

Analysis of Sexism and Stereotyping in Children's Literature

- The Chronicles of Narnia as an Example

Chenyu Lou^{1,a,*}

¹*Olive Tree International Academy, Hangzhou, China*

a. 540377387@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the real world, gender discrimination is ubiquitous and exists in every sphere: economic, social, political, cultural and geographical. The importance of literature to human beings lies in the fact that the ideas expressed in it affect people's consciousness in a subtle way, especially children's literature, which has a fundamental impact on children at the beginning of their lives, so it is crucial to study sexism in children's literature. The Chronicles of Narnia is a classic in children's literature and a classic in modern literature. However, the book has also been put forward by the public with many shortcomings. For example, the serious contradiction of Aslan's image, the serious ethnodiscrimination and prejudice, the degradation of women in a certain way, and the lack of characters' subjectivity, and so on. This paper focuses on how the books reveal sexism and gender stereotypes, either directly or indirectly, between the lines, by analysing the characterisation and storyline design of the Chronicles of Narnia series.

Keywords: The Chronicles of Narnia, sexism, stereotyping

1. Introduction

Reading has a great impact on children who have not yet developed clear values. This means that biased or discriminatory content in books will subtly shape a child's outlook and worldview. The reason for this thesis is that when the author read the book several years ago, she loved the adventurous world of Narnia and never questioned the content or the characters in the book. I was never questioned about the content and characters of the book, nor was I guided by anyone to think critically about the novel during the reading process. It was only after years of re-reading the book that I realised some of the irrational and discriminatory portrayals in the book. It is hoped that more people will be aware of the discrimination against women in literature.

The research method used in this paper is to analyse the text and summarise the general pattern of the author in designing the characters and plot by dissecting the details. The main objective of the research process is to find out the segments with sexist tendencies.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: section two is a literature review, section three is the logic of character construction in traditional children's literature, section four is a comparative analysis in terms of character construction, section five is the real-life implications and solutions, and section six is the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

There is not much relevant literature in existence. The only literature that exists is also more on discussing children's literature worldviews and reading methods[1]. Existing analyses include analyses of major characters such as the White Witch, Aslan, Diggory, Polly, Peter and Susan, although in fact some relatively minor characters can also be analysed comparatively.

3. The Logic of Character Construction in Traditional Children's Literature

3.1. Women

Firstly, there is the output of the image of women as ignorant, narrow-minded and gossipy.

In the book *The Magician's Nephew* [2], the male protagonist Diggory attributes his dissatisfaction with the heroine Polly's speech to the fact that Polly "is a girl". And he defines a girl as a group of people who don't want to know anything and focus all day long on parents and children and secret discussions behind their backs.

3.2. Men

The output of male characters that represent the image of the wise man.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Magic Wardrobe*, when the other children are doubtful about whether Lucy has lied about the world behind the wardrobe the old professor uses logic to help them think and answer their questions[3-7].

In *The Horse and the Boy Who Could Speak*, it is a male hermit who rescues and guides the main group of characters when they are in danger in the desert.

3.3. Inheritance Rights

The childless White Queen offers herself to find a young boy to raise as her heir to become the future king of Narnia. At the end of this part of the story, the elder brother Peter becomes the supreme king of Narnia while his younger siblings are kings and queens under him.

4. Comparative Analysis on Character Construction

4.1. Male Characterisation of the Great Saviour

There is one character in the Narnia series who is a perfect God throughout the books - Aslan, the Lion King. Although he is an animal, his name (Aslan) is an extremely popular male name among Turkic-speaking peoples, so he should be considered male. More than once, when children were in trouble in the Second World, he descended from the sky to resolve crises and punish evil. It gave life to all and founded the Kingdom of Narnia, and its words are accepted as supreme instructions (the creatures only laugh when Aslan says to let go of laughter).

4.2. The bias of the titles

Four of the seven books in the series are character-related. And three of those four titles in which characters appear are male only[8-10]. In *The Wizard's Nephew*, Diggory and Polly share an adventure, but only the more specifically identified male protagonist appears in the title. In *The Talking Horse and the Boy* the main story line revolves around the male protagonist Shasta and the female protagonist Aravis and their respective line of four talking horses, but the title has nothing to do with the female protagonist. [5]

4.3. Characterisation of the vicious and cruel 'Queen'

Queen Jadis (later the White Queen), who appears in *The Magician's Nephew* [2], is described by the hero Diggory as being as beautiful as he has ever seen in his life. In contrast, however, is her extremely ugly character - using a destructive spell to wipe out the entire Charn dynasty. Her language reveals stupid narcissism and violence. And in the book, God's perspective is used to describe "witches" as "so practical that they are only interested in people or things that help them" or even describe witches as egoistic. Not all children's books portray witches as sinister and evil, such as the one and only Little Witch in *Little Witch* [3]. Perhaps witch is indeed not a positive word. With this in mind, most of the occurrences of the profession of witch are associated with women.

