

The Distance and the Beauty

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Date of publication (dd/mm/yyyy): 05/05/2017

Abstract – Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) was a major American novelist of the early 20th century. His works use emotional melodies as the inner structure. He selects topics from real life with bold, unrestrained, and lyrical color. The short story *The Far and the Near* is one of his masterpieces. It shows the philosophical meaning and aesthetic pursuit by way of situation design of the contradiction between the far and the near. It also shows the various artistic styles of the author.

Keywords – Thomas Wolfe, Distance, Beauty, Situation Design, Romantic Style, Philosophical Meaning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Wolfe's life is one of the colorful legends in modern American literature. Within his short lifetime, Wolfe wrote four lengthy novels, plus many short stories, dramatic works and novellas. He is known for mixing highly original, poetic, rhapsodic, and impressionistic prose with autobiographical writing. His books, written and published from the 1920s to the 1940s, vividly reflect on American culture and the mores of that period, albeit filtered through Wolfe's sensitive, sophisticated and hyper-analytical perspective. (Reeves, P., 1974; Wang L. M. 2016).

The short story *The Far and the Near* is one of the masterpieces of Thomas Wolfe. It reflects a delicate and significant style to tell you a romantic story. It not only has rich aesthetic connotations but also gives extensive expressions to the thinking of society and life. The story starts out with a description of a little town, which contains a small cottage on its outskirts. Every day, after two o'clock in the afternoon, an express train passes by the cottage. For more than twenty years, the train engineer blows his whistle, prompting a woman inside the cottage to come out on her porch and wave to him. Over this time, the woman's little girl grows up, and she joins her mother in waving to the engineer. The engineer grows old during this time and sees a lot of tragic accidents during his service for the railroad, including four fatal accidents on the tracks in front of him. Throughout all of this tragedy, however, he remains focused on the vision of the cottage and the two women, the image that he thinks is beautiful and unchangeable. He has a father's love for the young woman and, after so many thousands of trips past their cottage, feels that he knows the women's life completely. [2] "That day came." He goes to "the same woman who had waved to him so many thousand times... and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt." [3] As he departs, "he knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's

desire, could never be got again." [3]

II. THE FAR AND THE NEAR

Originally, the "far" and the "near" are concepts of physical distance. It exists objectively, and it is measured by means of scientific criteria. When it comes to feelings, however, the measurement criteria of the "far" and the "near" is entirely and totally different. The "far" can become "near" and the "near" can become "far". As the story begins, the living environment of the two women is far for the engineer. He never gets close to them. He has never seen their appearances clearly. He has only seen them out and away, though "he had seen them in a thousand lights, a hundred weathers. He had seen them through the harsh light of wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth, and he had seen them again in the green luring sorcery of April." [3] But in the circumstance of "the harsh light of wintry gray" has he seen them clearly? Probably not. For the engineer, the mother and daughter are strangers. Their relationship is far. And as for the mother and daughter, they don't know the engineer, either. If it is not this engineer who is on the train, if someone else is on the train, they will do the same. So the engineer is also a stranger to them. But the care and focus from a stranger produce huge warmth in each others' hearts. For the engineer, the long journey, the lonely carriage and being away from his family, the loneliness is self-evident. And at this time, the two figures of the mother and daughter, the friendly and enthusiastic hands they reach out are greatest comfort to the engineer. Twenty years as a day, the engineer witnesses the girl's growth, and enjoys the girl's friendliness and enthusiasm. All this undoubtedly pushes his heart to the mother and daughter. Even the "tidy little cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds" [3] becomes a comfort in his long journey. As soon as he sees cottage and the two women, he will have a feeling of unique happiness he has never had. In his heart the two women and the place are near. And the mother and daughter also enjoys a kind of warmth from a stranger. If it were a sense of freshness, how could he have kept it for such a long time. "Every day for more than twenty years, as the train had approached this cottage, the engineer had blown on the whistle, and every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little cottage and waved to him." [3] The woman's waving seems to tell us: the engineer's care and focus from the far have become an indispensable part in the woman's life, and the train has become a place for the woman to release her love. A woman, a girl, and a rise of land that swept back from the railway, and the tidy little cottage of white boards, perhaps

