

A Comparative Study of *Stonehearst Asylum* and *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*—Conflict Between Film and Text, Ethics and Aesthetics

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The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether, written by American Romantic novelist Edgar Allan Poe, is regarded as a classic of absurd humorous short story. On this basis, director Brad Anderson adapted it into the movie *Stonehearst Asylum*. There are some differences between the text and film in space-time, characters, plots, themes, and ultimate artistic principles, reflecting the choices between ethics and aesthetics.

Keywords: Stonehearst Asylum, The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether, ethics, aesthetics

The movie *Stonehearst Asylum* is adapted from Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*. As we all know, as a novelist of the early American Romanticism (19th century), his works are unique and famous for their dark atmosphere, horrible plots, and strange characters. "Poe modifies theme and mode from an almost exclusively aesthetic concern for a particular effect" (Elliot, 1988, p. 269). "A tale should reveal some logical truth with the fullest satisfaction" (Chang, 2003, p. 110). At that time, the Americans' thoughts were dominated by rationality and logic during the colonial Puritanism and the Enlightenment, and then appeared the imagination and expression of emotion characterized by sensitivity and spontaneity in the Romantic period. During this period, the Industrial Revolution brought economic prosperity and abundant material life to American people, which prompted people to find more ways of entertainment. It coupled with national independence; the Americans hoped to get rid of any form of European colonial bondage, including ideology and literature, and people eagerly needed literary works with their own national style. Since then, American writers no longer blindly imitated British and European traditions, and works with national characteristics have emerged, and short stories was brought forth under this social background. The Westward Movement and call for return to nature also provided writers with broad space of imagination. Under this circumstance, Allan Poe insisted on aestheticism, that is, the view of art's for art's sake. Literary works are the independent objective existence. He believes that the basic feature of literature is to enable readers to acquire some experience which they seldom or even cannot experience in daily life through reading, that is, to emphasize the aesthetic quality of literature. However, if the film is consistent with Allan Poe's thoughts, it

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only shows some experiences of killing, crime, and death; without any ethical or moral preaching, and it will lose some ornamental value. This viewpoint coincides with literary ethical criticism, which holds that all literature originates from ethics and that literature is a tool to enlighten or make people human. Movies are no exception. Is it aesthetics or ethical? Through the following comparative analysis of *Stonehearst Asylum* and *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*, we can get the following enlightenment.

Comparison Between *Stonehearst Asylum* and *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*

Changed Time, Switched Space

In terms of timing, *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* takes place in the autumn of the 19th century, a very common day in the long history. The story time in *Stonehearst Asylum* is chosen at the turn of the century, with the meaning of saying goodbye to the old and welcoming the new, from negative pessimism to positive optimism. Bakhtin said that the spiritual death and renewal spirit of alternation and change are the core of Carnival feeling. In his Carnival Theory, the most prominent feature of carnival is the disintegration of social hierarchical order. The superior will suffer from the crude blood and mockery of the crowd. Slaves and clowns are symbolically crowned king. In his words, the world has turned over. This is exactly what happened in the transformation, as well as the burning bonfire at the end of story symbolizes destruction of the former world and coming of new home. In terms of space arrangement and transformation, the scene of the school psychiatric professor at the beginning of *Stonehearst Asylum* and the scene of the dancing of the hero and heroine in front of the palace at the end of *Stonehearst Asylum* are added to make the plot frame with a certain sense of foreshadowing and finality, and the content of story is more reasonable and complete. In *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether*, the narrator only introduces a few scenes of private hospitals. The protagonist accidentally enters into it. However, in *Stonehearst Asylum*, the protagonist carefully planned his visit, hoping to reunite with his loved lady.

Portrayed Character, Full Plot

Compared with the text, the movie adds more plots and characters. In narratology, stories are not equal to plots. Stories are the raw materials of plots. They generally follow the law of linear development in time sequence, while plots are screened, organized, and processed by the author. Discourse time can follow linear order which is like a diminishing road or circular order which is a combination of analepsis and prolepsis, like the evergreen meadow. In the text, the plot unfolds step by step in the order of the protagonist's visit. The narrator uses a lot of words to depict the grotesque behavior and ideas of the patients in the madhouse. Most patients have hallucinations. They imagine themselves as teapots, donkeys, frogs with bulging mouths, champions with open bottles, pumpkin with pies, a pinch of snuff with their index fingers and thumbs, and a pinch of snuff. Ten mental patients, including possessors of two heads, tea Porter turn with one foot, chicken cock with wings, and Venus dressed women, were included (Ma, 2001, pp. 197-207). The fake dean himself introduced the experience of overthrowing the real dean. This depiction of the absurd behavior of psychiatric hospitals and the risk of comfort therapy are closely linked with the aesthetic ideas held by Allan Poe. He believed that literature should not be mixed with any moral preaching or knowledge or information transmission, but should focus on expressing the experience in literary works. We should treat a text as a work of art. On the contrary, *Stonehearst Asylum* has made the following changes:

