

# *Double Sinking*

## *—Interpretation of Sinking from the Perspective of Depression*

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**Abstract:** *Sinking* has been an arguable piece in modern Chinese literature since its first publication. Among various interpretations of this piece, this article focuses on the anatomy of depression mentioned by the author in Preface to *Sinking* and interprets the theme of sinking from the perspective of depression. In order to explain the connections between depression and the sinking of the protagonist, this article analyzes the symptoms of his depression in the work, arguing that he is trapped in a depressed mood, negative thoughts, and non-action. The analysis shows that these negative factors of depression have formed a vicious circle that makes the protagonist fail to solve his life problems and fall into deeper suffering, which explains the sinking of the protagonist. Besides, Yu Dafu's bold presentation of his inner thoughts and personal experiences related to depression reflect a type of narcissistic depression during his creation. The addiction to self-portraiture of depression makes the author immersed in depression, which can be called the sinking of the author.

**Keywords:** *Sinking*, depression, Yu Dafu

### 1. Introduction

Over the century, there have been many different interpretations of *Sinking*, and even the author himself had different explanations of *Sinking* at different times. Among them, Preface to *Sinking* was completed right after the author finished the novel and was placed at the beginning of the collection of novels named *Sinking*, so it best reflects the author's mind during his creative process [1]. In Preface to *Sinking*, Yu Dafu writes: "The first piece, *Sinking*, depicts the psychology of a sick youth. It can be called the anatomy of hypochondria or youth melancholia" [2]. Based on the author's preface, it is clear that although the work contains themes such as sexual frustration and nationalism, the primary message that the author wanted to convey through the work was the psychology of a depressed youth [3]. The contemporary meaning of "hypochondria" is health anxiety, but according to the etymological history dictionary, it was also used in the past to describe a morbid melancholy, which is more in line with the author's description of "melancholia". Melancholia refers to melancholic depression as a specifier of depression in contemporary psychology [4]. In general, the features of melancholic depression are similar to those of other types of depressive disorders, including the presence of a sad, empty, or irritable mood, along with physical and cognitive changes that affect the individual's capacity to function [4]. This article uses depression as a clue to explore

the expression of the main character's sick mind in the work and explain the theme of sinking in the work. As a depressed youth, the protagonist sinks into a black hole of moods, thoughts, and actions and finds it difficult to extricate himself from it. After that, this article also analyzes the narcissistic depression of the author during his creative process, combining with the author's experience of depression, as an interpretation of sinking on the author's level.

## 2. The Depressed Protagonist

The sinking of the protagonist is highly associated with his depression [5]. Thus, it is important to first make a depression diagnosis of the protagonist based on his symptoms at work and then explain the connections between sinking and depression. The symptoms of the protagonist will be analyzed from three perspectives: mood, thoughts, and actions. It can be observed that the protagonist fits the criteria of depression: he is often caught up in a depressed and anxious mood; he holds negative thoughts and excessive guilt, coming up with suicidal ideation; he also fails to function in the study and social life. The connection between the protagonist's sinking and his depression will be analyzed respectively.

### 2.1. Mood

Depression makes one feel sad and lose interest in things. The protagonist is immersed in a depressed mood and loses interest. Crying, as the most direct expression of sadness, directly reflects the protagonist's emotional suffering. The author depicts the protagonist's crying multiple times in the work. The first cry appears at the beginning of the work: the protagonist suddenly cries for reasons unknown, even to himself. Crying without reason is considered one of the manifestations of depression because most depressed patients are often overwhelmed by sadness and frustration and cannot extricate themselves. The protagonist's mood is depicted as follows: "as if a thousand sorrows and grievances finding no immediate expression were weighing upon his heart." [6] The protagonist cries without reason because of the accumulated inner repression and pain. Of course, the protagonist's frequent crying can also be interpreted as a result of his own sentimental personality, so more evidence is needed to make a fair diagnosis for the protagonist. In addition to feeling emotional sadness, patients with depression also show a loss of interest in things. During his study, the protagonist feels that the school textbooks are tasteless and lack the slightest interest. When his classmates are enthusiastically listening to the instructor's lectures, he cannot concentrate in class and engages in boundless daydreaming. As for his hobby of reading, he still cannot maintain full enthusiasm. He always starts reading with great enthusiasm, but after reading three or four pages, he becomes bored and puts the book aside. The protagonist's loss of interest in studying and his hobby is another sign of his depression.

