

A Brief Analysis of the Ironic Art in Liu Zhenyun's Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers

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Abstract. From the late 1980s to the 1990s, Liu Zhenyun entered the mature stage of novel writing. Among his work, the new realistic novels stand out as representative creations. These works center on ordinary people, depicting their predicaments and existential embarrassments under the impact of the market economy. Irony serves as an important artistic device by which Liu Zhenyun refers to reality, not only criticizing social reality but also enhancing the novel's literary tension. This paper focuses on *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* and uses textual analysis to examine three dimensions of irony: verbal, structural, and thematic. Verbal irony presents the contradiction between appearance and truth through calm narration and self-mocking language of characters; structural irony uses everyday imagery such as "tofu" and trivialities to allude to the mediocrity of life and the weariness of spirit; thematic irony, on the other hand, points directly to the alienated fate of intellectuals between material and ideal. The research concludes that irony is not only a powerful tool for Liu Zhenyun to criticize reality but also builds a cold and tense narrative world at the literary level, prompting readers to reflect deeply on everyday life and human values.

Keywords: Liu Zhenyun, *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, Irony art

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, irony has undergone a transformation from a marginal rhetorical device to a core narrative strategy in Chinese literary studies. Traditional studies have mostly regarded it as a rhetorical device that creates an opposition between representation and reality in order to enhance the satirical tension of language. However, in the creative practice of new realist writers such as Liu Zhenyun, irony has been elevated to a fundamental worldview and narrative attitude.

Irony, as a rhetorical device, is local and strategic, while irony, as a worldview, permeates the soul, narrative tone, and structural texture of the work. It no longer pursues the effect of individual "golden phrases," but rather presents the absurd nature and irreconcilable contradictions that exist in the world itself.

In the 1980s, with the deepening of reform and opening up and the establishment of the market economy, the issue of "alienation" became the focus of intellectual attention. Liu Zhenyun's *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* reveals through ironic narrative how ordinary people gradually lose themselves and lose their individuality under the squeeze of the system and daily life. This ironic art

not only precisely presents the trivialities of life but also reveals the truth that the ideology of daily life intervenes and regulates everyone's life with its great corrosiveness.

This study aims to explore how the irony in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* goes beyond local rhetoric and is elevated to a fundamental narrative attitude that structures the entire text and criticizes reality, thereby demonstrating its unique literary power and social critical value.

2. Theoretical basis and analytical framework

The theory of irony has undergone a profound evolution from rhetorical techniques to philosophical perspectives. Traditionally, irony has been seen as a figure of speech that says one thing but means another. According to Mick, the typical form of irony is "ostensibly praise but actually rebuke, or ostensibly rebuke but actually praise," a partial means employed by the author to achieve a particular effect [1].

Since the 20th century, the scope of irony has been expanded to become a fundamental narrative attitude for structuring texts and observing reality. Pu interprets it as "a way of speaking that conveys an inner meaning that is quite different from the literal meaning of the text," which can run through the entire narrative, form the cold tone of the work, and thus elevate to a worldview in which the writer presents the complexity and absurdity of the world [2].

Based on this theoretical lineage, this paper constructs a triple analytical framework from the surface to the core: verbal irony, structural irony, and thematic irony. The framework is highly consistent with Liu's new realism: verbal irony forms the texture of his calm narrative, structural irony supports the skeleton of the narrative of life flow, and thematic irony ultimately leads to the cold cognition of the predicament of survival. This path systematically reveals how Liu Zhenyun has forged irony from a sharp scalpel that dissects the individual into a mirror that reflects the fate of the times.

3. Verbal irony

As one of the four major literary genres, language is an important bridge connecting the reader to the textual world. Verbal irony, also known as descriptive irony, refers to the rhetorical phenomenon in a work where the apparent statements are contrary to the author's true intentions. The interpretation of its deeper implications does not arise out of thin air but is a process of reconstruction based on textual cues, in combination with narrative tone, overall context, and even the context of *The Times* [3]. It is under this "contextual pressure" that the literal meaning of the language twists and gives way to a more tense, deeper connotation, thus constituting irony [4]. In *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, verbal irony runs through the text, often using the comments and exchanges of the omniscient narrator to reinforce the supporting role of language in the story structure from a "god's-eye view." This article will elaborate on both narrative verbal irony and character verbal irony.

