

Interpreting Life in the Aesthetic Perspective of Reception

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Abstract: Life is one of the most renowned works of Lu Yao, and it is a landmark novel in his creative history. The novel revolves around the tragedy of Gao Jialin's personal struggle, whose growth trajectory and struggle are different from those of his contemporaries in other novels, and which can lead to different reading experiences when readers read this work. This paper aims to analyze the "implied reader" and "summoning structure" set up in Life from the reader's perspective, based on the theory of reception aesthetics, as well as the satisfaction and renewal of the reader's "vision of expectation" by this setting.

Keywords: literary theory, reception aesthetics, Lu Yao, Life, Gao Jialin

1. Introduction

Reception aesthetic theory is a new literary theory that emerged in the 1960s in the field of Western literary theory. This school of theory broke away from the traditional model of literary theory, as scholars broke away from the work and the writer to focus on the role of the reader in the literary process, and on the process by which literature is received by the reader and produces aesthetic effects [1].

Among them, the theories of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser are better known. The central concept in Jauss's theory is that of the "vision of expectation". He argued that in the actual reading activity, readers develop their own aesthetic reading experiences and that they have formed their intentions and conceptual structures based on different personal and social experiences [2]. Expectation horizons consist of three levels: expectation systems, changes in horizons, and reconstructions of horizons, with "expectation systems" referring to the reader's combined understanding of literary genres, forms, themes, and language" [2]. Iser went on to state that "a literary text is simply an indeterminate 'structure of invocation', that contains certain 'gaps' which only the reader can fill" [3]. He considered that these gaps of uncertain meaning will empower the reader to participate in the construction of the meaning of the work and that a new aesthetic of the literary text will emerge from the reader's participation. This kind of reader, who will read exactly according to the author's 'calling structure, is called an 'implicit reader', not a real reader but an idealized reader. Despite their differences in their theories, the founders of Reception Aesthetics all affirmed the role of the reader in literary activity. They both agreed that the function of a work needs to be realized in the activity of reading by the reader and that the completion of this process is what accesses the work alive. This article will interpret Lu Yao's Life based on the theoretical foundation of "Reception Aesthetic".

2. Finding the "Implied Reader"

Writers put their emotions, their will, and their thoughts into their works when they write. In the process of reading, we as readers can not only deeply appreciate the writer's inner thoughts but also travel back in time to the society in which they were written at the spiritual level. As readers, we should also be able to read the writer's work as closely as possible to the 'structure of the call' he has set up.

2.1. A Theme that Suits the Psychological Needs of the Reader

The struggle is an eternal theme, and literary works are full of character images of young people struggling for their dreams, such as the rural youths who struggle to follow the rules for their university entrance examination in Liu Zhenyun's *The Lighthouse*, and Jullien who uses improper means to achieve his ambitions in *The Red and the Black*. Not only are there characters who struggle in literary works, but there are also people from all walks of life who struggle to survive in reality, therefore the struggling youth in literary works has been a topic that people keen on talking about since ancient times. The theme of *Life* revolves around Gao Jialin, a rural intellectual youth bent on fleeing the countryside and in pursuit of the city, and how he escapes and pursues his struggle is divided into two aspects. The first aspect is that Gao Jialin relies on his efforts. After graduating from the county high school, Gao Jialin diligently teaches as a competent village teacher, hoping to one day he would truly get out of the countryside. Even after he was forced to be laid off, he only worked hard regardless of life and death, besides he felt wronged and acted rashly. The second aspect is that Gao Jialin relies on "external forces" to escape from the loess land. He rides on the east wind of the countryside to work in the county town and chooses to accept Huang Yaping's confession in order to have a better world in which to practice his skills.

