

FEMALE TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN THE BROTHERS GRIMMS' SLEEPING BEAUTY: AN ACTANTIAL MODEL ANALYSIS

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 01-11-2022

Accepted: 07-02-2023

Published: 09-02-2023

Volume: 7

Issue: 1

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v6i2.168>

KEYWORDS

semiotics, actantial model, narrative trajectory, female stereotypes, traditional gender roles

ABSTRACT

The tale of the Sleeping Beauty is still one of the well-loved and popular fairy tales among children, especially girls. The story has been adapted into various versions but has not changed essentially—it is always about a princess saved from a curse, about good versus bad. Due to the simple nature of the story, most literary researchers no longer deem this story a valuable source of data anymore although there are still more to uncover from the fairy tale. This study attempts to examine how the female characters in the story are represented from the structural semiotics perspective using two theories proposed by A. J. Greimas, namely the Actantial Model and the Narrative Trajectory. The qualitative method is applied to interpretatively divide the story into different major events, from which an actantial diagram and a trajectory can be made before the representation is drawn. The findings suggest that the female characters in the story are mostly placed as an object of the actantial diagram and a goal in the trajectory; this means that the story puts the female characters in passive roles that comply to the traditional gender roles and female stereotypes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'gender' has often been used interchangeably with 'sex' even though the first refers more to social roles and the latter to human beings' biological structures and reproductive organs (Crawford & Unger, 2004). With this perspective in mind, a lot of people assign certain social roles on others based on only their physiology: humans with female organs are stereotyped, for instance, to have more roles in domestic domains, and are more passive and submissive. Meanwhile, humans with male organs are put with leading roles, assertiveness, and even aggressiveness. This view on how people should be and behave is reflected in many areas of life, including through the use of language.



Language has always been a powerful tool of relaying a message from one person to another. For generations, people utilize the use of language to teach younger generations of their culture, habits, and other social practices. One of the ways that language has been used to do this is by the means of narratives. Fairy tales are a form of narrative which are very popular among children and adults alike. The simple storylines, which tend to be very straightforward, and the fact that they are oftentimes thought to be embedded with moral messages and/or lessons make them considered suitable to be consumed by children as these stories are expected to impart important lessons that are useful for the moral development of the children. However, aside from these visible and explicit factors of the benefits of fairy tales, it is believed that they may also impart a less explicit life-lesson for the readers—a lesson that may not be easily realized, a lesson about gender roles.

Out of all popular fairy tales today, the story of Sleeping Beauty is still one of the most well-known and most beloved. Since it was first published in written form in 1697 by Charles Perrault, the story has been repeatedly adapted by writers across different centuries. In fact, Disney has also made an animated film with the same title in 1959 by taking inspiration from the version by the Brothers' Grimms, and later also made another version taken from the story villain's point of view in 2014 (and a sequel of it in 2019). However, despite the numerous available versions, it is observed that there are actually not many changes that occur in the core of the storyline of the tale—it is still about a princess who is cursed to sleep for a hundred years until a prince saves her. The moral of the tale has not dramatically changed over time, either: good will eventually always triumph against evil.

The lack of changes in storyline and main morals of this fairy tale—along with other fairy tales—is believed to be one of the main factors that fairy tales are no longer thought to be an interesting source of data in literary research. Many researchers think they are outdated as there have been many studies conducted about it. However, most research comes from the literature perspective and focuses mostly on the plot or characters and conflict (e.g., Fairfax-Owen, 2019; Starling, 2017). There have been few studies that dedicated to this source of data using linguistics perspective, especially from the structural semiotics point of view.

In this research, the researchers aim to examine the Brothers Grimms' 1812's version of the story of Sleeping Beauty using two structural semiotic theories proposed by Algirdas Greimas



(1966), namely the Actantial Model and the Narrative Trajectory theories. The purpose of the study is to examine the basic elements of the story to find how the characters' social roles are portrayed in the story in terms of their gender. It is hoped that the research will help bring awareness that gender is not only taught explicitly in media but can also be implicitly embedded in even the simplest stories. It is also hoped that this research will add to the literature of structural semiotics research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been some studies conducted on the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. For example, one research by Ihsan and Wijayadi (2015) attempted to explore the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* from a semiotic perspective with the application of Propp's functions of dramatis personae. In the study, they described that plot progression in *Sleeping Beauty* are similar to some of the functions in Propp's theory. In addition, Ihsan and Wijayadi also tried to put the characters in the tale into the seven spheres of actions that are still in line with Propp's functions. However, they did not go further than that; the research stopped at the identification of plot and characters' similarities with the theory.

