

An Analysis of the Characterization of Protagonist in *I'm a Fool*

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Abstract: Character is one of the key elements of a short story. Successful characterization directly related to the success of a short story. Taking the short story I'm a fool as an example, this paper summarizes the methods of successful characterization: indirect presentation, conflictive psychological descriptions, behavior consistence, proper motivation, being plausible, and creating authentic character with defects.

1 Introduction

Character, plot and environment are the three most important elements of a short story. They work together to show the specialty of a short story. In most short stories, special plot is designed and typical environment is chosen in purpose of creating a protagonist who represents a type of people or speaks for a group of people. Therefore, protagonist is the soul of a short story and directly related to the theme of a short story.

The short story I'm a Fool is written in first person viewpoint, which shows the features of character more plausibly. It narrates the protagonist's special experience. He was a swipec from a poor family. One day he attended a horse race to enjoy a kind of upper class life as he wished for a long time. To his great surprise he came across a noble girl whom he fell in love at first sight. To attract the girl's attention he formulated an elaborate plan to pretend to be a man from upper class through good clothes, twenty five cent cigars, etc. He thought that a few expensive cigars, a decent suit, a good seat and his lies would allow him to be accepted by the upper class. He was really successful in having a good conversation with her and her two partners. They enjoyed their rest time of that day. However, by the time they departed, the girl's suggestion of further communication by correspondence struck the protagonist deeply. He knew the correspondence would be in vain because of his lie. He hated himself for he was the most foolish one in the world to tell the lie.

In this short story the protagonist, the swipec's complex features are vividly shown. Zhu Liyuan says, "typical personality should not be simplified. Personality in literature should not be described as either perfect virtue or absolute villainy. " [1] It is well known that everyone has complex features. It's hard to say these features are good or bad. Human nature is not often entirely bad or perfectly good. However, it is the complex features that describe a lively person for readers. It is the complex features that close the distance between protagonist and readers. In some respects, fictional characters are even more believable and understandable than real people. For one thing, they are observed in certain typical situations and that serve to bring forth their character while the ordinary situations in daily life only occasionally do that. For another, their inner life can be viewed in some more ways like monologue, comments and so on, which are impossible in ordinary life. This essay is about to analyze the methods employed in successful characterization of the protagonist in I'm a fool.

2 The Methods Employed in Successful Characterization

2.1 Indirect Presentation

This short story is written in indirect presentation. "Indirect presentation of character is to show

the character in action, in thinking. Readers infer what he is like from what he thinks or says or does. 'Showing' is more demanding to both author and reader than 'telling', which is a direct way of characterization." [2] In *I'm a Fool* the author never directly commented on the character. Instead, let the character act and say as his will and clearly drew his thought from time to time. For example, when "I" attended the race, "I left the job at noon and had on my good clothes and my new brown derby hat I'd bought the Saturday before, and a stand-up collar... I went downtown and walked about with the dudes... I had forty dollars in my pockets and so I went into the West House, a big hotel, and walked up to the cigar stand." [3] These actions imply that the swiipe admired those who wore swell clothes because they stand for upper class and that the upper class way of life attracted him. What's more, he felt more or less ashamed of his status. It is not difficult to conclude that the boy was immature, because he simply considered wearing beautiful clothes, showing graceful manner, owning swell names, and showing generosity as the rich life.

2.2 Conflictive Psychological Descriptions

There are many psychological descriptions in the short story which reveal the boy's inner conflicts. For example: on one hand he tried every means to appear like a dude; on the other hand he conveyed his great contempt to those tycoons. He liked a man dressed up but not to put on airs. He bought the best seat for him but didn't enter into boxes because that's putting on too many airs. In the boy's deep heart he admired the luxurious life and wished to be a member of the rich people, so he worked hard for one taste of the enjoyment. However, he was not born with a silver spoon, which greatly limited his ambition. He had to come back to earth: he was poor. Therefore to find a balance for himself he blamed them as putting on airs

Look at another example and compare the two thoughts: "You can stick your colleges up your nose for all me. I guess I know where I got my education" [3] and "The young fellow was a nice guy, all right. He was the kind maybe that goes to college and then comes to be a lawyer or maybe a newspaper editor or something like that..." [3] It's not difficult to find that the swiipe looked down upon education while respected and admired the educated people. Actually his great satisfaction with his work and disdain to education also resulted from his instinctive willing of finding balance for himself. In other word, his pride of his job is formed by his self-abased psychology. He was too poor to get perfect education, but he wanted to be equal with the rich, so he compared with them with his special skill which was lacked by them. In this way he was superior to them. And only in this way can he find self-confidence for him. However, he was such a kind person that he had no hatred to the educated people and still respected them. Besides, these educated persons are all from upper class, so his admiration to this group of people also suggested his admiration to this class.

