

Loneliness in Ann Beattie's short stories

Mieko Muramatsu

Loneliness attacks every human both physically and psychologically. The important question regarding loneliness is degree- -to what degree we consider loneliness normal. The characters who will be discussed in this paper are lonely. They are possible future patients of nervous depression if they cannot divert themselves from the mental imbalances that impose severe emotional stress on them.

Finding a solution for loneliness has been and will be an eternal subject. Huckleberry Fin's solutions for it are to count stars in the sky and logs float in the Mississippi. Holden Caulfield assumes an ironic and foolish facade to counteract loneliness. Holden is considered to be one of the loneliest characters in American fiction. He sometimes confesses his state of mind, "I wasn't sleepy or anything, but

I was feeling sort of lousy. Depressed and all. I almost wished I was dead"¹ and "I was crying and all. I don't know why, I was. I guess it was because I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome."² Holden wants to make contact with others but he doesn't know how. Thus, by acting ironically and foolishly, he avoids being confronted with loneliness. In addition, his dream of becoming a catcher in the rye is his refuge from the disagreeable reality of his life.

Ann Beattie creates characters who struggle for peace of mind and relief from loneliness. However, her tortured characters attempt to maintain their upper-middle class positions. Unlike Holden, they are never hospitalized. They don't change by themselves on the surface. They choose to stay what they have been from the beginning to the last of the story, in spite of how they have struggled emotionally in secret. In "Like Glass," there is a passage that symbolically shows the state of mind of these people:

I sit on the edge of her bed in the half-darkness, tempting fate, fidgeting with a paperweight with bursts of red color inside, tossing it in the air. One false move and she [her daughter] will wake up. One mistake and glass shatters.³

¹ J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1964), 95.

² *Ibid.*, 159.

³ Ann Beattie, "Like Glass," *The Burning House* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983) 205.

Red symbolizes a person's hidden desire, which is shut up inside of the paperweight. The paperweight is made of glass, thus it is easily destroyed. If the character's fingers slip, the paperweight will be broken; her desires will be released and she will live as her passion leads her. On the other hand, another mistake will wake her daughter and let her return to reality. This passage implies that a person's passion is normally concealed inside the mind. Once a slight accident happens, like dropping a paperweight, passions are released. Sometimes this outflow of passion is interrupted by the trivial matters of real life. Most people, in general, including the person in this passage, are forced to control their passions in the face of reality. They are powerless to change their lives. Therefore, they have to stay afloat mentally. Dan Kiley says, "Belonging becomes the number one item on the family's shopping list...."⁴ However, on the other hand, "Trying to buy belongings only increases loneliness."⁵ A person's desire to be acknowledged by a certain group is a psychological matter of some concern. Individuals may become obsessed with gaining recognition. A person's real intentions and desires are not recognized by others, or even by his or herself. The person is lonely, but may not be aware of the loneliness or of the obsession.

⁴ Dan Kiley, *The Peter Pan Syndrome ----- Men Who Have Never Grown Up* (PLACE: Mead & Company 1983) 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

Beattie's characters can't stop making a fetish of the people and things they love. Her characters are unable to sever themselves from the past. They are frequently not content with the present. They are, in fact, very lonely. In "Amalfi," Christine is reminded by a large opal ring handed to her by a woman whom she meets for the first time on the beach of her engage ring and her marriage ring and begins "to miss them, and to want them back."⁶ Christine is vacationing with Andrew, her former professor and her divorced husband. She has no idea why she is with him. Not knowing what to do, she is absolutely lonely. The marriage ring is the only symbol of the happiest days in her life. The ring reminds her that her contentment had always been with Andrew. The first happiest memory for her is with Andrew when "she had studied, years ago, in Andrew's poetry class...she sometimes remembered how happy she had been to feel, for the first time, that she was part of something"⁷ and she was not lonely at all at that time. Her attachment to the ring means that she wishes to get back the past, including the good memories and the life with Andrew. Thus, the ring occupies an important position in her mind. She hints the ring given to her by the woman on the beach is a kind of epiphany--she believes she is fated to live Andrew.

