

Original Paper

A Textual Study of Imagery Representing Female Characters in Little Women under the Theory of Signifier and Signified

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Abstract

As a symbol, feminine imagery carries the character traits and conveys the author's own ideology. There are many distinctive female characters in Little Women, but related previous studies mostly focus on the superficial analysis of female images in the book. Guided by the theory of signifier and signified in Saussurean linguistics, this paper starts with the traditional and transformed female images in Little Women and the reasons for their use, explores how the use of traditional and transformed feminine imagery and their signifier and signified in Little Women by American female writer Louisa May Alcott helps construct the novel's main characters and thus expresses the author's own feminist views. This could help readers have a deeper understanding of the text and a more generalized view of the protagonist.

Keywords

Little Women, imagery, signifier and signified, feminism

1. Introduction

The theory of “signifier” and “signified” (Saussure 65) is the theory of semiotics in linguistics proposed by the Swiss linguist and founder of structuralism linguistics, F.de.Saussure, in the Course in General Linguistics published in 1916. It regards symbols as a combination of signifier and signified. The so-called signifier refers to the medium of symbols, namely the sound level, reflecting the materiality of language; The signified refers to the meaning pointed out by the signifier, which is the conceptual level of language. Saussurean linguistics has made the research objects in the field of literature “symbolic” and “textual”, expanded the concept of text, and had a significant impact on contemporary literary research and literary criticism. In literary texts, authors often view different images as symbols, using their signifier and signified to make the characters more deeply ingrained in people's hearts and express the author's own writing thoughts. While a considerable body of research

has been carried out on the distinct and diverse female characters in *Little Women*, much less is known about the use of imagery. The transmutation of feminine imagery studied in this paper fills the gap in previous research on the analysis of imagery in *Little Women*. Using Saussure's theory of "signifier" and "signified", this paper analyzes the signifier and signified of different imagery, and comprehends how the author outlines the characters through the transmutation of feminine imagery, and uses imagery as a vehicle to convey feminism to the audience.

Louisa May Alcott is a famous female writer in the history of American literature. *Little Women* is a famous novel based on Louisa's own childhood experiences. The rich and varied use of imagery in the novel brings the images of the four sisters of the March family to life. Through the vivid depiction of the lives of young girls and the affectionate eulogy of family love, the author celebrates the qualities of women's independence and courage in the pursuit of self. Set during the American Civil War, *Little Women* expresses a unique interpretation of women's existence and status by portraying the upbringing and love-hate relationship of four girls with different personalities. The novel is a meticulous portrayal of women, praising their strength and grit, as well as their exploration of the meaning of life, which resonates strongly with readers. The author also intentionally breaks with conventions in her writing, using feminine imagery to indirectly express her feminist claims, providing new insights for the whole society to think about the existence and image of women. This article will start with the traditional feminine imagery and the transformed unconventional feminine imagery in *Little Women* and explore how the author uses diverse feminine imagery to express feminist views and the underlying mechanisms that facilitate the author's use of imagery in the theory of signifier and signified.

2. The Traditional Feminine Imagery in *Little Women*

Saussure argues that language meaning originates from the combination of the signifier and the signified, and the generation of literary meaning still relies on establishing a connection between the signifier and the signified. (Saussure 65) However, the way and the connection established are different from the literal meaning of the generated language. (Li Yuhong, 109) In literary works, the symbols formed by the connection between the signifier and the signified of feminine imagery often contain deeper meanings than the superficial meanings of the original words. The feminine imagery in novels can serve both for characterization and as a medium for the author to convey female consciousness. But in the 19th century, female writers were still unable to escape the influence of traditional female images when creating family novels, and Alcott was no exception. (Pi Yanling, 46) Despite being limited by temper of the times, traditional female imagery is still a suitable medium for showcasing the characteristics of women in that era. Therefore, as a feminist novel depicting the growth of women, *Little Women* mostly reflects the characteristics of traditional women in the context of the era in its use of imagery and characterization.

2.1 Meg

In the case of Meg, the eldest daughter of the March family, her image and demeanor have been a role model not only for her sisters, but also for the women of her time. Quiet and dignified, elegant and domestic, Meg fits the image of a virtuous wife and mother advocated in the Victorian era. The thing most closely related to Meg in the book is “needlework”. Meg and her needle seem to be inseparable, and the image of needle and thread is the signifier, and the quality of diligence and virtue is the signified. The combination of needle and thread as two imagery symbols showcases Meg’s virtuous character. After marriage, Meg did not change her traditional image as an elegant and traditional lady. When she became a wife and began to manage family affairs, she “laid by her cambric wrappers, put on a big apron, and fell to work, as before said, with more energy than discretion.” (Alcott 327) The image of the cambric wrappers here refers to the signifier, and the demeanor of a girl is the signified. As a frequently used accessory for girls, the wrappers represent the image of a maiden. Relatively speaking, the apron is a symbol depicting a housewife, with its signifier referring to the shape of a large apron and its signified referring to the demeanor of a housewife in handling household chores. With just a few words, the image of a steady and responsible woman leaps off the page.

