

# Reality and Ideality: An analysis on Beauty and the Beast from the Perspective of Feminist Narratology

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## Abstract

**La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast) is a fairy tale originally written by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, a French female author, and later adapted into a cartoon by Disney, which tells an actualization of idealized love in reality through the whole story. Such is, on one hand, a revelation of the opposite relationship between reality and ideality while, on the other, an embodiment of the reconcilability in the emotional power, instanced by equal love, confidence and dependence, in the contradiction between the ideality and reality. The theme of La Belle et la Bête as the main objection of this article is analyzed on the basis of the feminist narratological analysis of characters, mainly of La Belle, for the purpose of the acquirement of the profound meaning of equal identity and, simultaneously, of the perception of the realizability of ideal life in reality. This paper intends to analyze the theme of La Belle et la Bête, an actualization of idealized love in reality, from the perspective of feminist narratology based mainly on La Belle, the female protagonist, to acquire the embodiment of realities and idealities, their opposite relationship and the way of equal love in conciliating the opposites.**

## Keywords

**La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast); Feminist narratology; Reality; Ideality.**

## 1. Introduction

*Beauty and the Beast (La Belle et la Bête)*, a classic French fairy tale, which has four versions, is originally written by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and translated into English by James Robinson Planché. The most notable ones are the adapted French version and, as well, an English version published on a children magazine by Jeanne-Marie Leprince De Beaumont in 1783. And later the transformed version of *the Singing, Springing Lark* is published by Brother Grimms in December of 1812 in their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales)*. And the fourth version of *Beauty and the Beast* is written by Andrew Lang, published in *The Blue Fairy Book* in 1889 [1].

The original version of *Beauty and the Beast* is a French fairy tale, narrating the story a fallen merchant, who has twelve children, among whom only La Belle asked him for nothing yet merely a rose on his way back home. However, it is the single rose that brought the whole family a nightmare—the dispatch of one person for the compensation of the fallen rose. And the following adapted versions absorbed the similar story lines and plots in their new versions. A cartoon movie later produced by Disney, different from literal works, is more suitable for children to understand the theme in the simplest way. Though different in expression and form, the storyline of each version goes in the same direction. It is the growing heroine La Belle who saves the hero and brings him back to human form rather than is, as a custom, saved by the “prince” in old fairy tales.

*Beauty and the Beast* is released by Disney in 1991. Along with the realization of the ideal life of Belle, the life of all the other male characters like Gaston and La Bête has changed impressively, revealing the differentiation between actuality and ideality and, as well, the increasing power

of female characters in patriarchal society. To some extent, this film has implanted new conception of gender power to the traditional way of children storytelling. The heroine controls and dominates her own life by the knowledge of and aspiration to future life other than being a normal innocent or attractive girl as is defined. As a result, the analysis of the theme of *Beauty and the Beast* from the perspective of feminist narratology provides a new way for understanding traditional fairy tales.

*Beauty and the Beast* is considered to be a meaningful fairy tale. It can be traced back to ancient county folks in varied cultural backgrounds, on account that the story of animal bridegroom and human bride is as popular and ubiquitous as the story of Cinderella [2]. And in a similar situation, the film arose great attention from the audience and was nominated as *Academy Award for Best Picture* in 1992, making the first cartoon to possess this award in history [3]. What's more, there is a comparative study between different literal genres in different countries. Kristin Bidoshi (2008) has made a conclusion that "we have noted, for example, that the the most important facet of the Russian versions of folktale type is certainly not the issue of origin but rather the insight it provides into the dynamic of the relations between oral folk narratives and literature" [4]. And "*Beauty and the Beast* under the Perspective of Evolutionary Psychology" written by Liu Danyu in 2013 takes Andrew Lang's *Beauty and the Beast* as the analyzed text and, on the basis of evolutionary psychology, makes a detailed analysis and interpretation of the psychological changes behind the "strangers—turn-to—lovers" behavior of *Beauty and the Beast* [5]. Tatiana Korneeva (2014) has incarnated the desire of different genders with the same power in the same social status, which is reflected within the paper, saying that "these eighteenth-century versions of *Beauty and the Beast* are thus remarkably modern in their capacity to explore the performativity of gender identity and in their rethinking of sexuality" [6].

