

An Interpretation of *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* from the Perspective of Benjamin's Messianism

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Abstract: It is believed that Walter Benjamin's theory is the combination with theology and Marxism. His Messianic thought especially expressed the idea of redemption which was the critique of the industrial progress. He was trying to criticize the consumer economy which was full of powers and desires. At the same time, he believed that Messiah is from the secular world and was trying to revert it to the original world. *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* was a representative work of expressing redemption. It not only redeemed himself but also helped other people get redemption. This paper interprets the book of *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* from the perspective of Benjamin's Messianism. The first part is the introduction of the book and Benjamin's Messianic thought. The second part is the interpretations of the three protagonists: Andy, Red and Tommy. This part illustrates the reflections of Messianic redemption thought in these three persons and the Shawshank Prison. All of them wanted to revert back the original life and freedom. The third part is about how to accelerate the coming of Messiah: the pursuit of secular happiness and the death of tragic hero. The fourth part is the coming of Messiah and getting redemption.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Messianism, Redemption, Hope, Means, Tragedy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to interpret American writer Stephen King's novel *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* from the perspective of Benjamin's Messianism. *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* was collected in Stephen King's novel Collection "Different Seasons [1]". The subtitle of this book was "Hope Spring Eternal". This is a special work which is different from Stephen King's previous work in style and theme. It attracted readers through the interpretations of human nature rather than horrifying theme. The theme of this book is redemption which can be analyzed with Benjamin's Messianism.

Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption

This story is about a banker named Andy Dufrense who was accused of murdering his wife and her lover in 1947. In prison, he made friends with Red who was a felon for 21 years and had the ability of delivering things to outside world. Initially, Andy encountered contempt, threats and perverts, but he soon won the appreciation from the warden Samuel Norton. Andy was an intelligent man. He was appointed to be an economic consultant because of his knowledge of

banking. The warden corrupted a lot and murdered Tommy who could prove Andy was innocent. Finally, Andy succeeded to escape from Shawshank prison with the help of hammer and a poster of Rita. He dug through the wall for 19 years and climbed out of a sewer. Eventually, he got freedom and the warden was punished. In this book, Andy not only got redemption by his hope but also spread redeemed thoughts to other inmates.

Benjamin's Messianism

Walter Benjamin [2] was a German thinker who was one of the representatives of the Frankfurt school. Walter Benjamin's thought is known as the "Janus-faced" which is a unique combination of Kabbalah in Judaism and Marxism [3]. Messianism was influenced by Judaism and practiced in Marxism. Messianism is not a meditation but a radical literary criticism which used redeemed thought to criticize the modern catastrophe and emphasized the urgency of redemption.

DEFINITION

Benjamin regarded himself as a mediator of secular world and holy redemption. That is, "The task

of the translator" [4]. But "translation" is not the horizontal transformation of language, but the vertical communication between heaven, earth and man. That is to say, human continually learn the God's revelations from the Language as Such. From the secular world, human see the manifestation of the ultimate meaning and the form and order of the ideal future. That future is what he called "The Messianic Redemption". The ultimate goal of mankind is to enter the Messianic Redemption.

In this paper, Messianism is a spiraling process. It starts with the secular world which is disordered, miserable and catastrophic. It adopts measures to make the history move forward to a new secular world which is original, harmonious and holy. Although there are many failures in this process, Messianism continues to revert.

The Messiah was the savior recorded in the Old Testament that the Israelites think Messiah can bring them away catastrophe. As a core of Judaism, Messiah was the "Promise" Contract of Jews and the God. The Jewish nation believed that they would return to their homeland under the help of the Messiah and would end their sufferings. Messiah provided spiritual supports for people who were living in misery. Judaism regards the sufferings as the only way to wait for the coming of the Messiah, and believes that the Messiah will come one day. Therefore, misery and catastrophe were the power sources of the coming of Messiah. From the ideas of Judaism, it can be seen that the beginning of salvation was secular world which was full of sufferings and lacked of spiritual supports.

It is a fault that regarding Messianism as a simply redemption. In Benjamin's Messianic thoughts, the core is reversion. Judicial Messianism only gave Jews the belief that the savior will come and calmed down their fearful emotions of miserable life. However, it didn't give a method to keep away from the sufferings. However, Benjamin's Messianism is a proactive redemption. It not only provided the belief but also a method--reversion to avoid sufferings. Every reversion stands on a higher position to move to the new epoch.

Profane Illumination

In Benjamin's views, profane illumination was the pursuit of materialism. He thought the revelation should be learned from historical ruins. He thought a critic should be responsible for destroying and saving. The dialectical negation was destroying the materials and saving the truth.

