

A Cultural Semiotics Perspective on the Portrayal of Women in Literature from a Male Perspective

——A Unique Perspective in the Sun Also Rises

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Abstract: *The Sun Also Rises* has been reviewed by literary critics from a variety of perspectives, not a few of which are feminist. However, few scholars have examined the portrayal of women in literary works from a cultural semiotic perspective, combined with a male perspective. In this paper, we will introduce the "Phallus complex" from the author's masculine style, point out the absence of Phallus in Barnes' novel, and then discuss the embodiment of the symbols of the female body and sexual inversion in Brett's body. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the symbolism of "the sun always rises", and finally, a proposal for a positive literary portrayal of women and a reflection on the development of social change.

Keywords: the sun also rises, cultural semiotics, phallus complex, female body, sexual inversion

1. Introduction

Women in Hemingway's writings is always an area of interest within the study of the portrayal of women in literature. The past decade has seen increasingly rapid advances about women in Hemingway's writings: In 2003, Sui Yan analyzed Hemingway's portrayal of women from a feminist perspective in *Man Without a Woman*, pointing out that the female figure in the Hemingway's novels is always in the shadow of the male protagonist, a puppet without a voice [1]. In 2004, Zhao Yujun systematically analyzed two types of female images in Hemingway's works: those sanctioned by patriarchal culture and those of "bad women" produced by specific historical circumstances, arguing that Hemingway did not escape the profound influence of patriarchal culture [2]. The author argues that Hemingway did not escape the profound influence of patriarchal culture. However, Zhao Yujun concludes by suggesting that the image of Brett in *The Sun Also Rises* is beyond these two types, and

that her portrayal needs to be studied by more scholars [2]. Most of the previous research on *The Sun Also Rises* has focused on the psychoanalysis of the lost generation [3, 4]. In recent years, scholars have also approached the text from the perspective of feminism and social institutions [5, 6]. But in most social science studies of *The Sun Also Rises*, very few have approached it from the perspective of cultural semiotic theory, which allows readers to understand the text from different cultural traditions and to study it in depth [7]. This essay introduces the “phallus complex” from the author's masculine style of writing, which Hemingway has always considered, and thus points out the absence of phallus in Barnes' novel. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the symbolism of “*The Sun Also Rises*”, and finally, a proposal for a positive literary portrayal of women and a reflection on the development of social change.

2. Theory Framework

2.1. Phallus Complex

Phallus refers to the male sexual organ, which as a physical concept is the object of eroticism and as a symbolic concept denotes power, desire, and order. According to Lacan's theory of the subject, there are three levels of subject formation, namely the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real [8]. In the symbolic realm, the father, as a symbol of external order and power, is the source and representative of culture and law, the only one who can provide access to language, who has the “Phallus complex” and who has the power to make or break decisions. Thus, in this symbolic world, the lost generation finds the Phallus, who rules the whole of society, ineffective and confused. In such a symbolic world, the subject can only be disillusioned and return to reality, and the process is one of confusion and disorientation. By contrast, phallus-centrism is also commonly referred to as male-centrism. It has two aspects: Firstly, all positions of authority in a society, whether in the political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military or family spheres, are reserved for men. Women are evaluated by male standards, not the other way around. Secondly, the objectification of women. The use of women as objects in male affairs and transactions. Limits and hinders female creativity and avoids female access to many areas of social knowledge and cultural achievement.

Hemingway loved many women in his life, but for him, women were a stumbling block, an obstacle, a playmate for pleasure rather than like-minded, equal, and mutually valued partners. At the same time, Hemingway's reverence for the tough guy image shows that Hemingway had a “Phallus complex”. However, Hemingway's early portrayal of women not only shows his sensitivity to female suffering and emotion but also shows the author's conscious effort to abandon conventional stereotypes and to represent women objectively and uniquely. These early works show that Hemingway was fully aware that the traditional social gender hierarchy favored men and placed women at the negative end of the gender dichotomy and was therefore irrational. In addition, Hemingway's depiction of women wearing men's hair and clothing of the opposite sex alludes to his awareness of the indeterminacy and variability of gender in society. Hemingway had a “Phallus complex”, but he did not espouse phallus-centrism.

2.2. Cultural Semiotic Theory

The central issue in cultural semiotics is meaning, and everything revolves around the production, preservation, and transmission of meaning. According to the cultural semiotician Lotman, one of the salient features of symbols is the indeterminacy between the text of expression and the text of the content. The content text always belongs to a more multidimensional space of meaning [9]. The expression therefore cannot cover the content completely, but only implies it. The symbol is used as an expression of a higher cultural value, a content that is difficult to define and articulate, but only

flashes vaguely and ambiguously through an image when the symbol acts as a bridge from the rational world to the mysterious world.

