

Finding a Way Out: A Study of the Female Image in Anna Christie

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Abstract. Anna Christie is the second play to win the great American playwright Eugene O'Neill the Pulitzer Prize. The heroine Anna is oppressed in the patriarchal society. She leads a miserable life, and her self-consciousness and self-independence are gradually aroused. She resists the social injustice and inequality in her own way. Based on the novel text, this paper analyzes the image of Anna from the following aspects: the personality, the absence of paternal love and the awakening of self-consciousness, in a way to show the ability, the trigger and the process of Anna's finding a way out.

Keywords: Anna Christie; Female Image; Self-consciousness.

1. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is a famous American playwright and is known as the "Father of Modern American Drama". In his life, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature once and the Pulitzer Prize four times. In 1921, *Anna Christie* was published, which enables O'Neill to win his second Pulitzer Prize. This book tells the tragic story of the heroine Anna. It shows how she degenerates in the patriarchal society and how she reborns and saves herself step by step. Anna is adopted by her cousins in their farms. However, she suffers from humiliation and abuse there. After being raped by one of her cousins, she flees the farm in despair and comes to the city, where she becomes a prostitute to make a living. When the brothel is shut down by the police, Anna sets out to find her father, who is a sailor. The life on the sea gives Anna a strong sense of belonging. Also, she meets the sailor Mat there and falls in love with him immediately, but Mat cannot bear Anna's sordid past.

For O'Neill, tarts were hapless victims of circumstance, trapped by the malice of fate (Gelb and Gelb 290). From what Anna goes through, we can have a glimpse into the tragedy of females under certain circumstances. We can also notice the awakening of Anna's self-consciousness, her resistance against the patriarchal society and her quest for independence.

2. Analysis of Anna's Image from the Perspective of Finding a Way out

2.1. The Ability of Finding a Way out--A Rebellious Nature

Anna was an American woman in the early 20th century, who has a rebellious personality. She is raped by her cousin on a farm, but she escapes the farm straightway instead of meekly accepting the humiliations. When she works briefly as a nurse's aide, she still encounters intolerable harassment, and children's crying there makes her feel she is locked up in a cage. So, she runs away again. As Dehal put it, the struggle of the character in the plays symbolizes the indomitable nature of human beings (5). Leading a vagrant life for some time, Anna begins to make changes, hoping to find her father whom she has not seen for years. She finds the address where her father sent her a letter, and leaves Minnesota for New York. Anna has a daring spirit. If the situation did not match her expectations, she will seek a way out.

2.2. The Trigger of Finding a Way out--The Loss of Paternal Love

A father plays a vital role in a child's upbringing. However, paternal love is absent when Anna is growing up. *Anna Christie* enviably raises the issue of man's moral responsibility for his own conduct



(Trilling 255). Chris leaves home when Anna is only five, and starts his seafaring life, leaving alone his wife and daughter who have been living off others for 15 years. Chris does not return for a last look at his wife, even on her deathbed. As a result, Anna does not even know what his father looks like: "Only—it's funny to see you and not remember nothing. You're like—a stranger." (O'Neill 27)

When Anna is on her cousin's farm, she writes to Chris several times, telling him how awful her life there is. She is treated as a servant, and lives a weary, inhuman life. But Chris always thinks himself is right, not considering Anna's opinions. Chris keeps an absolute control over Anna, who has to do everything to his liking. Afterwards, Anna is raped by her cousin, which becomes the last straw—she flees the farm, seeks a living in the city, and is eventually driven into prostitution. Anna is "one of the most poignant of dramatic literature's 'fallen women'" (Garvey 68), and there is no doubt that she is unsatisfied with his father for his absence in her childhood.

Yet Chris cannot quit his bad habit of whoring, which keeps him from getting back to his daughter. He is a pleasure-seeker, leading a decadent life like most sailors. As a result, every time Chris goes ashore, he squanders his hard-earned money to constantly satisfy his sexual desires, while ignoring the fact that he has a family, as well as a daughter who is living alone and helplessly at her cousin's house.

Chris himself fails to fulfill his duties as a father, but he blames the sea for all this. He thinks it is the best choice for Anna to stay away from the sea and live on an inland farm, but he has never really taken Anna's feelings into consideration. As a matter of fact, the sea is not as scary as Chris said. Life on the sea, for Anna, is much better than that inland. She gradually restores to health after coming to the sea. What really changes Anna is her discovery that the sea is in her spirit and in her veins, while the fog which leaves her in suspension from reality purifies her (Ranald 56).

So, Anna lacks her father's love and companion during her growing process. Chris leaves his ethical identity behind and fails to take on his ethical obligations, resulting in Anna's not receiving adequate material and spiritual support, which is a direct cause of Anna's wanting to find a way out.

