

Religious Problems in Callaghan's Works from the Biblical Archetypal Image

-- A Case Study of Two Fishermen

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Abstract

Morley Callaghan wrote a series of short stories in 1930s that reflected the social and religious conditions of The Dirty Thirties in Canada. One of his masterpieces, *Two Fishermen*, is based on the Bible as the narrative archetype, and tells the story of the fleeting friendship between a reporter and a hangman forged through fishing in an uncivilized town. Smith's identity of the law enforcer and the symbol of the fish God gives the story an obvious religious significance, and his recruitment of believer—suffering of betrayal—exit with haste obtained an abstracted connotation and an extended denotation which indicate the lack of traditional Christian doctrines such as justice, tolerance and order at that time. This paper will be based on the Northrop Frye's theory of myth archetype criticism to analyze the relinquishment of power of the Christ under the erosion of social forces.

Keywords

Morley Callaghan; Two fishermen; Biblical archetype.

1. The Biblical Archetype of Characters

In *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays*, Northrop Frye points out that an archetype is a "typical recurring image" used to refer to a "symbol" that can "integrate and unify our literary experience" [1]. In order to understand this short story, we need to adopt the method of "overall close reading" [2], compare the similarities and differences between the story and the Bible in characters, structure and imagery, make an intertextual analysis of Callaghan's related works, and make a comprehensive investigation of the context of the work. The story is titled "Two Fishermen", which corresponds the two major characters Michael and Smith. Michael is "the only reporter on the town paper", in order to get a first-hand information, he makes a private visit to Smith, who is a small and friendly hangman. Smith invites him to fish together and gives him two big trout as a gift. However, their friendship ends with Michael cowardly watching Smith being humiliated by the crowds after the execution. It will be superficial to illustrate this work merely from the moral point of view, instead, the readers should take the author's Christian background into account and be aware of the obvious religious implication in the story. Thus, the hidden text which differs from the surface text can be revealed.

In the first place, the title "fisherman" consists of one of the main followers of Jesus in the New Testament [3]. As it written in the gospel of Mark, Jesus evangelized two fishermen:

Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon (who was later surnamed Peter) and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him (Mark, 1:16-1:18).

In the story, when Michael first meets Smith, he is fishing, and immediately invites him to join together. Smith's subsequent offering of fish to Michael also corresponds to the New Testament in which Jesus blessed those who net fish by filling their stomachs with fish and bread. Therefore, Smith can be regarded as a symbol of Christ, whose fishing invitation as a means of fraternizing and recruiting believers, and gifting as a symbol of Christ's salvation.

It is worth mentioning that Jesus recruited two fishermen, one of whom was named Simon was later surnamed Peter. One of the famous stories about Peter is the fable "Before the Cock Crow Twice, Thou shalt deny me thrice." If seeing Smith as the symbol of Jesus, then Michael is the embodiment of Peter the fisherman. When Michael witnesses the town residents beating up Smith, he is coward and does not dare to stop them, nor does he dare to recognize Smith. However, he is also extremely ashamed of his betrayal, just as Peter had been regretful for being overwhelmed with the heavy burden. Jesus said at his crucifixion: "Father, forgive them; For they know not what they do" (Luke, 23:34). The "they" refers to the townspeople who hurl stones at Smith, but it certainly doesn't include Michael, who knows Smith very clearly. It is at this time that silence over the crucifixion of Christ becomes the most stinging betrayal of all.

From a narrative perspective, *Two Fishermen* adopts a limited third-person omniscient perspective, with Michael as the "central consciousness" of observation and narration. The plot takes place as Michael moves around and participates in events. Thus, despite the novel's title of "two" fishermen, the above actions clearly classify Michael as the main character, while the other "fisherman", Smith, is subservient to the status of the observed secondary protagonist. From this point of view, the story is not about a pair of friends who acquaint with and betray each other, but the personal psychological changing process of the town reporter Michael in the event of hanging. Different from the narrative technique in the New Testament which focuses on Jesus, the transfer of narrative power implies the aphasia and the relinquishment of power of Christ in a complex social environment.

2. The Biblical Archetype of Imageries

In the story, when Michael first asks Mr. Bagley about Smith, Bagley tells him that Smith is a "mild, harmless looking little guy". Immediately after that, Michael asks, "Did he look like the Hangman?" Bagley replied "I couldn't say that, seeing that I never saw one. He was awfully polite...". This dialogue reflects the fact that the townspeople, including Michael, have a negative image of the hangman. And after Michael meets Smith as a fisherman, the story also emphasizes that he is "little" for many times, and describes him "so meek and quizzical". After Michael and Smith parted, Michael noticed that "he couldn't figure out why he felt so ashamed of himself". In fact, his shame stems from the innate ill will he and all the townspeople have for Smith, the belief that the hangman should be someone who appears to be fierce, tall, savage and rude. Behind this vision lies the "guilt" of the executioner's status, that is, the judgment that they are guilty of what they have done, and therefore fit the image of the profession they occupy. This small-town setting, in which everyone can judge and enforce the law, contrasts sharply with the biblical religious tradition of God as the sole judge, suggesting a decline in Christ's power.

