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# SHANNON HALE'S *THE GOOSE GIRL*: SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND THE MIRROR OF SOCIETY

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**ABSTRACT**

Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* (2003) is a modern fantasy based on the *Grimm's fairy tale* of the same name. Although the novel presents the magical story of a princess who loses her identity and ultimately regains her rightful place, it also significantly portrays social hierarchy and the unequal distribution of power within society. This article views *The Goose Girl* as a mirror of society, focusing specifically on class, social status, gender, authority, identity, privilege, and social mobility.

This study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology based on close textual reading. The theoretical framework incorporates Jean-François Lyotard's concepts regarding postmodernism and the questioning of 'grand narratives,' as well as Jack Zipes's perspective on viewing fairy tales as culturally and socially constructed narratives. Michel Foucault's concepts of power and hierarchical surveillance, along with selected feminist perspectives, serve as supplementary approaches.

The study demonstrates that Hale's retelling presents the traditional social hierarchies found in fairy tales in a new light. It values marginalized voices, the hard work of ordinary people, friendship, and individual agency. In *The Goose Girl*, the use of fantasy and retelling serves not merely as entertainment but also to highlight social inequalities and challenge rigid notions regarding identity, status, authority, and social belonging.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Traditional societies have been depicted in fairy tales where an individual's social position appears clearly defined. Kings, queens, princes, princesses, servants, peasants, and social outcasts typically occupy distinct places within the social order. Such stories often establish a social hierarchy based on birth, wealth, beauty, marriage, and political authority. A princess belongs in the palace, whereas a servant or attendant belongs to the lower stratum of society. However, contemporary retellings often challenge these fixed social divisions and attempt to understand the relationship between identity and social status in a new light.

Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl*, published in 2003, is a significant modern retelling of a *Grimm's fairy tale*. It is the first novel in Hale's Books of Bayern series. The novel's protagonist is Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, commonly known as Ani. She is the Crown Princess of Kildenree. She is sent to Bayern to marry its Crown Prince, but her lady-in-waiting, Selia, betrays her and attempts to usurp Ani's identity and royal position. Forced to flee, Ani eventually becomes a goose girl, working among commoners while keeping her royal identity hidden. Gradually, she gains self-confidence, recognizes the value of her unique abilities, forms bonds with people outside the royal sphere, and ultimately moves towards reclaiming her identity and social standing.

Therefore, this article views *The Goose Girl* as a literary mirror of society. The central research question of this study is:

**CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION:**

How does Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* depict and question social hierarchies through the representation of class, gender, identity, power, and social status?

The article argues that Hale's retelling adds complexity to traditional social hierarchies. It demonstrates that a person's worth cannot be determined solely by their birth or social status. At the same time, the novel does not completely abolish social hierarchy; instead, it highlights its limitations and suggests that true leadership should be rooted not merely in authority or high rank, but in responsibility, understanding, relationships, and personal growth.

**METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study employs qualitative, analytical, descriptive, and comparative methods. The primary text for this study is Shannon Hale's novel *The Goose Girl* (2003). The research is primarily based on a close textual reading of the novel, focusing specifically on characters, social relations, narrative situations, power structures, identity, class distinctions, and transformations within the traditional fairy-tale framework. This study utilizes two interconnected theoretical perspectives:

- Postmodernism: Theory of Fairy-tale Retelling
- Theory of Power and Gender

Drawing on the above theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to understand how the novel portrays

social relations, power dynamics, gender roles, identity, and social classes. Additionally, Shannon Hale reimagines traditional fairy tales, using them to reflect social realities.

**POSTMODERNISM**

The idea of postmodernism as defined by Jean-François Lyotard is especially important for this study. Lyotard defined the postmodern condition as incredulity toward grand or universal narratives. His theory challenges narratives that claim to be the single, absolute story of truth

Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* complicates the traditional fairy-tale assumption that social identity is naturally determined. A princess can be a maid, a maid can pose as a princess, and who you are in society can be determined by who recognizes you. The novel thus separates identity from external appearance and social status. The novel proves that a person's real identity is not based solely on his outward appearance, dress, or social status. However, instead, identity may be a fluid concept created by society.

