

Bob Doran's Fall: From the Viewpoint of Eastern Philosophy

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I. Introduction

“The Boarding House,” the seventh story of James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, is regarded as the first naturalistic story in that it displays the most obvious pressure of the environment that drives a man into a state of fall (Tindall 26). As Tindall maintains, Bob Doran’s fall, which is determined by Dublin’s moral conventions and hypocrisies, has also become one of the typical examples of the fall of the city (26). The theme of the story is the external pressure which the determined “Madam” and her elusive daughter impose on the hero.

Of the two women in “The Boarding House,” Mrs Mooney, the mother, uses sexual exploitation to entrap Mr Bob Doran, one of the tenants in her boarding house. Bob Doran, who has been compelled to marry Polly for fear of losing his reputation and career in Dublin society due to the scandal, reappears in the “Cyclops” episode in *Ulysses* as “a drunk blubbering in the corner and trying to ingratiate himself with the Citizen’s dog” (12.486-97). As Levine puts it, the story

of entrapment, now given a new, more bitter closure, “foregrounds Doran’s brief appearance” (135).

About the structure of this story, Jean-Michel Rabete maintains that a persistent silence hidden behind the complicity between the mother and Polly plays the role of “the impetus behind the decisive gesture of the end” (60). Philip Herring also, mentioning the mystery concerning the sexual relationship between Bob Doran and Polly Mooney, complains that “convincing evidence that would lead us to certainty in the above cases is missing” (204).

As a “misdirected love story” (Senn 121), “The Boarding House” puts the three characters in three separate places, preventing the reader from learning about a comprehensive story, which enables him to weave a story of diversity on his own. Now, it seems that the imperfection and uncertainty caused by the silence in the story, which reminds the reader of “gnomon,” one of the well-known themes in Joyce’s works, provides a chance to “freely mis-read” his work.

In such an adverse environment, where he cannot help facing an unwanted marriage due to the external manipulations and his own mistakes, Bob Doran appears to be a paralyzed victim, agonizing between the fear of losing his reputation and the prick of conscience, and finally succumbing to the environment. Furthermore, his reappearance in *Ulysses* as a degraded drunkard is convincing enough to have a reader of the story regard this moment as nothing but a starting point of his “fall.” And it is at this moment that the concept of fall from the viewpoint of eastern philosophy breaks into the predicament that Bob Doran is compelled to face.

The reason for mentioning the eastern viewpoint here is that, while Joyce’s story as a literary work of the West emphasizes the naturalistic atmosphere, where the external surroundings drive the hero into a state of fall, the human nature theory of the East tells a different story, which provides the reader with a chance to have a comparative consideration for both.

Thus this paper aims to re-read the story of “The Boarding House” in the light of Mencius’s “Good Human Nature Principle” centering on the concept of “fall”

that deteriorates the Heaven-endowed good nature, and compare the attitudes of the East and the West towards the fall of a human being to grope for the possibility of reterritorializing a work of a genius writer into a new world of “hybridity.”

II. Human Nature and Its Fall: Eastern Point of View

The core of *The Analects*, a well-organized book on Confucius's teaching, is “Benevolence (仁)” (Lim 298). Confucius points up the virtue of “benevolence” as a value that the ruling class should pursue prior to any other human virtue, and Mencius, his successor, expands its significance to be applied for every person. Mencius himself maintains, “Being true is the Way of Heaven; to reflect upon this is the Way of man” (誠者, 天之道也; 思誠者, 人之道也, *Mencius* Book 4, 12).

As for human nature, Confucius maintains, “By nature close to each other, but through practice far apart from each other” (性相近也, 習相遠也, *The Analects*, Book 17, 2), and Mencius, while discussing the human nature with Kao Tzu, one of his disciples, maintains that human nature is neither good nor evil but is just developed as directed like water flowing to the East or West following the outlet.

To his disciple, Mencius replies that as there is no water but flows downwards, there is no man who is not good (人性之善也, 猶水之就下也. 人無有不善, 水無有不下 *Mencius* Book IV, Part A, 2), and we call it the “Good Human Nature Principle.”

Mencius maintains that every man has “a heart sensitive to the suffering of others” (人皆有不忍人之心 *Mencius* Book II, Part A, 6), which develops into the germs or the starting points of the four virtues, namely “benevolence” (仁), “dutifulness” (義), “observance of the rites” (禮), “wisdom” (知), and that without the germs man is no better than a beast.

From this it can be seen that whoever devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of the shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. Heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom. Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs.

