

Article

Non-traditional Narrative in Yu Dafu's "Sinking" from an Existentialist Perspective

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Abstract: Yu Dafu rose to fame in the literary world through his bold self-exposure in narration. His masterpiece, *Sinking*, possesses both the individualism of the Japanese "I-novel" (Shishōsetsu) and intense patriotic enthusiasm. Since its publication, Yu Dafu's fiction has been the subject of constant controversy. Experts at home and abroad have attempted to interpret it from various perspectives, such as narrative artistic features, narrative techniques, and the influence of foreign writers' trends of thought, achieving significant results. However, there is a scarcity of research in the academic community that attempts to analyze Yu Dafu's fiction from the angle of the writer's creative philosophy, representing a missing perspective in literary criticism. This paper attempts to cut in from an existentialist perspective, using *Sinking* as an example to re-interpret Yu Dafu's fiction. Switching the philosophical perspective not only helps the academic community better interpret his works but is also of great assistance in understanding and grasping the author's inner world, which is conducive to analyzing his unique creative thoughts.

Keywords: Yu Dafu; Chinese literature; narratology; existentialism; May Fourth Movement literature

1. Yu Dafu's Existentialist Tendencies

Yu Dafu's existentialist tendencies were little known within the "Creation Society." Even 100 years later, when the Creation Society's "Shanghai Coffee" at No. 41 Mainali, North Sichuan Road, was razed to the ground, this deep-seated pessimism and "existentialist" value system still lingered. Since returning to China, Yu Dafu emphasized the creation of "autobiography," making self-dissection and self-reflection the conscious pursuit of his fiction writing.

The opening of *Sinking* is striking, as if to set the tone: "He had been feeling lonely and cold to a pitiable degree lately." It seems the reader understands the direction that follows, but Yu Dafu suddenly shifts his tone. After narrating the background, he uses a passage of scenery description, mixing parallel and vernacular styles, to dizzy the reader. Some readers might directly conclude: this must be the endowment of emotion into scenery. After a passage of "unintelligible self-pitying words of a youth" and a poem by Wordsworth, the reader begins to grow impatient. It seems Yu Dafu can only throw out another lament:

"After reading it through at once, my intense desire had to be extinguished. At that time, I had nothing left to forget; without dreams, how can one go on?" [1].

Sentimental people might already be empathizing by this point. But Yu Dafu was inherently a man who sowed his affections everywhere. Although he had not yet put into practice his routine of the sickly, sentimental young master when writing *Sinking*, the signs were already visible. At the time, he was already married to Sun Quan. Although it was an out-and-out old-style wedding, Yu Dafu was actually "lucky"-the two had known each other for less than a month but frequently wrote letters to express their feelings and exchanged poems; in reality, there was more affection than in the average arranged

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marriage. However, Yu Dafu frequently felt "nauseated" by his wife's bound feet. This nausea did not come only from the physiological aspect. According to Yu Dafu's own preface, he had never actually seen his wife's feet without the binding cloth; mere imagination was enough to cause nausea. This was a nausea regarding culture, which led to his later longing for and perversion toward the slightly more modern foreign women he met in Japan.

Therefore, in the first section, Yu Dafu had actually already planted the seed of "self-dissection" for the reader. He wished he could destroy himself immediately, waiting only for the reader to finish the first section when their patience was exhausted, before entering Yu Dafu's own rhythm of "alienation." Entering the second section, the author suddenly throws out the word "hypochondria." Readers sensitive to writing will realize: he has taken his own bait and will now fully satisfy the reader's expectations of the protagonist. In the remaining plot, the author greatly satisfies the readers' voyeuristic desires. He displays all of this character's experiences to the reader through extensive self-narration and self-lamentation. While the reader is still constructing the contours and lines of this character amidst the complex information, Yu Dafu has already planted the seeds of the ending.