2.2. Character Images Under the Influence of the Writer's Style and the Urban-rural Barrier

Lu Yao's writing creation was influenced by foreign writers, and he once said that he loved foreign literature and considered it necessary to "draw on all good foreign literature to better develop the new literature of our nation" [4]. In *Life*, he even directly used Huang Yaping to say that Gao Jialin is more similar to Jullien, the main protagonist in *The Red and the Black*, indicating that his own writing was influenced by Stendhal in a way/to some extent. Secondly, Lu Yao grew up with Confucianism and Taoism, and most of the inspiration and prototypes for his creations came from the rural environment where he grew up. His depiction of rural life was infused with more souls of nature and beauty, while he did not use poetic brush strokes to describe part of the urban parts. It can be seen that Lu Yao prefers the loess land, therefore his character image of Gao Jialin also loves the loess land. "In these times of extreme urban-rural divisions, Lu Yao wrote *Life* with a keen perception, lamenting the personal fate of rural people moving into the city with the eyes of a modern intellectual"[5]. The tragedy of Gao Jialin's personal struggle also reflects the fact that only a small percentage of people can lead a good life in a period of rapid economic development. Under the intersection of Lu Yao's thoughts and social realities, Gao Jialin is portrayed as a "highly motivated character", with struggles and resistance, as well as his own human weaknesses [6]. Lu Yao "shows this struggling figure in his quest for life, while at the same time discovering the constraints of social 'identity' on human existence" [7]. In Lu Yao's view, such a non-dualistic character can be discussed and resonated with contemporary readers, and they would fill the gaps in his creation.

2.3. Plot Design Resonates

Through Gao Jialin's tragedy, *Life* evokes thoughts on the differences between urban and rural areas and their struggles, reflecting the gradual alienation of people's pursuits and struggles in a situation where there is a huge difference between urban and rural areas. Gao Jialin could abandon Liu Liu Qiaozhen (one of the heroines in *Life*) for the identity of "city dweller", the direction of his struggle was alienated from when he wanted to use his connections to get to the county town, and the emotion ontology in his mind is replaced by an alienated tool essence, which is contrary to human morality. Secondly, some of the episodes in *Life* still have literary authenticity and plausibility (/rationality) in our current society. Gao Jialin's starting identity in the novel is a village teacher. The two identities of teacher and farmer form a huge contrast, "the impact of knowledge makes him obsessed with the realization of personal values, while his identity as a farmer makes him trapped in the land. This deadlock in life will inevitably cause his mental trauma, making him struggle between ideals and reality" [8]. This leads to him being unable to truly love the loess land. Gao Jialin is both ambivalent and selfish in the face of his human moral choices; he can accept Liu Qiaozhen when he needs spiritual pleasure, and abandon her when he needs higher spiritual comfort. The portrayal of such episodes makes Gao Jialin's character more realistic and three-dimensional, and there is also a dramatic and literary truth to the episode in which Gao Jialin is finally forced to return to the land again. In reality, many young people are forced to return to their hometowns, and their lives may not be strongly tragic, but when they read *Life* as readers, they put their own life experiences and choices into their interpretation of *Life*, and they are motivated to follow Lu Yao's writing to make their reflections on the current state of society.

3. Showcasing the "Call to Structure"

3.1. The Desire to Create Inspired by "Gaps"

In the theory of receptive aesthetics, the active reading behavior of the reader is the decisive factor in determining the meaning of a text, and literary theorists have no way of imposing their views on the reader. There is an aesthetic distance between the text and the reader, and the reader actively fills in the gaps in the text, which are called 'gaps'. The "gap" drives the reader to personalize the text, it is "an unspoken invitation to seek a missing connection" [8]. In *Life*, for example, there is an 'aesthetic imaginary of blankness without end' [8]. In the work, Gagarin's personal story ends with his cry of "Where are my relatives?" This sad and helpless cry is then drowned in the earth, but the reader knows that "Gagarin's story" does not end there.