In "Janus," the bowl Andrea possesses and how much she

⁶ Beattie, "In Amalfi," *What Was Mine* (New York: Vintage Books 1992) 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

loves it is the center of the story. The bowl appeals to no one else but appeals irresistibly to her. She is a successful real-estate agent. She always puts the bowl in the house for sale and believes it has power to bring good luck. Thus, she is always afraid of losing it. In addition, she treasures the bowl secretly because it is a present from her real lover, not from her husband. This love affair itself must remain secret and she knows it is an act of betrayal, as she feels "guilty that she had such a constant secret."⁸ However, the more she values the bowl above everything else, the more she gives importance to the past secret relationship as "she became more deliberate with the bowl, and more possessive. She put it in houses only when no one was there, and removed it when she left the house."⁹ It is certain that she is discontented with her tragic marriage circumstances. She has no choice left but to have a secret lover in order to live. After her lover leaves her, she has only the bowl as a substitute for him. The bowl revives many cherished memories of him. This psychological trace can be explained that Andrea attempts to get an unpleasant matter out of the mind unconsciously and to find a substitution for it. Her repression, in other words, what she wants to get rid of, is loneliness from the unhappy marriage and from the fact that she has lost her lover and

⁸ Beattie, "Janus," *Where You'll Find Me* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

will never meet him again. The bowl helps her to escape from the reality. By taking care of the bowl as a substitution for the secret lover, Andrea can keep her mental balance and live normally.

As a means to divert loneliness, a person may try to find something or someone comforting. Obsession with a beloved object is one of the easiest ways to counteract loneliness because an object expects nothing of the owner and will never be guilty of betrayal. This obsession can be an escape from reality. Consequently, making a fetish of something does not lead to a positive solution. However, these repression and substitutive formations are a person's defense mechanisms in attempting to remain mentally well balanced. A person instinctively tries to avoid self-destruction. If unsuccessful, mental disorders such as neuroses may result.

Another diversionary method of the mind to combat excessive loneliness is to love one's child blindly. One starts to love the child without expecting love in return. This blind love can fill life's empty spaces. As I have discussed before, loving the substitution is a way of maintaining the balance of the mind. A lonely person can manipulate an object but not a person. One-sided love for a child may satisfy the lonely person for only a short period of time. As the child grows older, he or she will have his or her own will and will not be controlled by the parents. This

independence will become another great pressure for the parents, who will gradually demand the love in return from the child.

In "Horatio's Trick," constant maternal love proves fruitless and a mother's repression of the feeling of abandonment makes her neurotic. Charlotte divorced twenty years ago and has lived with her son, Nicholas. Nicholas has been the center of her world and her greatest joy. Even when he is a university student, she can't bear staying home when he has a broken thumb. She overreacts and travels all the way to Indiana to see him. She worries about him as if, instead of an injured thumb, he had all limbs paralyzed. She is given the cold shoulder by her son when he says to her, "it's a little unnerving to roll out of bed and be stared at"¹⁰ and "what's awful is that you let me know that I've scared you. It's like I deliberately did something to you."¹¹ The attitude of Nicholas is too cold-hearted for Charlotte to put up with. However, she continues to love him blindly. Nicholas harshly criticizes her and hurts her feelings. After the birthday party of Father Curnan, whom Charlotte has considered as the nicest person in the city, she realizes that she hasn't been spoked to by Father Curnan. Nicholas says to her offensively, "You're wronged. You're always wronged. Would you like it if I

¹⁰ Beattie, "Horatio's Trick," *What Was Mine* (New York: Vintage Books 1992) 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

left the engine running and we both went back in and said good night to Father Curnan? Because that would be entirely proper. I could bow and you could curtsy."¹² His sarcastic remarks hurt her deeply. However, she attempts to conceal her shock; she suppresses her frustration. She always feels abandoned by her son but her pain is concealed in her subconscious. In a word, she has a constant fear of her son escaping from her. She is content to hear his footsteps and is afraid he will abandon her and fly away soon.

