

A Brief Discussion on the Differences Between Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun's "Morbid"

Yuepeng Wang¹, Jiayun Zhu^{2,a,*}

¹College of the Liberal Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang, 321000, China

²College of Arts, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210000, China

a. 16220708@njnu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: “Morbid” description has long held unique symbolic meanings in the history of Chinese literature. Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun, two distinguished writers of modern Chinese literature, have drawn significant attention with their distinctive approaches to depicting “Morbid”. This article aims to delve into the differences in the depiction of “Morbid” between these two authors, through which we can discover the fact that there are distinct differences in the psychological analysis characteristics, and the focus of sexual-related descriptions. Yu Dafu presents psychological “Morbid” in a direct and intense way, while Shi Zhecun prefers delicate psychological description and complex character relationships, in order to reflect the multifaceted nature of humanity. All in all, their depiction of “Morbid” both have profound social and historical values, pushing forward the innovation of Chinese literature and the development of psychological analysis novels, enriching the expressive power and aesthetic dimensions of literature, which provides readers with a more diverse reading experience.

Keywords: Shi Zhecun, Yu Dafu, “Morbid” description, Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

1. Introduction

In the development of modern literature, Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun have attracted widespread attention with their unique literary styles and profound ideological connotations [1]. Most of Yu Dafu's works are in the form of autobiography, boldly dissecting the inner Morbidity to reflect social contradictions, and are representative of the “Morbid” descriptions during this period. In the 1920s and 1930s, another Neo-sensualist Writer, Shi Zhecun, who was skilled in psychoanalytic methods, emerged from the “old Shanghai”. His works unveiled the “Morbid” psychology concealed within individuals' hearts in the bustling urban life. Both of these two outstanding writers in the history of Chinese literature extensively explore the theme of “Morbid” in their writings. Their works frequently feature “Morbid” character images and psychological descriptions, which include not only psychological distortions and confusions, but also physical diseases and suffering. However, despite both having “Morbid” descriptions, the works of Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun present different characteristics.

Throughout history, Chinese literati have shown a unique preference for “Morbid” writing. Until the “May 4th” period, In the context of China’s “Saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival” era, various morbidities became abundant and apt metaphors for literati and patriots to depict Chinese society, spirit, and culture. This study aims to delve into the differences in the “Morbid”

description between Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun, analyze the roots of these differences, and strive to better understand the literary achievements and the epochal value of the two writers. Through comparative analysis of their works, this paper will explore the literary and social meanings behind these differences, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the unique contributions and epochal value of the two authors.

2. The Definition of “*Morbid*” Literature

2.1. The Connotation and Extent of “*Morbid*” Literature

The “*Morbid*” literature is not a traditional categorization of literature, but a unique and complex aesthetic tendency in literary works. It often depicts deformed bodies, distorted personalities, abnormal psychology, and split personality, touching upon the dark side of human emotion and thus presenting a sense of “*Morbid*” that is contrary to traditional aesthetics [2].

The “*Morbid*” description has been abundantly demonstrated at all times and all over the world, such as Du Fu’s “Through the hard hate white hair covered with double temples, decay full of partial and suspended the glass of sorrow.” Lu Xun’s *A madman’s diary* Zhang Ailing’s *The Golden Cangue*, and Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, etc. However, in different cultural perspectives, the symbolism of “*Morbidity*” varies, and in China, such “*Morbid*” is often combined with criticism and reflection on social reality.

2.2. The Relationship between “*Morbid*” and Modernity

In modern times, “*Morbid*” literature is connected with various social and historical issues, such as the process of urbanization, industrialization, and the psychological distress of people under the development of technology, as well as a series of social contradictions. The authors reveal the impact and great influence of modernity on the human spiritual world through the meticulous and frank description of “*Morbid*” personality, psychology and emotion.

3. The Expression of Yu Dafu’s “*Morbid*” Description

3.1. Psychological Analysis

The psychological analysis in Yu Dafu’s works is distinctly characterized by a strong expression of emotion. The protagonists in his novels often express their emotions through confessional monologues, such as Yu Zhifu in *The Vast Night*, trapped by loneliness and sexual desire, exclaims, “Oh, love, if you can be traded for knowledge, I would rather give up all my knowledge just for a hug that is full of blood and tears [3].” This kind of confession is direct, exaggerated, and impactful, revealing the psychological state of the characters.

