

"Thunder in the Silence": On the Art of Contrast in Callaghan's "Two Fishermen"

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Keywords: Callaghan, "Two Fishermen", Contrast

Abstract: Morley Callaghan adopts a superb art of contrast in his short story "Two Fishermen", conveying rich meanings by simple language. Through the analysis of the application of contrast in the scenes, characterization, psychological situations and symbols, this paper explores the moral dilemma, social role, human relationship and other themes expressed in this short story.

1. Introduction

Morley Callaghan was the first Canadian author to establish a major international reputation and has been generally accepted as the Father of modern Canadian fiction. In a long and productive career, he published twenty novels, three collections of short stories, three plays and a memoir. Among his works, it is his short stories that are his lasting legacy. Callaghan's short stories usually focus on small, personal events and are told in simple and lucid language. They show a distinctive "Callaghanese" style: "essentially a moral tale, structured like a romance, embroidered with realistic details, and lacking a definitive conclusion". He presents a realistic picture of his times, allegorically denoting in his stories the moral, psychological or religious dilemmas faced by ordinary people. However, for a long time, Callaghan has never attracted the same critical acclaim like his contemporaries, so Edmund Wilson argued in the 1960s that Callaghan was "perhaps the most unjustly neglected novelist in the English-speaking world". Since then, the achievements of Callaghan have been increasingly recognized, but the current researches are still not much.

"Two Fishermen," collected in *Now That April's Here* (1936), is a typical work of Callaghan's style and approach. He held this one in the highest regard when asked to select one of his stories for inclusion in *This Is My Best*, a 1942 collection of works by famous authors. It tells the friendship and the betrayal of two "fishermen": Michael Foster and K. Smith. The former is actually the local newspaper reporter and the latter is actually a hangman. Smith comes to the small town to hang Thomas Delaney, who kills his wife's molester. In an evening fishing, Michael comes to understand Smith and unconsciously befriend with him. However, after the execution, Smith is attacked by the angry crowd, but Michael lack the courage to stand by him. Most ironically, at the end of the story, the two fishes Smith has given to Michael a moment ago—the symbol of friendship—are seized by a big fisherman and thrown at the hangman as a weapon.

From the perspective of Brandon Conron, "Two Fishermen" deals with a typical Callaghan theme of human justice through a series of ironic contrasts. In Callaghan own words, he likes the material "because there was a certain grim contrast between the nice human and warm relationship of the young fellow and the hangman and the actual vocation of the hangman." The explanations of and research on the theme of this story are vary, while few studies observe or discuss about the art of contrast using in this exquisite story. Indeed, the art of contrast is one of the key features of this short story, through which it shocks the readers, tightens the drama, and balances the structure. In addition, it conveys powerful moral, social and psychological messages in simple words. Using the art of contrast, the writer elucidates his ideas and clears his meanings, making them more memorable for the readers. Just like the "Iceberg Theory" imposed by Callaghan's good friend Ernest Hemingway—"The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water", Callaghan expresses much more than the story appears in simple languages with the

help of contrast. In my opinion, the effect of "thunder in the silence" is created, which means, the story is given weight and gravitas from the simplicity of language in the use of this artistic technique.

2. The Contrast of Scenes

The setting of the story is a small and remote town near a lake, where everyone knows each other. Michael is the only reporter working for the town paper, which indicates the limited exposure of the town to the outer world and the relatively low education level of the townspeople. Therefore, the people who live there have their social conventions and value systems. Understandably, the townspeople are infuriated by the case of Thomas Delaney, who is sentenced to death for killing the molester of his wife.

The fishing part is one of the most crucial scenes in this story. When Michael and Smith go fishing on the peaceful lake, Callaghan describes the details of the striking beauty of nature as they are far out on the water in an idyllic tone: "the blue hills behind the town seemed to get larger at sundown" and "the setting sun shining brilliantly on square patched of farm land". There is a contrast between the blue hills and the town: as they run into the lake farther north, the town seems to become smaller and the blue hills seem to get larger. The further they row away from the town, the closer they become. Society is complex, with lots of rules and codes; while nature is pure, from which one can find the true self and revelations. As the saying goes, "within nature lies the essence for humanity", the tranquility of the nature lets them forget about the stereotypes of the society and return to the true self. In nature, they find the access to real value, which can be used as a standard against which to measure conventional evaluations. As Michael and Smith enjoy the beauty of nature together, the warm human relationship has gradually been established.

