

Common Destiny, Allied Rebellion—The Metaphorical Expression of Swan in *By the Bog of Cats*

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Abstract: *By the Bog of Cats*, as one of Marina Carr's tragedy trilogy, tells the story of Hester Swane, the female protagonist. Abandoned by her mother and her lover Carthage, she suffers from suppression and finally kills her daughter and herself as a rebellion and revenge. Metaphor is an important technique of the play, wherein the black swan metaphorizes Hester Swane. Therefore, this study tries to explore the metaphorical expression of swan in *By the Bog of Cats* from their common destiny and allied rebellion, aiming to reveal their relationship better and thereby uncover the existential predicaments of women and nature.

Keywords: *By the Bog of Cats*; swan; Hester Swane; metaphor.

1. Introduction

Marina Carr (1964-) is one of the most prominent female playwrights of contemporary Ireland. Carr creates her own textured mythological backdrop, which fully incorporates both Irish legend and the supernatural Midlands bog landscape (McNulty, 2001). *By the Bog of Cats*, one of her trilogy of tragedies, premiered on the stage of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on October 7th, 1998. It is a modern story of Euripides' *Medea* under the background of the Bog of Cats, which tells the story of the female protagonist Hester Swane, an Irish Tinker. After she is abandoned by her mother and then her lover Carthage, she kills her daughter and herself as a rebellion and revenge.

2. Theoretical Basis

According to Aristotle, "metaphor is applying to something a noun that properly applies to something else. The transfer may be from genus to species, from species to genus, or from species to species; or it may be a case of analogy" (Aristotle, 2013: 89), which first aims to connect two similar subjects and then serves to convey meanings and express the truth through the interplay between two subjects. Metaphor also combines the power of discovery and creativity. The former facilitates readers' judgments about the world, while the latter contributes to evoking their broad interpretation and constructing their own relationships within that world (Bontekoe, 1987).

Metaphor consists of "tenor" and "vehicle" and "ground", whose combination can convey underlying meanings or a deeper subject than two single and discrete contexts can express (Richard, 1936). In *By the Bog of Cats*, Carr deliberately compares Hester Swane, as a "tenor", to a swan called Black Wing, as a "vehicle", because "Swane" not only bears the similar pronunciation with swan, but also implies they share much resemblance—the personality they have, the predicament they encounter and the denouement they meet. Meanwhile, they struggle to rid themselves of the dilemma through allied rebellion. Therefore, the study tries to expose their survival predicaments and rebellion through this metaphor, thereby reflecting the relationship among men, women and nature.

3. Common Destiny

In the play, Hester, sharing the same name as Swan, is inevitably intertwined with Black Wing in various ways. Hester is alone and isolated like Black Wing who is equally isolated. The swan fails to integrate into her community and finally comes to death, all of which imply the destiny of Hester. Thus, this part tries to explore the metaphorical expression from their common destiny.

3.1. Similar Predicament

Swans are actually gregarious animals, often forming into family units and jointly rearing their offspring within these small family groups. While in the play, Black Wing does not have any swan companions and always appears on her own. She inhabits a nest of fallen leaves so that no one can disturb her. It is conceivable that such shelter and unsociable personality jointly lead to her isolation from her groups. Meanwhile, Black Wing is also confronted with severe survival predicaments. The exploitation and destruction of the Bog of Cats by human society has not only led to an abnormal climate there but also narrowed down the habitat of swans. When Hester is talking with Monica about the winter, she says that "Swear the age of ice have returned. Wouldn't ya almost wish if it had, do away with us all like the dinosaurs" (Carr, 1999: 260), which implies the extreme weather conditions on the Bog of Cats. It is the unrestrained human exploitation of nature that gives rise to extreme weather, thereby resulting in the animals' vulnerability to environmental changes. Black Wing suffers from isolation and survival predicaments, which serves as the first "ground" to connect Hester and further metaphorizes her living dilemma and isolation from mainstream society.

Growing up in a tinker family, Hester has been leading a loose and nomadic life. From the moment of her birth, she was placed beside Black Wing by her mother and was often locked beside the caravan while her mother always remained absent all day long. When Hester was just 7 years old, her mother permanently left her. The misfortune of her childhood marked by the prolonged period of solitude and ambivalent feelings towards her mother—collectively molds her unsociable personality and causes her isolation from mainstream society. Moreover, Hester is trapped in a dual

dilemma because of her identity as a tinker and her gender as a female. Recalling her experience that her mother took her to sing for people, she notes, "And they never axed us to stay, these people, to sit down and ate with them, just lapped up her songs, gave her a bag of food and a half a crown and walked us off the premises, for fear we'd steal something" (Carr, 1999: 313). It can be seen that the prejudice and expulsion against tinkers is deeply ingrained in the locals. Meanwhile, as a female, Hester is also oppressed by the patriarchal society. Male-centered ideology views both nature and women as conquerable objects, especially in Ireland where patriarchy prevails. In order to acquire the land of Xavier Cassidy, Carthage abandons Hester and marries Caroline, Xavier's daughter, instead. They even contemplate banishing Hester from the Bog of Cats. Xavier has already driven away her mother Josie Swane and now targets Hester; Mrs. Kilbride's aversion and disgust towards Hester make her an "accomplice" of patriarchal society, aggravating Hester's predicaments.

