

Kincaid's Cultural Values in *The Bridges of Madison County**

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Robert James Waller (1939-2014) does not catch readers' attention until his popular novel *The Bridges of Madison County* (1996) wins him great admirations since its publication in 1992 which brings him instant success. The story explores the dilemma between responsibility of family and fulfillment of desires. Set in America in the 1960s, the novel is woven by the romantic story of the two middle-aged man and woman after they countered and gathered together for four days. Though simple in plot, it really deserves detailed interpretation and appreciation. This paper will mainly discuss Kincaid's cultural values reflected not only in the romance between his lover and him, but also in his attitudes towards women's rights.

Keywords: cultural values, self-establishment, woman's rights, the other

Introduction

The Bridges of Madison County (1996) brings Robert James Waller a great achievement in literary creation. *Time* contributors have provided insights into his writing skills and comment that Waller knows the secret of romance novels and he writes the way people feel and think when they are first in love. In *Washington Post*, the reviewer praises Waller's writing highly by "Waller is an amazing storyteller".

The Bridges of Madison County is the story of Robert Kincaid, the photographer and free mind seeking for the covered bridges of Madison County, and Francesca Johnson, the farm wife waiting for fulfillment of a girlhood dream. The story shows readers what it is to love and be loved so intensely that life is never the same again and four-day love is as long as a life span. They encountered on a summer day in US in the 1960s. Then, they were together for four days in which it seemed all worldly responsibilities and duties faded away, and what they could sense was their sincere love. For many times, Robert asked Francesca to follow him to anywhere they wanted, however, driven by a sense of family responsibilities, Francesca turned down his proposal and chose to stay where she was. Four days later they separated, since then Francesca did not hear from him until he died. The plot of the story may be viewed as a cliché, nevertheless, some depictions to Kincaid draw out the deep thoughts of him. With detailed examples in the story, Kincaid shows his views towards cultural values, such as the way of his self-establishment, the way to seek for his identity, and his attitudes toward females.

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Acceptance of His Identity as a Cowboy

An individual's notion of cultural values can be reflected by what he behaves and says, as behaviors and words are voice of the mind. In *The Bridges of Madison County*, Robert Kincaid expresses his standpoints to various social phenomenon, in the meanwhile, he establishes his inner self as well. There is no denying that what he did made him stand firm on the ground taken by a counter-elite and a cowboy, and a potential supporter of feminist movements.

Robert Kincaid claimed that he was one of the last cowboys repeatedly because in this way he segregated himself from elites and most of the masses. As he pointed out that not all the people were the same. That is, though elites and the masses belong to different camps, not all the masses take the same side as counter-elites. Some populace still lives an agreeable life in a community characterized by mechanical elites. In this sense, Robert Kincaid was a warrior who insulated the tradition from being ruined.

I'm one of the last cowboys.... The course of modern times is the preponderance of male hormones in places where they can do long-term damage. Even if we're no talking about wars between nations or assaults on nature, there's still that aggressiveness that keeps us apart from each other and the problems we need to be working on. We have to somehow sublimate those male hormones, or at least get them under control. (Waller, 1996, p. 121)

Robert Kincaid interpreted the reason why he gives himself the appellation "a cowboy". The contradiction between traditional value and modern civilization could not be mediated as Kincaid said that dominating tribes never resembled possessing missiles. Undoubtedly, tribes and warriors represent tradition while missiles symbolize civilization. Men are always driven by the desire of conquest to achieve the goals of domination. However, it is the male hormones, according to Kincaid, which impels modern men, especially elites, to govern the world and the masses in the world. Such a spiritual domination can do long-term damage to man's ideology so that the masses lose the competence of thinking. Kincaid realizes the terrible damage to modern civilized men and he determines to be a cowboy who adheres to traditional cultural values, such as pioneer spirit and individual liberty, which attach to a person's character. The essence of being a counter-elite is his oath to be a cowboy.

Refusal of His Identity as a "Civilized Man"

Raymond Williams traced the association of civilization with the general spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development as well as its associated sense of modernity. Civilization comes to stand for a whole modern social process, including an increase in knowledge and physical comfort, the decline of superstition, the rise of forward-moving nations, the growth of freedom, but also "loss of independence, the creation of artificial wants, monotony, narrow mechanical understanding, inequality and hopeless poverty" (Williams, 1997, p. 35).

In a community dominated by civilization, those who enhance the development of the society are elites rather than the masses though the members of the populace can never be counted with an exact number. It seems that there is no certain connection between the power and the number. As a matter of fact, the power has become the weapon that is held in the hands of the minority—the elites. Undoubtedly, as a mainstream in a civilized society, elites occupy the most significant positions almost in the field like politics, culture, science, industry and so on. "There is no denying that elites boost the sustainability of civilization, however, they are also infected by the deficiency of civilization" (Williams, 1997, p. 68). As Williams points out, though civilization has

advantages, its disadvantages, such as, monotony, narrow mechanical understanding and inequality, are apparent as well. As the mainstream of civilized society, elites are terribly influenced by the epidemic so that they get involved in narrow-minded mechanical thinking and understanding. Not all the masses can identify such deficiencies of elites. Even in their minds, being an elite and a member in a high circle is a persistent goal in their lives. Nevertheless, Robert Kincaid is an exception. He takes the ground of a counter-elite firmly even if he is viewed as an obsolete.

