

CHARACTER ARCHETYPES IN AN ONLINE EDUCATION: THE CASE OF FEMME FATALE

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ABSTRACT

Creative writing courses have flourished in recent years. However, the accuracy of the content of some courses has yet to be examined. Character archetypes are an unavoidable topic in most courses requiring character creation. We found that some online creative courses include characters whose character archetypes are debatable. For example, the Femme Fatale is often considered a character archetype, but some scholars believe it is a stereotype bias. While the use of character archetypes and stereotypes in creative work is a matter of personal freedom, it is inappropriate to educationally disseminate content that is still controversial in the academic community. This study explores the history and reasons for the generalization of the Femme Fatale, the differences between the Femme Fatale and other character archetypes, and derives three reasons why the Femme Fatale is inappropriate as a character archetype in creative work. This study is intended to call attention to the rigor of the content of online creative writing courses.

KEYWORDS

Online Education, Creative Course, Femme Fatal, Archetype, stereotype

1. INTRODUCTION

Creative writing courses have flourished in recent years. Creative Drama, Creative Games courses, etc. Using creative writing as an example, the Association of English Departments (ADE) 2018 reports that creative writing has become an explosive growth area. Enrollment and majors in creative writing are on the rise, and ADE sees significant growth potential in creative writing [1]. In addition to creative writing courses for students, ADE offers a full range of creative writing courses for working professionals. Online creative writing courses were not new even before the coronavirus pandemic. Online courses not only expand learning opportunities at a distance but also offer the flexibility of choosing lecture times that fit one's schedule [2]. We believe that the increase in online authoring courses requires a more rigorous focus on their pedagogical content. Character archetypes are an unavoidable topic in most courses requiring character creation. We have found that some online creative courses include characters whose character archetypes are controversial. Take, for example, Femme Fatale. The archetype of the attractive female villain is the Femme Fatale, a term derived from the French for "serpentine beauty," meaning "deadly woman." The Femme Fatale used feminine tricks of beauty, charm, and sexual seduction to achieve her hidden goals [3]. The Femme Fatale is often considered a character archetype, but some scholars consider it a stereotypical bias. The use of character archetypes and stereotypes in creative work is a matter of personal freedom, but it is

inappropriate to educationally disseminate content that is still controversial in the academic community. This study explores the history and reasons for the generalization of the Femme Fatale, the differences between the Femme Fatale and other character archetypes, and derives three reasons why the Femme Fatale is inappropriate as a character archetype in creative work. This study is intended to call attention to the rigor of the content of online creative writing courses.

2. FEMME FATALE

The Femme Fatale is a woman who leads men to danger, ruin, or death with her seductive charms. The definition of Femme Fatale has only recently been added to the dictionary. However, Femme Fatale existed in most cultures much earlier [5].

Ancient:

Valeria Messalina: third wife of the Roman emperor Claudius. Her reputation for cruelty and licentiousness is etched in history, and Claudius is recorded as a man manipulated by her and unaware of her adulterous acts. She rebelled against the emperor and was executed when her plot was exposed [6]. Some scholars believe that her notoriety stems from political bias, but her works of art and literature carry this reputation into modern times [7].

Daji

According to the history books, Daji was favored by the King of Zhou for her beauty and was the main cause of the downfall of the Shang Dynasty [8]. After the fall of the Shang dynasty, Daji was executed [9]. Some scholars are skeptical about the authenticity of the historical accounts of Daji. This is because there are no records of Daji in Shang dynasty literature, and her image was gradually fulfilled after the Zhou dynasty. Scholars also believe that Daji is a character that reinforces the bad image of the King of Zhou since the criticism of Daji's intervention in politics in the historical texts is consistent with the values of the Zhou dynasty, which was against women's participation in politics [10].

Middle Ages

Eve

Eve is the companion of Adam, created by God. She shared the forbidden fruit with Adam in Genesis,[11] and was expelled from the Garden of Eden for disobedience to God. In the Jewish Apocrypha and some literature, Eve sexually seduces Adam and forces him to eat an apple [11]. However, there is no such depiction in Genesis.