Lu Yao's writing ends abruptly, and the 'gap' at the end gives the reader plenty of room for imagination and, to a certain extent, stimulates the reader's desire for individual creation. Readers may argue that, after experiencing the destruction of his ideals, Gao Jialin still intentionally separates his knowledge from the rural environment, and that his knowledge will not be linked to the Yellow Earth because of his failure. He combined his knowledge and interest in current affairs with the construction of rural reform. There are many different interpretations of this 'gap', and each reader's future outlook on the characters in the text is uncertain, and the reader can fill in this unsettled point according to his or her own personality and experience, but this gap is constrained by the writer's creativity. Throughout *Life*, we can see that Gagarin never stops pursuing his ambitions; he places his *Life*'s ambitions in a wider context. When he was in the countryside, he wished he could struggle in the county, and when he arrived in the county, he longed to see a larger world in the provincial capital. Faced with his expanding ambitions, Gao Jialin is then faced with the unethical choice of love, until in the end, both love and career fall flat. In the end, Lu Yao chooses to return Gao Jialin to the simple land, but in the context of the author's text, this is not the

end of Gao Jialin. If one were an 'implied reader', one would see Gao Jialin's return as a rest, not a settlement.

3.2. The Sense of Contrast Created by "Denial"

In addition to the 'blank', Iser also introduced the concept of 'negation' in his theory of 'evocative structures', which 'consists of both the text's negation of existing order and norms through It involves both the text's negation of existing order and norms through reworking the repertoire and the reader's evocation of familiar themes and forms, which are then negated', a variation on 'blank' [9]. Unlike the 'coming-of-age' heroes portrayed in the novels of the same period, Life portrays an 'anti-growth' character who defies conventional morality. At the beginning of the novel, Gao Jialin is forced to return to the land for the first time, arousing the curiosity of the first readers of the time about the story of Gao Jialin's land and the empathy between the readers and Gao Jialin. However, Lu Yao's writing turns on a dime, and instead of writing the heroic epic story that readers were expecting, he writes a characterization that puts humanism at the forefront. This denies the reader's pre-expectations and reorders the novel's narrative, in a way updating the reader's 'vision of expectation'.

4. Meeting and Renewing the "Vision of Expectation"

"How a literary work, at the historical moment of its appearance, satisfies, surpasses, disappoints or refutes the horizon of expectation of its first readers, clearly provides a yardstick for determining its aesthetic value" [10]. Lu Yao has been satisfying and changing the 'horizon of expectation' of the first reader in the storyline of Life, giving the reader a sense of pleasure in reading and thus generating a new reading experience, thus giving the text a new aesthetic effect.

4.1. Meeting the "Vision of Expectation"

Readers already have certain Life experiences and reading experiences when they read a literary work, so when they choose to read a text and interpret it, they are also influenced by their established reading experiences. Life" is Lu Yao's famous work, so naturally, Lu Yao himself did not have a regular readership before that, so he should grasp the scale between satisfying and renewing the horizon of expectations when creating the text. "In Life, the reader's expectations are met and the text's aesthetic needs are met. In Life, the reader's horizon of expectation is well met. Although some of Gao Jialin's actions are not morally and ethically correct, when the reader sees that he can return to the city from the countryside, this is again in line with the reader's horizon of expectation, and his experience of running away seems to bring hope to the reader. In addition, one of the key female figures in this text, Liu Qiaozhen, also carries a strong sense of rebellion and courage. Unlike traditional Chinese women of the past, Liu Qiaozhen has the simplicity and sincerity of traditional women, but also the courage to rebel against tradition that they do not have. Her strong vitality allows her to walk her path between love and the constraints of fate. When Gagarin is replaced, she is both furious and secretly happy, as if she thinks she is one step closer to her beloved. After she boldly expresses her love, Gao Jialin accepts him because of his own spiritual needs and Liu Qiaozhen's burning emotions. But there is a great divide between the two in their love beyond themselves. Liu Qiaozhen's father, who is initially adamant about not allowing his daughter to fall in love with Gao Jialin, whose family has no home, is strongly opposed to the pair being together, but in Liu Qiaozhen's eyes, Gao Jialin's knowledge is his wealth. Liu Qiaozhen defies the eyes of her family and the village people, she remains bold in showing her emotions. When Gao Jialin told her to start brushing her teeth, Liu Qiaozhen stood in front of her house and brushed her teeth hard, even when her mouth was full of blood, and many village people were

