

Sherwood Anderson's Feminine Consciousness Embodied in "Mother—Concerning Elizabeth Willard"

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Keywords: Feminism, Sherwood Anderson, "Mother", Elizabeth Willard, *Winesburg, Ohio*

Abstract: Sherwood Anderson, a prominent early 20th-century American novelist, depicted a range of female characters in his works, each marked by profoundly tragic destinies, with a particular focus on the women in *Winesburg, Ohio*. These characters are caught in a fate of misfortune, drawing societal attention to their plight. Anderson consistently demonstrates profound empathy and concern for women, highlighting his admiration and acknowledgment of the evolving role of women in the modern era. In his novel "Mother", the character of Elizabeth stands out as particularly poignant. Her tragic life is emblematic of the broader conflict between traditional and contemporary cultural values during the industrialization of America. This paper seeks to explore the sorrowful fate and the emergence of Elizabeth's feminist consciousness, which is evident in her complex relationship with her son and her resistance to her husband's authority. Despite the story's somber conclusion, Elizabeth's narrative is one of feminine awakening, as seen in her influence on her son and her defiance against her spouse. Anderson's portrayal of Elizabeth reveals his deep-seated sympathy for women, yet it is tempered by the cultural constraints of patriarchal norms, which even he could not fully transcend. His writing, while advocating for a feminist perspective, is paradoxically influenced by his patriarchal ideologies.

1. Introduction

Sherwood Anderson was a famous American novelist in the early 20th century, who portrayed a series of female characters in his works, all of whom had extremely tragic fates, especially in *Winesburg, Ohio*. Among them, the fate of Elizabeth in the novel "Mother" is the most pitiful. Essentially, female consciousness is a product of the clash between old and new cultures in the industrialized United States of America at the time. Thus, this paper aims to reveal the pathetic fate of the female character Elizabeth and her rise of female consciousness in Anderson's work "Mother", whose tragic fate reflected in Elizabeth's multiple stress and abnormal love for her son. Despite the tragic ending of the story, Elizabeth embodies feminine consciousness reflected in her influence of her son George Willard and her rebellion against her husband Tom Willard. Anderson shows his deep sympathy and close concern for women, but he was still unable to break through his cultural stereotypes of male dominance.

2. The Cause of Elizabeth's Pathetic Fate

2.1 Elizabeth's Multiple Stress

First, the pathetic fate of Elizabeth results from her multiple stress. The mother is one of Anderson's many freaks who is subjected to a triple pressure of physical and psychological stress from her family, society and her own limitations due to her status as a woman and mother. When she was young she dreamed of being an actress, and after her dreams were dashed, she married Tom Willard, whom she did not like. The downturn in the hotel business, combined with her growing frustration with her husband, turns her into a sickly, lifeless and unhappy woman. On the one hand, she is the wife of "father", the mother of her "son", a lonely, helpless and ugly middle-aged woman, but on the other hand, she is full of fantasies and desires and longs to perform everywhere with the theatre company. But for the sake of a normal life, she has to suppress herself. However, when she overhears the conversation between her son and her father, she feels that her "self" is being threatened, so she stops suppressing her true self and finally explodes, deciding to kill her husband. This is a manifestation of the schizophrenia caused by her inability to reconcile the contradiction between her ideal and real "self".

2.2 Elizabeth's Abnormal Love for Her Son

Second, the pathetic fate of Elizabeth is also attributed to her abnormal love for her son. Elizabeth wants her son to make some achievements, and she has an abnormal love for him, which is beyond maternal love. For example, when her son did not come to visit her for several days after her illness, she became anxious and frightened. "She was alarmed. She crept out of bed and hurried along the hallway toward her son's room." She could barely breathe but managed to "creep" to the door of her son's room[1]. "Perhaps he has now begun to walk about in the evening with girls." She was afraid that her son was out on a date with a girl. When she heard her son walking around the room and talking in a low tone, she smiled and all the fear that had been haunting her dissipated. Apparently, she feared that another girl would take her son's love away from her, and since he was still talking to himself in his room, she could go back to sleep in peace. At the same time, she hated her husband and said to herself "Now I will act. There is something threatening my boy and I will ward it off." But in the end, she couldn't make up her mind. She yearns for a big change in her life but is forced to suppress it, and in the end, she has to wait for the end of her life in a morbid state. In the chapter Death, Elizabeth ends her miserable life with death. When all hope is lost, this may be the only way to bring her ultimate relief and preserve what little dignity she has left.

