

## **Degree Project**

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### **Female Beauty and the Distribution of Power in *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman**

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## **Introduction**

*The Princess Bride* is an unconventional romance fantasy novel written by William Goldman. The novel is a combination of two genres that can be described as vastly different. Anna Faktorovich summarises the functions of a romance novel by describing the nature of repetitiveness of the genre. She argues that this is more noticeable in the romance genre since “there is less going on with the characters and the setting. The suspense is sex-based, rather than death-based, as readers anticipate the consummation or positive development of a sexual relationship between the hero and heroine” (Faktorovich 113). Thus, the genre itself can be read as quite predictable. The function of a fantasy novel, on the other hand, is broader. The transition between fantasy, science fiction, and horror can be difficult to identify. Faktorovich proclaims that these three types of literature are forms of speculative fiction. Furthermore, she states that fantasy is the opposite of horror since it occupies different ends of the same spectrum. “In theory, fantasy is the other side of horror, similar to the distinction between utopia and dystopia. Utopia is supposed to be an idealized imagined society [. . .]” (Faktorovich 45). Simply put, the typical fantasy hero lives in an idealised world and society while he strives to overcome any monstrous peril that threatens the tranquility of his utopian society. These different explanations of the romance and fantasy genres suggest that there is one particularly identifiable distinction between them. Namely, that of the romance genre’s predictability and the fantasy genre’s unpredictability. Goldman’s novel is an interfusion of these two combined genres, thus, it is positioned in the borderland of consistency and instability.

In true postmodern spirit Goldman intervenes in his own story acting as the storyteller and explorer of his own novel constantly searching for the next

chapter and scene. Thus, he makes use of the postmodern techniques of metafiction and frame-breaking while at the same time adapting the concepts to fit his own literary aspirations. He credits a fictional writer named S. Morgenstern to have written *The Princess Bride* after hearing the legends from the, in reality fictional, country of Florin; humbly adding that he himself is a mere re-teller of Morgenstern's work, since he as a child loved the story. This claim might not seem peculiar at first, but Morgenstern is in fact Goldman himself, having created an external persona to relate his work to, and so the line between his fiction, the reality in his fiction, and reality itself becomes blurred. By bending the expected rules of the genre and developing an alternative reality in the novel where the country and inhabitants of the author's imagination are set in the context of our own reality, Goldman is offering a new perspective and understanding of what a romance fantasy novel can be.

Goldman's use of humour, parody and satire in his novel challenges the reader to see not only what is presented, but how it is presented. The concepts of humour, satire and parody are somewhat hard to distinguish. Humour can be viewed as the general umbrella term that incorporates both satire and parody, which on their part are harder to truly separate and are often intertwined when discussed in literature. This essay will primarily focus on the concepts' actual functions as thought provokers and tools for change and empowerment of female characters in the novel. Therefore, satire is the primarily used term in this essay.

The power of satire and humour in literature has been discussed before. James E. Caron states that "satire is the most public of comic modes, always part of the public sphere and conversation within the body of politics, it is the comic mode most involved with civic issues and so its most likely to have extratextual

references to current social and political events” (*Satire Today* 6). This suggests that satire is a powerful tool for writers wishing to critique or trigger critical thinking in their own society. World-renowned authors such as, George Orwell and Jonathan Swift adapted the approach when they wished to be a voice of social commentary in their own societies. Both of these authors optimised their satirical commentary by writing stories of fiction that moved beyond the plausible and allowed their readers to focus on what is being satirised, rather than on what is physically probable or real. In fact, Caron writes that postmodern satire does not even claim that reality or truth exists. Instead it focuses on what to do with the ”degenerative satire’s exposure of the problematic, maybe impossible, nature of an universal Truth [. . .] Truth still matters, but mainly in the form of reverse discourses, maybe in particular within comic inversions of racial and gender stereotypes” (*The Quantum* 174), degenerative satire being satire that aims to undermine the hierarchy of accepted values. Thus, the focus is not on what is real or true, but rather on what the idea of truth does to the people who are being structurally oppressed. This approach of reaching beyond the possible and what is true, would seem to make Fantasy literature, with its proclaimed unpredictability, a particularly accessible venue for satirical writers. These types of satirical attributes can be seen when examining Goldman’s writings in *The Princess Bride*. His humorous reasonings and satirical questioning of societal and literary norms regarding women and their abilities and capabilities allow his readers to reflect on the concept of truth.

