

Conflicts between Ambition and Love of Ralph in *The Thorn Birds* in Light of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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ABSTRACT

Ralph as a churchman possesses all the needs of a normal man, such as the pursuit of power, wealth and love, and his track of life is characterized by the prolonged and fierce conflict between ambition and love. Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs throws new light on the conflict and its source and offers insights into human nature.

1. Introduction

The *Thorn Birds* written by Colleen McCullough is a voluminous classical masterpiece. The title of the book refers to a mythical bird in an old Celtic legend. In terms of time, the work extends from 1915 to 1969; in terms of space, it covers Australia, Rome, Greece and England; in terms of content, it reflects two great events in the first half of 20th century: the Great Depression of 1930s and Second World War. The major clue threading all these elements is the life-long love between the protagonists: Ralph and Meggie. They are the 'thorn birds', as the author hints. 'The bird with the thorn in its breast, it follows an immutable law; it is driven by it knows not what to impale itself, and die singing. At the very instant the thorn enters there is no awareness in it of the dying to come; it simply sings and sings until there is not the life left to utter another note. But we, when we put the thorns in our breasts, we know. We understand. And still we do it. Still we do it.' (McCullough 1992). In making life choices we at times knowingly place a thorn in our breasts. Ralph creates his own thorn. He aims to be a perfect priest, but he is essentially a man, he does love Meggie – the forbidden desire. In order to fulfill his ambition, he must sacrifice love. The constant conflict between ambition and love is the source of his pain, but he cannot find a better way out, he just endures the pain to death, this is his tragedy.

The love problem of priests has been the subject of other novels as well, such as *The Scarlet Letter*. Ralph is a prominent priest with modern color, for he reaches the core of the Catholic Church's power. Accordingly the pain caused by the conflict between his ideal to be a perfect priest and ambition to climb higher on the religious ladder and love is felt to be more piercing and striking. The two major forces of ambition and love compete against each other, shaping the life course of Ralph.

Ambition and love are major aspects of human life and are incorporated as essential elements into Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This theory offers new insights into Ralph's problems and the human situation in general.

2. Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Abraham Maslow is a humanistic psychologist. He proposed a theory of hierarchy of needs in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in *Psychological Review*. This theory is fully expressed in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow, 1954).

Maslow used the terms Physiological, Safety, Belongingness and Love, Esteem, Self-Actualization and Self-Transcendence needs to describe the pattern that human motivations generally move through with the most fundamental levels of needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization at the top.

All of Maslow's basic needs appeal to our instincts. Although it is criticized, his theory is practical by describing many realities of human experiences and is widely accepted.

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As to the relations among these needs, Maslow states that the "hierarchies are interrelated rather than sharply separated", and a certain need "dominates" the human organism instead of stating that the individual focuses on a certain need at any given time, (ibid) Maslow also acknowledged the likelihood that the different levels of motivation could occur at any time in the human mind (ibid).

Ambition and love discussed in this work roughly correspond to 'Self-actualization' and 'Love/Belonging' in the hierarchy in which 'achievement' is listed in the level of 'Esteem' and sexual love is in 'physiological' needs. Maslow describes self-actualization as a person's need to be and do that which the person was 'born to do' (ibid).

In light of Maslow's theory of motivation, the fulfillment of needs of ambition and love and their conflict are discussed and causes are analyzed.

3. The fulfillment and domination of ambition in Ralph

Ambition has two meanings: (1) an earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as power, fame, wealth, and the willingness to strive for its attainment. (2) the object, state or result desired or sought after (Webster, 1996). Ralph inclines to be a priest: 'I was brought up from my cradle to be a priest.... I am a vessel, and at times I'm filled with God' (McCullough, 1992). That filling that oneness with god even remains a mystery to him, but he cannot abandon it, and his vows are sacred: chastity, poverty and obedience. However, he sometimes does doubt and feels empty. 'I think I'd give up every ambition, every desire in me, for the chance to be perfect priest' (ibid), but would he and could he? He still has "the dreams of youth", and just as Mary Carson points out 'your natural element lies in some corridor of ecclesiastical power' (ibid). Correct, he has ambition – the attainment of wealth and seizure of church power. Gillanbone where he is in exile is a life sentence. How he regrets his insult of the bishop in the burst of youthful temper and sighs that the chance won't come again. When the chance really emerges, he immediately seizes it despite the cost. Mary Carson has seen through him and leaves him to his decision. "Thirteen million pounds. The chance of getting out of Gillanbone and perpetual obscurity, the chance to take his place within the hierarchy of church administration, the assured goodwill of his peer and superiors.' (ibid) That's exactly what he has always been waiting for. His ambition is aroused and he cannot resist the temptation. He accepts the bequest and cheats the Clearys (Meggie's family) out of their inheritance, selling his soul and love simultaneously. With the bequest as the economic basis he becomes the private secretary to Archbishop Chuny Dark of Australia.