**FAIRY-TALE RETELLING**

Understanding the ideological and cultural elements of fairy tales requires familiarity with Jack Zipes' research. Zipes analyzes fairy tales in relation to socialization, oppression, dominance, and cultural values. He also emphasizes how fairy tales evolve and adapt to a range of social and cultural settings.

Because of this, Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* modifies the traditional narrative rather than merely recounting the Grimm story. Hale gives Ani's character more psychological depth and expands the princess's social circle. The book depicts movement between the palace, the forest, the village, and the royal court, allowing various social classes and groups to shine.

**POWER AND GENDER**

For this study, Michel Foucault's analysis of power offers a useful viewpoint. According to Foucault, hierarchical relationships, observation, classification, discipline, and direct physical force are all ways that power functions. This viewpoint helps explain how Ani's behavior is shaped by social expectations and how her identity is controlled. Gender analysis is also aided by feminist criticism, which looks at how women are positioned within marriage, family, political power, and authority structures.

**SOCIAL HIERARCHY AS A MIRROR OF SOCIETY**

**PALACE LIFE'S ORGANIZATION AND PRIVILEGE**

As the Crown Princess of Kildenree, Ani is at the top of the social scale at the start of the book. Because of her position, she has access to amenities and privileges that regular people do not. Her royal birth, her family, political aspirations, and her future as queen are all intrinsically linked to her identity.

Her royal status, however, does not always confer emotional autonomy. She is supposed to behave in a way that complies with royal standards. Her personal desires are subordinated to the kingdom's interests, and her marriage is arranged for political reasons.

This presents a major paradox. On the one hand, social privilege provides material security and power, but it can also place limitations on an identity.

Ani has advantages as a princess, but she is also under authority. Because of this, hierarchy is portrayed in the book as a complex system rather than merely a simple separation between the strong and the weak.

**THE TRANSFORMATION FROM PRINCESS TO GOOSE GIRL**

When Ani loses her royal identity and becomes a goose girl, the novel's most important depiction of social hierarchy occurs.

This metamorphosis changes her social status almost entirely. The person who was meant to be a queen now lives among regular people and works with animals. The contrast between the princess and the goose girl highlights the dynamics of social standing. Importantly, Ani's birth, memories, intelligence, emotions, and skills do not change significantly on the inside. The only thing that shifts is how society views her.

By doing this, Hale raises an important question :

What qualities—birth, appearance, social acceptance, or inner self—make someone a princess?

Ani's story shows how external markers influence social identity to some degree. How a person is categorized by society depends on their attire, occupation, language, place of residence, and social recognition.

The royal princess becomes socially invisible when she plays the part of a goose girl. Through this experience, he has the chance to understand the people who live outside the palace.

**EXPLORING CLASS AND MARGINALIZED PEOPLE**

Ani's life among the goose-tenders and forest people challenges her earlier understanding of class. Scholarly discussions of the novel highlight the significant idea that Ani gradually recognizes loyalty, friendship, and goodness in people who are not considered part of the highest social class.

This is significant because the novel subverts traditional notions of social worth. The palace is associated with political authority, wealth, and status, yet betrayal occurs within that very privileged environment. Selia and others involved in the royal journey conspire to strip Ani of her position.

In contrast, Ani finds genuine friendship among people of lower social status. Thus, Hale decouples moral value from social rank; a person's social position does not automatically determine their character. The novel's movement between the palace and the countryside becomes a journey between different social worlds. Ani learns that those deemed socially inferior possess knowledge, loyalty, courage, and emotional strength.

**SELIA AND THE WANT TO BECOME MORE SOCIAL**

Selia provides another significant aspect of social hierarchy. She was not born as the Crown Princess, but she grew up in proximity to the royal family. She was close to the authorities and fostered an understanding of social differences.