Another example is Leigh Butler's (2014) analysis on how *Sleeping Beauty* is a feminist tale. In the article, Butler argued that the central conflict(s) in the story does not revolve around what happened between the prince and the princess, or between the evil fairy and the king and queen. Instead, the conflict is the 'battle of will' between the three fairy godmothers and the evil fairy—where the godmothers try to save the princess and the evil fairy tries to harm her. Yet, despite being a very interesting read, the article does not really explore the conflicts thoroughly or explain further why the story is claimed to be a feminist tale.

This research applies two semiotics theories: the Actantial Model and the Narrative Trajectory. These two theories are initially used to reveal thematized actions and plot progressions (Hébert, 2011), but they are also able to show the degree of activeness in the participants, which in turns will be able to help the researchers achieve the purpose of the study. The literature will be explained in further detail in the subsections below.



2.1 The Actantial Model Theory

Greimas believes that every narrative consists of six basic elements that build it, regardless of genre, length, and other factors (Hébert, 2011). He also suggests that these elements have nothing to do with the plot or storyline of the narrative but is more to do with the basic units in each event (or conflict). According to Chandler (2002), Greimas divides the elements of a narrative into six different ‘actants’: (1) the Subject, which is the element that takes an action towards achieving their goal; (2) the Object, or the element that is the goal sought by the Subject; (3) the Sender, which is the element that motivates/ urges the Subject to take an action; (4) the Receiver which reaps the benefit from the achievement of the Subject; (5) the Helper and (6) the Opponent—the elements that will either help or hinder the Subject from achieving their goal. An actant can be anything in the story (Hébert, 2011); In other words, an actant does not only have to be a character in the story but can also be a concept (e.g. love, hate) or an inanimate object (e.g. a sword, book) as long as it has a function in the story.

These actants are commonly drawn into a diagram for each of visualization, each pair of actants are placed in the opposite position from each other (see Figure 1). This is due to the fact that semiotics are the system of meanings that is based on oppositions (Chandler, 2002); for example, there is no light without darkness, or there is no concept of stationary without the concept of moving. In the case of the actantial model, the oppositions are between the subject and object (axis of desire), the sender and receiver (axis of communication/transmission), and the helper and opponent (axis of power).

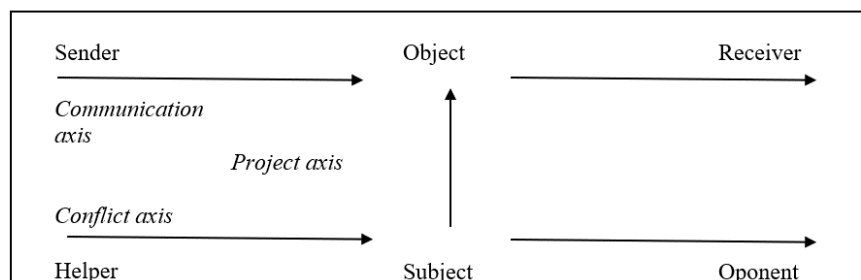


Figure 1. Actantial Model diagram

This theory provides the details in seeing the position of the elements in the story to decide which character(s) are central to the story. On grounds of this, the researchers believe that using



the two theories may give a more thorough findings on the degree of activeness of the characters in the story to reveal how they are portrayed in relation to gender roles.

2.2 The Narrative Trajectory Theory

A narrative is believed to be a sequence of events that usually begins with a conflict and ends with the said conflict is resolved (Marsen et al., 2003). Tanusy (2016) mentioned that there is no principle of causality in narratives; this means that the occurrence of the second event in the narrative is not caused by the occurrence of the first event. In fact, it is causally linked with the actions and performance of the characters involved in the narrative itself. In other words, what affects the storyline is not the conflict that occurs but what the characters do and how they react to it.

The theory of narrative trajectory is aimed to dissect narratives in the form that is termed as the ‘heroic quest’, which means how the plot progresses through the actions and/or choices of the ‘hero’—or the Subject of the story. (Greimas, 1966, as cited in Hébert, 2011). In each conflict, it is said the Subject must pass three different tests after they make a decision to (re)act to the conflict presented to them. The first test is called the qualifying test, where the Subject obtains the resources and/or other abilities to solve the conflict, after which they are faced with the second test, the decisive test—in which the Subject must use their ability and resource to solve the conflict. The third test comes immediately after the occurrence of the second test; this is called the glorifying test, which shows the result of the Subject’s action—whether they succeed (and the whole narrative comes to an end) or fail (and a new conflict begins).

