

The Evolution of the Motif of “Father and Son” in Jewish Literature in the 20th Century

Yijun Fan^{1, a}

¹Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China

^aiammollyvan@163.com

Abstract

On basis of theories of absurdity, modernity and post-colonialism, this paper attempts to explore the changes and development of “father and son” in the 20th century. The *Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka's literary masterpiece, is a successful example of writing “father and son” by using the absurd technique. “Father and son” is still hot in the 20th century, Works of Beckett, Miller, bellow, roth... reveal the influence of Kafka absurd style, writing all kinds of absurd stories full of black humor to tell the alienation of “father and son” problem. In this century's literary history, there are also many alienated father-son images that have created success. These anxious and painful characters are sick because of the alienated father-son relationship, but they can still have a large number of crowds today, because modern people are also trapped in spiritual alienation and belief crisis. The tendency of Jewish writers to rely on absurd techniques reveals their contradictory ethical thinking and complex interpersonal paradigm, and also reflects the deeper moral self of this group. This paper focuses on the comparison and discussion of the theme evolution and the characters image under the absurd technique of the writers, and also discusses the evolution process of this motif.

Keywords

Jewish literature; father and son; Franz Kafka; Arthur Miller; Philip Roth; Joseph Heller.

1. “Father and Son” as the Origin of Cultural Motif

“The motif of “father and son” is an important part of Hebrew culture. It has a long history and finally precipitates into one of the cultural genes of the Jewish nation, which is reflected in literary works [1]. The motif of “father and son” is mainly manifested in the contradiction and conflict between father and son. The source of this conflict is complex, which can be explained from three aspects: 1) Ancient Jewish law: the scholar Gilat believes that “Medieval Jewish law adheres to the ancient concept that fathers have exclusive rights over their children in all fields.” [2] Other family members “give way to their father in everything, even when he insults or attacks you” [3]. If a son does not obey his orders or questions his authority in front of his father, he will be severely punished by the law. “Anyone who refuses his father should be executed immediately without trial” [4]; 2) The moral guidance of the Bible. As the core of Hebrew culture, the Bible further strengthens and consolidates the authority of the father in culture. When it comes to children's affairs, the Bible almost grants absolute power to fathers, and can even decide the life and death of their children [5]. For example, when Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his son, he could directly decide to sacrifice his son without consulting his wife. Jonathan, King Saul's son, was considered by his father to be put to death for violating his father's oath; 3) The curse of the mystery of Oedipus. It is an ancient curse legend that King Oedipus killed his father by mistake and married his mother. The tragedy of “patricide” is inevitable. Even though human wisdom and rationality are constantly upgrading and developing, the old forces must face the moment of change and alternation, “patricide” has

become an important link of alternation. The new forces must overthrow the old forces to mean the completion of this ceremony [6]. Therefore, the conflict between “father and son” is a heroic tragedy that human beings can not escape in the sense of mythology. It has precipitated into an eternal theme through various literary forms.

In the expression of the theme of “father and son” in Jewish literature, the absurd technique has been favored by many authors. Absurdity, as a traditional writing skill in literature, has long existed, such as comedy and improvisation in ancient drama, but the reason why it received renewed attention in the 20th century is more from the special cultural mechanism faced by the Jewish people at that time [7]. The Latin etymology of “absurd” is “sudrus”, which means “deaf”, unable to understand the external discourse and express their own views. The survival dilemma of the Jewish nation has become the internal motivation of its enthusiasm for absurd techniques. Since the two Jewish wars, the Jewish nation has experienced thousands of years of diaspora history. Living in other countries for a long time, they often need to hide their national personality and cultural characteristics in order to integrate smoothly into the local culture. Western Jewish writers such as Franz Kafka, Bellow, Roth and Heller choose an obscure way to express the implied Jewish theme; At the same time, Jewish immigrants have been caught in the conflict between two different cultures for a long time, and are constantly facing the threat of assimilation by heterogeneous cultures. The confusion of identity and personal alienation have become the eternal plot of Jews; In addition, the deep-rooted anti-Semitic tradition in Christian society makes the exclusion of Jews a socially recognized thinking pattern. Liu Hongyi once pointed out in his article that Jews are always a special existence as an alien, a determiner and a denied object, which is related to its surrounding culture. The fact that Jewish life exists in the Christian world itself is a great absurdity.

