

Comparative Analysis Between Children's Perspective and Adult Perspective in Old Stories in the South of the City

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Abstract: With the development of fast-paced life and increasing pressure in modern society, children's literature-related works are becoming increasingly abundant. Returning to the world of children and exploring the beauty of childhood is one of the important topics of current research. The research topic of this article is the connection between children's perspectives and adults' perspectives. The research method of this article is as follows: First, read the text of the novel, looking for chapters that fit the theme as well as the direction of the research. Three aspects were selected: the conflict between "madness and civilization", the dialectic of "right and wrong", and the helplessness of "separation and growth". Then, through direct comparison and analysis, it is discovered that the child's perspective is to think deeply about this rational adult world with a critical eye. Finally, it is concluded that children's eyes can not only discover the beauty of the adult world but also present the true nature of children's resistance to and criticism of the real world. It also provides insight into the contradictions and hopelessness behind them and explores the expression of rationalization.

Keywords: Old things in the south of the city, children's perspective, adults' perspective, rationality, morality

1. Introduction

Old Stories in the South of the City is an autobiographical novel written by author Lin Haiyin, based on her own childhood experiences, and published in 1960. The book is a masterpiece of contemporary Chinese children's novels, as it shows the sorrows and joys of the adult world through Yingzi's childish eyes and is filled with faint sadness and deep longing. The body of research on *The Old Story of Chengnan* is considerable, focusing mainly on the novel's remake into a movie in 1983 and its release in 2022. This phenomenon suggests that the novel has reaped great repercussions and has endured, gaining new interpretations and understandings in the twenty-first century.

The main focus of the overall research status is the theme, narrative perspective, and comparative study with other works. On the one hand, the current research confirms the classic nature of children's literature in *Things in the Old South of the City*, but on the other hand, there is little in-depth exploration of its children's literature characteristics, which fails to rise from perceptual understanding to the height of rational analysis. There are some gaps in the direct comparison between children's perspective and adults' perspective and the exploration of the meaning behind them, and scholars mostly choose to enter the study from the aesthetics or narrative techniques.

The protagonist of *Old Story in the South of the City* is Yingzi, who is between the ages of six and twelve and who is both the narrator and the participant of the story. The image of Yingzi in the novel is full and colorful, a typical growth style. Previous studies on *Old Stories in the South of the City* have basically been in the realm of adult literature, ignoring children, the largest audience group of the work. On the basis of previous research, the work is re-read from the contrast between children's perspective and adult perspective, discussing the subtle transformation of the narrative perspective of the text and helping readers to better grasp the storytelling strategy and charm of the work.

Therefore, from the perspective of children's narrative perspective and adult narrative perspective, this paper selects the most representative three major conflicts: "The Legend of Hui'an Pavilion" represents the collision of madness and civilization, "Let's Go to the Sea" represents the dialectical thinking of right and wrong, and Papa's Flowers Have Fallen represents the helplessness of parting and growing up, so as to carry out a comparative analysis and research of the value of the exploration.

2. "The Legend of Hui'an Pavilion" - Madness and Civilization

The story told in "The Legend of Hui'an Pavilion" embodies the Foucaultian rationale of "madness and civilization" in conflict. During the Renaissance, madness was a symbol of revelation. The rise of a "culture of fools" in stories, moral fables, and works of art, and the romanticization of madness and the madman, which play the role of expressing the image of truth, is fundamentally based on the fact that it is wisdom itself. Madness provokes an overwhelming fascination with its "characteristic revelations, hallucinations, ludicrousness, well-intentioned transgressions, pain, and tragedy" [1]. In this chapter of the story, there are two gazes of adults and children looking at Xiuzhen, and in the dual narrative mode of children's perspective and adult's perspective, the two lines collide in parallel with the friction about ethical concepts.

2.1. Adults' Views of Xiuzhen

Xiuzhen had fallen in love with Sikang, a college student living in Hui'an Pavilion. However, Sikang seems to have evaporated after returning home. Xiuzhen always waits for Sikang's return. He does not know that Xiuzhen is pregnant with his child. Xiuzhen goes mad after giving birth to Sikang's child, which her mother hides from Xiuzhen by throwing the child under the root of the city of Qihua Gate, telling Xiuzhen that the child was born dead [2]. She went crazy and packed her bags over and over again, ready to take the train to find Sikang, whom she longed for day and night. Neighbors were afraid to avoid her, and adults would hold their children and rub the wall every time they passed by Xiuzhen's door, not allowing them to get close to Xiuzhen. As can be seen, Xiuzhen is demonized in the words of her neighbors, and her name becomes a taboo symbol. Some even unaccountably follow suit in loathing her, a situation that becomes more prevalent after she takes Xiao Guizi away.

