



Analysis of the Life Tragedy of Carla in “Runaway” From the Perspective of Androgyny

ZHENG Qin^[a], LIU Hui^{[b],*}

^[a]Department of foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

^[b]Associate Professor, Department of foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

* Corresponding author.

Received 5 May 2021; accepted 20 June 2021

Published online 26 June 2021

Abstract

From the perspective of the theory of androgyny, this paper analyzes the embodiment and transformation of the androgyny in the protagonist Carla through her two attempts to run away and further points out that the androgyny imbalance is the primary cause of her tragic fate. Her failure to achieve a harmonious coexistence of masculinity and femininity to a state of relative equilibrium made her a victim of the patriarchal society.

Key words: Alice Munro; “Runaway”; Androgyny

Zheng, Q., & Liu, H. (2021). Analysis of the Life Tragedy of Carla in “Runaway” From the Perspective of Androgyny. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 22(3), 56-59. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/12186>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12186>

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Nobel Prize for literature has gone to Alice Munro, a Canadian short story writer, known as “Canadian Chekhov”. As one of her representative novels, *Runaway* consists of eight short stories, each of which explores the theme of escape. The title story “Runaway” tells of the heroine Carla’ inner torture and distress in her two attempts of runaway.

Feminism has always been a hot topic in the study of the work of Munro. Scholars interpret *Runaway* mainly from a feminist perspective, such as women’s

consciousness, women’s existence, women’s identity and female writing.

Fiona Tolan interprets very early the causes, means and consequences in female quest to assume that it is a constant low-lying temptation for the awakened women like Carla. Ali Hamada Mgalladis considers the circumstances enveloping the protagonist’s escape so as to measure her in the after-escape state. Liu Qu analyzes female consciousness in “Runaway” varying from emergence, repression, awakesness to repression, revealing that the immaturity of female consciousness is the root of the tragedy. Studies about narrative, psychology and translatology to “Runaway” are also worth mentioning. José dos Santos maintains that “Runaway” is apparently a realistic presentation of the fact but ends with ambiguity and uncertainty realized by language and narrative. Based on Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, Raheleh Bahador illustrates that characters in “Runaway” are driven by the freudian mental agencies and undergo phases of psychic disorder. Liliya V. Bazarova studies the interlingual transformation peculiarities within the framework of the stories.

It can be seen that the above studies have made great achievements in studying Munro’s *Runaway*. From the perspective of androgyny theory, this paper analyzes the heroine Carla’s masculinity and femininity in her two attempts to run away to chase down the roots of her tragic life.

2. THEORY OF ANDROGYNY

Androgyny originally refers to the phenomenon of hermaphroditism in biology, but with the development of human society, it has been gradually endowed with social and humanistic significance. The so-called “androgyny” is also known as “hermaphrodite”. Although this idea existed as early as the ancient Greek era, it is attributed to the British female writer and literary theorist Virginia

Woolf who introduced it as a theory of literary creation and criticism into related fields.

In *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929, she points out: "in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating" (Woolf, p.113). Woolf's concept of androgyny is first to identify the differences between men and women. What she pursues is not annihilation of gender, but the cooperation beyond sexes. This is the interpretation of the most primitive concept of androgyny in feminist research, which later triggered numerous criticisms and is still one of the hottest topics of feminist study in literary circles today.

French writer Hélène Cixous once pointed out "Intersex means everyone finds the existence of both sexes in them. This existence is based on male and female individuals. The degree of obviousness and determination is varied, neither excludes differences nor excludes oneness" (Cixous, p.199).

They believe that a person has the characteristics of both sexes in his subconsciousness at the same time, and the integration of the two sexes is the perfect state of a person. Therefore, Out of resonance, it is easier for both minds to communicate effectively and promote mutual understanding, so as to dissolve the historical iceberg of gender antagonism eventually and achieve the ideal state of harmonious coexistence.

This theory has a revolutionary significance to deconstruct gender binary opposition of Western patriarchal society, as it holds that: "men are born bold, resolute, violent, independent, and have dominant and ruling ability, while women are naturally gentle, obedient, considerate, flexible and indecisive, easy to be dominated and ruled" (Yang, p.42).

In "Runaway", Munro is acknowledged to be skilled in portraying characters, especially female characters like Carla. She is seen not just as a tragic woman, but through Munro's delicate characterization, masculinity and femininity are found in her personality, which shows a tendency of harmonious unity with long-term struggles and sufferings. Thus to some extent, Munro's approval to the androgynous personality development of human beings can also be detected.

3. CARLA'S MASCULINITY

Carla's masculinity is mainly reflected in her ambition at work as well as her resolution in choosing what kind of life she wants to live in her two attempts to run away, which also witnesses her masculinity from germination to maturity.

3.1 Self-Supporting Personality at Work

Regarding her occupational planning, Carla's ambition about work and economic independence is gradually emerging. When Carla was a teenager, contrary to the traditional female characteristics of passivity, submissiveness and vulnerability, she had her own say when choosing her career. At the age of 18, she decided to be a veterinarian in exchange for higher education imposed by her parents.

