

The Causes of Hester's Tragedy in *By the Bog of Cats*...

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Abstract

By the Bog of Cats..., which mainly depicts Hester and her miserable experience in Ireland, was the masterpiece of Marina Carr—a contemporary Irish female playwright. In the play, Hester is labeled double-image— she is not only the other in patriarchal society as a female but also the other in inhabited community as a tinker (Tinker is a special nomadic ethnic group in Ireland, who has neither land nor permanent residence, traveling outside the mainstream of society). The exclusion from the society triggers and further enlarges her tragic flaws in character, which contribute to her tragedy.

Keywords

By the Bog of Cats...; Tragedy; The other; Gender; Tinker.

1. Introduction

The drama *By the Bog of Cats*... by Marina Carr is a typical tragedy which sets an ancient Greek tragic figure Medea as its stereotype. This is a story of abandonment and revenge in which Hester is the heroine who is also a tinker in Irish community. Miserable Hester is the daughter of Hester Swane, an Irish Tinker, who abandons Hester when she is seven years old. At the age of forty, she confronts her lover's betrayal. Facing the social unfairness, Hester suicides after killing her daughter.

2. Theoretic Basis

In *By the Bog of Cats*..., Hester's identity as a female in a patriarchal society and a tinker in an inhabited society makes her image of the other more vivid. So, this essay will apply the theory of the other and tragedy to analyze the external and internal causes of Hester's tragedy.

The other often suggests a kind of margin, inferior and oppressed condition and it appears with 'the self' as the opposite. The other can be used to refer anyone and anything outside the self, despite its pattern, visible or invisible, perceivable or not. The formation of the other must be appeared in conflict between two sides and there is

often a relationship of unfairness or oppression between them. And in literary criticism, all kinds of poetic research about the other aim to analyze and expose the oppression and supremacy in the process of otherization (Zhang Jian, 2011).

Actually, the other and tragedy are inextricably related. In general, tragedy is a literary work in which the protagonist meets an unhappy or disastrous end, and it depicts the actions of a central character who is usually dignified or heroic.

3. The External Causes of Hester's Tragedy

Ireland portrayed in *By the Bog of Cats*... is a society centered on patriarchal thought, and women are in a subordinate position of men, and are regarded as tools of reproduction, objects

of desire, and embellishment of men. Women in Ireland cannot have the same social status as men. Even when Ireland became the "Celtic Tiger", the social status of women has not been improved, and the duality of the status of men and women is justified. The gender other is produced. Therefore, the external cause of Hester's tragedy firstly points to the gender factor.

In *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester and Carthage have lived for fourteen years and they have a lovely daughter, Josie Kilbride. But when Carthage met Caroline, the daughter of the planter, he betrayed Hester and decided to marry Caroline. Ironically, when Carthage pursued Hester, he said that he loved Hester. Caroline's father Xavier had no grievances with Hester, but he still selfishly threatened Hester to leave. For them, women are subordinate to men, and when women hinder their will, they will throw them away mercilessly. Hester is the typical victim representative in this play. As the other in the patriarchal society, Hester suffered a lot of oppression.

Firstly, in *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester, as a female, fails to achieve equal rights and own fair social status in the patriarchal society. As is described in the play, Hester has a strong personality while Carthage is on the contrary. Thus, when murdering Hester's brother, Carthage sat aside like a coward and waited for Hester to take action. It was until Hester's brother was murdered, Carthage pushed him into the river. With Hester's brother's money, Hester and Carthage build a house and feed farm cattle. So Hester really makes great contribution to the family and her equal rights in the family should be granted. But actually, though Carthage is weaker than Hester, he still acts like the only determiner in big deals. In Ireland, sexual purity is emphasized and it would be intolerable if any couple has a child outside marriage. But Carthage refuses to marry Hester and give her a legal position as his wife. Obviously, it is because Hester is classified as the other in patriarchal society where male is the absolute authority that Carthage dares to look upon Hester and ignore her needs. The oppression from the patriarchal society to women is not only reflected in their unfair social status, but also reflected in male's interference in female's freedom. When Carthage wants to marry Caroline, he immediately throws Hester aside like clothes and even forces her to leave. Confronting with such an inequality, why Hester doesn't bravely keep fighting for her rights but begs Carthage to change his mind? Obviously, there is an invisible shackle behind her--the patriarchal society in which woman is to man what slave is to his master. In the dialogue, Hester's manner to Carthage just like a slave to her master.