The second important part of this story is the execution scene, opening with an abrupt and stark contrast to the pastoral and peaceful tone of the first part: "At seven o'clock next morning Thomas Delaney was hanged in the town jail yard." It is the place where the life of Delaney ends and then the crowd attack the workmen in the jail. The readers have to be pulled back to the real world, the complicated one full of injustice and violence compared with the simple world of nature. Touching lightly on the execution details, Callaghan presents a detailed and cruel scene of the mob violence. The violence starts when someone throws an old boot, and it then turns into a larger-scale attack when small rocks and sticks are used as weapons. Left alone on the sidewalk, the unfortunate Smith becomes the target attacked by the angry crowd. Like the close-up shot in a film, the poor Smith becomes the focus: "One small stone hit on the head. Blood trickled from the side of his head as he looked around helplessly at all the angry people." The cruelty of the execution scene is in great contrast with the peace and harmony of the fishing scene. From the sharp contrast, the complexity and vulgarity of the daily life, and the warmth and sincerity of friendship are well presented. The readers may feel shocked at first, and then can better understand the story: Smith regards fishing as his greatest pleasure because of the unfriendliness of the whole society towards his job, so getting in touch with nature is a way for him to get rid of the troubles and prejudices of the real world. It can also explain why Smith is so disappointed with Michael's betrayal—after such a harmonious and friendly fishing time, Michael betrays his friend when Smith is helplessly attacked by the mob.

3. The Contrast of Characters

Characterization is an important element of fiction. In this short story, there are three-layers contrasts concerning characterization. Firstly, focusing on one person Smith, his image as a fisherman is in great contrast with his image as a hangman. Secondly, analyzing the two persons—Smith and Michael, it can be seen that the two are in contrast with each other in many ways, especially in their attitudes towards job and the true self. Thirdly, regarding Smith and Michael as the representatives of the individual, then the weakness of the individual in in sharp contrast with the strength of the crowd, represented by the townspeople.

3.1. Smith's image as a fisherman and a hangman

In the words of William Shakespeare: "All the worlds a stage, and all the men and women merely players." In different situations, people play different roles. As the roles of Smith changes, his image as a fisherman strikingly contrasts with his image as a hangman. In nature, the author portrays Smith as an ordinary person who enjoys fishing—"a little fellow without a hat, sitting down with his knees hunched up to neck, who stared steadily far out over the water." When fishing together, Michael only touches on the topic of Smith's job twice, while the rest of the questions are about daily lives—Smith's family, his fishing habit and his personal interests. From their conversation, we get to know that Smith is a proud father, a thoughtful husband, and a cheerful partner who is "awfully polite", "meek and quizzical" in the course of fishing. When in society, however, he becomes a serious and professional executioner, serving the public as the instrument of justice. He dresses "in a long black cut-away coat with gray striped trousers, a gates-ajar collar, and a narrow red tie" who steps out "with military precision" and carries with "a cocky dignity" as he himself feels the importance of his job.

Irony of situation and of language is skillfully woven through the narrative, so the despised stereotype of a cold-hearted hangman is regenerated into the image of an ordinary person who only does his duty.

3.2. Michael and Smith

It is obvious that Michael and Smith are different in appearances, personalities, and careers in this short story. The hangman Smith, is a small, gray-haired middle-aged man who has a large head tapering down to a small chin. He is a man who speaks shyly and smiles with the charming ease of a small boy. Smith is a simple, ordinary, affable man—in a word, "a nice little guy". He is sort of content with his current life as his job provides an opportunity to travel around the country and find some place to go fishing. The reporter Michael, on the other hand, is a tall, long-legged, eager young fellow, who yearns to escape his small hometown for the big city. He is an ambitious young man, who has a greater expectation for his life. He is also a man of action, who comes to see the hangman immediately as he feels it is his duty to find the truth and seek the fact as a reporter.

The readers may wonder, as the two protagonists are so different, why the immediate amiability is still built between them? Here, we should notice that the author actually indicates the similarity of the two in spite of their differences: they are polite and friendly persons who both face with the difficulties of life. When they talk about the topics of daily life such as family and fishing rivers, they "felt friendly". But why they finally part their ways and take different turnings? From my perspective, the first reason is that there's a substantial divergence of job opinion between the two. Indeed, Smith's attitude toward his job is in sharp contrast with Michael's. Smith acknowledges his job value by saying "somebody's got to do my job" and does not regard his job as "so disagreeable", while Michael believes Smith should be ashamed for being a hangman. When Michael asks Smith why he doesn't take another job, Smith says he doesn't know about that. He doesn't know whether he can find a better job that he and his wife could go fishing together, or he doesn't know whether he will become unemployed if he gives up this one. For a married man who has a heavy burden of supporting his five young children, fishing is an extra luxury. When refers to the social context, we can find that Callaghan wrote this story in the 1930s, the decade known as the Dirty Thirties in Canada. At that time, millions of Canadians were left unemployed, hungry and often homeless because of the Great Depression. By 1933, 30 percent of the labor force was out of work. Smith's attitude towards job might represent many of the 1930s. Although others see it as a disagreeable job, he has to make a living for his family. Michael, however, represents the confused young man who just comes into society and lacks the experiences. He has a reporter dream, but he lacks the qualification of a good reporter such as courage, confidence, and integrity. For example, though he feels it "his duty as a newspaperman" to observe the execution, he is too "white-faced", "afraid" and "sick" to do so. Though he dreams of working on a city newspaper, he fails to explain the fish issue to the two hard-looking young city newspapermen because of his lack of confidence. Though he feels that he should prevent the crowd from attacking Smith, he comforts himself by repeating "it's

