

Power-discourse's Reading of "Jennie Gerhardt"

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Abstract

Michel Foucault, French well-known post-structuralism theorist, claims that power is more than supreme authority; instead, it is a relation that is intertwined with one another in a complicated net. At the center of his theory is the operating mechanism of power-discourse. Power and discourse is inseparable from one another. Power paves the way for the creation of knowledge which could also exert significant influence upon the implementation of power. The aim of this paper is to apply the theory of Foucault's power-discourse to analyze the power operating mechanism of "Jennie Gerhardt" written by Theodore Dreiser, exploring how the power-discourse mechanism that applies the modern punishment techniques of unequal gaze and gentle punishment can exert its influence on the fate of protagonists in the novel as well as how those who are oppressed by this kind of power relation endeavor to resort to the resistance power to acquire their discourse power.

Key words: *Jennie Gerhardt*; Power; Discourse; Unequal gaze; Punishment; Resistance power

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INTRODUCTION

Theodore Dreiser is one of the greatest American novelists in the 20th century. Comparing with other American novelists of the day, the greatest difference between him and others is that he is from the family of German immigrants. At that time, white Anglo-Saxon protestant culture occupied the mainstream position of American culture; so other European immigrant cultures are excluded from puritan mainstream culture. As the son of poor German immigrant, Theodore Dreiser feels about their family's marginalized predicament in the American society as a whole, thus he is full of enthusiasm about observing extensively social reality by walking throughout the metropolitan cities of the United States such as New York, Chicago, etc, which accumulates the abundant writing materials for his later literary creation. Theodore Dreiser is the representative writer of American modernist novels and is considered as one of the Big Three of American modernist novels with Earnest Hemingway and William Faulkner.

The well-known writing characteristics of Theodore Dreiser is that he frequently applies naturalistic writing style into his novel, which makes most of his novels permeate tragic and pessimistic atmosphere from the beginning to the end. Naturalism emerges as an important literary genre in the 1880s, the typical feature of which is to suggest the social condition, environment and heredity exert the decisive influence in shaping human's character and fate. No one can ever be capable of escaping from this deterministic arrangement due to the force of social environment. In the past, many literary critics mainly focused their attention on exploring the role of deterministic factors in shaping the protagonists' personal destinies and attempted to

have a profound reading of various deterministic factors emerging from Dreiser's novels such as the inevitability of death; nevertheless, seldom of them could realize the significance of the operating mechanism of power-discourse under the surface of Dreiser's works. According to Michel Foucault, so-called 'power' is not only practiced in the level of governmental authority or juristic procedures, but also is implemented pervasively in all walks of social life as an invisible discourse operating mechanism. He claims that power is a kind of relation which can organize a complicatedly intertwined net. Power and discourse are associated inseparably as an integral unity. More importantly, power and discourse are influenced reciprocally, that is to say, on the one hand, implementation of power leads to creation of knowledge, which subsequently produces specific power-discourse mechanism; on the other hand, accumulation of abundant knowledge can construct forceful power of discourse, which in turn strongly challenges the existence and supremacy of power.

The following parts will focus on how this power-discourse mechanism influences behaviors and actions of individuals and how these individuals resort to resistance power in order to seek for discourse power.

1. DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH IN "JENNIE GERHARDT"

In his well-known masterpiece, Michel Foucault puts forward an important terms called "disciplinary power". Unlike previous macro-power, disciplinary power is a kind of power which is practiced in every corner of social body as a whole. Due to productivity and fluidity of disciplinary power, every individual is able to act as the object or implementer of power. In other words, as an entity of the intertwined power relation of the sort, every individual can become the controlled object of power, and they can play the important role of implementing power as well. This kind of power no longer directly punishes or tortures the body of those who commit crimes, disobey orders or practise other indecent behaviors, and one of the reasons is that these physical punishments are proved to be ineffective and even have an exactly opposite effect to those criminals and audiences. In the 18th century, monarchy authority endeavored to apply this kind of corporeal destruction to show forth their sacred and inalienable power, however, criminals and other audiences seemed to be not willing to yield to this tyrannically despotic power; to the contrary, this cruel and inhuman punishment could in turn arouse the resentment to monarchy power among the public. In fact, strong opposition to this brutal corporal punishment had already put monarchy power holders in jeopardy.