Morgan le Fay: A powerful witch in Arthurian legend. Her character in early Arthurian literature is not described in detail, but she usually appears as a magical savior, protector, and healer [13]. In medieval romance novels, Morgan is usually portrayed as a beautiful and seductive woman. In later works, she attempts to take King Arthur's place through magic and intrigue, including manipulating men. For example, in the works of medieval English author Thomas Malory, Morgan is portrayed as the source of a longstanding threat to the kingdom and eventually reconciles with Arthur; Elizabeth Sklar notes that Morgan is portrayed in her works as a sociopathic personality dominated by ambition, jealousy, and lust [14 Mary Lynn Saul considers this portrayal symbolic of the potential danger of medieval female power run amok [15]. Scholars have argued that Morgan and other characters in Thomas Malory's work are misogynistic [16].

In addition to these examples, scholars have found that certain women were also *Femme Fatales* when depicted by male authors in ancient Egypt. They are lustful but ruthless, and unpredictable, and will use any means to satisfy their ambitions. All of these characters lead to the disintegration of male values or threaten male power [17].

The above examples seem to have been the traditional ideology that has long associated women who use charm with mystery and evil in different cultures [18].

Although the term *Femme Fatale* was first used in the 19th century, scholars such as Stott, Rebecca, and others argue that "*Femme Fatale*" did not appear until the 19th century, as in the example above [19]. The image has appeared in a variety of media throughout the ages.

For example, in the case of Renaissance theater: *The Changeling* (1622), *Arden of Faversham* (1592), and *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), among others [20]. The *Arden of Faversham* is the story of a wife and her low-status lover who repeatedly conspire to murder her husband and have him burned. The author of the play's libretto is unknown, but some scholars believe that Shakespeare collaborated with an anonymous person to write it [22].

For poetry in the Romantic period. The English poet John Keats wrote "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*" in 1819. In this poem, a long-haired faerie with beautiful eyes and a singing voice seduces a knight to sleep, and in his dream, he sees a desolate land. When the knight wakes up, he finds himself trapped there as well. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* inspired many artists, including Frank Dicksee and John William Waterhouse, who created many 19th-century portraits on the theme of *Femme Fatales* [22]. Among them, John William Waterhouse's 1896 painting *Huellas and the Faeries* is one of the masterpieces of oil portraiture on the theme of *Femme Fatale*.

In the case of films from the first half of the 20th century, most *Noir Crime* contains images of *Femme Fatales*. For example, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Woman from Shanghai* (1947), *The Paladin Incident* (1947), and *Please Kill Me!* (1947), among others; *Please Murder Me* is the story of a lawyer who wins the acquittal of a woman accused of murder, discovers that she committed the murder and manipulated him, and devises a plan to bring her to justice.

Although the fate of the *Femme Fatale* in these works is not identical, there are strong similarities in the ideological foundation upon which they are built [22]. They are presented as archetypal beings who seduce or manipulate men in their feminine forms, leading them and those around them to disaster. In most cases, they were eventually punished.

With a general understanding of *Femme Fatales* in various media in various cultures at various times, two questions arise for the researcher.

1. Why do *Femme Fatales* exist in different cultures?
2. Why the number of "*Femme Fatale*" characters increased rapidly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

2.1. Why do *Femme Fatales* Exist in Different Cultures?

Psychological Aspects. By comparing African and American, Western, and Eastern religions, myths, and legends, Carl Jung found that there were many common elements and themes. He considered these to be manifestations of the collective subconscious. The collective subconscious is the deepest and most powerful part of the personality, a genetic tendency that has developed over time as a result of accumulated human experience. These genetic tendencies are known as Jungian archetypes [24]. Jung believed that humans share the same collective instincts and

certain archetypes, regardless of race or cultural circle. For example, archetypal figures: mothers, wise old men, heroes, etc. [25]. The fact that stories from different cultures share similar themes may be explained by the concept of collective subconsciousness [26].

Sociological Aspects. The researcher summarized the embodiment in the works of various *Femme Fatales* through the consideration of:

1. *Femme Fatales* induce men to make mistakes. For example, Eve seduced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit.
2. a *Femme Fatale* who seeks to seize power. For example, Morgan plotted to take over the throne.
3. *Femme Fatales* not conforming to social "female" norms. For example, Valeria Messalina had numerous lovers and plotted to murder her husband, etc.

