

Disney's Global Adaptation of Classic Fairy Tales from a Semantic Perspective-- The Concept of "Beauty" in *Snow White*

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Abstract:

As a classic representative of world fairy tale literature, the semantic study of Grimm's Fairy Tales has always been one of the important topics in the field of fairy tale research. As one of the most frequent classic characterizations in fairy tales, the semantic complexity of the concept of "beauty" in the text is usually overlooked. This study tries to analyze the Grimm's fairy tale *Snow White* and the Disney adaptation film *Snow White* and the Seven Dwarfs as the main textual sample of this study. Disney diminished the historical and original cultural elements. Instead, it amplified visual images and commercial value to enhance its intellectual property's spread, acceptance, and influence. This study takes a semantic perspective, uses sense analysis and semantic field theory to deconstruct the multilayered meanings of the word "beauty". Discovering what connotations Disney's adaptations of characters changed and how Disney achieves its global commercial goals and cultural globalization.

Keywords: Sense analysis; semantic field; Grimm's Fairy Tales; Disney Fairy Tales; *Snow White*

1. Introduction

Grimm's Fairy Tales is one of the most familiar collections of classic fairy tales today. It contains more than 200 chapters of stories, and *Snow White* is undoubtedly one of the most household stories. Disney, as a representative of popular fairy tales, made one of its most famous animated films, *Snow White* and the Seven Dwarfs, which gained lots of fame and fortune. In this adaptation, Disney not only kept the same story structure as the original film, but also laid an aesthetic foundation for Disney's globalization

image of good and evil characters.

Early studies of the Grimm's Fairy Tales and their adaptations emphasized the general perspective. As their understanding of Grimm's Fairy Tales deepened, the scholars began to realize that the stories were not just for children but conveyed deeper messages for adults. Harvard University's Maria Tatar's book, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales: Expanded Edition*, shows readers the connotations behind the fairy tales, including the deepening gender stereotyping of evil stepmothers, and the impact of violent elements on children's mental health and

family's education [1]. Nanae Takenaka's study regards the story as a process of realizing absolute beauty. In this framework, the Queen represents the "real" chasing after perfectness, while *Snow White* represents the "ideal" [2]. In domestic studies of Grimm's Fairy Tales, most of them focus on exploring the stories and characterization. Deng Huan's uses critical pragmatics to analyze its gender archetypes and criticizes the fairy tale's narrative strategy of praising male wisdom and boldness by describing a female character archetype who needs to be helped by him [3]. Mao Naixian's study explains the development and changes of Disney's popular fairy tale from the traditional image of passively waiting for rescue to the image of an independent and autonomous woman. This fusion of multiple cultures is the key to the success of the globalization of IP creation for profit [4].

Although there have already been many linguistic studies on Grimm's Fairy Tales, most of them have focused on physiognomy and pragmatics. There is still a wide gap in the analysis of the similarities between the imageries themselves and the metaphor. Besides, very few studies have attempted to compare Disney's film version and the original version to explore the changes and globalization significance of the adaptation in terms of semantic perspective. This study tries to use semantic theory combined with the knowledge of globalization to fill these blanks in this field and deconstruct the concept of beauty in *Snow White*. The purpose is to reveal the changes in the characterization and metaphor in Disney's adaptation and explore the significance of the success of Disney's animated fairy tales' globalization.

2. Methodology

2.1 Semantic Analyses and Semantic Fields

The semantic component is the smallest and basic unit in the semantic system. Semantic analysis draws on the scientific method, which is like establishing phonemes and constructing a phonemic system. It aims to investigate the meaning composition of the vocabulary deeply, revealing how these meanings are composed and the structural characteristics of the system [5]. In the 1940s, the Danish linguist, Yimslev, advocated the use of phonemic differentiation for describing the meaning of the word, named the Semantic Analysis [6]. Semantic analysis uses mathematical logic in the form of formulas, for example, man = [+man] [+male] [+adult], boy = [+man] [+male] [-adult], to achieve the purpose of telling the differences between similar words.