The researches of this film are mainly conducted from such two perspectives as education and society. A research about educational enlightenment, published by Wang Xirong (2015), concludes that "the cartoon works, as illustrated above, allow children to make a further progress in the discovery of unknown world, which is exactly the function of an excellent work" [7]. And an analysis of metaphors from linguistic aspect written by Liu Yuxuan (2015) finds that "metaphor has a substantial effect for the foiling of theme and the expression of interior world of characters" [8]. In addition, this film also reflects the circumstance of human society. And the equality between different social genders is acquired through, in the first place, Martha A. Bartter (1998), who claims that Disney rarely incorporated either "liberated" female figures or adult sexuality in his works" [9]. And in the second place, Li Lihua (2017) concludes that "female has their own dream and pursuits, in the stead of waiting negatively only for love, finds their identity and realized their own value" [10].

Reality, according to Oxford Dictionary (2014), is, as an uncountable noun, the true situation and the problems that actually exist in human life, in contrast to how you would like life to be while, as a countable noun, a thing that is actually experienced or seen, in contrast to what people might imagine [11]<sup>1705</sup>. The reality, therefore, in this paper functions as an uncountable noun, and is represented and embodied by the actual life in that small town around La Belle, mainly through the character manifestation of Gaston on one hand and, on the other, the unconscious mass.

Ideal is, based on Oxford Dictionary, an idea or standard that seems perfect, and is worth trying to achieve or obtain [11]<sup>1040</sup>. And furthermore, ideality is a capacity to form the perfection and beauty. As is mentioned by Gerald A. Katuin in "The Ideality of Values" that "the important phase in these values must be ideal if they are to be usable as designations for the functions of an act or an object, and it is the individual that makes them ideal" [12]. The ideality, as a result, in *Beauty and the Beast* is the ideal life of La Belle and the return of the appearance of La Bête into human again.

As for feminist narratology, it can shed light on the ways in which gender influences storytelling. By analyzing how characters are portrayed, the language used, and the power of female protagonist within a narrative, it reveals underlying assumptions and biases about gender roles and identities. It flourished mainly to challenge the dominance of male power in patriarchal society, which historically marginalized women and other marginalized groups. By deconstructing these narratives, it exposes the ways in which they reinforce and perpetuate oppressive structures. In this aspect, by analyzing texts through a feminist lens, readers can gain insights into the ways in which literature both reflects and shapes social attitudes and norms. Feminist narratology encourages readers to engage critically with texts, questioning assumptions, uncovering hidden meanings, and challenging dominant interpretations. This critical engagement fosters deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities of gender representation in literature and culture. Overall, analyzing a text from the perspective of feminist narratology is significant because it allows for a more nuanced understanding of gender inequality, power relations, and social structures within narratives, ultimately contributing to broader conversations about equality and social change.

Although many studies are conducted on *Beauty and the Beast*, there is very little research on the feminist narratological analysis of the thematic interpretation based on the speech and act of the heroine La Belle. There is, in sum, a large room for the thematic analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* from the feminist narratological view of point. This paper intends, from the perspective of feminist narratology, to analyze the theme of the cartoon *Beauty and the Beast* [13], that is to say, the possibility in the reconciliation of the opposite relationships between ideality and reality under the condition of equal gender and social identity. There are, in total, three parts in this paper. The first part introduces the presentation and symbols of reality and ideality in *Beauty and the Beast* through the speech and act of the heroine and her pursuers Gaston and La Bête. The second part analyzes, in the first place, respectively the opposition between realities and between idealities; and in the second place, the opposition between idealities and realities. The final part discusses the main theme of this paper from two points of view—the importance of gender equality in love and ‘Magic’ as a reconcilable instrument—for the profound understanding of the possibility in the reconciliation of the opposite relationship between ideality and reality in *Beauty and the Beast*.

## 2. The Embodiment of Realities and Idealities in *Beauty and the Beast*

The opposite relationship between ideality and reality as the main theme of *Beauty and the Beast* is embodied by the discovery and recovery of La Bête as the prince by La Belle after a magic rose in an enchanted place was occasionally picked up by the merchant, father of La Belle. The preliminary element in the plot development is, in the main, on the basis of the cognitive struggle of La Belle between an ideal amour, a lover in dream, and a special Gothic male, La Bête, in reality. The lover in dream is the representation of an expected future life by La Belle for the purpose of the fulfillment of her ideality, her desire to be in possession of a fairy living circumstance far away from the provincial life circumstance, while, on the contrary, La Bête is the one who gives fortunes, decent life and almost everything he possessed to La Belle with no reluctance or hesitation. It is love, the instrument, for La Belle to recover the true identity of La Bête as a real prince, and for La Bête to understand the importance of equal rights and status in love. This love, different from the description of traditional male writers, grows under the maturing heroine and exists as a result of the realization of equal social status and rights. The supernatural existence of magic is a presentation of as much the fragility of idealized life in reality as the desire to break out the shackles on females imposed by patriarchal society.

