

On the Shaping of Female Image in “A Dill Pickle” from the Aspects of Story and Narratology

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Abstract: Katherine Mansfield’s “A Dill Pickle” has been studied from the perspective of story as well as narratology respectively. Yet, from the perspective of characterization, the two aspects can be combined together and they all serve for shaping a feminist image. Focusing on the story, we can see that the heroine Vera was put under male gaze and objectified by her ex-boyfriend. However, she managed to resist the male gaze and establish the female subjectivity through decisive and subjective leaving, showing an image of an awakened feminist to the readers. Apart from that, the author also used other methods to assist the readers’ comprehension to the image. She used symbolism to help the readers better understand the characters’ personalities and the embodied theme, and narrative techniques, including applying authorial voice and taking the third person internal focalization, to inspire the readers’ empathy with Vera while ensuring the objectivity of the narration. In these ways, the author has successfully established her authority and created an impressive feminist image, through which she effectively conveyed her feminist thoughts to the society.

Keywords: A Dill Pickle; Female image; Feminist; Author’s authority

1. Introduction

Katherine Mansfield is a famous short story writer celebrated as one of New Zealand’s most influential writers. Her works point to the female living condition, and are good at expressing the complex and delicate relationship between men and women. “A Dill Pickle” is one of her masterpieces, which tells a story of two once parted lovers. The heroine, Vera, came across her ex-boyfriend “he” at a restaurant. She once recalled the love between them, but later discovered that he was still selfish and ruthless after they have parted from each other for six years. Therefore she firmly left him. Compared to complicated plot, the story put more emphasis on ordinary communications, reflecting the inner activities and characteristics of the characters through subtle actions.

In recent years, there have been various studies concerning the female image in “A Dill Pickle”, and most of them focused on the feminist thoughts embodied in the heroine according to the story’s content. For example, Deng Huiwen and Wang Shuxia have studied symbolism in the work. Deng focused on interpreting the symbolic meanings of different kinds of flowers in the text (45), while Wang included more images such as the dill pickle, the strange beast and heroine’s clothing (131-132). Niu Xuelian has studied the egocentric and feminist ideas showed by the heroine, and argued that the latter ultimately overcame the former, and therefore made the heroine a feminist (97). Chang Baixue has focused on the subject of gaze, stressing that the heroine was an awakened person who resisted male gaze and constructed her subjectivity as a woman (1).

There are other studies that concerned about the work from the narrative perspective. Using the theory of feminist narratology, Chen Min has studied the authorial voice, distance and value judgement of “A Dill Pickle”, analyzing how the author conveyed her values to the readers (80). Zhang Chunfang has argued that the narrative perspective, direct and indirect speech have played an important role in showing the inner world of the heroine (66); and Fan Xin, apart from the role of indirect speech, has also focused on the importance of scene description, holding that it reflected the heroine’s inner activities (72).

The above studies have respectively analyzed the the heroine’s image and the narrative characteristics of the story. Apart from them, there are also researchers who combined the two aspects together. For instance, by analyzing the overt and covert

narrative progressions, Shen Dan has pointed out the irony in the work was twofold rather than single, and the author actually used a satirical tone to create a self-serving female image (17). In my point of view, the study of female image and narratology should be put together, but unlike Shen's idea, I hold that these two aspects should not be analyzed separately because they both contribute to the characterization of the story, which means, to be more specific, to shape a feminist image in a very empathizing and impressive way to the reader. As it is known that narrative works are generally divided into two different levels: the story itself (content) and the narrative discourse (form) (Shen 3), the author has made efforts on both levels in order to establish her own authority and better convey the ideas of feminism to readers. Therefore, both the content and the use of narrative techniques serve the author's feminist opinions, and they should be considered connected and consistent. This paper attempted to explain how the author arranged both the content and the form to create a well-remembered feminist image and let the readers and the society hear her voice.

2. Features of the female image-an awaken feminist

In general, the image of the heroine, Vera, was an awaken feminist. She was featured by qualities such as reason, decisiveness, resistance and self-esteem. It is worth mentioning as background information, Vera was inferior to the hero "he" in terms of economic and social status. While he "had made money" and had "a confidence and an assurance" (Mansfield 3), she's own situation was much worse, facing constant troubles and frustrations of life. Thus, in the case of a gap in economic situation and social status, Vera was likely to be in a passive position and was easy to lose initiative in love. Yet, that she could still affirmed her own subjectivity and fought against the patriarchal oppression represented by "he" through actions was therefore considered very valuable.