their life also needs some warmth and care. So the hearts of the mother and daughter are set on the engineer. The distance is heart to heart between the two strangers. They are transmitting warmth each other. In fact, the distance of their hearts is not to be measured by the physical distance. The psychological distance is different under the influence of feelings: the “far” can become “near” and the “near” can become “far”. However, how can man, the social animal, be content with natural harmony. Man needs communication. Man needs care. Man needs each other’s warmth. But contrary to expectations, when the engineer goes to see the two women at last “he was sorry he had come” because “her face was harsh and pinched and meager; the flesh sagged wearily in shallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt.” [3] The engineer is disappointed at all this as if a wall appears between their intimate hearts. This interpersonal distrust makes their relationship farther instantly. The care and focus in the twenty years disappear completely, remaining only confusion, doubt and hopelessness. At this very moment, their psychological distance is far although they are standing face to face. There is a poem named “The Far and the Near” by the famous Chinese poet Gu Cheng (1956-1993). It reads, “You look at me one moment/ And at clouds the next/ When you’re looking at me/ You’re far away/ But when you’re looking at the clouds/ You are nearer.” “This is different in approach but equally satisfactory in result. It expresses the original intimacy of human beings toward nature and the chronic cautions and fear between human beings.” [4] The poet Gu Cheng realizes a profound meaning in an instant misconception: the harmony between man and nature and the coldness between man and man. [5]

III. GAINS AND LOSINGS

Flowers’ blooming and fading have their own time. Everything has its own gains and losings. As Rabindranath Tagore once said, “If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars.” Some things are destined to have nothing to do with you. Even if you insist on them, they will be away from you. Some people are destined to be passers-by in life. Even if you are reluctant to leave them, all hopes will become empty. In this big world we cannot own too many possessions. And endless desires will bury the original happiness. If you want to catch everything, you will lose everything. [6]

Either in life or in work, sometimes we have to face the gap between expectation and reality. In the story *The Far and the Near*, the changes of the engineer’s feelings make us think of the problem of gains and losings in life. In the past twenty years the woman’s enthusiasm and warmth have been accompanying the engineer, accompanying him to get through a lot of difficulties: “The ghastly dot of tragedy; a light spring wagon filled with children, with its clustered row of small stunned faces; a cheap automobile stalled up the tracks – all this he had seen and known.” [3] And all has not impressed the engineer so much as the mother and daughter have. In the twenty years, this impression has become happy and enduring as if it will never change. The care from the mother and daughter has a

sign in the engineer’s life. Of course, it is also a gain. So, although they have never had a chance to see each other, the engineer has had the tenderness that a man might feel for his own children. In his heart, he seems to have known every minute and every second in their life. That’s why he decides to visit them after he retires. In his heart he seems to have gained the feeling of twenty years. Who’d think this feeling is only his supreme good pursuit in his heart. He does not know that this world is imperfect and there is a gap between ideal and reality.

There is a kind of distance that we want to lengthen. That is the distance between life and death. There is a kind of distance that we want to shorten. That is the distance between man and man. The cause of tragedy is the engineer’s extravagant wishes. He wants to fill the gap between ideal and reality. He does not know how far the “far” is. And he does not know how near the “near” is, either. At this time, the far and the near are so alike. He even cannot distinguish which one is near and which one is far. The far and the near seem to be an integral whole. They coexist. But unfortunately, he does not realize that coming near from the far opens the distance from the near to the far. What is coming near is the bodies, but what is leaving apart is the hearts. When he sees that “her face was harsh and pinched and meager; the flesh sagged wearily in shallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt” instead of being welcomed freely and courageously, what he feels is not “the most extraordinary happiness” but “the horror of regret, confusion, disbelief.” Then he denies what he once had. He feels confused. All this “drowns all his former joy and making his act of hope and tenderness seem shameful to him.” [3] “And he knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope’s desire, could never be got again.” [3] He denies everything he has had.

Probably, we should admit that the attitude of the mother and daughter is not so good as the engineer wishes. But the world is not so perfect. It is really cruel for the engineer to face the huge gap in reality. The engineer seems to have lost too much. So it is normal that he feels depressed. If we look at it from a different perspective, we will find that the mother had accompanied him for twenty years and they had made the engineer get the warmth from strangers. And this has given him the immense impetus and made him feel “the most extraordinary happiness”. Although it is not the two women’s real intention to depress the engineer. Had it not been for the accompaniment of the two women, the life on the train would have been lonely and cold. In actual fact, the engineer has not lost anything. He has gained much more. Perhaps he has lost his long dream, but at the time he has gained twenty-years accompaniment and warmth. Who can say that life experience is not wealth and gains? Life experience is an important part in man’s life process. If he cherishes life, he should cherish the real experience he has owned because it is his spiritual treasure. Maybe it is a beautiful wish. Maybe it is a false hope. However he can truly feel the warmth, happiness and energy the illusion brings about. We should not understand the gains and losings by way of material things we have got right now.