The actuality, a country life, for La Belle is much happier than the life in town for its free lifestyle, serene atmosphere, authentic and aimless ordinary living circumstance. There are many

episodes that indicate people there having no concern for the matters outside their reality (3:10 - 3:32). Firstly, the baker who sells his bread rolls like always cares nothing about what La Belle narrated about the content of the book (3:36 - 4:10). Secondly, villagers are busy engaging in their actual life which is in an evident comparison with the conduct of La Belle endowing in books while strolling along road (7:48 - 8:02). This scene embodies the actuality of La Belle's real life and the iniquity of genders between male and female. At that time, the social status of female is inferior to male on the whole, and the conventional thought, as a matter of fact, rooted deeply in the mind of villagers. Therefore, they are not on the side of those who are in favor of females' learning and studying, representing vividly by the application of 'odd', 'strange' and 'peculiar' to the incarnation of the characteristic of La Belle in their mind (5:32 - 5:40). One of the most animated scene is a laundry woman involuntarily chose to leave the pool where Belle was reading a book joyfully (5:41 - 5:50). What's more, Gaston is the typical presentation of paternity at that time, who has less interest in supporting La Belle to be knowledgeable and independent. He is a suitable one as a fiance in real life yet not eligible in an idealized way in the growing awareness of femininity, because the words said by him are a faint narration of reality without any respect for La Belle's dream or the imagination of future life. Clearly, it can be discovered from his proposal words to La Belle—a hunting lodge, strapping boys like him (18:49 - 19:12)—those are real description of the future life in his own dream rather than the ideal life of his proposed girl nor any thing could happen outside the settled convention in real life.

The ideality of La Belle, more or less, is an expectation of escaping away from the dull, tedious conventional life. She dreams by the side of a pool to encounter her lover, which would happen in the same situation as in her favorite book (5:41 - 6:11), showing her unspeakable dream to find equality in love and at home at that time. After she refused Gaston's proposal, the illustrations, on one hand, of the exhaustion by living a monotonous life in the little town and, on the other, of the anticipation of the great, wide somewhere and of the quest for having someone understand (20:15 - 21:07) are all unveiling her inner unspeakable dream which is almost impossible to be realized or accepted by male dominated society at that time.

Then the detail that shopkeeper presented La Belle with a book (4:48 - 4:50) gives an impulse to the plot development, indicating her subsequent living condition which is supposed to be in consistence with the book description and, in the meantime, implies a bright future that La Belle one day will find out the Prince Charming is right here, next to her. La Bête is a prince in reality and an incarnation of Belle's ideality in disguise. Therefore, the ideality and reality of La Belle are in a contradictory position and unable to be conciliated because La Belle as a female revolutionist has barely any supports of her own groups, let alone that of her "suppressors".

### **3. The Opposite Relationship Between Realities and Idealities in Beauty and the Beast**

The opposition in real life is embodied by the non-equivalent attitudes of La Belle and Gaston towards ideal and real life. Gaston unconsciously throws her book into the muddy ground at the first time of meeting La Belle (9:05 - 9:13). This conduct, first, unveils the ignorance and self-arrogance of Gaston and, second, insults the imagination and dream of La Belle. That is to say, Gaston loves only the appearance of La Belle other than her whole self. The existential relationship between reality and imagination is reflected by the different application of words to the explanation of the same thing in book. Picture to Gaston is just a reading style instead of his own creation yet to La Belle is a new perspective to the imagination of her own. In a similar way, Gaston, at La Belle's home, contaminates her book with the mud on his shoes (18:21 - 19:00). It shows not only his contempt for women's cultivation and growing but also his subconsciousness of male-domination and self-arrogance. From these two plots, it is evident

that the problem among them is caused by their distinct personalities and mindsets and, to delve more deeply, the different attitudes towards life as a whole.

La Belle sings the possibility of the existing life is more than that provincial life (3:10 - 3:24), as a universal statement, while Gaston the intention to have the marriage with La Belle (7:15 - 7:23) is merely an individual situation. If, under this circumstance, La Belle marries Gaston, she would have never had the chance to separate from the life of a small village or the life of patriarchal society. As a consequence, she refused his proposal to indicate, on one hand, her strong aspiration to an idealized life and dissatisfaction with current living modes while, on the other hand, the misconception of Gaston towards La Belle, a new woman, so that the realizability of his dream is much less likely than the dream of La Belle.