Besides these, Hester is also financially oppressed in the patriarchal society. The money from her brother should be hers, but she shares it with Carthage and builds their home and raises cattle. But later, when Carthage leaves Hester he even refuses to leave the house to her as if it is his private property. In such a society, women are regarded as the other and they themselves are deemed as males' property. So, people tacitly approve that women should hand in it to their male lovers.

Furthermore, when Carthage and Xavier threaten Hester to leave, they also use money as a weapon to expel her. In fact, in Ireland, the role of men in the family is like an authority figure while women are just an accessory to the husbands. Therefore, women are inevitably become the sacrifice of the gender other.

In Ireland, there is a nomadic minority called tinkers. They have no land or fixed residence. The vagrants are marginal people in Ireland. They rarely marry settled residents because they do not have a fixed residence and stable work. Most of the time, they are not accepted by the society in which they live and are regarded as outsiders. Because they are separated from the mainstream society, they are often discriminated against by the settled community. Floating outside the mainstream of society and being squeezed out by the settled community, Hester, as a descendant of the wandering group, racial otherness is also a very important factor in her tragedy. The racial other is based on a collective concept that separates the culture of the group from the culture of the non-group, and believes that this race is superior to other races. Under

the control of this concept, the vagrant ethnic group not only confronts the settled community but exists. Moreover, it exists for the settlement community, reflecting a kind of hegemony and domination relationship, so as to construct its own superior image.

In *By the Bog of Cats...*, the inhabitants, standing for the mainstream society here, have a strong prejudice against the tinkers. Therefore, as a typical tinker in the community, Hester's maltreatment stems not only from her gender as a female in the patriarchal society but also from her identity as a tinker in the community where outsiders are not welcome. The settled ethnic groups discriminate against the vagrant ethnic groups, and they often devalue Hester's humble origins. For example, Carthage's mother, Mrs.

Kilbride looks down upon Hester. According to her point of view, it is "a waste of time of giving chances to a tinker. All tinkers understand is the open road and where the next bottle of whiskey is coming from" (Marina Carr, 2002). Besides, Mrs. Kilbride even calls Hester's daughter a "bastard" to humiliate tinker's identity. What's more, when the inhabitants invite Hester home to sing songs, they will hurry Hester away as soon as she finishes in case that she steals anything from their homes, as if Hester is a thief.

Hester keeps repeating that she is the same as the settled inhabitants, but those inhabitants believe from the bottom of their hearts that tinkers are born a dawdler. They strongly believe Hester is different from them, so they tend to classify Hester as the other and never accept Hester as part of the community. All of these make Hester feel sad and upset. Social disapproval and exclusion drive Hester into a corner where all Hester's efforts seem in vain, which sows foreshadowing for his tragedy. Thus, Hester's tragedy stems not only from her female gender in patriarchal society, but also from her tinker identity in inhabited community.

4. The Internal Causes of Hester's Tragedy

The internal and external causes of a tragedy are closely linked, and the external causes will affect the internal causes and have a decisive effect through the internal causes.

The internal cause mainly refers to the inner psychology, thought and character of the subject. The character of Hester in *By the Bog of Cats...* also has certain flaws. Under social exclusion, her character flaws have been further amplified and promoted her tragic ending.

In *By the Bog of Cats...*, Hester's double identities as a female and a tinker make her the other not only in patriarchal society but also in the inhabited community. So, Hester is inevitably put in a passive status. Despite her effort, people are still not willing to accept her and always give her negative judgement. Facing with such exclusive world, Hester is tired of defending for herself. And finally, she refuses to believe others and becomes stubborn because she wants to protect herself from outside evils by isolating herself from the outside world.

When Monica encourages Hester to prop up and to recognize the reality, Hester forwardly says that Monica never knows anything about her and Carthage, she believes that as long as she stays together with Carthage for some time, he will come back to her. Besides, when talking to Hester, Carthage shows a great deal of impatience and asks her to leave from time to time. Actually, everyone, except Hester herself, knows there is no hope between them. While, Hester is so stubborn that she still keeps her own illusion that Carthage will come back. What's more, when Catwoman predicts that Hester will be involved in a big trouble if she refuses to leave. She mentions many examples to ensure her words and hopes Hester would be persuaded by her. However, though what Catwoman says is true, Hester is so obstinate that she is still not willing to believe Catwoman and refuses to leave. The inclusive society makes Hester so stubborn that she even fails to distinguish others' kind suggestion. And Hester also completely isolates herself from the outside world.

