Author Background

Childhood and Youth

Zhou Zhangshou (, and later Zhou Shuren, ), more commonly known by his pen name, Lu Xun () (1881-1936), was born to a well-educated and wealthy family living in Shaoxing, Zhejiang; his father was a scholar and his grandfather was a high-ranked government official in Beijing. However, events such as the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), his father's chronic sickness, and his grandfather's arrest for being involved in a bribery case were the reasons that Zhou Zhangshou grew up poor.1

As a result of this fall in fortune, the Zhou family was looked down upon and treated poorly by their relatives and the community. The family's experience of having to send money every year to the government in order to insure that Zhou's grandfather would not get the death sentence is also the root of Zhou's contempt for China's traditional government system. Zhou's childhood experiences living in poverty greatly shaped his later writings, which are marked by its sharpness, sensitivity, and pessimism.2

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In 1899, Zhou attended a mining school in Nanjing, where he became interested in the Darwinian theory of evolution; Chinese intellectuals at the time interpreted the theory as reasons to have social reform and to welcome the new over the traditional. In 1902, he went to study medicine in rural Japan, and became friends with Chinese revolutionaries who were also studying there at the time. Their influence led Zhou to quit medical school because “however rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble” (pg. 17), then the country was in even worse shape because its people would not be able to innovate and think of new ideas. Spurred by this ideology, he moved to Tokyo in 1906 to study literature and the humanities with the hope of inspiring and revolutionizing the people of China in the future

**Literary Emergence**

In 1909, he and his brother, Zhou Zuoren published a two-volume translation of European stories with the hope that the stories would rally people for a revolution, but it did not garner much interest. Dejected, Zhou returned to China, where he soon joined an anti-Qing revolutionary party, Guang Fu Hui (); he stayed involved with the group all the way up to 1911, when the Qing Dynasty was overthrown by the revolutionaries. However, Zhou soon became disappointed with the results of the Revolution because the people were still “backwards” from abiding by traditional thought and the instability in the aftermath of the Qing overthrow caused China to suffer from imperialist intervention and colonial oppression.3

During this same time period (after he returned to China), Zhou spent several years working as a teacher in his hometown and as a low-level government official before he started writing again; in 1918, he became associated with the beginnings of a new Chinese literary movement through his published story, “Diary of a Madman” (1918) in New Youth magazine; due to the well-received response to the story, Zhou quickly followed up with other stories, including "The Real Story of Ah-Q" (1921-1922). It was during his initial emergence as a prolific author that he coined his pen name as “Lu Xun”, partially in tribute to his beloved mother whose surname was Lu. The stories he wrote during this time were collected and published in *Outcry* (1923) and quickly established Lu Xun as a leading Chinese literary figure and writer; he then published *Wandering* (“Hesitation”) in 1925. These two collections of short stories, because they were written in vernacular Chinese, are often considered the beginning of modern Chinese literature and are considered modern Chinese classics.

**Later Life**

In the 1920s, Lu Xun taught Chinese script and literature part-time at several universities in Beijing. Despite his success as a writer, Lu Xun was experiencing marital troubles, government pressure, and had a rift with his brother, Zhou Zuoren in 1926. These events forced him to flee Beijing in 1926 and finally settle down in Shanghai in 1927. In Shanghai, he began a relationship with a former student, Xu Guangping, and they had a son, Haiying in 1929 who was Lu Xun's only child. In 1928, he began to study Marxist theory and began to translate Marxist literature. In the last few years of his life, he considered himself as a Marxist and although he never formally joined the Chinese Communist Party, he recruited many followers to the CPC through his translations of Marxist works and his own political writings.

In 1931, the Chinese government prohibited the publication of most of Lu Xun's work, so he published the majority of his writing under pseudonyms criticizing the government and the Shanghai communist literary circles for embracing propaganda. In 1934, he published his last collection of short stories called *Old Stories Retold* where he took traditional Chinese stories and revised them to have darker themes, a reflection of his own thoughts in life since he felt frustrated with both the government and intellectual elite. He died in 1936 from tuberculosis and was survived by his wife and son.