In his consecutive climbing the hierarchy of church, he is very successful, because he does have many advantages, and he knows how to give them to full play..That is sufficient. He is beautiful, and he uses his appearance; he is wily and witty, and he uses his brain well; he is talented for language, and he uses it, too. In the long service to his superior, he learns how to deal with the checks put forward by him. 'But Father Ralph at least as wily as his master, and he had been with him long enough to know how his mind worked. So he parried the smooth question with deceptive honesty, a trick he had discovered lulled His Grace's suspicions at once.' (ibid) The suspicion are obviously about Ralph's secret love. And he can work out beautiful words to move his superior. When the latter finds his rose, he says: 'of a love as pure as that I bear my God... it was for the church I forsook her, that I always will forsake her. I've gone so far beyond her, and I can never go back again' (ibid). So he hides his secret well from his superior. He is a diplomat, too. Before his ex-superior and master-to-be, how skillfully he talks: 'But may I say I shall miss Your Grace, while looking forward to serving Your Grace?' (ibid) Beautiful words. However, it is when bargaining for the safety of Rome with Herr General of Germany that he fully displays his advantages. He speaks German. He is fully aware of his effect on the general, and uses it without hesitation. Actually the general admiring his good looks and composure is moved, thus makes a concession. Ralph is thanked for saving Rome. Moreover, he has business thinking. During the Great Depression of 1930s, he does not worry. Instead, he sees it as an excellent time to buy land, houses and buildings in major cities at an essentially low price thinking that real estate is a lucrative business. He is something of a businessman. He has his own way of earning money for his Church.

Ralph realizes his ambition, achieves what he strives for throughout his life by becoming an honorable, respectable and powerful personage in Vatican. Eventually he becomes the Cardinal de Bricassart and is one of the few men actively concerned in determination of papal policy. The route to his success? All his energy

and wisdom are devoted to the fulfillment of his ambition and God. In a word, he actualizes his 'potentials'. 'What a man can be, he must be' (Maslow, 1943).

4. The torture and satisfaction of love

While pursuing his ambition, Ralph cannot abandon or cut off his desire for love completely, despite the fact that he has successfully resisted many women's seductions. Humans need to love and be loved – both sexually and non-sexually – by others.[2] It's natural for a man to love sexually and emotionally. For a Catholic priest the love of a woman is a forbidden desire. Ralph loves Meggie when she was a little girl, but he fears God, and he will devote his heart and soul to God as his vows dictate. What he can only tell her is "you're my rose, the most beautiful human image and thought in my life" (ibid). Many times he repeats "ashes of roses", which he explains as the 'dying of an idea which has no right to be born, let alone nurtured" (ibid). Despite his repression of his love to Meggie, he frequently thinks of her in his lonely and dull life, although he has a promising career to embrace. How much pain he must have endured when he learns that Meggie gets married. He will endure till he can endure for ambition's sake. Arriving at Matlock Island, he cannot endure anymore, he does want her. Love predominates ambition this time and reason is subservient to passion. In the meantime, he realizes that God is a trick, a phantom, a jest; he loves her more than he does God, and the life in search of Godhead is a delusion (ibid). Nevertheless, he proceeds with his ambition by returning to his religious duties. However, he can never approach his priestly duties in the same light or with the same zeal.

He does sacrileges to God, and fortunately he has been forgiven. Finally he becomes a Cardinal. He obtains what he strives for with his whole life at the old age, but then he is thirstier of love and the happiness of family life. He knows he is a man, not God. 'Dust thou art, to dust thou returnst'. He has regretted: in the cycle of life, when he dies, what will mark him as a man? How does he want Dane to be his son who really is his son? He loves Dane as a father loves his son. When he should be happy to know Dane is his son, he has to cry over his son's death. He just demands love from Meggie, caring less about the result, so he cannot identify his son and find the opportunity to display real paternal love to him. He realizes all his efforts and struggles for power are meaningless and useless, compared with the loss of love and the loss of son. He can only show deep sorrow for his son's death and ask for forgiveness from Meggie. His load of debts to love is so much so that it weighs him down. Death is the end of everything, he needn't shoulder the burden of love any more or be torn between love and ambition.

5. The conflict between ambition and love and its source

The conflict between ambition and love runs through Ralph's entire life. The two fight against each other incessantly, mostly ambition gets the upper hand while love takes precedence over ambition at rare times.

