

# Exploring the Nature and Cause of Human Suffering

## A Comparison Between *The Book of Job* and Flannery O'Connor's Short Novels\*

Hua He

School of Foreign Languages  
Northwest University  
Xi'an, China 710127

Rui Su

School of Foreign Languages  
Northwest University  
Xi'an, China 710127

**Abstract**—Similar descriptions of human sufferings are found in early Israelite literature *The Book of Job* and in Flannery O'Connor's short novels. By comparing sufferings from three aspects of material loss, physical pain and mental trauma, this paper intends to reveal the source and nature of human sufferings, which would be helpful in figuring out possible solutions in the presence of human suffering.

**Keywords**—sufferings; comparison; nature and cause

### I. INTRODUCTION

Suffering seems an everlastingly attractive theme for literature description. From Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens and Balzac to modern Chinese writers who have committed themselves to the sacred mission of soul-saving and wound-healing, countless writers have never ceased their reflection on the mist of human sufferings. Besides the literature world, all generations under the sun have never seemingly freed themselves from this prison.

What is suffering? Lain Wilkinson describes suffering as death, loss, loneliness, desperation, individual dissimulation, etc. in the process of lifetime experience, composed of emotions like depression, anxiety, guilt, insult, tiredness and sadness, and he distinguishes the concept of pain and suffering, the former referring to physical sensation, while the latter referring to subjective response to pain.[1] The concept of suffering in this paper is mainly concerned with the latter within Wilkinson's definition.

What is modern expression of suffering? There seems certain degree of denial and silence. In the first place, the reason of denial lies exactly in modern development. Just as what Wilkinson points out, there seems no place for concern of suffering in this modern world with the pursuit of reasoning and science as dominant concepts [1]. In the second place, the reason of silence lies to some degree in the difficulty of narration caused by particular features of suffering. According to Wilkinson, the features of suffering are: one individual's suffering is less understandable by another; the complexity of human nature brings about a variety of sufferings; the conceptualization of suffering is no

easy work. However, denial and silence would by no means help diminish or remove the existence of suffering for modern generations. Furthermore, science and technology are creating new problems, so modern men are not facing less or no suffering at all, instead, their situation is even more severe than those of previous generations. Max Weber says that science and technology would ruin modern society in the sense that, without concern about suffering, human beings are incapable of solving the issue of meaning [2].

The author believes that facing the dual difficulties of the inescapability of suffering itself and the incapability of narration, the first step forward for modern generation is to break the ice and face it instead of ignoring, talk about it instead of keeping silent, conceptualize it instead of staying confused. Only by doing this, could we obtain its significance and then the possibility of relieving ourselves out of it. Thus, comparison or contrast of various kinds of human sufferings depicted in literature works would help us find the nature, cause and ultimately significance of it.

Early Israel literature work *The Book of Job* from the Old Testament of Bible, as one of the oldest literature works, is famous for its depiction of human suffering. The author of this book is unknown and some have suggested Moses, Solomon or Elihu in Israel history [3]. The main idea is that a righteous person named Job fears God and shuns evil, blessed with abundant possessions and 10 children. Under the permission of God, Satan challenges Job's faith in God by depriving him successively of his wealth, children and health. Job couldn't understand the reason of his suffering, so he asks God and debates with his three friends. In the end, Job sees God and realizes his ignorance, and then God brings Job out of his suffering and blesses him more than before.

The 20th century American writer Flannery O'Connor's (1925-1964) novels are considered to have much description of violence and suffering. O'Connor, with a nickname as "Evil O'Connor", is famous for her depiction of grotesque characters and violent plot, influenced not only by the Gothic writing style in southern America where she lived but also by her Roman Catholic belief. O'Connor explores issues such as good and evil, life and death, salvation, mortality, eternity, etc, among which the theme of suffering is of prominence and universal value for both the religious and non-religious.

A further observation of *The Book of Job* and O'Connor's short novels shows that both have mentioned three aspects of

\*Fund: 1. Humanities and Social Science project from China Ministry of Education: *Comparison of the English Translation of Chinese Classics from Missionary translators and Chinese translators*. (17YJA740044); 2. Graduate School of Northwest University, China: *Construction of Academic Writing Course* (YKC17011).

suffering: material loss, physical pain and mental trauma. This paper, inspired by these similarities, tries to explore the nature and cause of human suffering by comparing the two from these three aspects. The organization of this paper is as follows. Section I is introduction. Section II, III and IV are three respective comparisons, following which, section V illustrates the nature and cause of suffering. Section VI is conclusion.