2. Early “Father and Son” Motif

Kafka is a classic writer who wrote the motif of “father and son”. His book *The Metamorphosis*, published in 1915, is a pioneer work of using absurd techniques to express the alienation of father-son relationship. When the publishing house designed the cover of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka sent a special letter asking “don not draw that insect on the cover” and replaced it with the scene of a young man running away from home crying [8]. The conflict between father and son in *The Metamorphosis* has an irreversible impact on the protagonist's fate every time. After the protagonist Gregor was found to be a flea by his family, his father not only did not show pain and worry, but turned a blind eye to his son's tragic experience, even deprived him of his treatment as a human being and completely regarded him as an abominable livestock, “Every moment, my father may beat him to death with his walking stick, or on his back, or on his head.” [9] Finally, Gregor's wound festered because of the rotten apple his father hit on his back, which indirectly led to his death.

Gregor's father was a king. After his son became a flea, he did not care about the reasons for his deformation, nor did he take care of his son who lost his ability to take care of himself, nor did he take into account Gregor's loneliness and fear. But his son Gregor never contradicted or resisted his father's oppression from beginning to end. He even felt guilty and sad because his deformation increased his father's family burden, “If want to meet daily expenses, must make money. Although father was in good health, he was old, not to mention that he had not worked for five years... Gregor left the door and threw himself on the leather sofa next to the door, because he was hot with shame and sadness.” [10] On the one hand, the son's extremely strong respect and fear for his father led him to regard the oppression of his father after he lost his ability to support his family as his due punishment, and the plot that he should finally be beaten on the back by his father is similar to Oedipus's atonement of self-stabbing his eyes and exiling himself; On the other hand, Gregor has worked hard every day for five years to pay his family's

bills. He has fantasized about turning himself into an insect countless times to get rid of the suffering life. Therefore, his deformation also symbolizes the squeezing and alienation of individuals in modern industrial society. People lose their personal freedom and once ideal, and are just an alienation machine for manufacturing objects and creating wealth.

Mr. Ye Tingfang, an expert in the translation of Kafka's works from China, once pointed out: "most people familiar with Kafka have a prominent feeling: his relationship with his father has always been very tense, and there is a strong projection in his creation." [11] In 1924, Letter to My Father, Franz Kafka wrote at the beginning of the article that "when I write a letter, my fear and consequences of you also block my writing, and the amount of materials has far exceeded my memory and understanding." [12] In this 100 page letter, the author accuses how the father's autocracy destroyed his normal life and the failure of marriage, and finally led to the irreparable situation of the father son relationship. "Because I respect your opinion too much, failure is inevitable. I lose my self-confidence, I swing and doubt... And you are very powerful in front of me, and you use all your power." [13] In *The Trial*, the protagonist Gregor, with love and respect for his father, "dear parents, I have always loved you", threw himself into the river in accordance with his father's "judgment"; In *The Castle*, Kafka tells the story of Surveyors K trying to enter the castle. Scholar Dou Yan once pointed out in his article that "Castle" symbolizes the absoluteness of the authority of "father / God", and K has deep-rooted fear and inferiority complex about it in his heart. [14] *The Castle* has no end, and the protagonist K is still waiting for his doomsday judgment. When Jewish biblical literature depicts the end of the world, the breakdown of the relationship between parents and children is often one of the signs of the coming of the end. In Jewish tradition, father son relationship is almost the most important social relationship, so that when creators try to describe the suffering of the end, the worst they can think of is the rupture of father son relationship.