**Legacy**

**Communism**

Lu Xun's relationship with the Communist Party of China (CPC) is complicated. Although Lu Xun never formally joined the CPC, his criticisms of the Nationalist or “Guomindang” () party drew many new supporters for the CPC. After Lu Xun's death, the Chinese communist movement depicted Lu Xun as the paragon of Socialist Realism and incorporated many of his literary works into textbooks and the educational curriculum; as a result, generations of Chinese students grew up memorizing and studying many of Lu Xun's literary works. Mao Zedong regarded Lu Xun as the most influential writer associated with the May Fourth movement in 1919 because of his poignant criticisms of traditional Chinese values and called him "the saint of Modern China". The government in 1951 also opened up the Lu Xun Museum in Shanghai which contains memorabilia from his life such as letters, manuscripts, and photographs.
At the same time, although Lu Xun, along with his contemporary educated peers, believed that Communism was the best solution to a more equitable society at the time, he also disliked some aspects of Communist ideology and its leaders for being too focused on power and fame. In fact, during the 1920s and 1930s, Lu Xun and his intellectual contemporaries often had intellectual discussions on political and social thought; however as the CPC gained more power, this type of intellectual thinking was suppressed because the CPC desired for more control on free speech. Eventually, Lu Xun's satirical writing style was discouraged and censored. Thus, the paradoxical fate of Lu Xun's influence is that he is both commended by Communist leaders as a source of "moral authority" for Communism while at the same time is denounced for the type of free-thinking and intellectual discussion that he advocated for and participated in. Mao Zedong reconciled Lu Xun's alleged patriotism to Communism and his famous satirical writing style by stating that "under the rule of dark forces, Lu Xun rightly fought back with burning satire and freezing irony but in our communist bases, where democracy and liberty are granted in full, we do not need to be like Lu Xun."  

Even though Mao Zedong revered Lu Xun, current party officials still feel uncomfortable with Lu Xun's dark and satirical views of Chinese society. Thus, beginning in 2007, the Chinese government has slowly started to remove some of Lu Xun's works from school textbooks, perhaps as an attempt to discourage the present youth from adopting Lu Xun's style of finding criticisms in the government. Although the government is attempting to remove Lu Xun's influence in the educational curriculum, his influence can be felt through China's internet presence. Today, disgruntled Chinese citizens reference Lu Xun to describe their increasing unhappiness with China's one party rule and even adopt his satirical style to mock government propaganda. For example, the CPC's touting of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi or ) is satirized by changing the phrase to "logic with Celestial Empire characteristics" (tianchao tese luoji or ), "which feeds off Lu Xun's insights into the dynastic habits that haunt the unconscious of modern Chinese politics."  

New Woodcut Movement and Communist Propaganda

The New Woodcut movement of the 1930s and 1940s was started by Lu Xun as an attempt to help the Chinese people break away from traditional Chinese and Confucian beliefs and embrace new Chinese art and literature. Lu Xun became inspired by the woodblock prints made by German Expressionists as they were relatively cheap to make and easy to copy, thus becoming an effective medium to express the social flaws of China at the time. Many of the woodblock prints were made by artists who focused on the social inequality prevalent in China at the time. Later, the influence of the woodblock prints would have a huge impact on the design of Chinese Communist propaganda posters. In fact, in 1937, the Lu Xun Academy of Arts was created in Yan'an to train artists in propaganda art.  

References in Modern Culture

The Real Story of Ah-Q

"The Spirit of Ah-Q"

In modern, vernacular Chinese, the phrase "ah Q jing shen" or "the spirit of Ah-Q" (Q) is a derogatory term meant to describe somebody who does not own up to reality, believes without good reason that he/she is superior to everybody else, and rationalizes every failure as a victory (referencing Ah-Q's own "moral victory" rationalization every time he gets defeated in a fight).