In terms of exploring the inner world of the characters, Yu Dafu prefers placing them in peculiar situations to examine their emotional reactions to subtle external stimuli. Details like a Japanese girl staying overnight in her husband's room in *Wind Bell*, a painting in *Spring Weather*, and “He” occasionally peeping at the young girl bathing in *Sinking* all prove that Yu Dafu elevates the ripples of sexual desire to conflicts of moral psychology, delving into the complex emotions of the character's inner worlds through the processing of these details.

In addition, Yu Dafu’s works exhibit a keen insight into social psychological phenomena. He magnifies and presents common psychological traits that are often overlooked through the behavior and psychological changes of his characters. He can capture the emotional reactions of individuals when they are excluded. For instance, after being labeled as “*Infected with a mental illness*” by Chinese friends in *Sinking*, the protagonist’s emotions expand, leading him to stop greeting Chinese

students and even to develop a revenge mentality. This magnification of psychological phenomena allows readers to see more clearly the reaction patterns of human nature in specific situations, reflecting the author's meticulous observation of social psychology and unique presentation methods.

The “Morbid” psychological state depicted in Yu Dafu’s works has been criticized for a long time, but it undoubtedly depicts the universality of human nature in the microcosm of a decadent society, guiding readers to ponder the causes of these “Defects” and “Imperfections” and the rationality of their existence.

3.2. Description of Sexual Frustration

The description of sexual frustration in Yu Dafu’s works has a unique and profound connotation and background. In the context of feudal literature, “Sexual frustration” is often simply equated with licentiousness and evil, yet Yu Dafu re-examines and affirms this concept from the perspective of human nature and humanity. He closely linked sexual depression with ideological depression, emphasizing its importance in life and society.

Since the publication of *Wistaria and Dodder* in 1923, Yu Dafu began to delve into the social phenomenon of material poverty and spiritual suffering, during which sexual frustration became a significant area of his focus. The sexual frustration depicted in his works is not merely an isolated, one-dimensional psychological phenomenon; rather, it is deeply embedded in the vast and complex narrative system of the modern transformation era in China.

In the context of the times, the youth who have returned from studying abroad encountered unique cultural circumstances. On one hand, the enlightenment of Western sexual liberation concepts inspired the awakening of their self-perception, leading them to pay attention to their own emotional needs and human instincts, thereby impacting and questioning traditional sexual concepts. On the other hand, they could not escape the heavy constraints of traditional moral values, including the conservative attitudes and strict norms about sex in traditional Chinese culture, such as the Confucian idea of “denying oneself and restoring propriety”, which still occupied a dominant position in society and exerted a negative influence on people's behavior and thoughts. This contradiction between sensibility and rationality constituted the source of their inner depression.

At the same time, there is also a complex tension between national dignity and personal desires. In a historical period when the country faced internal and external troubles, intellectuals shouldered a strong sense of patriotism and national responsibility. They were fully aware of the weakness of the country and the threat to the dignity of the nation, yet personal desires and instinctive pursuits surged deep in their hearts. This hesitant struggle between patriotic emotions and instinctive pursuits further aggravates their inner pain and contradictions, and vividly demonstrates the spiritual dilemma of people in the transitional society. For example, in *Sinking*, he peeks at the girl taking a bath from the toilet window and freezes after “Taking a look”; pricking up his ears behind the reeds and listening intently to others; when he thinks about the place where prostitutes existed, his spirit became tense. He longed for women but did not dare to look at them and communicate with them. He would have shortness of breath when he saw them; Feel guilty while hiding under the covers, feel remorseful and self-blaming afterward; When he peeped at the landlord’s daughter taking a bath, he was nervous and worried about being discovered; Feel excited while eavesdropping on couples having intimate moments in the wild, but with more distress; always panicking and fleeing from a brothel [3]. These behaviors show his complex emotions and ambivalence about sexual depression from different angles, as well as the struggle and dilemma between traditional morality and personal desires.

3.3. The Presentation of the Disease Theme

Illness is the fate of the character, the state of survival of the character, and it also constitutes “A metaphorical symbol of the new attitude towards the self” [3]. The disease has multiple meanings in Yu Dafu’s works. It is not only the character's fate and survival state, but also “A metaphorical symbol of the new attitude towards the self”. Common diseases in Yu Dafu’s works include neurasthenia, tuberculosis, depression, sexual disorders, etc. The descriptions of these diseases are related to his own illness experience and reflect his real-life experience. The characters in his works are mostly weak and often sick, which fully embodies the literary theme of “disease”.