When "I" arrive at the inn, the sudden insertion of obscure content about masturbation, repeated and intense ideological struggles, and sexual fantasies about the innkeeper's daughter-it is like adding a violent, excessive dose of savage vitality to a leisurely poem, making it feel inevitable yet catching one off guard. Nabokov said: My characters are galley slaves. E.M. Forster, however, once said: The main characters in a novel can control and dictate the progress of the novel. Compared to the two, Yu Dafu is more like Shakespeare writing *King Lear*-like a tolerant father, allowing his son to express himself freely in the first part of the story, where the novel's progress is entirely controlled by the character. But after a certain point in time, this father suddenly becomes strict; he crudely creates incidents, causing the writer's surrogate in the text to suffer a crisis. The reader begins to realize what must inevitably happen next, as Yu Dafu's large hand quietly reaches over. Looking back suddenly, at this moment, this ordinary adolescent "stranger" begins to reveal his nothingness and his desire for exploration—"Life lasts a hundred years, but youth is only a span of seven or eight years. These best and most beautiful seven or eight years, I am forced to waste in this heartless island nation. Pity that I am already twenty-one this year." even though he does not know what he wants to explore. He feels time passing and must explore something to define his existence. It is at this moment that Yu Dafu's latent existentialist tendencies become apparent [2].

2. Internal Consciousness Tendencies from an Existentialist Perspective

The most obvious characteristic of existentialist fiction lies in definite nothingness and the constant search for existence.

In *Sinking*, everything presented by the character in the first four sections is intended to present "the psychology of a sick youth, which can also be said to be an anatomy of youth hypochondria, carrying within it the anguish of modern man-namely, the demands of sex and the conflict between flesh and spirit." Because it is based on the form of the "I-novel," Yu Dafu pursues a kind of immersive writing in his expression, that is, like writing a psychological profile of himself, allowing a definite sense of nothingness-one that immerses him in the character and that young people can empathize with-to emerge. In the next step, Yu Dafu jumps out of the original framework; constant internal scrutiny prevents him from writing in such a "sinking" manner any longer, and the seeds planted by the writer begin to take effect [3]. This definite emptiness reaches its peak after the protagonist peeps at the innkeeper's daughter taking a bath. After the character's (or rather the writer's own) voyeuristic desires, inner longing for sex, and the "dark side of man" regarding emotion are completely exploded, the heart of a flesh-and-blood youth with hypochondria has been completely dissected. The work of the writer creating a

nihilist and then destroying a nihilist is ready. The character begins to slide into exploring his own existence, or going a step further-exploring a *definite* existence. Starting from the original "Eve" of love supremacy, through the mixed influence of perceived rejection, humiliation, and the inferiority complex of a citizen from a weak nation, to the guilt regarding his own masturbation, and finally reaching a peak under the disappointment in the certainty of his physical existence and the alienation of his evaluation of surrounding things, he needs to find something definite to define his existence. Thus, the subsequent trip to the red-light district to find the definite existence of spirit and flesh became inevitable. Looking for existence in a red-light district is in itself an absurd thing, but the protagonist, like Sisyphus, still wants to find "definite happiness." The result, of course, can be imagined. After the final journey to find existence also declares failure, "I" commit suicide. Camus said: "Suicide, in a sense, and as in melodrama, is a confession. It is a confession that one is outstripped by life or that one does not understand it." We do not know whether Yu Dafu felt the absurdity of estrangement from society after losing his virginity, but as the article proceeds to this point, we see the confession of a patriot regarding society and life-he found existence here instead-definite disappointment and abandonment. Thus, an anti-Sisyphus character appeared [4].

In terms of the overall context of the article, it is hard to say that it is a work with a specific nature of tendency, but in the main narration and the psychological profiling of the character, we can easily see the nothingness and emptiness hidden within. But Yu Dafu is not prepared to carry this through to the end; he still wants the character to find a definite existence-even if it is a spiritual existence. So Yu Dafu allows the character to finally achieve a sublimation of "conflict between spirit and flesh" in the embrace of patriotism, but it fails. What we see is merely a character exploring definite existence like Don Juan. Not only the "I" suffering from hypochondria in *Sinking*, but also Mr. Zhu who is "mentally abnormal" in *Early Morning with Light Snow*, Wenpu who seeks famous doctors to treat his blood-spitting disease in Dongziguang, and the protagonist recuperating in City A in *The Stray Sheep*, all possess a tendency and action to explore definite existence from emptiness. It can be said that in Yu Dafu's works, the internal existentialist tendency is quite obvious.

