Paradox in H.G. Wells’
The Country Of The Blind
(Cross-Cultural Prespectives)¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify and look into the paradoxes found in the story to find out their aims. To investigate the paradoxes, the close reading applied by the new criticism is used. Things are viewed from two points of view: one is from the perspective of the blind, and the other from that of the sighted. It is discovered that the blind manifest the behaviors of the sighted, and the sighted those of the blind. What happens to the main character, the only sighted in the story, is typical of what is experienced by one thrown into a new culture. He goes through five stages: jubilation, culture shock, Initial adjustment, mental isolation, and acceptance.

Key Words: close reading, new criticism, the blind sighted, culture shock

Introduction

The language of every day life is different from that of literature. The former seeks for precision and avoids ambiguities. On the other hand, the language of literature prizes rich interpretations, for which writers employ ambiguities, ironies, paradoxes and other figures of speech.

The story is about the main character who gets lost in an expedition and finds himself amidst people who are totally blind. His persistence to demonstrate his superiority over the blind and his ambition to become king for the people causes him humiliation, frustration, downfall and submission to the blind.

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The purpose of the study is to identify and look into the paradoxes found in the story to find out their aims. To investigate the paradoxes, the Close Reading of the New Criticism is employed. Things are viewed from two points of view, one from the perspective of the blind, and the other from that of the sighted. It is discovered that the blind manifest the behaviors of the sighted, and the sighted the behaviors of the blind. After careful examination of each absurd phenomenon, truths are revealed. The two groups of people live their completely separate worlds that can not be reconciled. What happens to the main character is typical of what happens to one thrown into a new culture. He goes through five stages: Honeymoon period, Culture shock, Initial adjustment, Mental isolation, and Acceptance.

The story should not be understood literally, for it is impossible to have a country whose population is totally and physically blind. The story, however, should be understood as an allegory, a story that has a secondary level of meaning. “Blindness” should be taken as ‘ignorance’, ‘seclusion’ or ‘isolation’ from other worlds. Such group of society is possible to exist because of some factors, such as its geographically inaccessible conditions.

Wells uses paradox to serve his purpose, which is to underscore that a culture is unique in itself, and that there is no culture which is inferior or superior to other cultures. However absurd a culture seems to be, it is formed, lived and defended by its people.

Methodology

Paradox, which is the main concern of this paper, can be defined as ‘an apparent contradiction that, nevertheless, somehow true’ (Perrine, 1984: 100). Paradox can be in the form of a sentence or situation. A sentence is a paradox if the constituent words have contradictory meanings, as in “He died of joy that kills”, (Story of an Hour). The dead man is one who suffers from prolonged heart trouble. When good news is passed to him, he turns jubilant, but inadvertently triggering his heart arrest. In /... a voice less loud through its joys and fears / /Than the two hearts beating each to each? (Meeting at Night) These two lines tell about a young man visiting his girl friend in a farm house and at night. When her window was rapped, she was alarmed, but after knowing who the visitor is, she and her lover are joyously tied in embrace. Of course, no one can tell which heart beat is because of fear, and which one caused by joy.

Paradox can be a situation, like a humor in Reader’s Digest “A driver makes one pray, and a priest makes him asleep.” The driver is driving so recklessly that from horror, he says “Allahu Akbar.” The sermon which is extremely boring made him fall asleep. Furthermore, Aesop tells of a traveler who blows things to warm them up and to cool them down (Perrine 100). This phenomenon is not clear until we know that the temperature of something blown for some time will at last adjust to that of the
medium, in this case that of the breath, which is neither hot nor cold.

To identify situations and remarks that look or sound contradictory to common sense the writer uses the Close Reading of the New Criticism. To look into each phenomenon he sees things from two points of view: one from the side of the blind, and the other from that of the sighted. Emphasis is made on who says things, when and why he says them.

Findings and Discussion

Below are some of the paradoxical phenomena found in the story

1. The Sighted Stumbles a lot.

The statement above defies logic. Common logic goes because they don’t have eyes, it is the blind and not the sighted that stumble a lot. This condition can be understood if we are aware that the blind people, blind since birth, have been accustomed to and living in total blindness. They move cautiously using their ears and other senses.