After getting married, Carla followed Clark to work on the farm. Instead of relying on Clark to support her family, she supports half of the family doing housework, feeding horses, painting, and subsidizing her neighbor Sylvia as a cleaner. It can be seen that in the three years after her marriage, Carla's work goes far beyond the traditional female job and covers many traditional male jobs. Thus her strong and unyielding, self-supporting personality is evident. Moreover, her reliable working style is appreciated particularly by Sylvia, thus the latter has a masculine description of Carla as she watches her cleaning the windows: "Surprised by the shadow of Carla, bare-legged, bare-armed, on top of a ladder, her resolute face crowned with a frizz of dandelion hair that was too short for the braid. She was vigorously spraying" (Munro, p.28). And in her eyes, Carla is definitely unique in many aspects: she is strong, energetic, free, and completely different from those female students who just complain and cry in front of her.

3.2 Carla's Resolution in Two Escapes

Carla's first runaway at the age of 18 is the beginning of her bravery and freedom in the choice of her own life, in which her masculinity is stimulated.

When Carla made up her mind to run away from home for the first time, she willingly gave up the good life, the false middle-class life in her eyes, to elope with a "tramp" in his father's eyes, because she longed for a "more real" life. She told her mother and stepfather: "I've always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life. I know I cannot expect you to understand this" (Munro, p.47). She is clearly aware of what she wants to be and wants to do, so she chose to run away for the first time without any hesitation, which found the way for her second runaway.

In the second runaway, Carla's masculinity becomes the motivation, thus she becomes more decisive, believing that she will live a better life without her husband.

At the very beginning, Carla talked with Sylvia about her plans after leaving home, Carla has a plan for her future to make full use of her charming to live in a strange city and has no plans to go back to her parents or siblings. Especially when Carla says, "now. Today. This minute" (Munro, p.37). Moreover, her courage to escape is further aided by the support of her fellow woman. Wearing the clothes Sylvia gave her, she went to Sylvia's female friend in another place, and lived in her large, empty house, and then went around looking for work, or a job on a horse

riding stable—this is her only work experience. Although she relies on Sylvia in the beginning, she has a clear occupational planning there that she tries to make the most use of her feminine charming to find a job suitable for her to gain the material wealth. She was determined to find “a life, a place, and chose it only for a special reason that is, Clark will not be included there” (Munro, p.41). At that time, when she fled to Clark, she used similar reasons. She told her mother and stepfather: “I’ve always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life. I know I cannot expect you to understand this” (Munro, p.47). While here with Clark, the more real life--the sense of existence--was still not found, instead she was being destroyed by Clark. Therefore when she started, her masculinity was maximized and occupied in a dominant place.

As Mrs Jamieson would say—and as she may hopefully say—“Hold our destiny in our hands”(Munro, p.34). No one will glare at her fiercely, and no one with bad mood will affect her, making her upset day by day. It shows an innocent, romantic, independent, self-confident and resolute female image that devotes to pursuing her perfect personality and realizes her all-round development in another way. At the very beginning of the second runaway, Carla’s masculinity is not merely driven by instinct but a more mature masculinity, together with a more decisive awakening consciousness, and it is her resistance against her femininity under the rules of the patriarchal society that brings possibility and opportunity to her escape twice.

4. CARLA'S FEMININITY

Her femininity is mainly manifested in her marriage life, her tolerance and unconditional obedience to her husband, and her indecision in the face of runaway which her life trajectory has been rooted in.

4.1 Carla's Obedience as a "Good" Wife In Marriage

In the male-dominated culture, women have always been defined as the other who lacks self-consciousness and is in inferior position. Beauvoir believes women’s subordinate status as the other is moulded by men as she puts: “one is not born a woman, but becomes one” (Beauvoir, p.267). Apparently, here Carla in this marital relationship has been dominated by her husband.

As Clark’s wife, Carla, who had run away from her parents, thought of Clark as her master: “ she saw him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission both proper and exquisite” (Munro, p.46). Carla has become Clark’s belongings and her husband is everything to her, which is manifested in her words and deeds.

“Just don’t be mad at me.” She said.

“I’m not mad. I hate when you’re like this, that’s all.”

“I’m like this because you’re mad.”

“Don’t tell me what I am. You’re choking me. Start supper” (Munro, p.23).

In this conversation, it can be seen that Carla does not have any say in their marital relationship meanwhile Clark has always been regarded as the backbone to her. She humbly begs her husband for forgiveness, but Clark still faces the computer, talks to her in a tepid tone, and ends the conversation by ordering Carla to cook. Even in these circumstances, Carla maintained her role as a “good obedient wife” and cooked dinner as Clark told her. It can also be seen from other dialogues that in this marriage, Carla and Clark are in a completely unequal position. Clark is like a dictator, dominating everything. He always talks to himself, and ignores Carla, even when she tries to change the topic. This fully shows Clark’s coldness and brutality on the one hand, but also reflects that Carla considers herself to be Clark’s belonging and blindly follows her husband, even to the point where she loses her dignity and independence, particularly in the matter of Mr Jamieson.