"The maker of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject's implicative complex" (Black, 1977: 442). In the play, the similar predicament of both transcends the boundary of species. It forms a meaningful metaphorical expression by showcasing the black swan's survival predicament, which is nearly isomorphic with Hester's miserable experience, constructing the parallel implicative complexity of the two. Also, as the similarity of Black Wing and Hester spans across the natural and non-natural realms, it effectively exposes the intimate relationship between nature and femininity, revealing to the readers the shared predicaments they endure from human society.

3.2. Shared Denouement

Swans are extremely sensitive to temperature, and during freezing winters, they typically migrate to warmer locations to spend the cold days. However, in the play, it seems that Black Wing does not plan to leave. She has such a deep attachment of the land that she spends all her life there. However, the exploitation of human society has brought about environmental destruction, including freezing weather and limited living space, posing great threats to Black Wing's survival. Instead of choosing to flee, Black Wing opts to endure or even resist, and these factors make her death a doom. "Among the mysteries of human speech, metaphor has remained one of the most baffling" (Boyle, 1954: 257). Her mother's prediction that Hester "will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less" (Carr, 1999: 268) interacts with the mysterious metaphor. In the play, the metaphor of the black swan's death is projected onto Hester through mysterious prophecy and other supernatural elements. This supernatural power and the metaphor complement each other, deepening the mysterious color in the play.

At the beginning of the story, Hester trails the corpse of the black swan after her while Ghost Fancier, the messenger of deceased spirits, approaches to take her away but decides to return at dusk due to his mistaking the time. His appearance serves as an omen of Hester's impending death. Furthermore, at the end of the play, Hester slits open her chest, revealing her heart which just resembles a bird with black feathers, evoking the image of the black swan. As the heart is the core of life, its resemblance to the deceased black swan similarly implies Hester's denouement. The death of both Hester and Black Wing is a consequence of the combined effects between

internal and external factors. Hester, like Black Wing, also harbors a deep attachment to the Bog of Cats and similarly suffers oppression from the settled community. No matter how violently Carthage and Xavier intimidate her, they cannot drive Hester away. It is because this land not only bears her memories and serves as her hometown but also represents her sole hope waiting for her mother's return. In return, her vigorous belief in staying on the Bog of Cats inevitably exposes her to various hardships because of her tinker identity and gender. Ultimately, she resorted to the extreme act of taking her own life as a form of rebellion.

"Metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (Ricoeur, 1977: 5). Carr does not intend to merely use the death of Black Wing to showcase the consequences of environmental destruction by human society; rather, on a deeper level, her death is also a metaphor for Hester's impending tragedy because human society dominated by patriarchy has also brought profound misfortune upon Hester. The successive deaths of the two on the same day expose the cruel reality of human actions posed on nature and women, intensifying the original tragic tone.

4. Allied Rebellion

Metaphor not only reveals the similarity between two objects, but also elucidates and tries to resolve the issues on the basis of such similarity. The metaphorical expression of the black swan is not limited to implying their predicaments. Rather than remaining silent about these issues, the death of Black Wing at the beginning of the play implies the theme of rebellion of the two. Therefore, this part will explore the metaphorical expression through their allied rebellion against patriarchy and fate.

4.1. The Rebellion against Patriarchy

Male-centered ideology emphasizes that women and nature should be subordinate to men. Consequently, the destruction of the environment and the deprivation of land as well as the killing of animals by patriarchal society become justified. The central Irish countryside where the Bog of Cats is located has a marine west coast climate, generally characterized by cool summers and warm winters. However, the climate on the Bog of Cats has become abnormal with scorching summers and freezing winters. The relentless exploitation of nature by human society, where patriarchy occupies the center stage, has led to the deterioration of the natural environment. In turn, human destruction of nature will inevitably lead to nature's backlash against humanity, with increasing extreme weather and decreasing flora and fauna, thereby threatening the survival of all creatures. Black Wing stands resolute on the Bog of Cats, tenaciously resisting human persecution until death. Therefore, the death of the black swan is seen as a negative reaction of nature's rebellion against patriarchal society. The black swan's rebellion against patriarchy underlies a deeper logic: she is deeply oppressed by patriarchy but possesses a defiant spirit. This spirit interacts with and parallels to the rebellious property of Hester and metaphorizes how Hester rebels against patriarchy.

Hester constantly revolts against patriarchy until her death. She is absolutely not "an angel in the house" and when her rights are threatened, she dares to resist. She vigorously contests Josie's custody with Carthage and insists on staying on the Bog of Cats no matter how hard Carthage tries to expel her. At the wedding ceremony of Carthage and Caroline,

Hester shows up in her wedding dress, irrespective of glances and malicious gossip. She is just pursuing what she desires: to be with Josie and stay on the Bog of Cats. Even if her entreaties are rejected, Hester still does not give in. Surprisingly, she ties up Carthage's cattle together and sets fire to Carthage's house which is soon to become his wedding abode with Caroline, saying that "I'd burn down the world if I'd enough diesel—will somewan not come and save me from meself before I go and do worse" (Carr, 1999: 307). It can be seen that Hester launches her resistance to its extreme, as she is willing to fight against the patriarchal society at all costs.