Klee's painting named "Angelus Novus" shows that an angel is looking as if he is about to move away from something. He is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open and his wings are

spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress [4]. In his interpretations of this painting, it is obvious that the angel was redemption or Messiah. The past was catastrophe and the storm was the progressive power. The storm forced angel to fly to the future which is full of materialism and lacking of belief. The modern society was full of commodity, objectivity and disorder due to the industrial tools and technological politics. In his views, that kind of future was a regression of history. He gained inspirations that people should revert to the original state of harmony to oppose to the institutionalized and disordered society. Therefore, he stressed Messianic redemption to make people got the spiritual redemption.

He adopted reversion to save the debris of the modern society. He thought the future was buried and destroyed by the debris of modern society. The task of Messiah was digging out and recovering the tradition which was forgotten by people, which is also the basic goal of Benjamin's Messianism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many reviews on the film version, "*The Shawshank Redemption*" from the theme, characteristics and narration. Few scholars focused on the novel, "*Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*". Chinese post-graduate student [5] from Shandong University, analyzed this book with archetypical criticism and semiotics. In his thesis, he discussed the major characters, theme and structure in detail. In 2011, Zhao Huiting from Henan University analyzed this book with the theory of existentialism. She illustrated the theme of anxious living state, disorder society and the constant choices they need to make. All of these reflected existentialism. In 2017, Lu Minghui from Henan University analyzed this book with stylistics. He made use of the characters of stylistics to claim the theme of redemption.

In foreign countries, there are some comments on this book. Rita Kempley from Washington Post claimed that "Rita is not a typical story from the horror King. Instead, it's a devoutly old-fashioned, spiritually uplifting prison drama about two lifers who must break their emotional shackles before they can finally become free men".

Therefore, there are few researches about Rita. This thesis will provide a new prospect or a new field to analyze this book. Although the theme is also about redemption, but this paper uses the theory of Benjamin's Messianism.

The Interpretation of the Book with Benjamin's Messianism

Written during the post-World War II economic boom of the 1940s, Stephen King's *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* can be seen as the economic recovery at a point in this nation's history when the World War II ended. America got a lot of wealth from the war. American economy developed fast. At the same time, because of the World War II, people began to seek for freedom and personalities. They objected to the machine economy and monopoly capitalism. Political corruption began to appear and people fell into the spiritual emptiness.

Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption does not celebrate the intelligence of Andy it portrays but, as a Marxist interpretation of the novel makes especially clear, reveals its dark underbelly instead. Through observing the characters of Andy and his life in Shawshank Prison, Stephen's novel stands as a scathing critique of American capitalist culture and the ideology. In addition, the capitalist undermine people's hope and make people lack of humanity.

Andy's Redemption

Nowhere in *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* is redemption so clearly embodied as in the character of Andy Dufrense. The man who escaped from Shawshank Prison, Andy completed his life through redemption: for him, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things and no good thing ever dies [1]. He was innocent but he was accused of murdering his wife and her lover. He was disappointed to American law and the lack of humanity. In the capitalist society, everyone wanted to seek excitement. His wife is an example. Andy was a banker, having a high income. His wife may feel satisfied in our minds. However, because of the spiritual emptiness, his wife chose lover to seek for excitement. Andy's work was institutionalized which made his wife lose interests. It can't be known how difficult his wife's life was. However, when she had affairs, she got redemption. She reverted to her natural characteristics. When Andy carried the gun to attempt to kill his wife and her lover, he suddenly gave up. He also got redemption because of the natural law or the harmonious relationship between people.

Of course, Andy's acts of redemption are not limited to his relationships with his wife. When he went into Shawshank Prison, he kept silent. It was his silence that helped him avoid beating by the prison guards. A fat man shouted to go home and he was beaten severely.

In Shawshank Prison, beating was a common thing. Another conflict was between him and what was called "sisters" who always threatened and beat him. He noticed the violence in prison and there was no humanity. Thus, he understood if you wanted to survive in the disordered prison, you must attain the body redemption. He helped the Byron Haley to get a sum of heritage depending on his intelligence of money management. After that, a lot of prison guards sought help from Andy for tax evading. His talent of money management was known by the warden, Norton, he asked Andy for service for him. Andy helped him to do money laundering and corruption. After those acts, he got his body redemption. He gained the experience from those violence and cold-blood men so that he had to believe hope and decided to escape from the prison.

One of the turning points was that Tommy Williams told him that he knew who killed his wife and her lover. However, when he told it to the warden, he was thought to be crazy and locked in a dark room for 20 days. This event made him realize it is necessary for him to escape prison and regain freedom.

