gathered a group of women to serve for man. "They gave them the clear mystery as gnarled grapevines and cool water; ……men forget all pride around them; he experienced the ecstasy and the tenderness of becoming a child again…… for he knew that, obedient as he was, he was their master" [14].

Hermina is given this kind of sanctified motherhood. Her mysterious personality comes from her amazingly accurate prediction toward Harry's thought. "This woman, who had seen through me so comprehensively," Harry admitted. Hermina's mystery comes from her "ability to switch from being deeply serious to extremely funny" unpredictable motions as well. "She was really mothering me, but from time to time I noticed momentarily how beautiful and young she was". Harry followed Hermina's "mother's orders". He learned to have a good rest and tried dance the foxtrot under the order of Hermina. With her command, Harry needn't to worry whether "dance" is corresponded to his own value, but to follow all the instruction like a child. The frequent description and emphasis about the motherhood of Hermina suggests that, Hermina's guiding behavior is centering on Harry. It is Harry that Hermina's action center on. This again reinforces the male-centered color of the text.

4. The Breakthrough of Gender Conception on Hermina

4.1. Bisexuality as Anima

Anima archetype theory is an important further explain and complement of C.G. Jung's bisexuality theory [15]. Polly Young-Eisendro points out, Jung's theory of intersex personality is a breakthrough towards the traditional binary gender stereotype [12]. Although Hermina's being projected the anima image suggests the tendency of male-centered, the character still indicates this breakthrough toward binary gender. This breakthrough is initially manifested in Hermina's appearance, "A short curl was hanging down on to her smooth, motionless forehead and the corner of her brow where the cur rested was the source from which that wave of boyishness". Hermina is "pretty little" "beautiful" "sweet, playful, free flowing sensuality and intense carnal desire". She owns mild facial features mixed with "firm face" "boyish hair". This kind of appearance add to Hermina's intersex personality and the ambiguity of gender. Despite the expression "boyish hair" contains the stereotype against gender, there is a reconciliation of the two traditional genders.

4.2.   Wisdom as an Inspirator

As a leader, Hermina acts as a bridge which communicate Harry and civil life [3]. She plays the role of guide leading Harry to "the immortal". Hermina displays her unique wisdom and glamour. As a leader, Hermina is "active" also "controlling": Hermina decides the chance and frequency that Harry can talk with her; she grasps the pace of the conversation and controls the leading way of the chat; she also has a clear command of Harry's periodical target——learn to dance, and even while dancing, it is Hermina who control the rhythm of steps.

Those who are inclined to distinguish gender temperament, have made a lot of distinctions and generalizations about gender temperament. In these classifications, femininity is usually recognized as "passivity" and "conformity" [16]. However, Hermina's "initiative" breaks the above labels, and increases the fertility and complexity of gender temperament.

4.3.   Hermina's Death Symbolizes the Reconciliation toward Androgyny Personality

In the magic theater, Hermina was ultimately killed by Harry, through which Harry finally understood "the laugh of the immortal". He Xinyi interprets this ending as the "subject" Hermina was killed to give way to the "subject" Harry [4]. This interpretation maybe too radical. From the perspective of C.G. Jung's Analytical Psychotherapy, it's more appropriate to consider the ending as a symbol of Harry's acceptation of the civil life which Hermina represents. It's also a signal of Harry's adoption of the active and rational attitude toward life which Hermina shows. In Jung's Analytical Psychotherapy, the unbiased respect and acceptance of the shadow, makes the road to inner healing. The integration of reason and instinct, consciousness and unconsciousness, self and shadow lead the way to the completeness of human spirit [17]. Shadow is the other side of oneself. For example, anima archetype is one type of the shadow, a larger realm of the self, because anima is the other side of male inner image [18]. It is the respect, acceptance and reconciliation toward anima the "female part" that benefits the going through of Harry's spiritual crisis. Thus, the ending of Hermina's death, symbolizes Harry's adoption of androgyny personality, which manifest gender's flexibility.

5.   Conclusions

This paper focus on the female character Hermina, first analyses the reason and necessity to take Hermina as an independent character. This paper digs out the figure's feminist value while making criticism against it. Hermina should be interpreted as an independent character, for she is a basic unit when discussing the female figure in *Der Steppenwolf*. Hermina being a "object" of projection of Harry's anima and the mother archetype, her existence adds a strong male-centred atmosphere to the text. However, Hermina being a female character, her intersex personality and her unique wisdom as an inspirator, breaks the opposition of traditional binary gender. The novel's ending of Hermina's death symbolizes the reconciliation to the intersex personality for Harry and shows the fertility of gender. This paper aims at objectively interpreting the figure Hermina, by balancing feminist criticism and value discovery. This paper not only to break the possible fixed cognition toward female image by the influence of male-centred voice, but also to avoid over criticism. The third wave of feminism challenges the grand narrative, points out the diversity within women, and highlights the significance of discussion specific to a smaller scale. Based on the overview of female images in Hesse's work, this paper makes a further analysis of a certain role. However, this paper merely focuses on the female character Hermina. There's still places for the analysis of female images in Hesse's works.

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