

An Analysis of the Father's and Mother's Image in Hamlin Garland's Short Stories

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Abstract

Hamlin Garland, an influential American writer, describes the images of fathers and mothers in their everyday west-frontier lifestyle. By analyzing those figures, this paper will reveal the social significance of his work, his writing style, and his literary views: *Veritism*.

Keywords: Hamlin Garland, the father and mother, short stories, Veritism

1. Introduction

Hamlin Garland, a famous native writer of America, wrote about the quotidian Midwestern farmer's life in the early to mid 1900's. With great consciousness and strong local characteristics, he has made tremendous contributions to the formation of American national literature.

Main-Travelled Roads is the most important collection of short stories by Hamlin Garland. Based on what he saw and felt, Garland devoted all his deep feelings into this work. When Garland returned to his hometown area, after his adventures in the east, he witnessed the disillusionment of the American dream and the abject poverty in the West. In his depiction of his abject parents' lonely and hard-work efforts to survive the western life, one can sense how deeply distressed Garland felt. He was so disgusted and helpless with such form of "wasting life", but to the heroic quality of his parents who worked hard without striving for reputation, he expressed much understanding and admiration.

It was under the influence of such complex emotions that Garland created the group images of "the father and mother" in his story. "The father and mother", as the elder generation in those times, toiled on the same piece of land and suffered the same cruel fate. Despite their hard work and determination, Garland's parent struggled at the edge of despair. His father, Richard Garland, is a stern man. "His scheme of discipline impressed itself almost at once upon his children... seldom presumed a second time on his forgetfulness or tolerance." His mother, Isabelle McClintock, was not demonstrative. "She never expressed her deeper feelings. She seldom kissed her children," and once he reached his teenage years, Hamlin recalled that "she never embraced us." His bitterness was great when his mother suffered a stroke in the summer of 1889. Angrily he blamed the Westward lure that had driven his family into the prairie wilderness and caused his father to keep his mother "working like a slave long after the time when she should have been taking her ease". Dedicated to his mother and father, *Main-Travelled Roads* was a tribute to their "silent heroism" in following the rugged Western life. With courage and tenacity, mamma and papa Garland trudged on the road of life's survival while still showed kindness towards their family and neighbors.

2. Literature Review

After the publication of *Main-Travelled Roads*, it caused great repercussions in the United States, and made people re-understand and reflect on the rural life in the west. William Dean Howells praised the book, Garland's best known work, for evoking "the bitter and burning dust; the foul and trampled slush of the common avenues of life: the life of the men who hopelessly and cheerlessly make the wealth that enriches the alien and the idler, and impoverishes the producer."

But there are also dissenting voices who claim that his depiction of the midlands is a complete fabrication, arguing that Garland's work leaves no trace of the realities of life, just the gruesomely ugly and trivial realities. Some critics literally flew at his head, railing at a "bird who would foul his own nest". Through the analysis of

the images of fathers and mothers, this paper aims to re-examine the real living situation of people in the transition period between urban and rural areas in the United States, and the irreversible nostalgia in the process of modernization, and the brave and healthy national spirit that Garland wanted to shape.

3. An Analysis of the Father's and Mother's Image in Short Stories

3.1 *The Lonely Mother—An Overworked Contributor*

In Hamlin Garland's novels, the Midwestern rural life is all about hard working, specifically, working day and night in a solitary atmosphere. During the difficult period of pioneering the West, women make tremendous sacrifices, especially "mothers" who had to do both housework and field work as an important part of family farming life. Therefore, the kitchen and field are what their life was all about. In *Up the Coolly*, Garland creates the image of a lonely, old, and weak "mother", highlighting the erosion of the mother due to the isolated village and hard work. When Howard returns home from the East with fame and money, he is taken back by the barren, dark, dilapidated, and lifeless existence of his homeland:

Howard went slowly around the corner of the house, past a vilely smelling rain barrel, toward the west. A gray-haired woman was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch, her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed on the faintly yellow sky, against which the hills stood dim purple silhouettes and the locust trees were etched as fine as lace. There was sorrow, resignation, and a sort of dumb despair in her attitude.