Some scholars have deduced that Xiuzhen and Sikang fell in love on the eve of the May Fourth Incident [3]. The boldness of young men and women in love broke through the constraints of the times but also attracted suppression from the authority of feudal rites and rituals. The more Xiuzhen's family is squeamish about unmarried pregnancies and finds illegitimate children dishonorable; the more Xiuzhen unabashedly shows her love for the child. Therefore, the social morality and ethics of the society had to regard her as a heretic, and the "demonization" of Xiuzhen by the public was one of the ways to remove dissidents and correct thinking in such a social environment. It is up to the public to decide what is "civilized" and what is "insane." The end of the story is the departure of Xiuzhen and her illegitimate son, which shows that in a civilized society, there is no place for "madmen" like Xiuzhen to run away from the ethics and morals of the time, and they eventually disappear.

2.2. Children's Views of Xiuzhen

In Yingzi's opinion, Xiuzhen is no different from other girls. After secretly getting acquainted with her, Yingzi learns the story of Sikang's third uncle and how she named her unseen child "Xiao Guizi". When Yingzi told the adults about this incident, they laughed and asked Yingzi, "Are you crazy too? Where did Xiao Guizi's mother come from?" [4]. The adults' belief in the established facts and the belief that events contrary to reality are "crazy" is reflected in the fact that only Yingzi believes that the madman Xiuzhen did not lie to her and believes that there really is a Xiao Guizi, who was thrown out of Qihua Gate in the world. Xiuzhen put the love of the child and guilt love unconditional empathy to Yingzi. At the same time, Yingzi, because of the association of Xiao Guizi with her own age, feels sympathy for Xiuzhen. The two people, heart to heart, became secret best friends.

Since Xiuzhen reveals that Xiao Guizi has a birthmark on the back of her neck, Yingzi begins to notice her friend Niu'er and realizes that she also has a birthmark on her neck, believing her to be Xiao Guizi, who was abandoned by Xiuzhen's mother. One rainy night, Yingzi takes Niu'er to Xiuzhen, who pulls Niu'er and says she is going to find her father, Sikang, shouting that the train is going to be too late. Yingzi then went into a coma for ten days and woke up knowing that Xiuzhen and Niu'er might have died after being crushed under the train [2]. At that time, Yingzi probably did not quite understand this. She only knew that her heart was empty, aggrieved, and uncomfortable. Song Ma thought that Yingzi had been poisoned and blamed the crazy Xiuzhen, but only Yingzi knew that she did not understand her! She was thinking about those two people! "Did I do something wrong?" [4]. The complex emotions of the abused Niu'er and the lost child Xiuzhen affect Yingzi's perspective on events; she is not limited by the adult world's indifference to cleanup but uses the innocence of a child to step by step resist the "insanity" that is not tolerated by society. "The Way begins with love". In the world of children, emotional choice is the basis of all ethics and morality, but she did not expect that the escape she helped them achieve would become the impetus for their deaths. Yingzi's serious illness is also a metaphor for the temporary failure of the children's confrontation with adult society, as well as her mother's and Song Ma's blame later on, which left her speechless and made Yingzi feel that the intangible barriers between the worlds of adults and children are hard to shake.

Children's ignorance and adults' indifference coexist in this novel, presenting multiple perspectives of the world, forming a sharp contrast and conflict. The children's point of view is essentially a metaphorical expression of the adults' own observation and reaction to the world, and the author puts himself into it, blending the two systems and creating a three-dimensional tension in the text.

3. "Let's Go to Watch the Sea" - Right and Wrong

Yingzi encounters a problem in "Let's See the Sea": "How do you tell if a good person or a bad person is good?" While looking for a ball in a heathland, Yingzi meets the thief who has hidden the stolen money there. The thief is openly identified as a rag collector boy. When Yingzi sees his "thick eyebrows" and "thick lips," she remembers what Uncle Li, a face reader, said: "Thick lips, an honest man." [4] This remark also sets the scene for the rest of the story, as the contrast between the "thick lips" and the thief's behaviour suggests a moral judgment from the beginning. This statement also sets the stage for the rest of the story, as the contrast between the honest face of the "thick lips" and the thief's behavior suggests the difficulty of moral judgment from the beginning of the story. In this story, Yingzi encounters a twofold ethical dilemma.

3.1. Adults' Perspectives on thieves: rational jurisprudence

After seeing each other several times, they accidentally find themselves talking to each other. He seems to like Yingzi very much and talks to her about many things that he supposedly did not even

tell his brother. Yingzi realizes that he is not inherently bad and that he can only steal and sell for the sake of his brother and mother. In the end, he asks Yingzi, with a mixture of remorse and tentativeness, 'Do you think I'm a bad person?' He is willing to open up to Yingzi because he does not approve of what he is doing either, so he is desperate for peace of mind. He knows that in the adult world, almost all adults will scold him, and no one will want to know about his past, helplessness, and remorse, but the innocence of a child's heart will bring him spiritual rebirth. Yingzi says she can not tell the good guys from the bad guys or the sky from the sea, so when confronted with this question, Yingzi happily replies, 'Let's go see the sea!' For him, Yingzi's answer without an answer was the best answer, and he willingly enjoyed a moment of pleasure with Yingzi in the green meadow as if he had found a utopian sanctuary so that his soul could gain shelter.

