

The Sense of Bleakness in Eileen Chang's Works: Taking "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" and "The Golden Cangue" as examples

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Abstract:

Eileen Chang is a famous modern female writer, and the study of the sense of bleakness in her works is one of the important topics. However, the author finds that there are fewer studies on this aspect, and there is a lack of comprehensive explanation on the various factors that constitute the sense of bleakness. Therefore, this paper takes Eileen Chang's works "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" and "The Golden Cangue" as examples to analyze how the sense of bleakness is manifested in various aspects. The research methods of this paper are as follows: by reading relevant literature, generalizing the issues under study, comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences in the embodiment of the sense of bleakness in the two texts, and searching for potential connections. It is found that the sense of bleakness in the two works is evident in the interpersonal relationship, the fate of the character and the environmental atmosphere of the story. The three factors are intertwined and interact with each other to create a strong sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang's works.

Keywords: The sense of bleakness; Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier; The Golden Cangue.

1. Introduction

"Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" and "The Golden Cangue" are two of Eileen Chang's masterpieces. The stories take place in the modern metropolises of Hong Kong and Shanghai respectively, and the plots unfold with two women's degradation and distortion process. The depictions share a similar emotional tone – amidst the glitz, bleakness is revealed. As Eileen Chang herself affirmed about the existence of bleakness: "I am fond of sadness, and even more fond of bleakness... Sadness is a kind of completion, while bleakness is a revelation" [1].

Scholars have done little research on the sense of bleakness presented in Eileen Chang's works, and the discussion on the sense of bleakness in the existing research mostly focuses on a certain angle, which is not comprehensive. For example, Zidong Xu analyzes the sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang's works from the perspective of imagery in "Materializing Bleakness: A Preliminary Exploration of Eileen Chang's Imagery Technique" [2]; Yeping Li analyzes the sense of bleakness in terms of existential tragedy in "The Bleak Writing of Existential Tragedy: On the Tragic Consciousness of Eileen Chang's Novels" [3]; In "The Miserable World of Sound and Color: On the Use of Sound and Color in Eileen Chang's Novels", Bingxue Tan explores descriptions of sound and

color to find out the descriptions of bleakness [4].

This paper takes the two works "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier" and "The Golden Cangue" as examples and analyzes the sense of bleakness shown in Eileen Chang's works from three angles in a more comprehensive way. They include the indifference and deformity of interpersonal relationship, the tragic destiny of the character, and the horrific and depressing ambience of the environment.

2. Indifference and Deformity in Interpersonal Relationship

The relationship between characters in Eileen Chang's works is cold and tense, and people are often in a relationship of using and being used. Even the warmth, selflessness and dedication of kinship relationship constructed under the influence of Confucianism in historical literature are broken in Eileen Chang's writing. The kinship relationship is reduced to a simple interpersonal relationship, in which the selfishness, hypocrisy and greed of human nature are revealed, and the relationship of money and interest holds people's behaviors and emotions in check.

In "Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier", Mrs. Liang is Weilong Ge's aunt, but she is cold, shrewd and selfish, with no regard for family ties. When Weilong Ge first enters the Liang mansion, Mrs. Liang evaluates Weilong Ge whether she can be used as a "pawn". During the con-

versation with Ge, Laing seems to be careless, but she is observing her carefully in fact. Later on, she tailors Ge's clothes for attending various social occasions, tempts her with Xie Situ's bracelet, colludes with Qiqiao Qiao to keep her, and coaxes her in the name of caring for her and thinking of her.

All these behaviors are in Liang's plot: she needs to make use of Ge's beautiful face and youthful body to attract more young men to satisfy her own desires and vanity. She takes advantage of the weakness of human nature to let Ge indulge in gold and luxury world, and leads her into the dark abyss gradually. When meeting Mrs. Liang for the first time, Ge senses Liang's complexity. When she is confronted with a cupboard of splendid clothes on her first night at the Liang mansion, she also realizes Liang's intention. But she obeys her aunt outwardly because of her monetary needs, and she tolerates the situation.

Mrs. Liang and Weilong Ge do not have the warmth and care that should be found in a traditional aunt-nephew relationship: they appear to be affectionate, but in reality, they are using each other to get what they want. "Weilong, I can't promise you marriage, I can't promise you love, I can only promise you happiness" [5]. Qiqiao Qiao never loves Ge truly, he just desires a brief moment of physical pleasure, but he even rationalizes this idea "I give you pleasure. Is there anything rarer in the world [5]?" In order to achieve his goal of getting Ge to "get money" for himself, Qiqiao Qiao takes advantage of Ge's affection for him and pretends to keep her. Qiqiao Qiao only has his own desire for pleasure, and he is selfish, indifferent and irresponsible.