Howard stood, his throat swelling till it seemed as if he would suffocate. This was his mother—the woman who bore him, the being who had taken her life in her hand for him; and he, in his excited and pleasurable life, had neglected her! (Garland, 1899, p. 80)

The description of the mother is based on careful observation, which describes the instant feeling of Howard when he meets his mother. Garland accurately records the emotional resonance by combining the environment with the author's feelings, at the time. It is easy to appreciate Garland's writing technique in his novels—*Veritism*, which reproduces the environment of that time in an impressionistic way, as if the mountains at dusk have become lonely and desolate because of the sadness and solitude of the mother. When observing and depicting the mother, Garland does not reproduce mechanically without any attitude or emotion like a naturalist. Instead, he from time to time integrates his own attitudes and expresses his feelings. When he says that the mother is the woman who has given birth to him and devoted her whole life to him, he expresses his deep gratitude for her selfless dedication. In this way, readers can participate in the novel with a strong sense of presence and interconnection with one's own mother. This writing tactic touches our inner feelings and thus promotes a better understanding of the mother in the novel.

The aging of his mother brings a great shock to Howard who was naive to the many relentless years' devastation his mother faced. As he confronts his mother's declining years, Howard is filled with guilt and shame. When Howard repents to mother as he regrets not visiting home more often, she replies, "It don't matter now. It's the way things go. Our boys grow up and leave us." (Garland, 1899, p. 81) Few words uttered, we can feel the generosity and greatness of the mother, though. In order to raise their children, mothers toil on the land all their life, sacrificing their precious youth and good looks. However, when the children grow up, they fly away to the outside world like birds, leaving the aged and weak mothers behind, lonely and wistful. This may seem cruel and unfilial to ordinary people, but Howard's mother is so open-minded that she doesn't blame her son but shows her support and understanding. As we all know, there is no mother who does not want to live with her son and enjoy the happiness of family life in her old age. As a mother, nevertheless, she wants her son Howard to have his own career and life. It is obvious that she not only understands her son, but also accepts and observes the rules of life. For his son, she is willing to sacrifice herself. Even if she suffers a lot from loneliness and hardships of life, she doesn't want to trouble her son and choose to bear them, self-esteemed, strong and open-minded.

Howard hands out the gifts he brought from the city to his mother as an attempt to make up for all these years of absence and ignorance, only to find it is too late. His mother is too old, and these gifts are rather superfluous and inappropriate for her. The sharp contrast between the flashy gifts and the aged mother shocks Howard a lot.

"His heart swelled almost to a feeling of pain as he looked at his mother. There she sat with the presents in her lap. The shining silk came too late for her. It threw into appalling relief her age, her poverty, her work-weary frame. 'My God!' he almost cried aloud, 'how little it would have taken to lighten her life!'" (Garland, 1899, p. 105)

Like an impressionist painting, Garland uses *Veritism* to describe an impressionistic instant experience. Being truly aware and profoundly conscious of her mother's aging, helplessness, as well as her being neglected and forgotten, Howard finds the gifts too ridiculous and inappropriate against the context of here and now. This kind

of contrast underscores the erosion of the years, making us feel gut-wrenching. At this time, no matter how beautiful and precious the gifts are, they will never make his mother young again. What she missed and lost has gone forever. Years of hard work has robbed her of her youth and drained her of her energy, so Howard realizes the moment he gives her the gifts that it is too late for him to make up.

Garland vents his resentment against society through the words of Howard, “*If I had the world in my hands, I’d crush it like a puffball; evil so predominates, suffering is so universal and persistent, happiness so fleeting and so infrequent.*” (Garland, 1899, p. 120) Garland also expresses deep sorrow and regret, accompanied by understanding and sympathy towards the mothers. We can not only sense Howard’s guilt for his mother, but also Garland’s guilt for the elder generation—his parents who worked hard all their life. Instead of enjoying their old age in peace, they were forced to live a lonely and helpless life. They continued to stay on the land and engaged in tedious and laborious work. Howard seems helpless when his mother is stuck in such a dilemma and the novel also vaguely reveals his unspeakable difficulty. Then, who is to blame?