## II. MATERIAL LOSS

Job, living in the land of Uz, was very wealthy and “owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants.” [4]<sup>1:3</sup> Satan’s first challenge to Job is to take away all his possessions, with his wealth carried off by the Sabeans and all of his children dead. Facing this sudden loss, Job tears his robe and shaves his head. However, he undertakes this pain with the right attitude and continues worshipping God by saying “the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” [4]<sup>1:21</sup>

Many characters in O’connor’s short novels have strong desire for material possession. In *A Circle in the Fire*, Mrs. Cope is seized by her greedy desire for wealth, taking her into such a lifetime captivity that she shows indifference to others’ needs and would not let anyone invade her territory. Even her gratitude towards God is merely based on God’s blessings on her farm. Mrs. May from *Greenleaf* is also confined in a world of material possession, her religious belief and life practice being separate from each other. She worries that her son would marry Mr. Greenleaf’s daughter so that her possession would go to the other family. Mrs. McIntyre from *The Displaced Person* thinks her farm is all what she has and those working on it are just trying to “squeeze her oil”, and even the peacock is fed on her. Mrs. McIntyre’s employee Mrs. Shortley also takes those displaced farmer workers as intruders into her territory of property.

Both *The Book of Job* and O’connor have pointed out the fact of human suffering from material loss either out of social or individual causes. The reason probably lies in that all the characters have their fixed conception of “being blessed” with material possession or a desire to stay wealthy. Thus an experiential pain of unwillingness arises because being robbed of their material belongings is like taking away their blessings or the whole world. However, despite of this conception or desire, individual attitude towards material possession brings about varied responses to material loss. For those characters from O’connor’s short novels, their strong desire for material possession is exactly their yoke of suffering, isolating them from a gracious life and thus bringing about negative emotions and perceptions like narrow-mindedness, selfishness, anxieties, fears and intolerance. When the doomed violence in reality breaks down their world, this yoke of suffering restrains them even more severely or destroys their lives. For example, Mrs. McIntyre suffers from a nervous collapse and Mrs. May loses her life by being gored in the heart by a bull. While for Job, it is seen that his faith in God prevents him this time

from being harmed. He accepts whatever God gives and takes away from him and this attitude towards material possession has virtually lessened his suffering though he undergoes similar experience with those characters.

## III. PHYSICAL PAIN

Due to the physical and mental duplicity of human nature, half of human suffering is from physical pain, so does Job. Satan’s second test to Job is to afflict him with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. “Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.” [4]<sup>2:8</sup> Job said: “My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering” [4]<sup>7:5</sup> and “He would not let me regain my breath.” [4]<sup>9:18</sup>. He had restless days and nights, frightening dreams [4]<sup>7:4-14</sup>, offensive breath and nothing left but skin and bones [4]<sup>19:17-20</sup>. Physical suffering includes not only sickness, aging, disability and malfunctioning, but also the subjectively unbearable experience and emotionally intense response to it. Job’s kinsmen and friends have gone away from him because what he suffers, even his wife detests him. That is why Job isolates himself from others sitting in ashes and cursing the day of his birth and there are 29 chapters in *The Book of Job* describing Job’s pain and suffering.

Flannery O’connor also depicts many characters with disability or illness, partially due to the fact that she herself suffers from lupus erythematosus or it could be a metaphor for spiritual disability or sickness. In *Good Country People*, 32 year old Joy has a Ph. D degree and lives with her mother. She lost her leg in a childhood shooting accident, so she drowns herself in an emotion of being insulted and angry and changes her name from Joy to Hulga, which means ugliness. Physical disability shuts her from the outside world and traps her into the conceptual stream of existentialism and nihilism. Asbury from *The Enduring Chill* returns home to his mother’s farm in the south after being diagnosed with a serious illness. Together with his decaying health, many negative emotions knit a net of his suffering: unsuccessful career, complaint of his mother, his belief of his dying, unfulfilled hope to rebuild relation with other people, etc. In *The Life Your Save May be Your Own*, the deaf and mute girl Lucynell’s physical disability brings destructive consequences in her life. A young man called Shiftlet intrudes into her life and marries her for her money and automobile but finally abandons her on their honeymoon.