Therefore, the transformation of this physical punishment to comparatively humanistic one has become

an inevitable historical trend. Under this circumstance, disciplinary society has gradually come into being in the course of historical development. For the convenience of dominance, European governing authorities did away with various savage punishments and in turn adopted more humanistic one to subdue those criminals. They invented a new punishing technology: prison. Prison is the inevitable product of implementation of disciplinary power. Until now, there constantly appears more effective means of correct training that are used to reinforce and stabilize disciplinary society as a whole, such as hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and the examination, etc.

1.1 The Practice of Panoptical Gaze

In modern society, panopticism is proved to be one of the most effective disciplinary means among the public. Foucault believes that various modern institutions, including schools, factories, armies, have adopted so-called "panoptical principle" to a certain extent. The panopticon is a kind of "compact model of the disciplinary mechanism" which was initially proposed by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham in 1785. This is a kind of panoptical rotary building: at the center, there is a tower with wide windows, at the periphery is panoptical building with each prisoner being secluded into respective cell without the possibility of contacting with other companion. The inspector in the central tower is capable of watching every detailed behavior of prisoners in order to control them physically and mentally. In addition, this panoptical mechanism makes it impossible for prisoners to discern whether the inspector is there to gaze them or not. "The panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen."^[2]⁽²⁰²⁾ Under this circumstance, this kind of panoptical gaze makes it possible to implement constant inspection and examination towards prisoners. Prisoners are forced to be confined into secluded cells respectively, which completely shatter their hope for taking their common plots into effect. Moreover, prisoners will never make sure that whether they are observed by the inspector at any moment or not, hence, this constant equal gaze causes prisoners' internalization of disciplinary teaching and training, which makes them become docile body and prisoners of themselves.

In "Jennie Gerhardt", this constant unequal gaze permeates in every corner of American society in the early 20th century. Initially, Jennie Gerhardt is a sixteen years-old innocent American girl who is employed by a kind-hearted American Senator named Brander as a washing girl. With the time passing by, Brander gradually falls in love with her. However, the rumor about the love story between them spread all over the neighborhood in which Jennie and her family members live. Afterwards,

several officious neighbors convey this gossip to Jennie's parents respectively. Generally speaking, the American society of Jennie's time was full of strong puritanical religious atmosphere everywhere, and every American religious believer expected to faithfully comply with established moral obligations that are inscribed into Christian Scriptures. If someone attempted to transgress the bounds of decency, they would be confronted with strong condemnation of public opinion, and this kind of constant gaze made every individual in the society identify themselves with established social morality and institution. In addition, Gerhardt, Jennie's father, is a German immigrant who persistently adheres to ancient German traditions and Lutheranism. As an immigrant who sets the foot on American soil, he has to endure various unjust treatments and meanwhile works very hard all day long to make a living for the whole family. One of his spiritual pillars is Christian-based Lutheran doctrine, which has been sustaining him to keep on living and fighting to realize his American Dream in this "New World."

After the rumor over her daughter's "immoral relationship" with Senator Brander conveys to Gerhardt's ear, he feels that her daughter not only violates the family's religious belief but also expose the whole family under the moral condemnation of the neighborhood and even the society at large. He totally understand from the bottom of his heart that the fact that people surrounding his family start to talk about something terrible regarding his daughter's "scandal" would inevitably ruin his family's hard-won reputation and fame. Under this circumstance, he is determined to cast his daughter out in a rage to ease the pernicious influence caused by the malicious neighbors spreading the gossip about his family. Only in this way, can he completely purify her daughter's original sin and retrieve his previous reputation among his neighbors once again. Mrs. Gerhardt, the wife of Gerhardt, also fully approve of her husband's stance towards this "scandal".

"It's so terrible that people should begin to talk!" Said her mother.

From Mrs. Gerhardt's comment about this gossip it can be seen that she is finally submissive to this kind of disciplinary observance on her family's private affairs. Just as Michel Foucault has mentioned in his works, "At the centre of which reigns the notion of 'docility', which joins the analyzable body to the manipulable body, a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."²⁽¹³⁶⁾ Gerhardt's neighbors don't punish physically the body of any Gerhardt's family member; nevertheless, the force of this moral condemnation is more intolerable to the Gerhardt than any other cruel physical punishment. It is because sustainable neighbor's gaze leads to internalization of Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt's moral obligations, thus they believe that any of their behaviors must strictly follow social norms and regulations without

any defiance.

Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt's complete submission to disciplinary institution fully proves that disciplinary society could effectively control and manipulate every individual living within this social environment. Constant observance or even a single gaze can disintegrate the psychological barrier of every individual in the society as a whole. "A perfect eye that nothing would escape and a center towards which all gazes would be turned."

On the other hand, Lester Kane, the companion of Jennie Gerhardt, is also the victim of disciplinary society. From the perspective of ordinary audiences, as a second son of the wealthy carriage company's boss, Lester Kane should have been married a noble lady of his station; out of everyone's expectation, he falls in love with the washing girl Jennie in humble station and has lived with her for several years. As a publicly known figure, Lester Kane has the least chance to withhold from public view but reluctantly accepts the observance of public gaze, in particular American publishing circles. As soon as the American journalists realize that it must be a sensation if they report about the romantic affair between wealthy "Romeo" Kane and the down-trodden woman Jennie. To achieve this goal, these reporters blinded by profits do it immediately without any hesitation.

"The American public likes gossip about well-known people, and the Kanes were wealthy and socially prominent. The report was that Lester, one of its principal heirs, had married a servant girl."

Finally, it indeed turns out to be an astonishing sensation among the public. One can well imagine that the gossip about Kane's love affair with the woman in humble station out of the boundary of matrimony puts enormous pressure on his inner heart that he starts to doubt about whether it is necessary for him to sustain this unacceptable relationship with Jennie even though he still loves her just like before. It seems that the power of public gaze could indeed exert enormous effects upon the behaviors and mentality of the big men like Lester Kane to some degree. It fully demonstrates that no one can ever escape from public attention or gaze in disciplinary society.

1.2 Disciplinary Punishment

Just as mentioned before, unlike physical punishment, the aim of disciplinary one is to essentially correct the abnormal or indecent behaviors of individuals. Therefore, disciplinary punishment seems to be corrective. If criminals committed crimes, they would not be punished physically just like before, to the contrary, they would be trained to become normality through various effective disciplinary technologies and means.

Just as Michel Foucault has said: "Punishment is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment. And it is this system that operates in the process of training and correction." That is to say, punishment could not achieve expected target to correct individual's

abnormal behavior by itself. To make punishment mechanism near to perfection, gratification system is also indispensable. For instance, if some workers are often late for work, the punishment is of no use to enhance their positivity. Instead, it can yet be regarded as a sensible choice for factory managers to stimulate these workers' desire to work hard through reward mechanism just as those diligent ones do.

In "Jennie Gerhardt", when Old Archibald hears of the "disgraceful" live-in relationship between his son Lester Kane and "obscure girl" Jennie Gerhardt, this unexpected incident plunges him into unspeakable astonishment. He never thinks that his son would ever love the girl in humble station regardless of his family's pride and prominent social position. However, as a shrewd merchant fighting in the business world for all his life, Old Archibald knows very well that severe financial punishment only has an exactly opposite effect on persuading his son Lester to change his mind to leave Jennie Gerhardt, thus he decides to use both hard and soft tactics, in other words, coupling threats with promises, to deal with this business. On the one hand, Old Archibald promises in his will that if Lester Kane would leave Jennie and marry a woman of equal social position, he would get all of a million and a half; on the other hand, if Lester married Jennie, he would get ten thousand a year; if Lester did not marry her and still lived with her, he was left completely penniless. This kind of gratification-punishment double system makes Lester Kane face the dilemma of obeying his father to obtain the share of large fortune or keeping on living with the woman he loves without any money at all. It turns out that sometimes application of reward mechanism is more effective than punishment. In the face of great temptation of money and social prestige provided by his father, Lester Kane thinks about the gains and losses of his present situation and is then determined to forsake his beloved Jennie Gerhardt so as to achieve his desire for the fortune and social position.