3.2 *The Unyielding Father—A Failing Hero*

Of all Garland’s short stories, *Jason Edwards* is considered to be the most representative one. The subtitle of this story is “an Average Man”, which refers to Jason Edwards, a man who, as a father and husband, has worked hard all his life but is destined to be a failing hero. Faced with the harsh reality, he was forced to move from one place to another with worsening living conditions, and then on again, until he moved to the West, which he thought foreshadowed hope and dreams, in order to keep the family’s living expenses within limits. Nonetheless, the painful truth revealed itself in a cruel way that the West was not a heaven of peace and happiness either. Exploitation was everywhere, and, whenever they went, they could not get free from poverty. In the end, a storm destroyed everything, and Edwards fell ill. He conceded to his family’s arrangement and was taken back to his hometown—a small town in the east—by his daughter and son-in-law.

The story leaves us with mixed feelings, especially towards Jason, the father. When expressing my admiration for him, I also feel sad, helpless and even angry. Garland portrays Jason as the figure of an ordinary father with typical qualities of New Englanders and a capacity for self-restraint. We not only see Jason’s lifetime struggles, but also “experience” what he underwent as a bystander and witness the life status of the people at the bottom of both urban and rural areas. With Garland’s full-view judgment from time to time, we have a more comprehensive understanding of the fathers represented by Jason.

In the historical processes of urban-rural transformation and western pioneering in the United States, Jason was far from alone. There were still many people who, in order to survive in such a society, spent their whole life on labor, ignoring leisure and rest.

“In those few moments he had traced their devious way about the city. How they were obliged to leave K Street for a poorer place on Carver Street; how from there, where his little boy died, they were forced again to move to poorer quarters, his work making it necessary for him to keep within a certain limit.” (Garland, 1892, pp. 52–53)

“My life is a failure—I don’t know why. Don’t seem ’s if it was my fault. I know it ain’t yours, mother. Fifty years of work—an’ here we be! I’ve worked every well day of my life since I was ten years old; we’ve worked early and late, an’ pinched an’ saved. I never was a drinker, we ain’t had the necessities of life—rent went up an’ fuel went up, an’ wages went down—an’ here we are.” (Garland, 1892, p. 165)

Through the author’s statement and the dialogue between Jason and his wife, we find that Jason has been working nonstop all his life, struggling for life. No matter he worked in the city as a mechanic or moved to the west as a farmer, he could not escape from the misery of hard work and get out of the mire of poverty and distress. To survive, the family could but move around a lot and keep working hard. Either as a father or as a husband, Jason was responsible and diligent. When his daughter Linnie advised him to take a break, he said, “*They ain’t no rest for me. If I should set around in the shade, my girl wouldn’t have any home when winter came. Rain ’r shine, wet ’r dry, I’ve got to keep movin’.*” (Garland, 1892, pp. 138–139) With the advancement of urbanization and the rapid accumulation of industrial capital, the elder generation including Jason were caught up in the process of modernization. Unfortunately, without a sound management system under the transition from the old to the new, the life of their generation was much more arduous and difficult in such a harsh natural environment.

What impresses the reader the most is that the Jason senior was enthusiastic about life and brave enough. After struggling for half his life in the city, Jason decided to give up everything and lead his family to settle in the West. At that time, he was over 50 years old, and going to the west meant they needed to start from scratch. Still, in

order to get rid of the exploitation of the city and live a better life, he sold his only furniture and gathered all the pieces together to set foot on the road to the “dream west”. From the description, we can feel the father’s yearning for the west and his strength of exploring life. Jason was also optimistic and imaginative. When Jason and his family decided to go to the west, “*He was already full of springing dreams. In a vague, sunny field of vision, he saw a comfortable home among the trees, a lake near at hand (or a river), golden fields of grain, and cattle feeding on green hillsides. All the reports of plenty he had ever read came back now to fill his mind. Letters from friends and relatives, newspaper articles, lectures, poems, songs, all the legendary, as well as real prosperity and cheer of the great West.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 65) Therefore, we can see the picture that, on that night when they resolved to move west, the whole family sang an old song for the upcoming freedom, for their beautiful dream in the west and for their strength to fight for it. The quality of his self-restraint was also prominent. Apart from hard work, he tightened his belt and never got drunk, which also symbolized the pursuit of the American dream at that time, and the emerging national spirit.