Lotman reveals three qualities of symbols as cultural memory: antiquity, cohesion, and traversal. On the one hand, the symbol is the most stable element in the cultural space; it always has a relatively stable and unchanging element in it. On the other hand, the transversal nature of the symbol allows it to enter a wide range of cultural styles and contexts in which it can fully express itself in its versatility and modernity. Symbols act as bridges between different symbolic fields and all realities outside symbols, linking the cultural meanings of different times, thus realizing the intersection of cultural coeval and ephemeral, and completing the collective memory of human culture.

The two expressions of “female body” and “sexual inversion” are reflected in different literary works, but the texts of their contents are different, so the reader needs to study them according to their contexts and infer their meanings. This paper assumes that Hemingway's “female body” and “sexual inversion” in *The Sun Also Rises* are progressive and symbolic, as discussed in the next subsection.

3. Text Analysis

3.1. Sexual Inversion and its Symbols

Lacan argues that the normality of a sexual act is not determined by the biological male and female, but by the traditional and conventional norms of society, i.e. by the norms of sexuality in a patriarchal culture that considers gender rather than sex [10]. The male is the natural possessor of the phallus. But Barnes, who was supposed to possess this symbol, got wounded during the war which led to his loss of sexual function. As a result, he would relate objects or events with phallus, though they are completely irrelevant. For example, When he went to the beach:

A boy and girl were at the other end. The girl had undone the top strap of her bathing-suit and was browning her back. The boy lay face downward on the raft and talked to her. ... I lay on the raft in the sun until I was dry. Then I tried several dives. I dove deep once, swimming down to the bottom. I swam with my eyes open and it was green and dark. The raft made a dark shadow [11].

When Barnes encounters objects of similar shape, he always relates that with phallus. The lack of physical phallus makes Barnes always struggle to find the physical and symbolic phallus. At the same time, the heroine, Brett, did not conform to the role of women in the patriarchal social structure of the time:

- a. “her hair! -brushed back like boys”, with curves like “hull of a racing yacht” [11]
- b. she is “a little drunk; just enough to be careless” [11]

She not only has a perverse appearance but also defies social convention by being a maverick, expressing her sexuality explicitly, and having sexual relations with multiple men [12]. It could be argued that Barnes and Brett, the two main figures of the novel, are a powerful demonstration of sexual inversion in their defiance of convention.

The “sexual inversion” is one of the typical symbols of the novel, reflecting the fact that, as a rebellious woman, Brett experiences a slippage of the subject from the “imaginary world” to the “symbolic world”. This includes a play on patriarchal rules and conformity to social conventions. She engages with men as she pleases, and her style of dealing with them is completely contrary to patriarchal social traditions. The part of existence that is not symbolized is the realm of the real, and the heroine's madness is a manifestation of being in the realm of the real. But in her heart, she still retains her desire for true love and her adherence to feminine traditions.

Barnes, as a representative of the symbolic world, is a symbol of patriarchal society, albeit a weak one, and can still provide help and comfort in critical moments. Barnes and Brett, as individuals,

symbolize the journey of the young men and women of the society of the time in their quest for “Phallus” in order to construct their own subjects.

3.2. Portrayal of the Female Body

The female body is a major area of interest within the study of feminism. The text of expression of the female body can be understood as various texts of content based on context [9]. Helene Cixous once mentioned that “women must write through their bodies; they must invent an invulnerable language that destroys divisions, classes, rhetoric, and puritanical rules [13].” She saw women's body writing as a form of resistance to male oppression and a way to fight for women's right to speak. As the name implies, women's body writing is a way of portraying women's bodies, promoting female consciousness, and reclaiming the neglected image of the female community.

The portrayal of the female body in *The Sun Also Rises* is particularly evident in the case of Brett, who is a woman of pleasure, living a life of pleasure and unabashed desire. She displays her body as she pleases:

He started to smile at me, then he saw Pedro Romero with a big glass of cognac in his hand, sitting laughing between me and a woman with bare shoulders, at a table full of drunks [11].

Brett dresses with bare shoulders to show herself bravely. The symbol of Brett's body shows not male's gaze, but female consciousness and desire which is always hidden in patriarchy society. In addition, when Romero, a man meddles with Brett's hairstyle, she resolutely refused:

- “He wanted me to grow my hair out. Me, with long hair. I'd look so like hell.”
- “It's funny.”
- “He said it would make me more womanly. I'd look a fright [11].”