2.2 Beth

Meg’s sister, Beth, is another typical traditional woman in the family. She was called “Little Miss Tranquility” by her father because of her shy demeanor and her serene, far-reaching expression. Instead of being disgusted with the dolls her sisters had thrown away, she cherished and took good care of them, “All were fed and clothed, nursed and caressed with an affection which never failed.” (Alcott 47) The image of the abandoned dolls is the signifier, while Beth’s love and compassion are the signified. Thus, when the weak dolls appears, readers will immediately associate it with Beth, who has a compassionate heart. The description of Beth taking care of these poor dolls also paves the way for Beth to take on the task of caring for her sisters during her mother’s visit to the front to care for her seriously ill father, reflecting her unrequited love and concern for her family, the poor and the weak. Meanwhile, she has a passion for playing the piano and demonstrates great enthusiasm and talent in music, and Mr. Lawrence took the opportunity to present her with a “little cabinet piano”. Here, the small and delicate piano is the signifier, while the music-loving, shy and graceful little Beth is the signified, and the combination of the two forms a clever symbol representing the image of Beth.

The personality traits of several female protagonists are embedded in the most relevant objects in daily life. The imagery like needlework, apron, piano, and doll is highly compatible with the good qualities of the characters it refers to, showcasing the definition of ideal women in mainstream American society at that time. At the same time, as a clue to promoting the development of the novel’s plot, imagery presents readers with a stark contrast between traditional ethics and capitalist ideas in a turbulent era. Alcott emphasizes the former in her works, establishing a utopia of common people at the bottom of society by praising truth, goodness, and beauty.

3. The Transformed Feminine Imagery in *Little Women*

In addition to traditional feminine imagery, unconventional feminine imagery is often used in novels to depict the image of the core characters or to portray important plots. Transformed feminine imagery mainly refers to unconventional feminine imagery, which often uses things unexpected by readers as symbols to describe female roles. Feminist writers can “use feminization strategies by being gender-specific about the characters’ interpersonal relations in a way English grammar does not normally allow.” (Simon, 20) By using transformed imagery that seems to contradict the characters themselves, the author is able to design female characters that deviate from traditional images, artificially induce changes in the personality and behavior of traditional female characters, thereby generating surprises beyond readers’ psychological expectations of the protagonists. Transformed imagery also helps to break the norms of male writers as authorities in creating novels, thus pursuing the discourse power of feminist writers in the writing field. Thus, the use of transformed imagery not only helps female writers to control the characters of the novel, but also indirectly reflects the female consciousness and identity. The following text will take Jo and Meg as examples to analyze how the author uses transformed imagery to reveal the personalized features of the protagonists for readers.

3.1 *Jo: The Concentrated Embodiment of Transformed Feminine Imagery*

Jo is the second daughter of the March family. As the core protagonist of the novel, her disposition is completely different from the young girls of her age, showing a strong, optimistic and independent disposition at all times, and is the leader among the sisters. Schweitzer once summarized Jo’s image characteristics as follows: “Jo herself hates to spend time dressing for parties and instead she loves to wear her russet leather, whistling.” (Schweitzer, 13) She has the characteristics of a young boy and is out of step with the traditional image of a lady. Her appearance is mentioned at the beginning of the novel: “Fifteen-year-old Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way.” (Alcott 6) The image of the “colt” here refers to the signifier, while Jo’s healthy and compact figure refers to the signified. The combination of the two forms a symbol depicting Jo’s personal physical characteristics, allowing readers to feel her boyish appearance. Later, when referring to the image of Jo folding several dresses with her long arms, the author writes that she “looks like a windmill”; The image of Jo working very skillfully here is mainly represented by the image of the windmill as the signifier, and by Jo’s slender limbs and breezy appearance as the signified when working. And the masculinization in Jo’s character is more obvious than in her appearance. When she talked to Laurie about school, she enthusiastically replied: “Don’t go to school, I’m a businessman—girl, I mean.” (Alcott 61) Jo only did some household chores while serving her great-aunt, but she referred to herself as a businessman. The image of a “businessman” here is the signifier, while Jo, who is serving her great-aunt and doing household chores, is the signified. The combination of the two has become a symbol of Jo’s optimism and confidence. Simultaneously, Jo puts a great deal of effort into her writing and regards it as one of her careers. “Money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2), and Jo is no exception.