*The Princess Bride* has often been referred to as a classic since its publication in 1973. The later film adaption in 1987, contributed profoundly to the cult following that has spread worldwide. Even so, no research has been written on the actual novel. Richard Henry and Deborah F. Rossen-Knill argue, in their article

about the film adaption with a screenplay by Goldman himself, that Goldman as a screenwriter “uses parody to simultaneously reject and reaffirm the values of fairy tale True Love” (43). This handling and questioning of accepted truths regarding true love can easily be compared to Goldman’s questioning and handling of the accepted truth of female beauty in the novel.

The portrayal of women and their attributes such as looks, and abilities has often been problematised and discussed. Postmodern feminism is an approach to feminist theory that incorporates post-structuralist and postmodern theory. In so doing, postmodern feminist theory emphasises the importance of language, and argues that our whole reality including sex and gender is a product of it. Judith Butler highlights this idea by writing that:

There is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term [ . . . ]. (Butler 3)

In other words, she discards the idea that there is a natural biological definition of female or women that are not affected by humans’ use of language. Earlier forms of feminist theory have often distinguished between the two ideas of sex and gender as; biological sex, and socially constructed gender. Lisa Cosgrove argues that “the continued focus on gender difference research, together with the failure to address how gender is symbolized and produced, have contributed to the belief that differences between men and women are essential, universal, and ahistorical” (91).

Postmodern feminist theory argues that no such distinction can truly be made as even material and biological aspects are subjected to social construction. Linda Martin Alcoff even argues that “the feminist turn toward postmodernism was motivated precisely out of a felt need for a deeper methodological critique of the roots of sexism and patriarchal assumptions in all existing domains of knowledge [. . .]” (11). In other words, it is not just the question of femininity that carries the oppressive nature of patriarchy. Instead all assumptions of understanding and accepted truths need to be examined and challenged with regard to their patriarchal nature. This theoretical practice, which is the core of postmodern feminist theory is described by Teresa Ebert as “[. . .] an oppositional practice that simultaneously participates in and contests prevailing knowledges in order to critique and transform patriarchy” (*The Romance* 22). Hence, it deals with the repression and subjugation of women by partaking in the ongoing discussion and understanding of truths created by the establishment, in order to put an end to the tyrannical practice of power established by the patriarchal culture and society of today. These ideas are developed even further when she continues her reasoning by arguing that postmodern feminism achieves this since it “exposes the fraud of the inclusivity, justice, and universalism of patriarchal categories such as “man” and “human nature”-showing how these mask the power relations, exclusions, and exploitation inscribed in them” (Ebert, *The Difference* 888). In other words, postmodern feminism strives to abolish the patriarchal oppression by highlighting the issues with how language is being used to signify male superiority, and to set expectations on what a woman is supposed to be.

Descriptive detailing of female beauty is a prominent aspect of Goldman’s novel. When the reader is first introduced to the protagonist Buttercup,

Goldman makes a point of listing the most beautiful women in the world throughout Buttercup's childhood and upbringing. He does this as to prepare the reader for what the protagonist is to become, namely the ultimate beauty. He describes not only the women's beauty and attributes, but also their demise as their beauty fades, and the patriarchal norms deducting their fate, thereby, satirically describing the repetitiveness of the idea of beauty portrayed in the novel. Thus, the tone of crucial importance regarding female beauty is set right from the start. This thesis argue that when applying postmodern feminist literary theory as a literary lens in interpreting *The Princess Bride*, Goldman's use of satire to depict female beauty rejects and display the patriarchal structures that oppresses women in order to engage the reader, and empowers the female characters of the novel. Firstly, postmodern feminist theory and its focus on language is used to examine Goldman's list of the most beautiful women in the world. Secondly, a few scenes depicting Buttercup's beauty and her Prince's character are studied in regard to Goldman's use of satire. Finally, some of Foucault's theories on power are examined together with the literary and theoretical findings in order to understand the empowerment of female characters, and the distribution of power in the novel.

