

Loss and Pursuit: A Greimas Structuralist Analysis of the Japanese Anime “Violet Evergarden” in the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: Anime can, to a certain extent, symbolize the growth of Japanese feminism as one of the most significant literary creative forms in contemporary Japan. Although the trend of female characterization in anime in recent years is diversified, there is a lack of independent female characters that break through the traditional gender division. A hugely popular anime called Violet Evergarden in 2018 tells the story of a young girl named Violet who lost her arms in a war, but fortunately regained robotic arms and started to help others write letters. In the process, she, who once knew only combat skills, gradually learned to express her emotions. Her story is a journey of seeking out the true meaning of love. The anime adaptation focuses on her growth and inner self, breaking the gender stereotype and showing Girl Power. This essay examines the feminist implications of Violet Evergarden, revealing its role in the growth of Japanese feminism by using Greimas' actantial model and the semiotic square following structuralism's theoretical thinking.

Keywords: Violet Evergarden, Feminism; Greimas, Semiotic square, Anime.

1. Introduction

The gender roles of the male being the breadwinner and female being the homemaker, formed during the economic boom of the 1970s and 1980s, prevented women from participating in employment and social activities and diminished the value of caregiving within the family, leading to gender discrimination [1]. Women still shoulder the responsibility of housework and childcare even if they have jobs since society takes women's efforts for granted. The government's annuity policy for housewives and the male-dominated social structure in modern Japanese society has prevented the country from entirely emancipating itself from the outdated family model [1].

The family model established in the mid-to-late-1970s profoundly influenced the portrayal of female characters in contemporary and subsequent anime works. Male characters dominated the image of the social elite in the 1970s, as seen in Mazinger Z and Samurai Giants [2], which featured virtually solely male characters with few female characters. From the late 1990s, the proportion of female characters rose and actively contributed to the primary plot [2]. From 1970-2015, although

the portrayal of female characters showed a trend toward greater diversity, they could still be divided into three stereotypical categories: "women who need protection, women who need to fall in love, and women who conform to traditional gender distinctions" [2]. The female characters embody both qualities of an independent girl associating with sex and a motherly caregiver [3]. However, the January 2018 broadcast of *Violet Evergarden*, adapted and produced by Kyoto Animation, shows a different approach to portraying women than previous anime, fully reflecting the development of Japanese feminism cast off the shackles of traditional gender stereotypes [4].

Violet Evergarden is a light novel written by Kana Akatsuki. The work won the Kyoto Animation Award and was animated [5]. Based on the perspective of female writer Akatsuki, male director Taichi Ishidate creates a story of a girl who seeks her identity and transforms from a war machine to a human being through beautiful scenes and deep character relationship construction. Compared to the original work, the anime stresses the process of Violet's transformation and emphasizes her inner self. At the same time, the anime adaptation magnifies the role and position of female characters and challenges our perception of Girl Power [6]. This paper will analyze how *Violet Evergarden* achieves a breakthrough in the portrayal of female characters using Greimas' actantial model and semiotic square.

2. Theory

Greimas is one of the representatives of the Paris School of Semiotics, whose theoretical model is developed on the basis of Saussure's structuralist view, the Copenhagen School's theory of semiotics, and Propp and Levi-Strauss's theory of narrative [7]. Based on Chomsky's theory and Floyd's theory of structure, Greimas locates the action element and narrative functions in a large textual semiotic framework, and proposes a three-level structure for narrative texts: deep structure, surface structure, and explicit structure [8]. The action element and functional model of the story belong to the surface structure. The symbolic matrix, on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of deep structure of the narrative [9].

2.1. Actantial Model

Greimas' theory of Actantial Model develops the concept of "action element" from the syntactic studies of linguists such as Thenieres and Martinez, aiming to explain the generation of narrative texts. And he also argues that the existence of action element has predetermined a priori in the whole semantic world [8]. Greimas proposed two pairs of opposing primary action elements: subject/object and sender/receiver; and two auxiliary elements: auxiliary and opponent, building up a Actantial Model accordingly. Meanwhile, Greimas divided the action model into four stages: generating desire, having the ability, achieving the goal, and receiving the reward. The stage of generating desire means that the subject has developed a goal under the influence of external factors. "Having the ability" emphasizes the stage when the subject acquires the ability to achieve the goal through a change of state. The stage of achieving goal contains two types, for instance, from having to losing or not having to gaining. And "Receiving the reward" indicates the authenticity of the relationship between the subject and the object [10].