After Smith's execution, an angry crowd surrounded him and threw rocks at him. In a behavior of profound significance, residents of the town become law enforcers themselves because of their dissatisfaction with Smith's law enforcement. In Genesis 22, Abraham sacrificed his son to show his fearest for Jehovah. When the angels stopped him, Abraham found a goat to replace his son:

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. (Genesis, 22:13)

Since then, the concept of scapegoat has become familiar. In the story, when there is a conflict between the simple sense of justice in the hearts of the crowd and the law of excessive sentencing, the excessive criminal law makes the effect of legal restraint run contrary to the legislative will. The town residents impose violence on Smith, the law enforcer, and he becomes the scapegoat of the legislator. The story of throwing rocks can also be found in the New Testament, where a group of men caught a woman who had taken in adultery and stoned her to death according to Moses in the law. Here is what Jesus judged in this case:

he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? (John, 8:4-8:10)

In the original, Jesus told the crowd that a man who thinks he is innocent can stone the adulteress, and the crowd goes away. However, in *Two Fishermen*, Smith, who is innocent but becomes the scapegoat of the legislator, is thrown stones by every “law enforcer” in the crowd, which forms a great irony. Irony, as a literary technique, refers to a kind of meaning generated by the contradiction between the appearance and reality of things. The rewriting of the stone-throwing story undermines the authority of Christ as the sole enforcer.

3. Callaghan’s Intertextual Texts and Religious Attitudes

Given Callaghan’s Catholic background into consideration, religious issues can often be found in his works. In his time, because of the confusion of “God is dead”, everyone was looking for religious substitutes in their own ways to satisfy the remaining primitive religious instincts. Barbara Pell has already mentioned in *Faith and Fiction* that Callaghan pursues grace and redemption instead of “sin, the world and the devil”. In her opinion, Callaghan “displays a ‘Christ-like’ identification with and compassion for his characters in their existential situations” [4].

Let’s start with Callaghan’s early original work. In *My Beloved*, the best of Callaghan’s earlier novels, is more explicitly Christian. Young Father Dowling is bright and enthusiastic, fired with the social controversies of the depression, impatient of the church’s inaction. When he does act by trying to rehabilitate two prostitutes, he is caught in the rift between the church’s doctrine of universal love and its temporal need to avoid scandal. The conflict is at first within the young priest, since he has been a favorite of fashionable bridge parties and fund-raising campaigns, and he occasionally doubts the purity of his own reaction to the girls. Yet his attempt is Christ-like in transmuting divine love into mundane concern for the lowest of his parishioners, even as he feels Christ must love the church though it too survives by prostituting itself to profane interest.

Callaghan’s protagonists often choose to sacrifice themselves in the conflict between religion and society. “Frequently he is sacrificed in an attempt to bring forth a new order, and not infrequently he is given explicit overtones of Christ, the new Adam” [5]. Callaghan wrote *Two Fishermen* in the 1930s, the decade known as the Dirty Thirties in Canada. At that time, millions of Canadians were left unemployed, hungry and often homeless because of the Great Depression. By 1933, 30 percent of the labor force was out of work.

At the same time, he wrote another short story, *Two Brothers*. The story echoes *Two Fishermen* in its title and character setting, but tells the exact opposite story: Frank, the older brother, escapes after committing a crime, and Tom, the younger brother, sent him back to the small town for trial after struggling with his heart. The story develops in a sequence of the two brothers’ state—disorder to order, which is in sharp contrast to the story of the two

fishermen—order to disorder. To some extent, these two opposite stories indicated the bewilderment of the author and his hesitation on religious problems.

Callaghan noticed the conflict between naturalism and Catholicism in a society where “God is dead”. Catholicism emphasizes man’s spiritual condition and his responsibility for that condition, whatever it may be. But naturalism tries to substitute for the rigorous judgment of religion upon man’s shortcomings a sympathetic account of the forces that go to make a man what he is. This is also shown in *Two Fishermen*. Michael’s betrayal is not due to his heinous nature, but due to irresistible social forces. His shame and escape are the proof that the author speaks for him. In *It’s Never Over* the figure of the priest appears prominently in the action, mainly, it seems, in order to reveal the great difficulty his orthodox religious position has in accounting for and accepting the manifest evils, injustices, and suffering that make up the story. The young priest in that novel is shaken in his comfortable faith in himself as priest and in the uprightness of the leading parishioner, Mrs. Gibbons, by his inability to cope with her incipient alcoholism. A similar situation disturbs Father Francis in the story, “A Predicament”, from *A Native Argosy*, though Callaghan’s tone is more comical this time as he describes the unfortunate young priest’s humiliating descent into worldly trickery in order to eject discreetly and peacefully an obstreperous drunk who has unwittingly invaded his confessional box.

4. Conclusion

Callaghan used a lot of biblical archetypal images and symbolism in his short story *Two Fishermen* to hide the hidden text of Christ’s loss under the surface text. From the perspective of archetypal criticism, combining with the social background and the context of *The Times*, we can make a new interpretation of his works.

Reference

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