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Women's Transformation and Growth Reflected in *The Thorn Birds*

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ABSTRACT

The Thorn Birds is the masterpiece of contemporary Australian writer Colleen McCullough. It is a magnificent saga novel, telling the life experiences and emotional courses of three generations in Cleary family. It tells the different experiences and fates of four major female characters, among which Meggie is the most important one. This thesis makes a feminist study on women's transition and growth. It analyzes the image of Meggie and reveals women's transformation and growth in hardships. As an obedient woman, Meggie suffers a lot from society, religion and marriage, but is always unable to get the happiness she wants. After a series of hardships, her female consciousness is gradually awakened. Finally, she manages to get rid of the marital bonds, and courageously begins her pursuit of true love. Her story clearly shows us women's growth from a silent other to a mature individual at that time.

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1 Introduction

Colleen McCullough is a well-known contemporary Australian writer. *The Thorn Birds* is McCullough's masterpiece which created her reputation all around the world. It is a fascinating family saga, telling the life experiences and emotional courses of three generations of an Australian family—the Cleary family. It became an immediate success right after its first publication in the year of 1977, and it drew the attention of millions of readers in the world scope.

In foreign countries, it has received a lot of splendid literary evaluations and reviews. It was reputed as the “*Gone with the Wind* of Australia”, and one of the ten modern classics. As one of the best-selling novels at that time, it has also received great praises from the public media. Most of the critics focused on its characterization, plot design, and the wonderful story-telling technique.

The Thorn Birds has been translated into Chinese for more than twenty years. In China, the studies of Australian literature leave still much research space and possibility, so do those of *The Thorn Birds*. In the only history of Australian literature in China—*A History of Australian Literature* written by Professor Huang Yuanshen—there are only several hundred words about *The Thorn Birds*. Other critical studies and researches of *The Thorn Birds* in China can be generally divided into several groups.

First of all, some scholars use feminist critical theories to analyze the feminist themes and elements reflected in *The Thorn Birds*. Secondly, some scholars analyze the religious themes of the novel. Thirdly, many scholars make comparative studies of *The Thorn Birds* with other famous works such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Notre Dame de Paris*. And there are some other scholars who compare

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The Thorn Birds with Chinese masterpieces such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Undying Hatred of Love*.

Last but not the least, some critics focus on the writing techniques of Colleen McCullough, and the images and symbolism in *The Thorn Birds*.

The purpose of this thesis is to further analyze women's growth and transformation reflected in *The Thorn Birds* from the feminist perspective, mainly focusing on the heroine Meggie. Although former studies have touched upon this perspective, few of them have analyzed Meggie's life as a whole with regards to women's growth in history. Therefore, through analyzing Meggie's life journey in detail, this thesis is trying to discover the difficult process women have gone through in their way to transformation and growth. In the process of the study, Australian feminist theories and Australian social features will be referred to.

2 Women's Situation as the "Other"

2.1 A life full of miseries

Since the old time, "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other". (Beauvoir, 1987:16) This situation can also be found in the life of Meggie. Because of the subordinate situation women have, Meggie has suffered a lot during her lifetime.

Meggie was born in the year of 1911. During her time, Australian feminist movement has emerged along with Australian nationalism, but Australian women are still in a low position. As a female, Meggie's life is filled with miseries and misfortunes, which clearly shows the living dilemma of Australian women at that time.

Meggie is quite traditional, and has never thought of struggling for her own happiness. The only thing that young Meggie longs for is to have her own family and her own children. This longing meets the demands of the so-called "perfections of womanhood", which calls for women's perfect virtue of domesticity—one of the important virtues under patriarchy. As it is mentioned in the novel, "No rebel, Meggie; on the contrary. All her life she would obey, move within the boundaries of her female fate." (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005:107)

However, such a "perfect" woman has never been favored by life. Meggie's whole life is filled with miseries which begin since her childhood. As the only daughter of the Cleary family, Meggie has never received any special care. On the contrary, she is often ignored by her mother Fee for the simple reason that she is a girl: "Fee cast her no more than a passing glance before leaving; there was no mystery to Meggie, she was female. Fee knew what her lot would be, and did not envy or pity her. The boys were different; they were miracles, males alchemized out of her female body." (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 21) Due to her traditional ideas, Fee has paid little attention to her only daughter.

From a broad perspective, Meggie's miserable life is a reflection of all women's life at that time. Meggie is a traditional woman who embodies every perfect female character. Therefore, in spite of all the bitterness she has tasted, she never complains. Or it can be said that Meggie has never realized the unfairness in her life. All she does is to accept whatever befalls her. However, being silent and obedient has never brought women any kind of happiness. On the contrary, it deepens women's bitterness and misfortunes. The forthcoming tragedies are waiting for Meggie.

