ENGL 129

Discussion 4: The Surrounded

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Throughout the book, the author shows that assimilation is rife with conflict, misperceptions, misunderstandings, and diminished life expectations, in every aspect of life, in every level of the society, to any extent, and with everyone.

The biggest conflict, I think, lies in the realm of religion, or to be exact, Christianity. The misperception was there from the beginning – the Salish people sought the “black robes” for settlement of temporal affairs and to “bring back the power”, but the priests could only “minister to their spiritual health”. And as Modeste said, it turned out that the Salish people eventually “had less”.

Much of such conflict is reflected on Catherine, the “Faithful Catherine”. Throughout the book, we gradually know Catherine’s life experiences and witness her change. She was the first to be baptized and was regarded as a role model, but after Louis’s death, she gave up her Christian faith and seemed to return to the Salish beliefs. She was troubled by the idea that her son might not go to heaven and heaven might not be a happy place, as demonstrated by her dreams, and her Christian faith could not help with that, and therefore she “gave up her baptism”. In fact, her renounce of Christianity was so determined that, before her death, she said in both English and Salish that she wanted “no priest”. Such change was actually not surprising. Misperception had existed from the beginning – she had been worried about her “paganism”. Indeed, her faith I think was not really “genuine” – her recollection was full of her effort of following the practice of the Church but rarely mentioned her real internal belief.

Many other details also demonstrate the distorted role that Christianity had played in Salish people’s life. I assume that, generally speaking, religion is supposed to bring people love and peace. However, the religion filled children with fear rather than faith. For Archilde, “the religion of the priests was definitely gone from him, it had died as he passed out of childhood, in spite of momentary lapses into old fears and patterns…”. Even worse, for Narcisse and Mike, who was frightened to lose sleep, they were so afraid of the mission school that they ran away into the woods to escape school. Such bad influence even continued into adulthood. For example, Father Jerome criticized Archilde at his mother’s final moments, Archilde “instead of boldly objecting to the interference, he made an elaborate attempt to explain himself”.

Moreover, the priests were filled with prejudice that Christianity was the true faith. Instead of genuinely thinking from the perspective of the Salish people, they would characterize any behavior that was not in accordance with the requirement of the Church as “bad” and “corrupt”, like Father Jerome said to Archilde, “you have been going your own way for some time now. I hope you are not one of these boys who at the first touch of the world become corrupt.”

Another aspect of conflict and misunderstanding comes from the change in the juridical system.

The old tribal laws were replaced by new laws, and the Salish people did not fully understand them, for example, it was pointed out new crimes were added, and the old practice of whipping was forbidden. However, the Salish people did not completely accept the new laws and the young people “liked neither the old nor the new”. Therefore, some of the young people stole horses and engaged in other illegal activities without really thinking about the consequences of their behavior. Also, there was something fundamentally different between the two systems. In the old way, one was supposed to avenge him/herself or his/her family member, and it would be shame and cowardice if one refused to do so. However, in the new system, one should leave everything to the Agency. Such difference greatly contributed to the conflict in the Big Paul story.

Furthermore, the juridical system was dominated by white people, which deepened the distrust of the Salish people toward the system. Throughout the story, Archilde and the people surrounding him never trusted the Agency. In the first place, Catherine and Archilde, after killing the warden, instead of turning to authority, they chose to conceal the event. And in the later part of the book, Archilde had been trying to hide the fact from Mr. Parker and Sheriff Quigley all the time. The distrust was more than obvious. It was not until his mother’s final moments that Archilde somehow decided to tell Mr. Parker the truth. Even more distrusting was Elise. After Catherine’s death, her first and only idea was to run away, and she said she had been preparing for that since she fell in love with Archilde. She was depicted as someone that was confident and progressive (lack of better word) and had been somehow assimilated – she smoked cigarettes, drank wine, flirted with men, enjoyed white people’s party, and said she was sick of the Indian dance. Even so, she had zero trust towards the Agent and the Sheriff. The moment she saw Quigley, however friendly and calm he seemed to be, she had come up with a plan to kill him.

The white people in turn also had misunderstanding towards the Salish people. Quigley was outward hostile and “carried with him out of the past a grudge against all Indians”. Mr. Parker seemed to believe Archilde at first, but in the end the misunderstanding deepened, not only towards Archilde but also towards all Indians – “A man gets pretty tired of you and all your kind”.

The misunderstandings and misperceptions were also reflected in the relation between white and Indian people.

Throughout the book, except the Leon family, we barely see any other intimate relationship between the two groups, and even the Leon family was rife with conflict. Catherine was educated with housework skills and other knowledge pertinent to living a white lifestyle. However, after marrying Max, she had been unsatisfied with her life in many aspects, such as daily chore, living to a clock, interaction with relatives and etc. Then their conflict culminated with the trial of their oldest son and their separation.

Later in book, at the dance on Fourth of July, Archilde noticed that the white people viewed the Indian dance as a “circus” and somebody even shouted out disrespectful words towards Modeste. At the white men’s dancing party, people looked at Archilde and Elise and despised them. It was also mentioned in later part of the book that people bet on how long Archilde would squander all his money. Such inaccurate and disrespectful perception of Indian people were prevalent throughout the story. They were viewed as lazy, troublesome, backward, and less intelligent. At the dancing party, Archilde engaged in a fight with the manager and then with pretty much everyone. I do not really understand that part, why the old woman said “somebody got to stop it…”, how the fight started, and why suddenly everyone started to beat Archilde, but I guess this exactly confirms the conflict and the misunderstanding between the two groups.

One thing I find interesting is that, although the whole series of events seemed to be accidental, there was something inevitable in them that somehow determined the fate of Archilde and others.

The story of Big Paul foreshadows the fate of Archilde. Same as Big Paul, Archilde acted as a connection between the Indian world and the white world; he struggled between the two worlds and tried to reconcile between them; eventually, just like Big Paul, he too failed to save anyone including himself.

The similarity across different generations also add to such inevitability. Catherine had firmly renounced her faith, and Archilde too was losing his own. Archilde, influenced by his childhood experience with Christianity, developed a mixture of fear and respect towards the religion, and his nephews were the same. Max’s older sons were of the “bad Indians” who had no respect for law, stole horses and hid in the mountains; Mike and Narcisse also developed resentment towards authority and actually went to the mountains to hide from others.

I think the author intended to convey the sense that the tragedy of Archilde was not accident but a true representation of the lives of the Salish people and of the tragic situation they were facing. It also adds to the story a sense of hopelessness and desperation. Just as the story ends, “you people never learn that you can’t run away.”; just as the title suggests, they are surrounded.