Carla fabricated the fact of sexual harassment Mr Jamieson did to her to please her husband and regarded the loss of her innocence as insignificant. “The couple talked about it more than once, seeing it as a fun news in their lives” (Munro, p.25). When it comes to Mr Jamieson, it is not only Clark who is amused, but also Carla, who is eager to please her husband and stimulate him, giving an impression of her ingratiating personality and nature of weakness. She even acquiesced to Clark’s conspiracy to blackmail Mrs Jamieson, without substantial resistance. Once Carla maintained her own dignity in the case of Mr Jamieson, but when she saw himself as a capture of Clark, she lost herself.

Carla’s femininity is reinforced by the marriage and the Western patriarchal society as her gender characteristics have given her a social role. Although her masculinity takes a part instinctively, she has always been imprisoned in the role of a good obedient wife. When she is completely guided by the statute of femininity, she can only choose to obey, compromise, and tolerate, which also sets up for her failure to run away.

4.2 Carla's Irresolution and Hesitance in Life Choice

Carla’s second runaway failed finally even though it succeeded briefly at the beginning, which proves that her femininity is overwhelmed eventually for her indecisiveness and weakness in nature therefore further hinders her from moving towards happiness.

When Carla decided to leave Clark to live alone, she pretended to be independent and brave on the surface. However, her acceptance of the help from her neighbor, her occupational planning, as well as her confidence in living a better life all came to naught when she determined to get off from the dream bus. Merely after three stops, her firmness was shaken by the unknown future. She could

not imagine that she would never see his husband again and how she would make a living there. She had sorts of indecisive thoughts and even fears of freedom, and finally in a state of collapse and delirium stumbled out of the bus and begged Clark to take her home, which declared Carla's failure in the second runaway.

Her femininity overwhelmed her again and made her still unable to get rid of Clark's influence. Carla returned to the past life. However, she seemed to have a lethal needle stuck in her lung somewhere, and could breathe lightly without pain. Every time she needed a deep breath, she could feel that the needle was still there. "It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there" (Munro, p.62). The needle here refers to the lure of freedom therefore the pain she feels constantly when she tries to make a conscious effort to stay away from all temptations: she stopped going to Sylvia's house to help and she stopped looking for flora. It is a full embodiment that she does everything to repress her independent and confident self and buries her desire for freedom and independence.

However, it says Carla: "she had only to raise her eyes, she had only to look in one direction, to know where she might go" (Munro, p.63). After Carla's hesitation, helplessness and escape, this kind of perseverance appears and further foresees that Carla is not giving up yet. She seems to find the direction of life again, still pursuing the balance of her masculinity and femininity in her mind to realize her happy life.

Every woman has a hidden temptation forever in her heart, and every heart room has a secret wound. Female writers and their female characters would not deny this. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain: "the image of female hero shaped by women writers is often an indecisive and bounded fantasy, they are buried in the center building of a patriarchal society, but they imagine, dream or is actually in the design of their runaway routes, such as through the wall, the lawn, the antlers and the path, and so on, so that can reach the light flashing town outside the building." (Gilbert and Gubar, p.257). We see more or less that illusion in the female character moulded by Munro. In "Runaway", the androgynous Carla testifies that Munro has a faith that women can both play male

and female's role, conveying her condemnation to male-dominated culture.

CONCLUSION

From the first runaway to the second, it shows Carla's change from a woman having the courage to break free from bondage to an object of a rough and brutal husband, meanwhile from an independent and confident female to a wife who is resigned to fate and stays away from temptations, which is also a manifestation that she has gone through the transformation from masculinity to femininity to the brief coexistence and eventually to the collapse, which is the fatal reason for her marriage and life tragedy.

REFERENCES

- Behador, R., & Zohdi, E. (2015). Alice Munro's "Runaway" in the Mirror of Sigmund Freud. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 4(2), 169-17.
- Bazarova, L. V. (2019). Interlingual transformations in the translation of the literary work "Runaway" by Alice Munro. *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 9(2), 1-9.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (1956). *The second sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Cixous, H. (2005). Laugh of the medusa. *Apokalipsa*, 25, 90-92.
- Dos Santos, J. (2009). Postmodern challenges in Alice Munro's short fiction: Issues of language and representation. *New Challenges in Language and Literature*, FALE/UFMG, 265-273.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Susan G. (1984). *The madwoman in the attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Liu, Q. (2013). An analysis of female consciousness in Alice Munro's *Runaway*. *Movie Review*, 21, 125-126.
- Mgallad, A. H. (2020). Feminist Identity, Ambition and Choice in Alice Munro's *Runaway*. *Journal of Al-Frahedis Arts*, 12.42(II), 389-398.
- Munro, A. (2005). *Runaway*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tolan, F. (2010). To leave and to return: Frustrated departures and female quest in Alice Munro's *Runaway*. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4(3), 161-178.
- Woolf, V. (1945). *A room of one's own*. London: Penguin Books.
- Yang, A. H. (2008). Tamara Ivanovna's "androgyny"—Analysis of "Ivan's daughter, Ivan's mother" from a Perspective of Feminism. *Russian Literature and Art*, 4, 42-45.