2.2. Semiotic Square

On the basis of Saussure's linguistic concept of "Binary Oppositions", Greimas concludes the theoretical view, proposing that the twenty-six phonemic collocations made by Jacobsen can give three hundred and twenty-five oppositions [8], which becomes the logical starting point of the Greimas Semiotic Square. Greimas asserts that in any narrative structure, there is a fundamental

opposition. Thus, the basic structure of the Semiotic Square is formed by the "semantic axis" generated by a pair of opposing elements:

$$S1 \longleftrightarrow S2$$

The relationship between S1 and S2 is one of absolute negative opposition, for instance:

$$\text{Black} \longleftrightarrow \text{White}$$

In addition to the opposites, Semiotic Square also includes contradictory relationships. Suppose S1 represents "black", then S2 represents "white". On this basis, two pairs of contradictory relations are created:

$$(\text{Black}) S1 \longleftrightarrow \overline{S1} (\text{Non-Black})$$

$$(\text{White}) S2 \longleftrightarrow \overline{S2} (\text{Non-White})$$

The opposing elements occupy the two ends of the semantic axis, while contradictory elements, e.g. (Non-White) $\overline{S2}$ occupies the remaining positions except for S2 (White). Thus, S1 is related to $\overline{S2}$, and S2 is related to $\overline{S1}$, which illustrates the existence of an implicit relationships. Accordingly, Figure 1 provides the Greimas Semiotic Square:

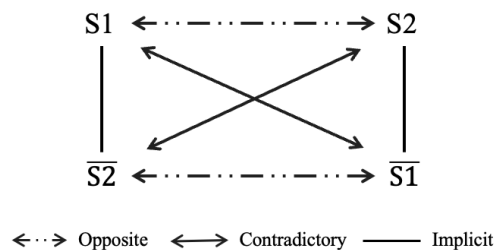


Figure 1: Greimas Semiotic Square.

According to Greimas, any meaning can be revealed through this matrix. If the structure is extended from the level of linguistics to narratology, it can be a tool for studying the deeper connotations of a literary work.

3. Surface Structure——The Pursuit of "Eternal Love"

Greimas divides narratological structure into two aspects: surface structure and deep structure, where surface structure refers to the action element on the narrative [11].

In *Violet Evergarden*, Violet acts as a pivotal link between all the characters in the anime story. The anime begins with Violet trying to find Major Kilbert and understand the meaning of "love" and ends with Violet getting rid of her identity as a "prop" and finding the meaning of her self-existence. Therefore, Violet plays an important role in the entire storyline. A series of actions and results triggered by Violet indicate the existence and pursuit of "love" which was inspired by Kilbert.

3.1. Generating Desire

According to Greimas, desire is the source of the story, which prompts the subject to chase their goal. Anime *Violet Evergarden* shows the emotional relationship between Violet and Major Kilbert in the beginning, revealing the irreplaceable affection. As a "war prop", Violet was sent to Kilbert from childhood to live as a "machine", obeying his orders. She has a very beautiful appearance, but lack of self-awareness. Therefore, after the end of the war, the pursuit for Kilbert becomes her motivation to survive, which also becomes her first desire. After being brought back to C.H Postal Company by

Hawkins, Violet often thinks about the words "I love you" that Kilbert said to her in the ruins, which illustrate the feelings that are incompatible with Violet. At the same time, Violet also has her second desire: understanding what the meaning of "love" is.

3.2. Having Ability

Ability is the basis for the subject to achieve their goal. Violet's ability is the "machine instinct" that she got from the life of "war prop". Excellent fighting skills allows Violet to have the possibility of finding Kilbert. And, this "instinct" is not only reflected in her physical qualities, but also in Violet's emotional expression. The mechanical arm allows it to become the best Auto Memories Doll; and the straightforward expression of emotions, but also for Violet to find the meaning of "love".