4.4. Traditional gender division of labour

In *The Wizard's Nephew*, there are two siblings, Letty and Andrew, who live under the same roof. While the younger brother is a self-proclaimed "wizard" and spends his days at work, the older sister makes her first official appearance kneeling by the window sewing a mattress.

Of the four Pevensie siblings, both brother Peter and sister Susan take on the responsibility of looking after everyone. But a closer look reveals that Susan is very much in charge of worrying about what everyone is eating and wearing, and makes decisions more conservatively. When Father Christmas gives them presents, Peter gets a sword and shield, and receives the instruction, "These are tools, not toys, so use them when you can." Susan received a bow, a bag of arrows and an ivory horn. Father Christmas tells her to only use the bow and arrows in an emergency and that he does not intend for Susan to go to war because it is ugly for a woman to fight. This reflects the different expectations and division of roles that men and women are subjected to. When fighting the White Witch Susan is too scared to fight. It is later learnt that Susan is very good with a bow and arrow but does not appear in the battle, but who has considered that Susan does not receive the same encouragement to fight as the others, so how can she let go of all her worries and be invincible when she is needed? When the four of them finally ascend to the throne, Peter is portrayed as a tall warrior, while Susan is the 'gentle queen', a 'vase' of traditional feminine elegance. The text also emphasises the many emissaries from many countries who came to ask for her hand in marriage. Even when a woman achieves the status of queen, she is still valued for her marriage value. Susan was turned away during the last battle because she was intoxicated by the world of adult power and gold. In the distant past, Edmund had betrayed Narnia to the White Witch, putting everyone in danger. But Aslan forgave him "inclusively" and gave him a chance to change. Susan, on the other hand, who had worked so hard to build Narnia, was ostracised because she was attracted to the other world (and had done nothing to harm everyone who had betrayed her promise). A boy's adventurous trial and error is what can be forgiven; a girl's just going to have to be confined to not making mistakes [9].

4.5. Bold and adventurous portrayal of male characters and conservative and more timid portrayal of female characters

In *The Magician's Nephew*, Polly is constantly worried in the second world about getting home safely. In contrast, Diggory has been exploring with great passion.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Magic Wardrobe*, the four siblings arrive at the old professor's house for the first time. While Susan and Lucy remind everyone to go to bed for fear of being scolded, Peter is undaunted, saying that nothing is done in such a household without being policed. When Lucy freaks out about the strange noises, her brother Edmund says it's "foolish" of her to be so frightened, but Peter guesses it's just birds and offers to go exploring the next day. When the expedition is thwarted by the rain, his sister Susan says she wants to stay home, and Peter offers to

go on another expedition at home. Throughout the book, Peter's older brother has been the initial instigator of the expedition[3].

In *The Talking Horse and the Boy*, the messengers tell the stranded prince Shasta that "running away can be interpreted as boyish playfulness of a courageous nature". Here, bravery is categorised as a boyish trait. Among the supporting characters, Archduchess Rosaline reveals a fear of the unknown and a desire to return to her safe place. In contrast, the male characters, such as the Archon, the Archon's son and the Prime Minister, show ambition and fearlessness in their quests. Even the one male and one female talking horse are mares "timid and gentle by nature, easily overpowered. Still in the book, Prince Colin explains why Queen Lucy went to war and Queen Susan stayed in the castle by saying "She was not like Lucy, who was as good as a man, or at least as good as a boy. Queen Susan is more like a common noble lady." [5] The meaning behind this statement is that a woman has to achieve something to be as good as a boy, and perform better to be said to be like a man. Such a metaphor is surprisingly complimentary.

In *Prince Caspian*, four siblings lack supplies when they are first stranded on a desert island. Again, the older and younger brothers suggest exploring the forest[6].

5. Realistic Implications and Solutions

A good solution is for students to be able to identify some of the segments that create sexism before they read them, with guidance from the teacher. Reading will be more effective and meaningful if the children themselves have mastered critical thinking to a certain extent, and are not accepting one-dimensionally but absorbing the good parts of the plot when reading.

6. Conclusion

It is possible that the appearance of individual gender stereotypes is just a character trait or an accidental design of the author. However, when the whole novel is carefully examined, it is still not difficult to find a certain degree of devaluation of women. The main audience of children's literature is children, for whom the three views have not yet been fully moulded. For them, even if some of the bridges are deliberately designed by the author to satirise the inherent stereotypes of different genders, it is still difficult to recognise them in their reading. Instead, they may be influenced by the wrong stereotypes and be further gender socialised in the process of reading. This is not what children's literature was created for. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a classic of modern literature and its artistic merit is undeniable, but the shortcomings of sexism and ethnicity still need to be addressed.

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