

The Freak Show in "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden"

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ABSTRACT

Freak show, getting popular in the middle of the 19th century, is the original form of mass entertainment before televisions and films dominate American people's visual life. It has attracted the attention of writers who draw some inspiration from them. From the middle of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, freak show was popular in America's urban and rural areas and then gradually disappeared with the rise of medical and disability discourses. Freak show then became a despicable activity since it made use of other people's weakness or disabled body as a tool to make profits. Eudora Welty, a novelist as well as a photographer, once got close to freak shows but refused to be the audience of them. Instead, she integrated her criticism about freak show in the short story "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden". The essay will analyze the silences of Little Lee Roy in Steve's recollection of a freak show in Eudora Welty's "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" with the aim to make the silenced voice of Little Lee Roy, who played the role of the outcast Indian maiden, be heard and show Welty's ethical criticism about such a visual activity. Through the analysis of the short story, it is found that Welty has maintained her sympathy towards the performers in the freak show and reminded us of audiences' ethical position in a visual activity.

Keywords: *freak show, "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden", Eudora Welty, ethical criticism*

I. INTRODUCTION

W.J.T. Mitchell announced that there has been a pictorial turn. It cannot be doubted that our life has been dominated by visual elements. Visual medium and activities have become an important part of our life. Before televisions, cinemas, and computers dominate Americans' life, freak show has long been the leisure activity for urban and rural dwellers in the latter half of the 19th century in Europe and the U.S. Items from an alien land and people of different color and look from afar have drawn Americans' attention and inspired their imagination about faraway places and possible human species. These freak shows offered windows to these people to know the world and even motivated them to dominate the world. Cameras are one of the tools to record those freak shows. In American south, there is one writer and photographer who has recorded freak show. William Ferris once said, "as we consider Southern photography and literature, we should consider photographs, the photographer, and the writer as an integral triad" [1]. Eudora Welty is a writer and photographer. The dual identities endowed her different ways to see the world and the people around her. Michael Kreyling once praised her, "if fate had made Welty a photographer, we would have lost a great writer but gained an equally great photographer" [2]. He thought highly of Welty's gift in literature as well as in photography. It should be mentioned that being a

photographer has enabled Welty to "see" the world in a different way. Making readers see can be considered as one standard of judging whether a writer is good or not. Many of Eudora Welty's literary works have reflected her identity as a photographer. At the same time, appreciating the photographs took by her also give people the experience of reading a story. In literary creation, she sometimes used the techniques of framing and focusing in the formation of characters, which gives readers a visualized reading experience.

Seeing is a process of satisfying one's desires. Once a picture is not interesting enough, seers will ask for more pictures. While working for Work Progress Administration as an agent, Welty carried her camera with her. She once had the opportunity to see a freak show but refused since it was hard for her to be exposed to other people's privacy. Gazing at a person's face, body and his or her weakness is kind of intrusion of privacy to Welty. Instead, she has integrated the story she heard from other people who were setting up the tent for a freak show and has used it as the original material in the short story "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden". The short story is about the recollection of Steve in front of Little Lee Roy and Max. However, during the process, Little Lee Roy was silent or made silent, which perfectly shows how "Little" and minor he is. Welty is good at finding the lost voice. The silences of Little Lee Roy have represented his tragic past when he was a performer in the freak show since he was

asked to keep silent while he was performing. The essay tries to make the silences sound and reveal Welty's ethical sympathy towards Little Lee Roy.

II. FREAK SHOW

The earliest freak show can be traced to the performance of freaks in the market in the Middle Age. At that time, the show appeared in a random manner. In the Elizabethan Age, freak show was the entertainment activity shared by people of nobility and the mass. In the 19th century, freak show attracted the eyes of audiences both in Britain and the U.S. "The Victorian era was often viewed as the heyday of the freak show. It was an age of scientific and medical advancements and, consequently, the public was naturally curious about unexplained oddities" [3]. The spirit of pursuing scientific truth and the desire to see something rare were combined. In the U.S., Orientals and people with particular traits like dwarfs, giants, two-head men and so on kept satisfying their imagination about alien lands and their curiosity about human beings themselves.

