

On “the Faces of Eve” in Sherwood Anderson’s *The Egg*

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Abstract: In *The Egg* by Sherwood Anderson, the life of small town people under the pressure of urbanization and mechanical modernization is miniaturized in a family’s painful pursuit of the American Dream. This essay is devoted to analyzing the role of the female character in the story, the mother, who bears four faces of Eve—the Temptress, the Great Mother, the American Princess, and the New Woman, and facilitates the reconstruction of the myth of “the Lost Paradise.”

Key Words: faces of Eve; American Dream; the Lost Paradise

The Egg by Sherwood Anderson (1876—1941) is about a peasant family’s struggle to survive and go up in the industrializing and urbanizing America in the 1920s. The characters in the story gave up their happy rural life with the hope to rise in this roaring world. Their first venture of ten-year chicken-raising turned out to be a failure. And then in their running of restaurant business, they felt hard to entertain the customers though the father tried the best to play tricks with his grotesque chickens and eggs.

The focus of the story is put on the psychological distortion of these small town figures and completes the image of grotesque in the father, the representative of the misfits who cannot avoid the embarrassment of failing the American Dream with desperate efforts. In parallel with the father, another image, the mother, is built up and virtually bears more importance in reconstructing the story as the imitation of the myth of the Lost Paradise. As Northrop Frye says that “the myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say myth when referring to narrative,

and archetype when speaking of significance”^[1]; with assistance of this archetype, the significance of *The Egg* is deepened and universalized in spite of its superficially simple plot.

Building on the idea of American as a New World Garden of Eden, Judith Fryer identifies, in a number of novels, four distinct types of female characters, or faces of Eve: the Temptress, the Great Mother, the American Princess and the New Woman. And in *The Egg*, the mother is found to be a combination of them.

The mother is the temptress who transplants the father from his pastoral “Eden” to the roaring world of mechanical modernization. “It may have been that mother was responsible. Being a school teacher she had no doubt read books and magazines”^[2] which are “intended to be read by the gods who have just eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”^[3]. In the narrative, Anderson purposefully establishes analogies between Eve and the mother, and between the biblical myth and the family’s story. Like the effect of the forbidden fruit on Eve, the knowledge about persons like Garfield and Lincoln prompts the mother’s ambition. She initiates the family’s reform. “...She induced the father to give up his place as a farmhand... and embark on an independent enterprises of his own.”^[4] The word “induce” explicitly illustrates the way the mother deals with the father, and it is also the archetypal relationship between women and men, which can find its mythic interpretation in that Eve tempts Adam to go out of the Eden. Women inducing (or tempting) men recurs in human history, and, according to Frye, it is deeply founded on the organic cycle of human life. So temptation is one of the links existing between two genders. In the story, the mother tempts the father into the ten-year toil on the chicken farm and then into a restaurant business. The result of being tempted is that the unversed father is changed from an intendedly cheerful man into a “habitually silent and discouraged”^[5] one, and finally a grotesque who finds no comfort of life.

Though the mother directs the father into the mechanical America with uneasiness, she is really great in her devoting love for the child and the family. “For herself she wanted nothing. For father and me she was incurably ambitious.”^[6] During the ten years of chicken-raising, the mother works as hard as the father for their American Dream which is represented by wealth and high

social status in that time. Her second idea of running into the restaurant business comes into being because "she wanted me to rise in the world, to get into a town school and become a man of the towns."^[7] Though the way the mother considers for "me" is somewhat impractical, she means good at the starting point. What's more, the mother's maternal role extends to father when he suffers from the failure in entertaining his customer. "He began to cry like a boy while the mother's hand continually stroke the bald path that ran across the top of his head."^[8] In this case, the mother becomes the origin of love and life, which helps the father stand again from his collapse.

In fact, the mother in *The Egg* experiences depression and disillusionment as well as her family members, but she is qualified with selfless sacrifice and forbearance. As Eve is punished by the God to bear the pain of giving birth to children, and then becomes mother in real sense, the image of the Great Mother is connected with torture-bearing and self-sacrifice in its archetypal significance. The emphases the author puts on the mother's ambition for "me" and her devoted work on the chicken farm and in the restaurant all prove the quality of the Great Mother in this female character.

As is mentioned, America is regarded as the new Garden of Eden since it was founded. American passion takes hold of so many ordinary people who keep the belief that they can go from the bottom of the society to the top. The mother is typical of them. The images of the American Princess and the New Woman are interwoven in this heroine for her participation in the pursuit of American Dream.

The American Princess, in its basic meaning, indicates that a woman, with great efforts, changes from a poor common one to a rich one with high social status. The mother has not become a great one or a rich one from the beginning to the end of the story. But her identity as a country school teacher and her inspiring directions to the family movements provide possibilities and imagination. With the capability of reading, the mother, like a transition element, obtains the freedom to cross the boundary between the rural world and the mechanically modernizing one. The experiences of failures on the chicken farm and in the restaurant do not fail the mother's ambition. When the father topples with a frantic fury, "I have forgotten what the mother said to him and how she induced him to tell her of what had

happened downstairs.”^[9] But the father’s intention to destroy the egg disappears when he gets into the presence of the mother. After “much muttered conversation,”^[10] an open end is left to the readers. Some new plans may be brewed in the mother’s mind. At any rate, she is in the process of continual efforts for American Dream. With no relation to royal blood, she works her way toward material wealth and high social status, which reflects the courage of populace in the American Princess.