In "the Golden Cangue", the Jiang family is an aristocratic family, but the second young son was born with chondromalacia, which prevents him from marrying a lady. Qiqiao Cao's family runs a sesame oil store. After her parents died, her brother was her only relative, but for money, her brother and sister-in-law sold her to the Jiang family to be the second young son's wife. This not only sacrifices Cao's marriage, but also her freedom. When her brother and sister-in-law come to visit her, Cao uses a lot of harsh and sharp words against them. But her brother still tries to cover up his essential intention of being greedy for money, and believes that his own behavior is justified, "In good conscience, I just use some of your money, and it's deserved, if I had been greedy for wealth and gifts, I would have asked the Jiang family for a few hundred more tales of silver, and sell you as a concubine to them at that time" [5]. Every time Cao's brother and sister-in-law come to the Jiang mansion, they do not simply visit her, but with the intension of getting some benefit from her. Selfishness of kinship relationship is one of the important factors leading to the distortion of Cao.

The relationship between the Jiang family and Qiqiao Cao is based on their respective interests: Cao is of humble birth, so she is not truly accepted by the Jiang family which only needs a woman who can be the wife to take care of the second young son and procreate offspring. For Cao, though life is lonely and depressing, she is well aware of the benefits of marrying into the Jiang family, so the relationship between the Jiang family and Qiqiao Cao is tense, cold and turbulent.

For her children, Cao's twisted inside manifests in the form of horrific control and distorted love, making her an "unlikeable" mother. Cao leads her children to indulge in opium addiction so as to keep them under her control. She knows that foot-binding is no longer fashionable, so she stuffs cotton into her own shoes to make her feet seem civilized. However, in order to control her daughter, Cao forces Chang'an to endure the physical and psychological pain of foot-binding and being ridiculed by others. Cao's frantic counting of tiny gains and losses causes Chang'an to lose face at school and is forced to drop out. Even when Chang'an has a wonderful love and gets a moment's respite from it, Cao snuffs it out without mercy. Cao is not so worried about Shifang Tong coveting her wealth because of his good birth, the reason why she still separates them is her psychological distortion: Cao's own unsatisfactory marriage leads her to feel jealous of the good love of the same sex, and even hostile to her daughter, unable to accept Chang'an's attainment of happiness.

Cao is also an "unlikeable" mother-in-law, and her relationship with her son Changbai have a sense of incest. She leaves Changbai to burn cigarettes with her at night, leaving her daughter-in-law alone, and they have a conversation that resembles flirting, acting intimately, "She squinted at him. Throughout these years, he was the only man in her life. Only him, she was not afraid that he coveted her money—for all her wealth was rightfully his. Yet, because he was her son, he alone could not amount to even half... Now, she couldn't even hold onto this half of a person—he had gotten married" [5]. Long-suppressed lust of Cao has no outlet, resulting in her serious "mother-love complex" and her unreasonable dependence on her son, Changbai [6]. Cao is very harsh and critical to her daughter-in-law, and she even snoopied and talked about Zhishou's sexual affairs and publicized it as a laughing stock, leading to the death of Zhishou.

3. The Tragic Fates of the Characters

Characters in Eileen Chang's works, especially female characters, are often in a tragic situation of helplessness and self-degradation. Their tragic destinies arise out of the limitations of the times and all kinds of personal desires.

In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Mrs. Liang and Weilong Ge’s father turn against each other, but Ge has to ask her aunt for help and hide it from her father in order to stay in Hong Kong to continue her studies. She is faced with a dilemma between traditional family values and personal pursuit, but she chooses to conceal and compromise in the face of family conflicts in order to pursue her studies and the opportunity to stay in Hong Kong, which reflects her personal desire to survive and gain a foothold. And accepting her aunt’s financial support and becoming active in various social occasions is the first step of Ge’s approach to danger.

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao’s marriage is a bare deal between her brother and sister-in-law and the Jiang family. Cao suffers from contempt and repression, and with full of grief and resentment, she confronts everyone with sharp and venomous words and behaviors, but she still does not dare to defy her old family’s decision and run away to a new family. According to scholar Ruixue Song, during the May Fourth Movement period, women who ran away from their old families had very limited choices, and if they did not return to their old families, there were often only two paths in front of them: to join a new family or to live by prostituting [7]. Therefore, even if Ge escapes from the Liang family and Cao defies her brother and sister-in-law and runs away from the Jiang family, there will still have a difficult future. Limited by social environment, they choose to compromise and surrender out of consideration for their personal survival.