2.2 The victim of religion

In a world where women are not allowed to love freely, it is love which usually causes women's tragic life. Meggie is just a common woman who cannot get rid of her love emotions. The first big impact that Meggie experienced in her life comes from her love and admiration towards Father Ralph de Bricassart—the most important man in her life.

Meggie met Ralph at the age of nine. During her childhood, Ralph has always accompanied her, therefore, Meggie, the young girl, gradually falls in love with Ralph. At the same time, Ralph also falls in love with this beautiful, lovely girl. The love between Meggie and Ralph is pure, but it is doomed from the start for the simple reason of Ralph's identification as a Catholic priest. Catholicism not only puts women in a lower position, but also demands its priests to remain chaste. Because of this prohibition, Meggie can never marry her beloved Ralph.

In *Genesis*, God created Eve, the first woman of the world, out of Adam's rib. So it is often said that women are taken out of men. Because Eve was tempted by the serpent and committed the original sin with Adam, they were then expelled by God from the Garden of Eden. Besides, God punishes the woman with the pain of childbirth and with subordination to man.

Due to this religious tradition, women are doomed to be inferior to men, and become the subordination of men ever since they were born. Christianity often believes that men and women belong to two different worlds. Men represent the field of spirit, while women represent that of substance. They think that women are corrupted, and they are corporal and sexual in nature. They seduce men to make mistakes and finally led to human's corruption. It is advocated by Christian ideology that men, especially the monks, should get rid of the carnal desires in order to serve God better.

As an important branch of Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church even celebrates the ideology of celibacy. Catholic priests have to obey their vows and cannot get married in their life. As McCullough points out in *The Thorn Birds*, "That no earthly things come between the priest and his state of mind—not love of a woman, nor love of money, nor unwillingness to obey the dictates of other men." (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 69) Obviously, for Ralph, there is a contradiction between his vow as a priest and his love towards Meggie. In Ralph's life, he is always trying very hard to suppress his love. Here, celibacy becomes an obstacle of the development of

human nature. It not only leads to Ralph's bitterness and struggles in heart, but also brings the greatest blow to Meggie. Ralph does not get any spiritual liberation from his religious belief. Instead, because of his vow of celibacy, his sufferings become even stronger. Because of this, this love has been doomed from the very beginning.

Towards the tragic life, Meggie's attitudes are not active enough. Meggie, the traditional woman, is not aware of being her own master. When Ralph is leaving, all she does is to accept silently.

No outcry, no weeping, no storm of protest. Just a tiny shrinking, as if the burden sat askew, would not distribute itself so she could bear it properly. And a caught breath, not quite like a sigh. (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 196)

Although very sad, Meggie says nothing to complain. Teased by fate, she has no power to struggle, nor has she the right to make her own choice. Up to now, Meggie's self-consciousness has not been awakened. She has not realized that as an independent human being, she also has the right to chase for her own happiness. Being "passive yet enormously strong", (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 107) she accepts all the misfortunes and goes on with her life. In order to get over her love with Ralph and to realize her dream of her own family, Meggie decides to marry Luke O'Neill, who, ironically, looks like Ralph. But it is a pity that while Meggie is looking forward to a brand new life, much more bitterness is waiting for her.

2.3 The oppression in marriage

In order to get rid of her adoration for Ralph, Meggie finally decides to marry Luke. Through this marriage, she also wants to get her own family and babies which she has always been longing for. Eventually, Meggie becomes Mrs. O'Neill and leaves Drogheda with Luke. However, like most of the women in her time, Meggie has not got her own happiness in marriage. On the contrary, marriage brings her a lot of miseries.

Luke O'Neill is a clever, conceited, extremely hardworking man with a strong desire for money. With the hope of marrying a rich girl, he immediately begins his court for Meggie, the only heiress in Drogheda. Luke treats Meggie just as an accessory, a method to get money. From the very beginning, the relationship between Meggie and Luke is not equal at all.

Shortly after marriage, Luke suggests that he sing over all Meggie's money and property. While Meggie, without a clear self-consciousness as an independent woman, immediately accepts Luke's suggestion.

This is a typical patriarchal marriage, in which a man has the total ownership over his wife and his wife's property. Simone de Beauvoir once said, "In marrying... she becomes his vassal. He is the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society. She takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half'." (Beauvoir, 1987: 449) Meggie is also trapped in this situation, but she is not able to question the unequal treatment upon her.