Self-effort paves the way for the American Princess, and self-effort itself qualified a New Woman. The image of the New Woman is based upon the literary figure—New Man, which is created by Daniel Defoe in his *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe’s New Man is the embodiment of the rising bourgeoisie who earn great wealth with endeavor and oppose to the ruling of the corrupted feudal nobles. With analogy to the image of New Man, Eve, in the biblical literature, is interpreted as a New Woman by literary critics for she resists the control of the God and strives for the independence and freedom of human beings instead of enjoying life charged by the God.

The mother possesses this face of Eve and is never willing to live the comparatively poor rural life in a rising America. She, a farmhand’s wife, tries to struggle out of the rural civilization which she herself belongs to. As a country school teacher, she seeks accesses from books. Her reading about Lincoln and Garfield facilitates her with models. After the child’s birth, with great courage she decides to guide the family into commerce and manufacturing. Being the opposite of her husband, in the story, she stands for the force of industrial civilization. She believes in machinery and science, and entrusts their first venture—chicken-raising—to those so called inventions advertised on newspaper. The mother finds advertisements like Wilmer’s White Wonder Cholera Cure or Professor Bidlow’s Egg Producer which is the representative of mechanical times. Being a betrayer of the agricultural culture, she is built up as the new woman who follows the tide and is brave enough to try new things.

The faces of Eve possessed by “the mother” not only provide the role with significance and profundity, but also offer a new clue to appreciate the archetypal pattern of the story, with which the symbolic meaning of “egg” can be better

understood.

The "egg" symbolically means prenatal darkness and secret hopes at the bottom of people's heart. "The hens lay eggs out of which come other chickens and the dreadful cycle is thus made complete."^[11] This cycle completed by eggs and chickens has some profound synchronization with the organic cycle of human life. Hopes come into being in human life; then people work hard and hopes succeed or fail; and new hopes appear. When a man feels discontented with his environment, according to Frye, he will make "a voluntary effort to recapture the rapport of the natural cycle."^[12] That may explain why hopes never end in human history.

Adam and Eve, being partly gods or archetypal human beings, lose their paradise because of hopes for freedom and new life. In *The Egg*, the farmer's family step out of country life for the same case. The mother, being ambitious for the father and son, produces the idea of chicken-raising when her hope (the son) is born. The son, the story teller, spending his days of childhood on a chicken farm, hopes for a new life away from the farm and the presence of the discouraging, sad-looking chickens, while the father clings to his five-legged hen and two-headed rooster insisting on the values of these monsters which come out of the eggs. Different hopes grow in them because they want changes in the environment.

Failures cannot fail hopes in human history. The everlasting charm of American Dream proves it. In the story, the father's American passion can be seen in his crazy performance to entertain his customer. His first trick, making an egg stand on end is ignored by his hoped audience, Joe Kane, who is not watching at the moment of his success. His second trick, showing the poultry monstrosities to the customer, runs to the opposite of the father's expectation because the visitor of the restaurant is made ill by the terribly deformed bird. His third trick, heating the egg in the pan of vinegar and putting it through the neck of a bottle without breaking the shell still catches no eyes of his hoped audience for the train waited by the customer comes into the station. The result of the father's show is that his audience decides he is mildly insane but harmless. The father is put into frantic fury by the insult. When he goes upstairs with an egg in his hand, "I imagine he had some idea of destroying it."^[13] However, he lays it on the table, which

indicates hopes are restored. The narrator's wonder about "why eggs had to be and why from the egg came the hen who again laid the egg"^[14] illustrates the synchronization of natural cycle with human's psychological cycle and predicts the repetition of the myth of "the Lost Paradise" in human development.

Anderson's gift for pouring a life time into a moment displays thoroughly in *The Egg*. Attributing to "the faces of Eve" embodied in the mother, the theme of the story is endowed with archetypal and historical significance, and the female character becomes an immortal image to be modeled on and pondered upon.

Notes:

- [1] Frye, Northrop, "The Archetypes of Literature", *Twentieth Century Western Critical Theories*, Ed. Zhu Gang, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001, pp. 144 - 145.
- [2] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1327.
- [3] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1328.
- [4] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1327.
- [5] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1328.
- [6] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1327.
- [7] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1328.
- [8] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1329.
- [9] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1330.
- [10] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1330.
- [11] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1330.
- [12] Frye, Northrop, "The Archetypes of Literature", *Twentieth Century Western Critical*

Theories, ed. Zhu Gang, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001, p. 144.

- [13] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1330.
- [14] Anderson, Sherwood, "The Triumph of the Egg", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ed. Nina Baym, Illinois: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 1330.