### **The Function of Postmodern Feminism and its Language Focus in *The Princess Bride***

Postmodern feminism is critical of the idea of the biological female being unaffected by language. Lisa Cosgrove even argues that "feminism that privileges sex over other determinants of difference inevitably and inadvertently participates in other forms of oppression" (96), thus, indicating that previous forms of feminist theory have inadvertently contributed to the oppression of women by accepting any form



of standardised female template. Postmodern feminist theory, instead, reasons that since everything in our culture is part of the political structures of our society, everything is influenced by our use of language. Judith Butler writes that “if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinctions suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (7). This type of discontinuity has never been observed since the biological sex is attributed the cultural expectations of its gender, they cannot be efficiently separated. This means that everyone is affected by how the patriarchal society permits us to talk and write about them. Therefore, everything and everyone are determined by the use of language. Looking then at Goldman’s text and use of language, a pattern of explicit standards of female beauty and critique starts to appear. This pattern is initiated early in the novel with the listing of the most beautiful women in the world, a listing that, although in itself oppressive and reaffirming of the patriarchal norms, utilise a strategic use of language to reject and undermine the aforementioned patriarchal oppression.

Starting with the year that Buttercup was born, the most beautiful woman in the world was a French scullery maid named Annette. She worked in the French capital for a Duke and Duchess. It was not long until the duke noticed that “[. . .] someone extraordinary was polishing the pewter” (Goldman 33). His wife the Duchess acted quickly when she saw her husband’s admiration of the maid and conducted a plan to put an end to her husband’s wandering eye. “The Duke’s notice did not escape the notice of the Duchess either, who was not very beautiful and not very rich, but plenty smart. The Duchess set about studying Annette and shortly found her adversary’s tragic flaw. Chocolate” (Goldman 33). This scene clearly

relates to what Ebert writes about the patriarchal structure of our society “[. . .] giving males control over female sexuality, fertility, and labor [. . .]” (*The Romance* 19), since the Duke’s desires and needs controls both the Duchess’s and maid’s existence. Both women portrayed in these extracts are clearly dependent and, or affected by, the Duke’s liking and preferences. His wife even sets out to diminish the maid, all because of her husband’s lust. Consequently, repeating the structural pattern described by Butler when she writes that all subjects are related to the political structures and that all topics “[. . .] are, by virtue of being subjected to the, formed, defined, and reproduced in the accordance of the requirements of those structures” (2). This means, that the Duchess is being misled by the patriarchal structure of the hierarchy demanded by her society. So instead of challenging her patriarchal oppressor, she turns against the one beneath her on the hierarchical ladder, namely the maid. Linda Alcoff argues that this type of forced structure and pattern is precisely what postmodern feminism wishes to expose and reform. She writes that by adapting a social criticism that showcases the idea of self-progress at the expense of others, postmodern feminism reveals a “[. . .]progress that preordains the glorious future and preassigns the roles we shall all play in it, roles inevitably indexed to the identities constructed for us by systems of oppression” (7). Therefore, the Duchess’s role as the oppressor of the maid is predestined by the patriarchal structures and oppression that determine her society. Put differently, the patriarchal structures that dictate the women’s worth to be determined by men’s need or desire for them, are the same structures that determine the Duchess’s and maid’s roles as oppressor and oppressed in relation to one another.

The choice of apparent opponents in this scene indicates a critique of the absurdity of the female situation, forcing woman against woman. An absurdity

that has its crescendo in the use of chocolate as a fattening weapon. This critique is even more visible when examining the description of what happened after the Duchess's failed attempt of controlling her husband through the fattening of Annette. "the Duke, for reasons passing understanding, next became smitten with his very own mother-in-law, which caused the Duchess ulcers" (Goldman, 34); the Duchess was forced to spend the years watching her husband and mother blow kisses behind her back, while she herself became grumpier and grumpier. This type of critique is explained by Ebert as a crucial part of postmodern feminist theory. She writes that the primary critique of patriarchy "[. . .] and its organization and reproduction of practices, signification, and subjectivities in terms of asymmetrical power relations based on gender exploitation" (*The Romance* 22), are related to the supposed inferiority of women. The patriarchal structures are organised as to enhance the dominance and superiority of the male sex, and to diminish and undermine the female sex to subordination. It is this supposed inferiority, that makes woman turn against woman in the example from the novel, instead of challenging their male oppressor. The supposed inferiority is also what prompts the Duchess to give up and accept her fate as the unhappy betrayed wife, when she could not fix her husband's wandering eye. By presenting the Duchess character in this way Goldman affectively fulfills the purpose of feminist theory that is described by Cosgrove as "expose[ing] the unnaturalness of a patriarchal social order" (89).

