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The Reception of the Taoist Parable in Jerome Salinger's Story "Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters"

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Abstract

To this day Jerome David Salinger has primarily been popular with his first novel "The Catcher in the Rye", which is not surprising as Holden Caulfield has become a beloved hero for almost all teenagers of Salinger's time onwards. However, Jerome Salinger deserves equal attention for his Glass family stories as well. Especially, that the Glass family protagonists share their perception of life and provide much food for thought by navigating through Oriental and Occidental philosophical realm. Jerome Salinger's distinction is mostly caused by his fascination with eastern religious and philosophical teachings, particularly Zen Buddhism and Taoism. These philosophical systems assist him to openly criticize materialistic and superficial lifestyle of the Americans. The article deals with the parable as a literary genre

illustrating the Taoist tale given at the beginning of the Glass family story “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters”. It describes how the parable assists the reader to evaluate the protagonist’s fate through the moral of the Taoist teaching.

Keywords: parable, Salinger, Taoism, alienation, story.

Introduction

Jerome David Salinger holds a distinguished place among modern American writers. Fame reached him right after the publication of his iconic novel “The Cather in the Rye” in 1951. To this day he is primarily popular with this very novel, which is not surprising as Holden Caulfield has become a beloved hero for almost all teenagers of Salinger’s time onwards. However, Jerome Salinger deserves equal attention for his Glass family stories as well. Especially, that the Glass family protagonists share their perception of life and provide much food for thought by navigating through Oriental and Occidental philosophical realm. Jerome Salinger’s distinction is mostly caused by his fascination with eastern religious and philosophical teachings, particularly Zen Buddhism and Taoism. These philosophical systems assist him to openly criticize materialistic and superficial lifestyle of the Americans. The Glass family members appear in Salinger’s collection of stories titled “Nine Stories” (“Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut”, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “Down at the Dinghy”), as well as in the separate stories “Raise High the Roof Beams, Carpenters”, “Seymour: An Introduction” and “Franny and Zooey”. Taoist influence is often revealed in insertion of parables in the stories, which are difficult to understand at a first glance but helpful to evaluate personal characters in their eccentricities, hard times or aspirations.

Parables as a Literary Genre

Parable comes from the Greek word meaning ‘*to throw beside*’, that is, “to compare”. We are to compare these little stories with our own behavior. People tell stories for many reasons, including the sheer egotistical delight of talking, but probably most of the telling proceeds from one of two more commendable desires – a desire to entertain and a desire to instruct. Among the most famous of the stories designed to instruct are the parables that Jesus told, for instance, the parable of the Prodigal Son. We can say that the parable is told for the sake of the point. We also can say that it is told for our sake because we are implicitly invited to see ourselves in the story, and to live our lives in accordance with it. This simple but powerful story with its memorable characters – though nameless and briefly sketched – makes us feel the point in our hearts.

Even older than Jesus’ parables are the fables attributed to Aesop, some of which go back to the 7th century BC. These stories also teach lessons by telling brief incidents from which homely morals may easily be drawn, even though the stories are utterly fanciful. Among famous examples are the stories of the hare and the tortoise, the boy who cried “Wolf!”, the ant and the grasshopper, and the good many others that stick in the mind because of the sharply contrasted characters in sharply imagined situations (Barnet et al. 1993:28).

An Oriental parable’s meaning is to illustrate the wisdom of not judging events as inherently good or bad, but to instead accept the uncertainty of life and the long-term consequences of events. By avoiding automatic judgments and emotional attachment to outcomes, one can find peace and respond more effectively to life’s challenges and opportunities, aligning with Taoist principles of naturalness and balance. Here is a tale from nineteenth century Japan. It is said to be lite-

rally true, but whether it really occurred or not is scarcely of any importance. It is the story, not the history, that counts.

“Two monks, Tanzan and Ekido, were once travelling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono, unable to cross the intersection. “Come on, girl”, said Tanzan at once, lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. “We, monks, don’t go near females, it is dangerous. Why did you do that?” “I left the girl there”, said Tanzan. “Are you still carrying her?”

It is a marvelous story with a strong ending. The opening paragraph is simple and matter-of-fact, but nevertheless, holds our attention: we sense that something interesting is going to happen during this journey along the muddy road on a rainy day. Perhaps we even sense, somehow, by virtue of the references to the mud and the rain, that the journey itself rather than the travelers’ destination will be the heart of the story: getting there will be more than half the fun. And then, after the introduction of the two characters and the setting, we quickly get the complication, the encounter with the girl. Still, there is apparently no conflict, though in “Ekido did not speak again until that night” we sense an unspoken conflict, an action (or, in this case, inaction) that must be explained, an imbalance that must be righted before we are finished. At last, Ekido, no longer able to contain his thoughts, lets his indignation burst out: “We, monks, don’t go near females, it is dangerous. Why did you do that?” his statement and his question reveal not only his moral principles, but also his insecurity and the anger that grows from it. And now, when the conflict is out in the open, comes the brief reply that reveals Tanzan’s very different character as clearly as the outburst revealed Ekido’s. this reply – tho-

ugh we could not have predicted it – strikes us as exactly right, bringing the story to a perfect end, that is, to a point (like the ends of Jesus’ parables and Aesop’s fables) at which there is no more to be said. It provides the denouement or resolution.