2.1 The objectification of Vera and her resistance

In the story of "A Dill Pickle", Vera was faced with being objectified by male gaze, with "he" as its source. First, at the beginning, Vera was interrupted by "he" when she spoke of the cold weather, which reminded her of his trick six years ago. "he, quite suddenly, in the middle of what she was saying, put his hand over her lips... attended to something different, and then took his hand away... gave her his attention again. . . ." (Mansfield 2). Feminists held that "behind the interruption is the strength of power, the strong side interrupts the weak side, and is rarely interrupted by the latter. The dominant side uses this to eliminate what they think is irrelevant and move the conversation in the direction they want" (Guo 11). Thus, "his" interruption reflected his lack of respect for Vera, and embodied his dominance over her.

Similarly, their inequality was also embodied in the unequal opportunity to speak, since the opportunity to speak was a sign of power. During their conversation, "he" decided the topic and spoke for almost the entire time, and Vera just played a role like a silent listener. However, Vera herself appeared to be invisible and ignored. The subject of her own experiences was cut off in a few words, and she had few chance to express her own idea and inner feeling. Just as Guo Donglin said, this is not a voluntary choice, but the result of being in a position of weak power (11).

What's more, in accordance to Chang Baixue, male gaze is a psychological mechanism that objectifies, visualizes and makes women desirable objects. In the patriarchal society, women are the object of male desire and male observation. In this process, women gradually dissolve their subjectivity and internalize their subordinate image of 'the second sex' (1). In "A Dill Pickle", "he" did not treat Vera with equal respect. When "he" recalled their first afternoon at Kew Gardens, he ignored what Vera was saying, but only remembered her voice. It was evident that "he" had not been able to communicate intellectually with Vera, and only valued her voice and regarded it as a tool to please himself. Further, "he" loved himself more than "he" loved Vera. "He" was always self-centered, indifferent to Vera's life, and showed no consideration for her feelings by telling her of his travels in a showy tone. In the end of their conversation, "he" seemed to be reflecting on their common problems of being egotist. But though "he" used to word "we", his actual intention was to blame Vera. This indicated that even six years had passed and "he" had turned from a poor boy into a rich man, as Niu Xuelian wrote, the selfishness in his nature and subconscious will never be changed by his mature appearance and superior social position (96).

However, Vera didn't submitted to "he", who was a representative of the patriarchal society. She recognized the irony in his tone, and noticed that he was inconsiderable of her. For instance, while "he" recalled their afternoon at the garden very pleasant, Vera only remembered his awkward and embarrassing bee-scaring pose; and as for the night "he" brought her the little Christmas tree, what impressed her was his stinginess, while the dog she loved left no impression on him. It can be said that even if the man had less defects in his character, the two were not suitable for each other because they were incompatible. Vera had once yearned for his love, but she did not lose her head, and determinedly left him without hesitation.

In brief, Vera successfully maintained her self-esteem and female subjectivity under male gaze. Although objectively she lived worse than the man, she didn't choose the stay with him for wealth or blind love. Influenced by her emotion, she was still capable to stay calm, clear and rational to judge whether "he" was sincere or not. It was a strong rebellion against conventional stereotypes on women, stressing that women were not born to be controlled by emotions, nor were they inferior. They had the ability to think rationally, make right and wise decision and love themselves just like men. They did not agree to be subordinate to men. Even under the hostile gaze from men, they were able to fight and live a life well on their own. After reading the story, the readers would be clear that the author shaped the heroine Vera as an awoken feminist, and may draw female power from this image.

3. Methods of shaping the feminist image

In order to create a feminist image that can be deeply rooted in the readers' mind, it is not enough to merely rely only on the story's content. Apart from the arrangement of content, the author also used various rhetorical skills and narrative skills to made her image impressive.

3.1 Symbolism-an assistant to the readers' understanding

To better convey the theme of the story to the readers, the author used symbolism as an assistant to the readers' understanding. The imagery appeared in the story played an supporting role in shaping of the female character. For instance, the beast, the dill pickle and the clothing of Vera all had implied meanings.