The unnaturalness and absurdity of this patriarchal order and the importance of female beauty is further examined in the case of the second entry on Goldman's list. In the year of Buttercup's tenth birthday the most beautiful woman in the world was the young daughter of a tea merchant. Her name was Aluthra and she lived in Bengal. "[. . .] her skin was of a dusky perfection unseen in India for

eighty ears. (There have only been eleven perfect complexions in all of India since accurate accounting began.) Aluthra was nineteen the year the pox plague hit Bengal. The girl survived, even if her skin did not” (Goldman 34). When contrasting extremes such as youth and potential death Goldman manages to present his readers with the question of what really matters. By praising her complexion and beauty, and almost tragically complaining about her survival when her skin gets destroyed and her beauty fades, the author once again provokes his reader to examine the rules and norms of female existence. These rules are referred to by Ebert as the political structures that shape everything in our surroundings. She argues that the political structures in the society of today align to undermine the importance of women and to give power to males. She writes that patriarchy arranges and distributes everything of value so that the male sex is superior to the female. Furthermore “[. . .] While seemingly universal, the particular structure of patriarchy at any given moment is always historically determined [. . .]” (Ebert, *The Romance* 19). Hence, the patriarchal structures of society dictate and undermine the conditions that women, and everyone else, live by. Ebert’s analysis also demonstrate that these structures are determined by humanity’s own history. The relation between previously mentioned structures, history, and the formation of our society, is what the postmodern feminist movement wants to display to the public. It is also what Goldman manages to display to his readers. He displays the inconsistency of truth and reason applied by the patriarchal society on his female characters and what is to be expected of them. By showcasing the absurdity of the female situation in a society that is structured by patriarchal norms, he also manages to present the issue with a traditional generalisation of what a woman is expected to be.

The female characters are all evaluated and examined in regard to how

they fit the template of female beauty prescribed by their male observers. This implies that there is a standard to follow, and expectations to be met, when it comes to how and what the female characters are supposed to be. Goldman questions these assumptions by presenting his readers with the absurdity of this type of generalisation. Crosgrove argues that this type of questioning is one of the main tasks that needs to be accomplished through postmodern feminism. “there is no indeterminacy or undecidability to the signifier woman. The category “women” is assumed to be self-evident and transparent, and the term femininity is contested only in terms of how best to measure it” (88). This means that, while the descriptive passages describing Anette, Aluthra, and the Duchess follow the idea that Woman is what Man ascribes her to be, the author’s questioning and choice of language to showcase the ridiculousness of these assumptions dispute its validity. By this means, Goldman’s success in materialising the issue with this type of determined descriptiveness in his novel can be seen as an attempt to reclaim every woman’s own power to define herself and her own femininity.

The third and final entry to the list of beautiful women is that of Adela Terrell of Sussex. She “[. . .] was easily the most beautiful creature [. . .] so far did she outdistance the world that it seemed certain that she would be the most beautiful for many, many years” (Goldman 34). In fact, one of her many suitors exclaimed that “without question Adela must be the most ideal item yet spawned” (Goldman 34). The suitor’s remark causes Adela to reflect about the truthfulness of his statement. Soon she is perched in front of her mirror examining and finding every flaw in her perfection. She realises that she will not be able to stay young forever, and asks herself “when I’m not young, how am I going to stay perfect? And if I’m not perfect, well, what else is there? What indeed?” (Goldman 35). The worry of her

pending doom of ageing causes her appearance to decline even faster, and by the end of the week the first worry lines appear. This descriptive scene from the novel regarding the importance of female beauty to the woman's own perceived worth even further strengthens a notion of the author's stand against the oppressive patriarchal norms enforced on women.

Moreover, the depiction of Adela as an inanimate object in these quotations is clear evidence of the author's understanding of the issue of depriving women of their humanity to fulfill the beauty standard put on them by males. The text thereby achieves one of the main aims of postmodern feminism described by Alcoff, that is the ability to prove that "experience is coextensive with language by arguments that can offer better explanatory accounts of experience than their alternatives" (16). Consequently, what a person experiences and what language conveys are crucially dependent on one another. When describing Adela's despair and lack of confidence as a result of her pending ageing, the scene conveys how the patriarchal expectations put on her by her society ultimately lead to her untimely decline. Since Adela has been taught, and believes that, her purpose as a woman is to be perfect and serene, she cannot see a purpose for herself outside of that perfection. Hence, she deems herself unworthy since she cannot fulfill the expected template that her society wants her to match.