When it comes to freak show, P.T. Barnum is a name familiar to Victorian Americans. With a shrew head and excellent advertising ability, he has swept the freak show field from the 19th century and the early half of the 20 century. Although he has displayed some rarely seen animals and people really from alien lands, there were also some strategies that were adopted by him to make normal people look different to draw audiences' attention for making money. As Bogdan said, "freak is a way of thinking, of presenting, a set of practices, an institution— not a characteristic of an individual. Freak show can teach us not to confuse the role a person plays with whom that person really is"[4]. Thus, it can be seen that not all spectacles in a freak show are real and some performances are designed to achieve some effect. As people are immersed themselves in the performance, they should know that there is a great possibility that the performer is not the role he plays since the showman of a freak show will adopt some strategies to present a scene that attracts audiences' attention.

Freak show has been associated with the dime museum, the circus, the world fair, the amusement park, carnivals and so on which are a kind of formal institutions that provide a platform for freak show. In America, freak show could be seen in rural and urban areas. In the rural area, freak show might be their only leisure activity, thus making the show more welcomed. People would like to pay money to enjoy a show after a day's hard work.

When working for Work Progress Administration, Welty travelled in poverty-stricken areas in the U.S., mostly the south. By chance, she noticed the existence of freak show. However, instead of seeing the show as

an audience, she tried to capture it in an indirect way, which is reflected in her photography albums and novels.

III. WELTY'S PHOTOGRAPHY OF FREAK SHOW

With a visual mind, seeing has played a vital role in Welty's photography and literary career. While traveling in Jackson, Welty noticed the existence of freak show and took photos of the banners and audiences.

For example, her photography album *One Time, One Place* has contained some photos of freak show such as "Hypnotized, State Fair", "Hypnotist, State Fair", "Sideshow Wonders, State Fair", "Sideshow, State Fair". In the photo "Hypnotized, State Fair", Welty did not take photo of the performance in a direct way. Instead, she stood in a diagonal position to the stage so as to keep a distance from it. The hypnotist is doing the performance and all of the performers who appear in the photo do not look at the lens. There is one man wearing an academic cap and gown who is listening carefully to the hypnotist's speech. Actually, he plays the role of scientific authority so as to make audiences believe that the show is related to science and can open a window for them to get closer to scientific truths. The person who is hypnotized lies on the platform. The audiences under the stage are immersed in the performance deeply. In the photo "Hypnotist, State Fair", three young boys are immersed in the show and they do not even notice Welty taking photos of them. Instead of bringing seers into the bizarre world of the freak show through taking photos of the performance and performers in an direct way, Welty tended to record freak show with the photos of some banners, which was not separated from Welty's education experience. She studied advertising at Columbia University. For example, the photo "Side Show Wonders, State Fair" taken by her shows the banner of a freak show which presented siamese calves, which means that two cows share the same body. It is hard to imagine audiences' response to that, which might be the mix of shock and excitement. In another photo called "Sideshow, State Fair", there is a banner of a mule face woman. The animality has been instilled into the human body. These photos could challenge audiences' imagination about species. Knowing the essence of advertising, Welty could easily find out the secrete behind these banners. The functions of these banners are attracting audiences' attention and motivating them to pay for the show.

Pollack notes that Welty frequently uses the word "exposure" during her literary creation [5]. Like adopting the technique of exposing with a camera, Welty also does that in literary creation. To Welty, exposure is necessary, but reflection is more important. Welty has done the reflection in the short story "Keela,

the Outcast Indian Maiden". With the recollection carried out by Steve, Welty tries to pull the curtain of a freak show and expose the cheating mechanism behind it.

IV. THE SILENCES IN "KEELA, THE OUTCAST INDIAN MAIDEN"

In Welty's short story "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden", we can find out the deceptive design behind a freak show where a black man was designed to play the role of an Indian maiden. The silences of Little Lee Roy in front of the whites show his passivity in the show. The recollection of Steve about the freak show in which Little Lee Roy participated reveals to us the deceptive mechanism of the show. With the story, Welty shows her sympathy towards those performers in freak show and informs us of our ethical position in a visual activity.

Steve, once a ticket seller in a freak show, went with Max to show him the performer of "the Outcast Indian Maiden" who was actually a black man. His recollection and explanation about the freak show have represented the show to Little Lee Roy as well as readers.