In relation to this research, the theory helps further establishing which character becomes the Subject of each conflict and take the actions to move the plot of this story, which has been first classified by the Actantial Model. It will reveal the degree of activeness of the character and therefore assists the researchers in determining how the traditional gender roles play a part in the story author’s decision of using certain characters as Subjects or Objects.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach as its research method, as the approach is believed to be able to capture the essence of the data in a more systemic way to obtain the portrayal of the female characters and the traditional gender roles; this is in accordance with the Miles and



Huberman's (1994) take on qualitative approach, which includes a prolonged or intense contact with data to capture and isolate the preconceptions about the discussed topics through a process of deep attentiveness. Out of the three approaches to qualitative studies that are mentioned by Miles and Huberman (1994), the researcher believed that interpretativism was the best approach to employ on this study due to the nature of the data—a fairy tale entitled *Sleeping Beauty* as this approach focuses on seeing the data as a collection of symbols with layers of meaning to be decoded and interpreted by researchers.

The actantial model theory requires that every narrative should be divided into several events that correspond to the conflicts of the narrative itself before putting it into the actantial diagram. As the structure of this story is simple, the researchers divided it into two events: the event before the curse and the one after. Then, from each event the Subject of each event's diagram was determined. To further establish the character's role as the subject of the event, the narrative trajectory theory is applied to it as commonly the subject of the event is the one who is actively doing something to propel the plot forward.

After the subject was established, the next step was determining the Object and the other elements in the actantial diagram based on how the Subject was related to the element (e.g., the one that was considered as a Helper in the event was the element/character that helped the Subject to achieve their objective). Again, to ensure that the element/character held a function in the diagram, each of them was placed in the narrative trajectory theory. After having found the function of each element/character in the event, a further analysis was conducted to find the roles of the characters (especially the female characters) in the story.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion was divided into two subsections; the first subsection focused on the first event of the story, which was from the beginning of the story until the princess' birthday party (before the curse was activated), while the second event discussed the part after the princess fell asleep until the end of the story.



Event 1: Before Princess Rosamond falls asleep

This event is counted from the beginning of the story, where Princess Rosamond was born. In this event, there were various other minor incidents, namely a party to celebrate the birth of the princess, followed by the giving of blessings from the fairies which ended with the eldest fairy's curse, until in the end Princess Rosamond could not escape the curse and her finger was pierced by a spinning wheel then she and the whole palace fell asleep.

In this event, Putri Rosamond, who is actually the main character of this story, does not get a place as a Subject but as an Object. A subject is an active element in taking action (Hébert, 2011, p. 72). In this event, Princess Rosamond is portrayed as the recipient of the action because she does nothing. It was the King who took various actions to prevent the curse that had been given so that the position of the subject was more suitable to be pinned to the King.

Sender: The King's resolve to save his daughter			Receiver: 1. The King and Queen 2. Princess Rosamond 3. The citizens of the kingdom
	Subject: The King	Object: Princess Rosamond	
Helper: All citizen of the kingdom			Opponent: 1. The fairy in disguise 2. Spinning wheel

Figure 2. The actantial diagram for Event 1

The diagram above shows the position of the King as an active element in carrying out his mission because he has a desire. One of the conditions that the Subject must have is that he must have motivation (Greimas, 1966, as cited in Chandler, 2002, p. 119), and here the motivation or sender is the desire of the King to save his daughter's life from the curse. In this event, the king also has a helper, namely the inhabitants of the kingdom. In other words, the King can pass the qualifying test because he has the resources to resolve the conflict. If the mission is successful, not only the King and Queen and Princess Rosamond will benefit, but the entire kingdom as well; therefore, they gladly tried to help the King by following his orders to burn all the spinning wheels in the land. The burning of the spinning wheel was a decisive test passed by the King. After the



two tests passed, the king had to pass the final test, namely the glorifying test. Here the results of the first two tests are shown (Marsen et al., 2003: 2). In this test, the King has failed to obtain the object he wanted—the safety of the princess. This is evident from the end of this event, where the princess is said to have fallen asleep. It means, in this event there are opponents who try to prevent the King from achieving his wishes (Hébert, 2011: 72).

The application of the theory of Actantial Model and Narrative Trajectory for Event 1 above shows that Princess Rosamond is a passive character or element. Since the beginning of the story, she is depicted as a helpless character. She needs protection from her father and other people around her to prevent the curse from happening. Even then when she moved into her teenage years (in this version, Princess Rosamond's age is 15 years) she was still portrayed as a character who needed the protection of others. Disaster happened to her when her protectors (the King and Queen) left the palace; in other words, without any outside protection, Princess Rosamond has no means or abilities to create a decision that may save her life.