The "strange beast" in Vera's heart appeared twice in the story. The first time was when she heard him talk about his travel experience in Russia, and the second time was when he told her that he was willing to love her as a magic carpet. It represented her desire for love, and was defeated later. The dill pickle, which referred to a pickled cucumber flavoured with dill, was a sweet and sour appetizer before a Russian dinner. It first appeared when locals shared dill pickles with "he" in his description of his journey to Russia, and again in Vera's imagination, hoping that she could also travel to the Black Sea and try a pickle in " the greenish glass jar with a red chili like a parrot's beak glimmering through" (Mansfield 5). Here, according to Wang Shuxia, the greenish glass represented the colorful life, while the red chili implied the bitterness of Vera's life. It is quite vivid to draw an analogy between a parrot's beak and a red chili, and the peak also referred to "he" who was good at telling lies (131). In general, this imagery was used to symbolize Vera's life as well as her love. The nature of the pickle as an appetizer symbolized that Vera was despised by "he", and its sour taste was also a symbol of Vera's difficult life and her love. The romantic relationship she once sought for had soured over time and would eventually ended up.

What's more, Vera's clothing contributed to reflect her personal sensitivity and pride. When she firstly appeared, she wore muff, veil and a coat with high fur collar. These clothes wrapped her up tightly, and showed her inner closed mind. "Vera's past six years have not been happy. She hid her true self and lived a lonely and solitary life" (Wang 132). Then, when she started conversation with "he", she took off her muff, "raised her veil and unbuttoned her high fur collar" (Mansfield 2), which implied that she was ready to open her lonely heart to welcome her old lover. Yet, after she was disappointed by him again, she "buttoned her collar again and drawn down her veil" (Mansfield 7), and went back to the self-enclosed status. It can be said that Vera's clothes were the external manifestation of her inner activities. It was a symbol of how she once tried but failed to let go of herself in pursuit of true love.

Symbolism used in the story helped the readers to have a better understanding. The symbolic meaning of the dill pickle enabled readers to grasp the story's theme and tone, while Vera's clothes helped readers to be more close to Vera's mind and give more understand and support to her psychological changes as well as her final decision. In this way, the author included the main idea she wanted to express in the imagery in the story.

3.2 Techniques of feminist narratology-a helper to inspire the reader's empathy

Apart from symbolism, the author used narrative skills as a helper to inspire the readers' empathy with her image. From the perspective of feminist narratology, the author adopted authorial voice and the third person internal focalization to establish her authority and ensure the readers can interpret her characters as she wished.

3.2.1 Authorial voice

The concept of authorial voice was first put forward by American literary theorist Susan Sniader Lanser. In her book *Fictions of Authority*, she mentioned that authorial voice referred to "narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential" (15). In this narrative mode, " the narrator is not a participant in the fictional world and exists on a separate ontological plane from the characters" (16); and the narrative object is "analogous to a reading audience" (16). To be specific, in "A Dill Pickle",

the narrator was the author Mansfield herself, while the narrated object can be regarded as the readers.

The adoption of the authorial voice brought several advantages. First, “since authorial narrators exist outside narrative time (indeed, “outside” fiction) and are not “humanized” by events, they conventionally carry an authority superior to that conferred on characters, even on narrating characters” (Lanser 16). The story began with the sentence “AND then, after six years, she saw him again” (Mansfield 1), which showed that the narrator was free from the constraints of time and space in which the story took place, making it clear to the readers that she knew exactly what happened six years ago and also six years later. Thus, with just one sentence, the author gave the readers a full sense of her authority over the story. Then, in terms of narrative time, the author did not use the traditional chronological structure, but interwove Vera’s memories into the conversation that is taking place in present. By replacing the moving plot by sets of flashback, Mansfield displayed the readers that she was in control of her story and made the readers naturally believe in her narration.