From birth to death, physical disability and malfunctioning are like nightmares inevitable for almost everyone and the resulting negative emotions like fear, sadness and desperation are even more unbearable. Physical pain itself results from the law of nature that mortal beings are perishing within the confinement of time, and the resulting negative emotions comes from the conflicting human conception that they need or desire to stay healthy. For Joy, Asbury and Lucynell, physical disability and pain bring about destructive consequences in their lives both outwardly and inwardly. Job suffers from the destructive consequences as well shown from his complaints and self-pities. However, the best quality in him is still his attitude. In all his physically painful experience, he tries to stay awake,

defending himself by asking God why this happened. Even when his wife tells him to curse God and die, Job did not sin in what he said [4]<sup>2:9-10</sup>. His defense shows he is not totally seized and paralyzed by the destruction of physical pain. The reason that Job does better than other characters from O'Connor's short novels at moments of both material loss and physical pain lies in his faith in God, while characters from the latter are either non-religious or falsely religious.

#### IV. MENTAL TRAUMA

Besides sufferings resulting from material loss and physical pain, human beings suffer mentally as well. Human beings have a natural desire and dignity to pursue mental fulfillment, but when real world couldn't satisfy them, they will suffer. In both *The Book of Job* and O'Connor short novels, two kinds of mental trauma are depicted: one from broken relationship and the other from broken conception.

##### A. From Broken Relationship

Following sufferings from material loss and physical pain, a greater suffering for Job is that two kinds of relationships are no more connected. One is between Job and people around him. Job loses his ten children, his wife detests him and his three friends rebuke him, which, along with his physical pain, put Job in a helpless situation. The other is between Job and his God. Job almost loses his faith in God because he couldn't understand why righteous people would suffer and his previously perfect image for and relation with God consequently turns into a spiritual darkness. It is shown that the spiritual desperation Job experiences right then intensifies his suffering from material loss and physical pain, while love and care from healthy and intimate relationships will undoubtedly lessen subjective pain.

As well, in many of O'Connor's short novels, she depicts many broken relationships, particularly between parents and children, which are considered as related with her own life experience. When her father died, she spent her adolescent years with her mother and three aunts in much matriarchal tension. In her novel *The River*, the young boy Bevel's parents indulge themselves in material enjoyment and ignore Bevel. Bevel chooses to leave his unloving family and drowns himself dead in the river where he was baptized by an evangelist in the preceding day because he wants to re-experience the eternal kingdom where he is loved and counts. In *The Lame Shall Enter First*, Norton's father Mr. Sheppard invites a fourteen-year-old juvenile delinquent to live with them against Norton's wishes. Mr. Sheppard's behavior shows his hypocritical moral values and being unsympathetic of his son's grief in losing his mother. His father's indifference and a hope of reunion with his mother lead to Norton's hanging himself dead. In *The Comforts of Home*, Sarah is also a victim abandoned by her mother and sexually harassed by the son of his step farther and these broken relationships lead to her indulgence and self-degradation.

One point drawn from these characters' sufferings is that human beings are existence of relations. Intimate relations delight us but broken ones distress us. It's also shown that the reason of broken relationships lies in the self-

centeredness of human nature. For example, Job's three friends couldn't feel what Job feels because their starting point of building up a relation is their own conception that righteous ones wouldn't suffer. Mr. Sheppard from *The Lame Shall Enter First*, against the meaning of his name, is no good shepherd for his son at all, because he insists on his own way instead of feeling his son's heart. Bevel from *The River* suffers mainly from the indifference of his self-centered parents. However, the difference between Job and other characters is, Job suffers mostly from the broken relation with God instead of human relations only. This higher level of relationship has helped him surpass both material loss and physical pain, but when it's broken, he is thrown into a spiritual darkness. So only when this relationship recovers, would Job recover, which O'Connor has also pointed out as a possible remedy for broken human relations, for Bevel in *The River* finally chooses to build a relation with God.

