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The Significance of Symbolic Elements in Lu Xun's Short Stories

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Abstract

The present article interprets the symbolic elements in Lu Xun's short stories which have been neglected in earlier studies about Lu Xun. I intend to show that the most obvious symbols in his fiction, like the iron room, the cannibalism, etc., have their counter balance in the animal symbols present in his work. Following this idea, I will focus on his less famous stories, such as *A Comedy of Ducks* and *Some Rabbits and a Cat*.

Keywords: modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun, symbolic elements, *A Comedy of Ducks*, *Some Rabbits and a Cat*

1 Introduction

Lu Xun is known as the father of modern Chinese literature, a short story writer, an essayist, a poet, a translator, a social critic, a teacher and a lecturer. Above all, he was a great writer and thinker who longed for spiritual and mental freedom, but who was, due to his incredible literary talent and clear insights into Chinese history, culture and society, a “loner in the crowd”, entrapped in the “iron house” of the backward Chinese society of that time. Because his literary legacy is extremely rich, it is hard to classify his works and ascribe them to one literary trend. His short stories are attributed to realism, satiric realism, symbolic realism, symbolism and psychological symbolism. Jaroslav Průšek denoted them as “predominantly reminiscent and lyrical”. In my opinion, Lu Xun's fiction cannot

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be grasped in a single trend, but is composed of multiple trends clearly incorporated into his stories. I believe the principal element that connects these fragmented pieces in a deeply sensible whole is the symbolical meaning.

In this article I intend to show that the most obvious symbols in Lu Xun's fiction, like the iron room, the cannibalism, etc., have their counterbalance in the animal symbols present in his work. Following this idea, I will focus on the analyses of his less famous stories, such as "A Comedy of Ducks" and "Some Rabbits and a Cat", in which the author presents the problem inherent to the Chinese society, which prevents Chinese youth from imposing their ideas in order to change the society. Due to an extended use of symbols, Lu Xun's short stories carry a universal message that transcends the context of the 20th century China, and fit perfectly in today's society.

Quite a few sinologists already argued and presented evidence that Lu Xun is not simply a realistic writer: Fokkema in his study *Lu Xun: The Impact of Russian Literature* states that "the objective representation of social reality was not a value that inspired Lu Xun" (Fokkema 1977: 91). Fokkema also notes that Lu Xun certainly did not harbour the ideal of realism and naturalism according to which the writer is supposed to be merely a humble observer who must depict the world in objective manner and be able to completely separate reality from his creative sensibility, his inner state of mind, his beliefs, psychological traumas and childhood memories. (Fokkema 1977: 92) In his essay titled *How "The True Story of A Q" was Written* Lu Xun writes: "I only wish that as people say, I had written about a period in the past, but I fear what I saw was not the past but the future – even as much as from twenty to thirty years from now." (Lu 2003a: 317) It is quite clear that Lu Xun did not simply depict current situation in China, but concerned himself with much broader and far-reaching questions concerning Chinese national character and human nature in general. He does not see himself as a mere observer, but almost as a prophet who uses his highly developed sensibility to reveal problems concerning the cannibalistic, indifferent, apathetic, cruel human nature that needs to be cured by realizing its own wrongdoing. He saw himself as the "voice of China" as "warrior of the spirit" as he writes in his essay *Silent China*: "We have men but no voices, and how lonely that is! Can men be silent? No, not unless they are dead, or – to put it more politely – when they are dumb." (ibid: 330)

