

THE PARABLE OF THE *PRODIGAL SON*: THE IDEA OF GRACE

Johan Kristanto

Program Studi Sastra Inggris – Fakultas Sastra
Universitas Katolik Widya Mandala Madiun

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan membahas penggunaan simbol *the son* and *the father* dan konsep rahmat (*grace*). Teori yang digunakan adalah teori karakterisasi, teori simbol, dan teori rahmat (*grace*). *Sociological approach* akan diterapkan dalam menganalisis data karena data yang ada membahas tentang karakter dan simbol yang merupakan refleksi dari kehidupan masyarakat pada waktu itu. Teknik *interpretation* dan *explication* digunakan untuk menemukan makna dari perumpamaan tentang *Anak yang Hilang* itu. Hasil analisis dari kisah perumpamaan *Anak yang Hilang* disimpulkan bahwa *the son* and *the father* menyimbolkan pendosa yang bertobat dan Allah Bapa yang siap mengampuni pendosa yang bertobat itu.

Kata kunci: *grace, character, characterization*

A. Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Nowadays our world has become rougher. Extreme crimes happen almost everyday; parents torture their children, children kill their parents, and violence spreads widely. Not only does terrorism become a main issue, but also gun shooting in school no longer an impossible matter. Leaders, who are supposed to protect people, choose to satisfy their own interest and even sacrifice their own followers. There is a huge rage coming out of human's heart. This is the age where 'grace' is the most unimaginable concept ever existing.

Trapped among our sorrows, we scream "where is grace?" To satisfy our curiosity, we travel among dictionaries and encyclopedias but they give us flowery and beautiful description about grace. As a result, we degrade the precious grace in our daily life. Grace is no longer a free-gift, without effort, and contains the essence of love.

Among thousands of English literary heritages, there is one extraordinary inheritance left in modern society, the Bible. Since the earlier age of its existence until intellectual era today, the Bible has become a controversial text. It is very famous, strong and controversial that war of the words and war of the worlds are fighting on it. It is not only a scripture limited for Christian faith but also a rich literature containing great ideas from the ancient past. It is a fact that the Bible is a basic masterpiece in western philosophy and literature. Vorst admits the importance of the Christian Scripture in western culture:

“This scripture has played such a prominent role in world events past and present to know the New Testament and the patterns of its use to have a key to the understanding of Western culture as well as Christianity itself (1988).”

In general, the Bible is divided into two main parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is actually a scripture for Judaism. The Jewish Bible is a foundation for Christianity. This paper deals with a specific part of the Gospel of Luke. He wrote Jesus’ parable about *The Prodigal Son*. Understanding the concept of grace revealed in the parable, hopefully will answer the questions disturbing our mind.

2. Problem Limitation

This research focuses on the symbols used in the parable *The Prodigal Son*. The analysis concerns the use of symbols as reflected on the parable. The writer interprets the symbol and the characters of the father and of the prodigal son.

3. Problem Formulation

The question of the research can be stated as follows:

- a. What are the basic elements of *The Prodigal Son* as a parable?
- b. How do the son and the father symbolize “receiver and giver of grace”?

4. Research Goal

The objective of this study is to understand the use of symbols used in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* and to find out the concept of grace manifested in the story. The first aim is to find out how the character of *The Prodigal Son* symbolizes the receiver of the Grace. The second aim is to understand how the character of the father symbolizes the giver of the grace. Then, the last aim is to analyze and to conclude what the grace is.

B. Theoretical Review

1. Theory of Character

E. M. Foster helps us to understand the two poles of dualism in characters of a literary work. His *Aspects of the Novel* explains that there are two kinds of characters presented in a work. They are:

a. Flat Character

This is a kind of character with no changes of his personality from the beginning to the end of the story; the character is built upon one single idea.

b. Round Character

This character has certain development, certain changes of personality along the story.

Regarding these two different kinds of characters, typical judgment toward a character could be made by considering in detailed description of the character. A flat character will have the similar personality in the whole story, while a round character owns his character development related to events which happened in his life.