Film Adaptation

The True Story of Ah-Q (originally called "Ah-Q Zheng Zhuan" or ) was a film made in 1981 in China, directed by Fan Chen and starring Fumin Bao, Xi Chen, and Yikang Jin. It got nominated for the Cannes Film Festival in 1982 and the 1982 Golden Rooster Awards for Best Costume Design. Shunkai Yan won the Hundred Flowers Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Ah-Q. Below is the full film on Youtube:

Historical Background

Civil Service Examinations
Civil Service Examinations began in the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) with the invention of paper and was in full operation by the Tang Dynasty (618 AD - 907 AD), dubbed the "Golden Age of Literature" in China with the invention of printing. In order to enter into the upper levels of the government bureaucratic administration, participants must take the jinshi (進士) exams, which tested the Confucian Classics such as poetry, history, ritual, and divination. The examination system became so popular that by the end of the Tang dynasty, the original aristocracy was replaced and replaced by the bureaucratic officials who passed the jinshi exams, or the "scholar-gentry". By the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912), the exam became so stylized that it was often criticized for being so strict with style rather than focusing on content. Other criticisms of the exams were that it only tested on the Confucian Classics, which did not correlate with a participant's ability to properly govern nor did it test on other subjects as math and science (the latter being a major point of criticism by Lu Xun since his father died due to an improper diagnosis by a Chinese doctor and would have most likely lived had he been treated by Western medicine). Because of the criticisms and with the rising influence of Western thought, the Civil Service Examination System was abolished in 1905 in an attempt by the Qing Dynasty to modernize the country.9

Fall of the Qing Dynasty (1911)

Foreign Influence

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, European powers slowly expanded their influence in East and Southeast Asia. After China's defeat in two Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60) with Great Britain, Great Britain imposed unfair treaties on its trade with China and took Hong Kong. By 1900, European powers had established "spheres of influence" along the Chinese coast, thus controlling trade.10

Domestic Turmoil

Ordinary Han Chinese did not feel much loyalty to the Qing Dynasty because they were ethnically Manchu and not Han. The loss of both Opium Wars caused the public to lose faith in the Qing Dynasty even more. The Chinese people were also growing increasingly wary of the foreign influence in its country and launched an anti-foreigner movement, called the Boxer Rebellion.

Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901): The Boxer Rebellion attempted to drive all foreigners out of China. The Name "Boxer" was what foreigners gave to members of a Chinese group called the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, who practiced certain boxing rituals in the belief that it made them invincible. In 1900, the Boxers led an uprising in northern China against foreign influence where they killed foreigners and Chinese Christians, as well as destroying foreign property. From June to August 1900, the Boxers took over Beijing, but an international military force then came in and quelled the uprising. The rebellion officially ended in 1901 where through the Boxer Protocol, China agreed to pay more than $330 million in reparations.11

After the Boxer Rebellion, which signaled the demise of the Qing Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty barely held onto power for another decade before the last emperor, 6-year old Puyi, formally abdicated his throne on February 12, 1912, due to intense revolutionary party pressure.

May Fourth Movement (1917-1921)

After student demonstrations in Beijing on May 4, 1919 protesting the Chinese government's decision to allow Japan to receive some territories in China from the Treaty of Versailles, it sparked an intellectual and sociopolitical revolution all throughout China. In 1915, Chinese youth, inspired by the content of "New Youth" magazine began to advocate for reform to strengthen Chinese society. This movement was against traditional Confucian values and instead, was in favor of Western ideas, science, and technology. The movement also advocated that Chinese characters shift from classical, wényuàn (), to naturalistic vernacular, báihuà (), style. The May Fourth movement is also often called the "New Culture Movement" as well.12 At the time, it was not popular and widespread to write in vernacular Chinese but Lu Xun composed many of his stories in modern Chinese (even though he was very well-educated and trained in Classical Chinese) as a way to signal his rejection of traditional Chinese values in favor of more modern views.
Summary of Selected Works

Preface to *Outcry*

**Summary**

Lu Xun starts out by narrating his early childhood of going in-between the the pawnshop and the pharmacy; his family has to pawn off many of their valuables for cash in order to buy his father medicine. Unfortunately his father passes away. Because the family was poor, Lu Xun enrolled in the Naval Academy of Nanjing, where he was exposed to Western sciences and realized that the Chinese medicine his family spent years paying for was a sham. Inspired by what he learned at the Naval Academy, he enrolled at a medical school in rural Japan, with the hope to go back to China and treat the sick with Western medicine. However, he soon realized that the "greater illness" was if a country's citizens were "intellectually feeble". Thus, he returned to Tokyo to study the humanities in order to raise the people's spirits. He attempted to start a literary magazine called New Life but that failed due to lack of content and logistical issues. Feeling lonely and dejected after the magazine's failure, he spent his time idly copying ancient stone inscriptions. However one day, a visit from his friend, Jin Xinyi, convinced him of the need to start writing stories again, with the hope that future generations do not suffer the same loneliness that he did.

