

From the Misread to the Misreader: the Irony Narrative in “The Other Two”

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Abstract

The short story “The Other Two” adopts the hero Mr. Waythorn as the center of consciousness. In his perspective, his wife undergoes a dramatic change from angel to witch. However, he might not be a reliable narrator, whose vision deserves a cautious treatment. The irony narrative in this story lies in a double framework, -- in Waythorn’s critical misreading of his wife, the readers in turn, shed a new light on himself. As the story moves on, the author skillfully lets the hero betray himself, and emerged his own limitations as well as female’s inferiority and suppression in patriarchy society on the whole.

Key words: *The Other Two; Edith Wharton; misread; irony; narrative*

1 Introduction

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is a major American writer of the turn of the 20th century, “bridging the Victorian and modern eras”¹ in that transitional period. Born into a distinguished family in New York, as a contributor of “novel of manners”, she excels in depicting the people and lives of upper class in Old New York at her time. Wharton’s works are well-received by both critics and readers for her admirable observation, insight, delicacy and elegance. As Brooke Allen claims that, Wharton achieves a “quick precision of characterization” and “psychological complexity” through her “taut, epigrammatic style”.² Wharton has composed 88 short stories, however, in contrast to her celebrated novels, these stories regrettably received less attention. “The Other Two” is regarded as one of her most prominent stories, which mainly dramatizes Mr. Waythorn’s discomforts and embarrassment in unexpectedly frequent contacts with his honeymoon wife Alice’s two ex-husbands. As these “grotesque” and “awkward” encounters went on, the image of his wife in his vision was undergoing a dramatic change. With irony and subtlety, this black-humor story reveals the inferiority of female’s social status and the unfair treatment they suffer, as well as satirizes the bondage of female exerted by patriarchy society and the hypocrisy of the moral standard.

2 From angel to witch: the misread Alice

As the center of consciousness throughout the story, Waythorn subjectively pictured all the other characters from his limited perspective, be it his wife, or her two ex-husbands Haskett

and Varick. It might be suggested that the process of Waythorn's initial repugnance to final acceptance of his two predecessors was, simultaneously, the process of rediscovery, re-exploration and reconstructing the image of his newly-wed wife.

Virginia Woolf has once held the opinion in "A Room of One's Own" that the female characters in literary works are at the opposite extremes of either unusually beautiful or ugly, either unbelievably pure or corrupted.³ And Alice became such a victim of Waythorn's vision, whose personality and quality actually remained unchanged throughout the story, while in her husband's eyes, she dramatically transformed from innocent angel to artful witch.

Specifically, at the beginning of the story, the author presents us with a typical sweet domestic scene with an intimate atmosphere, in the "softly-lighted" drawing room with "rosy candleshades", Waythorn was waiting for his wife to come down to dinner. At this moment, she was still his "angel in the house", -- a pattern Victorian lady in patriarchy society, in whose virtues he took great pride. Just as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe in *The Madwoman in the Attic*--"the ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel. she has no story of her own but gives 'advice and consolation' to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes" .⁴ In the story, Alice was regarded by her husband as such a "holy refuge", and when Waythorn told her business troubles, "she listened sympathetically, adjuring him not to let himself be overworked, and asking vague feminine questions about the routine of the office" .⁵

However, his nice anticipations of such enjoyment on her soon fell off, ever since he unexpectedly began frequent contacts with her ex-husbands. A pure angel inside the house soon transformed into a vicious witch outside. When he first met Alice's first husband under his roof, the "small effaced-looking" Haskett, he had just thought him as a mere "piano tuner" or "those efficient persons who are summoned in emergencies to adjust some derail of the domestic machinery". He began to cast a curious doubt on her past and confessed "how fine and exquisite he had thought of her!"⁵ He couldn't help but "reconstruct with curious precision the surroundings of Alice's first marriage",⁵ and "her whole aspect, every gesture, every inflection, every allusion, were a studied negation of that period of her life" .⁵

Nonetheless, is Waythorn a totally reasonable perspective? What might Alice be really like? Not considering Waythorn's colored vision, Alice might be neither an angel nor a monster. She could be just an ordinary woman, with quite a few admirable qualities. Based on the text, she is "charming", "graceful", "soft", "brightly girlish", and popular among people. She seemed to be a considerate wife and a caring mother. It also might be inferred from the text that she was able, determined, "serene", "unruffled" with "balanced nerves". When she was announced to marry again, there was a huge pressure of people's gossip. However, she "took it all imperturbably, she had a way of surmounting obstacles without seeming to be aware of them" .⁵ In contrast with Waythorn's usual awkwardness in the face of emergencies, Alice showed her judiciousness, calmness, elasticity and adaptability through her charming smile, graceful gesture and appropriate speech. In sum, despite the hero's critical perspective, so

many of Alice's favorable qualities still survived, which might shed some light on the author's real intention.