Kafka tried to publish three works including *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* under the title of *The Sons* because he thought "These novels are a whole in terms of their external form and internal spirit. There is an open and more hidden connection between them. Only by using the word SONS can we accurately summarize and express this connection." [15] The image of uncommunicable father confesses Kafka's personal crisis and implies the problem that Kafka can't solve in real life - that is, the alienation between him and his father. First, the father image, like the king, has the divinity of God and is the secular symbol of God. Especially for a child, the father's power, like the power of God, seems to be absolute authority. The conflict and alienation between father and son is essentially the alienation between human beings and spiritual God, which leads to the absence of son's spirit and belief; Second, patriarchy represents a strong bureaucratic system. The father plays the role of dictator and ruler in the father son relationship. They can make any punitive judgment on the disobedience of their son. Sons are in an absolutely weak position, and they must unconditionally accept the punishment of their father.

3. The Great Depression: Collapse

Arthur Miller published two books successively in 1949, including *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons*. The image of the father in the book and the image of the deified father in Kafka's book began to change, and their image was full of the anxiety and inferiority of losers, They face the questioning and betrayal of their wives and sons. In the motif of father and son, the father is pulled down from the altar by the writer and becomes an ordinary mortal, even a pathetic person worthy of sympathy. In 1929, the United States had the most serious economic crisis in history. The unemployment rate reached a record 25% in 1933, which meant that one in four people was unemployed. Many male labor forces lost their jobs to support their families in the financial crisis.

The father of Arthur Miller went bankrupt and lost his job in the economic crisis and never recovered. Before that, Miller's father ran a fashion shop in New York and made a lot of money [16]. He not only gave the Miller family a decent middle-class life, but also supported the families of dozens of Irish Jewish immigrants in the store. Like the employees in his father's shop, little Miller was full of awe and worship for his father. Because his father was illiterate, he even doubted the necessity of reading. After his father lost his job, the burden of the family was transferred to his mother, and their living place was moved to a cabin in Brooklyn, a slum. His father's temperament became more eccentric and sensitive, and he remained silent all day. Such a change made Miller's image of his father plummet. Father is no longer a deified idol, but an ordinary person, which also triggered his creation of the image of the loser's father. In the *Death of a Salesman*, Willy, the protagonist, has the shadow of the author's father. He used to be a little famous salesman. In 1928, he could get a salary of up to \$170 a week. He is a prestigious figure in the community. Willie described to his two sons, "when I raise you two little guys, you'll be popular everywhere. Why? Just because I have friends. Children, in New England, I can park my car on any road, and the police there protect it like their own car." [17] After the great depression, he could only earn less than \$40 a week and worried about unemployment every day. This is unacceptable to men in a society that believes in the principles of elite management and upward wealth in the United States. They believe in the Darwinian philosophy of the survival of the strong, It was this philosophy that inspired and stimulated men throughout the United States to realize their American dream.

The decline of the father's economic status led to their position in the son's heart began to shake. Like the characters in Kafka's book, the sons used to regard their father as an authoritative God, respect him emotionally and look up to him morally. Just as Chris and Willie expressed their dependence and respect for their father, "I never treat you as an ordinary person." [18] "I was too young when my father left. I didn't have a chance to talk to him, so I still feel like I have no roots." [19] The image of the father like god suddenly collapsed. The sons who once took the father as the target and example felt confused and hesitant. Even the mother began to challenge the father's authority. In *After the Fall* published in 1964, the father suffered a business failure, and even his wife abused him "we should get a divorce" and "you idiot" [20]. Because fathers have become the weak in society and the obedient in the family, this psychological gap has created a huge gap in their son's heart. Sons will not implement their father's arrangements and instructions as before. They began to doubt the correctness of their father's previous teaching, and even blamed their own failure on the wrong cognition transmitted by fathers to them. If the father makes another moral mistake at this time, the son's inner confusion and hesitation will intensify into anger and resistance. After Biff caught his father breaking his extramarital relationship with a Boston woman, he had a fierce conflict with his father. Even in some literary works, the image of father began to stain.

