London's Age and Agelessness

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In this paper, the author read Henry James's *The Awkward Age* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, in order to demonstrate the dialectical moment of London's age and ageless. The age of London is in the character of literary works, as Clarissa Dalloway comes to show the reader her feelings while walking on the London street. At the gate of St James Park, she has the dialectical moment of feeling "very young; at the same time unspeakably aged" (Woolf, 2010). That is a moment which represents a particular sense of personal history, when the past comes into one's own living present.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, party, Henry James, personal history, dialectical moment

Introduction

In *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, Woolf depicts a particular "party consciousness" in London society, in order to see "the human being's reactions and anxieties under the conditions and limits imposed on him by the social occasion", revealing "the psychology of the party" (McNichol, 2010, p. 12). For Henry James, the age of London somehow indicates the spirit and the social context of his time. The Victorian London setting reveals a sense of uncertainty and crisis. As Mr Longdon looks at Nanda's picture, his tears come to show a mixed feeling. Looking at the photo and thinking about the past, the intensity of the dialectical moment brings him into tears. Both James's and Woolf's societies in London indicate shifting consciousness from the old to the new generations. As Mrs Dalloway's guests come and go in her drawing-room in Westminster, getting together and being apart, the author would conclude, the dialectical moment is a fusion of the past and the present, constituting the agelessness of London.

London's Age

The crisis of James's London society is that, as the reader can see, through the intensity of language, gesture, and acting, every character in the novel is looking for a self-conscious freedom, even the reader does not know what exactly had happened, only through reading. It does not matter who said what. The meaning of representing a crisis in this way is that Nanda suffers from her "compromise" (Preface xxxv). Nanda's being around that social circle is exactly the very force of the little circle's freedom of speech.

The Awkward Age is constructed by 10 Books. Each one of them can be seen as a verbal portrait of the character in the novel—starting from Lady Julia in Book I, and followed by Little Aggie, Mr Longdon, Mr

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Cashmore, The Duchess in Book V, Mrs Brook, Mitchy, Tishy Grendon in Book VIII, Vanderbank and the last but not the least Nanda in Book X.

Stuart Culver, in his article *Censorship and Intimacy: Awkwardness in The Awkward Age*, points out that “by writing a novel whose subject is entirely in dialogue, James has collapsed the distinction between subject and treatment, intension and form” (Culver, p. 376). Culver’s point sharply reveals the way in which the verbal form of the conversations in the drawing-room “has come to stand as a substitute for truth” (Culver, p. 376). For *The Awkward Age*, my reading does not focus on finding out what is the truth. Rather, the author would argue, the crisis of the novel form stands in the process of its representation, showing a gap between what things should be understood and the way people misunderstood—in other words, between reality and mis-representation.

James’s novel shows a process of representation through language. And yet, the question is, how can this process be understood through reading the novel? In *The Awkward Age*, James’s literary technique comes to show this process through words and conversations. Visual impressions come to represent knowledge in London, including observations and impressions of a person. Photographic images are very important. In this novel, for example, a photograph shows not only a visual reality, such as the way Little Aggie looks like, but also James’s verbal pictures such as observations, memories and conversations which come to be a contrast to a photographic reality.

In the text, as the reader can see, when Vanderbank and Mr Longdon have a conversation in a room, Van’s observation of Mr Longdon makes him feel that he does not mean what he said. The “small photograph” (James, 1899, p. 10) on the table shows that Little Aggie “is extremely pretty—with extraordinary red hair and a complexion to match; great rarities”, as far as Van can see, “in that race and latitude” (James, 1899, p. 10). Young girls give their own photos to friends as gifts, to show how much they appreciate their “friendship” (James, 1899, p. 13), as Little Aggie did. And yet, ironically, the reality that one can see from Van’s perspective is that there is no such thing as “friendship” in London life, because there are only “sociable” elements rather than real feelings. Van, representing the young generation, himself has doubts to see “the existence of friendship in big societies—in great towns and great crowds”. In fact, for him, friendship is like “a plant that takes time and space and air; and London society is a huge ‘squash’, as [people in London] elegantly call it—an elbowing, pushing, perspiring, chattering mob” (James, 1899, p. 13).

Vanderbank also has another photograph “beside the lamp”, which is a “present” from Nanda herself, framed in “glazed white wood” (James, 1899, pp. 10-11). Both young girls, about 18, are as “charming” as “innocent lambs” (James, 1899, p. 11). The “horror” is that Mrs Brookenham, Nanda’s mother, treats her as if she was “only sixteen” (James, 1899, p. 12). Little Aggie is also trapped in a small circle, which involves only four people—Dr Beltram, Aggie’s aunt the Duchess, a governess Miss Merriman, and a nurse who is also an old maid, Gelsomina (James, 1899, p. 160).

Mr Longdon’s tears suggest that Nanda reminds him the beauty of his lover, Lady Julia—who is Nanda’s grandmother. He knows Lady Julia as in his own memory, in a way which there is no point to know if she is really beautiful or not. For Mr Longdon, Nanda’s portrait reveals the beauty of the previous generation, as Lady Julia is “one of the greatest beauties of her day”, and Nanda is “exactly like her” (James, 1899, p. 15). Thirty years of being in London, Mr Longdon’s tears are emotional, as he looks at a young man such as Van, he realises that he is from “a different period of history” (James, 1899, p. 5). Mr Longdon’s feeling and memory show the reader the

reality that one perceived and recognised, even through generations.