Charlotte's symptoms of neurosis are caused by repression of the abandonment feeling. Children experience separation anxiety when they leave their mothers. This type of anxiety is not neurotic. It is a healthy part of the relationship between a mother and a child. However, there are some children who feel this anxiety too acutely. The child feels suddenly and painfully abandoned by the mother. Psychoanalysts think that this painful experience and the subsequent lack of mental growth influence adult behavior. Charlotte may have suffered extreme anxiety when she separated from her mother. She may have retained this childhood anxiety. She is fearful of being abandoned by Nicholas in the same way she was abandoned by her mother. It is suggested that the mental stress of being abandoned by the child causes her to become neurotic. In addition, a person who loses an object tends to become

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

depressed because the person also loses the self that is identified with the object. Because Charlotte has lost her son psychologically, she indulges herself in alcohol, which acts as a substitute for him. Though she has given up her dream of being a lawyer because of her total devotion to her son, her love is merely a burden for him and isn't reciprocated. It goes without saying that her blind love only plummets her into absolute loneliness.

Ann Beattie describes some women who are suffering from loneliness and depend on alcohol. For example, the reason for the divorce of the heroine in "Longest Day of the Year" is her alcoholism. Charlotte in "Horatio's Trick" has been abandoned by her son and is addicted to alcohol as a substitution for him to console herself. In a sense, normally, she would seek pleasure and intoxication in communicating with others, especially with Nicholas. However, because she is lonely and has to find something else to solace herself with, she has to find the pleasure and intoxication in alcohol. In addition, excessive dependence provides an escape from reality. Presumably, Charlotte knows the harmful influence of alcohol but she can't exercise self-control and keeps drinking. She wishes to repeat the pleasure of alcohol, which is a pleasant experience for her, or she wishes to avoid suffering from the withdrawal symptoms. Drinking alcohol is a handy way of

forgetting loneliness, and can be a means of diversion; thus it is good for physical and mental health if she knows how to enjoy it. However, in the same way that has been discussed, depending on alcohol excessively only brings relief and enjoyment for a short time and then loneliness and despair return.

"In the White Night," Ann Beattie writes about the characters' process of readjustment to reality. Vernon and Carol lost their daughter, Sharon, from leukemia more than ten years ago. Just after her death, Vernon was hospitalized for mononucleosis, the cause of which was extreme mental and physical exhaustion. In that period, he was unable to accept the fact of her death and to adjust to life without her. His process of mourning was never completed. Superficially, Vernon and Carol appear to have accepted Sharon's death, but they are both still suffering. Vernon and Carol's words and deeds do not betray their sorrow and they never mention Sharon to their friends. They seem to believe that not mentioning "a sore subject"¹³ will help them achieve peace. Finally, they begin to move toward a solution to their grief and loneliness.

...to stop passing judgment on how they coped with the inevitable sadness that set in, always unexpectedly but so real that it was met with the instant acceptance one gave to a snowfall.¹⁴

¹³ Beattie, "In the White Night," *Where You'll Find Me* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

They believe this is a necessary adjustment. Consequently, they learn to coexist with loneliness. In other words, once they have overcome crushing despair, they are able to control the degree of loneliness.

In conclusion, like Vernon and Carol, Beattie's lonely characters have their own solutions. To avoid absolute loneliness, each of them must find a mental refuge. As has been discussed, they master ingenious techniques to cope with loneliness. They find something or someone as a substitute for what they can't have. In addition, they repress what they find disgusting or unpleasant. Their adjustments are necessary for them to appear as happy people — and for them to conceal their inner turmoil.