Jo had a hat, and once she was ready to get down to writing, she tied her hair into the bow of the hat. Alcott wrote: "This cap was a beacon to the inquiring eyes of her family." (p. 318) As can be seen, in order to construct symbols describing Jo's writing career, the image of the hat itself is used as the signifier, while Jo's writing is used as the signified. Jo's model of life shared with the feminist ideology of the time, both believing that men and women were equal and should establish their own businesses and gain material and spiritual independence. (He Yuanyuan, 79) Thus, through various transformed imagery such as masculine appellation, the author succeeds in showing the difference between Jo and traditional women, highlighting the awakening of Victorian women's sense of independence and autonomy, praising women's independent spirit and dedication ability, and praises their individual efforts to pursue independent selves. (Jia Zengrong, 36)

3.2 *Meg: Occasionally Transformed Non-conformist Feminine Imagery*

Meg has always been perceived as a gentle and quiet, stable and responsible elder sister, but there is also a hidden vanity in Meg's heart that is not easily felt by others, which lays the groundwork for her imagery deformation. When Meg visited the Moffat family, the noisy young ladies and maids tried their best to make Meg the perfect girl in their own minds. However, after dressing up, "Her friends repeated the pleasing phrase enthusiastically, and for several minutes she stood, like a jackdaw in the fable, enjoying her borrowed plumes, while the rest chattered like a party of magpies." (Alcott 107) The author associates Meg, who has no family background to support herself in this fancy dress, with the image of a jackdaw, using the jackdaw as the signifier and the indigent Meg as the signified, highlighting Meg's complex state of mind at this time. This means that Meg has lost her true nature and is being used as an object of amusement by others due to her inflated vanity, and the imagery describing her has begun to transmute. And after the ball began, Meg was even more in the limelight. She put on makeup, dancing a rapid spin Teutonic dance, drinking champagne with Ned and his friend Fisher, and joking around, and almost tripped her partner with a long skirt. Her "crazy" look shocked her accompanying good friend Laurie. When Meg was admonished not to drink too much, she uncharacteristically replied: "I'm not Meg tonight, I'm 'a doll' who does all sorts of crazy things. Tomorrow I shall put away my 'fuss and feathers' and be desperately good again." (Alcott 111) At this point, the image of "doll" refers to the signifier, while the frivolous and beautiful Meg is the signified. The "doll" not only reflects Meg's transformed appearance after being swallowed up by vanity, but also reflects Meg's disgust with the image of a lady she has always maintained. Meg uses the symbols "doll" and "fuss and feathers" to describe her performance, which implies her disgust with the dull and impersonal life of women at that time, and her "fuss and feathers" at the ball is the best expression of her nature. (Long Yun 100) These symbols imply Meg's challenge to ladyhood and norms, embodying an attempt by women to win their own discourse. However, the difference between Meg and Jo is that her imagery transmutation is only sporadic. Although she indulges in promoting her true self through the ball all night, after the ball is over, Meg would still return to normal and continue to play the traditional role of a woman at home. But the use of non-conventional feminine imagery symbols not

only makes Meg's character image more realistic, but also makes the representation of the character's current state of mind more complete and the plot conflicts more prominent, thus allowing the reader to intuitively feel the contrast between Meg's image when she rebels and her normal image.

The establishment of character images in *Little Women* is closely related to the use of transformed imagery. In the author's works, they have vastly different personalities, constructing their own "castle in the air" (Liu Chunying & Chen Yuli, 125) and possessing their own independent consciousness. Beth is always presented as a traditional woman, Meg is occasionally rebellious, and Jo is always in an unconventional image. The author successfully portrays these teenage girls with very different personalities through the use of diverse frequencies and types of transformed imagery, making the characters' personalities distinct but relatable.

