

Analysis of Narcissism in Flannery O'Connor's *The Comforts of Home*

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's work has been discussed a lot by the literary critics these years. This article will explore the theme of Narcissism reflected in Flannery O'Connor's masterpiece *The Comforts of Home*, from the perspective of textual analysis. The author will focus on the protagonists' Narcissism, analyzing the Narcissistic love of the mother and the covert Narcissism of the son Thomas. Through discussing the theme of Narcissism and the plot of the fiction, the author will try to explore the reasons that contributed to the occurrence of Narcissism which results in the tragic life of the protagonists and further penetrate the alienation and the spiritual aridity of the Southern America from the psychological and religious points of view. The conclusion concerns on some solutions to diminish Narcissism and then gives some suggestions on how to make the relationships between people more harmonious.

Keywords

Narcissism; Covert Narcissism; Overt Narcissism; *The Comforts of Home*.

1. Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's works is becoming more and more popular these years, "In the competition of the top 50 most popular writers in America in 2013, Flannery O'Connor won the first place among the greatest writers Cheever, Ellison, Faulkner, Pynchon, and Welty." [1] As the most remarkable short story writer who contributed a lot to American literature, Flannery O'Connor depicts the life of the Southerners, penetrating the social problems and exploring the inner world of the individuals. Flannery O'Connor is such a disputable writer that many critics and scholars have discussed her fictions from almost every perspective that a literary work can be estimated. Until now, there are more than 100 books about her life and her art. However, among all the criticisms on O'Connor's works, O'Connor's Narcissism theme is not a topic that receives much attention. "Flannery O'Connor's oeuvre of short fiction is unparalleled in as such as nearly every story in her two collections contains narcissism as a salient theme." (Scheurich 537) [2] The theme of Narcissism were written in almost all of her works, so the study on her narcissism theme seems to be important and inevitable. Narcissism is a kind of symptom behaved as sensitivity to failure, characterized by self-centeredness, hubris, lack of empathy, an incomparable belief in oneself, an excessive need for admiration, and a sense of superiority over others. The word "narcissism" initially was introduced into European and American literary works, translated literally into Chinese as daffodils. It comes from a sad ancient Greek myth: the beautiful boy Narcissus saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with himself. For he was attracted by his own beauty too much, that he forgot eating and sleeping, and eventually emaciated and died. After his death he became a flower which was later called daffodils. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have borrowed the term to describe the phenomenon of someone falling in love with themselves. In O'Connor's works, the narcissists fall into two broad categories: one type are those who are overconfident

and blindly arrogant, the pseudo-Christians who think they can control everything around them; and another type are the naked, self-centered intellectual atheists who ignore the existence of others. The *Comforts of Home* which was collected in O'Connor's last collection *The Violent Bear It Away* told a tragic story of Thomas and his mother. This article will analyze the two different kinds of Narcissism happened on the mother and son, exploring the reason of the grotesque characteristics and their relations with people in their community. In O'Connor's eyes, the South is a wasted land spiritually and people are becoming more and more alienated. At the beginning of the story, the mother and son live a happy life, but the calm is broken by an intruder, Sara, a juvenile delinquent. Sara's future becomes the main conflict of the novel. The Mother insists on keeping the girl, while the son opposes the decision and that eventually leads to the tragic outcome: the son shot the mother to death. As narcissists, the mother's narcissism and the son's narcissism manifest in different forms, the former is the narcissist pursuing self-object for her self-redeem, while the latter is "covert narcissist". First, the mother here is the prototype of the mothers in O'Connor's works. They are arrogant middle-class women, trying to find self-esteem through people around them, dominating the family life and neglecting the emotions of their children, and they are the classical narcissists such as the grandmother in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Second, in O'Connor's works, there are so many intellectual narcissists such as Hulga in *Good Country People*, Ruby in *The Enduring Chill*, and Thomas in *The Comforts of Home*. These narcissists are pride and self-righteous and that eventually contributes to their tragic life. In "Narcissism and Spirituality in Flannery O'Connor's Stories", Nell Scheurich claims: "We are not aware of any better example of this than Flannery O'Connor's works. Almost any O'Connor's story could lend itself to a discussion of narcissism." (Scheurich 540) [3] So here we choose *The Comforts of Home* to analyze the narcissism theme.