3. The Rise of Female Consciousness

3.1 The Influence of Elizabeth on her Son

In addition, the rise of female consciousness is reflected in the influence of Elizabeth on her son. Sherwood Anderson demonstrates his celebration of femininity by depicting the role of women in the development of men, in contrast to the traditional trope of men influencing women. As George Willard's mother, Elizabeth Willard is not very good at expressing her feelings because of her own introverted personality and frustrating experiences. Although she did not have a very close mother-son relationship with George, she nevertheless had a profound influence on his upbringing in her own way. Elizabeth's aspiration for her son was not to become a successful businessman, but to rise above himself and not to be a boring and dull man. [2] George's eventual choice to become a writer, listen, express and get out of the small town was also influenced by his mother's

expectations of him. Although it is difficult for Elizabeth to clearly express her love and expectations of her son, in the end, at the moment of her death, George has an epiphany of the ideas his mother had been trying to convey to him.

3.2 The Rebellion of Elizabeth against her Husband

The rise of female consciousness is also reflected in the rebellion of Elizabeth against her husband. Although she is ugly and frail, living in a corner cottage, bored by her husband and shunned by her son, the lonely mother still comes out and occasionally tidies up the room for the lodgers. She does not close her door because her husband does not like her. Each meeting with her son is a simple conversation, but she always encourages him to go out, reflecting a deep-seated desire to get out and learn new things, and the contrast between her restlessness and her current state of life. The mother has high hopes for her son, and this attachment to him begins to turn into a fierce hatred for him when she sees him leave his room and encourages him to leave the house. All along, her hatred for her husband had been impersonal, but now it is solidly personal. She wants to settle it all by force, to escape from this suffocating life and to come out of it. This awakening of consciousness is the first time that a mother has stood up to a feminine struggle against a patriarchal society, and wants to take extreme measures. Sherwood Anderson explains from the female perspective that in an increasingly industrialized society, as a vulnerable group, women have their own dreams and aspirations. However, for socio-historical reasons, the limitations of women's soft nature make it difficult to realize their dreams. Under the oppression of a patriarchal society, "they cannot find a place to stand in society, and their efforts to find themselves and gain social recognition often end in tragedy. They become victims of patriarchal culture at different social levels and psychological levels" [3] The choice of a female perspective gives the reader a deeper understanding of the uncertainty and misery of women in a capitalist society, and a further sense of alienation and loneliness that results from the failure to realize dreams and pursuits, which is a shock to modern men.

4. Limitation of the Author's Female Consciousness

However, against the backdrop of Western patriarchal culture and history, Anderson is unable to transcend his ideology as a patriarchal writer, nor is he able to overcome his own patriarchal morality, which manifests the paradoxical expression of the feminist consciousness of Sherwood Anderson. The men represented by George, on the other hand, dared to envision the future and grew up and matured in the company, care, love and enlightenment of women. Anderson argues that the Craftsman era highlighted men's creativity and self-confidence, as they dominated and controlled women's destinies through their mastery of the world. And the greatest need of a woman's life - to love and be loved - prevented men from concentrating on creating the world. [4] The frustration suffered by men require women to compensate and support men's worlds in different ways. Men need women to grow up with them, but are afraid of capable, independent women. Thus, despite women's full support for the men around them, their efforts repeatedly fail. "To live alone and die lonely" is the common fate of Anderson's women.

5. Conclusion

The painful situation of women, as inferior ones, who are oppressed by both the patriarchal and industrial societies, is of great concern to the author. In his novels, whether *Death in the Woods* or *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson portrays the inexpressible suffering and frustration of women in the American Midwest at the beginning of the 20th century, and the women he portrays cannot

escape their tragic fate, thus drawing the attention of society to this group. At the same time, he shows his deep sympathy and close concern for women at all times, reflecting his praise and recognition of the women of the new era. But at a time when patriarchalism was prevalent, he was still unable to break through his cultural stereotypes of male dominance. He wanted men to retain their masculinity, and once femininity affected masculinity and prevented men from pursuing art and freedom, femininity was put in second place, thus showing the contradictory manifestation of his masculine writer's feminist consciousness.

References

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