2.3. The Process of Finding a Way out--Awakening of Self-Consciousness and Resistance against Patriarchal Society

The awakening of Anna's self-awareness is a growing process. When she comes to the sea, she gradually falls in love with it, feeling somehow cleansed by the fog there. She thinks fog enables her to forget her dirty past. It seems that compared with the land, the sea is a better place for her to live.

Previously, Anna always passively accepted her father's arrangements. After coming to the sea, however, she does not believe in her father's teachings blindly. Instead, she reasons and judges independently. Even though her father still regards the sea as an "Dat ole davil", she has a different opinion from him and feels that the sea makes her sense the true happiness. She decides to live on the sea by her own will, rather than depend on her father to make the decision as he had always done before. She rejects the traditional belief that men are superior, they are more rational and they know better what is right. (Moosavinia and Kochel 63)

When Mat boards, he thinks Anna is no different from those women he has met on the waterfront, thus behaving frivolously. But Anna rejects him calmly, asking him to behave himself and stop spooning. She tells Mat explicitly that she is the daughter of the captain, and he is in no position to take liberties with her. She also requests him to apologize for his offensive words and deeds. Anna resents casual teasing from a man—she will no longer allow males to insult her and endure that in silence like what she did at the age of 16. The longer she stays on the sea, the stronger her self-awareness grows. Now she prefers articulating her needs directly, in a more aggressive way.

Though Anna does not want to board the barge, she does so in obedience to her father's order when she first meets him after arriving at the bar. When Chris notices that Anna is close to Mat, a sailor he has never meets before, he is furious, demanding that: "Anna, you gat in cabin, you hear!" (O'Neill 48)

However, Anna does not obey him as before this time. “Her emotions immediately transformed into resentment at his bullying tone.” (O'Neill 48), and she also asked: “Who d’you think you’re talking to—a slave?” (O'Neill 48)

Later, Chris worst fears are realized--Anna falls in love with Mat. He berates Anna for hanging out with Mat all the time. However, Anna does not care whether her father likes Matt or not, and she boldly expresses her love for Mat. As it can be seen, Anna longs for true and pure love. She desires respect from others, rather than being treated as a public sex object as she had been inland. Her awareness of equality is further awakened. She is eager to break free of others’ restrictions, get away from her father's dominance, and create her own future.

Eugene O'Neill wrote in one of his letters to a critic: “And as she [Anna] is the only one of the three who knows exactly what she wants, she would get it (Bogard and Bryer 148). Anna's decisive rejection to accept an urgent proposal from Mat is not due to her father's expectations that she should remain away from Mat, but because she wants to keep the relationship between Mat and her pure. As a result, she makes no secret of her background and tells Mat the truth that she was raped by her cousin and subsequently became a prostitute. Anna is looking for free love rather than a large cage. She does not see marriage as the ultimate objective and only end-result, as traditional women do. Anna, driven by self-consciousness, does not want to be an appendage of men, nor does she want to hang her future on anyone else.

Mat, on the other hand, views Anna with double moral standards. When he arrives at a dock, he will look for prostitutes to satisfy his sexual needs, but he is demanding of Anna's chastity. As Kamala Bhasini said, in most sexual relations men are subjects; their desires likes and dislikes and their satisfactions are paramount (29). Mat allows himself to enjoy sensual pleasures outside, while asking Anna to stay royal to him. After knowing what Anna has been through before, Burke accuses her about her past with other men. Anna responds that it is not her fault and says that Mat is no better than her because he finds a new girl every time he arrives at a dock. Anna does not accept the criticism from her father as well. Instead, she directly blames Chris, who has failed to fulfill his obligations to her: She is an independent human with her own ideas, and she learns to control her own life and be her own master. Anna is no longer “voiceless” in the world dominated by men.

At first, Anna placed herself in a position of “others”. However, under long-term oppression and injustice, Anna’s self-awareness is aroused. She resists in their own way to show her self-identity.

The depiction of the awakening of Anna’s self-consciousness has much to do with the era in which O'Neill wrote this play. *Anna Christie* was written after World War I, a time of great change in the United States. The government adopted a laissez-faire economic policy, and American capitalism entered a stage of rapid development. In 1920, women in the United States won the right to vote with the passage of the Constitutional Amendment. In the decade followed, American women sought liberation, leaving their homes and entering the workforce. All this influence O’Neil’s writing, and Anna is depicted as a woman who is unwilling to become a male’s appendage and fights for freedom and equality.

3. Conclusion

As O'Neill wrote, “Before the soul can fly, its wings must be washed in the blood of the heart” (Gelb and Gelb 53). Anna is a victim of the patriarchal control; however, she does not succumb to her fate. Instead, she tries her best to find a way out. She bravely steps out to fight against the male-dominated society and strives for her independence and equal rights with men. She can do it because she has a more rebellious personality, she wants to do it due to the absence of her father’s love, and she finally does it through the building of her self-identity. With her strong feeling of equality and freedom, as well as her fearless defiance against the patriarchal domination, Anna eventually won the self-independence that she has been fighting for since she was a child.

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