3. "Superfluous Men" and "The Stranger"

In Yu Dafu's fictional works, the "superfluous man" is a literary group image that cannot be ignored. Most of them are dissatisfied with and feel inferior about their current status, often showing momentary impulses and spirit, sensitive and self-pitying. They are sandwiched between the times and society, between nature and traditional feudal rituals, feeling constant pressure and repression. The famous image of "The Stranger" (L'Étranger) created by Camus resonates with the image of the "superfluous man" to some extent. The "Stranger" image is a typical existentialist character image, not only out of tune with society but also estranged from various conceptual ethics and universal metaphysical things. The "superfluous man" image is similar to the "Stranger" image in several aspects, possessing strong existentialist colors.

3.1. Opposition to Society

The difference between the two is manifested in the degree of opposition to society. In *The Stranger*, Meursault's estrangement from society is deep-rooted, but in *Sinking*, "I" manifests more as a kind of initial withdrawal reaction from society. "I" still want to achieve something in society, and the opposition to society is more due to the alienation of the mind of a young man suffering discrimination and humiliation in a foreign land. However, the two only differ in degree and subtle causes. Whether in the external manifestation of having more thoughts than actions, or the internal natural sense of escape inherent to society, they are similar. When creating "superfluous men," Yu Dafu himself carried a certain consciousness of escaping into Zen Buddhism. For example, in *Dingchan*

(Settling Meditation): "Picking a flower, I wish to settle my Zen heart; dare I be frivolous and learn from the youth again?" Or in Jiaoshu (Banana Leaf Calligraphy): "Tomorrow I intend to wander away like an immortal; I write on a banana leaf to make an appointment with the old monk." All of these reveal an intention to escape society. In *Sinking*, "I" express dissatisfaction with this society several times [5]. After breaking off relations with Japanese classmates, Chinese classmates, and the eldest brother, the opposition between "I" and society becomes more obvious. Upon finishing the narration of moving into the empty courtyard, the self-evaluation is—"Apart from blaming others and cursing myself, there was nothing else to do." Unlike the opposition hidden in self-blame, in the state of long-term self-pity and self-resentment, the mentally extremely unstable "I" finally reveals a bit of an aura of opposition:

"Forgiven! Forgiven! Whatever offenses you people of the world have committed against me, I forgive you all! Come, come, all of you come and make peace with me!"

This utterance, extremely rich in the style of Russian forgiveness, allows one to clearly feel the relationship between the character and society, the contradiction within the opposition, the sense of prejudice against society, and the strangeness of integration. The character's movement toward becoming a stranger to society is irreversible [6].

3.2. Self-Absurdity

Absurdity, nothingness, and existence are several major factors of existentialist fiction. The Stranger possesses a rich aura of absurdity. Whether it is the typical Meursault or the atypical stranger—the doctor in *The Plague*—it lies in perceiving the absurdity felt when one is in society, which intensifies the confrontation with the status quo. The absurdity of the "superfluous man" image is often expressed using dramatic techniques. For example, the contrast before and after the song of *Mignon* in *Moving South* and the contrast with the status quo utilize cultural dislocation to create an absurd effect. Using the absurd plot where the lover does not sympathize with the Japanese girl at the critical moment but begins to pity himself, making the girl's situation appear even more nondescript, expresses the protagonist's own absurdity and his own perception of absurdity. In *Sinking*, the shaping of absurdity is concentrated on the "perverted" period of "sexual frustration."

"After he committed the sin, he would often deeply repent, gnashing his teeth and saying he would never commit it again next time. However, when that time came the next day, all sorts of fantasies would vividly come before his eyes again. The remnants of 'Eve' he usually saw would all come naked to seduce him... After committing the crime, he would go to the library to look up medical books [7]. The medical books all monotonously said that this kind of crime was most harmful to the body. From then on, his fear increased day by day... He thought of Gogol and felt a little relieved because the author of *Dead Souls* was the same as him. However, this was merely self-consolation; there was always a great anxiety existing in his chest."