The conflictive psychological description plays a significant role in characterization. Various sharp conflicts create fresh, real and believable characters. Xu Peng says, "characters in literature help people to find out some profound meaning of life, essence of life and profound connotations of history." [4] Through the conflictive psychological description readers understand protagonist, understand people like them in their real life and even find some shadows of themselves. Therefore, conflictive psychological description is punch line.

2.3 Behavior Consistence

Characterization observes behavior consistence: characters do not behave one way on one occasion and another way on another occasion except that there is a proper reason for the change. There's no doubt that the swiipe's behavior is consistent from the beginning to the end. He lied to the peasants by saying he owned the horse in order to pretend to be a rich man. Latter he lied about himself and his background also to pretend to be an upper class man. His psychology never changed, so did his behavior. Therefore, his behavior is consistent.

2.4 Proper Motivation

"If the motivations are plausible, characters act believably." [2] The properly motivated behaviors show that the character is normal, reasonable and believable. Each of the swiipe's activity is

properly motivated. For instance, He wore the most beautiful clothes, bought the twenty five cent cigars, had a hack out to the races and bought the best seat, all for “put up a good front”[3] He concealed his real identity in front of Miss Woodbury because he was willing to be accepted by her.

2.5 Being Plausible or Lifelike

Literature starts from life and characters come from human beings. Readers like the authentic character rather than a perfect character. That’s why people need to read more books than Bible. Protagonist is a typical person who represents a group of people and collects all their personalities, so everyone can more or less find himself on the protagonist. Each aspect of his characteristics exists in people’s daily life.

Take his attitude to education and his job for example. He respected educated people while despised their education. Little education didn’t bother him much. He was proud of his own job, which has nothing to do with education. It seems to be silly but it is a way widely applied by people to keep balance in daily life. One can neither be prior nor inferior to others in every way. There is a saying that once God closes a door he will open a window for you. When one finds that one is inferior to others in some way, to keep psychological balance, he must compare with others in some other ways in which he is better than them. Then the rich are proud of their wealth because they can buy whatever they want, while the poor are proud of their friends because with their accompany they never feel lonely and are happy all the time. The intellectuals say they are knowledgeable while technicians say they are skillful. The urban citizens enjoy their convenient modern life while the countrymen intoxicate in the fresh air, pure spring and beautiful nature. If one can’t find out a good way to keep his psychological balance he must feel frustrated, because no one is better than others in every aspect and everyone wants to be better or at least equal with others. In this way, the swipe’s pride is a natural feeling. He looked down upon education actually because he couldn’t get that kind of formal education. However he was proud of his own job because he was more skillful than others in his job. He has conflict, so does everyone. There’s no doubt that everyone is a complex unit of conflicts. The protagonist’s complex thinking makes him lifelike.

Swipe is simple as most people at his age. For the boy who seized his job he “kept thinking of wagons running over him and bricks falling on his head as he walked along the street.”[3] This kind of thought is common for anyone in this condition. No one can be as kind as Jesus because no one can survive while starving. However he was simple and easygoing and finally decided “never mind him.”[3] The process of this thought brought life to the protagonist.

Plausibility of the swipe is also reflected by the description of his feeling when he fell in love with the girl at first sight. “you want that girl to be your wife, and you want nice things around her like flowers and swell clothes, and you want her to have the kids you’re going to have, and you want good music played and no ragtime...”[3]It was clear he had fell into love river completely. Anyone who had a similar experience would share his feeling. When he departed with Miss Woodbury he felt extremely regretful for his lie: “I’ll bet you what—if I had an arm broke right now or a train had run over my foot—I wouldn’t go to doctor at all. I’d go set down and let her hurt and hurt—that’s what I do.” [3] Such a thought is greatly suitable for an immature boy who just failed in love.

2.6 Creating an Authentic Character with Defects

No one is perfect. To be authentic, characters should be round ones. Swipe is an authentic character with defects. He was immature, simple, proud, and self-abased. He instinctively hated the rich and their education but also admired the luxurious life and educated people. Besides, he tried every means to get respect from others and wished to be accepted by upper class. For example, on the race stand he was so proud of the feeling of “sitting up there and feeling grand and being down there and looking up at the yaps and feeling grander and more important, too.”[3] This feeling implied his urgent need of being respected by others. He mentioned his grandfather from time to time implied his admiration of noble life and his inferiority complex feeling. He was happy to be respected greatly and was surely satisfied to enjoy the day with three noble young people. When he

found his lie separated him from the lovely lady, he felt extremely regretful. However, he incorrectly assumed the lie as the result of hatred caused by seeing the man who wore a Windsor tie and that he was a fool. This showed his ignorance. He could not find out the real reason which separated him from Miss Woodbury. From these different aspects a complex and authentic character is described.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, Sherwood Anderson successfully created a complex character from whom readers can find some common human natures. Sherwood Anderson not only created a swipe, but also deeply analyzed human nature. This paper summarizes some ways of successful characterization such as indirect presentation, conflictive psychological descriptions, behavior consistence, proper motivation, being plausible, and creating an authentic character with defects.

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