



Disillusionment of American Dream in “The Egg” by Sherwood Anderson

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Abstract

“The Egg” is a short story by Sherwood Anderson. The story is told in the first person from the perspective of a child about his father’s disillusion to rise in the world. The child’s father used to live a self-sufficient and happy rural life. Under the pressure of his wife’s urge to “rise in the world” after marriage, he experiences a series of failures to run a business. Finally, he breaks down in a ridiculous failed attempt to please his customer. Through the father’s failures and absurd behaviors, the story shows that the American dream symbolized by the egg is illusory and impractical, reduced to monetary pursuit. Anderson satirizes the American people’s fanatical quest for fortune in an unscrupulous manner in the early 20th century. He extends his sympathy to those who try to keep up with the rapid process of industrialization but get lost.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

American Dream, Sherwood Anderson, The Egg, Disillusionment

1. Introduction

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) is claimed as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century and the precursor of modern American literature. Born in a small town in Ohio, undergoing America’s rapid transition from an agricultural society to industrial society in the early twentieth century, he was concerned with small-town life and people’s spiritual alienation under the impact of the commercial economy. His representative works are *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), *Poor White* (1920), and *Dark Laughter* (1925). His works have profound meanings in spite of his simple fragmented plots or loose structure. His stories are impressive

with his use of black humor and subtle symbols [1] (p. 81). “The Egg” is included in his short story selection, *The Triumph of the Egg*, published in 1921. This story collection includes 14 separate stories that jointly shed light on the social reality in the early 20th century when people had to give up traditional lifestyles due to the drastic changes brought by the wave of industrialization, yearning for material affluence; therefore, many people were alienated in their quest of material success. These stories reveal corruption and emptiness in the American people’s fanatic pursuit of fortune by unscrupulous means and extend sympathy to those victims who fail to come to terms with the drastic social changes. Hence, doubt and criticism are raised about the American dream strongly advocated by American society in the early 20th century.

“The Egg” is one of Sherwood Anderson’s famous works about the early wave of industrialization, often anthologized in the literary anthology. The background of the story is an American small town under the impact of industrialization around the first decade of the twentieth century when the emerging commercial society was eroding people’s traditional life and values. “The Egg” is told in the first person by a child about his father’s failed business ventures. His father used to live a self-sufficient and happy rural life. Under the impact of the new era, urged by his wife to “rise in the world” after marriage, the father gives up his original simple and happy life and pursues his dream of success but finally ends miserably. His father first sets up a fowl run that turns out badly. After the bankruptcy, his father opens a restaurant but the profit is dismal. Experiencing a series of business failures, his father is eventually disheartened by the ridiculous show he puts up to please his customers. He turns out to be the butt of scorn in the stupid show. The following part will give an analysis of how Anderson reveals the illusory American dream with the metaphor of eggs. The American dream is satirized as essentially money worship through the father’s tragedy. His tragedy shows how people are alienated from their corrupted materialist dream of success.

2. Egg as the Metaphor of American Dream

The American dream or the concept of liberty, equality, democracy, and the free pursuit of happiness has been deeply rooted in people’s minds since the early puritan settlers came to the American continent. Hope was everywhere in this virgin land: people were eager to establish their careers through their sweat, talent, and courage. This is the core value of the American dream [2] (p. 268). For hundreds of years, the American dream has served as a strong faith that spurs many humble Americans to achieve great achievements, such as the two great Presidents mentioned in the story, Lincoln and Garfield: “She had read of how Garfield, Lincoln, and other Americans rose from poverty to fame and greatness, and [...] she may have dreamed that I would someday rule men and cities” [3] (p. 56). The feats of the great people are the best illustrations of the American dream: A better life can be gained as long as striving is paid; that is to say, people

will go as far as their talent and hard work allow them to go regardless of their religion, color or creed. Inspired by their stories, the child's mother induces his father to "embark on an independent enterprise of his own". In the story, egg stands for the luring promise of success, because chickens are hatched from eggs, then the hatched chickens will produce more eggs, and then more chickens, more eggs. The cycle of production goes on and on and the fortune accumulates. Tempted by those widespread stories teaching people how to get rich, the father ends his life as a farmer: he sells the horse that has accompanied him for many years and gives up his job on the farm. Then, he runs a chicken farm, taking good care of the chickens and working hard for ten years. However, due to his lack of experience, the chickens either die of strange diseases or die from accidents. Until then, the child realizes the illusion of success stories: "Do not be led astray by it. It was not written for you" [3] (p. 57). His father's first failed undertaking reveals that the American dream, that is, success will be rewarded as long as you work hard, is just like the promising and yet elusive eggs, exquisite but delicate, bringing both hope and despair. People will never know whether fortune or misfortune will come first. Just like the chicken from the egg, the moment it comes into the world it cannot decide its destiny. After the failure of the fowl run, his father doesn't learn from his failure but becomes more addicted to his second venture and moves to the town to run a restaurant. He is blind in his eager yearning to get rich. The stories of those great men always highlight their qualities of industriousness and steadiness, but most of time, the objective elements such as personality, methods, environment, and timing on the road to success are often omitted. His father blames himself for not being positive enough, so he forces himself to pretend to be positive and talkative, trying different ways to please his customers in his restaurant to earn money. At this time, he rests his hope on eggs again, hoping to boost business by the show of grotesque chickens. He wishes to attract customers with tricks of egg but these tricks make him a ridiculous clown. One day, aiming to entertain a young customer named Joe Kane, his father claims that he can make an egg stand on end, to which Joe feels uninterested. He is upset and gets another idea. He heats the egg in hot vinegar and attempts to push it into a bottle through its long neck, but fails again. This failed egg trick is the last straw and he breaks down in tears for his frustrated dream. Eventually, in resentment and shame, the father throws the egg at the customer, and the egg breaks, which signifies his broken dream. With the metaphor of the egg, Anderson criticizes those whose life centers on monetary pursuit and reveals the absurdity of illusory American dream.