In his creative writings Lu Xun thus relied on his creative sensibility, his convictions, his memories and his trauma of early childhood, whether exaggerated and fictionalized or not. The melancholy, pessimism and fascination with the darker aspects of life and with death, mentioned by T. A. Hsia pervade his works and to use David Der-wei Wang's words "serve as a secret fountainhead of his literary inspiration" (Wang 2004: 22). Fokkema also pointed out that Lu Xun's taste for foreign literature and his choice for translation show that he had preference for "the complex of symbolic values conveyed by Russian literature" (Fokkema 1977: 90). The authors that he especially liked, like Byron, Shelly, Andreyev, Artsybashev, Garshin and Gogol to name just a few, regardless of whether or not they are officially stigmatized as exponents of realism, romanticism or symbolism, often resorted to, as Fokkema writes, "to romanticist devices as natural symbolism, mystification, the cult of heroism, and the irrational predilection for absurd exaggeration and irony" (ibid.). What I am trying to show is not that Lu Xun wasn't concerned with the events of his time, I am only trying to throw some light on Lu Xun as a creative writer and stress his ability to make his literary works timeless and to draw some attention to a different kind of interpretation of his creative writing, based on symbolic elements that connect individual, separate stories into a coherent whole, which alludes to some kind of meta-meaning, that surpasses time, space and nationality. Lu Xun himself wrote the following: "The happenings I described generally arose from something I had seen or heard, but I never relied entirely on facts. I just took one occurrence and modified or expanded it till it expressed what I had in mind." (Lu 2003b: 264). In my opinion, categorization of symbols and their analyses will eventually convey what he had in mind, and it will help us understand his deepest inner feelings, his beliefs and his traumas. Further, it will show us the essence of his creative writings and the message he tried to convey not only to his own but also to future generations. By focusing on the symbolical nature of his fictional writing we will neglect some other crucial aspects, but that doesn't mean that all additional dimensions of his work aren't present.

In this paper I shall only focus on the analysis and interpretation of the animalistic symbols in the stories *Some Rabbits and a Cat* and *A Comedy of Ducks*. The reason for this is that prevailing traditional interpretations usually focus on Lu Xun's more famous stories and thus neglect the importance of these two short stories that are thought as his less inspired works. (Lee 1987: 54) I believe that Lu Xun's intention in the two stories already mentioned was to transfer the human

realm to the animal realm, so he could once again express his central ideas about the world we are living in: the cannibalistic feast where the strong eat the weak. This central idea is timeless as it can be applied to any society at any time.

2 Depiction of Symbolic Elements in *Some Rabbits and a Cat*

In the story *Some Rabbits and a Cat* the gathering of children, adults and even a dog in a circle to see the new bunnies reminds us of the crowd gathering around the victim, who is about to be beheaded. In the case of rabbits, the crowd likewise came to feed its curiosity. Once they fed their curiosity, the Third Missus kept the bunnies penned up in a little yard behind the back window – she prepared a little “iron house” for them.

At the beginning of the story, we can read that “Third Missus bought her children two white bunnies”. (Lu 1990: 191) The narrator depicts them as “naive and trusting” (ibid.), but capable of “apprehensive and suspicious look too” (ibid.). The description of the bunnies can easily be translated into the human world. They represent a new life, the Chinese youth that is trying to survive in a hostile world full of predators. Rabbits are prey animals; they have a very fast reproductive rate, which gives them more chances to survive. If confronted by a potential threat, they usually do not resist or fight, but tend to freeze and observe. Rabbits appear in all world mythologies, beliefs and folklores. They are all alike, even in their contradictions, just as images of the moon. The moon connects rabbits to the ancient deity Mother Earth, with the symbolism of fertile and always renovating waters, vegetation, and never-ending revival of life itself in all its forms. Rabbits are lunar creatures, because they sleep during the day and run around during the night. The rabbit is also a symbol of fertility, and in China there is a belief that the female hare conceives merely by looking at the moon. However, the rabbit is still a weak animal, which is willing to sacrifice its childlike nature for future evolution. (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2006: 293–294)

The rabbits in Lu Xun’s story symbolize downtrodden people who still persist in their fight for life. Though constantly threatened by predators, they are still capable of producing enough offsprings not to die out. If we think of a quotation from the *Diary of a Madman*, we can depict some other symbolic meanings of the rabbit in Lu Xun’s stories: “Savage as a lion, timid as a rabbit, crafty as a fox ...” (Lu 1990: 35) According to Leo Ou-fan Lee’s interpretation of this quotation, the

world the Chinese were living in was a hierarchical nightmare, where the strong with lion's cruelty oppressed the weak, and the weak timidly like rabbits fawned upon those who possessed power. When the strong and the weak met for the first time, and they were not completely sure of their social positions, they both acted craftily like a fox until it became clear who is who. The rabbit is thus depicted as timid and represents the Chinese masses that have experienced so many difficulties for so long that they became indifferent, following only their instinct to reproduce.