From the above, we can see that the *Femme Fatale* is represented by focusing on men who are dragged into disaster and symbolizes the destruction of the social values and moral codes of the patriarchal structure.

Early on, the presence of the *Femme Fatale* is a warning. She defines women's social roles in reverse and warns them not to do so. This is why most *Femme Fatales* are usually punished or killed. Men are also warned to stay away from such women [27]. Scholars argue that the emergence of the *Femme Fatale* is a product of and a reflection of the patriarchal structure's concern and anxiety about female subjectivity [28]. This may explain the emergence of the *Femme Fatale*, which was premised on a patriarchal society, even though the period and cultural sphere were different. The birth and early universalization of the *Femme Fatale* could be said to have been a manifestation of misogyny in patriarchal societies.

From a creative aspect. The *Femme Fatale* has the salient characteristic that it is never what it seems. In many cultures, appearances are considered to represent an individual's inner thoughts and actions. For example, an ugly and aging body is a mirror of the distortions of the mind [29]. People subconsciously believe that what is beautiful is good, and when beauty brings disaster, a fascinating dramatic clash ensues. Researchers believe this is one of the reasons for the purported birth of the *Femme Fatale*.

2.2. Why the Number of "Femme Fatale" Characters Increased Rapidly in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries.

Praz Mario argues that *Femme Fatales* became more prolific during periods of social and cultural upheaval[30], while Amy Antonio finds that *Femme Fatales* also increased during the Renaissance and that they share the same characteristics as 20th-century *Femme Fatales*. The increase in *Femme Fatale* roles in both periods, she notes, resulted from the same male concern for the autonomy of women's choices. For example, some Renaissance *Femme Fatales* used their sexuality to gain the independence they desired, such as marrying without their father's or brother's consent or following their own desires to be united with a man. Amy Antonio argues that Elizabeth I and the revision of marriage laws had a significant impact on gender relations in society at the time, increasing strong female characters in Renaissance works [31].

Elizabeth I, also known as "the Virgin Queen,"[32] was a woman of great power. To secure her power, she chose to remain unmarried and childless for the rest of her life. This was because if she named a successor, her throne would be subject to a coup d'état [33]. Such actions overturned the long-established notion of women as objects of passive desire.

In Renaissance theater, researchers have noted that the anxieties associated with the change from arranged marriages to the freedom to choose one's spouse influenced the portrayal of the *Femme Fatale*. Examples include *The Changeling* (1622), *Arden of Faversham* (1592), and *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619).

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, the social paradigm changed again with industrialization and the promotion of gender equality. Scholars believe that the frustration and anxiety these changes caused men contributed to the prevalence of *Femme Fatales* in Noir Crime [34].

Sylvia Harvey notes that the increase in *Femme Fatales* in Noir Crime coincided with an increase in the number of women entering the labor market. She also finds that the family system was beginning to be questioned and that one of the manifestations of *femme fatalism* during this period was to threaten and even destroy traditional family structures [35]. This was because social constraints on women's rights gave married women fewer rights than single women, who could at least claim property [36].

It is the general view of scholars that the cultural construction of the *Femme Fatale* is based on a male preoccupation with the female. This was especially true as women's rights developed and women became more active in the cultural and business world. In other words, men's anxiety about women's existence as powerful subjects led to the construction of the *Femme Fatale* as the malevolent other [37]. The *Femme Fatale* is at odds with traditional patriarchal social values, where, to defend and warn against patriarchal power, an important characteristic of the *Femme Fatale* in Noir Crime is death or other punishment [38].

3. ARCHETYPES AND STEREOTYPES

Character archetypes are also called stock characters. They appear repeatedly in works of different media and have similar characteristics, so they are usually easily recognizable by audiences. Character archetypes have a variety of uses. For example, by grouping certain characters into archetypes, one can study characters of that type more systematically and efficiently. In terms of creativity, using character archetypes can save time [39]. Creators can use character archetypes not only as inspiration but also to help the audience understand the character more quickly and to advance the story more efficiently [40].