The image of the father fell down from the altar and even became a tainted villain. The sons feel cheated and betrayed. They have always regarded their father as their idol, which is difficult for them to accept. In *All My Sons*, Chris finally found that his father Keller was the source of all sins. His father was opportunistic and shoddy in the production of aircraft engines, resulting in the death of 21 pilots. He blamed all crimes on his old friend Steve and made him serve his sentence to this day. "I know you are not worse than most people, but I thought you were better. I can't look at you like this now, and I can't look at myself." [21] As a father, Keller expressed his inner collapse and despair incisively and vividly in the face of his son's abandonment after the matter was exposed, "but he won't abandon me, although... He won't abandon me... Will he?" [22] The stability of the relationship between father and son comes from the son's loyalty to the father and the father's authority. When the father realizes his son's betrayal and contempt, their pride and confidence are in danger of collapse. Willy felt ashamed because his son broke up his extramarital affair, and even chose to commit suicide to preserve his last father's dignity. Before

he committed suicide, he still asked himself, "How -- How can you think of it? Biff -- He has loves for me!" [23] Father Willy could not confirm his son's attitude. Mixed with pain and doubt, he chose suicide to complete his last efforts as a father, that is to say, he relied on suicide to reshape his glorious image in his son's heart. He wanted to be a respected and authoritative father again. By committing suicide, he can leave his son a considerable insurance fund, which is the only way he can think of to regain his status now. This seemingly absurd plot implies the decline of patriarchy. Willy's way of recovering patriarchy through suicide insurance seems ridiculous and pathetic.

Arthur Miller is called "American conscience". He is good at showing the ethical and moral conflicts and changes in social atmosphere in his works. His preference for father son relationship and the shaping of the image of the loser's father in ethical discussion.[24] On the one hand, it is because he inherited the writing tradition of father and son motif in Jewish literature to a certain extent. Liu Hongyi pointed out in the essentials of Jewish culture that Arthur Miller set a typical character theme in American Jewish Literature - father and son theme. In American Jewish literature, one of the most important motifs is to describe the father son relationship in Jewish family; On the other hand, it is because he released the depression brought to him by the real father son relationship in literature. "Miller placed his Jewish nature, identity and self exploration on this family in his subconscious mind, which is the search for a way out of suffering." [25] When writing the Death of a Salesman, he once said, "when writing this play, I put aside all my concerns and always pursue to write the content that reflects the truth... This play has maintained its influence because it reflects all kinds of self contradictory phenomena in this ethical chaotic modern society, including self contradictions in spiritual life." [26] In the era of Miller's life, the father's divine aura gradually faded and became an ordinary person. The alienated relationship between son and father became more serious under the background of the great depression, but it was also full of contradictions. The relationship between father and son was both dependent and antagonistic. Through the father's suicide, the motif of "father and son" is discussed from the perspective of modern human sociality and industrial alienation, "Willy's failure can only explain the tragic situation of people in the industrial age: people have become non-human people, people are just an economic unit, and a salesman is just a tool to sell goods. In addition, people have no other meaning. This is a real display of people's living conditions in the industrial age and the post industrial age, which can play a thought-provoking and sobering role and has universal human significance characteristics". [27]

4. The Later Stage: Regression Trend

In 1972, Philip Roth published *The Breast*, which tells the absurd story that university professor David suddenly turned into a huge breast weighing 255 pounds one day due to the long-term attack of reason and desire. David's variant is similar to Gregor's variant in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Hong Chunmei, a domestic scholar, once pointed out in her article "in laws" of Philip Roth, "Roth obviously absorbed some modernist techniques of Kafka. Roth's works of the third period, *The Breast*, *My Life as A Man* and *The Professor of Desire*, are variants of Kafka style stories, of which *The Breast* is most like *The Metamorphosis*." [28] We can also find favorable evidence for this argument in *The Breast*. David once analyzed the root cause of his transformation into breast with his doctor. He attributed the reason to the European and American literature courses he taught, "they implanted some ideas into my brain. I teach Gogol and Kafka every year - *The Nose* and *The Metamorphosis*." [29] Roth was deeply influenced by Kafka's absurd thoughts when he came into contact with Kafka's works in his early years. A portrait of Kafka was hung on the wall of his study. This view can also be verified by another work published by Roth in 2010, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*. The book

