

A Comparative Study of Death and Human Consciousness Reflected by Small Characters in Gui Zi and O. Henry's works

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Abstract: O. Henry, one of the world's three major short story giants, whose works covers a wide range of themes, is good at express the connotation of tragedy in the form of comedy, to eulogize the glory of human nature. He grew up in the times greatly impacted by American civil war and the second industrial revolution. Death and human nature is one of the most obvious characteristics of O. Henry's works. Gui Zi, whose real name is Liao Runbo, one of the three swordsmen in Guangxi literary circle. His works are full of tragic consciousness, most of which focus on "little people", and express the importance of human consciousness by depicting the social life and death consciousness of small characters at the bottom of society.

1. Small Characters 's Consciousness of Death and Human Nature in the Works of Gui Zi

1.1 Small Characters -- the Weak in Society

In Gui Zi's works, although there are no many images with Chinese characteristics such as emotion and revolution reflected in the works by the writers of the older generation such as Lao She and Guo Moruo, there is a kind of awakening of new China's literature -- tragedy consciousness. One of the important manifestations of the tragic consciousness is the weak of the society.

Therefore, most of his works take peasants, workers and low-level civil servants as the protagonists, that is, small characters. This kind of literature that truly describes the suffering of "others" is more shocking. The sufferings they have experienced, the pains and helplessness they have felt are arousing the conscience, morality and meager dignity in the hearts of readers all the time.

1.2 Death and Humanity Reflected in the Tragedy Consciousness

Death is the end of life consciousness. It is the most helpless and uncontrollable fact that people's consciousness has felt since its birth. Human nature, the nature of essential human difference, is the most primitive driving force of human behavior with a certain degree of control.

The characters' death in Gui Zi's works is often the exact moment for humanity reflection. In his works *rural brother*, Yi Zuomao's behavior, is at that time, the status quo of the countryside in China, as well as the epitome of longing for city life. small characters's greed leads to the tragedy -- the death of "my" parents, Yi Zuomao's mother's death, Li Tiao's death, finally "my death" in the hands of Yumei. This series of deaths and the resistance to reality reflect the evil, the ignorance and the desolation of human nature. In *the Death of Su Tong*, there are similar tragedies, deaths and human nature. Su Tong, unwilling to give up his ideal and conscience for literature, embarked on a road of no return for the sake of truth, and the failure led to his own indulgence. In the life of absurdity and desire, he hastily ended his life. Here, we seem to see the defeat of an intellectual.

In fact, Gui Zi used death to reflect human nature, he also looked for the factors of death from people themselves. In his works, the defects of human consciousness often lead to tragedy -- death. Cowardice and bigotry are the two most distinct themes in his works. Chen Cun in *the Rain-drenched River* is the representative of cowardice. As a farmer of the older generation, Chen Cun is simple and kind. It is this kind of kindness that makes him lose his nature: he never complains in the face of suffering and silently endures all the injustices. Wages arrears only left a record in his tears and notes; Xiao lei's bitter cry was burned in his cowardice as well. He chose to

escape cowardly. Finally this cowardice broke out after his child died unjustly, but it was too late, he had been defeated by the cruel blow of reality.

Li Si in *Wheat fields above tile city*, the representative of paranoia, after putting up with all kinds of hardships, raised their children, and sent them out of the mountains. He firmly believed but that his children will never change, always staying what they used to be. Little do we know that material society has such a great impact on people. On the day of his 40th birthday, he was so paranoid to believe that his children would definitely remember this special day, but the impact of the reality forced him to use the extreme means of fake death. His wife had no idea about what happened, so when their children came home to Li Si's funeral, their mother was stimulated to death because of anger. The children's indifference caused his tragic hit to death by a vehicle in front of the children. Li Si's paranoid is not only his own sadness but also the pain of their family forever.

1.3 What is Crueler than the Truth is the Reality

The death described by Gui Zi is sometimes crueler than life itself. In *The girl who dozed off in the morning*, he created an ordinary girl named Han Lu, whose flexibility possessed by traditional Chinese women, made her choose her life in countless hardships and choose the future hidden in the dark. When looking for her father for the first time in Tile City, her mother actually stepped on her daughter's body to turn over the door, Han Lu being thin and weak and enduring pain without saying anything, but there is no way for her to stop the flow of tears. In the way of looking for his father, she found herself pregnant after being drugged and raped. The 13-year-old girl still quietly endured everything, did not tell her mother and went to see the doctor alone. Even if the doctor was abusive, she still left quietly. After her mother committed suicide, she still appeared to take part in the examinations the next day, dragging her exhausted body. Without parental love, she still chose to live firmly by herself, which definitely showed the strength of human nature and shocked all the readers. The truth in this novel is so shocking, and the cruel reality of "life is better than death, and death is the only way to find happiness" is so hard to face.