Femme Fatales are often considered character archetypes. From an inductive perspective, researchers consider it appropriate. From a creative perspective, however, we believe that *femme fatales* are closer to stereotypes.

Archetypes and stereotypes are easily confused because of overlapping concepts and characteristics. For example, the pervasiveness and immediate cognitive nature of both. Several studies have demonstrated that characters in artworks have a significant impact on people's perceptions of gender relations, race, and cultural communities [41]. When creators use stereotypes as archetypes of characters in their creations, it is likely to lead to the propagation and persistence of various stereotypes [42].

Scholars have summarized some of the differences between archetypes and stereotypes: stereotypical characters are stale and predictable [43]; Dwight V. Swain argues that all characters begin as archetypes [44], and stereotypical characters are not archetypes at all. Archetypes are the raw materials and creative tools at the creator's disposal to build and flesh out the work. Stereotypes, on the other hand, almost always hinder the development of character and are often seen as "bad writing and superficial thinking"[45] and a sign of creative inertia.

To better understand the differences between the two, researchers randomly selected 10 common archetypes and compared them to the Femme Fatale. The Ruler, The Mentor, The Gambler, The bully, The Artist, The Anti-hero, The Innocent, The henchman, and The Trickster. There are some crucial differences from the Femme Fatale. First, none of the above archetypes are defined by gender, whereas the Femme Fatale is defined as female. Second, another characteristic of the Femme Fatale is an attractive appearance, but none of the above archetypes make any special demands on appearance. For example, the trickster is an archetype that appears in the mythologies of various cultures. They take pleasure in jokingly breaking rules and challenging traditional behavior [46]. In contrast to the Femme Fatale, whose gender and appearance are fixed, tricksters often exhibit gender and appearance diversity. In Norwegian mythology, Loki, the son of Laufey, once transformed into a mare and gave birth to an eight-legged horse [47].

In the course of our research, we also discovered the archetype of The Seducer/Seductress, which is defined as a character who seduces others to achieve his or her own ends and gives them what they want. The Femme Fatale fits this definition. At the same time, the Seducer does not question gender or appearance. Unlike the Femme Fatale, the seducer's enticement may or may not be sexual [48]. Thus, there is room for character development without tying the character too tightly. Therefore, we believe that the "seducer" is the best substitute for the Femme Fatale as an archetype in creation. Typical "seducers" include Mephistophelean from Goethe's Faust, Don Juan, and Circe.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The birth and early spread of the Femme Fatale was a manifestation of misogyny in a patriarchal society. Their cultural construction was based on men's preoccupation with women, and their increase was the result of anxiety about the shifting values of traditional patriarchal society. This preoccupation and anxiety led to the construction of the Femme Fatale as the malevolent other [49].

Femme Fatales have become more complex in character as history has progressed, but early on, and for a long time, Femme Fatales were inseparable from misogyny, prejudice, and stereotypes. This is reflected in the statement of the author of Catwoman, a prime example of a Femme Fatale:

"I felt that women were feline creatures and men were more like dogs. While dogs are faithful and friendly, cats are cool, detached, and unreliable...You always need to keep women at arm's length. We don't want anyone taking over our souls, and women have a habit of doing that." [50]

To summarize this research, there are three reasons why the Femme Fatale is inappropriate as a character archetype in a creative context.

1. the researcher compared the Femme Fatale with other character archetypes. The results showed that most archetypes are not gender or appearance specific like the Femme Fatale.
2. the Femme Fatale can be replaced by "The Seducer/Seductress".
3. the birth and early generalization of the Femme Fatale is a manifestation of misogyny in patriarchal societies, and for a long time, the Femme Fatale was inseparable from prejudices and stereotypes about gender.

In sum, Femme Fatales is not an appropriate archetype in a creative context. While the use of character archetypes and stereotypes in creative work is a matter of personal freedom, it is inappropriate to disseminate in education content that is still controversial in the academic community, especially when that content is not explicitly labeled as controversial. Researchers

will continue to focus on controversial content in online creative writing courses and will continue to call attention to the rigor of online educational content.

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