The contradiction of La Belle between reality and ideality is reflected by the experience of herself with La Bête. La Bête, as a master in a castle, declines the demand of La Belle for the rescue of her father (23:24 - 23:44) after a private enchanted rose in the garden was taken off. Because of the disparity in their identity, the magic rose under the spell of a wizard didn't fall at once until they truly fell in love with each other with equal status. When, at the first time, La Bête invites La Belle to have dinner with him but was ejected instantly with no hesitation. It is because her freedom and right to the pursuit of her dream are deprived by him ruthlessly. Their identities are not equal, as a result, the spell would not be dispelled only under the condition of the return of La Belle from her home with the same equal identity and status as La Bête. While the opposite relationship between La Belle and La Bête is as a matter of fact the opposite relationship between human and beast, which is, accordingly, more serious and grave than the opposite relationship between La Belle and Gaston, that is between ideality and reality in male dominated society.

The opposite relationship of reality and ideality is characterized by the irreconcilable and existing relationship between La Bête and Gaston. When Gaston sees La Bête through a magic mirror, the inside animality conquers his humanity though he was in a human shape. Gaston sings, "so it's time to take some action, boys, it's time to follow me (70:00 - 71:20)" indicating his jealousy of her affection to La Bête, which threatens his superiority as an attractive male at that village. This opposite relationship autonomously changed by La Bête himself when he forgave Gaston at the termination of their fight that he suddenly realized he, himself, is a human being other than a beast.

#### **4. The Reconciliability of the Opposites with Equal Love in Beauty and the Beast**

The insistent and continuous development of the contradict and opposite relationship is, nevertheless, the incremental realizability of the ideality of La Belle. Magic functions, negligibly, as a indispensable and fundamental tool to make the opposite relationship of the reality and ideality reconcilable. While other than the unrealistic force of magic, the most important way to reconcile the opposite relationship is the conception of love in the mind of characters. The view of La Belle towards love is, from this point, based on the subjective existence, generated and originated from reading and constructed through her own imagination based on the knowledge in books. However, that of Gaston, is the *posterior* in dominant position in love, a kind of re-representation of the secular values of the residents in that small patriarchal town. The alleged *posterior*, contrast to a *priori*, depends on actual experience that had been through by himself, alike vision, audition and many others.

The ideal love of La Belle is transformed into reality when she encounters La Bête. At first, she is shocked by the ugliness and rudeness of the appearance of La Bête (23:53 - 24: 03), which according to her prior ideal is exerted great influence on the actual experience because of the insistence of her ideal on the transformation of reality. To transform the beast into human is

another way for her to change the reality. La Belle promised La Bête never left that castle (23:30 - 23:44) is an adherence to transcendental ideals of La Belle, showing the deliverance of masculinity by femininity and the value of females to the pursuit of their dreams. In the west wing, La Belle at the first time sees the original appearance (45:20 - 46:00), particularly the eyes, of La Bête, which echoes the end when La Belle looks into the eyes of her Prince La Bête (82:34 - 82:55), presenting the developing process of the heroine and the endless pursuit of equal identity of both social status and inner recognition in a relationship.

The unequal relationship of La Belle and La Bête is ameliorated, firstly, through the rescue of her life from the enclosure of wolves by La Bête. La Belle chooses to take care of La Bête after his injury caused by her to express her gratefulness to him (48:00 - 49:38). This conversation, though seeming brevity, actually implies that the beast is the ideal man whom La Belle wanted and who has saved her life. The attitude of La Belle towards La Bête has changed gradually, and she begins to treat him as a human being rather than a horrible beast, and he starts to regard her as a friend rather than a servant, in this way, their equality in social status and gender has reached in the final end.

The dream of book-endorsement, that is of obtaining female rights, changes into reality through the conduct of presentation of his library as a gift to La Belle, which is, at the same time, correlating to the words of the bookkeeper that all is supposed to belong to La Belle as she wishes all the time (4:30 - 4:58). Different from the actual realization of her dream by La Bête, the implication of the bookkeeper is an expectation for the unexpected future. Therefore, the feeling of La Belle towards La Bête, who realized her lifelong dream, is an unreasonable yet natural phenomenon under such circumstance as La Bête considers her status the same equal as himself. She sees him from the angle of human, instead of beast, which, in simultaneity, reassuring their sprout in engaging in emotion by the lyrics of servants indicated the possibility of the existence of non-existed things before (55:43 - 55:58).