With the author's tactical use of language, to showcase the issue of degrading self-worth as a result of oppressive patriarchal norms, the novel questions and contests the accepted truths of womanhood. This follows what Cosgrove describes as the promise of postmodernism combined with feminism:

[. . .] it is possible to build a politics of solidarity without succumbing to a false ontology of gender. Indeed, perhaps the conjunction of feminism and postmodernism is most useful for reminding us when we are reifying rather than resignifying gender, and for helping us to develop more complex accounts of difference. (Crosgrove 105)

This means, that Adela's suffering for not fulfilling the perceived standard could have been avoided if her society answered to a postmodern feminist way of reasoning, as that would have allowed for difference and variation in regard to what it means to be a woman. In this respect, *The Princess Bride* can be viewed as contributing to the vital aspect of feminism that Ebert describes as the fact that feminism "has sought to contest patriarchy in ever more diverse sites of culture and increasingly to interrogate power/knowledge [. . .]" (*The Difference* 886). In other words, Goldman's choice of determinative language when depicting the beauty of his female characters reveals the structural injustice caused by a patriarchal society's misuse of language, and urges his readers to think critically.

### **Goldman's Use of Satire to Question Patriarchal Structures**

Goldman makes use of the humoristic functions of satire in order to engage his reader with his text and to encourage them to practice their individual thinking. Henry and Rossen-Knill argues that "even a minimal parodic message needs to be worked out by an audience" (46). This implies that when authors use satirical writing, they rely on their readers to actively partake in the reading of their texts, so that the texts can reach its full potential as thought-provoking. In order to reach the desired level of participation, it is crucial that the author applies strategies that

engage and motivate his audience. Caron discusses why postmodern satire is perfect for this purpose, when he writes that “postmodern satire does not correct and reform in a traditional sense but rather insists on the empathy of the audience for the inferior characters, the knaves and fools who inhabit a world in which routine practices deserve the most scathing of satiric attacks.” (*The Quantum* 173). Simply put, postmodern satire does not aim to drastically reform the norms that are being satirised, which is the traditional use of satire, but rather to prompt the recipients own critical thinking and empathy towards others.

Goldman evokes his readers empathy by continuously referring to the previously mentioned listing of the most beautiful women in the world, and at the same time putting the male perspectives, such as that of the previously mentioned Duke and the suitor to Adela, as determiners of the female character’s reality. By portraying the female characters as dominated by the patriarchal norms and the will of the male characters, the author insists on his readers being empathic towards his female characters and their actions. As a result, the text simultaneously reaffirms and rejects the patriarchal norm enforced on women by a patriarchal society. Goldman’s satirical portrayal of men as irrational oppressors, preoccupied with their own desires and yearnings to the extent that they forsake any other obligation, such as the Duke’s forsaking of his wife, is a clear example of questioning the patriarchal norms deeming women inferior to men.

Other scenes that invoke empathy for the subordinate characters are those depicting encounters with men of power. When the Count first encountered the protagonist Buttercup, he “[. . .] could not stop looking at her. Understand now, she was barely rated in the top twenty; her hair was uncombed, unclean; her age was just seventeen, so there was still, in occasional places, the remains of baby fat.



Nothing had been done to the child. Nothing was really there but potential” (Goldman 44). Unbeknown to Buttercup this scene sets the tone for her entire future. In fact, the sole argument for her later climb of the hierarchical ladder is her natural, and her acquired beauty, since that is what caught the Count’s, and thereby later the Prince’s attention. Thus, the author once again satirises the male obsession with female beauty. This obsession is further detailed in the scenes following Buttercup’s first encounter with the Count. When the Count returns to court, after he has encountered Buttercup, he is informed by a servant that the king is dying. He then hurries to inform Prince Humperdinck of this news, who directly after being informed of the matter exclaims “Drat! That means I should have to get married” (Goldman 66). With this little outburst Goldman effectively informs his reader of what type of person the Prince is. The Prince’s personality is described further when Humperdinck, after rejecting every suitable Princess available for marriage, angrily exclaims “find me somebody! She should just look nice that is all” (Goldman 75). When the Count informs the prince of his encounter with the beautiful commoner named Buttercup, Humperdinck eagerly says that “I’ll tell you what I want. I want someone who is so beautiful that when you see her you say, ‘Wow, that Humperdinck must be some kind of fella to have a wife like that. Search the country, search the world, just find her!’” (Goldman 76). This harsh and satirical description of a ruling man’s character as superficial, and almost childish in his lust for beauty and fame, falls directly in line with what Laney Nepeer describes as typical for postmodern satirists. She writes that they “are writers characterized by their refusal of stable normative grounds and whose “contemporary satiric fiction indicts without consoling; it finds large scope for unchecked greed and virtually none for ethical values” (282). By satirising Prince Humperdinck as a caricature of a male infatuated

