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Analysis of the Senders in Some Contemporary Chinese Literary Works

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Abstract

The concept of the sender originates from Greimas' semiotic square theory, but its earliest origin can be traced back to Propp. Propp discovered that the 31 "functional units" that form the basic structure of folk tales are distributed within seven "spheres of action", including the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. The French theorist Greimas reorganized Propp's seven "spheres of action" and simplified them into six corresponding actants, namely subject/object, sender/receiver, opponent/helper, and established a model. This article intends to select one of the actants, the sender, to analyze Zhang Ailing's The Story of the Golden Cangue, Su Tong's Wives and Concubines, and Yan Geling's Frost's Descent, so as to further explore the profound connotations of the senders in these three articles.

Keywords

Sender; Cao Qiqiao; Songlian; Frost's Descent

1 Introduction

According to Greimas' semiotic square theory, the structure of a folk tale can generally be summarized as follows: the subject lacks the object; the sender issues an instruction, requiring the subject to find the object again; with the help of the helper, the subject defeats the opponent and retrieves the object. "Actants" clearly illustrate the internal connections between the basic elements of a narrative. The role of the sender is to motivate the subject's actions. There is a certain object for the action. In this situation, the subject will face the resistance of the opponent. However, if someone provides help, the subject can overcome difficulties, obtain the object, and pass it on to the receiver. The importance of the sender among these six actants is self-evident. Therefore, it is necessary to sort out the senders in some articles.

2 The Sender in The Story of the Golden Cangue

The Story of the Golden Cangue is a work by Zhang Ailing, which tells the story of Cao Qiqiao. Cao Qiqiao came from a small merchant's family. She was forced to marry a disabled man. She might have had illusions and expectations about life once, but under the oppression of greed for wealth and lust, her character became

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twisted and her behavior became perverse. Like a prudent and witty madwoman, she casually distorted the lives of her relatives around her and used money to control the marriages of her children. For 30 years, she wore the shackles of gold. These shackles locked up her whole life. She wantonly exerted tyranny with the heavy corners of the shackles, consuming the vitality of the people around her and trampling on their lives in the most pathological way. Through the sharp and poisonous words, the author allows us to see the deep-seated changes in human nature and brings shock to the readers. Obviously, as the protagonist of the story and the subject of action, the initiator of Cao Qiqiao's actions gradually becomes clear as the story progresses.

Cao Qiqiao's early marriage into the Jiang family was obviously not out of her own will. From the description of her eldest brother coming to visit her later, it is highly likely that her family's greed for power and wealth led to her later tragedy. Therefore, in the early stage, her involuntariness became the initial sender of this story. This involuntary situation is also a foreshadowing of her tragic fate, and the story begins from here.

At the very beginning of the story, the author mentions Qiqiao's background through the mouths of the maids Fengxiao and Xiaoshuang, and there is no lack of contempt in their words. It is conceivable how the other servants in the Jiang Mansion regarded Qiqiao. Then there is a good show of paying respects. Among the sisters-in-law, Qiqiao sowed discord, constantly complained and grumbled, and vaguely flirted with her brother-in-law Jiang Jize in her words, and her behavior was not very decent. After that, Qiqiao's eldest brother and sister-in-law came to visit. Qiqiao first sneered at and then poured out her grievances to her brother and sister-in-law. Although she somewhat took into account their affection, there was no warmth to be seen. These situations can be summarized by Qiqiao's sister-in-law's words. Before her marriage, Qiqiao was just relatively strong-willed, and after marriage, her character became slightly irritable, but later it even developed to the point where "she talked incoherently and had no pleasing qualities at all." [1] This is the first half of the story. Perhaps from the maids and 婆子 to her husband's relatives and even her own brother and sister-in-law, they were not without sympathy for her situation, but why did she become such a crazy person that everyone avoided? Was it just because fate gave her a disabled husband? To borrow a sentence from Xiao Hong, perhaps the source of the tragedy in her life was just because she was a woman.

