

Tragedies of the Times: A Comparative Analysis of “Nobody” in “Poor Folk” and “Rickshaw”

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Keywords: Nobody; Tragedies; Poor Folk; Rickshaw

Abstract: Belinsky hailed "Poor Folk" as Dostoevsky's "first attempt at a social novel"; Fan Jun noted that Lau Shaw "introduced the fate of the urban poor, a social class often overlooked, into the realm of art, and succeeded in doing so..... somewhat similar to what Dostoevsky was to Russian literature of the same period." [1] Comparing Dostoevsky with Lau Shaw is based on the fact that both authors shed light on the inner struggles that existed inside their respective societies and the souls that drove their characters' suffering. The histories, destiny, and characterization strategies of the characters in "Poor Folk" and "Rickshaw" are comparable despite the differences in genres and cultural backgrounds. This study, based on the notion of "Tragic Consciousness," uses the era as a starting point for additional investigation. It concentrates on the viewpoint of "nobody" at the bottom of the hierarchy, peeks into serious social issues, and offers ideas.

1. Introduction

"Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain length; and by causing pity and fear this emotion is inculcated," writes Aristotle in Poetics. [2] He unveils the essence of tragedy, a tragic consciousness that is a profound insight into the pain and struggle that are inherent in human nature, as well as a grief for the individual's fate. Lau Shaw's book writing in the 1930s and 1940s benefited greatly from the Russian novel. Russian literature served as an inspiration for Lau Shaw's frequent emphasis on realism and authenticity in his writing. Academics acknowledged the tragedy of the character's fate in Dostoevsky's Poor Folk for a long time as the tragedy of the times, and ironically, Rickshaw's tragedy was frequently recognized as the tragedy of the individual's destiny within the historical context. A "nobody" in literature is a poor person, at the bottom of the social ladder, devoid of human dignity, and subjected to abuse and humiliation by the wealthy and powerful members of the upper class. These individuals are typically identified by their worn-out clothing, sense of inferiority, and low social standing. In "Poor Folk," a typical "nobody" is Javushkin, who has patches on his clothes, and Teresa, who is regarded as a "rag." In "Rickshaw," a typical "nobody" is Javushkin, who comes from a modest background, and Teresa, who is treated like a "rag." In "Rickshaw," Xiangzi, who comes from a humble family, and Xiao Fuzi, who sells his body, are examples of typical "nobo" characters. These people's awful fate is a powerful illustration of the small guy. The notion of tragedy needs to be reexamined as we approach the next century to provide a more impartial assessment. This paper's analysis will offer fresh insights into Nobody's literary performance and social importance.

2. Shaping “Nobody” in “Poor Folk” and “Rickshaw”

2.1 “Nobody's” Own Physical and Mental State

Dostoevsky meticulously captures the run-down aspect of the lower-class individuals in "Poor Folk". Phrases like "grease twisted, old ragged clothes" and "all patched" not only convey their low social standing and material deprivation but also the tragedy of the era. These depictions capture the sadness of the era as well as their lack of wealth and low social standing. Because of the stark contrast between this run-down image and the grandeur of the upper class, small people tend to experience

inferiority complexes in their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, the work delves deeply into the poverty and helplessness of the supporting characters who are forced to sell their clothing because of financial hardships. Despite their optimism and resilience in the face of societal oppression, these characters are still trapped in the terrible trap that is their tragic destiny.

Lau Shaw's portrayal of Xiangzi, the primary character in *Rickshaw*, further highlights the traits of the small guy. Xiangzi's original attire consisted of a "white cloth coat" and a "dandies blue trouser coat." He was unpretentious and tidy, representing his zest for life and desire for dignity. But as the narrative progresses, Xiangzi's circumstances worsen, and he is reduced to wearing tattered clothing that is even "made to stink by sweat." The way this image has changed illustrates not only how tough it was for Xiangzi to survive in that period, but also how powerless and struggling he felt on the inside.

2.2 Identity Differences of "Nobody" in Interactions with Others

The way that "nobody" is portrayed in literature frequently offers profound insights into social status and interpersonal dynamics. Two pieces, *"Rickshaw"*, and *"Poor Folk"*, illustrate how characters at the bottom of society manage to survive despite class divides by nuancedly capturing the protagonist's interactions with others.