2. The Mother: An Arrogant Narcissist Giving Narcissistic Love to Others

In *The Comforts of Home*, the mother's and the son's narcissism are very different in the form of expression and the pursuit of goals although both are paranoid narcissists. The bigots of the first type are all good people in the eyes of the mainstream society. They show kindness to people around them, but only regard others as their own self-object, and through which they seek their own identity and thus obtain the value of their own existence. That is to say, they seem to be decent Christians, but in essence, they could not understand the true meaning of love and could not find the meaning of survival, and had no way to redeem themselves. There is a gallery of protagonists in O'Connor's novels who are in search of "self-object". The grandmother who were shot three times in the chest in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*; the father, Sheppard, in *The Lame Shall Enter First* and Mr Head in *The Artificial Nigger* are all archetypal images of O'Connor created for the hypocritical, arrogant middle-class narcissists of the Southern America. They are self-righteous and constantly searching for their self-object. It seems that they are giving faithful love to their neighbors in their communities, however, their love is not reciprocated by others, in fact, the love they impose on others prove to be hurting inevitably. They insist on until the last moment of their life when they realize their own limitations: only God's love can save people, and their thought of charitable love, turns out to be nothing more than pure narcissism.

In *The Comforts of Home*, the mother endeavors to create her own ideal profile, everyone in her community including Thomas and Sara act as the objects where the mother could absorb nutrition for her narcissistic comforts. Behaving like a kind-hearted good woman, the mother treats people around her generously: "taking a box of candy was her favorite nice thing to do. When anyone within her social station moved to town, she called and took a box of candy; when any of her friends' children had a baby or won scholarship, she called and took a box of candy; when an old person broke his hip, she was at his bedside with a box of candy." (Collected Works

576) [4] The mother felt good about herself and was praised by all around her as a charitable, selfless and devout Christian. However, in O'Connor's eyes, the more the mother behaves like this, the worse she becomes, and the nearer she steps to her tragic destiny, because that will make her narcissism swell. When she saw Sara's picture on the dinner table, she said to her son, "Imagine, only nineteen years old, and in that filthy jail. And she doesn't look like a bad girl." (Collected Works 576) [4] So she went to the prison to bail the girl who suffered from intermittent mental illness, hoping to redeem the girl from evil through her own efforts. In spite of Thomas' objection, the mother took Sara back, and that was the beginning of the disaster of the family. Flannery O'Connor had said: "I think evil is a defective use of good" (HB 129) [5] On the surface, the mother is trying to save Sara's soul out of kindness, but in fact, it is to seek her own self-object through Sara to realize her narcissistic purpose. Because when the Bible says: "To love your neighbor", the premise is on the basis of "love yourself", but the mother did not put the girl on the equal status with her at the beginning. She was noble and upper-class, with a condescending arrogance to pity others, therefore, her efforts to save others just leads herself to the darkness of narcissism. The Bible says, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (Corinthians 13.3) [7] God is love, and without God's redemption, all acts of good cannot be recognized or accepted.

For Thomas the greatest virtue of his mother lies in: "the well-regulated house she kept and the excellent meals she served." (Collected Works 575) [4] But the intention of being a perfect profile drives her to save others. In the Christian ethics, Perston points out that "Some of the worst sins against love have been perpetrated by those who 'meant well'" (Singer98) [7] The Mother is just such a "kind person". Out of kindness, she wants to provide family warmth to Sara, a homeless girl, but she gets the return of family destruction. Her single-minded desire for goodness has created evil results. The image of the mother is the typical representative of the middle class women in the south of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. They paid attention to their appearance, and behaved their humility, kindness, compassion and generosity to help the poor, full of proud sense of superiority, playing the image of the noble southern rich ladies. O'Connor rightly pointed out that they are poor hypocritical narcissists wandering in sin, and without god's salvation they are lost lambs, unable to find the meaning of their existence. In his masterpiece *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas asserts that: "Since evil is opposed to good, it is impossible that any evil, as such should be sought. Evil may be sought accidentally, so far as it accompanies a good" (Aquinas, I, qu.19, a.9). [8] The mother took care of her son's daily life wholeheartedly and devoted all her love to her son Thomas. However, her excessive love for her son turns to evil and becomes a kind of narcissism behavior. Her son Thomas has virtually become a self-object for her to seek her sense of self-esteem, achievement and superiority. In the fiction, O'Connor expressed this view through the tongue of Thomas: "Had she been in any degree intellectual, he could have proved to her from early Christian history that no excess of virtue is justified, that a moderation of good produces likewise a moderation in evil, that if Antony of Egypt had stayed at home and attended to his sister, no devils would have plagued him." (Collected Works 575) [4] It is clear, in Thomas's eyes, the mother is not a smart mother who could understand the truth of the world so she can't make the right choice in her life and finally makes herself in trouble.