Taoist Parable and Seymour’s Eccentricities

The character who predominates (physically or virtually) in Salinger’s all Glass stories is Seymour. He is the eldest of the seven Glass family children. He is one of the most inexplicable characters with strange behaviors and unexpected decisions. Seymour is the brother who influences all his siblings even after his death. Salinger wrote his story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” in 1948 (published in *Hew Yorker*). Interestingly, the author kills the protagonist right in the first story but returns to him later in the rest of the stories, thus reinforcing the prominence and significance of Seymour. Although the scholars agree that Buddy (Webb Gallagher) is Salinger’s alter ego, still Seymour appears as the main carrier of the author’s principle thoughts and opinions. This is mainly revealed in occasions related to eastern philosophy and parables that imbue the narratives and cause deep thought.

“Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters” was published in 1955. In the story Salinger depicts a wedding day of Seymour and Muriel, the wedding on which the bridegroom does not show up. Buddy becomes the narrator and the explainer of Seymour’s strange behavior. It is hard to him to convince bride’s relatives and his own family in Seymour’s good intentions, especially that he believes his brother would never put beloved ones in awkward situation. Seymour’s post-war trauma turned him into a reserved, depressed and unsociable individual. However, it is not the only explanation to his strangeness. He is more inclined to search for independent intellectuals around him rather than superficial materialists pursuing worldly welfare. Seym-

our's eccentric decision is far from materialistic understanding. That is why the author provides the beginning of the story with a Taoist parable that should lead to understand specific nature of Seymour's worldview.

The story unfolds as one evening Seymour reads a Taoist tale to Franny who is ten months old, in order to make her sleep:

Duke Mu of Chin said to Po Lo: "You are now advanced in years. Is there any member of your family whom I could employ to look for horses in your stead?" Po Lo replied: "A good horse can be picked out by its general build and appearance. But the superlative horse—one that raises no dust and leaves no tracks—is something evanescent and fleeting, elusive as thin air. The talents of my sons lie on a lower plane altogether; they can tell a good horse when they see one, but they cannot tell a superlative horse. I have a friend, however, one Chiu-fang Kao, a hawker of fuel and vegetables, who in things appertaining to horses is nowise my inferior. Pray see him." Duke Mu did so, and subsequently dispatched him on the quest for a steed. Three months later, he returned with the news that he had found one. "It is now in Shach'iu," he added. "What kind of a horse is it?" asked the Duke. "Oh, it is a dun-colored mare," was the reply. However, someone being sent to fetch it, the animal turned out to be a coal-black stallion! Much displeased, the Duke sent for Po Lo. "That friend of yours," he said, "whom I commissioned to look for a horse, has made a fine mess of it. Why, he cannot even distinguish a beast's color or sex! What on earth can he know about horses?" Po Lo heaved a sigh of satisfaction. "Has he really got as far as that?" he cried. "Ah, then he is worth ten thousand of me put together. There is no comparison between us. What Kao keeps in view is the spiritual mechanism. In making sure of the essential, he forgets the homely details; intent on the inward qualities, he loses sight of the external. He sees

what he wants to see, and not what he does not want to see. He looks at the things he ought to look at, and neglects those that need not be looked at. So clever a judge of horses is Kao, that he has it in him to judge something better than horses"(Salinger, 1965:11).

The parable is a bit longer than the one we discussed above but fulfils the same function to the story. As we see, the ending gives the clear idea about the wise man how to choose a perfect solution. If one can perceive the spiritual value and ignore the rest, the result will be infallible. The reader might ponder why the author inserted this parable into the story. Following the plot, we can realize how Seymour tries to make people understand what he is running after, how important for him the inner beauty is and not appearance, that the wedding is an intimate pact between two people that does not require any witnesses.

"Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" describes the events taking place prior to the events told in the story "The Perfect Day for Bananafish". As was mentioned above, "The Bananafish" story ends with Seymour's suicide. The reader follows Seymour's actions first on the beach, then in the lift of the hotel and finally in the hotel room. On the other hand, the readers are informed about Seymour's strange behaviors through Muriel's phone talk with her mother. After Seymour's suicide the readers are left alone to ponder about the unexpected ending without giving direct explanations inasmuch as they are unaware of the "spiritual mechanism" leading Seymour to suicide.

Conclusion

Publication of "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" several years later provides more detailed description of the Seymour's personality, of the people surrounding and of the experience from his childhood. Somehow, we guess Salinger's intention to keep readers in suspense and gradually come to the point. Therefore, it becomes nece-

ssary to get familiar with all the Glass family stories in order to tie the knot and finally evaluate the hidden impulse driving to the denouement. Taoist parable introduced at the beginning of the story serves as a prompt to follow deep into the protagonist's soul, explain his weird existence and feel empathy towards him, like the author who had been seeking for empathy and escaping alienation for all his life.

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