This young man in a period of "sexual frustration" repeatedly wanders between self-blame and sexual pursuit, trying to use "scientific" explanations to justify the legitimacy of his sexual pursuit. This seeking of external affirmation for legitimacy is understandable and fits the psychology of a young person. But comparing it with Pamuk's description of the protagonist in *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, one can see the absurdity of this young man—he is exploring the legitimacy of his reasons with a pre-existing negation. In other words, he does not want to seek the correct answer at all. At this time, an illogical, dislocated absurdity emerges. This *a priori* negation, after several factual negations, turns into fear, into fear of the existence of his own actions. This young man finally found an example in a "literary senior" and received temporary comfort. But the reader's discomfort has already accumulated, and the feeling of absurdity becomes stronger and stronger. In the end, the fear and guilt regarding masturbation and the unstoppable subjective pursuit form a compelling manifestation of absurdity. On this point, Yu Dafu fully expressed the

peculiar perception of a person falling into the trap of his own consciousness, creating absurdity.

3.3. *Morbid Pursuit and Twisted Personality*

In *Sinking*, love supremacy is described as extremely morbid:

"If there were a woman, whether beautiful or ugly, who could love me sincerely and truly, I would be willing to die for her. What I demand is the love of the opposite sex! Oh Heaven, oh Heaven, I do not want knowledge, I do not want fame, nor do I want that useless money. If you can grant me an 'Eve' from the Garden of Eden, so that her body and soul belong entirely to me, I will be satisfied."

Although this pursuit is placed on a sensitive character with youth hypochondria, one can still feel the desire, the hazy ambiguity, the subtle state of mind, and the psychological profile of a perverted, twisted youth. One can see the absurd morbidity of a man changing from being flustered in front of women to gradually becoming twisted on the road of "sexual frustration." The collective morbidity in *The Plague* and its description of individual morbidity have the same effect; both express the alienation of man under the invisible internal pressure of society, and the morbid thinking caused by perceiving the fact of absurdity in an irrational desert but lacking experience.

3.4. *The Path of Exploring Existence*

As a leading general of the May Fourth New Literature, Yu Dafu was at the forefront of the path of exploration. However, his contemporaries did not all know what he was exploring. Liu Haisu once evaluated Yu Dafu as "Poetry first, prose second, fiction third," which was completely contrary to the evaluation at the time, but now it seems quite prescient. Yu Dafu's intention in writing fiction lay in dissecting the morbid young people under the tide of the times. Regarding big issues like existentialism, he mainly maintained a wait-and-see attitude; his fiction rarely sees contemplation of "big questions." But it is undeniable that Yu Dafu was constantly exploring a way out. He was not satisfied with mere depiction and presentation but hoped that there would be new solutions and breakthroughs for the status quo. In other words, he was craving a kind of certainty. This is a major characteristic of existentialism.

When describing the individual morbidity of the "superfluous men" in his novels, Yu Dafu often pursued a kind of unconscious immersive writing, and the presentation effect was often full of infectious power. But unlike the writing of the Japanese "I-novel," Yu Dafu often unfolded descriptions of the character's morbid features within the unconscious.

"When he proved himself to be the most miserable person in the world, his tears flowed down like a waterfall. While he was crying there, a soft voice in the air seemed to say to him: ..."

The description of individual morbidity was expressed in immersive lyrical description. This description is similar to the description of collective morbidity during the plague in the whole city in *The Plague*. The analysis of morbid pursuit and twisted personality is quite characteristic of existentialism—"Description, this is the last attempt of absurd thought... Explanation is futile, but sensation remains, and with sensation, there is the constant call of a world that is inexhaustible in quantity. Here people understand the place of the work of art."

In summary, we can infer that in his constant exploration, what he sought was a kind of certainty—a kind of existence. Within the unconscious, this existentialism of exploring existence also flowed into the fiction, becoming one of the cores of the novel, and invisibly created the enduring vitality of Yu Dafu's fiction.

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