First, the hero (Newgate) was treated as a patient in Harvard class. He was fascinated by lady patient in the classroom. He stole the professor's certificate and glasses, as well as the picture of the lady. And later he

pretended to be the doctor and visited Stonehearst Asylum. He entered the hall and heard the lady playing the piano. While the text just introduces a beautiful lady who is the niece of the fake dean. In the film, the woman becomes a married woman who suffers from intimate phobia, or hysteria, as a result of long-term sexual abuse by her husband. Her father sent her to a lunatic asylum to protect her from her husband's abuse. Her husband has been looking for opportunities to conspire with the professor, intending to release her on bail and continue to abuse her as a materialized thing. These are plots that are not in the text. Later, the fake dean asked the protagonist to treat some patients with serious illnesses in the madhouse, such as a patient imagining himself as a bull named Arthur. He used his own understanding and eyes to treat the patient's insane and traumatic state. He secretly planned some escapes with lady, and accidentally discovered the secret of the lunatic asylum, where the roles of patients and medical staff were changed. Medical staff were put in dungeons. He helped them with supplies such as medicines and food. Some of them ran away and were chased and killed by one of the patients who is a abuser. Mentally handicapped girls were strangled to death by him. It also introduces the past experience of Lamb, who was unable to endure the cruelty of war. He ended the lives of the wounded, but when he was ready to shoot himself, there was no bullet to kill himself and then he went mad. From Lad's mouth, we know that the former medical staff, especially the real dean, used abuse methods, and carried out various criminal laws on Lamb, such as water boarding, rotating chairs, and so on. Sexual abuse is such as stripping the clothes of women and checking their privacy. Newgate also shows the heroine some of the pain he has suffered, such as the death of his parents, the loss of his relatives and being forced to go to an orphanage, the scar of humiliation on his body, etc. He can feel the heroine's pain. At the turn of the last century, a bonfire broke out; Lamb and the sadist were completely defeated; people restored calm; the heroine and the heroine fled together to harvest love and happiness. The film ends in front of a beautiful mansion. People dance and the sun rises. Everything is so beautiful. The plot eventually reverses. The heroine's husband brings the real professor Newgate, hoping to release the woman on bail, but only finds that she has been taken away by a patient in the professor's class. The patient disguised himself and rescued the heroine in his capacity. In terms of plot, the text only introduces the absurd and crazy behavior and voice of patients, which belongs to humorous and grotesque short story. The movie shows rich relationships between characters and abundant interesting plots.

Deepened Theme and Expanding Imagination

Stonehearst Asylum emphasizes the ethics of the film, while *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* emphasizes the aestheticism of the text. The film presents the following themes which the text does not have. Firstly love. The protagonist treats the lady out of an active and spontaneous feeling, not like lady's husband, who materialized women. He can understand the lady's pain. Their illness and mental disability are overcome by the light of love. The lady no longer has hysteria symptoms, and the hero is no longer dull, and love inspires his pursuit. Secondly, trauma. (1) The wounds of war, such as Lamb, the false dean, suffered from the wounds of war. He was unable to get rid of the manipulation of fate. He could not cure the wounded one by one. On the edge of mental collapse, he raised a gun to kill all the wounded. At last, he wanted to give himself a bullet on his head, but he collapsed without bullets. He wanted to control everything and decided the life and death of others. In fact, these are manifestations of his powerlessness. His name is the same as Jesus Christ, the son of God, like a lamb suffers silently. Under the torture of the real president, he seems invincible and has gone through various criminal laws, such as water boarding, rotating chairs, and so on. But the fragile part of his

heart is that he remembers the wounded and collapses into his own world. (2) Scientific research and rational trauma. In the University classroom, lady and Newgate are as well as regarded as objects of study. Professor's apathy stimulates lady's onset, and he teaches students the causes, process, and consequences of hysteria. The students were trying to record and think, and only one voice asked him that she seemed to be healthy, but the professor said that she is like criminals who never say they are guilty, without any pity or warmth. (3) Trauma of power, medical staff oppressed psychiatric patients in insane asylum. Use water boarding and spinning, and strip the sick women naked, then check their privacy. Thirdly, authority and resistance. Power authority is reflected in the film that oppression can lead to resistance and overthrow authority. On the contrary, comfort therapy can bring better mental and physical condition to the mentally ill. Some dull girls become smart and able to do things. Old ladies begin to eat. Some paranoid patients can communicate normally. While in the text, comfort therapy was invented by a real doctor, but it brought some problems to the hospital, brewing some evil plans to overthrow the real medical staff. Obviously, the author is satirizing the treatment. Fourthly, carnival. The bonfire welcomed the new century. There is no new life in the text. Others are just a variety of food at the table, disorderly display, dazzling candlelight, and the noisy voice of the band, people's boring conversation, all kinds of delusional behavior, and the demonic dance of mental patients. It's absurd but meaningless. Lastly, the explanation of madness. In *Stonehearst Asylum*, the real madman is not mad. He suffers all kinds of pain and suffering in his heart. Psychiatric patients are actually more delicate. They can experience the pain of others. However, rational people, the so-called healthy people, torture, study, abuse, and hurt each other. But in the text, a madman is always just a madman who makes trouble without restraint.

Conclusion

Stonehearst Asylum has changed its story time, location, delicate characterization, complex and changeable relationship between characters, increased plot, richer thematic significance, clues and inversion, which enrich the content of the text. *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* only shows some effects of absurd humor. It can be seen that the film is better in terms of content, form, character relationship, and so on. In the eyes of "normal people", mental patients are abnormal. In order to help them recover to normal, extreme means to increase their pain are used. But in the eyes of mental patients, these talents who try to change them are abnormal, so they have to fight, fight against oppression, and let the other party taste the pain they have experienced. Originally, these experts are the real mental patients. Perhaps it is not a group that is abnormal, but a narrow and habitual vision that is not inclusive of each other and that is benchmarked by it. There is no so-called terminal mental illness. Love and care are the best remedies for mental illness.

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