The second half of the story is even more terrifying. First, she soberly ended her little fantasy about love in her heart and completely became a person incapable of love. She didn't love anyone, not her husband, her son, or her daughter. She became a prudent and witty madwoman. She couldn't forgive that others could normally have what she didn't have, even if these people were her own relatives. She was consumed by jealousy to the point of madness. She was like a terrifying ghost. She insatiably amassed wealth. She suspected that her brother, sister-in-law, and nephews were all trying to seize her wealth. She deliberately and meticulously destroyed the marriages of her children. She used the golden shackles on her body to fiercely strike at her relatives and "enemies", as if she wanted to find the happiness she had once lost from their painful moans. But this is also a tragic song of endless struggle. Seriously summarizing Qiqiao's series of abnormal behaviors, they were due to the involuntary situation imposed on her by fate, but there were also her own character flaws, such as being shrewd, vulgar, and insatiable. More importantly, it was actually a

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bit of her unwillingness to accept the hardships and degradation of her life. She didn't want to just endure all these silently in this short life. A few years ago, when watching the popular TV drama Empresses in the Palace, I thought there was something very strange. An Lingrong had no motive to do evil, but she did a lot of evil things. And her character was not cruel, but it was precisely she who did many things that violated moral principles. The answer to this question was given when she was dying, and I suddenly understood. She sat there in plain clothes and a blue dress, carefully chewing those bitter almonds, slowly as if savoring her life, slightly bitter and astringent. She said she didn't want to just be someone else's stepping stone silently and also wanted to live a good life once. Fireworks pursue a moment of brilliance and have to burn themselves to ashes. Some people pursue a vigorous love and then fade away after loving and marry someone else. Some people are persistent in an ideal, pursue it, gain it, lose it, and then settle down. Qiqiao couldn't have any of these, so she chose to be a complete destroyer and executioner, coloring her pale life in another extreme way, bright and poignant, like a butterfly specimen. She is a flower of evil. As a flower of evil, its color is gorgeous and cold, its fragrance is strong and far-reaching, and its appearance is charming and mysterious. I believe that among the many protagonists in Zhang Ailing's works, Cao Qiqiao best interprets Zhang's famous saying: "The long one is suffering, and the short one is life."

3 The Sender in Wives and Concubines

The protagonist Songlian was originally studying in university and enjoying the elegant life of an old-fashioned young lady. However, misfortune befell her. Her family suffered a severe blow, and her father lost everything and committed suicide. She had to drop out of school and go home to face the choice of her future survival. Between working and marrying a wealthy man as a concubine, she chose the latter. From then on, she was involved in the interpersonal pattern of "wives and concubines in groups" and the rules of the game of competing for favor, and her fate was bumpy all the way until she finally went crazy. When her stepmother said to her that being a concubine in a wealthy family was a grievance in terms of status, Songlian didn't care at all. "What is status? Is status something that someone like me should consider?" [2] So many signs indicate that to a certain extent, Songlian's entry into the Chen family was her free and independent choice. She didn't choose to work but to get married, which is a way back that has been in the subconscious of women for thousands of years. I think it is one-sided to simply criticize feudal patriarchal ethics. We can't attribute the occurrence of any tragic event to the involuntary rise and fall of fate in the big era. This is irresponsible. Even in the same era, things will definitely be different when they happen to different people. So we can analyze the uniqueness of individual experiences. Songlian could have become one of the "new era women" because she had studied for a year. However, when her life encountered unpredictable changes, she naturally chose the path of marrying a wealthy man as a concubine instead of finding a way to make a living with her own hands. Therefore, at this level, this story is more worthy of discussion. In fact, it is a story about how a person makes a choice and then faces a series of consequences brought about by this choice. Su Tong's writing is rich, gloomy, and this is why such a clichéd story can be so poignant and euphemistic, as if sobbing.

