



Depiction of Life Contradictions and the Character of Strangers in "One Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words": A Case Study

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Abstract. The contradictions in life and the characterization of strangers are common themes in literary works. By depicting the contradictions and conflicts that characters face in their lives, as well as their different personalities in foreign environments, writers are able to show the complexity and diversity of human nature. In the depiction of life contradictions, writers often reveal the various struggles and conflicts that people face in real life, such as social class contradictions, family contradictions, marriage contradictions and so on. These contradictions not only reflect the relationship between individuals and the environment and others, but also reflect social and cultural problems. By depicting these contradictions, the writer can arouse resonance and reflection in the reader, prompting people to think about social phenomena and personal fate. The characterization of alien character involves the personality characteristics and attitudes that people show in the strange environment. When a person is far from home and in an unfamiliar place, they often face the challenge of adapting and may feel lonely, confused, helpless, etc. Some people may become open, optimistic, brave to face difficulties and take the initiative to adapt to the new environment. And some people may become closed, resistant, stubborn, difficult to integrate into the new environment. The characterization of alien characters aims to present these different personality characteristics and show the challenges, changes and growth that people face in a foreign land.

Keywords: One Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words, Liu Zhenyun, Depiction of life Contradictions, Character of Strangers, Symbolic meaning

1 Introduction

Contradictions and conflicts are crucial elements that drive the development of plots in literary creation. In novel writing, contradictions have a significant impact on the progression of the story's mainline. The foundation of novel creation is fiction, and any fictional text must be based on the author's aesthetic foundation to engage readers. The relationship between readers and authors is often nuanced. From a literary standpoint, readers can typically be divided into two categories: professional readers

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and ordinary readers. Professional readers mainly refer to literary critics, while ordinary readers refer to the general public who read books. When writers engage in literary creation, they often involuntarily set the target audience of the text, with most writers leaning towards ordinary readers. Although ordinary readers may differ slightly from professionals in terms of aesthetics and theory, they are the primary audience for most writers' works. In the process of reading novels, ordinary readers often seek a form of spiritual catharsis, venting their negative emotions through reading, correcting their distorted psychological state, and gaining emotional satisfaction. This is also known as the "purification" effect in literary theory.¹ To achieve this "purification" effect, writers can employ the most direct and effective method of setting up contradictions and conflicts in the plot, enabling readers to achieve emotional resonance in the process of conflict resolution and emotional catharsis.

Liu Zhenyun is a prominent contemporary writer from Henan, known for his numerous popular literary works. One of his most widely circulated novels is "One Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words," which received high acclaim from industry professionals upon its publication. Five major literary critics in Beijing hailed it as the Chinese version of "One Hundred Years of Solitude." The novel features a diverse cast of strangers, such as Duan Pangzi, a blacksmith from Anhui, the principal Lao Hu and his assistant Xiao Han who travel a long distance for work, the old Pei who trades donkeys in Inner Mongolia, the private tutor Lao Wang, and the protagonists Wu Moyi and Niu Aiguo. Each character left their hometown for different reasons, experienced different hardships, and had distinct outcomes. Through their struggles and experiences, the author portrays a unique sense of loneliness and friendship among the Chinese people. An analysis of the role of these strangers in the novel from a literary creation perspective reveals the relationship between character development and the portrayal of conflicts in "One Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words."

2 The Art of Conflict Development in the Novel

The novel explores various conflicts, including those between strangers and locals, individual spiritual conflicts, and conflicts that combine both life and spiritual elements. These conflicts play a pivotal role in shaping the personalities of the strangers in the novel and highlighting their unique characteristics.² The first type of stranger introduced in the novel is Duan Pangzi, a blacksmith from Anhui who meets a local blacksmith named Lao Li upon his arrival. Their conflict arises due to their competition for limited resources. Lao Li rushes his work and produces subpar ironware, while Duan Pangzi is meticulous and produces high-quality ironware. In an attempt to outdo each other and gain recognition from the locals, Lao Li showcases his skills by making ironware for his mother's birthday celebration, while Duan Pangzi promotes his craft by celebrating his child's one-month birthday. Despite their efforts, neither emerges as the clear winner. Through this conflict, the author effectively portrays Duan Pangzi's calm and rational personality. He is observant and decisive, responding to Lao Li's challenge in the same manner, and ultimately succeeds in establishing himself in the local community.