The novel highlights the significance of social status through her attempt to replace Ani. Selia wants more than just Ani's identity; she also wants the status, power, and recognition, and the benefits associated with that identity. Thus, the disagreement between Ani and Selia can be interpreted as a social force. Selia's capacity to act as a princess shows how social identity is partially theatrical. She uses the signs to persuade people that Ani is connected to the nobility.

As a result, the conflict highlights an instability at the core of the social hierarchy: if a person can

effectively adopt a different social identity, then society's acknowledgment of status becomes exposed. Thus, Hale challenges the notion that hierarchy is entirely innate or unchangeable.

**THE POLITICS OF GENDER AND MARRIAGE**

Gender is a significant element of the social hierarchy in *The Goose Girl*. Ani's journey to Bayern is linked to marriage. Initially, her movement is not based on her own choice but rather on political and dynastic expectations. Marriage becomes a means of maintaining relationships and political stability between kingdoms. Consequently, as a princess, Ani is both a political subject and a political resource.

This aspect reflects traditional patriarchal structures, where a woman's identity is often tied to family, marriage, and male authority.

However, Hale complicates this pattern by taking Ani on a journey of personal development. Ani gradually becomes capable of making decisions, forming relationships, understanding her own abilities, and acting according to her own judgment. Hale has stated that she deliberately did not make Ani a conventional sword-wielding heroine. Instead, Ani develops a different kind of strength. This is significant for a feminist reading, as the novel does not suggest that female empowerment requires women to emulate traditionally masculine forms of power. Ani's strength develops through communication, emotional growth, courage, relationships, and self-knowledge.

**LANGUAGE, VOICE, AND SOCIAL POWER**

In the novel, language is deeply intertwined with power. Initially, Ani struggles to communicate with people, whereas she possesses a unique ability to communicate with animals and nature. In contrast, her mother can speak with people.

This contrast between human language and animal communication illustrates different forms of knowledge. Finding and using her voice becomes crucial in Ani's journey. Although she initially becomes socially powerless after losing her royal status, her evolving communication skills become a vital source of strength.

The novel suggests that power is not limited to political authority; knowledge, communication, friendship, emotional intelligence, and self-expression can also constitute forms of power.

This aspect contributes to a critique of conventional hierarchies. The palace does not hold a monopoly on knowledge, nor are socially marginalized people devoid of it.

**SOCIAL RECOGNITION AND IDENTITY**

Identity serves as the central link between social hierarchy and the "mirror of society."

Even after becoming a "goose girl," Ani remains Ani, yet society does not recognize her as a princess. Consequently, her social identity shifts, even though her personal identity remains intact.

This distinction between internal identity and external recognition is crucial.

Hale's novel demonstrates that various factors shape identity:

* family and birth
* social recognition
* occupation
* clothing and appearance
* language
* relationships

* memory
* personal choices

Ani's experience illustrates that identity can be lost, concealed, performed, and reclaimed.Thus, the novel challenges the simplistic notion that identity is entirely determined by birth.

**POWER AND SURVEILLANCE**

The royal world of *The Goose Girl* can also be understood through Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. According to Foucault, power can operate through observation and the regulation of behavior.

Ani's royal identity subjects her to constant expectations; she must conduct herself as a princess, fulfill political duties, and conform to social norms. When she becomes a goose girl, the nature of surveillance changes. She is compelled to conceal her identity, as revealing it could put her in danger. Her new social position entails a different form of discipline: she must learn the behavior expected of a servant while simultaneously concealing her true identity as a princess. This dual identity illustrates how social systems regulate individuals by establishing expectations regarding appropriate behavior.

**AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL WORLD AND FOREST**

The forest holds a significant symbolic position in the novel. While the palace represents established authority, the forest becomes a place where Ani encounters people and forms of knowledge beyond the conventional royal structure. The forest dwellers occupy a lower rung of the conventional hierarchy, yet Ani recognizes qualities in them that are not necessarily present in the royal court.