##### B. From Broken Conception

If the pain from broken relationship is due to the social attribute of human nature, then the one from broken conception results from the cognitive attribute. American psychologist Leon Festinger, (1919-1989) in his *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*, points out that human has a tendency of keeping their internal and external cognition consistent. If not, individuals will undergo a painful experience of being deprived and threatened [5]<sup>p210</sup>. The more individuals feel deprived and threatened, the more painful and rebellious they will feel [5]<sup>p213</sup>. Professor Elliott Alonson from the University of Texas adds the idea of "self-concept" into Festinger's Theory, saying that cognitive dissonance means psychological disorder or displacement happens when one's self-concept of the world and real situation are inconsistent [5]<sup>p214</sup>.

Ancient Jews have a deep-rooted concept that disaster and suffering are God's punishment for evils. Job is righteous and blameless in God's presence, so he wouldn't suffer. This Jewish "self-concept" or internal cognition conflicts with the reality that righteous Job does suffer, which constitutes the most of Job's mental pain, as he exclaims "If I have sinned, what have I done to you?" [4]

(7:20) Job's three friends couldn't either free themselves from this "self-concept", so they debate fiercely with Job instead of showing mercy when he claims he doesn't sin. They insist that "where were the upright ever destroyed?...those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" [4] (4:7-8). After several turns of debates, God reveals to Job the sovereignty of life and the secret of suffering. Then Job humbles himself and understands the meaning of suffering, saying "He knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." [4] (23:10)

In O'Connor's short novels, there are two kinds of typical characters: intellectuals and false believers of religion. Both have a strong "self-concept". Intellectuals are arrogant and indifferent, equipping themselves with knowledge, reasoning and ideas of self-salvation, but drifting away from the real world. False believers idolize material things, greedy and



desperate. However, both illusory conceptions are so vulnerable that when violence in reality breaks them into pieces, these characters undergo painful experience. In *Good Country People*, as a typical intellectual, Joy's conception of existentialism and nihilism is just as vulnerable as her fake leg. When the Bible salesman Pointer disappears with her fake leg, Joy undergoes a pain of being raped and deprived of her whole world because her "self-concept" of this world is broken. Main characters from *A Circle in the Fire*, *The Displaced Person* and *Greenleaf* are representatives of false believers. The ultimate pain for Mrs. Cope from *A Circle in the Fire* is that all her possession loses almost within a moment, but she has tried so desperately to seize because in her "self-concept", it is her whole world. In *The Displaced Person*, Mrs. Shortley believes that the farm is only for the white people to work on but no other intruders, however when her husband is fired, her "self-concept" is broken and she suffers from psychological disorder and dies of a stroke. She has undergone an extreme experience that she is expelled from all what she has owned in this world[6](p59). The farm owner Mrs. McIntyre delays firing the Polish refugee for her mere concern of money, so when the resentful Mr. Shortley positions a tractor to roll over the Polish refugee's body, Mrs. McIntyre suffers from a nervous collapse from her guilt of becoming a silent participant in this murder and is virtually abandoned by her farmlands in the end. For Mrs. May in *Greenleaf*, the bull's running into her property symbolizes the shake of her wealth world. Meanwhile, her mental world is invaded and shaken as well. Just as what she has prayed: "Lord, please pierce my heart," at that moment, Mrs. May is undergoing a piercing pain in her heart wrapped with social hierarchy and materialism.

All the characters depicted by both writers suffer mentally from a collapse of their self-concept of the real world, but the difference still lies in their attitudes. One kind characters, like Job and Ashbury, are capable of rebuilding a new conception of the world out of their sufferings, while the other, like Mrs Shortley, are unwilling to accept changes and thus swallowed by their miseries.

## V. THE NATURE AND SOURCE OF HUMAN SUFFERING

Through the comparison above, the nature and source of human suffering could be found.

Firstly, the nature of suffering lies in the conflict between the law of nature and the self-centeredness of human conception. Within the law of nature, birth, aging, sickness, death, ups and downs are universally inevitable for all mortal beings within the confinement of time. However, the self-centered human conception drives individuals to hopefully stay perfectly healthy and wealthy forever. It is this conflict that makes suffering arise. Just like what Arthur Schopenhauer says, if human nature of being self-centered can't be changed, that is, when human perception and observation are confined within the worldly utility and their mere will of physical survival, they would be kept away from knowing the nature of both themselves and the world, which constitutes the ultimate source of human suffering[7]<sup>p301</sup>.