3.3. Achieving Goal

The subject with sufficient capacity changes the situation of events, reaching the climactic stage of the narrative. Violet's reliance on Kilbert goes hand in hand with her search for the true meaning of "love". At the middle of the anime, when Violet finally heard the news of Kilbert's death, she achieves one of her goals; while at the end of the anime, the conversation between Violet and Dittfleet reveals that Violet has gained what "love" really is, which symbolized the second goal has been achieved.

3.4. Receiving Reward

According to the Greimas, this stage is not only a judgement of the authenticity of the final relationship between subject and object, but also a reaffirmation of the achievement of the goal. In Violet Evergarden, although Kilbert died in the war which means that Violet lost her Major, in textual terms Violet is not rewarded; while in connotative terms, after becoming an Auto Memories Doll at C.H Postal Company, Violet received a lot of emotional connections from friendship and family, finding he real meaning of "love" and also clearly understood what Kilbert expressed before his death. In this respect, therefore, Violet has been truly rewarded with the "eternal love".

3.5. Actantial Model of Violet Evergarden

Greimas argues that story is framed by the "Actantial Model". Based on his three opposing spheres of action elements, actantial model of Violet Evergarden can be constructed. Violet is undoubtedly the subject of the anime. The real content of the object "eternal love" can be extracted from the connection between Violet and Kilbert. The sender inspires the desire of the subject. Accordingly, Violet's desire originates with Kilbert, who then becomes the sender of this text. The object "eternal love" is directed to the receiver, who is ostensibly Violet. However, the object is aimed at the recipients of letters, therefore the C.H Postal Company becomes the helper. Dittfleet plays as a symbol that materialises Violet, who also denies the existence of Violet as an individual, becoming a hindrance to Violet's growth. Therefore, Dittfleet becomes the opponent in this text. Figure 2 illustrates the Actantial Model of Violet Evergarden.

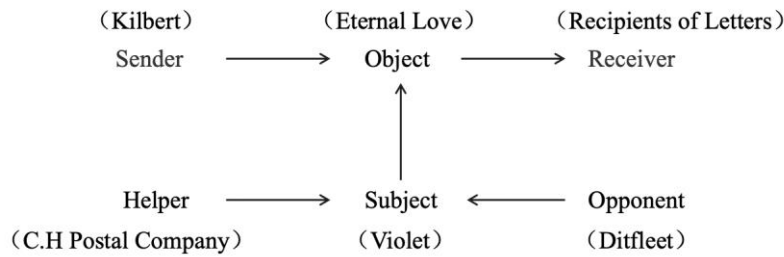


Figure 2: Actantial Model of Violet Evergarden.

4. Deep Structure——Lost and Liberation

In order to reveal the significance of the deep structure of the violet eternal garden, we apply the Greimas' Semiotic Square to literary research. In order to more intuitively reflect the relationship between symbols, we set the meta symbol as S1, which is assigned as "female". According to the derivation, S2 symbolizes "the force that oppresses female ", $\overline{S1}$ symbolizes "non-female", and $\overline{S2}$ symbolizes "the force that supports female ". In this text, the symbol of S1, S2, $\overline{S1}$ and $\overline{S2}$, are respectively Violet, Ditlet, Kilbert and C.H Postal Company. Among them, Ditlet is Gilbert's brother with the same surname.

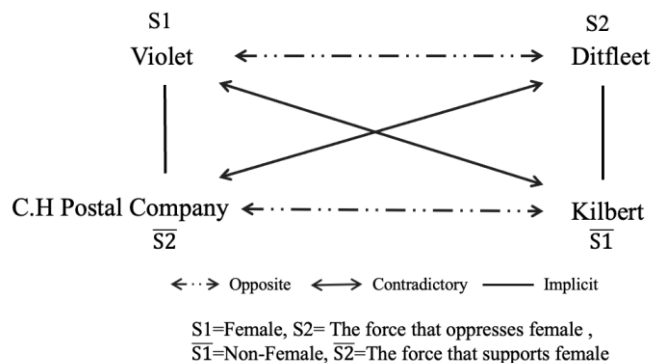


Figure 3: Greimas Semiotic Square of Violet Evergarden.