by excessiveness and the greed of the patriarchal structures that oppress women, Goldman refuses to let the norms that enforce males' power over women be left untouched. Instead he highlights them, and draws on his readers ability of individual thinking and reasoning to interpret its meaning.

The process of relying on the readers individual thinking, is referred to by Caron as when the writer rather than wishing to reference a real-world political change focuses on a "potential metanoia, a change in thinking, perception, or belief, even a repentance of the old way of thinking, perceiving, believing" (*Satire Today* 7). Metanoia is a word of Greek-descent the meaning of which can be translated to 'profound transformation'. The point is thereby to stimulate and develop the critical thinking of the readers of the text. Goldman stimulates his readers' critical thinking when he relies on the readers' abilities for compassion. One example of this is when Prince Humperdinck greedily demands Buttercup's hand in marriage. The Prince was at a loss for words when he first saw her beauty, but then quickly came to his senses and demanded that she married him:

"I am your Prince and you will marry me," Humperdinck said.

Buttercup whispered, "I am your servant and I refuse."

"I am your prince and you cannot refuse."

"I am your loyal servant and I just did."

"refusal means death."

"kill me then."

"I am your prince and I'm not that bad - how could you rather be dead than married to me?"

"Because," Buttercup said, "marriage involves love, and that is not a

pastime at which I excel. I tried once, and it went badly, and I am sworn never to love another.” (Goldman 77)

In this particular scene the readers capacity to feel compassion for both satirically created characters is crucial to achieve what Layne Neeper calls "the only correction that is both desirable and attainable in postmodern satire" (297). Neeper argues that it is the writer of postmodern satires ability to make use of his readers "capacity to extend emphatic compassion to the pathetic grotesques he creates, who, we might find, surprisingly resemble us in word or deed" (297), that entails the true essence of postmodern satire. This scene describing Humperdinck's proposal to Buttercup encourages the readers to explore both characters' reasonings and realities, thereby, urging the readers ability to extend their compassion towards both characters. In one respect, Humperdinck's greed, superficiality, and supposed power, come to their peak in this conversation. He is pictured as a selfish tyrant who would murder Buttercup if he does not get his way. But as the scene continues, his worldly disorientation and loneliness shows in the description of his lack of empathy and companionship:

“Love?” Said Prince Humperdinck. “Who mentioned love? Not me, I can tell you. Look: there must always be a male heir to the throne of Florin. That’s me. Once my father dies, there won’t be an heir, just a king. That’s me again. When that happens I’ll marry and have children until there is a son. So you can either marry me and be the richest and most powerful woman in a thousand miles and give turkeys away at Christmas and provide me a son, or you can die in

terrible pain in the very near future. Make up your own mind.”

“I will never love you.”

“I wouldn’t want it if I had it.”

“Then by all means let us marry.” (Goldman 77)

The concept of love is thereby described as being so foreign to Humperdinck that he cannot even imagine wanting it, thus, this scene reveals a side of the satirised patriarchal tyrant that encourages the readers to be compassionate towards the character. This shows his incapability to fathom and feel love, something most people would argue is crucial for human existence, thereby, indicating his own hollowness and loneliness.

Buttercup, is in this scene presented as a poor grieving servant who has to agree to her master’s demands or face death. She is utterly powerless. But at the same time, she refuses to be frightened into not speaking her mind. She talks back to her Prince, and she does not even stop when he threatens to kill her. Moreover, she is the one who sets the terms for their agreed upon marriage. Which indicates Buttercup’s power over the Prince. This shift of control between both characters leads to the question of what power is, and how it is being distributed.