3. Spiritual Alienation from American Dream

"The Egg" reveals the drastic changes in American rural towns in the early 20th century, which was undergoing the process of accelerating transition from agriculture to industrialization. A mass of rural folks were caught in the trend, giving up their traditional life and pouring into cities to live a better life. Anderson's

short stories are all about the transformation in small town life during the transitional industrial era, express sympathy for the people caught in the changes, and deal with the theme of disillusioned “American dream”. The short story “The Egg” shows us the pathos of people’s getting lost in their blind pursuit of material success.

“The Egg” is narrated from a child’s perspective in his naive language about his father’s pursuit of dollar dream and his confusion over his father’s behaviors. Before marriage, his father lives a simple and self-sufficient life as a farmhand, and after work, he drinks with other farmhands in bar every weekend, living an easy-going life. After marriage, with encouragement from his educated wife, his father gives up his peaceful lifestyle: “an idea in regard to getting up in the world came into his head. The American spirit took hold of him. He also became ambitious” [3] (p. 60). How he gradually loses himself in the pursuit of dollar dream is presented from the child’s observation. At the very beginning of the story, the child praises his father as a cheerful man by nature and describes how his father enjoyed his life as a farmhand in the past, an unsophisticated and happy guy. But with the acceleration of industrialization in the early 20th century and the influence from his country-teacher wife, his father has been gradually possessed by the eagerness to rise in the world. He spends ten years on the fowl-run with little profits which turns out to be his son’s permanent horror and hatred towards the eggs. The boy witnesses chickens coming out from the eggs, getting sick and dying from various strange diseases; therefore, he always sees the world from a dark and negative side. The gloomy atmosphere over the frequent deaths of chickens affects his father as well. He becomes silent and depressed. Occupied by undue labor, he gets old quickly, leaving less hair on his balding head. In the past, his father can entertain himself in his spare time after work, but ever since the establishment of the fowl-run, his little world is simply crammed with eggs and chickens. Though later giving up the chicken farm business, he racks his brains on how to get rich quick. He regards the grotesque chickens coming out from the eggs with two heads or four legs as amazing treasure and he keeps them in alcohol. He attaches great hope to the show of grotesque chickens and other ridiculous egg tricks to attract more customers. With his freakish mind and behavior, he has become a grotesque, just as the boy says: “Grotesques are born out of chicken as out of people” [3] (p. 58). He has been alienated by his ambition “to rise in the world”. The boy gives an ironic comment on his father’s breakdown at the end of the story that, “And that, I conclude, is but another evidence of the complete and final triumph the egg—at least as far as my family is concerned”. The egg’s final and complete victory over his father defeats his desire for wealth, takes away his passion for life, and turns him into a depressed man.

The father’s broken American dream is revealed in the broken egg he throws at the guest he tries his best to entertain. At this moment, he realizes the futility of his efforts in gaining fortune, respect, and success. In his two business ventures, the father has been working hard driven by his desire to rise in the world. When his business broke, he is broken spiritually. He has been twisted in perso-

nality and spirit in his chase for material success and his family life is also affected by the gloomy atmosphere brought by his slack businesses. “The triumph of egg” in the story is also a criticism of the social trend that many people have been consumed and corrupted by materialistic dreams.

4. Conclusion

With wry irony, “The Egg” shows us a family tragedy in the pursuit of material success, criticizing that the American dream has already deviated from its original aspiration of material fulfillment and spiritual well-being and it has reduced to a monetary quest in essence. Such twisted values erode people’s hearts and souls and turn individuals into freaks in their slavish devotion to money seeking. Taking the boy’s father as the protagonist, the writer focuses on the father’s psychological state before and after his business ventures. The desire for success has consumed the father’s mind, and he spares no effort to get rich, reckless with the measures he takes. The story satirizes American society in the early 20th century where people tend to pursue money by unscrupulous means. Anderson also conveys his sympathy for those farmers who have to give up rural life due to the wave of industrialization but find it hard to get accustomed to the modern and industrialized society. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the social and cultural crisis in American small-town life that emerged in the process of industrialization in the early twentieth century through one family’s tragic story, and shows how the American dream is corrupted into materialistic dreams. Further study about the social context of the story is needed in order to better illustrate the historic and cultural significance of the story.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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