From the point of view of the blind, Nunez frequently stumbles. This is because when they try to ‘feel’ him, to touch all over his body - as a way of knowing strangers - of course Nunez feels uncomfortable, and therefore tries to avert it with jerky movements, bumping here and there. Actually for common people such movements are just usual, but for the blind who move slowly and with calculation, it is considered stumbling. Nunez must have ‘stumbled’ much more when the blind want to know whether the stranger is male or female. “Certainly he is a man”, said Correa (111)

2. The Blind Lead the Sighted

This is another contradiction to common sense. How can blind people lead a blind person? Logically, it is the sighted that lead a blind person. To look into this phenomenon, a reader has to be aware that Nunez stumbles a lot. And for them he is an idiot, talking nonsense, because they cannot understand whatever Nunez says. They don’t even understand the meaning of ‘eyes’, ‘seeing’, and ‘blind.’ When Nunez proclaims his motto “In the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed Man is King”, one sightless person says ignorantly “What is blind?” (115) The more excited he is to explain these things, the more convinced they are that Nunez is really an idiot, therefore needs guidance. One of them says: “His senses are still imperfect. He stumbles, and talks unmeaning words” (111). In spite of all these, he is considered a rare finding and needs to be reported and taken to the elders. The person continues “Lead him by the hand.” On another occasion, another blind man suggests “Bring him to the elders” (112).

*Henceforth, unless the source is cited the numbers refer to The Penguin Book of English Short Stories
3. People in the Country of the Blind work at Night and Sleep in the Day time.

In the normal world, people work in the day time, and sleep in the night time for the global reason that for work people need abundant light, which is supplied by the sun. For sleep light, the sun, is dispensable.

Believing that Nunez’s mind is newly formed, one of the elders offers him guidance and explains to him about life, philosophy and religion, “how this time has been divided into the warm and cold - the blind equivalents of day and night.

For the blind people, as far as light is concerned, our day and night are exactly the same: pitch darkness. The difference is that in our night the weather is cool and fit for working for the blind, and in our day the weather is hot, for them unfit for working but for resting and sleeping.

4. Superiority of the Blind Over the Sighted Nunez

The first thing Nunez plans to reform after taking control of the blind is to change work-sleep time pattern, which has caused him in great misery. In the day time people are asleep, leaving him alone awake, whereas in the night time people work, again leaving him alone, unable to work because the absence of light. “He found working and going about at night a particularly irksome thing to do” (115).

But when trying to prove superiority of having eyes, Nunez faces more and more frustration, humiliation and ridicules. When some blind men ask him to come, he deliberately doesn’t move, a gesture they can detect. They say “You move not, Bogota” (Bogota is another name for Nunez) (115). Further, like a sighted to a blind person, he is reminded not to walk on the grass. Worse, when he proudly announces that Pedro, one of the blind, will be in their place in a while, he is corrected, that that person doesn’t have anything to do in that place and in that time of day. It is true, Nunez moments later in fact turns another direction.

These embarrassments hasten his planned coup d’état (115) and his downfall. In one incident, he cannot stand his anger, and he snatches a spade from one of the blind. But almost at once, people are alerted and besiege him. In spite of his special sight, he feels cornered. The blind people move with certain advance, and as if well coordinated the ears were also ‘assaulting’ him. He is panic stricken. Like a real blind person harassed by naughty children, he moves groping, dodging when there is no need to dodge. His immediate instinct drives him to hit one of the blind, and with that, he stumbles many times, but any way, he manages to escape the attack.

5. The Blind Nurse the Sighted

In his hideout he runs into yet other problems: lack of sleep for fearing of being captured, extreme cold and hunger. To survive, no way for him but surrender. He crawls and tries to make terms with the blind. Later he asks for mercy: “Before you ask me any more, give me some food or I will die” (121). They even nurse him kindly.
6. Because of her Same Facial Texture, a Young Girl is Loved and ‘Unloved’ at the Same Time.

In his submission to the citizens of the Country of the Blind, Nunez has special keenness on Medina-Saroté, the only ugly, unmarried young girl in the society. For Nunez, however, she is the most beautiful thing in the whole creation (121). This is because, unlike most people in the Country of the Blind, the girl’s eye sockets are less sunken, less hollowed, and her eyes might open in a moment. She also has long eyelashes.

In contrast, for the people of the Country of the Blind, Medina-Saroté, is the ugliest person: “She is little esteemed” (121). This is because for the people her facial texture is particularly different from any other’s in the society, which are hollowed, without eyebrows and eyelashes. What makes her ugly for these people is exactly the reason why Nunez falls in love with her, namely her less sunken face, her barely open eyelids, and her particularly long eyelashes.