In the first stage of the story, Violet unfortunately lost her parents in the war and became an orphan. She was adopted by Ditlet. Kilbert fell in love with her at first sight and expressed the hope that she would stay at home. Ditlet and Kilbert trained her into an excellent fighting machine, which was used by Kilbert. Violet and Kilbert risked their lives in the war and developed deep feelings. Violet also made great achievements on the battlefield with her excellent fighting skills. This part of the story ends in the first sentence of the animation: Violet wakes up alone from a coma and finds that she has lost her hands. Under the arrangement of President Hawkins of the C.H Postal Company, she became an "Auto Memories Doll" - a profession that provides clients with ghostwriting services according to their oral account. Subsequently, in the second half of the story, Violet began to work as an " Auto Memories Doll " with her yearning for major Gilbert. She provided ghostwriting services for various people, and accomplished the task excellently: either conveyed the sincere feelings of others, or untied the hearts of those hurt by the war. In this process, she gradually understood the true meaning of "love" and no longer relied on orders to act.

According to the above summary of the plot, we can find that in the two life stages experienced by the heroine Violet, the first stage is repressed and the second stage is liberated. The repressed performance is the loss of subjectivity, which is reflected in the following two aspects: the first aspect is that Violet performed well in the army and made great achievements in the war, but she still can't exist as an independent soldier, and can only rely on the orders of major Kilbert. This condition continued until the end of the war. She was so unaccustomed when she lost major Kilbert that she still needed orders to support her actions. Even when the new guardian Hawkins took her out of the hospital, he had to use the "order of the major" to persuade her to go with him. The second aspect is that she and Kilbert have clearly developed deep feelings, but even when Gilbert continuously hinted at her, she was still unaware of her feelings. Here we can refer to the conversation between Kilbert and Violet on the night before Kilbert died:

Kilbert: you have feelings, and you have heart like me. If not, how can you explain your expression now?

Then came a series of questions from Gilbert, accompanied by the picture of Violet with tears in her eyes.

Violet: I don't understand myself. I just want to follow your orders. I can go anywhere as long as I have the orders of the major. Nothing more.

It can be seen that Kilbert has already fallen in love with Violet at that time and hopes that she can get a free life, but Violet has no awareness of the surging love from her heart. At that time, she only regarded herself as a tool, and her subjectivity was covered up. Therefore, although she loved Gilbert deeply, she didn't realize and couldn't express such feelings.

In the second stage of the story, we will see how Violet pursues the lost subjectivity and the true meaning of "love". After entering the post-war life, with doubts about the Kilbert's dying declaration of love, in order to reveal the meaning of "love", Violet became an "Auto Memories Doll". The acquisition of this new identity allows her to act independently without relying on orders. From then on, Violet has not only acquired new labor ability, but also gained control over her fighting ability that did not belong to her in the past. Her fighting ability is no longer driven by the will of the army, but subordinate to her own will. This point can be referred to the eleventh sentence of the animation. When she was fighting with the enemy's remnant party on the train, she directly refused Ditleet's order to kill a person, and retorted: "I won't kill anyone. I don't need weapons." This represents that Violet got rid of the control of the military system and recovered her subjectivity. By writing the words in people's hearts, she saved many people who were traumatized in the war like her, and gradually understood the true meaning of "love". At the end of the story, she wrote a sincere letter to major Kilbert who has already dead. At the end of the letter, she wrote: "if I can see you again, I want to tell you that I understand the meaning of 'love' now." This represents that Violet has recovered her suppressed feelings and revived her lost love. The film came to an end.

Now let's go back to the semiotic square established earlier to explore the deep meaning of the story and answer the question whether Violet Evergarden is a feminist work. First of all, according to our structure, the heroine Violet represents the symbol of women in this story, that is S1. in the first half of her life, she was suppressed which was reflected in the plot that despite her outstanding combat achievements, she could not act independently; despite falling in love with her commander Kilbert, she was unconscious about it and unable to express herself. The root cause of all these tragedies is that she lost her parents in the war and was trained as a fighting machine by Ditleet, who adopted her, and then incorporated her into the military system to exist as a combat tool. From this moment on, Violet's fate was doomed to be loss of subjectivity and inhuman. Obviously, Ditleet here represents the symbol of the force that oppresses women, that is S2, which forms a opposite relation with S represented by the protagonist Violet.

