

# Gender Alterations in English and French Modernist “Bluebeard” Fairytale

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## Abstract

The article is aimed at scrutinizing a variety of modernistic writings in a Bluebeard fairytale tradition. It is intended to show what is to be gained by studying texts in relation to the contexts in which they were produced. The period considered here is that of the late XIX and early XX centuries. This takes us into discussing patriarchal authority in the political thought of the early modern time in France and that of the Victorian England. The “Bluebeard” fairytale changes in the domain of gender as a response to certain historical and psychological changes are analyzed. A wide range of writings is investigated to reveal the contribution made by the French and English authors in the field of literature. The analysis implies that certain feminist ideas which grew out of social changes in the society of France and England have provoked some archetypal alterations in the texts of French and English modernists.

**Keywords:** fairytale, patriarchal, feminist, gender, archetypal

## 1. Introduction

The popular “Bluebeard” fairy tale stands out as a generalized name for a series of stories that are united by similar themes.

Thus the proximity of the Bluebeard fairytale revisions is determined by a repetitive element, namely, one motive. The similarity of the authors’ treatment of the topic makes itself evident in the fact of constant reference to the genre of fairytale and to the plots with close motives in particular.

The Bluebeard fairytale tradition is well highlighted in the works of Maria Tatar and Casie E. Hermansson. Besides one should not leave out of the account Heidi Anne Heiner’s “Bluebeard. Tales from around the world”, which provides an anthology of folktales and literary fairy tales influenced by the famous motive.

Hence forth to establish a comprehensive and systematic account of the archetypal changes, taking place in “Bluebeard tale” throughout the history of its evolvement, one should consider the process by which it came into being and the reasons, which provoked alterations taking place in some of the modern variants of the tale. These alterations emerged through the circulation of ideas and practices within a specific culture. This takes us into discussing some concrete social, political and psychological issues in all their complexity and peculiarity.

Firstly, it is expedient to look at the idea of patriarchal authority in the political thought of the early modern time.

## 2. Historical Preconditions

As far as the idea of patriarchy was largely connected to the establishment of absolute monarchy in European countries in the XVI - XVII centuries, it is advisable by all means to consider political thought of the time.

According to the French lawyer Jean Bodin power originates from the supreme power of God the Father.

Hence for Bodin the power given to the husband or father is more than natural—it is divine. Consequently, the subordination of wives to their rightful husbands seems necessary as it turns out to be the basis of public authority in the Republic (Bodin, 1986).

One more critic, whose name is inseparable from the history of political theory, is R. Filmer. The scientist takes almost the same view towards the question of power and authority.

According to Filmer the origins of the royal authority lie in patriarchal power of the family (Filmer, 1680).

As a result Filmer as well as Bodin amalgamates the notion of paternal authority and Christian tradition, basing his theory on the Biblical Commandments. The existence of these approaches foregrounds the perception of the idea of patriarchy in France and England.

But towards the end of the XVIII century a contrary view develops in France, offsetting the opposition of women to men as unequal creatures. For as much as the French Revolution provided rights to a larger portion of the population it still regarded women as inferior to men. Women were deprived of the right to vote and in fact they were denied full civil capacity (Pushkareva, 2004).

At the end of the XVIII century such views came into contradiction with the trend of feminine social activity growth. The cult female figure during this phase of political thinking was Olympia de Gouge.

The origin of the ideas implemented in practice by a feminine movement is made conspicuous in "Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne" (1792). This work highlights the demand to give women political and social rights (Ushakin, 2001).

In England, on the other hand, feminism did not manifest itself until the late nineteenth century due to certain peculiarities of the English political and social ideas. To demonstrate the essence of the feminist issues in the UK, we should illuminate the conditions that preceded cardinal revision of gender roles.

It was the Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill who in his work "The subjection of women" (1869) stated that the rule of men over women in the XIX century differed from all other forms of power by the absence of constraint. Paradoxically it may be said that women were taking male authority voluntarily (Guy, 2001).

This explains the Martha Vicinus statement that female education was intended to raise "natural" subordination to authority and some kind of innate maternal instinct. As the author states, ladies were taught not to have their personal opinion for they could become "unmarketable as a commodity" (Vicinus, 2013).

In this respect, the analysis of Sarah Stickney Ellis works is of fundamental importance as she was the main bearer of the Victorian principle propaganda in the late nineteenth century. As Martha Vicinus puts it, she recommended all unhappy in marriage, "to suffer, but be still" (Phegley, 2011; Vicinus, 2013). This statement actually stands out as the motto of the Victorian age.

Nonetheless, women's position continued to improve into the XIX century. The next generation, that of the end of the XIX century, turned out to be quite radical in their political views. Their readiness to overthrow the worn-out values of their fathers and husbands inevitably echoed in the domain of literature.