We should look back at the road we have taken and think carefully about, in life, every touch, every warmth, every laughter, every happiness and throb from the heart.

IV. DISTANCE AND BEAUTY

Distance is not only the way of art reflecting life but also a necessary aesthetic attitude that forms aesthetic relations. The key to aesthetics is whether the aesthetic subject could stand some distance from aesthetic object. [7] A certain distance produces a certain beauty. A certain angle produces a certain beauty. A certain environment produces a certain beauty. On the one hand the psychological distance of aesthetics cuts off the utility relations between man and object and makes things fully reflect their inherent natures. On the other hand, it can also move the subject's emotion into the aesthetic object and reinvest the objective matter with characteristics of affect. [7]

The distance and beauty in the novel are reflected in the fact that when the engineer sees the mother and daughter afar, everything is so nice, so amiable and so kindly. This remote distance brings him a sense of happiness. They do not need too much communication and understanding and they can feel it from afar. That waving of arm is bold and free. Because it looks like flowers on the other side of the river. Though the flowers are so nice, we cannot touch them and we have hope for them. That nice feeling can be found in ancient and modern times. For example, in "The Song of Qin" in *The Book of Songs*, we read the line "The so-called Iraqi people, in the water side". The beauty of the maiden (Iraqi people) is not because that she herself is beautiful, but because that she is beautified by our imagination. The obstruction of the water arouses our imagination for the maiden, and the imagination further strengthens the beauty of the maiden. [7] Once we cross the river and come close to the maiden, all the beauties will come to naught in an instant. She is only a woman with "her face harsh and pinched and meager, the flesh sagged wearily in sallow folds, and the small eyes peered at him with timid suspicion and uneasy doubt". We are filled with hesitation, suspicion and depression. It is not only because of the woman but because of the town and the streets as well. To be precise, it is the world we have been trying to get that overturned our thinking. Once we approach the cottage, once we approach the woman and her daughter, we are disillusioned. The author sets up such a romantic and blurred situation to let us know the truth. The engineer may have been trying to break up conventional living mode. The two sentences in the story are worth our thinking: "The engineer had grown old and gray in service. His own children had grown up, and married". The two sentences tell us: "He lives as ordinary people. His job is to drive the train. His family should have been happy. Now it's time for him to retire. It's time that he could live a more leisurely life with his family. The town and the mother and daughter are the scenes in one of the stations he has passed 'ten thousand times'. But because that 'brave free motion of the arm is filled with freedom, he is impressed deeply." To a certain extent, it is this impression that has become his conviction. "He had known all the grief, the joy, the peril and the labor such a man could

know." [3] But who is "such a man"? Evidently, it is the individual in normal life. We walk along the same pathway: working, marrying and death. We want to escape but we have no courage. So we've been on the train. At last one day, he breaks away from the fixed pathway, and sets foot on the place in our dream. To his disappointment, everything is so strange. Even if he has passed the place "ten thousand times", he still hesitates and suspects. Does it indicate that the life in our dream will become an ugly nightmare once we come close to it?

V. CONCLUSION

The ending of the story is reeking with sentimentalism. This is a kind of sentimentalism that all the best wishes are dashed like soup bubbles: "He knew that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, could never be got again." [3] And thus we have got a life philosophy: Distance produces beauty. We can only yearn for a kind of beauty. And this beauty cannot be touched. This beauty is like flowers in the water and moon in the mirror. It can only be viewed from a distance but it cannot be watched closely. If you view it from a distance, and if you don't approach and touch it, it is like a calm and beautiful lake. It will be a classic work in the heart for ever. It will lead you to endless aftertaste. It is a sophisticated beauty with remote poetry. Obscuration is also a kind of beauty. [8] It gives you more imagination, more modes of understanding and more hope because you cannot see it clearly. Once you approach it, everything becomes clear. You have to accept everything, those you want and those you don't want. Thus helplessness and disappointment appear. In fact, it does not matter whether it is far or near. The feeling of the far and the near depends on time, place and characters. The process of chasing dreams is happy. But once the dream comes in reality, it will no longer shine. [9] The artistic situation from dream to reality arouses our dialectic reflection and enriches the philosophical connotation. [10]

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Zhao Shu-wen, born in Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, in December 1970. Won M. A. in English teaching (1999), in Department of English, Shanxi University,. Won B.A. in English literature (1993), in Shanxi University, Department of English.

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