If the semantic analysis distinguishes word meanings from a formal perspective, then the semantic field theory

recognizes word meanings from a general perspective. As one of the core theories of modern semantics, semantic field theory reveals the inner correlations in the language system. There are various levels of the semantic field, and words at various levels have both superior-subordinate relationships [7]. These levels concretize the superior semantic field of abstract nouns into the subordinate semantic field and emphasize that some words in a language can form a semantic field under the domination of a common concept [8].

For example, if take "organism" as the superior concept of this semantic field, then "animal" and "plant" are subordinate concepts of "organism," and concepts such as "Vertebrates" and "invertebrates" are the more subordinate concepts of this semantic field. While inheriting the core meaning of the superior words, the subordinate words are refined by attaching their unique meaning. This is a process of differentiation from the abstract to the concrete.

In this study, the authors choose to use the semantic analysis and semantic field as the core theoretical tools and analyze and reconstruct the word "beauty" in the original Grimm's Fairy Tales and Disney's popular fairy tale as an example to explore Disney adaptations' success in globalization.

2.2 The Semantic Field Classification Criteria of Beauty

As an abstract term, beauty does not represent a single concept. According to semantic field theory, this study classifies the beauty in the original Grimm fairy tales into three categories: natural beauty, moral beauty, and authoritative beauty. These categories represent three levels of social aesthetics. Natural beauty is the most direct and visible standard, representing external appearance as the judgment of good looks. The natural beauty of the two main characters is evaluated several times throughout the story. For example, at the beginning of the story, *Snow White* is described as follows: "Soon after that she had a little daughter, who was as white as snow, and as red as blood, and her hair was as black as ebony" [9]. Similarly, the Queen's natural beauty is expressed throughout the text. "After a year had passed, the King took to himself another wife. She was a beautiful woman [9]." These descriptions reflect an acknowledgement of the natural beauty of both *Snow White* and the Queen.

Moral beauty, as a moral reference, is an intrinsic value and character trait. In *Snow White*, it can be seen that a clear distinction between 'good' and 'evil', whether in the direct depiction or others' judgements. The dwarves repeatedly describe *Snow White* as a lovely kid and call the Queen "proud and haughty" and "wicked", both of which

are strongly negative judgements of the Queen's character. Authoritative beauty reflects a subjective evaluative perspective of superiority. It is a judgmental standard of scrutiny, as the mirror always reveals who is the fairest of them all between the Queen and *Snow White*. The beauty

identified by the mirror is the embodiment of this concept of beauty.

These 3 subordinate semantic fields of beauty in the original Grimm's Fairy Tales can be summarised as the following Table 1.

Table 1. Semantic analysis of beauty in two female characters of Grimm's fairy tales.

	Natural Beauty	Moral Beauty	Authoritative Beauty
Snow White	+	+	+
The Queen(pre)	+	-/+	+
The Queen(pro)	+	-	-

3. Research Findings

In the Grimm's fairy tale *Snow White*, beauty as a core semantic field appears 38 times, of which twice as a noun and 36 times as an adjective. These words are not only used as tools to portray the characteristics of the characters, but also play a key role in describing the objects' features. In the following, the study findings will be discussed in both characterization and classical imagery.

3.1 Beauty in Shaping Characterization

As a positive character created under the patriarchal system, *Snow White*'s beauty is divided into three subordinate semantic fields, and each of them is positive. These three beauties make her reach the standard of the most beautiful in comparison with the Queen. At the same time, these fields also establish a system of value exchange. Her natural beauty triggers a chain reaction of behaviours from others: pity from the hunter, shelter from the dwarves,

and adoration from the prince. This reflects the fact that *Snow White* always gains a passive benefit because of her beauty. In terms of moral beauty, *Snow White* uses domestic housework for the dwarves to get shelter in exchange, which means the ethical value becomes her survival strategy. In this process of *Snow White*'s self-redemption, her passivity quietly increases, and subjectivity gradually decreases. In addition, the mirror forces *Snow White* to be the most beautiful woman, which admits her authoritative beauty, and even puts her in danger. This means that the positive female characters like the princess are mostly portrayed in fairy tales as beautiful frames without their personality and soul, and it is like they are programmed to keep exchanging their beauty for their needs. This is quite different in Disney's fairy tale adaptations. Based on the same criteria for standard as above, this study analyzes the same characters in Disney animated films and summarizes them in Table 2.