Against the background of these changes from the very beginning of the XX century and through present, the Jungian theory takes pride of place.

Reading "Bluebeard" for its connections with its time does not mean ignoring its insights into the ways of the psyche.

In this respect it may be helpful to consider briefly the Jungian theory of archetypes because it stands as an important point in relation to the changes that took place in literature of the period.

Jung's theory of archetypes is based on the theory of collective (or transpersonal) unconscious. This is a level of unconscious shared with other members of a human community, comprising memories from our evolutionary past (Jung, 1991).

### **3. Bluebeard and Gender Shift**

In this paper we address the problem of "gender" using the definition introduced by Joan Wallach Scott. In her work "Gender and the Politics of History" the author insists on the break away from a biologically determined notion of what it means to be male or female. The author's attitude towards this question is that even the sex roles themselves are culturally determined, not to mention gender.

Her understanding of gender is binary, involving the social nature of relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes and the function of gender as "a primary way of signifying relations of power" (Scott, 1988).

Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" was written in the XVIII century, thus it depended on gender stereotypes, which were, then in force. Being written as a fairytale, though hardly the one for children, it could not avoid bearing some social stereotypes and taboos.

As it has been outlined above modern European space demanded fresh looks on the old themes.

Taking their origins in the XVII century France, feminist moods were by all means reflected in the works of two prominent French writers Maurice Maeterlinck and Anatole France.

The most striking feature that unites their creative searches in the field of literary fairytale is a new revised perception of the Bluebeard image that suggests certain gender alterations, positioning the main character as victim. While in portraying the main heroine, the authors tend to emphasize the genesis of an absolutely new type of women.

The feminine ideology permeates Maeterlinck's "Ariane et Barbe-bleue" (1896). This is the first time in history of "Bluebeard" tale when the man cannot hide his secrets. The woman is going to discover them anyway, frankly displaying her intentions. Following Hermansson, the fact that Bluebeard secretly collects his wives, is the first case of imprisonment being substituted by the concept of death (Hermansson, 2009).

The most amazing thing in Maeterlinck's "Ariane and Bluebeard, or The Useless Rescue" is the implication that imprisonment in the castle of Bluebeard is nothing but the result of the state of consciousness of women.

Considering this, we can conclude that with the subtitle the author argues the inability to save women who are freed by Ariane. Not all of the wives of Bluebeard agree to leave their husband because some do not yet possess the consciousness of a free woman.

The main idea is summed up in the following words "Of beauty into darkness cast away! This above all: fear nothing! And to-night let us be beautiful!" (Maeterlinck, 1920). In these verses, the author metaphorically highlights the major feminist ideas concerning the enlightenment of soul and mind. We have to admit that partially the main protagonist does manage to fulfill her feminist mission. According to Ariane all women who do not agree to go with her, are dead to the world, because they are not able to free themselves. The ending becomes very interesting indeed. In the final verses, Ariane, having done her job, leaves Bluebeard, who actually loses his power as if his very nature underwent deconstruction. Thus, an updated image of a "loser", who cannot keep his masculine features, is foregrounded.

"Les Sept Femmes de Barbebleue et autres contes merveilleux" (1909) written by Anatole France is in no case inferior to the innovations of Maeterlinck. As a result the ideologic affinity of the authors is made manifest.

The logic of the plot seems to confirm, that the main focus falls on a number of common stereotypes, concerning feminine moral drawbacks. To demonstrate the complexity of the women's characters, it is necessary to have a look at the feminine panorama given by the French writer. Consequently France's novel preserves the antithesis between stereotypical images of a child-like innocent and a wicked whore.

Reading France's work we learn that the first wife betrays and abandons Bluebeard. The second is fond of the bottle and accidentally drowns in the river. The third is hankering after power but dies of a disease. The fourth has an affair with a man and dies by her lover's hand. The fifth is so stupid and naive that is abducted by a monk. The sixth dismisses sexual relationships and her husband requests that the Pope permit him to divorce his wife. The seventh wife conspires with her mother, sister and lover to murder Bluebeard, having got hold of his property. To sum up, each of the wives acts out as a symbol of human drawbacks, and especially feminine weaknesses. Once again, Bluebeard proves to be a victim and is killed by his wife's last lover.

The authors reveal that at the gender level a new system of values is being foregrounded that forms another feminine identity. The essence of this new woman makes a dissonance with the ideas promoted by the previous epochs. From the viewpoint of poetics the works of these writers are marked with deep irony. This inevitably undermines the image of a contemporary "new woman" emphasizing the disapproval of the new ideas taking place in the society of the time.

In contrast to French writers of the early XX century, English modernists seem not to mind the image of Bluebeard, which remains unaltered, acting like a tyrant and a murderer. At the same time female characters undergo certain changes.