The rebellion of the black swan is essentially a rebellion of nature, and this rebellion from nature is bound to stimulate the rebellion of women, who share a natural affinity with nature due to their common fertility. Furthermore, as "the implicative complex" sustained by a metaphor's secondary subject functions as a representation of the characteristics imputed to the primary subject (Black, 1977), "the implicative complex" of this rebellious metaphor exposes the potential power of both nature and women. It suggests that both of them possess the capacity to rebel and will launch rebellion under the cruel domination of patriarchy and that these rebellions are complementary, simultaneously illustrating in return that the oppression of nature signifies the oppression of women, and vice versa.

4.2. The Rebellion against Fate

In *Bog of Cats*, the black swan confronts harsh natural conditions and a narrowing living space, yet she demonstrates remarkable resilience and adaptability. Far from being intimidated by the adverse environment or despairing over the departure of her companions, she continues a stable and independent life just as described in the song.

"I know where a black swan sleeps
On the bank of grey water,
Hidden in a nest of leaves
So none can disturb her" (Marr, 1999: 255).

This persistence not only makes her the longest-living swan on the Bog of Cats but also exemplifies the indomitable spirit of life. Moreover, animals often maintain vigilance and fear towards humans, but Black Wing dares to defy this norm. This brave and rebellious spirit blurs the boundary between her and humans, earning her a precious and intimate relationship with Hester. In the play, Hester recalls that "when I returned years later this swan here came swoopin' over the bog to welcome me home, came right up to me and kissed me" (Marr, 1999: 258). This emotional bond transcending species further underscores the black swan's uniqueness as an individual and her break from traditional constraints. The fundamental purpose of literary metaphor is to explore the complex and multifaceted relationships between "vehicle" and "tenor" (Tang, 2022). Hester and Black Wing are placed in the same society and rise in rebellion despite being of different species, reflecting the alliance relationship between nature and women—this is precisely where the essence of such metaphor lies.

Hester not only starts her rebellion against the patriarchal society as a female but also continues her defiance against fate. Facing Carthage's coercion and inducement, Hester resists from the very beginning.

Carthage I want you out of here before dusk! And I've put it to ya now about Josie. Think it over when ya've calmed down. And here. (*producing envelope*) There's your blood money. It's all there down to the last penny.

Hester No! I don't want it (Carr, 1999: 283)!

Hester could have chosen to leave with the money and start a new life, but she resolutely takes control of her own fate rather than following a pre-arranged life path. In addition, to prevent her daughter from suffering the same fate as hers, she even takes her daughter's life herself. "Hester redefines the grounds on which filicide takes place, to the extent that Hester's crime goes to be understood as an act of 'ultimate love': Hester kills her daughter Josie so that she can be spared from the same tortures that Hester endured all her life" (Kentrotis-Zinelis, 2022: 2). Hester is unwilling to leave Bog of Cats as Josie Swane does, nor does she abandon her daughter as her mother has abandoned her, nor does she want Josie to endure the same waiting she has, being repelled by mainstream society for her tinker identity and oppressed by patriarchy for her female gender. She disregards prophecies and advice, constantly pursuing what lay within her heart, as she herself states, "there's things about me ye'es never understood and makes ye'es afraid and ye'es are right for other things goes through my veins besides blood that I've fought so hard to keep wraps on" (Carr, 1999: 313). It is the terrible force that drives Hester to challenge authority and resist the predetermined arrangements of her fate.

Nature has its own operational laws, but the life trajectory of Black Wing has been severely disrupted. The seeds of tragedy are already sown in her fate, yet she decides to break free from the prescribed path, living according to her own wishes for as long as she can. Metaphors blending characters' inner experiences can create access to their mental exhibition (Caracciolo, 2013). The metaphorical expression of swan transforms Hester's abstract psychological states into concrete and perceptible behaviors, exposing Hester's external isolation and her inner loneliness that constitute a deeper spiritual plight, serving as a catalyst for Hester's rebellion. Because in Hester's view, women are also the masters of their own destinies, not subordinate to any man. However, her belief deviates from that of mainstream society. It is only through challenging the dominant belief that women can be liberated from constraints.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphor is overt, whereas the connection between the vehicle and its metaphorical meaning is often covert (Wang, 2016). The similarity of names and mysterious prophecy lay the foundation of the metaphor, and it further connects swan and Hester through exploring swan's destiny and rebellion, which reflects Hester's social predicament and her inherent rebellious spirit. This metaphor also unveils Hester's arduous struggle and tragic fate, offering contemporary enlightenment.

The common destiny they confront serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced by women and nature in Irish patriarchal society, and their allied rebellion inspires contemporary Irish society to reconsider whether women should still be "angels in the house" and whether nature should be unduly exploited. Although both Hester and Black Wing ultimately end in tragedy in the play, their rebellious spirit provides valuable insights into contemporary societal

oppression and appeals to harmonious coexistence among men, women and nature.

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