The moneylender Peter Petrovich in *"Poor Folk"* illustrates the socioeconomic division of his era in his response to Gorshkov's loan request. His alleged assertion that "the interest is a trifle" and his demand for collateral demonstrate his mistrust of the underprivileged and draws attention to the reality of social class bias and economic segregation. Simultaneously, the doorman Snegirev forbids the impoverished from using the public brushes for self-cleaning, citing concerns about the brushes being "broken." This action, in reality, is a rejection of the impoverished's identity. Collectively, these representations highlight how various social strata were treated in Russian society at the period and reveal the intricate details of the tragedy of the times.

As a carter, Xiangzi symbolizes the lower stratum of society in *"Rickshaw"*. He works extremely hard every day, even in the winter, to serve Mr. and Mrs., who employ him for a very cheap rate in their cozy automobiles. Because of the limitations of economic stratification, Xiangzi believes that the money Mr. and Mrs. give him each month is much more than his regular wage. As a result, Xiangzi is glad to wear a ragged cotton jacket and tow their automobile. This comparison demonstrates the existence of economic stratification as well as the significant impact that social structure has on personal fate. The union of Xiangzi and Huiyu provides another evidence of the influence of social power on people's lives. Xiangzi's initial goals are freedom and independence, but Tigress's class dominance forces him to give up on those goals. Not only is this a personal tragedy, but it also highlights the harsh power that the social structure has over an individual's destiny; even the most intimate choices are subject to social structure limitations, underscoring the theme of the tragedy of the times.

"Poor Folk" and *"Rickshaw"* eloquently illustrate the pervasive influence of socioeconomic class disparities on people's lives by depicting "nobody." This is evident in societal conceptions, interpersonal interactions, and other areas in addition to the economic gap between the rich and the poor.

3. The Portrayal of "Nobody" in "Poor Folk" and "Rickshaw"

Mr. Lau Shaw highlights the changes in Xiangzi's life and his decline in mental health by drawing comparisons between the picture of him in the past and the present. In addition to giving the image of Xiangzi greater life and depth, this contrast also intensifies readers' sense of helplessness and marginalization in the face of society and surroundings. Xiangzi's image becomes more complete and realistic as Mr. Lau Shaw delves deeper into Xiangzi's inner world, revealing his love of life, quest for dignity, and hopeless acceptance of fate. By portraying these particulars, Mr. Lau Shaw can eloquently convey Xiangzi's inner struggle and yearning in addition to illustrating the predicament of being an outsider. The novel's detailed exploration into nobody's inner life gives readers a vivid, three-dimensional vision of Xiangzi, allowing them to feel his hardship and perseverance. This deep humanistic care and concern for nobody's fate is reflected in the novel.

The epistolary approach to the plot of "Poor Folk" helps the characters to reveal their inner feelings and separates the author from the characters to create a polyphonic effect. In the novel, through some inner monologue of the characters to express nobody's response to the external evaluation and their thinking about their destiny, this kind of psychoanalytic writing technique makes the characters become thinkers while respecting the independence of the characters in the work, which has the characteristic of forward-looking.

3.1 The Development Process: Conflicts and Growth

Before her father is fired and the family is forced to migrate and live in difficult circumstances, Valenka, the protagonist of the communication in the novel *Poor Folk*, spends her youth living happily in a big manor house and viewing the world through an innocent and beautiful perspective. Through her relationship with Javushkin, Valenka gradually gains gratitude and love despite her difficult living circumstances. "I know and I believe that you love me; really, it's superfluous to remind me with gifts: it's hard for me to accept these things from you; I know how much it cost you to buy them,"[3] is how Valenka addresses Dvushkin in the letter, expressing her appreciation and shame. After seeing the depth of love between Pokrovsky's father and son and the misery and embarrassment brought about by their apparent poverty, Valenka had a greater perspective on life. She acknowledges the financial strains behind Jevushkin's gifts, which makes her feel uncomfortable and guilty while she accepts his assistance. This mentality indicates a better comprehension of the realities of life's obstacles. Valenka's self-description simultaneously conveys her insistence on independence and self-respect; despite her financial constraints, she nevertheless wants to retain some measure of dignity and autonomy and does not want to be entirely reliant on the kindness of others. For this reason, she eventually decides to accept Bekov's marriage proposal. As she matures from a carefree and innocent young lady to a lady willing to give up her love for the sake of others, Valenka's self-reliant nature also keeps developing despite setbacks and disputes.