3 Irony narrative: a double framework

From the above analysis, it might be reckoned that Waythorn is not a reliable perspective, whose vision therefore deserves a cautious treatment. And the irony narrative in this story lies in a double framework, — in Waythorn's critical misreading of Alice, the readers in turn, shed a new light on the hero himself. As the story went on, the author skillfully let the narrator betrays himself, and emerged little by little his own limitations as well as female's inferiority and bondage in patriarchy society on the whole.

What might be the hero Waythorn like? It seems that he had his own flaws, which ironically highlighted Alice's relevant admirable qualities. As Gilbert and Gubar have proposed, "woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence".⁶ Before his marriage with Alice, "his own life had been a gray one, from temperament rather than circumstance, and he had been drawn to her by the unperturbed gaiety which kept her fresh and elastic".⁷ Waythorn appeared to be rather sensitive and vulnerable, and was often described as "boyish", "womanish sensibility". In marrying Alice, he "found refuge in a richer, warmer nature than his own ... her composure was restful to him; it acted as ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities...how soothing her presence must be".⁷

Profoundly shaped by Victorian patriarchy values and old New York's moral standard, Waythorn had thought Alice as conforming to a pattern docile wife. Yet with his contacts with the two predecessors, he began to cast a doubt on her out of disappointment and discomfort. These misreading, and sometimes even demonization, brought about his somewhat biased perspective. He was later increasingly subjected to people's gossip that Alice merely adopted her three marriages as a social ladder towards upper class. Finally in his fancy, Alice even degenerated into a vain, hypocritical, manipulative schemer, who was "a juggler of tossing knives; but the knives were blunt and she knew they would never cut her".⁷

4 Female's speechlessness and marginalization

Throughout the story Alice basically remained an ambivalent and passive image, who usually uttered her voice briefly in response to Waythorn's questions, — except taking the initiative to smartly break the ice of the three gentlemen's awkward encounter in the end. In contrast to Waythorn, We have no idea of her inner world and thus her inmost self. While he was always gazing at her and passing judgments, even spoke out motivations for her on his side. Based on her ex-husbands, he pieced together her effigy.

It is normally believed that speech is the symbol of status and power, and articulating one's voice is therefore a fundamental embodiment of one's autonomy. Waythorn was the center of consciousness, readers learn about all his speech and mental state. While in sharp contrast,

Alice was passive and speechless under her husband’s critical gaze, who was thus incapable of expressing and justifying herself. He was at the center of light, while she had to stay in the dark margin.

As Gilbert and Gubar observed, “she had no voice to speak out her misery in male-authored text, her own hideous wound bleeding in silence and in secret.”⁸ Similarly, Dianne Chamber has echoed that women are deprived of articulating, explaining, and telling their own stories, while male characters are invariably gazing at her and passing judgments.⁹

Furthermore, in Waython’s fancy, Alice was more like his personal property rather than an independent human being with equal sense of autonomy:

“He leaned against the mantelpiece, watching her as she lifted the coffee pot. The lamplight struck a gleam from her bracelets and tipped her soft hair with brightness. How light and slender she was, and how each gesture flowed into the next! She seemed a creature all compact of harmonies. As the thought of Haskett receded, Waythorn felt himself yielding again to the joy of possession. They were his, those white hands with their flitting motions, his the light haze of hair, the lips and eyes...”¹⁰

“Women in patriarchal societies have been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely by male expectations and designs. she is an object, to be displayed and desired.”¹¹ This reification of female in the literary texts just echoes their subordination and marginalization in the patriarchy society. For instance, in the story expressions depicting Waythorn and Alice form an interesting contrast, more or less projecting the author’s tendency:

Table 1 – Expressions depicting Waythorn and Alice

	Waythorn	Alice
adverb	coldly, impatiently, stiffly, sharply	pliantly
adjective	exasperated	agonized
noun	groan, exclamation, repugnance, brute	pliancy, tremor
verb	gaze, explore, fancy, picture, vision, reconstruct; pass judgment, shed a new light, cast a curious light, cast a doubt	murmur, whisper, falter, redden, blush, color, tremble, quiver, hesitate, waver, obey

As Edith Wharton has mentioned, the American women have been encouraged to be as simple and innocent as kindergarten kids, who are pathetically incapable of conversing equally with men, not to mention exhibiting their inmost self.¹²

5 Conclusions

What is projected from the character’s perspective should usually be questioned, the more apparent the surface text is, the more it deserves being questioned.¹³ Similarly, in this story, in

the context of a double framework, the irony narrative produces a gap between the surface text and deeper text. Readers are thus encouraged to go beyond the surface water and explore the real “Alice” and “Waythorn”, therefore catching the author’s hidden intention of criticism.

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