4. The Reasons and Significance of Diverse Use of Feminine Imagery

The concept of Reception Aesthetics is that the educational and entertainment functions of the work should be realized in the reader's reading, and the process of realization is the process of obtaining vitality and final completion of the work. Readers are proactive in this process and are the driving force behind literary creation; the acceptance of literature is not only constrained by the nature of the work, but also by the reader. (Hans 339) The theory of Reception Aesthetics provides readers with a thinking direction to explore the reasons and significance of the diverse use of female images in *Little Women*. As a 19th century female writer, Alcott not only supported feminism, but also, to some extent, inherited traditional concepts. Accordingly, retaining traditional female images in the author's works to construct traditional female images is not only conducive to the dissemination of feminist works in the context of the times, but also enables readers to exert their subjective initiative to excavate and reconstruct the works, thus continuously bursting into new vitality. In the 1860s, the United States was greatly impacted in terms of social life and ideology. More and more women were willing to leave their homes and break free from the constraints of traditional concepts, but this transformation was very slow. At that time, society encouraged women to be more versatile, gentle, and peaceful. (Chang Liping & Yao Ruiling, 68) So, under the influence of this traditional concept, Alcott also used traditional feminine imagery to set the four sisters of the March family as virtuous women cultivated by traditional families; They are skilled at completing various household chores, following their mother's earnest advice, and full of insights into life. Consequently, on the premise that the character images in the work can be accepted by the public at the time, the colorful growth of the four sisters can make readers empathize with them, prompting readers to use their own knowledge to decipher the symbolic codes used in the feminine imagery in the work, thus promoting the dissemination of the entire work.

On the other hand, the use of distorted feminine imagery has made an impression on readers and sparked their interest in reading. According to Wolfgang Iser, if the structure of a text is all but definitive and the reader is not required to engage energetically in the reading process, the impetus for communication in the reading activity is lost. (Ren Weidong, 115) The uncertainties in the work can

stimulate readers' active participation, making the entire reading process explosive. For this reason, the unconventional imagery in *Little Women* can create surprises beyond the audience's psychological expectations during reading, break the image fixation, and make readers' understanding of the characters more holistic. No meaning can ever be "reproduced" or "recovered" but is always already created, or recreated, anew. (Flotow 9) Accordingly, for Alcott, the unconventional feminine imagery depicted in her work is the process of achieving the spread and reconstruction of feminist claims. For example, when portraying the masculine Jo, the author does not hesitate to use transformed imagery to let the reader visually experience Jo's rebellion as an unconventional female figure, while in the occasional transmutation of Meg, the author intentionally selects representative imagery, which not only accurately expresses Meg's changes, but also facilitates the reader's new experience of Meg's role by shedding the original solidified expectations. All these treatments of the text contain the author's ingenuity in designing the characters with the audience in mind, so that the main character is not mediocre.

At the same time, the transmutation of imagery is related to cultural and ideological issues, and this writing strategy is related to the way women gain their own power, changing the long-standing majestic dominant imagery of men and showing the deviation and rebellion of women. (Long Yun 99) The use of traditional imagery satisfies the public's need to read and accept traditional female images, and the emergence of transformed imagery highlights the ability of female writers to master the text, reveals the unique vision of women, and reflects women's consciousness of independence and their sense of self-identity. Moreover, Alcott's own writing philosophy is fully aligned with feminism. Feminism is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. (Beasley 3) Feminists typically advocate or support the rights and equality of women. (Hooks 78) The concentration and intermittent changes of female normative imagery in the works also demonstrate that women can also have the power to speak and exhibit a strong and independent female spirit, leading to the deconstruction and subversion of male centrism in literary works to varying degrees. Jo, for example, as the central protagonist of the novel, is far from the standard Victorian definition of a lady, and even has masculine features, but she is the most independent of the four sisters and the one with the greatest career success. The unique setting can be seen as an entire womanhood in which women are free to do anything without men's administration. (Auerbach 461) French Feminist Fallaize once said that "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being." (Fallaize 6) Obviously, Jo's character breaks the fixed restrictions on women under male centrism and demonstrates to the audience that women do not rely on men to exist, but can open up their own territory. And Meg, as the eldest daughter of the family, despite maintaining the traditional image of a lady in the minds of everyone for most of the time, also showed a surprising rebellion in asserting her sense of independence and challenging the so-called lady's standards. Thus, the use of non-conventional feminine imagery helps to give the reader a more

comprehensive understanding of the main character's image and expresses Alcott's own unique feminist advocacy in women's pursuit of economic independence and spiritual freedom, which had a profound influence on the literary world of the time and on later feminist writers.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the feminine imagery used in *Little Women*, this article explores how Alcott utilizes diverse conventional and unconventional imagery with its specific signifier and signified to successfully portray the four sisters of the March family with distinct personalities and styles, and convey her unique feminist insights. The imagery used in the novel, whether traditional or astonishing, harmonious or rebellious, has unique significance. Its transmutation not only includes the author's emotional attachment to the protagonists, but also reflects Alcott's emphasis on female dignity. In the mean time, Alcott also placed feminist views in this transmutation, namely gender equality, supporting women's pursuit of their own dreams, and encouraging women to achieve spiritual independence and personality emancipation. Therefore, analyzing the imagery representing female characters in *Little Women* can help readers have a deeper understanding of the characteristics of the protagonists in the novel, and thus appreciate the feminist ideological value conveyed by the entire work.

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