

Ethical Analysis of Hulga and the Family Relationships in Good Country People

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Abstract

Good Country People is one of the representative works of Flannery O 'Connor. The heroine in the story, Hulga or Joy, is a distinct image created by the author. The adult-baby's disability, rebellion, intertextuality, together with her self-conceit contributes to the sharpening of the special grotesque character of Hulga. This paper will explore the characteristics of Hulga, the ethical dilemma of the family relations and the ethical choice of the protagonists in the story from five aspects: the first part is an introduction; the second part briefly introduces the creation background, author background and the plot of the novel; the third part will analyze Hulga's characteristics including advocating nihilism, inferiority and blind arrogance, and then continue to discuss the reasons for the formation of her grotesque characteristics; the fourth part will analyze the ethical dilemma of the family relations; the fifth part will concern the the ethical choice of the protagonists. The conclusion will focus on some effective suggestions for the families who are suffering ethical crisis and point out that this work has a very high research value to the contemporary construction of harmonious society.

Keywords

Good Country People; Joy; Ethical Dilemma; Ethical Choice.

1. Introduction

Good Country People collected in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, is regarded as one of the most important masterpieces written by Flannery O 'Connor, an American southern genius woman writer. O 'Connor gained high reputation for her successful creation of a vivid grotesque heroine, Hulga, with her high writing skills such as irony and humour. The existence of the weird girl distorted the relationship of the family. Her mother Mrs Hopewell lives on the farm with her daughter and Mr Freeman family who were regarded as good country people. The daughter despises the mother and the workers for their vulgar, ignorance and meaningless. The appearance of the Bible Salesman broke the calm of the family and throws the arrogant Hulga into a dilemma and that prompts the change of Hulga's perception of the world and then she accepts the redemption from the grace of the Almighty God. Through analyzing the character of Hulga, we achieve some illumination that can be applied to the education of the youth and the construction of positive family relationships.

2. Backgrounds of the Story Creation

2.1. The Social Scene in the South

"In a number of high and mighty realms, Georgia's subtleties and complexities-social, racial, religion,cultural-are not exactly appreciated or celebrated. It is all madness or decay, rotting fluted columns belonging to abandoned plantation houses, or blacks in chains and flogged constantly, or whites fluctuating, with respect to their intelligence between a level suitable for

the designation of idiocy, and a level applicable to morons." [1] Living in the spiritual waste land of the South, Flannery O'Connor keep a sober mind on the rotten social reality and ignores the critical comments from the her southern neighbour. After World War II, the United States became the world's largest creditor country, and its economic advantages facilitated it to obtain more and higher profits. But behind the prosperity often lurks a crisis: rising prices caused by inflation make the middle and lower classes of people dissatisfied, racial problems in peacetime are more prominent, and disrupt social order... Therefore, the undercurrent of American society presents a bleak picture of "faith and moral crisis." Just like Ke Jianhua said: "in the 20th century, religion in the West was challenged seriously by science, philosophy, and social issues. With the gradual weakening of religion, God was placed on the side of the world, the value orientation of human beings shifted, and religion was no longer the unique center and rule of human life. The loss of contact with God not only causes the soul to lose its dependence, but also the disappearance of spiritual constraints and guilt, which breeds many social problems, such as war, violence, corruption, lies, greed... Human beings who have lost the authority constraint are dominated by the original sin impulse in life, and the evil side of human nature is unscrupulously exposed." [2] Living in the Christ haunted world, O'Connor screamed loudly to wake up the sinful people to find redemption from God, so as to change the evil social reality of the South.

2.2. Understanding the Author

Born into a Catholic family in the southern United States, Flannery O'Connor was infected lupus in her youth just like her father, and has since struggled with the disease. The Christian faith gave her the hope to survive, and the experience different from ordinary people also gave her a deeper understanding of the society in decline. She took writing as a sharp weapon to expose the "evil of human nature" and created many representative "monstrous" images. "For a Christian writer," she said, "modern life is full of repulsive grotesqueness, and it is his duty to make their grotesqueness known to the reader who is accustomed to them... To those who are hard of hearing you shout; to those who are nearly blind you draw large and striking shapes." [3] O'Connor's stories wake up the sleeping world like a storm lightening, guiding them to re-examine this terrible society with loss of faith and morality, and set up a lighthouse for people to seek change. In this sense, O'Connor is a woman writer with a strong sense of social responsibility.