The conflict between Duan Pangzi, as a representative of the strangers, and Lao Li, as a representative of the locals, effectively shapes the personality traits of the strangers in the novel. The locals are a geographical concept referring to a group of people distinguished by their region, with both exclusive and inclusive traits. While exclusivity manifests in their conflicting interests with the strangers, compatibility is evident in their shared interests. Lao Li, the local blacksmith, rejects Duan Pangzi, the outsider, primarily due to their competition for resources. However, other residents welcome Duan Pangzi due to his superior blacksmithing skills. Similar conflicts between locals and strangers also occur between Yang Baishun and his master, Lao Zeng. While Lao Zeng was a widower, he was kind and affectionate towards his well-behaved and quiet apprentice, Yang Baishun. However, after getting married, he became afraid that Yang Baishun would covet his property and began to guard against him, causing tension between them. For Lao Zeng, Yang Baishun was an outsider, while his wife was his family. Ultimately, he gave up on Yang Baishun for the sake of his family.

From the aforementioned examples, it is evident that the opposing relationships between blacksmith Lao Li and Duan Pangzi, as well as between Lao Zeng and Yang Baishun, are fundamentally the same. The antagonism between Lao Li and Duan Pangzi stems from an excessive emphasis on interests, leading to a conflict between locals and strangers. Similarly, the conflict between Lao Zeng and Yang Baishun also arises from an overemphasis on interests, resulting in a conflict between master and apprentice. Hence, it is possible to succinctly express the conflicts arising from disagreements over interests between locals and strangers in Liu Zhenyun's novels in the following manner:

A: B=C:D (where A represents the local blacksmith Lao Li, B represents the stranger Duan Pangzi, C represents the local Lao Zeng, and D represents the outsider Yang Baishun). Ultimately, the four different elements in the novel come down to a conflict between two groups: the locals and the strangers. Different events with similar functional features represent the conflicts between the two sides. For instance, A, which represents "excessive emphasis on interests," is a group of events that aim to attack the stranger at all costs to maximize one's interests. On the other hand, B is an event where the stranger immediately retaliates after being attacked by the locals. The conflict between A and B is the primary method used by the author to shape the personality traits of the strangers. Through the portrayal of the conflicts between the two sides, the root of the conflict between the locals and strangers is revealed, and the strangers' primary characteristics are more fully displayed in this series of conflicting events.

3 Depicting Character Traits Through Conflicts

Conflict is a common element in literary works, present not only in the plot but also in the portrayal of character traits. In the novel "A Sentence is Worth Ten Thousand," the author delves into the complexity and multifaceted nature of human beings by showcasing the inner conflicts of the characters. As outsiders from other regions, conflicts

become the primary means of depicting the character traits of these individuals. The impact of these conflicts on the personality traits of the outsiders is manifested in several ways, including:

3.1 Depicting Character Traits Through Economic Conflicts

As outsiders from other regions, the protagonists in "A Sentence is Worth Ten Thousand" leave their hometowns for survival or psychological reasons, becoming wanderers in new territories. In their new surroundings, conflicts arise, both internal and external, reflecting people's genuine reactions to their social environment. The inner conflicts of the outsiders in the novel arise from conflicting desires, motives, and values. For example, Duan Pangzi, a stranger in the town, competes with the local blacksmith Lao Li to establish himself in the area. Although his motives and goals are impure, this competition portrays the struggles of the outsiders, creating a character who is reserved and capable.

The growth of the market economy has led to economic development, but the outsiders who have left their homes and fields have no other means of income and must compete with the locals in various economic aspects, inevitably leading to economic conflicts. The economic conflicts in "A Sentence is Worth Ten Thousand" realistically depict the hardships of outsiders who go out to do business in a market economy, resulting in more comprehensive and authentic character portrayals.

3.2 Depicting Psychological States Through Family Conflicts

To integrate into the culture of a new region, outsiders must not only resolve economic conflicts but also face the challenges of family conflicts. As an important environment for individual growth, the family has a profound impact on a person's identity, emotions, and values. In a new environment, family conflicts can be essential elements in revealing the psychological states of characters and the challenges of integration.