Thus, the forest becomes an alternative social space. Ani's development outside the palace suggests that knowledge is not the exclusive domain of institutions of authority; she learns through experience, friendship, work, nature, and hardship. Her movement from the palace to the forest—and back to political society—offers her the opportunity to compare different forms of social organization.

**SOCIAL CRITICISM OF FAIRY TALE RETELLING**

Hale's use of the Grimm fairy tale is significant because the retelling itself becomes a form of social reinterpretation. The traditional story provides the basic narrative pattern in which a princess loses her identity and ultimately regains it. Hale expands upon this pattern, taking Ani on a complex internal journey.

The publisher presents the novel as a retelling of the *Grimm's fairy tale*, in which Ani must become a "goose girl" before she can become a queen. This transformation is crucial. Ani does not simply return to the palace unchanged; her experience as a goose girl alters her understanding of people, friendship, work, authority, and responsibility.

In this way, the retelling transforms the meaning inherent in the original fairy-tale structure. Zipes's approach to fairy tales is relevant here, as these tales often contain underlying social and ideological assumptions that can be transformed through later adaptations. Hale's retelling creates a dialogue between the traditional fairy tale and contemporary concerns—such as identity, gender, power, class, and agency.

**THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND LEADERSHIP**

The novel also raises the question of what qualities are required for an individual to become a leader. Ani is destined by birth to become queen, yet her experiences teach her that birth alone is not enough for leadership.

She experiences vulnerability, displacement, poverty, manual labor, friendship, discrimination, and social exclusion. These experiences deepen her understanding of society. Thus, the novel presents leadership not merely as inherited authority, but as a quality rooted in responsibility and understanding. Ani's journey can be viewed as a transition from inherited status to earned maturity. This does not mean the novel completely rejects monarchy or hierarchy. Instead, it questions who should hold authority and what qualities are essential for meaningful leadership.

***THE GOOSE GIRL* AS A MIRROR OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

The social hierarchy depicted in the novel can be linked to broader social realities. Even in modern societies, distinctions are made between people based on wealth, occupation, education, gender, family background, political influence, and social recognition.

The novel's central transformation remains relevant today because people are often judged based on their external appearance and social position. A wealthy individual might be considered more important, while someone in a low-status occupation might be overlooked, even if they possess valuable knowledge and abilities. By placing the princess in a socially marginal position, Hale's narrative challenges such perceptions.

The title *The Goose Girl* also becomes significant in this context; it shifts the focus away from the royal identity toward the seemingly ordinary identity imposed upon Ani.

Consequently, the book serves as a mirror. It depicts a society in which people are often classified by status, but it also raises the question of whether this classification accurately reflects human value.

**CONCLUSION**

Shannon Hale's novel *The Goose Girl* can be read as one of the most significant contemporary retellings of a fairy tale, illustrating how social structures influence people's lives, opportunities, relationships, and their sense of acceptance within society. Ani's transformation from Crown Princess to goose girl—and the eventual reclamation of her royal identity and status—demonstrates that social status is not fixed. Hale challenges the notion that birth, wealth, profession, and political authority should determine a person's worth. In the novel, social status is presented as a social construct rather than an inherent measure of human ability or value.

This study has identified several interconnected social divisions within the novel: royalty and commoners, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, men and women, and those accepted by society versus those relegated to the margins. These divisions influence who has the right to speak, from whom obedience is expected, who receives protection, and who is denied opportunities. The royal court represents a world where inherited status confers authority and privilege, whereas the lives of

servants, laborers, and common people reflect the limitations associated with lower social standing. In this way, Hale connects individual experiences to broader social structures of class and power.