### **Foucault’s Theory of Power and The Power Distribution in *The Princess Bride***

Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace summarise and explain Michael Foucault’s stand on the question of power in their book *A Foucault Primer*. They argue that Foucault avoids defining what power actually is since the interesting aspect from his point of view is its effects. McHoul and Grace write that:

Foucault avoids the tedious psychologism inherent in attempts to explain power in terms of intentions, motives, aims, interests or obsessions: the ‘mind’ of someone exercising power. For Foucault, what is important is the effect of power’s exercise and not the myriad rationalisations offered to ‘explain’ why its actions take place.

(McHoul and Grace 90)

What is interesting is thereby not what power is. Instead Foucault focuses on the practices and methods of exercising power, thereby avoiding attributing the devices of power to a single maker. In other words, power as a precise single unit is a highly fluctuating term, but the effect of power is defined as what we as humans create together.

One of the main ideas that Foucault stresses is that the analysis of power should be ascending. McHoul and Grace write, that any form of power always starts in the tiniest of actions, techniques, and tactics that occurs at the micro-level of our society. These micro-levels can be within a family, or the football team, and so on. “What Foucault places at issue is how these mechanisms of power have been ‘invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended’ by more general forms, leading to those types of social domination we can all readily identify” (McHoul and Grace 89). As a result, what interests Foucault is not how the power descends from the rulers down to their people, but rather how the people allowed it to ascend up to the ruler at the perceived top. In the case of postmodern feminist theory, and the patriarchal political structures that oppress women to “subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures” (Butler 4), the interesting question would then be how those structures were allowed to form in the first place.

This is also the question that Goldman's satirical writing in *The Princess Bride* invites his readers to consider. Throughout the novel, he defines and explores the concept of female beauty in great detail by presenting patriarchal ideas and norms for his female characters to relate to, thus, initialising the process of female assimilation in a patriarchal society. In other words, he shows how his female characters have to adapt to the difficulties of being a woman in a patriarchal world. While showing these difficulties, he makes use of the functions of satire to question the patriarchy and empower his female characters.

One example of this questioning of patriarchy and empowering of the female character is the scene depicting the Duchess jealousy when her husband starts to fancy their maid. By using an expression with clear sexual undertones when referring to the Duke's mind, such as "[. . .] someone extraordinary was polishing the pewter" (Goldman 33), he suggests the male's simplicity to his reader. The Duke is controlled by his sexual instincts and cannot manage to restrain himself, thereby, indicating that the Duke is in fact helpless to his own desires. At the same time, the choice of words when describing the Duchess as "not very beautiful and not very rich, but plenty smart" (Goldman 33), as well as her capability to take action and deal with her troubles, displays a capable woman who despite her jealousy manages to construct a plan of how to keep her husband in check. This plan is obviously not the most feministic one, since it boils down to the Duchess fattening her maid in order to make her undesirable to the Duke. However, the satirical portrayal of the characters in this scene clearly displays the power relation between the Duke and Duchess, a power relation that at this instance seems to be in the Duchess's favor. With this scene several interpretations of power are being presented. Thus, triggering the mind of the readers to examine, not just what is written, but also how

it is written, in order to determine the power distribution amongst the characters.

Another scene where the power relation concerning the man seemingly in charge and his female subordinate is examined, is the previously mentioned scene where Humperdinck proposes to Buttercup. With the exchange of dialogue between the two characters, it is evident that the Prince who is the supposed carrier of power is undermined by the power of Buttercup. She is aware of his authority but refuses to let that control her. Once again Goldman uses his satirical writing to portray the power balance between man and woman in a light that encourages the readers to question the perceived truth of that power equation. By doing so, he invites his readers to partake in determining the meaning of the text. Caron argues that this type of satirical approach “exploits the postmodern devaluation of authorial intent and effectively invites an audience reception determined to produce a definitive meaning” (*Satire Today* 9), of a text. In other words, the author strives to stimulate and develop the individual thinking of the readers of his text, in order for them to establish the text's meaning .

Individual thinking and change in the individual mind is also something that Foucault himself views as primary and important when it comes to the distribution of power. He states that:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously

undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

(Foucault and Gordon 98)

With this statement Foucault once again emphasises the importance of the actions that takes place on the micro levels of a society. He explains how every individual is a part of the big power grid that makes up a society's perceived truths and realities. This idea clearly shows that the distribution of power is not something that just happens to an individual by the force of others, but that each individual is contributing to the distribution whether they are aware of it or not. This is also what the analyses of Goldman's satirical writings have displayed, since the purpose of Goldman's satirical writings in his novel is to engage his reader in the reading process and to encourage critical and individual thinking. In other words, the readers are encouraged to take a more conscious part in their own contributions to what Foucault described as being "the vehicles of power" (Foucault and Gordon 98).