contains 100 interviews with famous writers, which was pointed out by Daneil medin, a foreign scholar studying Roth, "After analyzing its contents, American researchers concluded that only two of them did not directly or indirectly mention Kafka, and most of them could be named as the response to Kafka." [30] Although Roth's *The Breast* is a parody of Kafka's absurd techniques, due to the different times, the situation of Jews and Jewish families have also changed greatly, and the protagonist's father shows more pain and warmth to his son's tragic experience. Even though, the father was worried about the pain because of David's transformation, in order to take care of his son's mood, he calmly rushed to the hospital to see and take care of David every day. His courage and strength exceeded his son's imagination and made his son sigh that he had never really understood his father, "My father's courage is amazing. I don't know how to explain this. I can only say that I never knew him. No one knew him... In the face of such a terrible situation, this face showed calm and calm. Who would have thought it came from the face of a man who ran a low-class Hotel in South farsburg, New York?" [31] David recalled his father's hard life, started as a cook with his own hands, worked hard to support his family and established himself in American society. But his father's boring routine aroused his disgust for his father. His father's cognition was always limited to his Jewish circle and other immigrant friends. In his father's eyes, "it is difficult to understand the marriage of a Jew and an Egyptian" [32].

The father wants to narrow the distance with his son by sharing his daily life, and the son also wants to recall his father's past to understand his father's difficulties. However, because the two generations have completely different life experiences and education, there are many obstacles to their communication. The previous generation still lives in their own immigrant Jewish community, but the next generation feels fresh and curious about the outside world, Gradually began to learn to accept the modern things and ideas of American society. Two years after his father's death, in 1991, Roth himself published a documentary novel called *Patrimony—A True Story*, the book truly and in detail restores the time spent with Roth and his father in the last period of his death, and shows the real communication state of an ordinary Jewish father and son in real life. They want to reconcile and get close to each other, but there is always a gap, showing a touch of sadness and melancholy. The same sentiment is expressed in Michael Chabon's prose collection *Manhood For Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and son*, the author writes the warm memories of the Jewish family in the past and the difficult times and months of the grandparents in the way of memory, and tells the family affection, communication failure and regret between the two generations in the Jewish family in a peaceful way. Jewish culture and tradition are gradually losing in the process of immigration, and the family and clan relations connected with it are not closer than in the past, and even are going to perish. In 1997, Chabon also published an essay entitled *The Guide Book To A Land Of Ghosts*, The story revolves around a book called *Say It In Yiddish*, which the author bought in a bookstore. Yiddish was once the blood of Jews and played a very important role in Jewish culture, but now which country in the world still speaks Yiddish? Where should the author go with such a book? Yiddish has been lost and there is nowhere to go with this manual. The living space of Jews has become more subtle in the post colonial era. The Western governments are holding the slogan of pluralism, and Jewish Renaissance is gradually rising. However, in reality, the once powerful gene culture of Jews is gradually disappearing, In addition, the once strong and domineering fathers also died one by one, which makes the writers show the sadness and nostalgia rarely shown by the previous generation of writers when expressing the "father and son" motif.

With the weakening of the role of father, the significance of mother was gradually valued and emphasized by writers in the writing of the motif of "father and son" in this period. In the past Jewish literature, the image of mother was always portrayed as obedient, stubborn and ignorant. "The stereotype of Jewish mother and Jewish woman is a common stereotype, which