The first step of realization of La Belle's dream is her release by La Bête from the locked room (65:58 - 66:10), whose inner ideal is the evaluation of himself by the standard of human beings instead of the beast. Their relationship is, in posterity to this conduct, in equality rather than in master-prisoner status. The return of La Belle from the town provides the identification, interdependence and reliance for the realization of her dream and the reversal of magic spell, demonstrating that the equal identity is the prerequisite for the development of a harmonious love relationship. The reconciliability of the opposite relationship between reality and ideality is embodied by the self voluntary return of La Belle, of whom the act is the possible way of rescue La Bête from the beast form and herself from the provincial life, illustrating that the power in femininity can be as strong as that in masculinity. As a consequence, La Bête is, at that time of the final fighting, not an animal but a human being, and the death of Gaston is the reverse one. This, as illustrated above, demonstrates the fundamental importance of a relationship whether it is possessed of equality lies within the inner world that deserving attention of.

The identification of La Bête and La Belle, in posterior to a series of suffrage, presents the correctness of La Bête as the one wanted by La Belle, showing that respect, equality and humanity are the things that La Belle truly desires in her heart. It is magic, as a mediator, that assists them to recognize each other from disguise, which, in the meantime, recovers the whole castle with sunshine (83:45 - 84:33). Magic, as a result, reveals, on one hand, the functionality of equal love in the reconciliation of the fragility in imagination of actual life, namely, the difficulty in obtaining female freedom and equality in patriarchal society.

Chip, from the angle of a child, asks, at the end of the film, her mother whether La Bête and La Belle are going to live happily ever after or not, and the necessity of his sleeping place is in the cupboard or not (84:26 - 84:41). The first question is a demonstration of existing fact that whether different social status and convention of gender inequality affect their life in the future, and the affirmative answer is as a result supposed to illustrate the hope for bright future; while

the second one is out of his own curiosity rather than out of the actual fact, no answer is, consequently, responded there but only with a smile. Magic, in one word, is a fictional existence functioned as an evident sample to the illustration of the fragility and weakness of realizing female equality and freedom in either gender or social status under that social circumstance.

## 5. Conclusion

The thematic exploration within *Beauty and the Beast* extends beyond the confines of a mere romantic narrative, resonating deeply with the principles of feminist narratology. As scrutinized above, the narrative arc unfolds as a symbolic journey depicting the transformation and harmonization of disparate relationships entrenched within a traditional patriarchal milieu. *Beauty and the Beast* transcends its superficial portrayal of love, assuming a deeper resonance as it articulates the multifaceted barriers obstructing female autonomy and agency. In this context, feminist narratology offers a lens through which to analyze the power dynamics at play within the narrative structure.

Love, portrayed as an empowering force, assumes a central role as it catalyzes the transcendence of societal constraints, symbolizing the intrinsic potential for both the humanization of the beast and the actualization of an idealized state through the aesthetics of affection. This interpretation aligns with feminist narratological emphasis on the exploration of gendered subjectivities and the subversion of traditional power dynamics within storytelling. Moreover, the character of La Belle serves as a focal point for examining the intricate dynamics of power, agency, and resistance within the narrative. As an idealized embodiment of femininity, she navigates the constraints of her societal context with resilience and determination, challenging prevailing norms and expectations through her actions and choices. La Belle's journey reflects a nuanced negotiation of patriarchal structures, wherein her agency becomes a catalyst for transformative change.

Furthermore, the symbolic significance of magic within the narrative underscores the complex interplay between fantasy and reality, illusion and truth. Magic functions as a metaphorical device through which the limitations of societal norms are transcended, enabling characters to confront and challenge prevailing power dynamics. However, magic also carries with it a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, reflecting the inherent instability of idealized constructs within a fluid and ever-changing social landscape. This analysis resonates with feminist narratological interrogation of narrative techniques and devices as they relate to the construction of gendered identities and power relations within literary texts.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* offers a rich tapestry of insights into the complexities of gender, power, and agency within a patriarchal society, aligning closely with the principles of feminist narratology. Through its exploration of love, magic, and transformation, the narrative transcends its fairy tale origins to offer a profound meditation on the possibilities for social change and individual empowerment. By engaging critically with the themes and motifs of *Beauty and the Beast* through a feminist narratological lens, scholars and readers can continue to unravel its layers of meaning, offering new perspectives on gender, identity, and social justice within the broader cultural imagination.

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