Stealing is wrong in any society and under any law, and even if he did it because he needed to feed his family or put his brother through school, does the reasonableness of purpose infer the reasonableness of behavior? Even though the rational answer is clear in his mind, Yingzi uses her childlike innocence to dilute the guilt and insecurity he feels inside about jurisprudence. At the same time, it can also be interpreted from the sociological level that adult social oppression may force good people to steal, and the complexity of the reality of the situation adds to the uncertainty of rational judgment; there is no absolute right and wrong in this world. It is like the thought experiment in the field of ethics, 'The Trolley Dilemma': how to choose between driving an out-of-control trolley on a railroad track with five people strapped to one track and one person strapped to the other. It is an unanswerable proposition; no matter which track is chosen, someone is doomed to die, and there will be no such thing as absolute correctness, so many issues can not be measured by reason alone.

3.2. Children's Perspectives on Thieves: the Human Face of Emotion

The thief should be punished by the law, but the thief is a friend of Yingzi's, and his brother is in the same school as Yingzi, with outstanding performance and great prospects. It was because of the conversation over and over again that the thief and Yingzi became friends without words. He said, "Little sister, I mustn't forget you, and I've told no one else what's on my mind, not even my brother" [4]. He also gives Yingzi his ancestral ivory Buddha beads at their last meeting and makes a point of explaining that they are not stolen. When the thief is finally arrested, Yingzi feels that she has victimized him and runs home in tears, empathizing with his situation and suffering as she understands it. As Hume argued, people tend to empathize more with people who are very close to them rather than strangers. The psychological literature similarly asserts that as children learn more about the world and develop a better understanding of what it means to experience other people's lives and emotions in relation to others, they are able to have more mature or more subtle forms of empathy in the way they perceive them and ultimately become capable of empathizing with someone's situation rather than their feelings at the moment" [5] After many days together, Yingzi has become empathetic to his encounter, so subconsciously, Yingzi has tilted the balance of reason in favor of "thick lips".

"Yingzi's upbringing shows that she is deeply skeptical of the ethics of the adult world. Her behavior follows the guidance of her heart. At the level of developmental psychology, Yingzi is already ahead of what Piaget called the "self-regulated morality" of children's moral development: social rules are subjective agreements, and any rule can be challenged. They can be tweaked even with the consent of their makers. There is an awareness that rules can sometimes be broken in order to satisfy human needs" [6]. This kind of discernment is precisely what Kohlberg calls the highest level of moral reasoning reached by children - "post-customary morality": defining right and wrong in terms of broader principles of fairness, which may conflict with law or authority because moral rightness and legal propriety do not always coincide [6].

Li Zehou once pointed out that the source of Kant's "categorical imperative" is the "a priori rationality" beyond experience, in which no empirical emotion is allowed to remain. Kant's ethics has a certain sacredness, but it is difficult to have specific operability. However, if the "benevolence" of Chinese Confucianism is infused into the rational essence of ethics, the foundation for operationalization can be laid. This is to put the "heavenly principle" into human feelings and to emotionalize reason" [7] The story of "Thick Lips" is a typical example of unforgivable law and justifiable emotion. Since the late Qing Dynasty, Chinese society has emphasized the rational side of the West while ignoring emotion, whereas orthodox Confucianism emphasizes the importance of balancing emotion and rationality and being reasonable. The fusion of Confucian and Kantian ethical thinking advocated by Li Zehou at the crossroads of Chinese and Western cultures is the new generation's "mutual use of Confucianism and law", which means that benevolence and the rule of law go hand in hand" [8]. The collision between children's perspective and adults' perspective manifested in "Let's Go to the Sea" is further transcended in the reality of "mutual use of Confucianism and France".

4. "Papa's Flowers Are Falling" - Parting and Growing Up

4.1. Adults' Perspectives: Gradual Growth

The last chapter dedicates considerable attention to the farewell with her father, vividly rekindling more aspects of her childhood. "Papa's Flowers Are Falling" concludes the entire narrative, encapsulating both the farewell and maturation themes, encompassing the child's perspective in the final act and the emergence of a new, complete adult perspective.