Firstly, family conflicts can reflect struggles with identity. For example, Yang Baishun, a stranger, is apprenticed to Lao Zeng, a pig butcher, but is subsequently expelled from the house. Lao Zeng, a simple-minded pig butcher, begins to distance himself from Yang Baishun after remarrying. In an unfamiliar cultural environment, Yang Baishun is unable to resolve the conflicts within Lao Zeng's family. As an apprentice, he cannot earn the trust of his teacher's wife or his teacher himself. Yang Baishun once regarded Lao Zeng as his father, but the instigation of his stepmother has completely severed his path of apprenticeship, forcing him to reconsider his identity and make a new choice. As an outsider, Yang Baishun tries to improve his relationship with Lao Zeng's family, balancing his individual needs with the needs of his teacher's family, but ultimately fails. The portrayal of family conflicts during Yang Baishun's apprenticeship in "A Sentence is Worth Ten Thousand" reveals his inner struggles and exploration, as well as his growth in identity.

"A Sentence is Worth Ten Thousand" is a novel that portrays the contradictions of life and the character of outsiders. By depicting the living difficulties and psycholog-

ical struggles faced by the protagonist as an outsider, the book reveals the complexity of contradictions and the character of outsiders.

Moreover, the book reveals the inner struggles and confusion of outsiders through their family conflicts. For instance, Yang Baishun, a young man from the countryside, seeks a better life in another village due to poverty. However, he faces work pressure, economic difficulties, and unfair treatment from his teacher. These life conflicts make Yang Baishun feel trapped and confused, unsure of how to deal with and resolve his difficulties. By showcasing Yang Baishun's inner struggles in the face of life conflicts, the book portrays his character traits, such as resilience, persistence, and bravery in facing challenges

4 Symbolic meaning portrayed in contradictions

Similarly, some plot events in novels also have unique symbolic meanings. Take the event of "speaking" as an example. This is the key content that the novel "One Word Tops Ten Thousand Words" wants to express, and it is also the problem that everyone in the story faces. "Speaking" is used as a tool for verbal communication in ordinary interpersonal communication, but in the novel, it is given a unique symbolic meaning and becomes a symbol of human loneliness. Taking the experience of Mr. Pei and his friend Mr. Zeng in speaking as an example, Mr. Pei was once actively pursuing his life goals when he was young, but accidentally revealed his true identity while playing with a woman, which brought him trouble and had to stop wandering and spend his life in obscurity in his hometown. Similarly, Mr. Yang also left his master Mr. Zeng and embarked on a wandering path because of the words he spoke. Both of them suffered losses in speaking, which was a ridiculous and reasonable coincidence. For Mr. Pei, speaking is a tool he must use in business and also a way for him to relieve his inner loneliness. Because he speaks well, he won the heart of a Mongolian woman and became her lover. But because he spoke too well and accidentally revealed his true address, he was blackmailed by the woman's husband and was caught by his own daughter-in-law Mrs. Cai. He had to stay in Yanjin as a barber, which had a serious impact on him. He could no longer talk as before, and the pain caused by language made him begin to become silent, from chatting everything to saying only a few sentences a year. Mr. Pei's losses in speaking not only ruined his career but also trapped him in Yanjin forever. Mr. Yang also suffered losses in speaking. After becoming Mr. Zeng's apprentice as a pig butcher, the two of them had a period of warm years. However, since Mr. Zeng remarried, their lives have changed completely. He began to dislike his apprentice because of his wife's instigation, which caused great displeasure and grievance in Mr. Yang's heart. After getting drunk one day, he unintentionally told his grievances to his drinking buddy, but was reported to Mr. Zeng by someone with malicious intent. In addition to his wife's instigation, the master and apprentice were completely estranged. However, the losses in speaking did not stop there. After marrying Wu Xiangxiang, he wanted to live a quiet life, but because he was tongue-tied and had nothing to say to Wu Xiangxiang, he eventually caused her to have other thoughts and elope with the silversmith Mr. Gao next door. He spent his

whole life looking for a friend who could speak with him, but these friends always had different thoughts. Mr. Gao approached him just because he liked Wu Xiangxiang, and Mr. You approached him just to steal his daughter Qiaoling. Mr. Yang suffered losses in speaking constantly, lost everything, and eventually chose to leave his hometown and live in a strange city.