Songlian was portrayed as a completely normal person. She didn't have the so-called divinity, nor was

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she so unbearable as to have the so-called demonic nature. She was just a normal young woman. Before her father died, her family situation was acceptable, and she should not have suffered much. So it was reasonable for her to choose to marry someone as a concubine after her father's death. So she was sober and self-aware in the process of making this choice. But this self-awareness was only within the scope of what she thought she could accept at that time. The development of the whole story was that she had to accept more than what she knew. Like many people, Songlian began her journey of change in it. In the same quadrangular sky, the deep and secluded courtyard, the withered wisteria trellis, the mottled moss, the hazy and damp air, the winding corridors, and all kinds of boudoir women in pink and white, and the ghostly ancient well, if Songlian wanted to survive in the Chen family, she had to fight with various people, with the mistresses and the maids, sparing no effort in life and death struggles. The motivation for these actions is actually not complicated at all. She was just trying to survive in a cage full of beasts and couldn't just sit back and wait for death. She tried her best to give birth to a baby boy, to retain her husband's favor and not be taken away by other women, and to barely survive in this small world. Because of these, she had already lost too much, lost her love at the age of 19, and lost her original pursuit. However, she still went crazy. The crazy Songlian just didn't want to be buried in the well. In Songlian's subconscious, fate, pursuit, and death always seemed to haunt her, especially the ancient well described in it. "Every time she went to the edge of the abandoned well, she couldn't get rid of the nightmarish illusion." [3] She seemed to be able to hear the sound of the well water and feel the chill rising from the well. This chill seemed to be devouring her soul and skin. It was gloomy and cold, and the moss covered the well platform, making her feel terrified. She wanted to see it clearly but didn't dare to get close to it. Even so, she couldn't get rid of its shadow. This kind of helplessness and fate made even struggling and resistance seem so pale. Once she entered this high-walled compound, there was only one way to go. She couldn't die, but she couldn't live either, so she could only go crazy. So the indescribable fate was also a push. She was afraid of that well, just as she was afraid of her own honest heart. Among the women in this courtyard, who didn't long for the opportunity to make choices instead of being stuck with a withered and aging body. When she saw the scene between Mei Shan and the doctor, it was as if she saw that she might end up like this in the future, so she was afraid. She was so scared that she didn't know what to do. Since she fell out of favor, her emotions completely changed, and she became lonely and taciturn. Perhaps from that moment on, she truly realized that everything was gone, and she was left alone to face the ups and downs in this big house. The so-called husband was unreliable, and whether she had an heir or not, what else could a woman rely on? Her despair reached its peak when she learned that Chen Zuoqian's health had collapsed. At this time, she met Feipu, the eldest wife's son. But this is not a story of salvation, nor will it be the beginning of sin. This is just a satire on the Chen family and Master Chen. The men of the Chen family have been lustful for generations, but Feipu is afraid of women, not in the Freudian sense, but from the bottom of his heart, he is afraid of the viciousness, cruelty, and unscrupulousness of the women in these high-walled compounds. He liked Songlian a bit, but he was still afraid. So this may imply that she was no different from the other women here, so he couldn't save her, let alone himself. At first, it was just her choice, but in the end, wasn't it also a kind of her fate?