different now, it's different". The second reason is that Smith stays true to himself while Michael follows the crowd, fearing to defy the power of the majority. The difference of the two is in sharply contrast: Smith gives two trout to Michael in the presence of Dr Parker and city newspapermen, for he does not care about others' judgement. Michael, however, cannot stay true to his heart for he cares too much about others' opinion. He unwillingly becomes a part of the crowd violence, which finally ends their friendship.

3.3. The individual and the crowd

The short story "Two Fishermen" deals with the moral dilemma faced by people in their day-to-day lives between the social conventions of the crowd and the insistence on integrity of the individual. As in most of his fiction, Callaghan makes no judgment but merely portrays his characters with their ironic and even paradoxical strengths and weaknesses.

In this story, Smith is a lonely person, and it seems that the whole world is against him. When he shares his drink with Michael, Smith says that "The only time I take a drink... is when I go on a fishing trip by myself. I usually go by myself". He often goes fishing by himself as he cannot bring his family with him from place to place, and it also hints that he rarely makes acquaintance with others. However, it is also evidently that he wants a companion. Smith says "shyly" and "eagerly" to Michael, and is "speaking with so much eagerness". Smith's way of speaking indicates that he is a lonely person who actually longs to friendship. The readers can guess from his politeness and eagerness that he might never have a friend in his life as he is an outsider of his working places and also the commonly-despised person for his job. As the outlander of the small town, other instruments of the justice such as the sheriff, the town constable and the physician all show their indifference to the little hangman. For example, the sheriff Mr. Steadman realizes the public wrath but he fears to take the responsibilities, so he says "Don't ask me. I'm saying nothing... I can't do nothing" when Michael asks where the hangman is. Dr. Parker, the physician, should know that it is not the fault of the hangman as he himself has to do the job of examining the dead no matter he feels pity for Thomas Delaney. However, it is inappropriate that when Michael accepts the fish from Smith, the physician shows his hostility to the hangman by glancing angrily at Michael, and then turns his back on him, which, in my understanding, shows the hostility of local people to an outsider. The contrast of the little hangman and the angry crowd is more prominent. The sharp contrast of a dignified human-being and the violent mob is similar to the marketplace scene in *The Scarlet Letter* where the dignified and lady-like Hester appears in stark contrast to the gloom and the grim reality of the crowd. It sets people thinking what the real dignity and the real shame are.

The protagonist Michael is also a representative of an individual, who plays a special role in this story. He is one of the townspeople who feels pity for Delaney, but he is also the only one in this story who realizes the humanity of Smith. Thus, Michael as an individual also contrasts with the crowd: the former has his weak consciousness and conscience but the latter is unconscious, driven by their prejudiced judgement. Sadly, the strength of an individual is so weak that Michael is afraid of being seen as friend with Smith, showing the cowardice of the individual who fears revealing himself to the authority. The overwhelming force of the crowd and the weakness of the individual have been best presented in the mob attack against Smith. When the angry townsmen attack the hangman outside the jail by tossing sticks and stones, Smith falls and looks around desperately for someone to come to his aid. The moral integrity of Michael, unfortunately, fails.

4. The Contrast of Psychological Situations

The first psychological contrast is the one between the stereotype and the reality. The primary impression of Smith is in sharp contrast with the social stereotype which surprises Michael as well as the readers. Most people stereotype a hangman as a heavy and stout, rude and vulgar guy, but Smith is the exact opposite of these descriptions. He is an ironic character in the story because he looks rather innocent and sincere with his "large head, tapering down to a small chin, a birdlike neck, and a very wistful smile". Standing up, the little man smiles shyly. Just like the cliché says,

"don't judge a book by its cover", the stereotype actually skews the perception and creates the prejudice.