Event 2: After the curse lasts for a hundred years

The second part of this story begins when Princess Rosamond and the whole palace fall asleep, until the end of the story where a prince comes and saves the princess until they finally get married.

Similar to the previous event, Princess Rosamond does not act as a Subject in this event. Again, she was placed in a passive position—Princess Rosamond waiting to be rescued. The subject of this event is the prince whose curiosity arises to see for himself the kingdom which has become a folk legend around the palace after hearing the story of an old man he met (see Figure 4).

Sender: The prince's curiosity to see a legendary place			Receiver: 1. King and Queen 2. Princess Rosamond 3. The Prince 4. Citizens of the kingdom
	Subject: The prince	Object: Princess Rosamond	
Helper: 1. Old man 2. Thorns and bushes			Opponent: -

Figure 3. Actantial diagram for Event 2.



To complete the story sequence in this event, the prince who is the subject must pass three tests in the narrative trajectory. Here, as a motivated subject (sender), the prince also has resources or qualifications that can help him pass the qualifying and decisive tests. This is shown by the open bushes that act as a helper to allow the prince to enter the tightly closed palace; whereas, previously it was told that this thicket had prevented other people from trying to enter the palace. This also proves that Princess Rosamond still has protection from outsiders, even after the curse has passed. After going through these two trials, it is told that the prince managed to break the curse and finally married Princess Rosamond. In other words, the prince was able to pass the final test, namely the glorifying test, and managed to benefit from his success; this means that in addition to acting as a subject in this event, the prince also acts as a receiver, namely the beneficiary of the achievement of the relationship between subject and object (Hébert, 2011, p. 72).

Female Representation in the Story of *Sleeping Beauty*

From the two diagrams above, it can be seen how women are depicted in the story. In various adaptations, the title of this story is centered on the female character—in this version named Princess Rosamond—but it can be seen that the princess herself plays a very small role in moving the storyline. In fact, the princess is described as a passive character and unable to do anything without the help of the people around her.

Princess Rosamond's passive character is a stereotypical image of women in general. As stated by Deaux and Lewis (1983), women are often described as passive and submissive characters. In other words, women do not take much initiative in determining what is going on in their lives and mostly allow men to take over in solving problems. This opinion is also in line with the findings of Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) who say that men usually take an active role in making decisions, for example in this story when the prince decides to enter the palace to see the sleeping princess. Another stereotype, although not clearly visible in this story, is that women are emotional characters (Brannon, 2017; Emslie & Hunt, 2008). This can be seen from Princess Rosamond who is described as being more inclined to follow her heart to enter the tower and play with the spinning wheel when her parents are not around. Meanwhile, men are depicted as more rational and practical in their minds: the king ordered all spinning tools to be destroyed, thinking that would prevent his curse from happening.



Gender stereotypes do not just happen to the main characters of this story; this also happens to other female characters, namely the Queen. She is almost never mentioned in the stories, and when her name is mentioned, she is always mentioned together with the king. In other words, the Queen looked like she had no personal identity. The image of women like this is a picture that is commonly found in the stereotype of married women. Women are expected to follow the directions and wishes of their husbands, and not have opinions that conflict with their husbands (Holt, n.d.; Meyerowitz, 1994; Lippa, 2002; Brannon, 2017). We can see this from the fact that the Queen had absolutely no part in trying to save her daughter.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis above shows that even simple narrative stories such as children's fairy tales can contain implied messages beyond the usual moral message about good always defeating evil in the end. From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the division of roles based on gender has existed for a long time, and seems to still be part of today's society. By reading this story as well as other fairy tales, children indirectly learn about what role is expected of them in society. The child's perspective which is very easy to shape will begin to sort out what roles are suitable for them in society; they will also begin to think about what they need to do in order to achieve this role that is expected of them. Of course, by saying this, the author does not mean to say that children's fairy tales are not good because they teach girls to be passive. This conclusion is only drawn from the results of the discussion of the elements contained in the story. However, this analysis is far from perfect. Many things may have been missed due to time and place constraints in conducting this research; The author did not analyze all versions of the Sleeping Beauty story so that he cannot make generalizations, and this story is only divided into two large units, not discussed in more detail.

Therefore, for further research, it is highly recommended to examine this story further by comparing it with other versions to see if the findings regarding the role of women in this story are the same as other versions of Sleeping Beauty. Moreover, in conducting subsequent research, other semiotic theories can also be applied so that the ideology of this story is revealed.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Institute of Research and Community Service of Universitas Kristen Maranatha for having funded this research.

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