由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也，無羞惡之心，非人也，無辭讓之心，非人也，無是非之心，非人也。惻隱之心，仁之端也，羞惡之心，義之端也，辭讓之心，禮之端也，是非之心，智之端也。 (*Mencius* Book II, Part A, 6)

According to Mencius, these four germs are not only what differentiate man from beasts but also what the great kings in ancient times retained and followed for themselves to be great leaders and rulers as well.

Mencius said, ‘Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice.

子曰：人之所以異於禽於獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。舜明於庶物，察於人倫，由仁義行，非行仁義也。 (*Mencius* Book IV Part B 19)

Mencius also maintains that the four germs of good nature of man are bestowed by Heaven, and that a man has to develop all of the germs that he possesses like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can tend the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his own parents (凡有四端於我者，知皆擴而充之矣，若火之始然，泉之始達。苟能充之，足以保四海，苟不充之，不足以事父母 *Mencius* Book II A, 6).

Thus the four germs of good nature are mere small possibilities that have to be sustained and cultivated through continuous good stimuli, without which they are

to be exposed to the possibility of fall at any moment.

During the dialogue with his disciple Kao Tzu, Mencius mentions four elements of the fall of good human nature, which are “ensnarement of heart (物慾陷溺),” “environment(勢),” “disappearance of the night influence (夜氣亡)” and “consequent loss of heart (放心).”

“Ensnarement of heart” means the case in which a person loses his good nature due to the material desire for the physical needs in hard times (富歲, 子弟多賴 凶歲, 子弟多暴, 非天之降才爾殊也, 其所以陷溺其心者然 *Mencius*, Book VI A, 7). What he means by “environment” is that man’s nature can be affected by the external conditions that surround him just as in the case of water (其勢則然, 人之可使爲不善, 其性亦猶是 *Mencius*, Book VI A, 2). As for the “night influence,” Mencius stresses that the night time is the time when a person can reflect on his life in the daytime and make a plan for a better new day, and if he fails to make good use of the time he “will no longer be able to preserve what was originally in him, and when that happens, the man is not far removed from an animal” (夜氣不足以存, 則其違禽獸不遠矣 *Mencius* Book VI A, 8). And finally, he deplors the case in which a man gives up the right road instead of following it and allows his heart to stray without enough sense to go after it (放其心而不知求, 哀哉 *Mencius* Book VI A, 11).

Namely, though the human nature is good just as the water flows downwards, and the basic desire of a man is to do what is good, his nature is sure to be deteriorated unless he is able to surmount the above-mentioned four adverse elements.

However, despite his warning against the possibilities of the fall of good nature, Mencius exerts himself to emphasize the appropriateness of cultivation and expansion (存養擴充) of the nature through continuous individual reflections and learning.

Even though what “The Boarding House” concerns is not a matter of goodness or evilness of human nature, given that the work deals with the fall of a young man, it might be appropriate to consider the process of his fall or failure to keep

his Heaven-endowed heart and the possibility to recover from it through the elements of the good human nature principle.

III. Bob Doran: A Paralyzed Hero in Three Nets

It does not seem to matter whether Bob Doran has violated the virginity of Polly Mooney through sexual relationship, for it is not clearly mentioned in any part of the story. What is clear is that Mr Doran, a respectable, bespectacled clerk in a prominent Catholic wine store, who has allegedly seduced his landlady's daughter Polly Mooney, is entrapped by Mrs Mooney's emotional manipulation of his vulnerability to religious scrupulosity in a cunning and determined manner.

In a sense, Bob Doran is, as Stephen Dedalus mentions in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a paralyzed soul entrapped in "the nets flung at it to hold it back from flight" (*P* 203). However, here in this story, the nets that entrap him are those of nation, religion and family.

The boarding house is a miniature of the city of Dublin, and moreover the country of Ireland, full of corruption, violence and paralysis, which is to facilitate the fall of the hero (Tindall 25). The house is a trophy of Mrs Mooney, who expelled the violence and corruption of her husband, and it is also a source of her desire to preserve the system of family on her own. However, it is still haunted by her son, Jack Mooney, who is powerfully built, dangerous and handy with his fists.

By fighting his wife in the presence of customers and by buying bad meat he ruined his business. One night he went for his wife with a cleaver and she had to sleep in a neighbour's house.

After that they lived apart. She went to the priest and got a separation from him with care of the children. (*D* 61)

In this house, Mrs Mooney exploits her daughter for double purposes. At first she wants to keep on her business of the boarding house having her daughter play

the role of bait, but she also wants to find a future son-in-law to help her keep on the system of family.

