

An Analysis of the Characteristics of Female Characters in the Thorn Birds

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Abstract. Published in 1977, *The Thorn Birds* was written by Colleen McCullough, a famous Australian writer. It is also reputed as *Gone with the Wind* in Australia. It deals with love and fate, taking the love story of Father Ralph and Maggie as the main clue and describing the Cleary family's saga about the three generations. The thesis focuses on the characteristics, love and fate of the three female characters in the Cleary family. Based on these, one can draw a conclusion that under the male and religion-oriented society women should pursue their love bravely and challenge themselves so that they can truly master their own fates.

Keywords: Female's characteristics; miserable fates; self-consciousness; struggling.

1. Introduction

The Thorn Birds is a great family saga about the three generations of Cleary family. The writer of this novel, Colleen McCullough, was born on June 1st 1937, in Wellington, Australia, whose family members are catholic. In 1977, *The Thorn Birds* was published. Soon it became the bestseller fiction in the 1980s, Times equals it to the American novel, *The God Father*. It is also reputed as *Gone with the Wind* of Australia. Because of its popularity, *The Thorn Birds* is adapted to films and TV series, which attracts more and more readers to appreciate its glamour.

2. Female's Characteristics and Their Fates

In the process of fighting against their fates, Fiona, Maggie and Justine show different attitudes towards life. Women have subordinate social status and sinful images in Christianity. Facing the male and religion oriented society, all of them behave themselves as a brave, self-respectful and forceful woman to conquer the miserable condition.

2.1 Fiona -- The Victim of Marriage

Fiona, as the first generation of the Cleary family, is the most miserable woman. She is a beautiful, fair, hard-faced and stern woman. She lives with six children and her husband, Paddy. It seems that she has a satisfying family. However, everything is in contrast. As is described in the novel "she was a silent woman, not given to spontaneous conversation. What she thought, no one ever knows, even her husband; she left the disciplining of the children to him, and did whatever he commanded without comment or complaint unless the circumstance were most unusual." (10)

2.1.1 Fiona vs. her Husband, Paddy

Paddy and Pakeha were totally different and she had already devoted herself to Pakeha and his son, Frank, which caused her miserable life. Paddy was born in a lower class, and he was still inferior to Fee in the marriage. Although she didn't love Paddy but Paddy loved her at the first sight. He treated Fee as the goddess, protected her and loved her. Without Paddy, Fee's life would be even worse. In the male oriented society, she would be insulted if she had a sex with other woman's husband. It was her husband Paddy that protected her from being insulted by others. But finally, she even lost her Paddy. Paddy was burnt to death because of the accident. After Paddy's death, she said: "two days ago I discovered how much I loved Paddy, but it is like all of my life, too late, too late for him, too late for me" (127). Gradually she realized that she not only lost the person she loved but also sacrificed the man who loved her. Fee was the victim of the society. She finally submitted to the Christianity's rules and patriarchal dominance, which gave rise to her miserable life.

2.1.2 Fiona vs. her Son, Frank

Frank was not only Fee's son, but the substitute of Pakeha. As the only kid with Pakeha, Fee devoted all her love to him. Except for the Cleary family and Fee's father, nobody knew Frank's identity. Thus, Fee transformed her forbidden love to Frank. In fact, Frank also loved her mother so deeply. In the Cleary family, it was not allowed for a man to put his hand on female task. But each night after Paddy fell asleep, he helped Fee with dish washing. His deep affection and love gave Fee the value of love. His disgust to Paddy forced him to leave away. After leaving home, he committed crime for killing a man. He was in prison, which was a tremendous disaster for Fee. In her rest life, she chose to live in a sterner way without care, interest or the lifelong hope.

2.2 Maggie -- The Rebel of Fate

Another Cleary female character, Maggie, is the middle one of the three generations. She is pretty and charming. The novel starts with her and ends with her. Her love story is the main clue of the whole story. Maggie doesn't have a happy childhood, a cozy family, even the man who loves her surpasses himself. She is the ignored girl by the family members. Thus, she is eager for love.

2.2.1 Maggie vs. her Lover, Father Ralph

Maggie's love for Ralph was forbidden but romantic. Father Ralph was an ambitious priest, who also loved Maggie. But compared with his ambition, he took Maggie's love as the second. Except Ralph, Maggie couldn't get any love from others. He behaved as a brother, or a father. Maggie had a gift of strength in her process of growth. "Cleary family who could not fight their battles got scant aid or sympathy, and that went for girls too" (5). With time going by, Maggie treated Ralph as the only one she loved. She attached all things to him. As a priest, it was out of the question for Ralph to respond Maggie's love. Forbidden love was extremely beautiful but dangerous. The deeper she loved Ralph, the more painful she was. It was doomed that they couldn't accompany each other. She thought: "Not as much as I like you physically as I used to think, because these days I love you more, I hadn't got used to doing without you" (341). The physical description vividly showed all her love that was put to Ralph. For this forbidden love, Maggie fought against God. She acted herself as the atheist, ignoring the principles of the religion-oriented world. She stole a son from Ralph. What Maggie pursued in her whole life was Father Ralph. Maggie's life was a tragedy.

2.2.2 Maggie vs. her Husband, Luke

When it came to Luke, one could naturally think of a word, greedy. He was also a simple, handsome and hard-working man. But too much lust for money was not an advantage; it made him lose the love of Maggie. One cannot deny the fact that he married Maggie for her money rather than love. "No hope she'd inherit, but perhaps they'd want to dower her with a modest 100,000 acres out around Kynuna or Winton"(253). As the only successor of the Drogheda, Luck was pretty sure that he could get more property if he married Maggie. Maggie didn't devote any love to Luke either. She married Luck just because of his appearance.