Secondly, human needs driven by a self-centered conception are one of the major causes of suffering. Human have needs for material satisfaction, physical health, loving relationship and keeping consistency between inner and outer world. These needs could serve as motivation for progress, however, when they are not met in reality, suffering occurs, which one hundred percent happens. This result is consistent with Abraham Harold Maslow's (1908—1970) theory of Hierarchy of Needs, in which he uses terms of "physiological", "safety", "belonging and love", "esteem" and "self-actualization" to describe the progressive pattern that human needs generally go through[8]<sup>p40-50</sup>. Suffering from material loss and physical pain could be illustrated by the lack of "physiological" and "safety" needs; suffering from broken relationship could be explained by the lack of "belonging and love" and "esteem"; suffering from broken conception is corresponding to the lack of "self-actualization" in which the individuals' perception conflicts with the real situation. Furthermore, human needs based on this self-centered conception are like a black hole, never being able to be satisfied. Consequently, this dissatisfaction would throw human beings into a deeper and recursive self-pity and bitterness.

Then do these literature works provide a solution? That is, how did Job and those characters in O'Connor's short novels deal with their self-centeredness and dissatisfaction of needs? Characters in O'Connor's short novels have two kinds of responses in the presence of suffering. The first kind "died" in their sufferings, that is, they couldn't break through their self-centeredness and triumph over their sufferings. Stubborn Mrs. May in *Greenleaf* was gored in the heart by a bull. "The sun tries to go through the woods. She stops to look around and feels safe, because she knows the sun couldn't pass through, it would go down as usual outside her territory" [6]<sup>p58</sup>. In *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Julian's mother, sticking to an old southern attitude towards black people and throwing a coin to the black boy, was punched dead by the boy's mother. The second kind refers to those who are "saved" in the presence of sufferings, that is, they break through their self-centeredness and become acceptable to redemptive changes. In *Good Country People*, Joy's illusory perception of rationalism is broken by violence and God's grace enters her heart. Asbury from *The Enduring Chill* finally undergoes an incredible revelation that before he dies, he needs urgently to look for something great and accomplish it.[6]<sup>p59</sup>. Though Mrs. McIntyre from *The Displaced Person* suffers from nervous collapse, priest Flynn visits her once a week and teaches Bible to her, implying the possibility of her being saved despite of material loss.

Job belongs to the second kind who is "saved" or triumphs over his suffering. The most valuable thing about Job is that, in the presence of his suffering, Job stays conscious in that he tries to seek the truth behind it instead of being swayed back and forth by it. Though the way, duration and extent of individuals' sufferings are various, similarities among Job, Joy and Asbury are that they have shown perseverance, dignity and humility in spite of violence and disaster, so suffering is able to work in them to give up their self-centeredness, purify and lift them up. In this sense, they

have conquered themselves, surpassed sufferings and accomplished their redemption.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Modern development of reasoning and science can't remove human sufferings. By comparing human sufferings from three aspects of material loss, physical pain and mental trauma between relevant descriptions from The Book of Job and Flannery O'Connor's short novels, it's concluded that the nature of suffering lies in the conflict between the natural law and the self-centered conception of human nature, and human needs driven by the self-centered conception are one of the major causes of suffering. In addition, one's willingness to break through his self-centeredness is a positive attitude in the presence of suffering.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Feiyu, Sun. A Sociological Illustration of Suffering: A Start, not an End—A Reflection on Iain Wilkinson's Suffering : A Sociological Introduction[J]. Sociological Studies, 2007, (4): 207-217.
- [2] Weber, M. Protestant Ethics and Spirits of Capitalism [M]. New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1958:182.
- [3] Life Application: Study Bible [Z]. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997: 762.
- [4] The Holy Bible NIV. The Book of Job [Z]. Shanghai: China Christian Association, 2009: 476-511.
- [5] Haosheng Ye. Essence of Psychological Theory[M]. Fuzhou: Fujian Education Press, 2000:210-214.
- [6] Ming Zhou Everything That Rises must Converge---“Displacement” and “Suffering of Souls” in O'Connor's Depiction of Violence [J]. Foreign Literature Review, 2014, (1): 49-64.
- [7] Xinguo Ma. History of Western Literature Theory [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2002:301.
- [8] Abraham H. Maslow. Motivation and Personality [M]. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1987: 40-50.