As Polly was very lively the intention was to give her the run of the young men. Besides, young men like to feel that there is a young woman not very far away. Polly, of course, flirted with the young men but Mrs Mooney, who was a shrewd judge, knew that the young men were only passing the time away: none of them mean business. Things went on so for a long time and Mrs Mooney began to think of sending Polly back to typewriting when she notice that something was going on between Polly and one of the young men. She watched the pair and kept her own counsel. (*D* 63)

Later, Mrs. Mooney notices that “Polly began to grow a little strange in her manner and the young man was evidently perturbed” (*D* 63). She is clever enough to wait for a long time without intervening before being able to deal with moral problems as a butcher with a cleaver deals with meat. As such a boarding house as a microcosm of both paralyzing and paralyzed Dublin or Ireland plays a perfect role of a net that ties up an innocent young man.

The religion that prevails over this city functions as another binding net for Bob Doran. In appearance, it provides a peaceful atmosphere as if it attempted to hide all the conspiracies and evil schemes, just like the grace of God covers all the sins of mortal people in the world.

The belfry of George's Church sent out constant peals and worshipers, singly or in groups, traversed the little circus before the church, revealing their purpose by their self-contained demeanour no less than by the little volumes in their gloved hands. (*D* 63)

Furthering Bob Doran's binding net, the priest he met the night before for his confession, instead of listening to the confessor's situation and guiding him to a good direction in confidence, “had drawn out every ridiculous detail of the affair, and in the end had so magnified his sin that he was almost thankful at being

afforded a loophole of reparation” (*D* 65).

Along with the atmosphere of the house as an example of the country that keeps the young soul from growing normally and positively and the desire of Mrs Mooney, who wants to keep her house and help her daughter preserve her own family, the system of religion functions as another strong net to paralyze Bob Doran into a total helplessness.

In the long run, partly because of the prick of conscience out of his conceived misdeeds and partly because of the fear of losing his reputation and his job, poor Bob Doran reluctantly decides to step down to begin a negotiation with the victorious but vicious mother.

Here the predicament that Bob Doran is to face can be reconsidered from the viewpoint of eastern philosophy. To be sure, he is a helpless victim of a cunning conspiracy of nation, religion and family. And again, he is a man of good nature.

According to Mrs Mooney’s judgment, unlike the other men in her house, he is “a serious young man, not rakish or loud-voiced” (*D* 65). He is also an industrious and diligent man who “had been employed for thirteen years in a great Catholic wine-merchant’s office” (*D* 65), and “she knew he had a good screw for one thing and she suspected he had a bit of stuff put by” (*D* 65). More than anything else, he admits his sin and feels that “even his sense of honour told him that reparation must be made for such a sin” (*D* 67), and such an admission results from this struggle against his “instinct that urges him to remain free, not to marry” (*D* 66).

The instinct mentioned here is a type of evil desire, which, as Mencius maintains, “puts profit before rightness (苟爲後義而先利, 不奪不饜, *Mencius*, Book I A, 1),” and there is another desire that keeps him struggling against the desire and giving up his own ways for others (大舜有大焉, 善與人同. 舍己從人, 樂取於人以爲善, *Mencius*, Book II A, 8).

The desirable is called ‘good.’ To have it in oneself is called ‘true.’ To possess it fully in oneself is called ‘beautiful,’ but to shine forth with this full

possession is called 'great.' To be great and be transformed by this greatness is called 'sage'; To be sage and to transcend the understanding is called 'divine.'

曰可欲之謂善，有諸己之謂信。充實之謂美，無待於外矣。大而化之之謂聖，聖而不可知之之謂神。 (*Mencius* VII B, 25)

As Mencius implies here, not only instinct but also human nature has a desire, and if a man has to choose one of the two desires, it is preferable for him to choose the desire of the latter, which pursues rightness as goodness. Thus a man endowed with the good nature may well or should keep himself from the desire of the instinct and pursue goodness, which is desirable.

On the other hand, Bob Doran is a man of many weaknesses or faults, subsequently leading him to the fatal loop, and Mencius's good human nature principle, especially the elements that cause the fall of the good nature, can be a proper device to give a critical look at them.

First, even though it was through a cunning entrapment by Mrs Mooney, he has failed in keeping his heart from material desire, the physical lust for Polly, who finally seduced him. As a religious man, "he attended to his religious duties and for nine-tenths of the year lived a regular life" (*D* 66). If he had remembered the lesson of Joseph in the Old Testament, he could have kept himself from the trap of enticement beforehand.

Potiphar handed over everything he had to the care of Joseph and did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Joseph was well-built and good-looking and after a while his master's wife began to desire Joseph and asked him to go to bed with her. He refused and said to her, "Look, my master does not have to concern himself with anything in the house, because I am here. He has put me in charge of everything he has. I have as much authority in this house as he has, and he has not kept back anything from me except you. How then could I do such an immoral thing and sin against God? Although she asked Joseph day after day, he would not go to bed with her. (Genesis 39: 6-10)

If he could have maintained the religious attitude as a pious believer, spent his night time with a sober and sound mind, and kept disciplining him to manage his life wisely enough to surmount all the adverse surroundings with evil schemes and not to lose his heart, or if he had tried to have a beautiful love with the girl in a clean, frank and open-minded attitude, he might have been able to become a hero of one of the warmest love stories in the world.