Of course, for Nunez, accustomed to the sighted world, Saroté looks more like a healthy person than any of the others with sunken face and rather smooth eye parts. And as for the blind, when sight is denied, all parts related to this organ, like the eyeballs, the eyelashes, and the eyelids gradually disappear, and in the long run, such absence is considered beauty, and its presence a disfigurement.

7. The Blind Suggest that the Sighted Nunez Undergo Eye Surgery

Nunez-Saroté relationship has become more intense, leading to marriage proposal. But the elders, especially Yacob, Saroté’s father, object to the idea. Who would marry his child to an idiot? he reasons. “You see, my dear, he is an idiot ... ; he can’t do anything right” (123).

Fortunately, one of the elders offers an idea and solution. He theorizes that Nunez’s senselessness is attributed to that part in the face that continuously moving (meant his healthy eyelids). That constant movement affects the brain: “These queer things that are called the eyes, and which exist to make agreeable soft depression in the face (meaning the eye socket which is not so sunken) are diseased (124). He concludes that to make Nunez sane those moving things, the eyelids, must be removed, of course through surgery.

In the healthy world people suggest that the blind undergo surgery to restore sight, and in the Country of the Blind the blind people suggest that the sighted (Nunez) also undergo eye surgery to ‘recover’.

Cross-cultural Perspectives

Cross Cultural Understanding can be defined as understanding other cultures in order that the people of the respective cultures can establish co-operations that can benefit the people of both sides. Solidity of bilateral co-operation between countries, between people, between individuals depends, among others, on how well they understand and respect each other’s cultures.
Nunez, the main character in the story, takes with him his own culture, his own world, to a completely different culture, the Country of the Blind. His total failure to become King is attributed to his ignorance of other human beings and their nature. This is in line with James Michener's suggestion to tourists as quoted in Reader's Choice: If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay home: you are like a pebble thrown into water; you become wet on the surface; but never part of the water. (p.32)

It is agreed that no culture is superior or inferior to other cultures. No matter how bizarre a culture of a people may look like, for those people that culture is their ancestors' heritage and their way of life, which should be defended. Culture to people is likened to water to fish. Once the water is tempered with, the fish becomes alert.

Five Stages of Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Throughout the story Nunez goes through the five stages of adjustment, commonly faced by one who gets into a new culture. In their book Beyond Language on cultural adjustment, Levina and Adelman elaborate the process:

1. Honeymoon period
   Like a groom and his bride imagining new life and other exciting things ahead of them, Nunez is jubilant upon coming to the new place and discovering he is the only one lucky to have eyes. Overwhelmed with the strong possibility to become ruler for the people, he repeatedly chants his motto "In the Country of the Blind, the One-eyed Man is the King."

2. Cultural shock
   Nunez's elation only sort-lived, for soon he comes into trouble after trouble. He cannot communicate. Rather than being envied with for having eyes. He is ridiculed and considered an idiot because he is not understood. He even finds sleep a problem. He feels hunted.

3. Initial Adjustment
   This is the period when in his hideout, Nunez realizes his vulnerable condition. He is very hungry and feel cold. No way for him but to surrender to get food. He crawls from his hideout and announces "I was mad ... I was only newly made (120). When asked whether he still sees, he denies, saying it was only folly. Earnestly he asks for food.
4. Mental Isolation

In his submission and brooding over the upcoming operation of his precious eyes, he is torn between maintaining his eyes and losing Saroté.

5. Acceptance

Nunez story culminates when he agrees to the operation. When parting from Saroté the night before the coming operation, he says to her “Tomorrow I shall see no more”, and looking at her beautiful face, he goes on “Good-bye dear sight, Good-bye.”

But as said before, as he is savoring the beautiful morning for the last time, unintentionally he is drawn away from the valley attracted by the beauty of the nature, and at last away from the Country of the Blind and forgetting it. Here care should be taken that whatever happens in the end, Nunez does agree to the operation. His last remark then is ambiguous. First, it means he is saying good-bye to his power of seeing; and second, he is saying good-bye to the beautiful sight, his beloved Medina-Saroté.

Conclusion

The story The Country of the blind is full of paradoxes. The story should not be understood literally, for it is impossible to have a country whose population is totally and physically blind. The story, however, should be understood as an allegory, a story that has a secondary level of meaning. “Blindness” here should be taken as ‘ignorance’, ‘seclusion’ or ‘isolation’ from other worlds. Such group of society is possible to exist because of some factors, such as its geographically inaccessible conditions.

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Works cited