The key to Violet's salvation is that she was rescued by Mr. Hawkins, the president of the C.H Postal Company, who took care of her and arranged an independent job "Auto Memories Doll" for her. In the new working environment, women from C.H Postal Company have provided a lot of support for the growth of Violet. Jiadelia, the most excellent "Auto Memories Doll" in the company, taught Violet some basic working knowledge on the first day of her employment, including the use of typewriter and the working mode of "Auto Memories Doll"; When Violet encountered setbacks at her first job and fell into doubts from colleagues and herself, Erica enlightened her and expressed her support to Violet in front of the president Hawkins; When Violet and Alice returned to Alice's hometown, Alice's family held a blind date party for her without her knowledge, hoping that she would get married as soon as possible and become a traditional woman. However, Alice fought against the fate arranged by her parents and said that she would return to the city to engage in the business of "Auto Memories Doll". Alice set an example for Violet as an independent woman with her own actions. Therefore, C.H Postal Company here represents the symbol of the force that supports female, that is, $\overline{S2}$, which is contained in the S which symbolizes female represented by the heroine Violet, and forms a contradictory relation with S2 which symbolizes the force that oppresses female.

Major Kilbert as a member of the military system together with Ditleft, he objectively has materialized and oppressed Violet by directly conveying orders to her, but as an individual, he deeply loved Violet subjectively and hoped that she could live freely. The duality of his identity and the contradiction of his position determine that he represents the symbol of non-female, that is, $\overline{S1}$, which forms a contradictory relation with S which symbolizes female represented by the heroine Violet. Moreover, $\overline{S1}$ is contained in the S2 represented by Ditleft and forms a opposite relation with $\overline{S2}$ represented by the C.H Postal Company.

So far, our semiotic square has formed a closed loop, and the significance of the work has also surfaced. The Violet Evergarden actually tells such a story: female is materialized into a tool under the force of oppression, moreover, her subjectivity and the ability of saying love are completely lost. With the death of non-female and the disintegration of the force that oppresses female, she has entered a new living space and gained a new identity together with the possibility of self-development. Then, with the force of support, with her kind heart and firm efforts, she understood the true meaning of "love" and recovered her subjectivity, in hence finally realized the liberation of the individual. Therefore, Violet Evergarden is undoubtedly a hymn of the feminism.

5. Conclusions

The traditional gender division of labor and the male-dominated social structure of Japanese society has profoundly influenced the anime works of the same generation. From the 1970s to recent years, although the portrayal of female characters in Japanese anime has shown a trend of diversification, it is still difficult to escape the three stereotypes of needing protection, needing love, and conforming to the traditional gender division of labor. Violet Evergarden, however, breaks the shackles of these stereotypes and embodies the liberation of the individual female consciousness. Violet is strong, and her core desire focuses on her growth, breaking through the gender labels of needing protection and love above all else. Although Auto Memories Doll literally carries gender stereotypes, the word "doll" is easily associated with women and its fragile nature. However, the story's worldview reveals that Violet lives in a society with a low literacy rate, so Auto Memories Doll is a respectable job. Thus, the work breaks the stereotype that women cannot hold significant positions.

This paper analyses the narrative structure of Violet Evergarden using the actantial model and semiotic square, dividing the story into the surface and deep structure. In conclusion, from the superficial level, the main storyline is the process of Violet's forming desire to "find the meaning of love" to the realization of that desire with the help of CH Postal Company. At a deeper level, the narrative is about a girl's inner growth, from being instrumentalized and unable to express her

emotions to eventually regaining her subjectivity through the achievement of her desires. Although the premise of Violet's growth is slightly idealized, namely, she was passively removed from her repressive circumstance, and she was fortunate to receive mechanical prosthetics when she lost her arms as a basis for achieving her goals. However, the main storyline still emphasizes Violet's ability to comprehend the meaning of love on her own. In summary, Violet Evergarden is a work that focuses on the growth of women and their awakening to self-awareness.

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