Table 2. Semantic analysis of beauty in two female characters of Disney fairy tales.

	Natural Beauty	Moral Beauty	Authoritative Beauty
Snow White	+	+	+
The Queen(pre)	+	-	+
The Queen(pro)	-	-	-

As shown in Table 2, in the Disney fairy tale, *Snow White* is still the embodiment of natural, moral, and authoritative beauty. However, she is no longer simply defined by other people's admiration and compliments at first sight, but through the audience's heartfelt appreciation of the animation for visual enjoyment. In terms of moral beauty, *Snow White*'s relationship with the seven dwarves is a long-term process of making friends. She takes her initiative to earn their trust by treating them with sincerity and gradually gains their friendship and love through her kindness. This is a complex probationary process rather than a simple

exchange of value. The prince and *Snow White* get along at the very beginning, which perfectly explains the confusion and discomfort that the prince falls in love at first sight because of the beauty when reading Grimm's fairy tales.

3.2 Beauty in Shaping Classical Imagery

When focusing on the original fairy tale, it is apparent that beauty is not only used to describe people but also to describe classic imagery. The most famous example of

this is *Snow White*'s apple. While a semantic analysis of the meaning of the normal apple can be summarised as [+plant] [+fruit] [+edible] [+red], its meaning changes in different cultural contexts. In Western culture, the apple is always regarded as a symbol of desire, and throughout Europe it signifies love, marriage, innocence, fertility, spring, longevity, and immortality. Meanwhile, the colour red also represents blood and uncertainty [10].

In the story of Adam and Eve, the snake tempts Eve with a beautiful apple, and that leads to chaos in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, the apple in this story has the Temptation semantic component in the original Grimm's fairy tales. This makes it seem logical for the repeatedly persecuted *Snow White* to eat the apple, even after the dwarves' warning. She is attracted by the beauty of the red half of the apple, reflecting that those who cannot resist temptation will ultimately be harmed by it. This highlights the seductive nature of beauty and its destructive power.

In Disney's adaptation, the apple's appearance does not change, but its poisonous message is revealed through the queen's wicked magic. Its toxicity is no longer embodied in its beautiful appearance; red no longer symbolises evil, and beauty is no longer a temptation. The classic poisonous symbol is hidden in the apple as a hint. *Snow White* is not attracted by the apple's beauty, but the Queen takes advantage of her kindness and her good nature. At the same time, she tells *Snow White* that eating the apple will make her wish come true. This is the main reason why *Snow White* chose to eat the apple in this adaptation. Disney presents the original metaphor of beautiful temptation to the audience and makes the magic apple itself more striking than its beauty.

4. Discussion

This chapter summarises and analyses the sustainability strategies of Disney's fairy tale IPs of all kinds and finds that Disney has transformed the connotations of the classic images and elements from different classical fairy tales, clarifying the target demographic and other ways of integrating the original classic fairy tale with real-life values and visual art to develop its world-classic global IPs and culture.

4.1 Transformation of Character Connotations

As one of the most important elements in animated works, Disney modified the original historical background context of the character images, transforming them into a globalised aesthetic standard. As an example, *Snow White*'s beauty was transformed from a simple textual description into a concrete image, setting the template for subsequent Disney princesses. At the same time, Disney

created unique character characteristics for different cultures under the Princess brand, achieving the fundamental purpose of globalising the Princess series. Furthermore, the friendship with animals to reflect the goodness of the princess's moral beauty has become a common theme in Disney films. For example, if some cute animals are willing to interact with the character, such as a bird, a deer, etc., it proves that she is a kind person. Conversely, evil characters are always accompanied by dragons and crows, which means ominous and malicious. This template has been widely accepted and followed in every Disney fairy tale since then, such as in *Cinderella*, where mice and birds help with housework, and in *Mulan*, a fire dragon helps her a lot in the army.