5.1 The conflict between ambition and love

In Maslow's hierarchy the need for love and belonging stands lower than self-actualization. Ambition dominates Ralph's life, but love is a more basic and immediate need. He presses down his love and desires at the beginning. When love becomes hindrance to his fulfillment of ambition he does not hesitate to sell his love. Ambition is his long-term goal, while love is a daily or momentary need. Amid the boring, lonely and weary life, his desire for love becomes increasingly acute. When the love need is satisfied, he can only treasure it in his mind and returns to his career where he belongs. He has to leave the people in Drogheda who give him spiritual support and comfort, as 'Drogheda is his home of spirit and life', and he will return and sleep quietly there when it is the time. Learning the death of his own son, he asked 'Would he have pursued a different path if he had known about his son? Yes! Cried his heart. No, sneered his brain' (ibid). He will still choose to be a thorn bird. Ambition and love, he wants both, but when he can't get both, he sacrifices love, ambition is always his priority.

His relation with love undergoes three phases: from repression and avoidance, confrontation and consummation, to recognition or acceptance in line with his the track of success of his ambition.

5.2 Source of conflict: humanism vs. religion

The dilemma Ralph is pushed in is typical of the human situations. The contradiction and conflict between ambition and love is ubiquitous in human life. Nevertheless the situation of Ralph as an individual is unique in certain aspects, because he is a priest of Roman Catholic Church which is a special profession. The source of conflict in him has something to do both with religion and his personality and consequently reflecting to certain extent the conflict between humanism and religion.

The positive and negative aspects of religion are manifest since the very beginning. Religion creates a visionary but holy and perfect word, thus becomes people's spiritual sustenance, and it formulates ethical rules urging people to seek an ideal world (Zhao, 1997). People believe in God and priests choose to serve God as their career. On the other hand, it also has some strict ethical rules, such as priest are not allowed to love a woman, not to mention to get married, seemingly denying and devastating humanity, going against human nature. The Catholic Church like other religious sects demands the chastity of its priests, as its doctrines advocates asceticism, denying humanity. They are not supposed to love, it is a forbidden desire. This goes totally against one of the basic needs of man advocated by Maslow's humanistic theory: love is a natural and fundamental need. Man is endowed with desires and emotions. Therefore, total obedience to these rules and regulations is hard or impossible.

The conflict between God and love is common to many priests, it is a universal problem. When Ralph confesses and repents, his master says, "They, (the other two cardinals in Vatican) too, are men ... Only in their priesthood do they act as vessels containing God. In all else they are men' (McCullough, 1992). Ralph's superiors face similar dilemmas. The tragedy of Ralph and Meggie is lived through by many other priests and their lovers. Hence the falsity and hypocrisy of religion. Nevertheless, the Church is dark and corrupted, just as Ralph himself puts it: 'It's an old, sour, petrified world, the Vatican wrold' (McCullough, 1992). The Church distorts human nature and consequently destroys many energetic and intelligent young people. Ralph is just one victim among many. While suppressing his personality, he learns fast to adapt to the Church: he gets along well with his superiors, wins their admiration and help. He protects Rome and brings in money for the Church. In return he is rewarded and promoted for his contribution. The Church tempts and seduces him. Amid the ambitious men there he is assimilated, revealing the bad qualities of the Church: hypocrisy, darkness and corruption.

It can also be said that Ralph's destiny is his own making. He is too ambitious and envious of power. He uses the Church to seize power, priesthood is just his fig leaf. Even though he longs for love and happiness common folks enjoy, he won't quit being a priest. He sees himself a good seed to grow in the soil of the Church and he will not waste his life and he will pursue his ambition at all costs, including fervent love. Love is something that is endowed in man, will erupt like a volcano once triggered, breaking and destroying the chains and fetters around it and getting itself free, especially after long years of suppression. In the continuous conflict between ambition and love, Ralph has gradually realized the futility and meaninglessness of his pursuit of power, but there is nothing that is strong enough to knock him down till the last stroke – the death of his son. Then he completely awakens. In emotion he will give way to love; but in reason, ambition is still prior to love, that is the reality. Ambition is his lifeline. The tragedy of all priests lies in the fact that they are common people of blood and flesh, but they choose a superhuman road. They struggle between Heaven and Earth, and between morality of God and the natural attributes of human beings, but they are men instead of God (Ye, 1993). They cannot get rid of their human nature and escape from being men.

6. Conclusion

Ralph as a churchman possess all the needs of a man, such as the pursuit of power, wealth and love, and from his track of life we can see how they are satisfied and reconciled in a special way in the case of head-on conflicts. We individuals all possess the needs indicated in Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs. All these needs cannot be satisfied simultaneously. Many a time a choice has to be made between two valuable things, it costs too much pain to make decisions. We all have our own thorns. These choices constitute and create our life. It is sometimes very hard to say right or wrong, happy or painful, it is just a different track of life.

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