However, the west was not the place “flowing with milk and honey” in their fantasies and what they saw before their eyes was far from the scene they had seen from advertisements. The reality for them new settlers was that they could only choose between cheap and poor land provided by the government or better land leased at a high price by merchants, as the land available for free cultivation was gone. Jason chose the latter, so for the next five years, he worked hard on the rented land, which unfortunately didn’t bring the better life which they had been dreaming of. The continuous droughts and ruthless exploitation by landlords made life even more miserable and pathetic for them. Despite of the hardships of life, Jason was a man who would rather die than compromise. He still worked on the land every day without any rest. His excessive work made him look incredibly aged, with gray hair, hunched back and lame legs. Every day, he was not walking to the land but stumbling toward it. Having seen her father in such a state, Linnie felt extremely painful. She advised him to take a rest, but all her words fell on the deaf ears of her father. Jason’s tenacity was equally touching. He was self-proud and reluctant to admit defeat. Though unwilling to be a burden to his daughter, he was eventually destroyed in a storm and agreed to be brought back to the east by his family. It seems that Jason recognized his failure and surrendered to the fate at last. However, the author Garland judges the father Jason like this, “*He was broken, but not subdued. The pride rose in him yet—the pride of an American who will never surrender his freedom while he lives.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 209)

Through the father Jason’s “failure”, it traces and reflects on the reasons for the disillusionment of the “American dream”. Garland tells the story of the father Jason’s life of struggling for a living in a sincere and faithful way. Although Jason never realized his dream of building a comfortable home in the west till the end of the story, we understand that Jason’s “failure” is noble and respectable. Certainly, he was not defeated in spirit. From the perspective of Reeves, the author expresses his questions about Jason’s “failure” and tells us that his failure represents the typical American tragedy, which is actually the common fate of most American farmers and workers. Then, what caused their collapse and destroyed them?

Reeves said “*So this is the reality of the dream! This is the homestead in the Golden West, embowered in trees, beside the purling brook! A shanty on a barren plain, hot and lone as a desert. My God!*” (Garland, 1892, p. 142)

Alice said: “*The Lord is good, men are bad.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 155) “*We are not living here because He requires it of us, ...but because men push us out.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 156)

Jason said “*God and man has joined hands to break me down.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 205)

Through those words we can see Garland tells the reasons why the father Jason failed. What he really wants to make us understand is that there were many people like Jason in the elder generation who pioneered the west with their great dreams and courage but only ended up with failure. With the help of the author’s sincere words, we know about the father from different perspectives and understand the glory and dreams of that generation better. As Reeves said, “*He is a hero! He has fought heroically. No battle can test the courage of a man so much as this endless struggle against the injustice of the world—this silent, cease less war against hunger and cold.*” (Garland, 1892, p. 210) With the unique artistic technique of *Veritism*, the author not only narrates the truth, but also endows it with his emotional attitudes, successfully capturing the readers’ hearts. Based on the strong feeling of sympathy and empathy, we can appreciate the greatness and respectability of Jason and deeply understand the causes of the tragedy of people like Jason. The harsh natural environment was a factor, but more importantly, the lack of agricultural policies and national management during the social transition accounted for.

3.3 The Father and Mother—A Supporting Integrity

The life in the Midwest as pioneers was full of heavy and trivial labor. And the barren and secluded rural

atmosphere, the hostile natural environment, the frequent disasters and the like all added a lot to their poverty and distress. Garland, with the technique of *Veritism*, records the struggles of the pioneers, emphasizing “*the hard work of pioneering the desert in the United States is as harsh and arduous as fighting in the battlefield; It is also a do-or-die battle, but in another form. It is actually a desperate battle against hunger and cold, storms and droughts for which our fathers and mothers, kind and strong, gave their lives.*” The author tells the story of “the father and mother” and expresses their strong emotions in face of such difficulties.

