An Archetypal Analysis of the Imagery in the English Patient

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Abstract

_The English Patient_ is a masterpiece written by the Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje. This paper seeks to apply the archetypal theories to analyzing the dominant archetypal images in this novel, including fire, desert, garden and the Good Mother. The seemingly fragmentary and casual archetypes form a universal structural relevance which determines the interior consistence of the theme of the novel.

Keywords: _The English Patient_; archetypal theories; archetypal images

I. INTRODUCTION

_The English Patient_ is a world-famous novel written by the Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje in 1992. It won the Canadian Governor General’s Award and the Booker Prize for fiction. Also, it has been translated into more than 300 languages and was adapted into an Oscar-awarded film of the same name in 1996. The story occurs during the last stage of WWII in a damaged villa called San Girolamo. It revolves around four characters, namely a Hungarian count Almasy, a Canadian nurse Hana, an Italian Canadian thief Caravaggio and an Indian sapper Kip. Each of them is the victim of WWII and the British colonization. They come together in the villa to heal their trauma by telling stories of how he or she comes to be injured physically or emotionally. In the villa, these individuals unite as a multicultural society in retreat from battle, but their community shatters at the war’s end. _The English Patient_ is a rich bible of Christian myth that prevalently displays its images in the actions and interactions of its characters.

II. Critical perspective—myth and archetypal criticism

Archetypal criticism is a powerful movement in the history of recent literary theory, especially from the 1950s to the 1970s. “The word ‘archetype’ according to Jung, was much used in ancient Greek. _Arche_ means ‘root’ and ‘origin’, while _typos_ ‘pattern’ or ‘model’” (Zhu 128). The modern concept of the archetype refers to the recurring literary phenomena such as motifs, images, themes, and narrative designs. As archetypes usually include myths (tales, rituals, totems, taboos, etc.), so “archetypal criticism” is often used for myth and archetypal criticism. This kind of criticism owes especially to the following three figures for their separate contributions: James Frazer, Carl Jung, and Northrop Frye.

James Frazer (1854-1941) is the most prolific and influential Scottish anthropologist. He worked on _The Golden Bough_ (1890-1915) for twenty-five years, which was the first

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influential text dealing with cultural mythologies. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer identifies shared practices and mythological beliefs between primitive religions and modern religions. He argues that the death-rebirth myth exists in almost all cultural mythologies, and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. He also discovers numerous archetypes, such as rebirth and scapegoat, which frequently appear in literary works. *The Golden Bough* is widely accepted as the seminal text on myth that spawned numerous studies on the same subject.

Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss born psychoanalyst, is generally believed the authority on the subject of archetypes. He expounds the notion based upon his theory of the collective unconscious. The collective unconsciousness, or the objective psyche, is a number of innate thoughts, feelings, instincts, and memories that reside in the unconsciousness of all people. To Jung, archetypes are in the collective unconsciousness, and they are at an inaccessible part of the mind. It is through primordial images that universal archetypes are experienced, and more importantly, that the unconscious is revealed. By itself, Jung’s theory of the collective unconsciousness accounts for a considerable share of writings in archetypal literary criticism.

It was not until the work of the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye that archetypal criticism was theorized in purely literary terms. Frye differs from Frazer and Jung in that literature is the core of his discussion of culture. He believes that literature involves human collectivity rather than individual ego, and that collective unconscious in the psychological sense has little bearing on literature. “Frye’s archetype originates not from rituals or religion, or heredity (though he does not deny them wholly), but from the cycle of literature itself, and it is this inner structure that connects literature to myth” (Zhu 131). Frye’s archetype could be summarized in four points. Firstly, an archetype is a communicable unit in literature like a word and the communicative unit in language. Secondly, archetypes can be images, symbols, themes, situations, character types, or structural units as long as they reappear over and over again in different works of literature and have the accepted semantic associations. Thirdly, archetype embodies literary traditions in that it can connect one work with another and thereby help to turn literature into a kind of special communicating form. Fourthly, archetype roots in society, history, culture and the inner world of human beings.

In critical practice, archetypal criticism attempts “to identify the various images, narrative structures, and characters that repeatedly occur in literary works, to find the fundamental forms (especially myth archetypes) behind them, and to apply such archetypes to the analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary works” (Ye 220). In this way, it offers a fresh approach and opens up a new space for literary research.

**III. Archetypal analysis of the imagery in *The English Patient***

“Imagery is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in literary works, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles of its similes and metaphors” (Abrams 121). Archetypal critics usually study literary works in terms of the images that have classical mythic meanings in common with other works, by which a portion of the total human experience can be revealed. According to Northrop Frye, archetype is “a typical or recurring image… a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby
helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (Frye 99). Michael Ondaatje’s imagery is always vivid and immersive. The English Patient is saturated with archetypal images including fire, desert, garden and the Good Mother.

A. the image of fire

Fire stands for many things in archetypal criticism. In a positive and spiritual sense, fire can nurture and warm us. While negatively, fire can burn and destroy things. For example, in Genesis, the Lord punishes the men of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sin by “raining on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire out of heaven; and he overthrew the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities” (Metzger 13).