London's Agelessness

Childhood memory is significant, in a way which the present moment is lived through the past. The past and the present are like two opposite poles, which synthesis Virginia Woolf's many characters of Mr and Mrs in *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, as they come together to Mrs Dalloway's party in her drawing-room in Westminster, London. Woolf's verbal images come to depict a historical discourse, as the dialectical moment appears in her characters' thoughts.

As Big Ben strokes at eleven o'clock, Mrs Dalloway feels an air of freshness in the middle of June, "as if issued to children on a beach" (Woolf, 2010, p. 19). Although Clarissa is physically located "in the murmur of wheels and the shuffle of footsteps", in central London on the street of Westminster, she feels that "the moment was complete" (Woolf, 2010, p. 19), as the memory of her "happy childhood" comes back to her. Woolf skilfully uses the stroke of Big Ben, working in a rather magical way, to link Clarissa's past and her present. The reader seems to be able to hear Clarissa's thought—as "there is nothing to take the place of childhood. A leaf of mint brings it back: or a cup with a blue ring" (Woolf, 2010, p. 19).

Mrs Dalloway's memory comes very close to Proust's "involuntary memory" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 403)—a moment of remembering the past through an action on an external object, such as the narrator's having a taste of the Madeline cake. Memory is central to Proust's work. The process of searching for the "lost time" seems to bring up the intensity of emotions, in a pretty effortless way. The feeling of happiness is in the recognition of the meaning of Marcel's childhood memory. And yet, this "knowledge" (Szondi, 2006, p. 11), this recognition of meaning can also bring a totally opposite feeling—"the frightfully painful premonition" (Szondi, 2006, p. 12), as Marcel realises that he "does not stand outside of time, but is subject to its laws" (Szondi, 2006, p. 12).

It seems that the "past" does not really past; it will always be a part of Marcel's mental life. Mrs Dalloway's guests, on the other hand, seem to use their childhood memories to resist their current physical existence—namely, the party itself, the fact that they should talk to other guests (strangers), to act properly in the social condition which means civilization in Mrs Dalloway's drawing-room in Westminster, London. To remember, in *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, is not aiming to forget, or to find a character's own existence. Since Clarissa gives party in her drawing-room every single day, the author would argue, her guests' consciousness comes collectively to reveal a moment of criticism—to "the most banal, most fleeting, most sentimental, weakest hour in the life" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 203)—eventually, to the society and the city of London.

In "The New Dress", Mabel, one of Clarissa's guests, cannot act and sit in her world solitary. Looking at her new dress, she feels "silly, paltry, and provincial" (Woolf, 2010, p. 57). The design of the dress comes from her mother's old fashion magazine, which is "a Paris fashion book of the time of the Empire" (Woolf, 2010, p. 57). She feels "foolish, trying to be like them"—the models in the Parisian book (Woolf, 2010, p. 57). Through Maple and her thinking about the Parisian fashion book of the time of the Empire, Woolf brings out a sharp contrast between the old generation and the new, as the new dress itself, actually comes from an old book, which does not fit Maple and cannot make her look great.

In "The Introduction", Woolf again uses her character Lily Everit, to demonstrate a feeling of "horror" towards "civilisation" (Woolf, 2010, p. 43), bringing the society of London into a sharp critical focus. Clarissa's

drawing-room is “the famous place” for the party—in other words, it is “the world” (Woolf, 2010, p. 38). For Clarissa, it is a place for her to deal with another part of everyday reality. And yet, for her guest Lily, the drawing-room indicates memories of the past, as the interior is like a showcase—“a box in the theatre of the world” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 19).

Lily wrote an essay “on the character of Dean Swift”, which was “marked with three red stars: First rate” (Woolf, 2010, p. 37) by a professor. The intensity between fact and fiction seems to come from the dialectical moment of “her own white phantom” and a male guest’s “dark coat” (Woolf, 2010, p. 38). Thinking about her childhood, she feels that this moment of being in the party, in a very civilised social condition, civilisation pulls her out of “the long comfortable darkness of childhood” (Woolf, 2010, p. 39). Lily is now a woman, like a butterfly. And yet, “this civilisation” of meeting new people, talking to strangers, buildings including “the towers of Westminster; the high and formal buildings”—all can be seen as a “massive masculine achievement” (Woolf, 2010, p. 39). Lily cannot breath, as if her wings were torn off. She is trapped, as the fly in the milk.

Conclusion

If James’s *The Awkward Age* represents the significance of the age and the London society itself through conversation and language, Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway’s Party* somehow questions the definition and the function of civilization. Social occasions are depicted as “after all nothing more than ‘people in evening dress’” (McNichol, 2010, p. 13), if there is not any inner logic, which refers to a character’s solitude and reflection. James’s dramatic effects in his fiction are through language. As a social act, conversation and language somehow indicate a symbolic prison, in a way which comes to frame James’s characters in a particular social condition and social status. Woolf’s characters in Clarissa’s party go through the “stuffy London room” (Woolf, 2010, p. 45) of her drawing-room, observing each other and sensitively reflecting one’s own thoughts and recalling one’s own memories, as a feeling of “self-centred” “solitary” (Woolf, 2010, p. 62) is emerged across London’s space and time.

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