However, the stubborn, most of the time, can only recognize issues one-sidedly. But in real life, only the world viewed in different perspectives can people find the best solution. Since Hester is obstinate about her relation with Carthage and refuses to compromise, in the end, Carthage falls out with her. Not only does Hester not lift herself above water, but she put herself in a corner. So, being stubborn is bad for Hester to deal with her problem. Hester's stubborn character, in the end, also evolves into one of the important subjective causes of her tragedy-impetuosity.

Similarly, her impetuous character also has certain relation with her identity of the other. Since she is classified as the other who is not welcome both in the patriarchal society and the inhabited community, she is not only ostracized by the males but also by the settled inhabitants. Social maltreatment to her makes her full of hostility to society. She also often quarrels with Carthage and Xavier for her rights. In the end, she burns Carthage's cattle impetuously. Besides, since she is the other who was abandoned by her mother when she was still a little child, so when she was involved in troubles, no one would treat her as a poor girl, comfort her or teach her how to calm down and pay for her actions. With time going by, she develops an impetuous character and solved things on impulse. When Catwoman takes one of Hester's chairs away without her permission, Hester threatens she will knock Catwoman's little turf house down and bring down diesel to burn Catwoman. Though it is Catwoman's fault at first, Hester's response is also too extreme. Chair is a just small object in her life, but Hester would be mad about it as if she doesn't know there are many other methods to solve this problem. What's more, Catwoman is her friend who would persuade Hester not to bring herself troubles. Besides, she also helps Hester to recall her memory about her mother and gives very neutral comment on her mother. From this aspect, she is a kind character to Hester. But, Hester doesn't restrain herself in face of Catwoman. It reflects that in daily life, she is not good at control her mood and apt to act on impulse. Being impetuous is bad for Hester since it will pick up unnecessary conflicts and worsen problems. For Hester, her identity of the other determines there will be many potential problems around her. If she is impetuous, then it will finally detonate bombs around her. And, at that time, she will really have her back against the wall. So, this weakness of her character also is a key cause to her tragedy.

Being in impulsion, in the face of people's rejection, Hester is forced to resist both mentally and behaviorally. At first, since Hester is impulsive, she decides to destroy Carthage's wedding when Carthage refuses to come back. She starts a real counterattack, criticizing them for depriving her of everything and shattering her dreams. She unmasks Carthage's villainous virtues of abandoning children for money, and exposes Xavier's lust and greed. What's more, when everyone rushes her to leave, driven by anger and resentment, she takes more crazy actions- she burns all of her

and Carthage's property. In the end, with the despair of society, Hester ends her life in the raging fire. Though it is of a tragedy, it is still inevitable under her impulsive character.

5. Conclusion

By adopting the theory of the other, this paper reveals the external causes and the internal causes of Hester's tragedy. For the external causes, since she is a female who is regarded as the other among males, she will inevitably be oppressed by the patriarchal society; since she is a tinker who is deemed as the other in the inhabited community, she is discriminated by the inhabitants. As for the internal causes, since she is a female, she doesn't have the decisive right in her home, she is helpless in face of Carthage's betray; though she is not satisfied with this condition she could do nothing, she tends to be capricious; since she is expelled and oppressed by people as the other, she develops an impetuous character. Being ostracized by society,

Hester tries to rebel both mentally and physically to get rid of the shackle of the identity of the other, but all her efforts are in vain. Therefore, Hester's tragedy is the result of her identity of the other.

In the play, Carr exposes women have a low social status in Ireland, especially female tinkers who suffer more than common women. Therefore, Hester's tragedy is an epitome of female tinkers in Ireland. Through the interpretation of Hester's tragedy in *By the Bog of Cats...*, this paper analyzes the identity dilemma of the women in Irish stray community, which helps the reader to understand the current situation of the existence of Irish women, especially the women of the stray ethnic group, and helps to make people realize the importance of mutual understanding between different ethnic groups.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants from the Hunan Provincial Foundation for Philosophy and Social Science (20WLH12) -"A Study of Marina Carr's Tragic Trilogy from the Perspective of Eco-feminism".

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