The moment they came to Little Lee Roy's house, they did not enter but stood in the yard, which creates a distance between Little Lee Roy and them. In the short story, it seems that Little Lee Roy's right to see has been robbed. When he was described, his listening ability is strengthened but his ability of seeing is ignored. "First, he heard white men talking. He heard two white men coming up the path from the highway. Little Lee Roy ducked his head and held his breath; then he patted around back of him for his crutches. The chickens all came out from under the house and waited attentively on the step" [6]. It can be found from the sentence that Little Lee Roy knew some people approaching through listening instead of seeing. What should be mentioned is that the appearance of him and chickens on the porch seems to construct a platform for them to be seen by Steve and Max. It seems that by sitting on the platform, he and the chickens he raised were performing the show to other people.

Steve recollected the freak show, "they dressed it in a red dress, and it ate chickens alive. I sold tickets and I thought it was worth a dime. They give me a piece of paper with the thing wrote off I had to say. That was easy. 'Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden'. I call it out through a pasteboard megaphone" [6]. Steve once worked as the propagandist of the show. Even though the tools he used to publicize the show were simple and crude, the content of the show could arouse people's interest. It can be seen that the performance has changed the gender and ethnic identity of Little Lee Roy. In order to attract audiences' attention, he was

asked to wear a red dress and red stockings. Besides, he was painted red. In the show, he played the role of an outcast Indian maiden. In order not to let audiences know who he really is. He was required to keep silence or just make some meaningless sound. All of these contribute to helping form a barbarous image that is appealing to civilized people. The whole show design was based on trickery.

In the recollection, he also took on his previous role. He remained silent during Steve's recollection and made the sound of "hee hee" five times to respond to Steve and Max. The first "hee hee" appeared when Steve expressed to Max that Little Lee Roy had been required not to talk and just mumble like an animal. When Steve explained that if somebody got close to Little Lee Roy, he would growl something very awful and even hit people, he made that sound the second time. The third "hee hee" appeared when Max questioned Little Lee Roy whether the Indian maiden described by Steve was him. The fourth "hee hee" appeared when Steve recollected that a white man revealed the trickery behind the show. Instead of hitting the white man as the showman described to audiences, Little Lee Roy didn't, which reveals to audiences that he is not barbarian as the showman described. Little Lee Roy made that sound once gain. When the freak show was exposed, Little Lee Roy and other showmen were taken to the prison. It is found out that he wasn't an outcast Indian women but a little clubfooted nigger man. Little Lee Roy made the sound of "hee hee" the fifth time. Little Lee Roy played the role of a witness in front of Steve and Max. However, his silence is powerful as he has shown his tragic past through a silent way. Even though he was the performer in the show and could not have a voice in the representation of the show, he not only plays the role of the "performer" but also the role of "the witness" in the recollection process. The passivity can also be seen from the fact that Steve and Max have called Little Lee Roy "it" instead of "him". To them, Little Lee Roy has been objectified. To them, he is an object instead of a human being.

What worth mentioning is that when he tried to talk about his past in front of his children, his children asked him not to. The forced silence again shows Little Lee Roy's position. Though Little Lee Roy seems to be powerless in front of the two whites and his children, his silences say aloud his pathetic past and reflect his passivity in the freak show. Through telling such a story, Welty gives us one glimpse into the freak show.

V. CONCLUSION

The existence of freak show has satisfied people's desire to see something special or unique, especially during the period when Christian convention did not tolerate leisure activities. It is one way for audiences to

know more about the world. Freak show has gone through the transformation of being a mass entertainment industry to being the journey to science. To normal audiences, it is one way to know the world. To scientists, it is one of the ways for them to explore the secrets of life. Refusing to be an audience, Welty has tried to keep distance from the performer in the show since she shows great sympathy to them. It can be seen from the photographs she took and the description of "Little Lee Roy" in the short story. It is easy to make "Little Lee Roy" an object to be seen. During the reading process, readers might form the image of "Little Lee Roy" who is dressed in red and growls like an animal. Readers try to adopt the role of audiences. However, Welty tried to inspire readers' reflection and used "silences" to make readers hear the misery and passivity of Little Lee Roy. His miserable life of being forced to change his gender and identity in the show, to remain silent to cooperate with the showman, to remain silent even in front of his own children might cause some reflection in readers. The heyday of freak show has gone, but the representations of freak can still be seen in films or literary works.

Even though the story written by Welty happened long time ago, our position as audiences have not changed. With the development and prosperity of visual culture, we will have more and more opportunities to see spectacles. Seeing is not only our daily activity, but also a way for us to know the world. However, it is of great importance to maintain our sympathy to what we see instead of just being a spectator. Maintaining one's visual literacy is an essential quality of contemporary audiences.

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