Xiao Fuzi is a very exemplary minor character in "Rickshaw". Her steady change from a defenseless victim to a fighter who dares to resist not only represents her development but also powerfully illustrates the limitations and oppression that women faced at the time. Xiao Fuzi lives in a world where men rule and control all aspects of her existence, placing her in a subordinate position and controlling her destiny. After being sold by her father, she is used as an officer's plaything and eventually has to sell her body to survive. These experiences all highlight her helplessness and passivity in society. Xiao Fuzi is tenacious; she attempts to protect her family's means of subsistence and her chances of surviving in society, even at the price of her innocence. Her final act of defiance against this outdated culture is to hang herself in the woods after all of her attempts to change her destiny inevitably fail.

Not only is this the tragedy of Xiao Fuzi's destiny, but the paradoxes and tensions she went through are a real representation of the subjugation of women throughout society, which adds depth and distinction to Xiao Fuzi's persona.

3.2 Value Formation: Conformity and Resistance

The uniqueness of Dostoevsky's works also lends character to the values that "Poor Folk's" protagonist Jevushkin is forming. His area of expertise is crafting characters' psychological responses to dire circumstances while keeping psychological realism in mind. On the one hand, the protagonist Jevushkin views himself as a modest, honest man who strives for social acceptance via his work; he stands up for himself, demands "bread earned by himself," acknowledges the worth of his labor and the pride in his existence, and views bread as the product of his labor that he has rightfully earned. On the other hand, he acknowledges that small officials are referred to as "this rat" by the social Russian folk, and he comes to the realization that his efforts will not change the way society views and treats him. This internal conflict and agony stems from this cognitive contradiction. Despite being called a "rat" and living in abject poverty, Jevushkin maintains that his work is important and that the office needs his copying services. In addition, he emphasizes that he can still support himself through hard work despite having a low income. This self-sufficient mindset demonstrates his attempts to uphold his autonomy and dignity in the face of hardship, and his self-justification serves as both a

psychological defense of the little man and an insistence on his value.

In addition to Xiao Fuzi, another significant figure in "Rickshaw", Xiang Zi's molding procedure is also rather common. In the beginning, Xiangzi is a law-abiding individual who talks truthfully: "Once upon a time, he refused to rob other people's trade, especially for those who were old and weak." [4] He upholds his moral principles and has compassion for the helpless. He now "just pulls on the sale, no matter what else, like a starving beast," though, due to the weight of life. [5] His morals start to erode and progressively shatter in the face of money and profit, and he starts doing whatever it takes to seize every chance to gain money. He changes from being a young man with ideals and aspirations to a machine solely in it for the money. This change is a result of his drive to survive, but it also shows his powerlessness and acceptance of reality.

The transformation of Xiangzi depicts the exploitation and oppression of the underprivileged in that era's society dramatically. This kind of powerlessness and compromise was typical in the society of the period, and they had to give up their moral standards and values to exist. We see the pinnacle of a historical period as well as the resilience and decision-making of human nature in the face of hardship via the tale of Xiangzi. "A good fellow could turn bad." [6] Under the intense pressure of life, Xiangzi's character undergoes a fundamental transformation. His story accurately captures the hardships of the underprivileged people of that age to survive beneath the massive wheel of society.

4. The Context in Which Nobody Arises in "Poor Folk" and "Rickshaw"

4.1 Unity in Diversity

4.1.1 Class Oppression: Hard Survival at the Bottom of the Social Ladder

Dostoevsky portrays the misery of the lower classes in 19th-century Russia in "Poor Folk". Gorshkov was one of the nobodies in Petersburg. He lived at the very bottom of society, and like him, he had little control over his destiny because of the prevailing tides. Their lives are filled with suffering due to class oppression, and because of the strong social structure that binds them, they are unable to escape the chains of poverty. "It is our luck that the Lord has sent Teresa," Gorshkov says in his letter in *The Poor*. However, our landlady is a horrible person who pamper her and treats her like a rag. [7] Usually, a "rag" is used to clean dirt, and discarded rags are thrown away. To highlight Tereza's poor position in the landlady's perspective, Dostoevsky compares her to a "rag." Dostoevsky depicts the tragically colorful struggles of the characters at the bottom of the social scale amid disease, poverty, and social apathy through the image of Tereza. This image portrays the unfairness and class oppression that pervaded Russian society at the time. Furthermore, Dostoevsky was facing social and personal difficulties at the time he wrote "Poor Folk". His early experiences of living in difficult circumstances—he was born into a broken noble family—allowed him to have a profound understanding of the suffering and powerlessness experienced by those at the bottom, whose misfortunes were directly caused by the limitations imposed by the social structure and class of Russian society at the time.