What’s more, among those who adopted the authorial voice, Lanser further distinguished two types of narrators. The first type are those “who engage exclusively in acts of representation that is, who simply predicate the words and actions of fictional characters” (Lanser 16), and the second type are those “who undertake “extrarepresentational” acts: reflections, judgments, generalizations about the world “beyond” the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts” (Lanser 16-17). Compared to the second type, the first types of narrators did not make seemingly subjective judgment, evaluation and other behaviors that would probably arouse the readers’ different ideas, and was therefore easier to be trusted. In “A Dill Pickle”, Mansfield was the first type of narrator. She described Vera’s describes words, actions, and thoughts without any deep reflection or personal comments. For example, from the beginning that Vera “raised her veil” (Mansfield 2) and “shuddered” (2), to “She broke in” (4) and “made a little grimace” (4) during the conversation, and finally “She had gone” (8), the author was giving factual descriptions. In this way, Mansfield brought a distance between the character and the readers, and gave the readers a sense of objectivity that made them believe the image of Vera was real and credible.

3.2.2 The third person internal focalization

While the adoption of authorial voice distanced the readers from the character and enhanced the objectivity of the image of Vera, the author adopted the third person internal focalization in terms of narrative perspective, which, on the contrary, brought the readers closer to the heroine and increased their empathy.

While making heterodiegetic narration, the author frequently entered Vera’s mind at the same time, recalling, observing and thinking about people and things from her perspective. Taking the first two sentences of the second paragraph as an example. “He must have felt that shock of recognition in her for he looked up and met her eyes. Incredible! He didn’t know her” (Mansfield 1). In these sentences, the author used Vera’s own eyes to focalize, expressing her immediate mental activities in the present moment. Such expression was limited by the time and space of the story’s development, which was completely different from the heterodiegetic pattern. What’s more, Vera’s vision ran through almost every important event in the text, including recalling their past love and listening to her ex-boyfriend’s travel experiences. Through the narration of the internal focalization, the readers would fully understand Vera’s inner activities, her mental course, her motives and fears. Then, the distance between the readers and the character would diminish in the process, and it would be natural from them to sympathize with the heroine, which was exactly what the author expected.

In short, the third person internal focalization, on the one hand, enabled the author to integrate her own voice with the character, leaving less or no space for the narrator to make judgement and comment, which greatly enhanced her authority; and on the other hand, it also narrowed the gap between readers and the character, allowing them to focus on the female image, and to read, to see and to think from her point of view. Therefore, the readers built a spiritual connection with the character and would identify more with her.

To be general, by adopting authorial voice and the third person internal focalization, the author realized the flexible adjustment of the distance between the readers and her image. While authorial voice contributed to enhance the objectivity of her narration, pulling the readers away from the heroine, the third person internal focalization could shorten the distance between them and inspire the readers’ empathy. Through the flexible usage of the two techniques in the narrative process, the author successfully created a credible and impressive female image, realized the consensus with the readers, and strengthened the readers’ identification of her values.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Katherine Mansfield created an image of an awakened feminist in her story. Though being objectified

by the male gaze, Vera did not choose to be silent, but resolutely abandoned the fantasy of love, recognized the reality, and effectively defended her female subjectivity. In addition to the characterization on the aspect of content, the author also used symbolism and narrative techniques, including authorial voice and the third person internal focalization, to assist the readers' comprehension and better convey her values to them. As a result, she managed to shape a vivid and impressive feminist image.

Furthermore, the feminist ideas of "A Dill Pickle" was not only embodied in its female image, but also in the author's narration. The author used the above narrative techniques not only because they were helpful for image shaping, but also because she had few options. As Lanser wrote in *Fictions of Authority*, for a long time in history, "it has been one thing for women simply to tell stories and another for their narrators to set themselves forth as authorities. Indeed, authorial voice has been so conventionally masculine that female authorship does not necessarily establish female voice" (19). In Mansfield's time, since female writers were at the edge of society, unable to have the dominant position and right of speech in the public sphere as male writers, they could only use narrative skills to make their voices more effectively reach the readers' minds. Therefore, Mansfield had to adopt skills such as authorial voice to keep the narrator of the story away from having a sexual identity, which would not only interfere with male authority, but also give the work more public authority and make it more acceptable. Thus, it can be said that not only did Mansfield's work express feminist views, but Mansfield herself was also a practitioner of feminism, promoting the works of female writers to be read by a wider audience. In this sense, Mansfield became consistent with her work.

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