The Mother endeavors to find somebody as her self-object and invites Sara to her life. She tutors the girl and suggests the girl to enjoy some classical music, however, : "Sara paid no more attention to this advice than if it came from a parrot." (Collected Works 580) [4] In Sara's eyes the mother is just: "about seventy-five years behind the time." (Collected Works 580) [4] These ironical responses from Sara criticizes the narcissism, the innocence, the ridiculousness of the mother. She is busy in saving others and neglecting the facts that she herself is just the sinner who needs imperious salvation. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25) [9] The mother, neglecting the glory of God,

grasping his narcissism tightly until she was shot by her own son Thomas during the quarrel: "Thomas fired. The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world." (Collected Works 594) [4] and eventually the mother's narcissistic soul realizes its redemption.

3. Thomas — The Covert Narcissist Indulged in Materialism

Thomas, a 35-year-old single baby, is a historian who couldn't survive on his own. As the classical image in America southern society, Thomas is the representative of nihilism and hedonism, who has never meditate God, indulging himself in the pursuing of material entertainments. In her letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor said: "If there is any question of a symbolic redemption, it would be through the old lady who brings Thomas face to face with his own evil—which is that of putting his comfort before charity." (Collected Works 1147) [4] His strong egotism and possessiveness drive him into a pathological narcissist. His narcissism, more than his mother's, was an extreme form of self-serving and over inflated madness that had developed into a pathological mental disorder. Crockatt notes in his Freudian Introduction to Narcissism that "delirious narcissists, like Narcissus, seem trapped in their own subjective world." [10] As a spiritual and physical refuge, Thomas lives a secluded life, relying on her mother and refusing to communicate with others. What he cares about is only his own benefits ignoring the interests and existence of others. And meanwhile he is thirsty for reputation and admiration from people around him. His narcissism is triggered when his mother brings home Sara, a homeless girl. He felt frustrated, suffocated and despairing not only because his territory was being invaded by outsiders and his original life was being broken but also because he could not enjoy the integrity love from his mother. Then, he thinks out many ways to drive the stray girl out of his family, and try to restore the original environment. However, his mother is also a paranoiac and refuses to compromise with Thomas, which leads to a sharp conflict that ends in tragedy.

"The covert narcissists have a fragile grandiose self that is exquisitely sensitive to input from the environment. Covert narcissists are likely to appear timid and inhibited." [11]

Thomas, the covert narcissist, is arrogant in his domestic space, worrying about sharing his home and his mother's love with others, refusing to accept things from the outside world. Just Like Narcissus in ancient Greek mythology, Thomas spends his days in self-appreciation and defends his private territory: the home, the last refuge for him, like an ostrich burying his head in the sand. The comfortable home is: "workshop, church, as personal as the shell of a turtle and as necessary." (Collected Works 585) [4] The intrusion of Sara drives him crazy and triggers his narcissistic characteristics. When Thomas found his room was invaded, he behaves grotesque: "sprung out of his bed and snatched a straight chair and then he had backed her out the door, holding the chair in front of him like an animal trainer driving out a dangerous animal." (Collected Works 574) [4] Through the vivid description, it seems a sensitive coward is standing face to face with us. Facing the uninvited intruder, Thomas, the covert narcissist behaves strangely, exaggeratedly, and irrationally, like an intermittent psychopath. A pathological narcissist suffers from "excessive self-reference and self-centeredness and grandiosity, reflected in exhibitionist tendencies, a sense of superiority, recklessness, and ambitions that are inordinate in view of what they can actually achieve." [12]

Before the intrusion of Sara, Thomas was the sun of the family and he was served well there. When the comforts of home is threatened, he becomes outraged and his evil hidden in his soul is stimulated completely. Just like Hamlet, Thomas delays his action at the beginning of the story because of his weakness. In order to promote the plot to its climax, O'Connor arranges an invisible hero in the fiction—the ghost of Thomas' father, who gives Thomas courage to commit sins at every crucial point when Thomas feels too guilty to hurt Sara. On the first sight of Sara, Thomas felt so grieved that: "it was the first time in his thirty-five years...He felt a sudden