The father and the mother always show great care and support for each other. This is noticeable in *Jason Edwards* where we can see, no matter how hard their life was and how much suffering they were going through, the father Jason and mother Jennie always supported and cared for each other. When they received the rental notice, Jason felt desperate and frustrated as never before. To comfort him, Jennie said, “*Don’t give up, Jason. We’ll get along some way. We can live in a cheaper tenement.*” And Jason replied, “*I don’t want you to do that, Jennie. This is poor enough, God knows.*” (Garland, 1892, pp. 56–57) The hard life was always depressing, but in such a narrow and embarrassing living space, they still thought about each other, and wanted a better life for the other. Such tender feelings between them under the pressure from survival were particularly touching. The deep love between them was also embodied in the fact that they cared most about their family and would rather make personal sacrifices for the sake of the family. In order to support Jason to go to the west, Jennie would sell the valuable gifts handed down from her family. Besides these, there were so many little things in their life that could clearly reflect the love between them. Whatever they encountered, they didn’t complain but accepted everything that life had to offer and showed comfort and support towards each other in times of suffering.

The father and the mother are sometimes expressing their love and care for each other while hurting, complaining about and even ignoring each other. Perhaps their expressions of love are not well understood, especially by those outside “the real world” created in the stories. “Objectivity and authenticity” are what the *Veritism* pursues. Garland keenly observes and documents all the trifles of his parents’ lives. Nevertheless, *Veritism* does not reproduce trivial realities in detail and narrate the story without emotions like naturalism. Instead, it integrates emotions based on the author’s instant experience. Readers often have a sense of presence and are more likely to “communicate” with the characters in the stories.

In the story *MRS. RIPLEY’S TRIP*, Garland begins with, “*The night was in windy November, and the blast, threatening rain, roared around the poor little shanty of Uncle Ripley, set like a chicken trap on the vast Iowa prairie...The room was small, the chairs wooden, and the walls bare—a home where poverty was a never-absent guest.*” (Garland, 1899, p. 263) Following the author’s letters, we feel as if we are in such a poor and humble farmer family. How their life will go on is imaginable. Mrs. Ripley had been working hard day and night over the stove and the churn, but she still lived in poverty. She kept talking about going back to her parents’ home just once but had to wait long since she had no travel expenses. When she again voiced her wish to go back home after twenty-three years, Uncle Ripley even felt astonished with a taunt. In the face of her husband’s indifference and ridicule, Mrs. Ripley made a big moan to vent her anger. We may be shocked when we are reading the lines: how much was added to their misery and bitterness if they kept complaining about and sneering at each other in such difficulties?

However, from the following dialogues and behaviors of the couple, we suddenly know everything. Uncle Ripley felt he was wronged. He was actually in favor of his wife, but he couldn’t afford the ticket and had no idea how to express his true feelings. Finally, when Uncle Ripley secretly bought a ticket for her with the money from selling *piggies*, Mrs. Ripley took out the money she had saved bit by bit. Though Mrs. Ripley complained about how hard she was working and how her husband didn’t care about her, when she decided to go back home, she baked a week’s bread for her husband and tried every means to arrange for the life and needs of her husband and grandson. Whoever read here will find all the misunderstandings cleared up and feel warm inside. This is also “the love of paradox” between parents as I mentioned above. The person they complain aloud about is just the one they care about silently. Sometimes they may hurt each other intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps this kind of hurt is done as their last resort since they needed to seek an outlet when life is so difficult and cruel; or, perhaps this is their unique way of expressing feelings, which just cannot be understood by outsiders. That’s how Garland sees his father and mother, which is true of our fathers and mothers as well. In the hard life, their mutual support and love make life much brighter and more valuable.

4. Conclusion

In *Main-Travelled Roads*, Garland depicts the real living conditions of “the father and mother” who were at the bottom of the society. They worked hard on the land and fought for a living, but still struggled in the edge of despair. However, while they trudged on the road of life, they also showed their kindness and courage, as well as

the exploration and pursuit of life and tenacious will to survive. Through the interpretation of the images of “the father and mother”, we can have a better reflection and understanding on the changes of human feelings and social development in the current social transformation period.

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