What's more, Luke does not want to take the responsibility as a husband. After marriage, Luke immediately finds a job for her so that he needn't provide the money for her living. And all her wages will be paid straight into Luke's bank account. Obviously, Luke absolutely controls their life after marriage. He decides their lifestyle without discussing with Meggie. That is to say, Meggie has no say in her own life.

Meggie is just a woman who is negated and excluded. As her husband, Luke never really pays his attention to Meggie. For Luke, Meggie is just kind of possession which he does not really need or care.

When Meggie sees Luke in his true colors, she decides to change her life completely. After her struggles in bitterness and hardships for years, Meggie's self-consciousness is finally awakening. In the following days of her life, she is becoming more and more active and mature.

3 Women's Transition and Struggles

Simone de Beauvoir once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine." (Beauvoir, 1987: 295) Meggie is a girl who embodies the "perfect" female character, but she is not "perfect" in nature. The unhappy marriage with Luke makes her become more aware of her situation. When she sees Ralph's leaving her again after the birth of Justine, she begins to understand it is the Church and God that prevent her from having Ralph. Meggie complains: "It isn't fair! ... because of the celibacy of priests I've had to go away from Ralph, make my home and my life with some else, have someone else's baby...I resent the Church's implication that my loving Ralph or his loving me is wrong!" (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 372-373) Meggie learns to think independently, and begins to question the unfair fate oppressed upon her actively and bravely. Moreover, she even begins to question God. During this period, Meggie's former reverence towards God gradually turns into hatred and condemnation. Meggie is no longer the little girl who was seized helplessly by fate, but is becoming an independent woman with a strong will and a spirit to fight.

During the holiday on Matlock Island, Meggie meets Ralph again. This meeting is quite significant for Meggie's transition, because during this time, Meggie completely gets Ralph's love. Anne Herrmann once pointed out that "In the series of love scenes, Meggie was always in the dominate situation and Ralph was the object of her love desire". (Herrmann, 1968: 4) Meggie has changed her passive role and has become a dominator.

Before long, she is pregnant with Ralph's child. Meggie considers her pregnancy as a beginning of her fighting against God. Disregarding all those secular bonds, Meggie determinedly leaves her husband Luke, and bravely ends the unhappy marriage. Back to Drogheda, Meggie begins her brand new life, and soon gives birth to Ralph's son Dane. From those behaviors, we can see that Meggie's self-consciousness as an independent human being has awakened. As an adult female, she finally begins to control her own

life.

In Drogheda, Meggie's life is completely autonomous. She raises her two children independently and takes care of herself well. She devotes all her sincere love toward Ralph to their son Dane, whom she thinks she "stole" from God. Through this way, she is struggling against the patriarchal God and the unfair fate of women. In the latter part of her life, Meggie is able to get rid of her miseries all by herself. Meanwhile, she gains a lot of happiness from her wise decision.

However, Meggie's struggles are not completely successful. On a holiday in Greece, Dane is drowned while performing a sea rescue. In the end, Meggie completely loses Dane. Dane's death might be a reflection of McCullough's idea of fatalism, but on the other hand, it also reflects the deficiency of women's growth in Meggie's time. "But there was never a woman born who could beat God. He's a Man." (*The Thorn Birds*, 2005: 541)

This words show the obvious patriarchal feature of the Roman Catholic Church and the whole Australian society during her time. In the field of Drogheda, Meggie is fighting against patriarchy alone. Her story shows us her great transition from a dependent girl to a brave, independent woman. This transition is inspiring for all women around the world. But her strength is much too limited. As a common woman, Meggie has not been able to beat those social bonds yet. Although having achieved huge successes in the past, women still have a very long way to go.

4 Conclusion

Colleen McCullough's masterpiece *The Thorn Birds* is a huge family saga, mainly talking about the stories of the love and tragedies of the Cleary family. McCullough is not a typical feminist writer, but *The Thorn Birds* objectively shows women's gains and loss in their way to independence and growth.

Meggie is the heroine of this novel. Her life is a transformation from ignorance to rebellion. She is the first woman in Cleary family who is able to get rid of the marital bond upon women. Compared with her ancestors, she has made great progress. But the loss of her beloved son Dane seemingly tells us that at this moment, women are still unable to overcome their tragic fate. Meggie's growth and struggles are not quite complete, it is reasonable to say that Meggie has left a good example for the women at her age. And the task of women's transition and growth will continue in the future.

The Thorn Birds can be seen as a history of women's hard journey of growth. At the end of the novel, McCullough says that the age of Drogheda is going to stop. But for women, this does not mean the end of their journey. In a new age, they will continue to find their values and positions both at home and in society. And they will go on building the equal, harmonious relationship with men. In the future, women will play a much more important role in a broader world.

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