Long hair is usually considered as a womanly feature. While Brett likes a tweed skirt, she makes decisions about her body on her own. “Female body writing” is in fact writing that subverts male power, showing the world without the transition of men in a sensual way. It is writing about female desire, and physical sensation. Although Hemingway is a more typically male writer, we cannot deny that the novel does break new ground and think about the portrayal of female characters, and perhaps touches on the female body in a certain sense [14]. The positive portrayal of women in a male perspective is therefore worthy of further study and consideration in the text *The Sun Also Rises*.

3.3. The Symbolic Meaning of the Title *the Sun Also Rises*

The Sun Also Rises is not only a natural phenomenon but also a natural law that cannot be violated: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever... The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose [11] ...”

No matter how human beings' changes, the sun always rises from the east. People have no choice but to obey the natural rules. Hemingway uses it as a title to outline the confusion of a generation and the sorrow of an era in a sad tone. As an individual, one realizes that people's spiritual world is lost after the war, especially women, who have lost the space to develop freely, but just realizing but not being able to change is undoubtedly a greater deficiency. People stuck in that era find it hard to have purposes for themselves, and even harder to change the disappointing world. As a result, the novel is overwhelmed by great powerlessness and helplessness.

Hemingway describes Brett as a new kind of woman who is different from “slut” or “angel”, in order to inspire people to create a world with gender equality. However, it is difficult to achieve true equality when only a small number of people are aware of the injustice, the deep inequalities in society, but do not gather into a social, contemporary voice. Like the natural phenomenon of the sun rising, the gender inequality still exists in the society.

4. The Unique Value of the Novel

4.1. The Literary Significance

Unlike the hero, the heroine is able to remain bold in her pursuit of love, and she has a stunning beauty. She is rebellious and bold, but she is also able to restrain her but bad temper. She is able to recognize herself more clearly and they are still able to face the injustices of society with openness [15]. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway would create a positive literary image of women, embodying the deep extension of “feminism” in philosophical thinking and a forward-looking understanding of true equality of the sexes by a male writer with inter-generational consciousness. It has served as a reference for later literary writers in creating a literary image of women that is more in line with the female will.

4.2. The Social Significance

When challenged in life, look beyond the surface of the phenomena, as you would in Hemingway's work, by applying the “iceberg principle”, and consider and analyze the essence behind them as far as possible [16]. *The Sun Also Rises* ends with Madame returning to Barnes and Brett failing to come together due to Barnes' sexual impotence. Bringing in the thinking of the “iceberg principle”, the fact is that the needs of society at all levels are the same for both men and women. And women themselves have their own desires and needs on a deep level. The sexual inversions in both men and women are due to society's disregard for gender equality. And it also shows that there are no exceptions to discrimination and injustice, regardless of gender. Hemingway thus also conveys the idea that only a positive female figure can embody a positive male figure. If one of the two, yin and yang, is at odds with the other, ultimately the concept of fairness is not embodied and the idea of literature does not reach the level of literary conformity with reality.

5. Conclusion

Gender is objective, discrimination is subjective. Hemingway was aware of the disadvantaged position of women in society and their need for the social gaze, but felt both helpless, confused and disappointed knowing that it was difficult to change all the “Phallus gaze” in the wider context. Thus, in *The Sun Also Rises*, he focuses on the portrayal of women, and even the depiction of sexual inversion reflects the equal treatment of men and women. The loss of sexuality is equivalent to the loss of Phallus. After Barnes loses his dependence on Phallus, he is treated just as unfairly and has to tolerate his lover with other men. In doing so, Hemingway's creation allows him in the same way as the rest of the “Phallus gaze” to step outside the subject matter of the essay only and take a higher view of all the 'Phallus factors' that are entrapped in being male and find that men who lose their Phallus are just as likely to receive injustice. As the most prevalent and stable element of the social structure, the balanced development of the interests of both sexes and the and harmonious relations determine the harmony and happiness of family relations and, in a certain sense, the sustainable and stable development of society. In a certain sense, it determines the sustainable and stable development of society [17]. This is all the more reason why recognizing the importance of gender differences is not only a matter of defending women's unilateral rights, but also of easing social tensions and laying the foundations for real gender equality at the social level.

Finally, true gender equality can only be achieved by eliminating, as far as possible, discrimination between the sexes at a deep conceptual and cultural level, together with respect for the gender differences of the “he or she” in accordance with the wishes of the other, and by affirming the fruits of the different labor resulting from the division of labor in society due to gender differences. The hypothesis is therefore valid, and Hemingway's “female body” and “sexual inversion” in *The Sun*

Also Rises are progressive symbols. Hemingway's words were conveying the idea of “gender equality” and speaking out for women's rights. It was not a social, collective voice at the time, but today it is a vision of the common will of all humanity.

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