2. Theory of Symbolism

Symbolism has played an important role in literature heritage. Therefore, many experts tried hard to deal with this significant element. In his benchmark book *Understanding Unseen: An Introduction to English Poetry and the English Novel for Overseas Student*, M. J. Murphy explains that symbolism is not always written consciously by the author, but also unconsciously (1972). There is one very important point that he makes in this chapter. He mentions that in most literature and languages all over Europe, of course then being inherited by the American culture, many names of people, places, and events from the bible have become well known symbols. He also gives some examples:

Job is the symbol of patience – ‘He has the patience of Job’, we say; Judas is the unfaithful and treacherous friend; Daniel and Solomon stand for wisdom; the ark is symbol of safety and salvation; Sodom of corruption and immorality; Calvary of suffering” (1972)

At least there are three usual effects of symbolism in literature. The first effect is to underline or to emphasize an important moment. The second one is to remind us of certain element relevant in the world of the story. Then, the last one, the third effect is the clarified theme of the story.

However, Murphy says that literary symbolism gives the reader more challenges. He wrote: “Our problem as readers is therefore twofold: to recognize that certain details *are* symbols, and to discover what they mean” (1965). In most cases, a detail is symbolic in that it is conspicuous than its factual significance for some other reasons. Another way to recognize symbols in a story is by seeing the presence of patterns linking details together. After deciding the symbolic details, the readers have to reveal the hidden meaning the symbols convey. It is better to approach the symbols by comparing the detail to its context, looking for the element suggested, resembled, or repeated in the scene. Not only do we relate each detail to the context, but also relate the context to another context. The further clue to the meaning of the symbol lies in the pattern or progression of the details and certain qualities they share in common.

A symbol in certain environment might have different significance in some other environment. To understand particular symbols in a literary work, we have to understand the context, the setting, and the society background that become the environment of the story.

c. Bible as Literature

Despite its position as a scripture for the Jewish and the Christian, the Bible is worthy to be regarded as a powerful literary text. The qualities of intrinsic literature elements, the structure, the imageries, even the pattern of the Bible are undeniably the magic of a literature. Scientifically, Ruth Barr Hibbard and Horst Frenz present in their *Writers of the Western World*:

The inclusion of excerpts from the Bible, a book largely written in the Hebrew and dominantly oriental in tone and coloring, in a collection devoted to literature of the Western world is easily justified. The thought and language of

the Bible have woven themselves into the very texture of Western literature. (1954)

The Bible has placed itself in the center of the English literature. Many symbolic imageries, idioms, and sayings which are taken from the Bible become the base for the other canonical literary work. They are, for example, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Toni Morison's masterpieces, *Absalom Absalom*, et cetera.

C. Method of Research

1. Subject Matter

The subject matter of the research is the parable of *The Prodigal Son* written in Bible according to Luke. The parable tells about a very rich father who has two sons. One day one of his sons asks the father for inheritance. After getting his inheritance he goes to another town and spends all his money. To support his living, he works in a farm but the owner of the farm does not even give him cattle food. Then, he remembers that in his father's house there is a plenty of food. He stands up and walks to his father's house.

2. Research Procedure

Firstly, the writer reads the parable of *The Prodigal Son* many times and contemplates the meaning. Then, the writer studies the theory of character, symbol and grace. After studying the theories, the writer applies them on the character of the prodigal son.

3. The Data

The research tries to answer some questions dealing with symbols and characterization. In order to digest the data, the writer applies interpretation and explication. In interpretation, the writer tries to find out the meaning of the parable by reading it many times and also to find out the hidden meaning of the parable which is not stated in the parable. In explication, the primary data, that is the parable of *The Prodigal Son* are read and related data are collected.

4. Approaches

The research studies about the characters and symbols in the parable of *The Prodigal Son*. Characters and symbols used in the parable are a reflection of the society. Sociological approach will be applied to the research because it will study why a certain character does so and why a certain symbol is used.