Besides this, Michael's previous psychological situation also contrasts with the later one. "Two Fishermen" can also be seen as a story about the psychological growth of a young man. Building a friendship and breaking it because of his betrayal, Michael experiences mature emotions he has never before felt. While Smith is a relatively static character who doesn't change much as the story progresses, Michael, however, is a dynamic character who experiences a dramatic change in perception and behavior when he receives the kindness of Smith and experiences an epiphany by the time the story ends. At first, Michael holds the prejudice against the hangman Smith. After a sub-climax at the personal fishing meeting with Smith, however, Michael can't "figure out why he felt so ashamed of himself" by realizing that Smith is just an ordinary person who only does his own job for a living. It is the first time that the psychological situation of Michael changes. After accepting Smith's fish publicly, Michael feels uneasy, so he chooses to join in the crowd by pretending nothing happened between Smith and him. It is the second time that the psychological situation of Smith changes. The climax comes when the mob attacks the hangman, and the "big fisherman" grabs Smith's gift from Michael's hands and throws it at the little man as a weapon. As the hangman endeavors to rise from the ground, he stares at the fish "with his mouth hanging open", so Michael is "hot with shame", trying to get out of the crowd after seeing the expression on Smith's face. It is the third time that the psychological situation of Smith changes. Through the contrast of psychological situations, the story becomes more interesting and attractive, arousing the readers' expectation and interests.

5. The Contrast of Symbols

From Morley Callaghan's earliest short stories to his later collection, "Callaghan has constantly relied on symbols to structure the development of theme". Callaghan's skillful use of biblical parallels and the careful manipulation of symbols serve to make the emotional impact on Michael and Smith stronger. There are two important symbols in the story: fish and newspaper. The former contrasts with the latter in the story, but what makes the situation more complex is the fact that the previous meaning of fish also contrasts with its later meaning.

Barbara Pell has already mentioned in *Faith and Fiction* that Callaghan pursues grace and redemption instead of "sin, the world and the devil". In his opinion, Callaghan "displays a 'Christ-like' identification with and compassion for his characters in their existential situations." The significance of fishing for Smith could also be traced back to the baptism, which in Christian tradition signifies spiritual cleansing and rebirth. Thus, fishing could be regarded as the sign of sacred activity –the process of gaining friendship. Associated with Christianity, the fish symbol is one of the oldest symbols. In this story, the fish firstly symbolizes the friendship between Michael and Smith as the hangman pulls out "two good-sized salmon-bellied trout" and gives them to the reporter. However, it should be noticed that the fishes are only caught by Smith himself, while Michael actually fails to keep an appointment and has no intention to receive the gift. Their unstable friendship is only based on the contribution of Smith, so it dooms to fail. In fact, the nothingness of their friendship can be revealed by a detail in their fishing course: "They had gone far out on the water but they had caught nothing...No fish tonight, I guess, Smitty... When they reached the old pier by the power-house, it was full night and they hadn't caught a single fish". The fact that the old hand Smith gets nothing in their happy fishing times indicates the emptiness of their friendship, so it is no wonder that the symbol of friendship are finally thrown mercilessly back to Smith.

On the other hand, the newspaper represents the voices of the society, where the townspeople hate and rage at Smith. Callaghan, however, adds some details to the fish: the fish is folded in the newspaper. The use of newspaper here has its far-reaching meaning. If Michael unwraps the fish from the newspaper, he could see the fish. It means that if he denies the prejudices of the society and accepts the true friendship, Michael would be able to become the real friend of Smith. However, Michael finally chooses to be wise for self-protection and betrays his friend who has spent such a good neighbourly time last night. Just like Peter who left his career as a fisherman to follow Jesus,

Michael also at first breaks the stereotypes and builds the friendship with Smith. However, both Peter and Michael finally betray their friends. A pleasant and private encounter as it is, Michael feels ashamed and sick after he gets "two good-sized salmon-bellied trout" from Smith. When the big fisherman asks Michael why he does not participate in the attack, the reporter betrays his friend by weakly claiming that "Nothing. I got nothing against him". Similarly, Peter denies Christ for three times by insisting, "He just doesn't mean anything to me at all." The story ends in irony after the poor hangman realizes the betrayal of his friend, leaving the readers to think about the deep meanings of the story. The themes of the story are subtly shown with the parallels to the biblical betrayal and denial of Christ by Peter as well as the symbols of fish and newspaper, which underscores the flaws in Michael's character.

6. Conclusion

The force and power of this short story lie in Callaghan's skillful techniques by his juxtaposition of contrasting scenes, characters, psychological situations and symbols with the use of understated language. The effect of a series of contrast is like the "thunder in the silence", as the irony of the situation is intensified, and the rich meanings of human justice, humanity and integrity, friendship and betrayal are conveyed in simple languages.

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