## **Conclusion**

Postmodern feminist theory points to the fact that it is a theory that strives to expose and question the patriarchal patterns that color and undermine everything in our society. It strives to contest general assumptions of knowledge and truth in order to criticise and reform patriarchy. The idea is to display and discuss the perceived truths created by the patriarchal establishment in order to provoke an end to its oppression. Postmodern feminism does this by highlighting the issue with the patriarchal domination of language. Since everything in our culture is part of the political structures of our society, and language is a part of our culture, everything



is influenced by how language is being used.

With this in mind, the importance of Goldman's choice of wording and use of language, quickly comes in to focus when interpreting the novel. Early in the novel, a structural notion of oppressive patriarchal norms and expectations on women is displayed by the, in itself oppressing, listing of the most beautiful women in the world. Tactical linguistic choices are used to display and reject this pattern of oppression. By adopting the humoristic functions of satire, the structural injustice caused by a patriarchal society in the novel, is revealed. The Prince's egoistical greed is contrasted to Buttercup's reserved modesty and self-awareness, thereby, encouraging readers to utilise their own reasoning and critical thinking.

Goldman depends on his reader's ability for empathy and compassion to question the patriarchal structures that oppress the female characters of the novel. Instead of bluntly telling his readers that the men's presumed power over women is wrong, he relies on his satirical writing to awaken a process and transformation within the readers own minds. Furthermore, when depicting the Duchess's jealousy of her maid's beauty, and her husband's apparent disregard of his wife's feelings, the text also manages to showcase the pattern of imposed patriarchal power. By structuring the novel in this way, the author conveys how satire and critical thinking work together to undermine the presumed authority of man over woman, and instead highlights the absurdity of such an assumption. From this perspective it is easy to argue that Goldman's choice of wording in his novel displays a clear hint of postmodern feminist belief, that aims to abolish the patriarchal oppression.

The importance of each reader's active participation and reasoning is also noticed when the theoretical and literary findings are examined in relation to Foucault's theories on power. The examined ideas on Foucault's theory of power

display a theory that, instead of focusing on what power is, focus on how power is created, and how every individual partakes in the creation of the effect of power. The question is thereby not what power is, but how it functions at every level of a society, and how it develops the unfair forms of identifiable supremacy. In other words, it is the tiniest of acts and ideas that combine into the perceived truth and reality of power relations. By that means, a Monarch is not powerful because he has power, he is powerful because the combined mechanism of power on a micro-level of society believes, and allows him, to be powerful.

This function of power is exactly what Goldman manages to imply with his satirical writings of the power relation between his male and female characters. The male rulers of his novel are ascribed personality traits that likens them to unruly and vain teenagers, who cannot control their own desires and hubris, thus, displaying them as controlled by the shallowness of their own personality, or lack thereof. While the female characters are displayed as subordinate due to the patriarchal structures of their society, they are also portrayed as women who make use of their own minds and reason. They are women who are not afraid to try and act in order to affect their own future, hence, providing the reader with a broader representation of power.

The humoristic functions of satire engage the readers in the process of understanding the perception and distribution of power in the novel. Furthermore, Goldman's writings relate to Foucault's idea of every individual as a part of the large power grid that makes up a society's perceived truths and realities, when he ascribes Buttercup the power of choosing her own fate by making her reject, and set the rules for, the Prince's marriage proposal. The idea of an all-inclusive power grid, clearly illustrates that the distribution of power is not something that just happens to

an individual by the force of others, but that each person is equally contributing to the distribution whether they are aware of it or not. Hence, both the oppressors and the subordinates partakes equally in the power distribution.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that when applying postmodern feminist literary theories as a literary lens in interpreting *The Princess Bride*, Goldman's use of satire to depict female beauty, rejects and reaffirm the patriarchal structures that oppresses women in order to empower the female characters of the novel. This pattern of rejection and affirmation encourages the reader to engage with the text and function as one of the determiners regarding the question of distribution of power in the novel: this, in turn, can be related to Foucault's theories on power distribution that question patriarchal structures.

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