2.3 Justine -- The Self-rescuer of the Fate

Justine is the most independent generation of the Cleary family. She doesn't want to be hugged, kissed or laughed. Though her mom Maggie schemes to get her, she is not cherished. As Maggie said: "I suppose I want her, Yes, I do want her. I schemed enough to get her. But while I was carrying her, I couldn't feel anything for her, except that she didn't want me" (312). Justine's independence is in born. Her strength, integrity, independence and self-reliance make her realize her own dream. Contrary to Maggie and Fee, she regards social principles as unimportant. The most distinctive matter is that she doesn't hide his sexual behavior. She is no longer for the marriage or love. She stays optimistic in the whole life and pursues her dream. She is a self-securer when facing the restriction and oppression from the society. Thus, she is the only one who finally gains the happiness.

2.3.1 Justine vs. her Brother, Dane

Dane is the only brother of Justine. “In many ways, Justine was a lot closer to Dane than their mother was, and they felt for Mum belonged to Mom”(451). She despised the secular love and marriage. As she said to Dane: “I’m never, never going to love anyone! If you love people, they kill you. If you need people, they kill you. They do, I tell you” (453). She was so self-reliant that she didn’t need anyone. Dane’s death was a heavy blow to her. She was so self-blamed. “Then there was the conviction that she didn’t help him enough. What she felt as her betrayal of Dane” (546). With the love of Dane, she still exerted to her life, braved the weather and took the road. So firm and optimistic she was, she could never give up leading a positive life.

2.3.2 Justine vs. her Own Dream and Marriage

Justine O’Neil, snubbed by her mother, ignored by her greedy father, was the most miserable one in her family, yet she was the luckiest one for having a dream. It was exactly her acting dream that forced her to go further away. Without good appearance, she had a gift in acting. She convinced that through her exertion and perseverance, she could realize her dream. She was revolted and not content to waste her life on Drogheda. She chose to be an actress. To comprehend love, she lost her virginity in a simple way. She said: “How can I hope to be a good actress if I don’t have a clue what goes on between man and woman” (452). She regarded sex as a tool to promote her acting. Devoting herself to career led to her strength, independence, self-discipline.

3. The Roots of Female’S Miserable Fates

In *The Thorn Birds*, the three female of the Cleary family have totally different fates. Fee is forced to marry a man she doesn’t love. Maggie loves Ralph and leaves her husband named Luke. While Justine is the only one who gets the happy marriage and realizes her own value. In this process, they cling themselves to love, but neglect money, power and God. On their way of pursuing happiness, Fee is constrained, Maggie is rebelling and Justine acts herself. They play different roles in the process of rebelling. What has caused their fates? The reason is divided into two parts, the external and the internal reasons.

3.1 Internal Factors

Maggie, Fee and Justine all live in Drogheda. It cannot be denied that their different attitudes towards oppression make different results. Fiona is the first generation of the Cleary. She used to be willing to control the fate and strive for her own happiness. As time goes by, she has to give it up. With a husband who loves her, she cannot command more. She is stern, but it doesn’t last too long. She abandons her faith for Paddy, but she refuses to adopt his instead. Silent and cold-stern she remains, she doesn’t dare to rebel the fates directly. She gives no spontaneous conversation. What she has done is all soundlessly rebel, not direct rebel. To some extent, she is passive about everything around.

Cleary female’s characteristics are the internal reasons of their different fates. Despite the man-centered society, females can also strive for liberation and equality; they are not avoided to pay. They pierce their thorns in their breast bravely, they are worth learning and admiring.

3.2 External Factors

Cleary female’s fates are closely linked to the social surroundings. One of the most distinctive features is male-centered custom. The Cleary family’s males consider themselves as the dominants of the family. They have specific division of the work. Man should work out and woman should always pay more attention to the housework. Wherever they go, they are not allowed to help woman with housework. Cleary family’s males are very chauvinistic and hardly show respect to females except Frank. Born in so merciless a family, Maggie is lonely and thirsty for more love. Frank gives more warmth to his little sister, but others will never do that. “When she quietened, Frank made her tell him what was the matter: he pick up the door and started into its empty head in wonder ,trying to

remember if his infant universe has been so beset by strange terrors glance” (9). Another protagonist, Father Ralph, has a great ambition to get power and success. He can only take his ambition as the first place, thus his rise in the Roman Catholic, and finally, he realizes his dream—he becomes Cardinal de Bricassart. In the process of gaining success, he falls in love with Maggie, losing his divinity. Comparing Maggie’s instinct love with a great ambition, he resolutely chooses his ambition.

To sum up, Cleary female’s lovers’ attitudes somehow affect their fates. In that society, females cannot avoid being effected by the males around them. For Justine, she is lucky enough to get Rainer. However, for Maggie and Justine, their lovers sacrifice them for ambition or money.

4. Conclusion

The *Thorn Birds* is a novel concerned with love and marriage. In the whole story, Maggie’s forbidden love to Ralph is the main clue of the whole story. Maggie’s mother Fiona, Maggie and her daughter are the microcosm of the Australia society in the 1820s. They fight against fates, strive for happy marriage or successful career. The thorn has a particular meaning, representing hardships, difficulties and male-centered society. The more they strive for themselves, the more pleasant ending they will get. The fates are not doomed if they are never defeated.

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