Disney adaptations have strengthened the status of women, as most of the female villains are often portrayed as the most powerful and authoritative figures. As in the comparison between Table 1 and Table 2 above, the Queen is no longer singularly trapped in the pursuit of beauty in Disney's adaptation, but rather in youth and the power to rule the kingdom with her heavy hands. So she is unwilling to just sit by and wait for *Snow White* to take her crown. The queen is no longer a soulless character created merely to cause trouble, but begins to have her charm. Female villains. As a visual medium, Disney adaptations always created these evil and noble images with dark coloured regal dress and make-up or the image of the ghastly-faced aged witch with twisted witchcraft, so that the influence of the image of the wicked witch is further globalised and expanded. Not only that, but it also laid the foundation of Disney's female villains that most of them in Disney's works nowadays appear in dark colours. The most typical examples of these villains, besides the queen in *Snow White*, are the stepmother in *Cinderella* and Mary Filson in *Sleeping Beauty*, who can frighten people and quickly realize who is the troublemaker at first sight of her picture.

4.2 Precisely Meet the Preferences of the Target Audience

One of the noteworthy things is that Disney has realized the importance of capturing the attention of its target audience, namely, young women. Consequently, much of the focus is on the conflict between the princess and the villain. They are beautiful and have their unique characteristics, and each of them has its pursuit and ambition. When it comes to Disney princess stories, audiences often struggle to remember the prince's name or appearance, and in many cases, the prince is not even given a name. Laying down the women's protagonist, the general tone of popular fairy tales focuses on women. This sets the gen-

eral tone for popular fairy tales with female protagonists. Disney's images of women are changing according to the times, from the earliest images of goodness and beauty to the subsequent images of authoritative women. These women with a strong sense of justice and kindness spare no effort to pursue their dreams and happiness. Their status changes from subordinate to central, their roles change from "being saved" to "saving others" and they finally realize their values [11]. This is also in line with today's young women's progressive values that women start actively pursuing their dreams instead of passively waiting for benefits. Disney is also seizing the trend of the awakening of women's consciousness to create more female heroism IPs popular among modern young women. This is also one of the reasons why Disney can achieve globalization.

4.3 Creating Classic IP Elements

Disney's innovation of classic elements in the adaptation is also a key factor in its successful globalization. A strong IP always needs an eye-catching symbol. For example, the skull logo has been integrated into the normal Apple, so that the skull image deepens the commercial value of Apple and makes it a popular, exclusive Snow-White product. A variety of apple elements can be found in major Snow-White IP co-branding designs, meaning that most people will think of *Snow White* as soon as they see it. This achieves the purpose of IP globalization. Other examples include Cinderella's slippers and pumpkin carriage, the rose in *Beauty and the Beast*, etc. Disney's precise use of image creations has strengthened audience memory of these classic elements and achieved success in its IP's commercial value.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the complicated meanings and connotations of the concept of "beauty" in *Snow White* in both Grimm's fairy tales and Disney's adaptation. The study finds that "beauty" is not just a static and simple word, but rather a key semantic feature of characterisation and metaphor in textual contexts. At the same time, Disney has reconstructed the connotations of "beauty" through richer characterization and classical imageries to make it more acceptable to its aiming audiences globally. Through these adaptations, Disney spread its intellectual properties all over the world to achieve global influence. Using semantic analysis and logic of semantic fields, this study divides the concept of beauty into three categories: natural beauty, moral beauty, and authoritative beauty. It

recognises that in the original context, *Snow White*'s external and moral beauty is a tool for exchanging values, and the metaphor of the apple illustrates how beauty can be used as a symbol of temptation. Disney's adaptation addressed the needs of the times and the audiences and created unique, memorable elements. This is the key to the success of Disney's fairy tales, and this also means that independent women are being celebrated among female audiences, that women in fairy tales are not just beautiful and passive but can also be active and brave.

Semantic research is of great value and significance when it comes to exploring the connotations behind words. In future studies, further semantic analysis of other fairy tale texts could reveal the strategies and purposes behind popular fairy tale adaptations of classic fairy tales by exploring their socio-historical contexts.

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