Ani's transformation most clearly illustrates these social disparities. As a princess, she enjoys wealth, status, and security, yet her position is also governed by political expectations and interests tied to the continuation of the lineage. Her proposed marriage demonstrates that even members of the ruling class can be subject to institutional and familial authority. When Ani becomes a goose girl, she loses her wealth, security, social identity, and public influence. She is treated differently because her social status has changed, even though her abilities and fundamental human qualities remain the same. This contrast highlights the extent to which society equates human worth with status and social identity.

Living among common people broadens Ani's understanding of social inequality. As a goose girl, Ani encounters laborers, soldiers, servants, and other ordinary members of society whose lives are vastly different from those in the royal court. Her journey across these diverse social worlds offers an opportunity to illustrate the distinctions between privilege and insecurity, authority and dependency. Thus, the novel draws attention to the unequal distribution of honor, security, opportunities, and political influence.

Gender is also a significant aspect of the novel's social critique. Ani's situation is shaped by expectations surrounding marriage, obedience, womanhood, and political duties. However, Hale does not define female strength solely in terms of physical power. Ani develops self-confidence through communication, courage, empathy, friendship, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making. Her growth challenges traditional notions of womanhood and demonstrates that meaningful empowerment can be achieved not only through physical strength but also through other human qualities.

The novel also illustrates that social status relies heavily on the identity ascribed by others. When Ani is recognized as a princess, she is treated one way, yet when she is perceived as a servant, she is treated quite differently. This contrast highlights how labels and social expectations influence the treatment individuals receive. Thus, wealth and formal authority are not the only components of this system; social identity, prestige, and others' perceptions also play a role in maintaining social divisions.

From a postmodern perspective, *The Goose Girl* challenges fixed categories and established notions of authority. The boundaries between ruler and subject, the privileged and the marginalized, and the powerful and the powerless are portrayed as fluid and unstable within the novel. Jack Zipes's theory regarding the transformation of fairy tales helps us understand how Hale reimagines the traditional fairy tale and, through it, highlights issues such as class, gender, power, inequality, and individual agency. Foucault's ideas on power and observation also aid in understanding the roles of authority, societal expectations, surveillance, and recognition.

The central finding of this study is that *The Goose Girl* serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the unequal distribution of status, authority, privilege, and recognition, while simultaneously questioning the underlying assumptions behind these disparities. The novel does not merely present different social

classes; it demonstrates how social standing shapes people's freedom, behavior, opportunities, and relationships. Ani's journeys across various social strata illuminate these differences and provide Hale with the opportunity to examine them critically.

Ultimately, *The Goose Girl* does not simply replace one social order with another. Instead, it questions the principles upon which status and authority are assigned to people. By placing a princess in the role of a servant and allowing her to experience society from the bottom up, Hale inverts the traditional power dynamic and elevates the experiences of the marginalized. Thus, fantasy becomes a tool for examining actual social structures. Acting as a mirror of society, *The Goose Girl* reflects class and gender inequalities while highlighting the importance of courage, empathy, responsibility, and genuine human acceptance.

## SCOPE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The present article is primarily limited to *The Goose Girl*. In the future, this study could be extended to include other novels by Shannon Hale, particularly *Princess Academy, Princess Academy: Palace of Stone, and Princess Academy: The Forgotten Sisters*. A comparative study could examine how Hale portrays themes such as education, social class, gender, leadership, female agency, and social justice in these novels.

Future research could also involve a more detailed comparison between Hale's retelling in *The Goose Girl* and the Brothers Grimm's original version. Furthermore, other potential areas of study might include a psychoanalytic interpretation of Ani's identity development, a feminist perspective on female agency, an analysis of disciplinary power based on Foucault's theories, and comparative studies of modern fairy-tale retellings.

Ultimately, *The Goose Girl* demonstrates that fantasy can serve as an effective medium for examining real-world social structures. By placing a princess among ordinary people, Hale transforms a familiar fairy-tale twist into an exploration of society. Through this, she encourages readers to reconsider the interrelationships between social status, identity, power, and human worth.

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