The dominance of lust over the characters is also the key to their tragedy: drowning in lust and the inability to fulfill its lead Weilong Ge and Qiqiao Cao into the dark abyss respectively. In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Ge is an unsophisticated and innocent girl, and the playboy Qiqiao Qiao arouses her affection easily. Driven by her lust, Ge degrades herself. She knows that Qiqiao Qiao’s outlook on life is passive and he is addicted to pleasure, and he is frivolous and irresponsible, but she still has a relationship with him. After inadvertently witnessing Qiqiao Qiao’s despicable behavior, she is devastated and intends to leave Hong Kong, but Qiqiao Qiao’s simple retention makes her change her mind again, “Ah, Qiqiao! He’ll need her someday.” “Suddenly she decided not to go-no matter what” [5]. She chooses to stay in Hong Kong, marrying Qiqiao Qiao and getting money for him by working as a social butterfly, with “boundless desolation, boundless horror” looming over the future of her life [5].

In “The Golden Cangue”, because of her husband’s congenital disability, Qiqiao Cao’s erotic desire cannot be satisfied and it is in a state of long-term repression. According to Freud: “Man can never excrete his primitive desires. Male always seeks his first catharsis in substitute

objects” [8]. As a result, Cao quenches her thirst for sexual desire with vulgar words, and tries to secure her husband’s brother, and even develops an irrational emotional attachment to her son.

“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” depict a society infused with money, and the characters’ desire and even extreme madness for material wealth are shown to the fullest extent. Ge naively believed that she can remain true to herself and “come out of the mud without being stained” at first. In Liang mansion, she is dressed by beautiful clothes and in and out of social occasions glamorously, gaining the affection of many men, who willingly to offer expensive gifts to her in order to win her heart – Ge’s vanity was satisfied greatly. She gradually indulged in the high society and can no longer return to the plain and simple life. Ge’s decision to stay in Hong Kong not only involves the weighing of the pros and cons of survival and her reluctance to leave Qiqiao Qiao, but also her own attachment to gold and luxury life and her gradually expanding material desire.

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao is forced to marry into the Jiang family, but actually she knows the benefit she can get from it very well : this marriage is a leap in class for her, and her personal material life can be greatly improved, what’s more, the Jiang family’s inheritance will surely be a part of her in the future – faced with the choice between money and love, Cao preferred the former, „Dreams are good, otherwise, money matters” [9]. Selfish families, empty marriage, humble status. Cao is lonely and empty inside, so she regards “money” as the only existence which can give her a sense of fulfillment and security, and she holds on to her fortune desperately and being trapped in it for the rest of her life. For the sake of money, she confronts her brother and sister-in-law with harsh words, fights for the family fortune, drives Jize Jiang away crazily and even sacrifices her children’s happiness. “For thirty years she wore a yoke of gold. She had cleaved several men with the horns of the heavy yoke, and those who were not dead had lost half their lives” [5].

The tragedies of Ge and Cao are influenced by the circumstance of the certain era, but Lei Fu once said, “The greatest tragedies of mankind are often internal” [10]. Their tragic endings are driven by the desires for survival, lust, and money from the depths of their heart, all these desires interact with each other.

4. Terrible and Depressing Environmental Atmospheres

The ambience in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” is very grotesque. The Liang Mansion, centered on Mrs. Liang, and the family under

the control of Qiqiao Cao emit a ghastly aura, they like two bottomless, soul-sucking black holes.

In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Weilong Ge feels a sense of danger the first time she visits the Liang mansion. The elaborate design of the Liang Mansion is unusually abrupt in contrast to the barren mountains in which it is situated, “The garden seemed like a gold-lacquered pallet plucked out of the air in the midst of the chaotic mountains” [5]. The incongruity and unusualness of the external features of Liang’s mansion hints at the particularity of its interior. From the strong colors of “black” and “green” in her appearance, the “web” and “spider” decorations, and the “red fingernails”, Mrs. Liang’s image is reminiscent of a “witch”, which is in line with her complex and powerful inner self.