Having known that some people were suicide after they got liberty, Andy felt that institutionalized soul was harm. Under the influences of institutionalization, people decreased his resisted spirits. They lacked hope and the pursuit of freedom. From then on, Andy began to get soul redemption. He said, if hope is in your heart, hope will be coming. That's to say, if you believe Messiah, it will be coming. His hammer, poster and Bible can be seen as evidences for the beginning to redeem himself from body to soul.

In Andy's eyes, everyone in prison could be redeemed as long as they believe Messiah will be coming. He invited criminals to drink beers. In that few minutes, all of criminals felt free. He also broadcasted the music for criminals despite of the authority of the warden. He also enlarged library to educate criminals and gave them hope. Tommy Williams was also influenced by his education. What he did was to find an equality and freedom. While Andy was getting redemption, he helped his friends also got redemption.

In Shawshank Prison, enough courage is needed. Andy has no fear of facing the test of life and death. Facing the vicious prison guard, Haley and facing prison guards' tools – Boggs' insult, he took a lot of courage. Despite of the warden and stern warnings, Andy resisted and made use of his talents to exchange beers. All the prisoners were shocked at the moment when Andy talked to Haley and was thrown to the ground nearly. However, Andy wanted to give prisoners a moment of release. Under the most rigorous regime, such a release would be more detrimental to most prisoners, just as they got freedom and enjoyed their lives. Because of this, he won the human dignity and

respects from others. Depending on his courage and hope, he won the respects not the insults. He sought for the natural relationships of human under the strong authority.

Perseverance is also an important quality for redemption. Sticking to six years as a day, he wrote letter to the state government to fight for the rights to study for prisoners and got books and funds. Walking during the day, he quietly transported the stones to the playground. He used a small stone hammer hidden in the Bible book at night. In that way, he dug a tunnel to freedom within nearly 20 years. When he went to prison without any crimes, he believed the Messiah will be coming. He began to prepare for that day for nearly 20 years. Finally, in a storming night, Messiah appeared and helped him escaped from prison successfully.

After escaping from jail, Andy changed his identity, Peter Stevens, and got his investment funds about seven or eight million dollars. He went to a town in Mexico and led a comfortable and free life. It is his wisdom that Andy can accomplish redemption and Norton and Haley were punished. If Andy didn't appear, suicide was the future of Red and most other prisoners. Red lived well at Shawshank and there was nothing he can't get in prison. Although Red was aware of the essence of the Shawshank Prison clearly, he had no desire to flee from the prison and rebel the system. Certainly, he would not influence others with his own actions. He could only conform to the Shawshank Prison's institutionalized rules to protect himself. Fortunately, Andy's presence changed his mind and eventually led him out of the chains of the institutionalized systems. Similarly, under the influence of Andy, the Shawshank Prison has changed. 20 years ago, the Shawshank prisoners lacked humanity while 20 years later, they realized they are men and they had personalities. For two decades, Andy was not only redeemed his guilty mind about his wife, but also made efforts to help saving other prisoners' souls. Even though being prisoners, they also should have personalities and hopes. This is the reversion of the humanity. Whether the violent warden or the cold-blood prisoners or the contemptible lawyer, it criticized that the coldness of the world because of the industrialized society.

Red's Redemption

In the book, the typical person who was redeemed was Red, who was in the prison for nearly 40 years. He was influenced by Andy's hopes deeply. Before meeting Andy, Red thought he would stay in prison forever. He once bet on Andy wouldn't put up with the prison life, surprisingly, he lose two packs of cigarettes. He was surprised for the intelligence and perseverance of Andy. He made friends with Andy and brought what Andy needs. After Andy escaped from prison, even though he knew where Andy will go, he

didn't tell anything. After he got out of prison, he was afraid what he wrote would betray Andy. He took risks to take the papers out. He expressed his kinds and cares to Andy. Red began to revert to his own natural characteristics. This was also the basic relationships of being friends.

Red applied for many times of releasing him but failed. Although Andy told him keep hope in your heart, he also said, hope was a dangerous thing, hope can drive people insane. From his words, it can be seen a hopeless and ossified man. Institutionalized life made Red feel satisfied. He didn't need to consider the job, food, housing and money, because jail can provide him the basic life. When he drank beers and listened music, he found he was eager to get freedom. After Andy fled from prison, he had opportunity to state his reasons for being a good man after releasing. He said, there was not a day goes by he didn't feel regret. He regretted not because he was in prison, but because he was old that he couldn't talk to his young and stupid boy that he did the criminal thing. He realized the corruption of the judicial department thus he thought "rehabilitated" just was a made-up word. He was desperate to the corrupted judicial department, so he wasn't care of the final result. Fortunately, because of his sincere words, he was approved to leave jail.