3.1. Textual narrative language irony

In *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, Liu Zhenyun uses "textual narrative irony," that is, the third-person omniscient perspective and cool, restrained language, to construct the tension between the surface narrative and the deep intention. The narrator presents Kobayama's daily trifles in a detached manner, such as his wife's job transfer, rejected gifts, dissatisfaction with the nanny, etc., but within the plain description lies a profound revelation of the contradictions of reality and the mundane.

As Yang Jiang put it, a writer in a novel "reflects reality and cannot hide himself completely; his thoughts will be revealed in the work as if they were implied" [5]. Liu Zhenyun precisely uses this "hidden meaning" narrative strategy to present the trivialities of ordinary life with a humorous and cold satirical effect. "As long as you have patience, can wait, don't be impatient, don't be abnormal, what others can get, you will eventually get too" [6]. This statement, seemingly pointing to Kobayashi's compromise and waiting, is actually a satirical critique of the passive survival philosophy in reality, yet it reveals an optimistic resilience of accepting trivialities and moving on in a calm narrative. This "saying here but meaning there" narrative style pierces the surface of life and leads the reader to look at reality in irony and think about the possibility of going beyond it.

3.2. Character irony in speech

In the novel, Liu Zhenyun skillfully creates contrasts between appearances and reality through character verbal irony—including self-monologues and dialogue exchanges. Characters often express a certain position in a serious tone, but the reader perceives the absurdity and contradiction behind it, forming an understanding contrary to the surface of the text.

For example, when Kobayashi asked his old classmate "Little Li Bai" if he still wrote poetry, the other replied, "Don't daydream, don't always think about getting ahead, just mix in the crowd and think of nothing; that's the most comfortable" [6]. These words seem to advocate going with the flow and giving up pursuit, but in fact, they imply the helplessness of compromise with reality in a self-mocking way. It is through this misalignment between the appearance of words and the true intention that the author satirizes the attitude of life that dissolves ideals and passively "lies flat," thereby guiding the reader to reflect that the so-called "comfort" is nothing but an escape from the predicament of reality, and behind it is a silent call for positive change of destiny.

4. Structural irony

"Irony is the verbal phenomenon of the opposition between what is said and what is referred to, which is caused by the pressure of context on words" [7]. Verbal irony often acts on words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, while structural irony extends to the entire text, creating overall opposition and contrast through plot layout and narrative patterns to reinforce the author's intention. When irony is integrated into the structure of the novel, the whole text presents a subtle and flavorful tension, deepening the content of the work. Structural irony, which is both concealed and holistic, requires readers to read through the entire text and savor it repeatedly before they can perceive the author's ingenuity. The structural irony in "A Mess" is mainly reflected in three levels: the title, the clue, and the situation.

4.1. Title irony

The novel title *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* echoes the dream of Kobayashi at the end, creating a deep satirical tension. In the dream, he "dreamed that he was sleeping with a pile of chicken feathers on top and many people's dander on the bottom, soft and comfortable, making each day seem like a year" [6]. This image does not pursue the depth of symbolism or the sharpness of pedagogy but rather reveals the author's understanding of the true nature of life in a simple yet impactful way:

Life is made up of a pile of trivial and mundane "chicken feathers," which endlessly entangle, trouble, wear down the edges, dissolve the pursuit of the spirit, and trap people in the illusion of

"soft comfort" into the predicament of "each day feels like a year." The individual, without realizing it, loses consciousness, ideals, and the belief to change destiny and becomes a drowsy existence worn down by daily life. The title and the dream together form Liu Zhenyun's cold and incisive metaphor for existence.

4.2. Clues and contextual irony

In *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, Liu Zhenyun uses the everyday image of "tofu" to string together a series of trivial events in Xiaolin's life, from the quarrel caused by the spoiled tofu to the child's daycare, the wife's job transfer, the people coming from the hometown, etc. These "trivialities" form the thread and plot basis of the novel. The conflicts among the characters, such as the constant quarrels between Xiaolin and his wife due to life pressure, and the real-life predicaments they face, together construct a kind of situational irony where "expectations are contrary to reality." "The deliberate misalignment of the usual cause-and-effect links: the irony of the situation where expectations are contrary to reality [8]. Kobayashi originally had ideals but gradually wore them out in the trivialities of "a mess of trivialities" and eventually became a commoner content with the status quo. This narrative style, which takes everyday trivialities as the thread and characters' fates as the carrier, not only breaks the cause-and-effect logic of traditional novels but also profoundly reveals the alienation and helplessness of the individual under the heavy pressure of reality, reflecting Liu Zhenyun's veiled and tortuous ironic art under the guise of naturalism.