Since Lau Shaw was raised in a low-income household and is familiar with the struggles faced by the underclass in Beijing, "Rickshaw" is a reflection of early 20th-century Chinese society. In addition to living in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial civilization in China, his Xiangzi Xiangzi is an average coachman who faces many challenges in his life. He had to battle for every chance to survive at the bottom of society, but in the end, fate ruthlessly brought him down. (Providing further information to the text analysis of Xiangzi) Lau Shaw illustrates the hardship and powerlessness of the nobody tyranny and the terrible end of the characters at the bottom of society under class oppression through the account of Xiangzi's life. In addition to representing the destiny of a single person, the picture of Xiangzi also serves as a symbol of the underclass in general.

4.1.2 Conflict in Society: Intensification of Contradictions in Changing Times

"Poor Folk" is set in a time when Russian society was moving from serfdom to capitalism, a time when social tensions rose and the gap between the rich and the poor grew. This shift had a profound effect on the lower classes, like Gorshkov, who had to cope not only with financial difficulties but

also with diminished social standing and loss of dignity. Dostoevsky frequently drew inspiration from social injustice. He saw the misery of the lower classes and the social unrest following the abolition of serfdom, which was mirrored in his works. In "Poor Folk," he uses nuanced brushstrokes and insightful psychological insights to expose the inconsistencies in social progress and the powerlessness of the lower classes. The tragedy of these nobodies is not only a tragedy of personal destiny but also a product of the times and social structure.

The 1930s saw Beijing transition from a semi-colonial to a semi-feudal state, and the socioeconomic crisis in China was made worse by conflict and violence. This is the setting for "Rickshaw." Because of the interplay of social unrest, governmental corruption, economic exploitation, and other causes, people from lower socioeconomic classes, like Xiangzi, are often at the core of societal confrontations. Xiangzi is completely independent and by himself, since he traveled to Beijing from the countryside to fight for his life. He views this city as his friend and the only thing separating him from the outside world, a place where he can fight for his life. However, during the battle, Xiangzi eventually lost his automobile, his camel, his sweetheart, and himself. Millions of other sad people in Beijing, like Xiangzi, have seen their destiny cruelly shaped by the wave of social change, and their efforts and battles appear incredibly insignificant and helpless in the face of the times. Under the impact of the May Fourth Movement, he was baptized with new ideas and culture and developed the literary concept of "for life." In "Rickshaw," he illustrates the paradoxes and tensions in social transformation by using the fate of Xiangzi to illustrate the hardships and helplessness of the underclass people in Beijing. The social unrest and suffering of those from lower social classes are reflected in the tragedy of Xiangzi.

4.2 Same but Different

4.2.1 The Other Gaze: Individual Orientation Based on the Perspectives of Others

Gorshkov is shown in "Poor Folk" as a lowly petty clerk who must survive on a pitiful wage and irregular employment due to his low social standing. He works very hard, yet he never manages to break free from the cycle of poverty. Because of his status, he is constantly on the outside of society and finds it challenging to succeed. The people at the bottom of Russian society are fixed there and unable to rise beyond the social hierarchy and earn respect and recognition on their own because of the country's rigid class system. This backdrop is reflected in Gorshkov's fate. "So it is equally true that a poor man doesn't like to have people peeping into his doghouse..... Valentina, why are you bullying me along with my enemies who are so devoted to undermining the reputation and self-respect of decent people?" he asks, struggling inside despite his hard effort. Why do you support my adversaries in their bullying of me, who are committed to the disgrace and self-respect of honorable men? The poor's internal instability and insecurity are reflected in their sensitivity to social perceptions, anxiety about their image, continual self-surveillance, and worry about potential unwanted remarks from others.