burning moisture behind his eyes.”(Collected Works 573) [4] Although he is out of rage, Thomas, with his melancholy and weakness, decides to solve the problem through a soft way. He asks his mother to send the girl back to jail, however, his mother refuses his proposal and even finds a job for Sara. After Sara is fired for her drunken behavior, Thomas begins to torture her and trying to drive her out of his house. Sara cuts herself with a knife and later the mother hides all of the sharp things, while Thomas declares: “The gun is in my drawer, and I will not lock it up. If she shoots herself, so much the better.” (Collected Works587) [4] In fact, it was the ghost of his father who allures him to scream out these words, and the appearance of ghost is a symbol of the evil hidden in Thomas’ deep heart. During the conflicts between good and evil, Thomas’ narcissism drives him to choose evil. Now, Thomas displays the distinct feature of a narcissist, lacking of empathy, keeping himself secluded, wanting the admiration from the people around them, dominating all the thing according to his own will. “narcissists are prone to lying, manipulating, deceiving, causing moral and physical violence, with the obvious outcome of destroying the lives of their dearest and closest ones.”[13] Thomas becomes blind and what he concerns is just the material enjoyment, putting his comforts above, and becoming cruel to his dear mother. For his comfortable life, he discarded all of the virtue principles, and even worse, he plans to do something illogical to drive Sara out of the house mercilessly. He turns from a respectable scholar to an evil man without empathy. It is just his narcissism that drive him to the morass of crime. In order to end his nightmare, Thomas takes actions step by step, at first, he imagines many fantastic ways to get rid of Sara, such as discarding her on the highway after she was drunken. But he has no courage to do so evil thing. He is waiting for the proper excuse. The chance comes when he finds his gun was gone, the ghost of his father appears and prompts him to charge Sara for stealing his gun. Thomas obeys the ghost’s suggestion, and calls the police. However, when the police comes, the gun was returned by Sara to his drawer. At this crucial point, Thomas could stop his progress in falling into evil, but the ghost urges him to put the gun into the Sara’s purse before the coming of the police, and then Sara will be taken away by the policeman. Now, the temple of Thomas’ moral is broken completely, and he put the gun into Sara’s purse promptly and that arouses the rebellion of Sara. During the quarrel, Sara disclosed his crime and that astounded the mother: “Thomas would not put a gun in your purse, Thomas is a gentleman.” (Collected Works 593) [4] With these words, the mother was shot to death by her own son Thomas and: “the blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world, and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order.” (Collected Works 597) [4] Even before her death, the mother is reluctant to believe that her dear son, a respectable historian, has indulged in the sin of darkness so deeply. The blast of the gun puts the story to its climax, and Thomas’ pathological narcissism develops to its extreme point.

4. Conclusion

In *The Comfort of Home*, neither the mother who give narcissistic love to others, nor Thomas the intellectual covert narcissist can escape their destiny. They are the common people in the 1960s century living a wealthy life, however, their spiritual life is ruined, losing the ability of love, wondering in material world without directions. In this fiction, O’Connor adopts modernist writing techniques, such as exaggeration, symbolism, metaphor and irony, to depicta narcissistic motherand son. It vividly depicts the life scenes of morbid middle-class families in Southern America and the fierce conflicts caused by narcissism. It’s known that in the 1960s, the southern America was enveloped by an atmosphere of alienation and indifference, and that kind of social reality disappointed Flannery O’Connor. In *Flannery O’Connor and the Culture of the Cold War*, Joan Lance Bacon, a renowned critic, argues that “her era was morally corrupt and distorted”. Living in the south, O’Connor felt suffocated and she put the emotions into her works, drawing pictures of theses selfish, hypocritical, self-satisfied, conceited and morbid

narcissists, and unfolding a morbid social scene to the world. As a catholic woman writer, O'Connor smells that people are losing the faith on God gradually and going to church is becoming a kind of routine without the right communication with God. The loss of humility and reverence leads to the profound arrogance and dilatation of the individuals, and that triggers the religious crises in the Southern society. Just like George Eliot describes in *Waste Land*, the whole American south are falling into psychopathy and spiritual crisis and that resulted in the spreading of narcissism. As the woman prophet in American south, Flannery O'Connor tries to find the way for the narcissists on how to step out of their dilemma. According to O'Connor's view, the intellectual knowledge and the materialistic enjoyment could not bring people the happy life. What the narcissists should do is to contemplating God and find their own way in communicating with God. Only through the grace of God, can the narcissists live a harmonious and peaceful life.

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Conflicts of Interest

This author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication this paper.

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