Actually, Old Archibald ingeniously applies gratification-punishment double system into his final estate settlement. In his mind, any excessive punishment would add to Lester Kane's growing emotional aversion towards his father's compulsory actions, as a result, Lester would be even more persistent in his determination to live with Jennie Gerhardt together without the desire to obtain any fortune. Under this circumstance, he increases considerably the proportion of gratification mechanism in double system as a whole so that his son is keenly aware of the enormous benefits brought by this reward for forsaking his lover.

2. RESISTANCE TO POWER-DISCOURSE

According to Michel Foucault, any power can produce knowledge, which later creates specific power-discourse mechanism; in the meanwhile, discourse and knowledge

can in turn weaken and even subvert power. That is to say, discourse and power are mutually interacted. He proposes that every power can be confronted with strong resistance which in turn becomes new power-discourse mechanism. "It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point."

In "Jennie Gerhardt", Jennie is strong-willed girl who has experienced the life full of hardships and is deprived of discourse power as an independent individual. She has been condemned and oppressed by established social conventions without any chance to have a say in the American society. However, she never passively yields to unjust social reality but persistently pursues her true love with Mr. Right in her life and feels obliged to assume the responsibility to exert her maternal affection on her beloved daughter and adopted children in the face of relentless strikes of the fate.

In the very beginning of the novel, Theodore Dreiser successfully portrays Jennie as an innocent but very considerate German immigrant girl. Pauperization of her family's environment, inexperience of her younger brothers and sisters, as well as all other unfavorable factors propel her to actively share responsibility for the excessive working burden mainly born by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt.

When Mr. Gerhardt does his utmost to uphold German Lutheran doctrines and resolves to prevent his daughter from having anything to do with Senator Brander, his patriarchal authority is strongly challenged by her daughter's unshakable and indomitable disposition to keep on going out for dating Brander. When Mr. Gerhardt bitterly accuses his daughter of going out after dark with Senator Brander regardless of his commandment, Jennie bravely responds: "He doesn't want to do anything except help me. He wants to marry me." This courageous defiance enables Jennie to lay the basis for her later self-discovery and tireless exploration of eternal true love. Although Jennie is finally casted out by her father without saying a word due to her unchangeable affection for Brander, her desire to choose her spouse freely strikes a heavy blow to patriarchal authority characterized by Mr. Gerhardt.

Afterwards, her live-in relationship with Lester Kane is another strong challenge to established social conventions. This kind of relationship was fundamentally unacceptable among the public at that time. Although they have to pretend to be married in various important social occasions, they still believe that live-in relationship is beneficial to each other the most. In Lester's eyes, formal marriage certificate is no more than a piece of paper to him and what they really need is their sincere affection and fidelity for each other.

CONCLUSION

The power in disciplinary society is productive and fluid.

This kind of power relation permeates in every corner of the society as a whole characterized by panopticism. Under the guidance of panoptical principle, unequal gaze serves as the most effective operating mechanism for implementing inspection, examination and training, etc, which even makes it difficult for individuals to discern its actual existence.

This panoptical gaze plays a significant role in shaping the characters of individuals and deciding their fate. Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt spare no efforts to lessen the negative effects of public gossip and to be cautious about whether or not they are being gazed by their neighbors all the time without realizing that internalization of their disciplinary individuality forces them to do so. The ultimate product of disciplinary society is identical docile body like Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt.

Another point that needs be emphasized here is that Foucault's power-discourse theory is fundamentally distinguished from traditional power viewpoints for its unique features of fluidity and productivity. It can produce knowledge that is integrated as a specific discourse, simultaneously, power of resistance will challenge the authority of power and form new power relation.

In "Jennie Gerhardt", no one is capable of permanently

controlling power for the benefits of themselves. Take Mr. Gerhardt for instance. Initially, he is the master of the family as a whole and always has the final say on various family affairs, but when his supreme authority is confronted with strong challenge from Jennie and other family members, especially when his grown-up sons and daughters decide to leave him to pursue their own causes, his supreme authority and power are ultimately shattered into pieces without the possibility of restoration. Instead, Jennie is determined to put aside her disagreement over outlook on marriage with her father and generously invites her father to come on over to live comfortably with her and Lester Kane, which demonstrates that Jennie finally takes possession of discourse power through effectively implementing resistance power.

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