"Speaking" is a word that is repeatedly mentioned in the novel, representing a common psychological state among Chinese people - loneliness. "Finding someone to talk to is worth ten thousand words"³ but finding someone to "talk" to is not easy. Two different young people in different times and spaces have suffered from speaking, showing Liu Zhenyun's unique thinking about loneliness. Chinese people's evasion of loneliness is deeply ingrained in everyone's bones, but the courage to evade loneliness is always rare. Both Yang Baishun and Mr. Pei had to change their life paths due to communication failures. However, there is still a difference between the two. Mr. Pei's life was not as bumpy as Yang Baishun's, which meant that he could not leave Yanjin like Yang Baishun did and spent his remaining years in his hometown. Yang Baishun, who had a difficult and tortuous life, gave up his search in despair and spent a long time in a foreign land. The ending of leaving and staying cannot escape the torment of loneliness. "Speaking" gave them spiritual comfort, but the cruel reality made them lose the courage to communicate. In the end, lonely Yang Baishun and Mr. Pei aged separately in different places, with only the unsolvable loneliness accompanying them. Carner said, "A value statement is nothing more than an instruction with a misleading grammatical form." It can influence people's behavior, and those effects may or may not conform to our wishes; But it can be neither true nor false. It does not assert anything, and it can neither be proved nor disproved."⁴ Yang Baishun spent his whole life looking for someone to "talk" to, someone who did not need a noble status or great knowledge. He was disappointed and regretful in his search, but never found someone who could communicate with his soul. Mr. Pei was the same way. He was never stingy with his communication with others, but these communications always brought deception and harm. Words became the weapon of Yang Baishun and Mr. Pei, but could not help them gain actual security. Communication creates human language, and the original intention of communication is to enable people to communicate with each other through language and then promote cooperation between people. However, due to the limitations of language, not everyone can master the way of communication, which also causes harm and estrangement between people. The author uses "speaking" to connect the loneliness and loneliness of two generations of people, giving speaking a unique symbolic color.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the work also shows the struggle and complexity of the conflict between strangers and their families through the behavior and emotional expression of strangers. The author's description of the characters is not necessarily the real existence, but the readers' own understanding. The character is not an imitation of a real person, it is an imagined person, an experimental self.⁵ Yang Baishun, from a foreign land, chose

persistence and effort when facing difficulties. He changed his fate through hard work, studying, and communication with others. However, this still did not change his fate of being expelled. The injustice and pressure he encountered in life made him feel angry, desperate, and helpless. This emotional contradiction depicts Yang Baishun's character, showing his refusal to yield to fate. Mr. Pei was Yang Baishun's spiritual guide and also a contrast to Yang Baishun's loneliness. Yang Baishun had many friends and people he could "talk" to in Yanjin, but they all eventually parted ways. Lonely Yang Baishun would go to find his old friend Mr. Pei whenever he felt lonely. Mr. Pei did not understand the insincerity of language. When he cheated, he told his mistress his real name but did not know how to tell the mistress's husband that their children were not his own. He could only accept the blackmail and extortion of the mistress's husband. Yang Baishun repeated his path, complaining about his teacher's wife when he was drunk, but was misunderstood by his teacher due to his inability to express himself clearly. Yang Baishun did not know how to tell his teacher Mr. Zeng his true thoughts, and could only suffer in silence. Through expressing the deep thoughts in their hearts through language, speaking became a double-edged sword for Yang Baishun and Mr. Pei. They both encountered the embarrassment of not being able to express themselves clearly, but could not get rid of this predicament and could only suffer humiliation in a ridiculous world. The characters in the novel pursue a kind of happiness, what Aristotle called "happiness... It's when the soul acts according to virtue or virtue."⁶ Through the portrayal of strangers in "A Word Worth Ten Thousand Words," the author successfully shows the relationship between contradictions and the shaping of the image of strangers. In different contradictions, the character and psychology of strangers are specifically presented. Through the portrayal of strangers, the author shows the darkness of human nature and social contradictions, revealing that the root cause of Chinese people's psychological loneliness is communication problems.

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