In *Sinking*, the Japanese student “He” suffers from both “the disease of the times” and personal weaknesses. His sensitivity to the surrounding environment and confusion about his own fate, such as “He recently feels lonely and pitiable”, reflects the confusion of the times and the fragility of the self, which are reflections of the “Morbid” at both the social and individual levels. The characters who are affected by these dual diseases exhibit extreme psychological states when facing love and social interactions, such as experiencing excessive emotional turmoil and agitation due to their own weaknesses and dissatisfaction with the times upon an accidental encounter with female students.

To be sure, Yu Dafu’s “Morbid” description has another layer of textual charm, that is, the symbol of purity and beauty. “In the mid-18th century in Western Europe, tuberculosis had already acquired the characteristics that inspired romantic associations. When the myth of tuberculosis was widespread, it was for was a sign of elegance, delicacy, and sentiment to the vulgar and the nouveau riche” [4]. For example, in “The Mirage” when Chen Yiquan encountered Ye Qiuxin, the description of her fragile beauty is “Overall like the half of a Goose egg, with a protruding middle and a flat side. Her lips are pale, and the curve of her upper and lower lips is not very instinctual. Her hair above, her eyes in the middle, and her black cheongsam below highlight her sickly milky face, making it especially profound and enchanting [5].”

Different from other writers’ “Morbid” description of dying gradually, Yu Dafu made it possible for patients to recover from their diseases, just like Weng Zesheng in “Sweet-scented Osmanthus in Belated Bloom” returned to China, “the night fever no longer occurred and the night sweats actually stopped” In addition, Yu Dafu's depiction of patients with lung disease and their environment is harmonious and natural. The sweet-scented osmanthus in the book wafts through the picturesque landscape, creating a tranquil poetic atmosphere, which shows protagonist’s indifference to life. This kind of description shows the beauty of nature, and also reflects the inner peace and detachment of the protagonist. The “Morbid” aesthetic makes the characters have unique emotional and spiritual charm, and reflects the passion for life and the pursuit of love, is a kind of ideal, romantic pattern of “Morbid”.

3.4. “Superfluous Man” Image Building

“Superfluous Man”, also known as “The Extra Man” or “Unnecessary people”, originated from Russian literature in the 19th century and was a typical image of aristocratic intellectuals. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* is the earliest image of a “Superfluous Man”, and this concept became popular after the publication of Turgenev's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*.

Yu Dafu relied on the creation of the image of “Superfluous Man” to reflect the bewilderment and struggle of Petite bourgeoisie intellectuals at the crossroads of the times. Although the “Superfluous Man” are rebellious, their individualistic struggle to separate themselves from the masses shows deformed characteristics. They are sensitive and fragile, having a clear understanding of social reality but are unable to change it. Faced with the huge gap between ideal and reality, they gradually lost their confidence and courage in life, and could only anesthetize himself and escape the pain through alcoholism, prostitution and other behaviors. For example, in *Warm Spring Night*, “I” and the worker

Chen Ermei are connected by fate. From the perspective of class and class oppression, it shows the social status of the “Superfluous Man” and their honest, frank and compassionate hearts. However, their resistance is often weak. In the gap between ideals and reality, their confidence and courage gradually lost, and they can only escape through alcoholism and prostitution. By creating these images, Yu Dafu profoundly reveals the darkness of society and the weaknesses in human nature, and expresses his confusion about life and dissatisfaction with society. This kind of “Morbidity” shaping gives the work strong appeal and shocking power, allowing readers to deeply feel the pain and struggle of intellectuals of that era.

4. The Expression of “Morbidity” in Shi Zhecun’s Works

4.1. Psychological Analysis

Shi Zhecun’s works, *Madame Zhou* and *The Lamp of Yuan Xiao* initially reveal his inclination towards psychological analysis. In *Madame Zhou*, Madame Zhou’s yearning and attachment towards a young boy, along with her bizarre behaviors, are all manifestations of her subconscious nostalgia for her deceased husband and her longing for love; in *The Lamp of Yuan Xiao*, the beautiful interactions between “I” and the neighbor’s young girl, the reverence for lanterns, this inner monologue and natural association not only show Shi Zhecun’s passion for psychological analysis but also mark the first blending of Eastern connotations and Western modern novel techniques. In the urban life of Shanghai, he extensively read Freud’s psychoanalytic works and translated five novels by Schnitzler that utilized psychoanalytic techniques into Chinese. Afterward, Shi Zhecun truly embarked on his path of psychological analysis in his literary creation.