talking and laughing at her, but she didn't care. She can also take a donkey cart into the city with Gao Jialin to look for bleaching powder against the gossip. Lu Yao's portrayal of Liu Qiaozhen not only dares to break away from the traditional habits of *Life* but also dares to "go against the grain" by rebelling against the ethical and moral order of the three rules and five rules. In the 1970s and 1980s, when economic development was being vigorously pursued to emancipate the mind, women in society also hoped that they could boldly break out of the shackles of tradition, or that women readers from ancient times to the present day would have the same powerful original vitality as Liu Qiaozhen.

4.2. Updating the "Expectation Horizon"

But satisfying the reader's horizon of expectation is not enough to make the text more aesthetically pleasing; the author needs to renew the reader's horizon of expectation through the construction of the text. A text that meets and conforms to the reader's original horizons of expectation only allows the reader to engage in aesthetic activities based on his or her *Life* experience and interpretation skills but does not allow him or her to go further into the text. The reader's reading needs also require the writer to update his or her horizon of expectation based on satisfaction, to expand his or her aesthetic capacity and create a new aesthetic perspective. In *Life*, the reader's original expectations of the novel are denied, and Gao Jialin becomes an "anti-growth" character who defies morality, while another important female figure in this text, Huang Yaping, offers an olive branch to Gao Jialin. Huang Yaping does not mind that Gao Jialin is a rural man in the city, but she cares more about Gao Jialin's education, ability, and vision. She has a Romantic idealization of love, and uses the convenience of her position to help Gao Jialin stay in the city and move on to a wider world to seduce him. Both Gao Jialin and Huang Yaping are extremely autonomous and individualistic, and both are willing to abandon their partners for their so-called romantic love. In addition, when Gao Jialin is reported to have been forced to return to the countryside through the "back door", Huang Yaping is extremely conflicted and struggling. She truly loves Gao Jialin, but she also sincerely does not want Gao Jialin to be a rural man, and she is torn between bread and daffodils. In the end, it is Gao Jialin who takes the initiative to sever the idealized link between this relationship, freeing Huang Yaping from this binary choice [11]. The break-up of Gao Jialin and Huang Yaping is likely to renew the expectations of some readers, shattering the illusory expectation that they will return to the countryside together. The break-up of Gao Jialin and Huang Yaping may update some readers' expectations, shattering the illusory expectation that the two would return to the countryside together. In addition, I believe that Liu Qiaozhen's tragedy is more likely to create a new vision of expectation than Gao Jialin's. The character of Liu Qiaozhen is pure and defiant, but after being abandoned by Gao Jialin, her enthusiasm and courage are doused, and some of her qualities are channeled into traditional rural female traits. After being abandoned by Gao Jialin, Liu Qiaozhen is only sad for a few days and then goes back to work, and soon afterward she marries Ma Bolong. Here the reader is also updated with a new vision of expectation, as Lu Yao's tragedy of Gao Jialin leads people to think about the real social system, and then allows the reader to take a new aesthetic perspective and direction based on Liu Qiaozhen's tragedy and enlightenment, not limited to thinking about the difference between urban and rural development and personal ambition.

5. Conclusion

In creating the text, Lu Yao was aware of the role of the reader, so that by reading *Life*, the reader can become as much as possible an 'implied reader' in the 'summoning structure', following Lu Yao's brushstrokes in the process of filling in the 'gaps' he intentionally leaves behind, and

following the text to satisfy and renew his own 'vision of expectation'. "In the process of reading, the reader follows Lu Yao's strokes to fill in the 'gaps' he intentionally leaves behind, and also follows the text to satisfy and renew his own 'horizons of expectation'. Gao Jialin's story and attitude express his own disgust with the social Life after the rebellion, reflecting the thoughts of the aspiring young people in the countryside after the great social changes and development, facing the huge gap between urban and rural areas and the psychological disparity. Thus, Gao Jialin has a long way to go in Life after giving up Huang Yaping and losing Liu Qiaozhen.

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