We have timid rabbits on one side and a malicious predator on the other. The predator is the big black cat that killed the first pair of bunnies: "What we really had to guard against was that obnoxious black cat who often perched atop the low courtyard wall, watching them with savage eyes." (Lu 1990: 192) We must take into consideration that even well-fed domestic cats may hunt and kill – a fact that is comparable to the men-eating society in its metaphorical meaning. The cat thus symbolizes an oppressive, cannibalistic cultural, social and political system where the strong eat the weak. It belongs to the same family as the lion mentioned in a previous quotation. In the story the cat is placed upon the wall from where it is watching the rabbits. Height gives the cat a better observation point, allowing it to survey its territory. Lu Xun's big black cat could therefore symbolize the government that constantly surveys the frightened people, restricts their freedom and controls them by implementing a cannibalistic social system. In such a system, not only the strong devour the weak, but also the weak "eat" their own kind, the old "doom" the young by restricting their freedom and bringing them up in accordance with the old traditional system that supports cannibalism, causes the decline of humanity and hinders progress. When the rabbits in the story produced an offspring, the parents didn't look after their bunnies properly.

From then on, Third Missus not only detested the black cat but was also more than little put out with the parent rabbits... since the mother hadn't nursed them evenly, those bunnies in the first litter who had not been aggressive enough to get a teat probably had died long before the cat got the two we have seen. (Lu 1990: 194)

The question that arises is: How was mother China taking care of her children? Not only the repressive government, but also the traditional social system deeply inscribed in people's minds, are preventing youth from finding new ways, from abandoning the prevailing cannibalistic nature and from becoming "real human beings". If one is not aggressive enough, if he does not join the cannibals, he

prematurely meets death. Those who survive and are potential “warriors of the spirit” are killed by the cat. So the young, except for those who harbour a “slave mentality” and a “cannibalistic nature”, and are aggressive enough toward their own kind and obedient to those higher than themselves, have no chance to survive. In his essay entitled *Literature of a Revolutionary Period* Lu Xun wrote:

Those who are strong do not talk, they kill. The oppressed have only to say or write a few words to be killed; or, if lucky enough to escape, all they can do is shout, complain or protest, while those who are strong go on oppressing, ill-treating and killing them, and they are powerless to resist /.../ It is the same in animal kingdom. When a hawk catches a sparrow, the hawk is silent, the sparrow is the one to cry out. When a cat catches a mouse, the cat is silent, the mouse is the only one to cry out. And the one that can only cry ends by being eaten by the one that is silent. (Lu 2003a: 335)

After the death of the bunnies, the narrator thinks about all the lives that were lost. He sympathizes with all the people who were and will be “eaten” by the cannibals and forgotten. Then he reveals his own feelings towards the big black cat that killed the bunnies. Killing the “young innocent children” represents for the narrator an unfounded violence that draws him to react and re-establish justice, and the story ends in the following way:

That black cat is not going to strut and swagger on top of that wall for much longer, I promised myself decisively. Without premeditation on my part, my glance fell on a bottle of potassium cyanide that was stored inside the bookcase. (Lu 1990: 196)

The final passage can again be read in two different ways. It could mean that violence releases the desire for revenge and the narrator gets caught in the same pattern of hierarchical system where the strong devour the weak. The other more probable explanation is that he wishes to get rid of the predator that will continue to kill bunnies; by killing the cat, the narrator, named Xun (as Lu Xun), wants to destroy the social system based on the predator-prey pattern.

3 Ducks and Tadpoles as Animalistic Symbolic Elements in the Story *A Comedy of Ducks*

In the story *A Comedy of Ducks*, we come across the same image of cannibalism. What is new is that the big and vicious black cat is replaced by the cute little