“Literature and psychology increasingly erase the boundaries between them, and psychoanalysis begins to directly bear fruitful results in literary creation [4].” Compared to Yu Dafu’s psychological analysis, Shi Zhecun’s application of psychological analysis is more standardized and rigorous. Shi Zhecun strictly adheres to Freud’s psychoanalysis and is adept at exploring and revealing the deep subconscious, latent consciousness, and “Morbidity” psychology of the characters in his works. In Freud’s tripartite personality structure, the id follows the pleasure principle, the ego confronts reality, and the superego is the conscience and moral ideal after the instinctive suppression, transformation and sublimation of morality, religion and aesthetics. Taking *The Head of General* as an example, at the beginning of the novel, Hua Jingding was ordered to quell the Tibetan rebellion with the ambition of making achievements. However, as the march progressed, he fell into a psychological confrontation between “Killing his tribesmen in exchange for fame” and “Returning to his homeland and betraying the Tang Dynasty”. Shi Zhecun cleverly integrated Freudian psychoanalysis to create a complex image of General Hua. At the superego level, the social expectation of making achievements drives him to have the urge to “Kill his tribesmen in exchange for fame”; at the ego level, race and local emotions make him want to “Return to his homeland and betray the Tang Dynasty”, and the two conflict fiercely. At the same time, his yearning for the girl he met by chance conflicts with the military regulations. The status of this “love” gradually surpasses the yearning for the “motherland”. Although he has a sweet dream, he does not take it by force. In the end, he still pursues after his death, resulting in tragic and painful love. Shi Zhecun explores General Hua’s subconscious and latent consciousness to show the conflict between his sexual instinct and moral norms, and embodies the confrontation between the id and the superego. For another example, in “Meiyu Eve” the subconscious flow of “I” in the rain and the delicate and tortuous psychological description reveal the psychological variations of modern urban men and women in the hustle and bustle of life, such as impetuosity, restlessness, fear, and other morbid emotions. After the protagonist meets the girl by chance, his mental state is successively characterized by a pounding heart, eagerness to try, thoughts and thoughts, and finally reluctance and sadness. The author comprehensively and

realistically outlines the protagonist's entire psychological process after this. The male protagonist's psychological struggle between "Girl" and "Wife" reflects the struggle between "Self" and "Id" in the male spiritual world in an urban environment. The invisible oppression of the social environment makes men's rational "Self" try to cover the original "Id", but the "Id" is not always controlled by the "Self", which reflects the struggle of the self between the id and the superego.

The characters in Shi Zhecun's works often find themselves embroiled in internal conflicts, grappling with contradictions and confusions from various aspects such as society, family, and culture, and finding it "Blossoms Shanghai" is constantly tormented by doubts about her identity and value, experiencing inner anxiety and unrest; in *The Vast Horizon*, Li Xu is bewildered by his own inner ideas, unsure whether he is truly happy or in pain.

4.2. Sexual Repression Description

The sexual repression in Shi Zhecun's works is mostly manifested in two forms: the suppression of sexual desires and the constraints imposed by ethical and moral norms. For instance, in *Spring Sunshine*, Madame Chan chooses to adopt a tablet for marriage for financial reasons, sacrificing her own happiness. Years of widowhood have suppressed her sexual desires that should exist in a normal marriage. Even under the warm spring sunshine of Shanghai, her inner desires are briefly aroused, but she still constantly restrains herself. "Madame Chan felt shy in the bank when she was looked at with eagerness by a young bank clerk. There was a fluctuation in her heart, but she quickly regained her composure, constantly reminding herself of her status [6]." Madame Chan's repeated peeping led to sweet fantasies of love, but her self-restraint in sexual desires made her even with the arousal of desires, she dared not easily cross the moral boundary. Moreover, when Madame Chan strolled the streets and shopped, she always worried that strangers would see through her recent loss of her fiancé, and her excessive sensitivity.

In depicting the characters' inner world and spiritual dilemmas, sexual repression profoundly reveals the deep psychological conflicts within them. For example, the male protagonist in *Meiyu Eve* experienced subtle changes in his heart due to the emotional void in his marital life, after encountering women in the rain. His admiration for these women reflects his yearning for beautiful emotions while also exposing his loneliness and frustration in real life. The sense of loneliness brought about by sexual repression makes the characters more three-dimensional and full, and also resonates more with the readers. Moreover, Shi Zhecun critiques the constraints of traditional morality and social concepts through the depiction of sexual repression [7]. On one hand, this is a reflection on traditional morality. In the era of Shi Zhecun, feudal traditional morality strictly bound people's thoughts and behaviors, especially in the aspect of sexuality. In the works, characters such as Madame Chan, whose sexual desires are considered immoral, and this concept of restraint makes her life oppressed and painful. Shi Zhecun uses this to criticize the suppression and distortion of human nature by traditional morality, calling for people to re-examine and reflect on the rationality of traditional morality. On the other hand, the depiction of sexual repression also reflects the closed and conservative nature of the society at that time, as well as the suppression of human nature. Based on a specific social background, the portrayal of characters' experiences of sexual repression reveals the impact of the social environment on individuals, allowing readers to deeply understand the reality of the society at that time and the difficulties faced by people, which has significant social and realistic significance.