Francisca did not detect the inner identity of Kincaid the moment she first took a serious look at him. "She could smell him, clean and soaped and warm. A good, fundamental smell of a civilized man who seemed, in some part of himself, aboriginal" (Waller, 1996, p. 118).

"In the eyes of Francesca, he might present an image of a mixture of civilization and originality" (WANG, 2000, p. 39). In fact, it shows that though Kincaid emitted the smell of a civilized man apparently, actually he kept his aboriginality from his youthhood till old age. He revolted against the organized world—the American society and civilized man—elites for he thought that a society would lose its energy if rules and laws were organized mechanically. In this aspect, civilization and civilized men have become the barriers for the development of a clear-minded man with strong inner self like Kincaid. To some extent, his refusal to be a "civilized man" shows his standpoint to be counter-elite explicitly.

His Attitudes Toward Female Reflected in the Story

In *The Bridges of Madison County*, Robert Kincaid expresses his comprehension to the issue of woman's right from the angle of a counter-elite which insulates him from taking the same ground as those elites with mechanical understanding.

Robert Kincaid got together with Francisca Johnson in mid-60s in America when women's liberation was prevailing. In order to dispose of the identity as new kind of women, the new feminists rejected the traditional man-imposed roles. In the 1960s America, there were "significant changes for women in regards to basic rights, domestic issues and their abilities to get equal job equal pay" (Barker, 2004, p. 38). Although women still only earned less than men made, they were still the caretakers in the families. It is a long way for women to alter the traditional attitudes of old American value.

In this story what Francisca experienced set us a typical example of an oppressed woman. Francisca was longing for a bathroom for herself, and she asked permission from her husband, Richard, for long when the children were growing up. Each time she demanded for something she was mercilessly rejected. That was one of the few demands on which she had stood firm. She stuck to her dream for she liked long hot baths in the evening, and she was not going to deal with teenagers tromping around in her private spaces. "Richard used the other bath, said he felt uncomfortable with all the feminine things in hers. 'Too fussy,' were his words" (Waller, 1996, p. 132).

Richard was the representative of those who ignored the rights of women. In such a marriage, Francisca could not find out the happiness that she was pursuing since her youthhood in Italy. Francisca's obsession in life was a reflection of women's terrible situation in 1960s. In the meanwhile, almost all the elites who were inflected by civilization held the same standpoint as Robert. In other words, women's rights were awfully neglected and their dignities were excessively overridden.

However, Kincaid was an exception in gender discrimination because his notion of cultural value was determined by his essence—the side of counter-elite. He showed his respect to Francisca and praised her from inner heart sincerely. When Francisca put on her new dress, he discovered her beauty and eulogized her with full heart. He said that she was big-time elegant. His admiration made her revel in it and bathe in it. Maybe it was the first time for Francisca to be noticed and praised by men. At that time, when men in Madison county could not understand what their women really wanted or despised women's needs to “have their own rooms”—a symbol of awakening awareness of women, Kincaid could understand the real intentions of Francisca very well. He respected her choice to stay with her family rather than imposing his own idea upon her. In town, what he thought and behaved was totally unfit to the atmosphere of patriarchal domination. Sincere respect to Francisca, total understanding to her and full support to her decision are combined to suggest that Robert had a high potential to be a real supporter of feminist movements in US in the 1960s.

Conclusion

Though the author does not center on the cultural values of Kincaid while Waller is knitting the legendary love story which swings the whole world, readers can still catch the clues reflecting Kincaid's cultural values in some episodes. The 1960's America was not the same as what it was in 1860s because a century passed by, however, nobody could deny the similarity between them: a desire for rights. The former was woman's rights and the later was man's rights. In Madison County in 1960s, an opportunity was available to show Kincaid's attitudes towards woman's rights, and to show that he was a supporter for feminist movement. For another, the author sets the story upon such a background deliberately. After World War I and II, America underwent the explosive growth of economy throughout most of 20th century. Rising incomes and the spread of affordable mass-produced goods have allowed a life of growing material abundance. Nevertheless, the material abundance led to some social and physiological problem. In other words, with this material abundance came an increasing tendency of spiritual bewilderment among elites, who characterized by artificial wants, monotony, and narrow mechanical understanding. It was the elites who made the industrialized American an “organized” society without energy. It was Robert Kincaid who threw off the disguise of elites and probed to the meaning of life. The nature of the last cowboy as the last warrior was to protect the traditional values from being dilapidated by the civilized men. The resolution of Kincaid to tick to the old values such as individual freedom and pioneer spirit gave the inspiration to the spiritual exploration of modern people.

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