D. Analysis

As a parable, the story of *The Prodigal Son* teaches about grace and forgiveness. It presents in itself a complete thinking of the Gospel. The presentation is so holistic that it is called, as it is said by Trench, the Gospel within the Gospel. It means this single short story inside the Gospel of Luke actually contains the richness of grace theory based on the four gospels.

As a genre of literature, parable differs from the other genre that is often confounded with parable; that is fable. R. C. Trench explains:

Some have confounded the parable with the Aesopic fable, or drawn between them only a slight and hardly perceptible line of distinction. But the parable is constructed to set forth a spiritual; truth; while the fable is essentially of the earth, and never lifts itself above the earth. The fable just reaches that pitch of morality which the world will understand and approve (1948).

Therefore, parable is a different from fable. In *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Scott supports the idea to differentiate parable from fable. It says that a parable always teaches by comparison with actual events, and thus differs from fables (1999).

As *The Prodigal Son* is a literary work, there are some basic literary elements which need to be analyzed. The first one is the characterization. In this parable, there are three main characters. They are the father, the younger son, and the elder son. The younger son is the character that is called with the title of the parable, the Prodigal Son. Besides these three main characters, there are some other characters playing unimportant roles. Their roles give almost nothing to the chain of the plot. In fact, their characters are mentioned only once or twice in the whole story plot. They are the servants, the owner of the swine, and the prostitutes.

The second literary element is the setting. There are two kinds of settings in a literary work; the setting of time and the setting of place. The story of *The Prodigal Son* is set in an ancient era. In *Family Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Gooding explains the setting.

It is about 2000 years ago, around the turning point from BC era to AD era. Therefore, things used for living at that time are different from today's equipment. Life for human beings 2000 years ago is harder than the modern era. As the life setting pictured in this parable is completely different from our era, there are lots of different functions of action and lifestyle contained (1978).

Since this *Prodigal Son* is a parable, the meaning contained inside can not be perceived directly. There are lots of symbolisms hidden in the story. Regarding that symbolism can be revealed in the characters, actions, things, etc; therefore each detail in this parable is very significant to the meaning. In *An Introduction to Fiction*, Robert Stanton suggests: "approaching symbols by comparing the detail to its context, looking for the element suggested, resembled, or repeated in the scene (1965). Therefore, to be able to analyze the hidden meaning of the symbols in this parable, the intrinsic details need to be observed, especially those that are repeated; they are the character of the father and the prodigal son.

1. The Son

The parable of *The Prodigal Son* is started with a short verse. It is said that Jesus told there was a man who had two sons. There are three characters mentioned here; a father, a younger son, and an elder son. In fact, through the whole story, only these three characters play important role to the plot. Among these characters, the younger son is the character in the lowest status according to the Jewish culture, the head of a family is the father. Sons have no rights at all in taking decision. At that moment,

children could be sold as a slave whenever their father wanted it. This is a very inhuman action nowadays; however it was not surprising for the Jews at *The Prodigal Son's* era.

Compared to the elder son, the younger son deserves less rights of inheritance share. In Jews tradition, if a father has two sons, he will divide his wealth into three. The elder son will get two shares of the three, while the younger son only gets one share. Therefore, he gets only one third of the father's property. It does seem unfair in modern law of inheritance share, but this is proper law for the Jews. This reality is supported by R.C. Trench in his *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*: "The portion, according to the Jewish Law, would be the half of what elder brother would receive (1948)."

The younger son in the parable of *the Prodigal Son* was a son with no respect for his own father. M. J. Murphy mentions in his *Understanding Unseens: An Introduction to English Novel for Overseas Students* that characters can be described through some ways. One of them is through the speech of the character, what the character says can be a clue to his personality. It is written in the verse 12 that the younger son said to his father to give him the share of the family property which becomes his part. From his statement, other meaning could be derived. This is not just a usual asking from a son to his father. There is rudeness contained in it. Inheritance is shared after the death of the parents. In *The Bible Knowledge Commentay*, Walvoord explains: "Normally an estate was not divided and given to the heirs until the father could no longer manage it well (1983)."