2.3. Understanding the Story

Good Country People is a short story in O'Connor's collection of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955). It mainly tells the story of Hulga, a disabled girl who has a PHD in philosophy, cheated out of her prosthetic leg by the hypocritical pervert Bible Salesman. Mrs. Hopewell runs a farm with her thirty-year old daughter, Joy or Hulga, and employs Mrs. Freeman, a country woman who is interested in everything, as a tenant. Joy's physical disabilities force her to balance herself by earning a doctorate. She despises vulgar people (including her mother) and God, and Mrs. Hopewell has difficulty understanding her daughter's thoughts. The Bible-Salesman is deeply sympathized by Mrs. Hopewell, who thinks that he is a poor and kind country churchman, and his arrival makes Joy taste the sweetness of love. When Hulga is willing to share his most precious "dignity" - prosthetics with Bible-Salesman, the Christian exposed his original evil and ugly face, he approached Hulga only to meet his hobby of collecting prosthetics. Being left on the cool barn, the arrogant intellectual Hulga began to repent and achieved her time of redemption through the sudden violence brought by the evil Bible-Salesman.

3. Character Analysis of Hulga

In her article *Electra's Revenge: On the Grotesque Figure in The Good Country Man*, Shao Shan wrote of Hulga like this: "Helga represents many progressive Southerners who have escaped the shackles of the strong religious atmosphere of the South and believed in the freedom and spiritual salvation of industrial civilization." But when modern civilization disproves the existence of God, it discovers that the godless world is not as rich, just, and equal as it pretends to be, "but vulgar, mean, petty, mean, and malicious, full of Manley Pointer and Mrs. Freeman characters." [4] As a "grotesque image", her personality characteristics must also contain "deformed" characteristics, mainly in the following aspects:

3.1. Hulga- an Adult Baby

Just like Asbury in *The Enduring Chill* and Thomas in *The Comforts of Home* Hulga is another typical adult-baby figure in O'Connor's story imagination. As a disabled thirty two-year -old girl, Hulga has to rely on his mother's farm. Although she can not support herself, she regards everything she received as nature without appreciations, and on the contrary, she rebels her mother and the family all the time just like a teenage who is experiencing adolescent rebellion. For instance, her mother named her Joy when she was born, hoping the poor girl live happily, however, the rebellious daughter changed her name to Hulga at the age of twenty. For Hulga, the behavior of changing name is a triumph over her mother: "She considered her name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called" [5].

3.2. Hulga- an Arrogant Academic

As a senior intellectual, Hulga has gone to the extreme of blind and excessive worship of knowledge, for she once told Manley Pointer that she did not need the Bible, does not believe in God, claiming to be an "atheist", and sneering at the world with an arrogant attitude of "not eating the fire" and "floating beyond heaven and earth". In addition to rude words to his mother, she even thought that she could successfully seduce the intellectually inferior Manley Pointer with her own talent, so as to pass on her views and ideas to him and even control his emotions. When poor Hulga was intoxicated with her imagination and lingered, she did not expect that she had already fallen into the ambush of the "good countryman" and finally met a tragic end. "Educated intellectuals turn their noses up at faith and are staunch atheists. His idolatry of knowledge and reason, his self-righteous pride is the outward manifestation of his original sin and the cause of his loss of faith." [6] Perhaps "blind arrogance" and the second character trait "having an inferiority complex" seem to contradict each other, but in fact the former is the result of the "deterioration" of the latter, in other words, blind arrogance is the manifestation of "pathological" inferiority. We all have this experience in life, suddenly at some point because of the failure of something and feel that they are not as good as others, into a deep sense of inferiority. Some people will regain their confidence and keep going until they overcome the difficulties. Some people ignore the needs and feelings of those around them, and go into the extreme whirlpool of "superiority", Hulga is a typical such example. According to psychologist Adler, "People with inferiority complexes use superiority complexes as a way to escape difficulties." He assumes a sense of superiority and compensates his unbearable inferiority with false success." [7] Combined with Adler's narration, we can understand why Hulga, who has low self-esteem, treats people arrogantly. Each of us, as a small cell of a big social family, is inevitably in contact with others in one way or another. Hulga's "pathological" inferiority complex with a sense of superiority makes her arrogant and disdainful, which inevitably makes

it difficult to get along with others and faces one failure after another in the "lack of support", so she will taste the bitter fruit of the tragedy of life.