Coming up to "Bluebeard tale" in the English tradition, we should first of all mention the name of Beatrix Potter.

Addressing ourselves to the legacy of this writer, we must state that Potter provides a comprehensive panorama of the transitional moment in the Victorian society. An artfully drawn image of her sister Anne is an image of a modern woman who clearly stands out against the background of her sister Fatima. The latter fully meets the ideal image of the Victorian women slaves. Anna is a "new woman" who has her own opinion and can stand up for herself.

As the reader apprehends the events of the tale through the perception of a stubborn, rebellious, confident young woman it can be stated that not only the full change of a traditional canon of fairytales, but also the revision of the patriarchal social norms, especially in the society of the Victorian era is observed here.

Thus, the central antithesis of the book is rendered in the two examples of modern femininity, which represent

different attitudes to life.

The author of "Sister Anne" creates the image of an ideal Victorian woman. The bride Fatima cannot protect herself from verbal and physical abuse of her tyrannical husband. This character is the embodiment of specific indispensable female traits, such as lightheadedness, permanent dizziness and physical weakness.

In sharp contrast Anna operates bravely when faced with adversity and proves that she is fully capable of rational thinking in dangerous situations. For instance, such character traits as creativity and bravery are traditionally regarded as not feminine or seem to undermine the social tissue of an androgynous society.

In speaking of the English modernist writers, a separate section of this article should be devoted to Sylvia Townsend Warner.

Sylvia Townsend Warner's work, "Daughter of Duke Bluebeard" is published in the book "The Cat's Cradle Book". This is the tale of Bluebeard's daughter, who has her own interest in opening a locked room in the castle of her father.

Warner reviews traditional tale plot and creates a biography of Bluebeard's daughter, which shows that curiosity in no case depends on gender. All people are inclined to curiosity. In addition, when it turns out that this inquisitiveness is useless and harmful, you just have to put it into some objective worth pursuing.

Here, Bluebeard theme is reflected in the story of the tyrant's daughter. Soon after her birth, the girl is sent to the city, and she returns to the castle of her father when getting married. The author elaborates on the topic of curiosity, when the daughter and her new husband become obsessed with the question: "What may contain the room?" This obsession almost serves the cause of their parting. Fortunately, they decide to plunge into scientific research that is able to satisfy their thirst for disclosing secrets. Astronomy is their last refuge. Hence the author offers another solution to the problem of excessive curiosity.

Therefore, social changes in Europe provide a stark contrast between feminine and masculine genders. The features of the genders become, in a way, inverted. General feminization of male characters and masculinization of female characters take place.

In this respect it is necessary to address ourselves to archetypal literary criticism which as a type of critical theory came into being owing to Karl Gustav Jung's theory of collective unconscious. Grace to this approach we can interpret a text by focusing on myths and archetypes which function in the narrative.

From the analysis carried out above we can assume that if the fairytale motif undergoes certain changes in different cultures it signals alterations in national archetypes.

In terms of social alterations, archetypal orientations acquire different meaning. The Bluebeard story, in its turn underwent changes in gender stereotypes, which first took place in European mentality and were then reflected in literary process.

Having mentioned above the relation between social alterations in gender roles and modern psychology it is natural to put a question of how these social matters affected literature.

As Jung puts it, the further you plunge into collective unconscious, the more archetypes become involved and these ones intercross constructing a kind of a web (Jung, 1991).

Thuswise going deep into this archetypal web Clarissa Pinkola Estés singles out and analyzes the archetype of a "wild woman".

In such a manner the scientist identifies the main feature of this archetype stating that it represents the instinctual nature of women, acting as prototype of femininity.

"So, the word wild here is not used in its modern pejorative sense, meaning out of control, but in its original sense, which means to live a natural life, one in which the criatura, creature, has innate integrity and healthy boundaries" (Estés, 1992).

The Jungian psychologist points it out, that being cut off from her natural origins, the woman gets "sanitized, and her instincts and natural life cycles are lost, subsumed by the culture" (Estés, 1992).

But every woman unconsciously seeks to escape from the power of social circumstances and once somehow it happens, her wild self becomes free (Estés, 1992).

As for the image of Bluebeard, the scientist distinguishes the archetype of a predator who intends to kill the woman's dreams and completely destroys their integrity. The animal groom is working "methodically destroying a woman's most cherished desires, concerns, and aspirations" (Estés, 1992).

Gender discussion is equally reflected in Jung's psychology. The analysis suggests that French and British modernists succeeded in updating the archetypes of a "wild woman" and "predator". In this respect, we should place emphasis on the works of French writers of the time. As the analysis has shown, the "predator" archetype initially does not function in Anatole France's "Les Sept Femmes de Barbebleue et autres contes merveilleux" whilst it is disintegrated in Maeterlinck's play "Ariane et Barbe-bleue".

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