The younger son was asking for his share, but deep inside his heart he doubted his father's capability in managing the house. In his mind, the younger son thought the one who could decide the best choice was he himself, not his father. His statement to ask for money was a protest against his father's authority. The younger son no longer had respect for his own father. By asking for the inheritance to his still-living father, he actually was saying that his father had been 'dead' for his heart.

What happens next to *The Prodigal Son* is described by Trench as "fall within fall" (1948). In the verse 14, the disaster came for the Prodigal Son: "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. (Luke 15:14)."

The Prodigal Son had enjoyed his fortune in a terrible way. Now all he had had vanished. The money he once had went away with the prostitutes he had slept with. The Bible said that he had spent all. Not just a part of or almost all, but unfortunately he had spent all of his money. Not a single coin was left for him to be his capital facing new days. Because of his own choice, the Prodigal Son had nothing.

Unexpectedly, a great starvation destroyed that country. News about damaged harvest became the headline news, inflation caused high prices, life got harder, and everything was tough for the Prodigal Son. This careless young man was left alone without family, without friends, and without money. In such a climax difficulty, he lost his self esteem. Even, he was considered unworthy by other people.

He tried to do some work for his living, but what he got was another misery. Trench describes this as:

The prodigal began to be in want, was, no doubt, a summon to him to return home, but as yet his confidence in his own resources was not altogether exhausted. He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, hoping repair his broken fortunes by his help. And here we see a fall within a fall. He, who begins by using the world as his servant to minister his pleasures, ends by becoming its slave (1948).

This new master told him to do the worst job he could ever imagine, feed the pigs. The poor Prodigal Son tried to ask for some compassion from the stranger, but he got more disaster. At that time, in hunger he had no longer power of decision on himself. Trench says:

Sinful man finds no love, no pity from his fellow sinner. This new master dismisses him from his sight, and sends him to the vilest employment, to feed swine. We know that it was even accursed in the eyes of a Jew (1948)

Summing up the whole characterization of the Prodigal Son, he was a man with bad qualities that gets worse and finally meets the worst point through the whole plot of the story. His over bad role symbolizes the position of a sinner in front of God. In Him, there is no single quality at all in which he might deserve grace. Then, in this deep valley, the Prodigal Son remembered his father.

2. The Father

The character of the father in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* is a 180 degree opposite in the contrary of the character the Prodigal Son. While the character of the Prodigal Son is the character with the lowest status, the character of the father is the character with the highest status. In Jewish family, a father plays an important role as the head of the family.

There was no wife or mother mentioned in the parable of *the Prodigal Son*. It is not surprising since in Jewish tradition women tended to play lower role than their husbands. Whenever husband and wife have different opinion about something, the decision was taken from the husband's opinion. Even if there were a mother in the parable of *the Prodigal Son*, the father still became the character with the highest status. The absence of the character of mother here makes the character of father occupy ultimate ruler position.

From the economic perspective, the character of father in the parable of *the Prodigal Son* was a rich man. This conclusion was taken from what the Prodigal Son thought. As it is written by Murphy: a character might be understood from the opinion of the other characters, the Prodigal Son's thinking gives us a reflected image of the father: "And when he came to himself, he (the Prodigal Son-writer) said, how many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare... (Luke 15:17)."

Briefly speaking, the father in this parable was not only the character with the highest status in his family, but he is also the character with the highest status in the society. As the highest status character, the father occupies the position of God as the most ultimate character in the universe.

Despite his ultimately high status, the father did not use his position to underestimate the others. He did not force other characters to obey all he wanted. He did not even use his power to defend his rights which he deserved. When the Prodigal Son rudely ruined his honor by asking for the share, the father did not take revenge for the rudeness the son did. He did not punish his son. Instead, the father gave his Prodigal Son full freedom. Trench gave explanation on the reason of this attitude: "It would have little profited to retain him at home, who had already in heart become strange to that home (1948).

Through not forcing his son to be jailed at home, not prohibiting his son from his desire, the father was actually teaching the Prodigal Son to find the truth by himself. Undeniably, the character of the father in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* was a wise man full of self control and patience.