**Diary of a Madman**

**Summary**

The story starts out by stating that the aforementioned story will be the diary entries of a friend written during when he was sick and suffering from "persecution complex". In the beginning, the narrator begins to notice that people in his community start to treat and look at him differently and wonders why. He then hears reports of a famine in a nearby village where the villagers ate a person. He then starts to suspect that he, too, will soon be eaten by the villagers, which worries them where they are looking at him differently. His paranoia grows until he is suspicious that everybody is in on trying to eat him, even his own brother. He suspects that the villagers cannot be too conspicuous in their desire to eat him so they do everything very subtly. He then tries to convince his brother to not eat him, unknowingly also drawing a crowd of people observing him with his brother; his brother then orders everybody to disperse because his brother is going insane. The narrator then goes back inside where he contemplates while eating his meals. He believes that his brother ate his sister, who passed away when she was four, as well. In the second-to-last entry, the narrator contemplates the painful realization that he has lived in a country that has been practicing cannibalism for 4,000 years. His last diary entry is him wondering whether there are any children remaining who are not cannibals and his desire to "save the children...".

**Social Commentary**

**Critique of Traditional Systems:** In the story, Lu Xun makes direct references to how the government has robbed the people of their possessions: "they have been pilloried by their magistrate, beaten by their squires, had their wives requisitioned by bailiffs, seen their parents driven to early graves by creditors" (Entry III), perhaps also indirectly referring to the corruption evident in the government system as well. He also mocks traditional Confucian values, claiming that in between the lines of Confucian writing, it says to "Eat people" (Entry III). In Entry XII, he claims to be in horror that he has lived in a country that has practiced cannibalism for 4,000 years; however, he is greatly exaggerating how often cannibalism occurs in China. His exaggerations are in a sarcastic tone, and is also meant to indirectly criticize some of the other long and antiquated practices/traditions in Chinese history (and how they do not fit with modern times).

**The Real Story of Ah-Q**

**Summary**

**Chapter 1 - Preface:** Lu Xun describes his desire to write about the life of Ah-Q, but runs into the trouble of not being able to write Ah-Q's real name nor knowing his birthplace.

**Chapter 2 - A Brief History of Ah-Q's Victories:** Ah-Q is Weizhuang village's odd-job man and, although he does not own a home, he sleeps in the Temple of the God of the Earth and the God of the Five Grains. Ah-Q also thinks very highly of himself and thinks he is above everybody in Weizhuang, even above the two preeminent families in the village, Zhao and Qian. Characteristics of Ah-Q are that he has ringworm scars on his scalp, and likes to give people the "Angry Glare" when villagers provoke him (along with challenging them to a fight where he often loses). Despite often losing, Ah-Q has a habit of declaring moral victory when he loses, and the villagers use that habit to tease and provoke him even more. Even when he loses, Ah-Q will quickly become happy again and would often afterwards go to a tavern and drink, socialize, and when he had money, gamble.

**Chapter 3 - The Continuing Story of Ah-Q's Victories:** The villagers start to respect Ah-Q more because he claimed blood-relation with Mr. Zhao, who is part of a preeminent family in the village. One day as he was walking drunkenly, he passed by Wang (whose nickname is Hairy Ringwormed Wang) and got into an argument with him after getting jealous that he could not find as much lice as Wang did on his body. Wang wins the fight and smashes Ah-Q's head against the wall several times, and Ah-Q considers this defeat the first true humiliation of his life. His second humiliation in life was after he insulted Mr. Qian's eldest son (whom he calls the "Fake Foreign Devil" because he went and attended a Western school) for cutting off his queue, he then got beaten up again. However after this beating, he went to the tavern where he provoked a nun; this "victory" made him forget all about his defeats with Wang and Mr. Qian's son.