During his illness, Dad asked Yingzi not to be late on the last day of elementary school, prompting her recollection of his teachings from six years prior. One day, Yingzi hesitated to attend school, prompting her father's strict insistence and even physical reprimand. Eventually, tearful, she reluctantly rode in a foreign car to school. In class, the teacher escorted Yingzi out and discovered her father had visited to deliver clean clothes and copper coins. Since that day, Yingzi consistently arrived early to school, cultivating a commendable habit. A father's love transcends words. The author symbolically depicts her father with a flower, yet even the most beautiful blooms eventually wither. His illness claimed him, marking the end of Yingzi's childhood.

"Papa's flowers have fallen, and I am no longer a child." This chapter carries a profound sense of farewell, heightened by the recurring theme of "Farewell" throughout. Following the graduation ceremony and her father's passing, Yingzi matures into a "young adult," aided by the passage of time. The novel serves as the author's reflective narrative of childhood, employing Yingzi's distinctive childlike perspective to observe various aspects of human nature, charting the journey from innocent childhood to reasoned adulthood.

4.2. Children's Perspectives: Gradual Separation

The first four parts of *Old Stories in the South of the City* describe the tragic lives of grassroots people in the south of Peking and things related to Yingzi's life. As childhood passed, they all gradually parted and disappeared from Yingzi's life, leaving her with many instructions from an adult perspective. The growth of Yingzi and the departure of the protagonist of the story are the connecting points which promote the development of the story step by step [8]. Although Yingzi expressed feelings of reluctance and pity for the fate of these people, in fact, they had no lasting impact on Yingzi's life. She still maintained a childlike happiness, like a heavy rain washing away and then a sunny day, until the end. After her father passed away, Yingzi experienced a real transformation [9].

Seeing all kinds of people and things in childhood through Yingzi's childish eyes, the characters in the article all left Yingzi in the end, expressing the author's sadness and nostalgia for bidding

farewell to her childhood. The novel unfolds the narrative from the perspective of children, showing the world the joys and sorrows of the real world. It has an indescribable innocence but expresses the complex emotions of the world.

5. Comparison

The above three typical chapters employ children's perspectives to observe and comprehend the world, highlighting the significance of such a viewpoint in understanding reality. In Yingzi's perception, everything is imbued with romantic hues. Right and wrong, good and evil, do not always possess clear boundaries from a child's viewpoint. The world, as seen through a child's eyes, appears intricate and diverse. Yingzi introduces a perspective often overlooked by adults, one characterized by simplicity and kindness. These perspectives were once shared by everyone but gradually dissipated under the influence of societal norms. Simultaneously, it underscores the distinctive value of children's perspective within the adult world. Through Yingzi's emotional journey, readers can reassess and gain insights into the world, uncovering neglected aspects of adulthood.

The comparative analysis of these three narratives indicates that the child's perspective serves as a metaphor for the adult viewpoint. The clash between these perspectives unveils the sorrow and longing for escape from the harsh realities of adulthood while also celebrating the aesthetic sensibilities of children. By diminishing the dichotomy of good and evil, the author portrays the harshness of reality with a joyous, childlike innocence that underpins the essence of maturity.

"No matter how pristine a child's perspective appears in retrospect, it can not entirely evade the influence of adult experiences and judgments. The act of retrospection inherently hints at the intrusion of adult scrutiny." This also constitutes a prominent characteristic of retrospective narratives [10]. Although *Old Stories in the South of the City* maintains a consistent portrayal of a pure child's perspective in its material selection and narrative, the author's childhood memories and the dialogues and thoughts of other characters unavoidably carry traces of adult perspective. Consequently, the text manifests a dichotomy of perspectives, presenting a dual narrative mode and imbuing the text with a more three-dimensional and multi-faceted format.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the novel chooses the innocent children's perspective and the cold adult perspective to narrate the memories of childhood. This presentation yields a distinct social aesthetic, yet it not only constructs a poetic childlike world but also serves as a metaphorical expression of adults' own observation and reflection of the world. The purpose is to reflect the world through the eyes of adults with the aid of innocent, kind, and unconventional children's eyes, expressing pent-up thoughts and emotions. Through comparative analysis, the collision of the two perspectives reveals the sadness and escape from the adult world while praising children's aesthetics. The author downplays good and evil, treating reality with childlike innocence, and interprets the connotation of growth.

This article fails to analyze and compare all chapters of the novel fully. To some extent, it lacks an observational perspective. Simultaneously, the transformation and in-depth understanding of the children's and adult perspectives are slightly weak, failing to deeply explore the complex emotions in the characters' hearts and the author's intentions. In the future, scholars can delve further into the characters' inner worlds, attempting to dialectically unify the children's and adults' perspectives and explore the mutually complementary aspects within the text. More in-depth research can be conducted on the collision and integration of children's and adult perspectives in literary works. This may involve exploring the acceptance and preference of readers of different age groups and cultural backgrounds for these perspectives, as well as their potential and value in literary creation. Additionally, further exploration could elucidate how children's perspectives can be skillfully

combined with adult perspectives through clever narrative techniques to create more engaging literature.

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