From the perspective of depression, sinking for the protagonist means being immersed in negative emotions and unable to extricate oneself from them. Long-term depression does not mean that the patient is unable to feel positive feelings such as happiness and joy, but rather that they experience emotional highs for a short time and then immediately fall back to emotional lows and feel abstracted, resentful, or even self-critical of their happy experiences. At the beginning of the work, the protagonist smiles after laughing at himself and feels happy and calm looking at the beautiful natural scenery in front of him. However, his positive mood is soon disturbed by a passing farmer, and when he finds the farmer coming behind him, "he turned around and immediately assumed a melancholy expression, as if afraid to show his smile before strangers." [6] There are different interpretations of this plot. Shi Jian, for example, thinks that the main character puts on a melancholy face immediately after seeing the farmer because his melancholy is deliberately put on for others to see [7]. By contrast, the interpretation of this plot from the perspective of depression leads to another conclusion: the main

character is not pretending to be sad but is unwilling to show his happiness. When a person is in a depressed mood for a long time, he will believe that happiness does not belong to him and reject his positive feelings. The protagonist does indeed find a moment of peace and relaxation in nature. Nevertheless, his positive mood is very unstable, and when he receives the slightest external disturbance, it will immediately collapse into the protagonist's regular depressed mood. If, as Shi Jian says, the melancholy here is feigned for others to see, then for whom were the protagonist's sudden tears in the wilderness performed before that? He does not want to show his smile because he is afraid of others discovering that he faked his depression. It is because when he realizes his pleasant mood at the moment, based on his own rejection and revulsion of positive emotions, he gives up his positive emotional experience and returns to his depressed mood. This plot actually proves that the protagonist, as a depressed person, is unable to extricate himself from his depressed mood. Getting immersed in a depressed mood explains the meaning of sinking to the protagonist.

## 2.2. Thoughts

The sinking of the protagonist is also reflected in his negative thoughts. As the protagonist falls into a depressed mood, his mind is also full of negative thoughts. Like most depressed people, he feels helpless, hopeless, and excessively guilty. Helplessness refers to the belief that there is nothing one can do to improve a bad situation or achieve a goal. The helplessness of the protagonist is clearly shown in his attitude toward romantic affairs. He has full enthusiasm and expectations for the opposite sex, yet he never dares to initiate a greeting with any females. Besides the social anxiety that he possibly has, his beliefs about his inability to successfully pursue the opposite sex are a reason for his inaction. The accumulation of helplessness leads to hopelessness. As the protagonist keeps thinking that there is nothing to do to get a better life, he loses hope for a positive future and feels hopeless about his life. For example, when he passes by female students on his way back home, he cannot say anything to them despite his strong willingness to talk. Due to his helpless thoughts, his long-term unsatisfied desire grows into a desperate attitude. He writes in his diary: "Dead as dried wood at twenty-one!" "Dead as cold ashes at twenty-one!" "Far better for me to turn into some kind of mineral, for it's unlikely that I will ever bloom" [6]. Thus, it can be seen that the protagonist is very pessimistic about his future; he no longer believes he can meet love and gives himself an early death sentence for his love life.

The protagonist's excessive and inappropriate guilt is reflected in his frequent self-blame. Most people in the world would feel regret and blame themselves at certain points, but the difference between depressed people and ordinary people's self-blame is that ordinary people tend to blame themselves for their actions or decisions, whereas depressed people tend to blame themselves for their personalities, denying themselves as a whole, feeling shame, and believing that they are worthless. The protagonist regrets that he did not speak to the girl students, cursing himself: "You coward fellow, you are too coward! If you are so shy, what's there for you to regret? If you now regret your cowardice, why didn't you summon up enough courage to talk to the girls? Oh coward, coward!" In addition to regretting his own behavior, the protagonist repeatedly calls himself a coward, which exemplifies his personality's self-denial. What torments depressed people most is not necessarily the criticism and put-downs from others but sometimes the self-blame that keeps coming up from deep within themselves. He then turns the tables on his Chinese identity, believing that the female students are not interested in him because he is a "Chinaman", and becomes resentful and vengeful, swearing to take revenge on them. In his monologue, the protagonist is resentful about his Chinese identity, and his self-denial has spread from his own personality to his Chinese identity. Like the way he dislikes his weaknesses, he rejects his Chinese identity deeply inside. Therefore, his idea of revenge is problematic. If the idea of revenge came out of his hatred for the Japanese and his resentment for the injustice to the Chinese, he would not shed "a few icy teardrops" and be "in the utmost agony" as he

was after he came up with the idea of revenge [6]. This shows that revenge does not come from hatred or anger but is an emotional expression that contains not only his long-standing feelings of sorrow and pain but also his dissatisfaction with his own identity and situation. Behind the protagonist's distrust and self-denial of himself, there is also an aversion to himself, and this self-loathing is difficult to change. Depressed people tend to see bad things as difficult to change, as often present, and attribute responsibility to themselves; good things are seen as easy to disappear, as just their own luck, not something they have earned through their own abilities or efforts. This biased way of thinking leads to their inability to withdraw from negative thinking, and their denial and mistrust of themselves accumulate, eventually sinking into thoughts of helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, and self-blame. Sinking for the protagonist also means falling into negative thoughts.