2. The Consciousness of Death and Humanity Reflected by Small Characters in O. Henry's Works

2.1 Small Characters's Brilliance of Humanity

American cultural customs are obviously pervasive in O Henry's novels. Even in the tough survival environment, small characters still show the most sincere and kind human nature and even sacrifice themselves for others. In *The Gift of the Magi*, Jim and Della, a poor couple, in the upcoming Christmas Eve, in order to buy a gift for each other, have both lost their most precious things, but they finally harvest the emotion and sincere love from their beloved, which is so precious that many people will never have the chance to get in their lifetime. In *The Last Leaf*, the old painter painted an evergreen leaf on the wall at the cost of his life in order to help the sick young painter survive. The young painter was so moved that he got the courage to live from the green leaf. O. Henry's novels are good at creating little people who are in trouble in life and often move people greatly. The accumulation of small goodness makes human nature shine brightly.

2.2 Small Characters with the Good and Evil in Human Nature

In the eyes of O. Henry, there was no absolute good and evil, which were often associated with money. From this, we could see the social environment of the United States at that time, where the civil war just ended, the capitalist democratic society was basically formed, which brought about the gap between the rich and the poor, the main social contradiction. O Henry's analysis of the American capitalist class is very thorough, the evil of human nature in people's infighting and arbitrary looting depicted incisively and vividly. Competition in the capitalist society forces every financier to put everything he has into it. Ruthless capitalists and vicious financiers, small swindlers in the lowest class and big swindlers in the upper class all use their full strength to pursue wealth. Human nature is slowly eroding in the competition.

The boundary line between the good and evil in human nature is blurred in O. Henry's works. He gives the bad guys a chance to reform themselves. When a thief was giving up his profession, he discovered a child locked in the safe, and then opened the safe with stealing technology in the presence of the public only to rescue this child. After rescuing the child successfully, he chose to turn himself in to the police again. Being good and evil only exists in a moment, or perhaps, sometimes being evil is just forced by life.

2.3 Death, One of Man's Final Destinations

Death is the ultimate manifestation of people's pursuit of ideals. In *The Road to Destiny*, the death of the poet is not a matter of fate. His desire for poetry, his unrealistic self-impulsiveness, and his blind love and imagination under the delusion of beautiful appearance are all internal causes and doomed tragedies. Perhaps only death can exorcise him from the earthly body of the poet who tended the sheep. In his another works *The Room with Furniture for Rent*, a man at a loss, in order to find his former lover, was cheated by the landlady, and finally chose to commit suicide in despair. What's more ironic was that this room was also where his lover committed suicide in the past. Maybe if the landlady told him the truth, he would not go to despair, but this pursuit of giving up self and confusion of losing life is the truth of death.

3. The Reasons for the Commonality and Difference

Death is is proportionally a main theme in Gui Zi's works, but not very common in O Henry's works. Human nature is one of the foundations of their creation. This kind of thinking about human nature perfectly explains their profound perception of human nature and the world they live in. This paper explores the reasons for this commonality and difference through the following aspects.

3.1 Differences in cultural and historical backgrounds

O. Henry lived just after the civil war. Every American wanted a peaceful and stable life. Poverty and wealth became the most classic themes in O. Henry's works. O. Henry criticized the various phenomena of those being both rich and cruel. He uses his own way to change the fact that the poverty has gradually become a shame, so small characters are the focus in the majority of his novels, who are dominated by money, whose joys and sorrows are related to money, and whose behaviors of money worship in O. Henry's works are shown incisively and vividly.

Gui Zi was born in the most difficult period of the new China, grew up under the impact of the Cultural Revolution, and experienced a mature period of thinking after the reform and opening up. The works of Gui Zi also centers on small characters, but these small characters have different ways of existence. Their existence is to call on people to pay attention to the weak around them and their life experiences. The death consciousness reflected in his works is very different from that of O. Henry. Gui Zi thinks that death is a kind of cruel happiness, and this kind of cruel compassion is one of the characteristics of the devil's novels.

3.2 Differences in Creative Methods

In O. Henry's works, the ending is often unexpected. On the one hand, it is to increase the readability of the novel; on the other hand, it also reflects O. Henry's philosophical belief and spiritual characteristics. O. Henry tends to construct and describe the truth, goodness and beauty of small characters, and uses lyrical techniques to show their fates. He seldom takes the initiative to write about their pains and happiness, but hides his feelings in the scene and uses the scene to express his feelings. Gui Zi is good at depicting and reflecting the life of the weak, to analyze the real life of the people at the bottom of the society. The heaviness of life can only be shown through the conscious activities of small characters, and the meaning of life will become the deepest memory in each reader's heart among these sufferings and tragedies. The fragility of life described by Gui Zi is full of bitterness.

4. Conclusion

By comparing the death and humanity consciousness of small characters reflected in the works of O. Henry and Gui Zi, we can conclude that different eras and cultural environments have a profound effect on their writing style and purpose. Gui Zi's works are full of consciousness of death. He hopes that readers can feel what the people living in the bottom of the society suffer after reading his works, attracting more people to be really concerned with vulnerable groups. O. Henry is more inclined to use the truth, goodness and beauty in human nature shown by the little people in his works to trigger readers' inner goodness. Under the background of American society at that time, death did not receive much attention, so putting human nature before death was most recognized and resonated with readers. The commonality between them is a profound analysis of human nature.

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