

# The Unknown Woman's Sense of Inferiority in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*

FAN Mengwei

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The unknown woman in *Letter From an Unknown Woman* written by Austrian writer Stefan Zweig is a silent female image. Personally it is the inferiority feeling that stops her to confess her love towards the writer R. and leads to her tragic life. This paper aims to analyze the unknown's woman from three aspects including signs, causes, and effects of her inferiority feeling. Readers can learn more about the silent woman and have a better understanding of the novel through her inferiority feelings.

**Keywords:** the unknown woman, sense of inferiority

## Introduction

*Letter From an Unknown Woman*, a novella written by Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, is translated from German by Anthea Bell. Published in 1922, it tells a story of a famous author who receives a letter from an unknown woman. The writer R. gets a glimpse of her life story and her unannounced, unnoticed love towards him from this unexpected letter. It is popular due to the silent love story between the unknown woman and the writer R.. At first, the novella did not attract a lot of attention in academic circles in China until the film of the same name adapted from this novel showed in 2005. More critics including both Chinese and western scholars are quite interested in the analysis of adapted films and their directors.

Some researches about the analysis of Stefan Zweig and the translation of the novella are very insightful, such as Sally Connolly and Emily Ridge. Recent years much attention has been paid to the unknown woman in the novella from research perspectives like feminism, narratology, and psychoanalysis. For example, Yu Ying points out that absence of father has a negative effect on the unknown woman's personality according to Freud's theory. As a result, she chose to lead a "self-reclusive" life and got caught up in the "delusion" (2007, p. 97). Gaylyn Studlar discusses her masochistic performance from the perspective of feminism (1994, p. 48). Yang Dongying and Qin Xuefeng pay casts an eye on the expression of feminist thoughts in this novella in their essay. They hold the opinion that the unknown woman's obsessive love is passionate and the pursuit of this love persistently shows female freedom and desire. The form of letter is also a special way for women to express their feelings and thoughts (2013, p. 82). Wang Siyu also discusses the deep reasons hiding behind her amazing affection to the writer (2020, p. 249). Its letter form and narrative techniques draw many critics' attention, such as Steyerl Hito, Cao Xueqing. However, few critics analyze the unknown woman based on her

---

FAN Mengwei, Master degree, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

sense of inferiority. In my view, her inferiority feelings play an important role in her short life and it deserves more attention.

### **Signs of the Unknown Woman's Sense of Inferiority**

#### **Behaviors Reflecting the Unknown Woman's Inferiority Feeling**

Many behaviors in the letter reflect the unknown woman's sense of inferiority obviously and vividly. "I kissed the door handle that your hand had touched; I stole a cigarette end that you had dropped before coming into the building, and it was sacred to me because your lips had touched it..." writes the author (Zweig, 2013, p. 13). For a little girl, she does not have a clear understanding of love but she cherishes everything about the writer R.. A cigarette end is sacred to her just because of the writer. These foolish behaviors show her sense of inferiority. Another detail description is that the little girl's old school pinafore has a patch and she always uses her schoolbag to cover it every time when she returns home for fear that the writer R. despises her (Zweig, 2013, p. 13). The unknown woman is "an indifferent pupil" (Zweig, 2013, p. 12), and she does not perform well at school before the writer moving into the building. However, she begins to study hard at school, read countless books every night, and try to play piano after she occasionally learns that the writer R. loves reading and music. These behaviors all show her inferiority feelings towards the writer R..

#### **Mental Activities Reflecting the Unknown Woman's Inferiority Feeling**

Apart from behaviors, Stefan Zweig also focuses on describing mental activities of the unknown woman for the writer R. to demonstrate her inferiority feelings. The unknown woman says "I beg you" (Zweig, 2013, p. 7) to persuade the writer R. to finish reading her letter. Before the writer moves into the building, she mentions that her life is "dead and pointless" (Zweig, 2013, p. 13). It is the writer that begins her meaningful life and colourful world. The writer means everything to her. Her complicated inner struggle before leaving Vienna when hearing the remove news leaves deep impression on readers. Although the writer R. lies to her, abandons her, and never recognizes her when meeting her again and again, the unknown woman does not blame him at all. She accuses only God who brings misfortune and torment to her. Never does she rise against the writer in anger (Zweig, 2013, p. 26). In her view, she does not have right and quality to blame him no matter what he does. She always calls the writer "my beloved" (Zweig, 2013, p. 10). What's more, there are many words or sentences in this letter, such as "I was your slave" (Zweig, 2013, p. 11), "slavishly with such dog-like devotion" (Zweig, 2013, p. 11), and "fall at your feet and beg you to keep me as a maidservant, a slave" (Zweig, 2013, p. 15) showing her inferiority feelings as well.

### **Causes of the Unknown Woman's Sense of Inferiority**

#### **Lack of Concern From Poor Family**

As we all know, childhood plays an important role in one's life which affects and even determines one's destiny especially "unhappy experiences in childhood" (Adler, 2014, p. 24). The unknown woman was born in a poor family, and his father passed away when she was very young. The absence of paternal love has caused a negative effect on her growth. Her mother also does not pay much attention on her who always wears mourning with eternal sad expression and anxious pensioner's worries. In some degree, her mother is a total "stranger" to her (Zweig, 2013, p. 12). As a teenage girl, she cannot get much care from her parents and gradually she becomes sensitive and feels inferior. But the writer R. who suddenly comes into her life is a gentle, kind, and

tender man. Under this circumstance, she falls in love with the man obsessively. The lack of concern and care from parents causes her sense of inferiority and she is eager to gain attention from the man.