In brief, re-reading the tragedy of a naive and willy-nilly young man through a looking-glass of eastern philosophy, which emphasizes the strong individual self-discipline may be able to offer a reader a new perspective for approaching the work.

IV. Conclusion

“The Boarding House” is a story in diverse masks. It conveys another feminine victory against her husband for Mrs Mooney over the male-dominated Dublin society, a fantastic love story intermingled with cryptic pleasure, fear and other emotions for Polly Mooney. And for Mr Robert Doran, it is both a story about “a bolt from the blue” and “being caught in his own trap.”

The diversity of interpretation derives from the special structure of the story, as Fritz Senn suggests, split up into three distinct parts and two locations with three characters seen in isolation (122). There is no dominant narrative voice presiding over what happened among the three people living in the same house.

In a sense, Mrs Mooney is a great mother who reminds the reader of Mrs Kearney in “A Mother.” She is a mother with a shrewd sense of judgment, who is not like other mothers who are “content to patch up such an affair for a sum of money” (*D* 65). Her only wish is to keep her daughter and her family from dishonour.

The case is the same with Polly. Though slightly vulgar, she is a good daughter, who is obedient to her mother, and an innocent girl with enough

thoughtfulness and warm-heartedness to meet Bob with a tumbler of punch at night whenever the weather is bad. Everyone in this story has his or her reason for individual behaviour.

Needless to repeat, Bob Doran is a sincere, industrious and diligent young man, who is good at his business with a good reputation. He is also a man of conscience and responsibility, who regards his scandal as a sin and persuades himself to make reparation, going against his instinct that urges him to remain free, not to marry.

Every individual intention and behaviour of the characters is reasonable. However, what matters here in this story is that all the procedures are controlled by evil desire, and all the behaviours lack elements of “self-discipline to return to the courtesy (克己復禮)” and “benevolence (仁),” cultivated from the germ of Mencius’ “heart sensitive to the suffering of others (不忍人之心).”

In brief, the lack of eastern “benevolence,” corresponding to “true love” in the Western way of thought can be regarded as the missing part of Joyce’s “gnomon,” through which the writer continuously challenges us to dedicate ourselves to excavating the characters’ unvoiced intentions.

The significance of appropriating the human nature principle of the ancient Chinese philosophy as a framework to give a new interpretation to a literary work of a western writer lies in that it may be one of the ways to expand the territory of the work to the new land of “hybridity.”

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Abstract

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This paper aims to read, from the perspective of a human nature principle in Chinese Confucian philosophy, "The Boarding House," the seventh story of Joyce's *Dubliners*, which deals with the tragedy of a young man entrapped by a clever and determined mother and a perverse daughter, and then forced to face an unwanted marriage in the long run and ultimately to reconsider his naturalistic environment.

In appearance, Mr Bob Doran, an industrious young man, is a victim of the three nets from which Stephen Dedalus eagerly desired to escape: nation, religion and family. That is to say, he is a helpless young man making his living as a British colonial. Also, the predicament into which he falls by his own mistake is reinforced by the implicit conspiracy between a Catholic priest and a cunning mother who wishes to help her daughter have a proper family, which she herself fails to preserve.

In such an adverse environment, Bob Doran appears as a paralyzed victim, who is agonizing between fear of losing his good reputation and the prick of conscience, and finally cannot help capitulating to his own fate. Furthermore, his reappearance in *Ulysses* as a degraded drunkard convinces the reader of the fact that this moment is nothing but a starting point of his "fall."

It is at this moment that the concept of "fall" from the viewpoint of eastern philosophy breaks into the predicament that Bob Doran is compelled to face.

According to Mencius, one of the ancient Chinese philosophers, who persists in the good human nature principle, there are four elements that cause the deterioration of the good human nature: ensnarement of heart by material desire, subservience to environment, disappearance of night influence and consequent loss

of heart. Mencius maintains that the four negative elements will prevent one from cultivating the good nature endowed by the Heaven, making a person helplessly deteriorated to the level of a beast.

Such an interpretation may have a possibility to distort a creative work with “scrupulous meanness” into a mere moral allegory. However, it may also be able to offer an opportunity to reterritorialize a work of a genius writer into a new world of “hybridity.”

■ Key words : James Joyce, *Dubliners*, The Boarding House, gnomon, Confucius, Mencius, benevolence, good human nature principle, fall

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