5. Thematic irony

Mick has pointed out that the irony in the work "lies in conveying a broader and richer meaning than direct statement, in avoiding excessive simplification and excessive preaching, and in showing that people have learned the right way to reach a certain insight by presenting its potentially destructive opposite" [1]. The ultimate destination of the novel is to reveal the subject and to give the real people the right values. The theme satire in *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* is mainly in the following three aspects.

5.1. Irony of character traits and fate

Liu Zhenyun, through Xiaolin's spiritual transformation, reveals the ironic fate of intellectuals gradually becoming alienated under the squeeze of reality. Xiao Lin initially had the ideals and aloofness of an intellectual but constantly compromised under the pressure of life; his spiritual world was hollowed out, and his personality's edges were worn down by reality.

As Zhu Lin points out, "The 'big man' swears to crash into his ideals, but Kobayashi easily abandons them" [9]. The irony is reflected in the inner contradiction: craving material pleasures while struggling to give up spiritual pursuits; neither willing to be mediocre nor to drift along with the mundane. In the end, Kobayashi transformed from an idealistic intellectual to a numb commoner. His choice to abandon his spiritual persistence and integrate into the secular world is both an individual tragedy and a reflection and irony of Liu Zhenyun on the spiritual predicament of intellectuals in a particular era, becoming a typical example of "spiritual rootlessness" in contemporary literature.

5.2. The irony of the trivialities of life

Liu Zhenyun peels away the ironic nature of reality layer by layer through everyday trivialities: The wife of Xiaolin gets on the company bus because the neighbor is a relative of the leader, the child goes to the kindergarten to act as a "study companion," and the teacher treats students differently because no gift is received—these events, in the plain narrative, quietly expose the appearance of power, justice, interpersonal sincerity, and the dignity of teacher ethics.

Instead of exaggerating intense conflicts, the author allows the trivialities to pile up like chicken feathers, waxing and waning, forming a recurring flow of life. In this seemingly mundane rhythm, the mental predicament of intellectuals' constant compromise and gradual erosion of ideals emerges. Liu Zhenyun, with a cool touch, reveals that it is these seemingly insignificant daily wear and tear that gradually erode human dignity and perseverance, and the path to salvation becomes increasingly distant in the cycle of trivialities.

5.3. The irony of the collusion between text and reality

The era background, character traits, and group portrait of *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* are all based on reality, set against the backdrop of the reform and opening up in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, the development of the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics brought about comprehensive and profound changes, with great alterations in both material and spiritual life.

Against this backdrop, intellectuals' traditional values were undermined, their material desires magnified, and it was extremely difficult for them to stand firm. As a result, many people lost their will to live and even despaired.

The narrative of the novel is understated and plain, yet vividly expresses despair, the helplessness of life, and the confusion of life, depicting the awkward situation of intellectuals who are unable to resist and choose when facing reality and depicting their lives in a dilemma. The content coincides with reality. "It is through the paradox of the language itself that Liu Zhenyun leads the reader to understand its true meaning" [10].

6. Conclusion

The satirical art runs through the entire text of *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers*, which is Liu Zhenyun's weapon, and its true intention is not only to reveal reality but more importantly to trigger philosophical thinking. Research shows that Liu vividly presents the spiritual compromise and inner struggle of ordinary people in their daily trivialities through irony on three levels: speech, structure, and theme. This satirical approach not only shapes Koblin's transformation from an ideal youth to a secular citizen but also metaphorically describes the dissolving power of life on ideals through the interweaving of everyday images such as "tofu" and "chicken feathers."

The core conclusion of this study is that Liu Zhenyun, through irony, constructs not only a picture of the survival of a family but also a mirror reflecting secular life. Its greatest cautionary value lies in showing us the spiritual alienation we might experience when dealing with "a mess of trivialities." Although the essence of life is triviality and compromise, Liu Zhenyun's art of irony ultimately points to the aspiration for a higher spiritual pursuit after recognizing the truth of life and to holding on to the warmth and dignity of the heart in ordinary life.

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