3.3. Hulga- a Nihilist

French philosopher Jacques Derrida once said: "Nihilism is the loss of the meaning of life itself, once the meaning is lost, there are no hopes and dreams in life, the good, the noble and the ugly, the subservience, the world is fundamentally worthless." Everything is nothing, nothing is nothing, and therefore it is difficult for life to accommodate passion, love, and impulse of any kind." [8] Nihilism is a popular topic in Flannery O'Connor research, for the emotion of meaningless permeated the 1950th American South, when people advocated the material entertainments and ignored the spiritual growth. The source of the tragic life of Mrs Hopewell and Hulga lies in their loss of faith. When the Bible-Salesman asks her about the Bible in the home, she claims: "My daughter is an atheist and won't let me keep the Bible in the parlor. I keep my Bible by my bedside." [9] However, that is not true, she put the Bible in the attic somewhere. Through the description of this detail, O'Connor intends to tell the readers that the mother and daughter are both atheists who worship nothing, and the loss of faith results in the tragic life of the family.

As a highly educated man, why does Hulga believes in nihilism? Firstly, her physical disability: she has a heart condition and will not live long, and is supported by a prosthetic leg because of a disability. She was originally called "Joy" - meaning joy, Mrs Hopewell: "thought of her still as a child, because it tore he heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any normal good times." However, she was actually a bitter, angry person, defensive and hostile to the world, to her mother, to love. Secondly, she despised the superficiality of her mother and sharecropper regarding herself knowledgeable and superior, "she used to say to her mother... With something in his mouth - 'Bitch! Have you ever asked yourself that question? Have you ever asked yourself what kind of person you're not? Oh, my God!'" She can be so bitter and nasty to her own biological mother, let alone to other people and things. With this attitude to life, it is difficult to find the meaning of life, the beauty of life. Being isolated and reluctant to do anything is the typical characteristics of this kind heroes or heroines in Flannery O'Connors works, actually, what they need is not philosophy but salvation.

4. The Ethical Dilemma of Hulga's Family

The critic of literary ethics Nie Zhenzhao claims that: "In literary texts, the confusion or change of ethical order and identity often brings contradictions and conflicts that are difficult to solve." [10] In *Good Country People*, the whole family is enveloped in an atmosphere of agony: the difficult communication between the parent and children, the awkward relationship between Hulga and the tenants, the hard life of everyone in the family. "Home, usually a positive place, is a space that can provide shelter and protection from unexpected dangers and damage from the outside world. Home can refer to a physical place, such as a home, community, region, or the people who live in a place, such as relatives and family, and is often associated with positive feelings, such as warmth, comfort, acceptance, nurturing, and, of course, tolerance and love. The security of the home in which one lives and the home of one's loved ones is often the result of personal growth, of learning to love, accept and gain peace with oneself." [11] The distortion of family relationships throw the whole family into a kind of tragic dilemma, and they have no way to escape the miserable living environment for special reasons. In the family Mrs Hopewell is tortured by the disability of Hulga and the dishonesty of the tenant Mrs Freeman; Hulga suffered serious disease both in mind and in body, finding no way to escape the limitation of the original family or to realize her dream outside the farm. They encountered ethical dilemma in their family relationship construction.

5. The Ethical Choice of Hulga

The essence of spatial relation is power relation. According to literary ethics criticism, "ethical choice contains two meanings: on the one hand, ethical choice is human's moral choice, that is, moral maturity and perfection can be achieved through choice; On the other hand, it refers to the choice in the face of two or more moral options, and the difference in ethical choice leads to the difference in ethical results, and its ethical value is also very different." [12] In front of the broken of her ethic value, Hulga has to make a choice between the grace of God and nihilism, and turn to the embrace of the Love from God. At the end of the novel, the author designs the plot which indicates the epiphany of Hulga when her time comes. When she found the true face of the Bible-Salesman who grabbed her leg and threw it away, she asked "arnt you a good country people?" " You are a Christian!" The response of the man shocked Hulga: "I hope you don't think that I believe in that crap, I may sell Bible but I know which end is up ans I was not born yesterday and I know where I am going." It is true that a good man is hard to find in the south of America, even the Bible seller can bring violence to people. The sudden violence crushes the ethical perception of Hulga completely and she begins to confess for her arrogance and nihilism, choosing to live a happy life with the Love of God, and this kind of redemption is also what O'Connor emphasizes repeatedly in her works. Although walking on the wrong road for thirty two years, Hulga eventually got her salvation and made a right ethical choice.

6. Conclusion

The tragic life of Hulga and her family has universal significance, the grotesque character of Hulga and the unusual family relationships exist both in American families and in Chinese families. And the formation of his character is catalyzed by physical body, family, faith and social sex discrimination. The combination of these elements contributes to O'Connor's creation of a grotesque image who is sympathetic but worthy of profound reflection. The profound reflection on this grotesque image is actually the inspiration and warning to modern people by imagining the plot under the current era. O'Connor's Good Country People exudes the magic even in our age, attracting the readers to study and explore the inspiration implied through the story so as to benefit the contemporary youth education and the construction of positive family relationships.

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