ducklings – the calculative government is replaced by a naïve and ignorant crowd, which unconsciously follows the same patterns of behaviour, and devours the very people who could bring changes. At the beginning of the story, we learn that a blind Russian poet visited Lu Xun's family and stayed in Zhou's family compound while he was teaching Esperanto in Beijing. The first thing that attracts our attention is that Eroshenko is the one who reveals the truth about China to Lu Xun. When Eroshenko comes to Beijing, he complains to Lu Xun: "It's quiet here, too quiet, might as well be living in the middle of a desert!" (Lu 1990: 197) The truth about "silent" China which has "men but no voices" was revealed to the narrator through the presence of the other, a foreigner, a blind poet from Russia, a country whose writers Lu Xun deeply admired. China and her people became so apathetic that they were no longer capable of realizing the situation they have found themselves in. To describe it, Lu Xun uses the words from the book *The Family Sayings of Confucius*: "Stay too long in a room filled with orchids and you no longer notice their fragrance." (ibid.) In other words, before his friend's visit, Lu Xun went numb and had unconsciously reconciled himself with his country's status quo.

In the third paragraph of the story, the narrator mentions that there is no spring or autumn in Beijing. "The end of winter was tacked onto the beginning of summer, and as soon as summer was past, winter started right in all over again." (ibid.) Spring and autumn are both transitional periods that enable nature its rebirth. Spring is broadly associated with the concepts of rebirth and renewal. In spring, new life is being born. More generally the term is used as a metaphor for the start of better times. Autumn is associated with the transition from warm to cold weather. Most ancient cultures featured autumnal celebrations of the harvest, often the most important on their calendar. If we connect the absence of the two seasons with the social and political atmosphere in China (at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), we can conclude that after the winter – after the hardships and suffering of the people – immediately begins the summer – the suffering results in rebellion or revolution and people are full of enthusiasm and hope for a better future. After the summer, after the passionate revolutionary period, the winter comes again and the suffering continues, no spring and no autumn.

Eroshenko then compares China to Burma where "there is music everywhere" (ibid.: 198), where the insects sing and their calls blend together in a symphony. Burma was certainly not as silent as China. Eroshenko expresses his

disappointment by stating: “You don’t even have frogs in Beijing” (ibid.). He learns from Lu Xun that there are plenty of frogs in Beijing and decides to break the tormenting silence by buying tadpoles that will eventually become frogs. In metaphorical sense, by raising frogs, Eroshenko would once again give voice to China. The tadpoles, as the bunnies in previous story, represent Chinese youth who is eager to learn and grow.

Unfortunately, a peasant came with ducklings one morning, and because they were so lovable, Eroshenko could not resist and bought four of them. But the cute little ducklings ate all the frog babies, just when they grew their legs, yet before they had a chance to evolve completely. “ ‘Mr. Airy-send-go, they’re all gone. The frog babies are all gone!’ reported the youngest of the children excitedly /.../ ‘What, the tadpoles?’ ... ‘Oh, no!’ ” (Lu 1990: 200) Eroshenko then left China for Russia, and in silent China the two seasons changed again. The story ends in the following way:

Now we are again at the juncture between the end of summer and the beginning of winter. We have had no news at all of Eroshenko... Although he is gone, four ducks are quacking away for all they are worth in the midst of this ‘lonely desert’. (Lu 1990: 200–201)

Even Eroshenko, a foreigner, despite all his efforts (with the tadpoles and the students) could not wake up the silent China. After he left Beijing China was still a “lonely dessert”, as it used to be.

4 Conclusion

I believe that both Lu Xun’s short stories *Some Rabbits and a Cat* and *A Comedy of Ducks* carry the same central message as his other more famous stories: China with her cannibalistic social system, where the strong devoured the weak, where new prosperous lives were lost without notice, where people were not conscious of loneliness, apathy and indifference, where a vicious black cat as well as lovable ducklings ate baby rabbits and baby frogs. It was condemned to silence, and those few individuals who were conscious of this silence were condemned to loneliness. Lu Xun often compared the human world to the animal realm. He wrote about sheep and beasts, about prey and predator animals, associated the crowd with ducks, etc. All these reasons show that behind these stories, which seem like a comedy, lurks something more. Through the animal realm, Lu Xun tries to direct

our attention to the disease called the “old way in perpetuity” (Denton 1996: 102). With the theme of men-eating society, transferred to the animalistic realm, Lu Xun presented the problem inherent to the Chinese society of that time, which prevented Chinese youth from imposing their ideas in order to change the society. Owing to an extended use of symbols, Lu Xun’s short stories carry a universal message that transcends the context of the 20th century China.

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