When he leaved Shawshank Prison, he led the same life as other released men, a man who was institutionalized. He worked every day. He asked for going piss every time. He even can't squeeze a drop without say-so. Prison life made him feel harsh to face reality. He was not accustomed to the outside. The society has changed a lot within 40 years. He felt tired and couldn't find life meanings. He also thought to break his parole so that he can be sent back. In prison, he wouldn't lead a fearful life. What a terrible idea he had, but it made sense. The fear, terrible and hopeless life was brought by the fast developing society. Because of the World War II and industrial economy, people communicated less, and became coldly. Red didn't feel the kindness from other people. Thus, he can't be easy to integrate the society.

Fortunately, Red remembered his promise to Andy. What Andy left to him was a letter and some money as a fee to their promised place---a town of Mexico. In the letter, Andy told Red to have hope and go further. Red took the road to meet Andy. He regained hope and reverted to his passions of working hard, or freedom of his youth.

Added something that Red was also a social person, he could do well in prison, whether with prisoners or prison guards. He also had ability to get something in that severe situation. In fact, he was a capable person. That was a reason for Red could redeem himself under the help of Andy. That was also a

reason that Andy invited him to work with him. Andy treated him as a man and discovered his capabilities and his highlights. This is the original relationship between people. Man was not an object. They had emotions and feelings. That was a contrast with the value of capitalist society.

In the book, Red was redeemed because of his hope and his eager to freedom. Through 40 years' prison's life, he managed to find his own personalities in the reality. In that tough and corrupted society, he only wanted to revert to his peaceful life, be harmonious to nature.

Tommy's Redemption

In the book, there was a young prisoner who changed Andy's life and Andy helped him get knowledge and consciences. Tommy listened to Andy's words that he was not a very good thief and he should try something else. He suddenly felt that he should do something meaningful things to rejoin society better two years later. Tommy had a young wife and a new baby girl. When he thought his wife and daughter maybe in the cold street and his daughter may not know who his father was, he began to work hard. He asked Andy to help him prepare for high school equivalency. Andy told him that a hundred percent, nothing half-assed. He learned fast. From his act, a progressive boy in the Shawshank Prison was appeared. He was on the road of his self-redemption.

Another example that Tommy was a brave and good man was that he was willing to be a witness for Andy's innocence. He was willing to tell the story about the death of Andy's wife and her lover. He was a righteous man but he was transferred to another prison by Haley and Norton. He was threatened with his family by Norton. It was a shame of the society. In that kind of society, money and power were the authority. Norton needed Andy to serve for him. He treated people as objects. He would clear up all of barriers which stopped him to gain interests. This is reality.

Although he was disappeared, he gained self-redemption through his learning and integrity. He realized his responsibility for his family and his friends. He constantly reverted to his original life. Unfortunately, when he was reverting to origin, he was spoiled by the cruel society.

The Means of the coming of Messiah

Benjamin was also mentioned how to promote the coming of Messiah. There are two means for accelerating the coming of Messiah. First of all, the coming of Messiah was based on the ruins. In the process of seeking for the secular happiness, people will find many disadvantages in secular world. They will try their best to change. Thus, the Messiah will be coming

soon. Another mean is the death of the tragic hero, which reminds people to avoid and change the change.

The pursuit of secular happiness

Benjamin thought that going to the heaven after death is not the goal of history which should be the secular happiness of human. In fact, the direction of happiness is opposite to that of salvation. Benjamin attempted to find the power of redemption in the secular world. Just as a force reinforces another force in the opposite direction, the secular order helps the coming of the Kingdom of Messiah because of its secularity. Although the secular order is not a sector in Messianic Kingdom, it is a decisive factor for promoting Messiah coming [6].

The secular order is regarded as a practice. The content of practice is the pursuit of consumption and property. That was called negative happiness which can promote the arrival of the Messiah. This kind of negative happiness is materialism and self-alienation.

Benjamin managed to show the true state of the world and pointed out the opposition between the real world and the Messianic Kingdom. Activities of secular world may manifest ordinary and secular, but at the same time they are the basis on the Messianism.

In the book of *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, the Messianic redemption was built on the society which was spiritual emptiness, judicial corruption and humanity lost. Hope was appeared in Andy, Red and Tommy because of the violence of warden and prisoners' suicides. However, it was the disorder and misfortune that promoted the coming of Messiah. They constantly reverted to the original humanity, original relationship and original passion. That was the Messianic power.