The Father in this parable let his son try everything he wanted and finally return to him, and the father kept waiting for the time his son came home. The attitude of waiting can be derived from a part in the verse 20: "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he (the Prodigal Son-writer) was yet a great way off, his father saw him, (Luke 15: 20a)."

Even when the Prodigal Son had not yet arrived at home, he was still some distance off; his waiting father had recognized him. If the father had not waited and stared at the entry road to his house he would not have known the son before he arrived. There is only one possible explanation left. The father had waited. For those days the Prodigal Son spent his life in the far away land, the father kept waiting. Perhaps he even spent his days staring at the empty road; just in case that day was the day his son came home.

3. The Concept of Grace Revealed in *Parable of the Prodigal Son*

Parable of the Prodigal Son is a literary work which outstandingly presents a very different concept of grace than any other literature in its culture. The major literature for the Jews is their scripture that the Christians call the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, from the Torah to the Prophets, the main idea is not grace but curse.

In the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, the one who is guilty is the younger son, and the one who is powerful enough to grant mercy is the father. This relationship is often interpreted as the symbol of the relationship between God and the sinful human being. Humans do not have power to enable themselves to reach heaven and justification. It depends on God as the most powerful character to decide whether grace would be granted or not. As it is seen in the parable, even though the Prodigal Son had truly repented and gone home, the father still held the right not to forgive him. The father was totally innocent; it is the son who had to receive punishment. If the father had only accepted the son as a hired slave, it would have been a kind action to do. There was not any burden given to the father in which he was required to forgive the Prodigal Son. He deserved to send the son wherever he wanted to. What the Prodigal Son had done, his true repentance, did not give any influence in the punishment he deserved. The Prodigal Son had nothing to be done in order to

make his father forgive him. In spite of his true repentance, he still deserved the punishment. He should be a hired servant, not a son.

However, the father was powerful enough to have the rights to choose whether the grace would be given or not. In fact, the father would not have any interest in the reconciliation. It is the son who needed the forgiveness. The father in this parable faced a difficult situation. Mark Rutland in his *Streams of Mercy* states that to forgive is very hard:

The mercy we want the most from God and find the most difficult to grant others is forgiveness. If it is true that to err is human and to forgive is divine, then only God can forgive. Forgiveness is mercy in action at life's most painful points. Granting mercy to those who have been merciless to us runs contrary to our every carnal impulse (1999).

Naturally, forgiving others is very difficult for human. Even Rutland describes it as God's super power. It is almost illogical in human's mind to set a guilty man free from punishment. Most of us would prefer to give severe punishment to the sinners. However, there are two difficult conditions of mercy-granting.

God loves us personally. Like the father in the parable of *The Prodigal Son*, He loves each of us and rejoices because of each single existence of us. Like the *Prodigal Son*, when one of us returns home, we are embraced in His waiting hands. One by one, in a personal and in detailed way, God loves and waits for us personally to come back to Him.

E. Conclusion

The character of the son in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* symbolizes the receiver of grace. As the character that is called with the title of the parable; the Prodigal Son, he had been completely lost, cast away with no pride and no identity. He was the character with the lowest status, awful role, and no quality at all in which he should be deserved any grace. The Prodigal Son is regarded as the symbol of the sinner. In short, what the Prodigal Son should receive is punishment instead of grace.

On the other hand, the character of the father in this parable symbolizes the giver of grace. The father is the character with the highest status and great integrity. Therefore he is regarded as the symbol representing God. There is no responsibility obligating the father to grant grace unto the Prodigal Son.

The concept of grace presented in the parable of *The Prodigal Son* is shocking. Most teachings state some efforts to achieve grace. However, according to the parable of *The Prodigal Son*, grace is granted by the will of the father not by the son's effort. Grace purely depends on the giver. Grace depends on God not on the sinner. There is nothing a sinner can do to enable himself to receive grace. In fact, grace is given to those who do not deserve it. Grace is gifted merely because of love.

Grace is powerful enough to grant forgiveness. Even though the Prodigal Son deserved for punishment, the father provided forgiveness unto him. By the grace of God, there is forgiveness widely open for all sinners.

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