### 2.3. Action

Like countless depressed patients, when the protagonist falls into a depressed mood and has negative thoughts for a long time, his actions get affected accordingly. The protagonist encounters obstacles in her studies and social life and even attempts to commit suicide. First, depression impairs the protagonist's academic performance. His depressed mood and loss of interest make it hard for him to concentrate on his study. He finds school life boring and intolerable. His depression also influenced his social life. He cannot make friends with Chinese or Japanese students at school. Meanwhile, his helpless thoughts cause significant distress in his pursuit of romantic affairs. For instance, the protagonist is very fond of the innkeeper's daughter and is eager to talk to her, but he can never start the conversation and begins to avoid meeting her. His hope for the girl becomes so strong that he peeks at her taking a bath. The protagonist's inaction in the pursuit of the innkeeper's daughter comes from his helplessness: he has been harboring the idea that no one will like him from the very beginning, and therefore he hesitates to show his feelings to the girl she likes. He can only handle his desire by avoiding meetings and even peeking in the form of morbid voyeurism. In short, depression significantly affects the protagonist's function in school and social life.

Facing the difficult problems that appear in his life, the protagonist does not have the motivation or ability to take action to solve them, and these problems keep squeezing and finally aggravating his depression. In fact, the protagonist has fallen into a vicious cycle of depression. His depressed mood, negative thoughts, and inaction interact with each other, making him lose the will to overcome depression. Since he is unable to fight against depression, he falls deeper and deeper into it, like drowning in water. The vicious cycle of depression is shown in the protagonist's social life. He feels deeply lonely inside yet remains hostile and fearful of other people. His willingness and ability to take action in social life are weakened by his depressed mood and thoughts, so he ends up alone all the time. As he loses the companionship and support from friends and relatives, his loneliness will increase, and his isolation from the outside world will deepen, which in turn further drags him into depression. The more severe depression makes it more difficult for him to build emotional connections with others. The sinking of the protagonist means an irreversible process leading to a worse situation caused by depression. Sinking is difficult to overcome, just as depression is difficult to cure itself. When the protagonist loses his own motivation and the support of others, he will keep sinking, perhaps to death.

### 3. Discussion

Interpretation of the protagonist from the perspective of depression helps to explain the connection between his sinking and his mood, thoughts, and actions. Besides, sinking can also be understood as a self-portrait of the author as a depressed person. *Sinking* is a semi-autobiographical novel, as the author shares similar experiences with the protagonist. During his study in Japan, Yu Dafu met a

series of problems similar to those faced by the protagonist of *Sinking*, including the change in major, the discrimination of Japanese society, loneliness, and sexual frustration, which affected his mentality. Yu noticed his excessive sadness and diagnosed himself with melancholia, hypochondria, sentimentality, and nostalgia. He recorded “his feelings of alienation, low self-esteem, loneliness, paranoia, hatred, and self-objection” in *Sinking* [8]. It can be further speculated that the “sick youth” mentioned in Preface to *Sinking* is, in fact, a projection of Yu Dafu and that the author’s integration of a self-portrait into his creation is a form of self-expression [9]. *Sinking* contains the direct expression of the protagonist’s inner feelings and the author’s self-exposure. The author’s boldness in expressing his morbid psychological and painful experiences is thought to stem from a narcissistic episode in which he shows his shame and wounds to the outside world in search of both blame and sympathy [10]. Combined with the perspective of depression, the creation of *Sinking* marks the author’s descent into a narcissistic depression. The author makes an anatomy of his depression as a way to alleviate the pain it causes. However, the author, in the process of demonstrating his illness, finds the meaning of the existence of depression and identifies with it. Therefore, as the author indulges himself more in showing his depression, it will be harder for him to get rid of it. This explains the meaning of sinking to the author.

#### 4. Conclusion

The protagonist of *Sinking* is a depressed patient, and his sinking is closely related to his depression. The interpretation of his sinking from the perspective of depression leads to the conclusion that the protagonist is stuck in a depressed mood, negative thoughts, and the failure to take actions that he cannot get rid of and that these elements compose a vicious circle of depression, which means they cause the protagonist’s loss of mobility and worsening living conditions, which in turn further aggravate his negative emotions and thoughts. Besides, *Sinking* is also the author’s self-expression as a depressed person, and his indulgence in narcissistic depression is also a kind of sinking. This article analyzes the plight of the protagonist as a depressed person and explores the relationship between the author’s narrative creation and depression. It proves the connection between the theme of the work and a type of mental disorder. Unfortunately, this article does not include the temporal context of the creation of the sinking. Future studies could take the temporal context into consideration, which will probably give a more specific interpretation of sinking.

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