During the conversation with Ge, Liang’s demeanor appears to be casual incredibly, in fact, she is sizing up Ge shrewdly, “Her fan deflects a little, and a few threads of golden sunlight sifts into it, and brushes the edge of her mouth, just like the whiskers of a tiger cat, gusting to fly” [5]. “Tiger cat” is a symbol of her ruthlessness, power, and control, and like the “tiger cat”, she is calmly observing her “prey”. Leaving the Liang Mansion, looking at the white house at sunset, Ge thinks the house like an “ancient royal tomb”, and it is a “ghostly” world inside. On her first night in the Liang House, faced with many fancy clothes, Ge tries up them one by one, looking at the world of song and dance downstairs, she even imagines herself beautifully dressed and dancing. “She re-whispers: ‘It’s good to see!’ She smiles and falls asleep” [5]. Even though she feels dangerous clearly, she cannot help herself but look forward to future life. The world of Liang mansion has a terrifyingly hallucinogenic magic.

From the dispute between Mrs. Liang and Didi, Weilong Ge realizes the darkness of reality--in fact, it is a warning from Liang to Ge that disobedience to her will not end well. However, from enjoying the gold world, falling in love with Qiqiao Qiao, to being sent bracelet by Xie Situ--gradually, Ge can no longer get away from the control of Liang, “Mrs. Liang grins, and while laughing, she points at Wei Long with a blood-dripping index finger” [5]. Mrs. Liang seems to have predicted that Ge will plan to stay in Hongkong, and everything is in her calculations. The Liang Mansion is a cage that no one escape, a swamp of many kinds of desire. It has a fatal seductive power, like the compelling song of the Siren in the ancient Greek mythology, which causes people to lose the power to resist, to surrender voluntarily, and sink step by step -- just as Ge says, “They had to, I volunteered” [5].

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao’s extreme behavior manifests itself in the form of her strong control and frantic persecution of her family in many ways, which is depress-

ing and suffocating. Years of “heart demons” make her an extremely sensitive, selfish, twisted and perverted “ghost”, who wanders around every corner of the house with a grudge, making her family a dark and deadly hell. Lei Fu commented on Qiqiao Cao: “When love is not satisfied in one person, it requires the happiness and lives of three or four people to offset it. Terrible revenge” [10]. Personal secrets are talked about as a pastime, her husband marries another wife - Shou Zhi consumed her life in agonizing mental torture gradually, “She is lying straight on the bed, her two hands resting on her ribs curled up like the claws of a slaughtered chicken” [5].

Changbai’s another wife, Juan, is also driven to swallow opium to suicide herself. Growing up in a morbid environment, Changbai is full of bad habits: he is able physically but disabled mentally, and is a passive and decadent wanderer. From studying in the school to falling in love, whenever Chang’an gets a breath of fresh air from the outside world, Cao yanks her back mercilessly – Chang’an’s “beautiful and bless gesture” contains regret, helplessness and compromise, and she can only “lead to a place where there is no light” in despair [5]. When Shifang Tong meets Qiqiao Cao, he intuitively that she is a “madwoman” standing in the darkness, she is creepy. Cao’s family is a pool of water that is stagnant and putrid, a depressing, horrible and unbreakable cage that traps everyone’s body and soul. Whether it’s Liang mansion or Cao’s family, the environment’s stranglehold on people is nonviolent and bloodless, but it devours the soul completely and thoroughly, and everyone becomes a set of numb and desperate walking corpse.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that the relationships between people in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” are cold and detached, full of hypocrisy and deformity: not only do they lack the warmth between loved ones in the traditional values, but they even do harm in the name of affection. The characters in the two stories, Weilong Ge and Qiqiao Cao, struggle with three kinds of desire, namely survival, love and materialism. They move towards the tragedy of their lives: Ge degenerates from a simple-minded student to a social butterfly who relies on the exchange of her body to make a living and maintain the so-called “marriage”, and she has gone from being full of aspirations for life to being numb to it; Cao has gone from being a young girl with beautiful sentiment to a sick and twisted woman, destroying the lives of her children with her own hands and plunging herself into despair.

The ambience of the two stories is filled with perversity: the bizarre and frightening Liang Mansion seems to be

a “man-eating” trap, and the perverted and twisted Cao family is like a powerful “devil’s claw”, capable of shattering people’s bones. The sadness, horror and helplessness shown in the interpersonal relationship, the fate of the character and the atmosphere of the environment give the readers an endless sense of bleakness.

The main contribution of this paper is to analyze the constituent factors of the sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang’s works in a more comprehensive way using “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” as examples, which is conducive for other researchers to understand the sense of bleakness therein in a more concrete way. However, in the current study, the texts analyzed are limited and the perspectives are not complete. Future researches can explain the sense of bleakness from other texts of Eileen Chang and improve the theorization of studies.

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