American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley put up the "looking glass self" theory in 1902. According to this idea, a person's self-concept is mostly developed through social interactions with other people, and other people's opinions about and responses to a person work as a mirror, reflecting the person an image of themselves that they may use to identify and assess themselves. Drawing upon the mirror self-theory to examine the psychological behavior of the characters in "Poor Folk," it is evident that the impoverished are preoccupied not just with their appearance and social standing but also with the opinions of others. This self-perception via social "mirrors" exposes their reliance on outside assessments and their insecurity regarding their value. Due to his political activity, Dostoevsky was banished to Siberia, when he gained a greater appreciation for social injustice and the plight of the lower classes. In "Poor Folk," the pessimistic feeling that there is no hope for the future no matter how hard one has worked in the past or the present is also a form of despair among the poor. This pessimism about how one's unique identity is perceived in society may add to the desperation of the impoverished, making it harder for them to see or seek the possibility of improving their circumstances.

4.2.2 Self-Censorship: Self-Assessment Based on the Fate of the Poor

The scene in "Poor Folk" where Javushkin receives money from Valenka should be a source of warmth and hope, but instead, it unintentionally awakens his feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. Upon seeing the silver kopecks, his heart overflows with profound regret for his ineptitude rather than thankfulness. He believes that he is not better than "the palm of his shoe" and compares himself to a "waste". This severe self-deprecation is an accurate representation of the substantial losses in the person's sense of self-worth brought on by their situation of poverty.

More importantly, the protagonist profoundly rejects both his worth and any potential virtues in the process of self-censorship. He fears turning into a "robber" and stealing the little belongings that the orphans own. This moral indignation is his steadfast demand and battle for humanity's honor. But when faced with the harshness of reality, this kind of tenacity seems so helpless that he ultimately succumbs to self-denial, thinking of himself as "inferior" and "detrimental to elegance." The protagonist's long-term struggle with poverty-related bad self-perception stems from social pressure and negative judgment. He can only carry out unending self-punishment and self-judgment in his heart as he cannot receive adequate acceptance and encouragement from the outer world. This psychological mechanism pushes him into an even more desperate situation by deepening his sense of inferiority and making it impossible for him to recognize his potential.

Xiangzi, on the other hand, has a social rank much lower than that of a cart driver in "Rickshaw." Despite Xiangzi's great will to fight for a better life, his identity limits him, therefore the social system always controls his destiny. Lau Shaw captures the bewilderment and powerlessness of the people at the bottom of the social scale over their identification through the portrayal of Xiangzi's identity. People at the bottom of the social hierarchy in early 20th-century China found it difficult to change their status due to traditional ideas and the social hierarchy, and their efforts and battles were frequently ineffective due to identity constraints. This background is accurately reflected in Xiangzi's fate. Despite his best attempts, he is ultimately brought down by the brutality of the society, which is a reflection of the exploitation and oppression of the lower classes in Chinese society. Lau Shaw was raised in a low-class household of cheongsams and was exposed to the struggles of the lower classes at an early age. In "Rickshaw," he uses Xiangzi's identity to highlight the misery of the underclass and their battle in an unfair world. In addition to being a personal tragedy, Xiangzi's fate serves as a microcosm of the entire culture and period.

5. Conclusion

Using the theories of "tragic consciousness" and Lau Shaw and Dostoevsky as examples, we examine the fate of the "little people" and the enduring social tensions they represent across historical periods. In addition to the submissive values of the "nobody" in that era's society, we can see the persecution of class oppression on women and their tenacity in resisting it, as exemplified by Valenka and Xiao Fuzi, with the aid of the similarities and differences between "Poor Folk" and "Rickshaw" in terms of the background of character creation, character fate, and characterization techniques. It also offers a window into the values of that era's culture and the submission and resistance of "nobody." Dostoevsky asserts that "nobody" is little in terms of social standing but not in terms of inner life. The emergence of nobody values can be understood as a protest against the depressing nature of society. Using the period as a starting point to delve deeper into the history of nobody and concentrating on the viewpoint of the lower class "nobody" is not only a fundamental method and a crucial concept for us to study the literary works, but it can also aid us in comprehending the existential misery and tragic reality of the lower class nobody that predominated in that era's society.

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