In the novel *Shi Xiu*, Shi Xiu harbors complex feelings towards Pan Qiaoyun. On one hand, he is attracted by Pan Qiaoyun's beauty and has instinctual desire; on the other hand, he is constrained by the code of brotherly loyalty and moral principles. "Shi Xiu looked at Pan Qiaoyun, and within his heart, there seemed to be a burning flame, but he clenched his teeth tightly, forcing that flame down with great effort [8]." This repressed sexuality highlights the internal conflict within Shi Xiu, which also resonates with the work's exploration of the complexity of human nature and moral dilemmas.

In *Kumarajiva*, Kumarajiva, as a high priest, should have renounced worldly desires, yet he struggles with earthly emotions deep within his heart. He strives to control his desires while often being troubled by them. “Kumarajivau sat in meditation in the meditation room, but the distractions in his mind came upon like a tide, and he tried to expel the thoughts about emotions and desires [9].” This sexual repression not only shows the inner pain of the characters, but also further strengthens the theme of the conflict between faith and humanity in the work, allowing readers to deeply feel the repression and struggle of humanity under strong faith and moral pressure.

5. Conclusion

By comparing and analyzing the descriptions of “Morbid” description in Yu Dafu and Shi Zhecun’s works, people can see that there are significant differences in their literary creations. Yu Dafu’s works often highlight the psychological diseases and behavioral abnormalities of their characters boldly and directly. The characters in his works frequently find themselves in extreme emotional dilemmas and states of self-destruction, delivering a strong emotional impact to the readers. Through the creation of “Morbid” characters, Yu Dafu reflects the fate of individuals under the pressure of the times and society. At the same time, Yu Dafu’s “Morbid” description is often closely related to the poverty and illness of his homeland. The protagonists, who are subjected to bullying by foreigners, voice their complaints about national discrimination and oppression by imperialism, showcasing a spirit of patriotism and anti-imperialism.

In contrast, Shi Zhecun’s works focus more on delicate psychological descriptions and complex character relationships. In terms of “Morbid” descriptions, Shi Zhecun delves deeply into the character's inner worlds, revealing the dark sides of human nature and the psychological changes of characters in specific social environments. He is adept at allowing readers to experience the characters' inner struggles and contradictions through subtle psychological activities and behaviors, rather than directly presenting obvious “Morbid” states. He uses flexible and varied narratives to enhance the artistic impact and drives the stylistic transformation of Chinese literature from traditional to modern, laying the groundwork for the development of psychological analysis and new sensation novels. At the same time, Shi Zhecun uses “Morbid” descriptions as a mirror to reflect social reality, such as the collapse of traditional values in the process of urbanization, leading to the confusion and Sinking of the minority, as well as people’s mental trauma during the war, etc., it leads to thinking about the change of human nature under special circumstances. In the predicament, insisting on and understanding the true nature of human nature has become an indispensable theme in Shi Zhecun’s works, it urges readers to reflect deeply on their own situation in their thinking.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Jin Yongping. (2005) *On the evolution of modern psychological novels - from Yu Dafu to Shi Zhecun to Lu Ling*[J]. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, (05):8-11.
- [2] (GER) Adorno, (1998) *Aesthetic Theory* [M]. Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- [3] Yu Dafu. (2003) *Yu Dafu's Collected Works (the third Collection)* [M]. Guangdong: Huacheng Publishing House.
- [4] Cheng Guiting, (2007) *On the Metaphoric Meaning of the Pulmonary Tuberculosis Image in Modern Literature*[J]. *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)*. (01)20-24.
- [5] Wu Xiaodong. (2007) *Creation of Chinese modern aesthetic subject -- Reinterpretation of Yu Dafu's novels*[J]. *Studies on Modern Chinese Literature*, (03):3-34.
- [6] Shi Zhecun. (2013) *Good Woman's Work*. Beijing: China International Broadcasting Press.
- [7] Leon Edel. (1980) *Literature and Psychology. Cited from essays in comparative literature*, Peking University Press,
- [8] Shi Zhecun. (1996) *Ten Years of Works* [M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press.

[9] Shi Zhecun, Kumarajiva, (1996) cited from *Ten Years of Creation*, East China Normal University Press.