4 The Sender in Frost's Descent

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Yan Geling once said: "Even if these things are tiny, they can still inspire the heroine's perseverance and vitality." Yan Geling is well-versed in the characteristics of women and depicts these traits in her unique way. From Wang Putao, Zhu Xiaohuan, Fusang, Wenxiu to Wangzi, these brave, tenacious, and pure female images all depict this trait. It is the consistent portrayal of women's ups and downs and struggles in current affairs, the collision between the irresistible fate and the uncompromising spirit. And rough, ignorant, innocent, yet resolute female characters are naturally indispensable. "Frost's Descent" is originally one of the "Twenty-four Solar Terms". When this solar term arrives, the trees devastated by frost and snow have no vitality at all. And this name with strong metaphorical color makes her witness the rapid decline of the Cheng family in a short period of time, from prosperity like blooming flowers and lively feasts to desolation like a tree falling and the monkeys scattering. Frost's Descent has been the witness from beginning to end, and the fate of the Cheng family is also like "Frost's Descent killing all the plants", gradually moving from "splendor" to "witheredness". The old general died, Sixing fled, and Dajiang also fell into poverty. Some people say that this novel by Yan Geling has the shadow of A Dream of Red Mansions. On the one hand, it refers to its theme, which meticulously describes the infinite scenery and rapid decline in the Cheng family compound. Everyone struggles and schemes in it, but in the end, it all ends up as a desolate and clean white land. On the other hand, it also refers to the characters created in it. Frost's Descent has the experience of Qingwen in A Dream of Red Mansions, with a lofty heart but a humble status, and is also equally romantic and clever, and at the same time has the tenderness and intelligence of Xiren. Therefore, compared with the experiences of Qiqiao and Songlian, Frost's Descent's experience has more independent selectivity, although it is also a life encounter that starts with a chance opportunity. She has the characteristics of many women in Yan Geling's novels - tenacity, patience, and intelligence. She is not as innocent and pure as other rural girls when it comes to relationships between men and women. As repeatedly written in the text, Frost's Descent knows that she is not bad-looking, but she is not the kind of person who is arrogant because of her beauty. She understands the role of beauty and also knows its limitations, so she doesn't deliberately show it off. She was full of longing for love from the very beginning. Remember that after being disappointed in Dajiang, Frost's Descent went to look for Sixing in search of that authenticity. This was the first time she realized that love is completely different from life. Love must go through a transformation to last, while life doesn't need love. It is independent and mature in itself, so it can continue naturally. Life doesn't require you to go to great lengths to make your eyes look circuitous or to arrange your smile so cleverly. Life is like a bowl of rice. When you are hungry, it will fill you up firmly, simple and touching. However, love has completely different characteristics. If two people in love cannot successfully transition to life, they cannot eat, drink, defecate, urinate, and sleep normally. [4] And when Sixing proposed to take Frost's Descent to hide in Hong Kong, of course, with the catalytic effect of Huaihai's arrest, Sixing lost his former "true" charm, not only the "true" of living an ordinary life in the world but also the "true" of being timid, weak, and almost wretched. Frost's Descent then had a second realization: without love, that little bit of "truth" seemed too burdensome to support this relationship. "Truth" and "love" are the hurdles encountered in love and life, and often one can't have both. This was her initial understanding of love, but these things were not as good as the wisdom that life taught her. Frost's Descent's wisdom is admirable. She understands the meaning of "it's okay to play dumb and pretend to be stupid, but being truly stupid will lead to disaster". In the sophisticated world, the sophisticated Frost's Descent is really beautiful in her authenticity. "I once thought that

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women were like moths bravely flying into the fire, but later I realized that there is a kind of woman who can fly calmly along a peaceful route even in the face of endless challenges." [5] Frost's Descent is a migratory bird-like woman, so she chose to reject Sixing's "truth" and break off her "love" for Dajiang and truly live on her own. I think the so-called 定力 of life that Yan Geling mentioned is the sender of the whole story in the article Frost's Descent. It is not the old plot of an infatuated woman and a heartless man, but rather the grasp of one's own life in a difficult situation. From being shy and ignorant at the beginning to having a profound and complex gaze in the end, how many hardships must she have endured to attain such a state? Life is not easy for anyone, especially for women. If they want to go a little further, they have to put in a thousand or even a hundred times more effort. However, there are always some brave people who are willing to pursue and strive through thick and thin. I think this is the steadfastness of Frost's Descent's life.

5 Conclusion

From Cao Qiqiao's involuntariness to Songlian's semi-autonomy and then to Frost's Descent's complete autonomy, the shadow of the labor liberation of Chinese women runs through it all. Women have broken free from an extremely closed environment and stepped into a semi-open social environment, but the changes in their ups and downs of fate are still quite limited. Cao Qiqiao's viciousness and cruelty, Songlian's harshness and madness, and Frost's Descent's degradation into a life of hardship - although there are differences in their experiences, they more often reflect a sense of tragedy. Generally speaking, the senders in these three articles are different from each other, yet they are also connected. The alternation of women's tenderness and toughness, simplicity and cunning, kindness and ruthlessness, innocence and sophistication constitutes the rich and diverse connotations of the articles, and also makes the senders of the stories not far-fetched or artificial, appearing powerful, natural, and well-grounded.

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