Poor family situation is another reason that can explain her sense of inferiority. In this letter the unknown woman mentions words “impoverished” (Zweig, 2013, p. 7) and “poor” (Zweig, 2013, p. 28) several times which demonstrates a fact that she feels inferior about her poverty family. What’s more, she is surprised at his fancy furniture and luxurious decorations. She only has several cheap books but the writer has plentiful books in languages. Differences in economic conditions increase her inferiority feelings.

### **Prostitute Identity**

Prostitute identity is another major reason resulting in her inferiority feeling. In order to offer her son a comfortable and cheerful life of the upper classes, the unknown woman has to “sold” (Zweig, 2013, p. 28) herself. She loves the writer obsessively and cannot put up with his son to live in poverty. As a result, she chooses to find rich lovers and rich friends by virtue of her beauty. It is well known that prostitute is not acceptable in public while the man is a famous writer, a respected occupation. Even though both of them can kill time at the same theatre, at same concerts, or in the Prater, the huge difference of social identity brings about inequality in social status and aggravates her inferiority feelings. This kind of feelings stop her to express her passionate love to the writer R.. The reason why she refuses to tell him her identity and persists in being recognized by him is her deep inferiority feeling. She wants to prove that she is special to the writer R. even though he has close relationship with many beautiful women.

### **Isolation From Others**

Adler believes that the loss of “fellow-feeling and social interest” can also cause inferiority feelings (2014, p. 19). People are born with social interests which refers to a kind of emotion for all members of society for an individual, in other words, a kind of social attitude. The unknown woman does not have any close friends from childhood to adulthood. She always isolates herself from others. When she moves to Innsbruck, her mother wants to atone for her indifference and coldness; young people want to make friends with the newcomer; and her stepfather is kind to her and considers her as his own daughter. The unknown woman just refuses all of them. She does not want to be happy when living in a world without the writer. What she really wants to do is that she abandons herself to the illusion about the writer R. and tortures herself. Isolation from others for a long time is easy to make one unsociable and solitary and finally intensifies one’s inferiority feeling towards surroundings.

### **Effects of the Unknown Woman’s Sense of Inferiority**

The unknown woman’s sense of inferiority stops her from expressing her passionate love to the writer so as to the woman never being recognized by him. After reading this letter, the writer only has some kind of confused and vague memory about the woman and does not really remember who she is. Only empty blue vase reminds him her existence. She is eager to be recognized by the writer in order to prove her speciality in his mind which also attributes to her deep inferiority feelings. In addition, her inferiority feeling compels her to pay so much attention on her son that the sudden death of her child brings a fatal blow to her and causes collapse of life belief. It seems that she has transferred her love of the writer R. to the love of her son. Her son has become her spiritual support and she considers him as part of her life. She cannot accept his child’s death and now she does not know how to deal with the relationship between herself and the writer R.. The only link between them is the child but the link will disappear forever. Therefore, the unknown woman collapses.

## Conclusions

The unknown woman is poor woman. Her rooted inferiority feeling leads to her tragic and pathetic life. Many critics and readers are attracted by her obsessive love for the writer R. while some of them lose sight of her deep inferiority feeling. Stefan Zweig focuses on many detail descriptions reflecting her sense of inferiority in this novella. I believe that if a confident and independent woman falls in love with the writer R., she at least has a better ending. This paper mainly discusses signs of the unknown woman's sense of inferiority including her behaviors and mental activities, three reasons resulting in her inferiority feeling and effects of her sense of inferiority. Through analyzing the unknown woman from these three aspects, readers can understand the poor woman better and it contributes to text analysis.

## References

- Adler, A. (2014). *What life could mean to you*. London: Business and Leadership Publishing.
- Connolly, S. (2000). Letter from an unknown woman (book review). *The Times Literary Supplement*, 50(5095), 27.
- Ridge, E. (2019). Beware of pity: Stefan Zweig and the fate of narrative empathy under surveillance. *Novel*, 52(2), 240-260.
- Steyerl, H. (2011). Epistolary affect and romance scams: Letter from an unknown woman. *October*, 138, 57-69.
- Studlar, G. (1994). Masochistic performance and female subjectivity in "Letter from an unknown woman". *Cinema Journal*, 33(3), 35-57. doi:10.2307/1225587
- Wang, S. Y. (2020). Interpretation of the heroine in *Letter from an unknown woman* with Freud's psychoanalytic theories. *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics*, 6(1), 249.
- Yang, D. Y., & Qin, X. F. (2013). *Letter from an unknown woman* from perspective of feminism. *Film Comment*, (10), 82-83.
- Yu, Y. (2007). Influence on woman's character due to "lack of father" from the perspective of psychoanalysis—interpreting *Letter from an unknown woman* by Zweig, Stefan. *Film Comment*, (15), 97-98.
- Zweig, S. (2013). *Letter from an unknown woman and other stories*. London: Pushkin Press.