usually includes nagging, noisy, talkative, overprotective, suffocating and bossy mother or wife.”[33] At the same time, under the Jewish secular view, the father is the first choice of family custody, and the mother can not be compared with the father in family status. Although they are guardians, the mother's guardianship right is a derivative right given to her by marriage. If the mother decides to dissolve the marriage with the father, the father can recover this right, and the mother will lose custody of her children. The mother can take over this right only if custody is transferred due to the death of the father. The transformation of mother's image was closely related to the atmosphere of the times. At that time, the feminist movement in the western world was in full swing. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*, which challenged the male society and sexual class system. Then, American feminist Kate millit published *Sexual Politics* in 1970, which introduced the concept of “PATRIARCHY” for the first time, She believes that modern people should get rid of the shackles of patriarchy. This ideological trend makes many female writers begin to create a bright new female image. At the same time, male writers begin to adjust their definition and writing of female roles. In *The Plot Against America* published by Philip Roth in 2004, the author created the image of a strong and brave mother who acted as the protector of children when her father was “ABSENT”. Roth’s neighbor, a widowed mother was beaten to death by anti Semites in Kentucky. After learning the news, Roth’s mother did everything to protect the orphan and took him to her side, “That night, my mother was like a battle commander commanding selton to cook for herself and prepare him for departure.”[34] Roth’s father collapsed because his eldest son sandy defected from the anti Semitic group and had a violent conflict with him, “ The first time I saw my father cry, it was a milestone in my childhood. It was more unbearable than my own tears... I began a new life. I watched my father collapse... He cried with his mouth open like an abandoned baby and a tortured man because he was unable to prevent unforeseen things.” [35] Mary Chapman once pointed out that “Traditionally... Father’s crying symbolizes that his father has lost control; he just cries, but yells without self blame. His father, as a man and head of the family, should know what to do, and his failure in this situation can frighten the boy.” [36] Finally, the mother slapped the disobedient and unfilial children to protect the father’s dignity and the crumbling family. The rise of the mother’s image and women’s power are not only the modern transformation of the father and son motif at the end of the 20th century, but also another manifestation of the change of the Jewish father and son motif in this period.

5. Conclusion

After entering the 20th century, the motif of “father and son” in Jewish Literature experienced the stage of absolute authority in the early stage, alienation and opposition in the transitional period, and finally ushered in the return of Judaism and the birth of modernity. The changes in each stage are closely related to the political and economic situation, the historical situation of Judea and the ideological trend at that time. As an ancient literary motif, why does father and son still have strong vitality today? This is related to its strong modernity and symbolism. Sophocles once pointed out that the essence of Oedipus’ patricide tragedy is that human beings try to rule their political and social life with their own rationality, but they can not overcome the tease of fate. In the social forces, the father represents the ancient things and rules, and the son represents the new world and forces. The confrontation and game between the old and new forces eventually lead to the conflict between the father and the son. “In ‘alienated father and son’, the relationship between father and son shows the opposition and conflict of the power of alien relationship, that is, it shows the relationship between ‘individual / son’ and ‘alien relationship power / father’ from resistance to obedience, and shows the alienated situation and feeling of ‘individual / son’.”[37] At the same time, it is an inevitable trend for new things to replace old things, so the conflict between father and son has become an inevitable tragedy repeated from generation to generation, which has its significance in every era.

At the same time, the “father and son” motif written by Jewish writers has strong universality and humanistic color, which makes them stand out on the stage of world literature. The long-term diaspora and suffering history of the Jewish nation condenses the survival dilemma of the whole mankind, so they have more experience and understanding of family relations and father son conflict. American critic Gribstein once said: “for a deeper understanding of the true meaning of life, who can better educate us than the Jews? These most experienced and experienced suffering people.”[38] In the 20th century, Bellow, Malamud and other prestigious Jewish writers put forward the creative concept of “Everyone is Jewish”, encouraging Jewish writers to get rid of the narrowness of ethnic minorities and think about literary issues in the universal thinking of all mankind, so as to disseminate a lot of in-depth thinking about individuals, communities, races and even the level of human civilization. “Surpassing Judaism” has become a popular creative emotion among Jewish writers in the 20th century. Therefore, when writing the motif of “father and son”, writers also began to try to shift their brush strokes from the stalemate between two generations to the consideration of the whole national family ecology. With the help of the absurd theme of alienated father and son, they took the plight of Jews as a symbol of the spiritual plight of the whole modern people, This paper attempts to explore the eternal and universal philosophical connotation under the problem of father son alienation.

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