In The English Patient fire mainly serves as a destroyer haunting all the four major characters. It dominates the novel right from the English patient’s first account of his crash: “I fell burning into the desert. . . . I flew down and the sand itself caught fire. (The Bedouin) saw me stand up naked out of it. The leather helmet on my head in flames” (Ondaatje 5). A later revisiting of the same scene provides an even more vivid image: “Then his legs are free of everything, and he is in the air, bright, not knowing why he is bright until he realizes he is on fire” (Ondaatje 175). “If the English patient is indeed, in one symbolic association, Lucifer—the falling angel expelled from heaven, then the brightness that falls from the air has always been the hanging fire of nuclear apocalypse” (Spice 199). Not only Almasy is haunted by fire, the nurse Hana is devoted to caring for him at least in part because her own father died of burns: “So burned the buttons of his shirt were part of his skin, part of his dear chest” (Ondaatje 295). The thief Caravaggio, escaping his torturers, rests for a moment on a bridge, but the bridge explodes. “Light was pouring into the river. He swam up to the surface, parts of which were on fire” (Ondaatje 60). Caravaggio’s ascent through burning water just parallels and inverts the English patient’s fall through burning air. Moreover, the mined bridge links Caravaggio to the fourth character, Kip, whose whole element is fire: he works as a sapper, defuses bombs, and is in daily and imminent danger of going up in flames. Another passage describes one of Kip’s colleagues who “had been working in a shaft with frozen oxygen and the whole pit had suddenly burst into flames. They hauled him out fast, already unconscious in his harness” (Ondaatje 211). Thus, fire plays a negative role in the novel. It causes great damage to man and even takes his life in a second.

B. the image of desert

Desert is definitely “a place of faith” if one remembers the abundant desert imagery of the Old Testament. The Israelites refer to “the Lord that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt” (Metzger 400). Almasy also shows his faith in desert. He feels that “The desert could not be claimed or owned, it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones….It was a place of faith. We disappeared into the landscape” (Ondaatje 138-139). Almasy even acknowledges that “there is God only in the desert” (Ondaatje 250). When his burning plane crashes in the desert sands, it is the members of a nomadic Bedouin tribe who live in and nourished by the desert that save his life, and these nomads make us reminisce about the children of Israel. Hana is also linked with these desert nomads: “She herself
preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient’s room, sometimes in the hall, depending on temperature or wind or light” (Ondaatje 13). Thus, the desert is regarded as a place of divine revelation and the place to regain purity.

C. the image of garden

In addition to the specific desert scenes, Ondaatje echoes other elements of Christian myth from the Old Testament. The San Girolamo Villa is an Eden-like sanctuary surrounded by trees and flowers. In archetypal criticism, garden is the representation of paradise, innocence and unspoiled beauty. This Eden-like villa is also innocent in that it is isolated from the horrors of the war that has mutilated the neighbouring countryside and continues to propagate destruction outside of Italy. In an interview, Ondaatje refers to the villa as “an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war.... Then with the news of other bombs, suddenly this became, perhaps, the last Eden” (Spice 201). In keeping with the Eden myth, the novel begins with Hana (Eve) standing up “in the garden”, and ends with Kip passing Caravaggio while leaving the villa: “halfway down the path to the gate, Caravaggio was waiting for him, carrying the gun. He didn’t even lift it formally towards the motorbike when the boy slowed down, as Caravaggio walked into his path” (Ondaatje 289). It is quite similar to a passage in Genesis when God expels Adam from Eden: “So he drove out the man and he placed at the east of Eden the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life”(Metzger 4). Substituting a rifle for the flaming sword, Caravaggio adopts the role of the cherub and symbolically blocks the entrance to “the last Eden” following the completion of the atomic sin (the atomic bombs exploded in Japan).

D. The image of the Good Mother

The Good Mother archetype is associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, and abundance. Greek goddess Demeter is a good example of this archetype. According to the myth, Demeter is the Greek goddess of agriculture, the pure nourisher of youth and the green earth, the preserver of marriage and the sacred law.

In The English Patient, Hana plays the role of the Good Mother. She always tries to give comfort and warmth to others. She reads stories for the patient according to his will, protects him from others’ hurts, cleans his body everyday and goes to bad after he has fallen asleep. “Her body for last warmth, her whisper for comfort, her needle for sleep” (Ondaatje 126). Hana also sheds light on Caravaggio’s desperate life. She is the trustworthy listener of him who listens to the narration of his traumatized experiences. In her relationship to her lover Kip, her image as the Good Mother becomes more obvious. She literally bathes him in milk: “Hana was pouring milk into her cup. As she finished she moved the lip of the jug over Kip’s hand and continued pouring the milk over his brown hand and up his arm to his elbow ” (Ondaatje 123). Here, Hana is rendered as Kip’s mother who will ultimately continue her legacy of healing. Hana’s love also proliferates Kip’s sense of security. Previously, Kip has to “find a statue for the night to be his sentinel” and only “trust the races of stones” (Ondaatje 104). Later, Hana’s sleeping beside him makes him feel “he was now within something, perhaps a painting had seen somewhere in the last year, some secure couple in a field with laziness of
sleep, with no thought of work or the danger of the world” (Ondaatje 104). Thus, Hana’s image as the Good Mother is fully illustrated in their everyday life in the villa.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

It is significant that Michael Ondaatje uses so many archetypes in his masterpiece. Though seemingly fragmentary and casual, these biblical and mythical archetypes practice vital roles in the novel. They form a universal structural relevance which determines the interior consistence of the theme of The English Patient and creates the distinctive aesthetic function. Frye once remarked: “The myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle” (Zhu 144). Actually, Myth is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society. It transcends time, uniting the past and the present and reaching toward the future. Thus, Ondaatje’s method of allowing his characters to adopt the characteristics of mythological figures does more than lend them a temporary grandeur. It is a provocative statement concerning the loss of sacred origins and the diminishing potential of humanity to create or recover a dynamic, meaningful myth.

Reference