The death of hero in the tragedy

Benjamin thought that negative happiness is not a single thing. It is a series of events to form a tragedy. Although hero died, his personalities and heroisms will be eternal. Thus, hero doesn't really die with the time changing. His death will remind people to realize the danger and avoid it [7]. Thus, only hero's death can overcome the tragic fate, which was called redemption. It was completed by the tragic hero. He fulfilled his purpose in redemption depending on his strong courage and perseverance.

Therefore, the death of tragic hero can promote the coming of Messiah. He used his death to evoke people's conscious of holy happiness and promote the reversion of origin.

In the book, this paper thinks Brooks was a tragic hero. Although he didn't escape his decisive fate but he reminded other prisoners that institutionalization

was harmful to people's souls. Because of that, Andy and Red decided to strip out of the institutionalized life. Although Brooks' death was a tragic result, he promoted the coming of Messiah.

Tommy was also a tragic hero. Although Tommy was disappeared because of his honesty, he promoted Andy recognized the reality of the Shawshank Prison and decided to flee from prison. Thus, Tommy's disappearance was worthy and promoted the coming of Messiah.

Added one person in the beginning of Andy went to Shawshank Prison, a fat prisoner shouted to be eager to go home. But he was beat seriously. His consequence taught to other prisoners to be obedient. Andy kept silent and observed for surviving in the prison. It gave body-redemption in a degree.

The Coming of Messiah

As mentioned above, Benjamin's Messianism was a spiraling and constantly reverted process. The phenomenon is decomposed into various components to criticize, so that people can clearly see the concept behind phenomenon. They are also redeemed while being decomposed [8].

In the book of *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, people mourned what Andy experienced in the prison and institutionalized Red. People also saw the corrupted judicial of the society and the lack of humanity. This paper also criticized the dark prison, the violent Haley and the commoditization. The reason for mourning and criticizing was reconstruct a friendly, respect and fair relationship between people.

Allegory is a kind of language. It is not a tool to describe the phenomenon, but the contents of the phenomenon to explore truth. The allegory is extremely intermittent, full of divisions and heterogeneities. It has many interpretations rather than a single expression of symbols. Allegory is to redeem the conscious of the unity of the world. That conscious was the purpose of the Messianism.

Allegory emphasizes the more interpretations of an object. Metaphor is a typical feature of allegory. Interpreting sporadic images and integrating them, it can be found a surprising meaning behind the small images. For example, in the book, the image of Bible means the redemption methods. But Norton and Andy had different interpretations of Bible. Norton's office hanged a picture wrote: "Christ is my savior". He set himself as the same position of God. He said he was the light of the world. He also threaded prisoners that he was their lord. However, he was a sanctimonious evil person. In fact, what he hid was his lack of belief and disguise humanity. He treated bible as a spiritual bound rather than spiritual liberation. However, Andy hid his

hammer in the Exodus of Bible, which means his determination of escaping from prison. Andy really believed redemption is in the bible.

Another metaphor was baptism. In Shawshank Prison, every new prisoner should experience a bath with the low quality disinfection powder. It was similar to the baptism in the religion. Baptism in religion means belief and redemption. However, in Shawshank Prison, such baptism meant prisoners were controlled by warden in both body and soul.

Actually, Andy was a metaphor of Savior but warden was a metaphor of Santa. In New Testament, Jesus resurrected and fought with Santa. Jesus won Santa and help human gained freedom and redemption. Similarly, Andy fought with warden, revealed his crime and saved other prisoners.

In those metaphors, it can be found the theological thoughts were hidden in this book. Messiah has already come.

CONCLUSION

In fact, redemption is a religious concept but Benjamin treated it as a literature criticism which was called Messianism. Messianism was a dynamic process that constantly reverts to the original world. Messianism stressed the beginning point is secular world which was full of capitalization. He thought industrialization was a history regression. It broke up with the relationship of human and nature, the relationship between humans. Thus, Messianism criticizes the ruins of the technology and disordered life.

Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption is a book about redemption. The background of this book was a time of capitalization booming. Added the World War II, people lacked of belief and humanity. The main characters in the book had different results. Andy was the incarnation of the Savior. He was intelligent, brave, friendly and hopeful. Undoubtedly, he got self-redemption because he believed the evil should be punished and hope can redeem himself. Red was the best example that Andy helped him got redemption. He was lucky. The evil warden was died finally due to his criminal things. Therefore, Messianic coming was through the death of tragic hero to evoke others' consciousness. Prisoners and Tommy's events was a promotion of the coming of Messiah.

Through the decomposition of the phenomenon, it can interpret many meanings and reconstruct them into a unity which can reveal the truth and revert to the original world. Actually, many allegories have predicted the coming of Messiah.

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