**Chapter 4 - Love's Tragedy:** Ah-Q is determined to find a woman in order to have descendants. He then proceeds to ask Mrs. Wu, the Zhao family's only maid, to sleep with him; she immediately screams and rejects his advances. Soon, he is beaten by Mr. Zhao's oldest son for making inappropriate advances towards the maid. Later, the village constable instructs Ah-Q on several conditions he has to follow in order to properly apologize to the Zhao family for what had happened; he fulfills the conditions by selling his cotton quilt.
Chapter 5 - Questions of Economy: After paying off his dues to the Zhao family, Ah-Q begins to notice that the women on the street suddenly seem timid of him, the tavern refused him credit, he was kicked out of the temple he was staying at, and he was not able to find work. He tries to find out why he isn't being hired anymore and realizes that a person named D is doing all the work-for-hire that he used to do; he then proceeds to fight him, even after the fight nobody would hire him. Suffering from hunger, he proceeds to steal turnips from a convent.

Chapter 6 - Rise and Fall: Ah-Q returns to Weizhuang a few months later much wealthier than before. He told the villagers that he made his fortune by working for a scholar in another town, but came back because Ah-Q found him annoying. Then, he starts selling items to local women who were pleased with the great deals they were getting from their purchases. However, it was eventually discovered that the reason Ah-Q was able to sell all those items was because he took them from a thief who had just stolen them.

Chapter 7 - Revolution: The villagers hear rumors that the Revolutionary Party might soon take over. Ah-Q decides he wants to join the Revolution, not because he believes in the cause, but because this event was worrying the great Mr. Provincial Examination; he wants to join in order to see the preeminent families in town bow down to him when the Revolutionaries take over. One day, he got up really late and found that he had missed witnessing the Revolutionaries come to town; apparently the Zhao and Qian families had consulted with each other and both decided to join the Revolutionary Party while Ah-Q was asleep.

Chapter 8 - Barred from the Revolution: Despite the Revolutionary Party taking over, nothing much had changed in the town, except that men were starting to coil up their queues. Ah-Q feels left out that he was not able to join the Revolution, and attempts to by visiting the Qian household, only to be kicked out.

Chapter 9 - A Happy Ending: After a robbery occurred at the Zhao household, and Ah-Q was interrogated and put on trial as he was the main suspect (even though he actually did not commit the robbery). It turns out that the authorities cared more about punishing a person for the crime rather than finding the person who actually did it, because he fears that he will lose respect otherwise. Thus, Ah-Q is executed by a firing squad.

Social Commentary

Critique of Traditional Chinese Culture: Ah-Q is meant to represent all that is wrong and backwards about traditional Chinese culture such as the majority of its people being uneducated, unaware, uncritical. In addition, despite the Revolutionary Party taking over, nothing much in the town had changed, symbolizing that the people of the village need to also be enlightened ("awakened") and educated in order to fully take advantage of the new government. If the Chinese people did not become educated and aware of the world, then they would never be able to compete successfully against Western powers. In his attempt to educate the Chinese people, this story is also significant because it was written in modern, vernacular Chinese (so it was more accessible to be read by the masses) and is often considered the first major Chinese work to be completely written in vernacular Chinese after the May Fourth movement in 1919.

Embrace of Western Ideas but not Western Imperialism: Many scholars theorize that the use of the letter "Q" in Ah-Q's name is Lu Xun's way of subtly promoting the ideals of the May Fourth movement which advocated the adoption of Western ideas; however, as evidenced by Lu Xun giving the name of "Fake Foreign Devil" to Qian family's son, he does not advocate for Western imperialism or the superficial embrace of Western values (despite Qian's son being educated in a Western school, he still wears a fake queue, meaning that he has only superficially embraced his Western education.)

The Fallacy of Moral Victory over Defeat: Throughout the story, Ah-Q has a habit of having "moral victory over defeat", where every time he loses a fight or something bad happens to him, he rationalizes it to make him feel better. Although in small amounts this is okay, Ah-Q does this so often that the reader recognizes the absurdity of his rationalization. This is Lu Xun's critique of how Chinese people often rationalize defeat or imperialism, and if they keep on rationalizing like this, they will never become a forward and progressive nation.

A Comedy of Ducks

Summary

Lu Xun's Russian friend, Eroshenko, is staying with his family in Beijing. He finds the place lonely and introduces tadpoles into the pond to raise them. In addition, he soon bought four chicks to raise as well, but then the chicks accidentally ate the tadpoles. By the time the ducklings had begun to mature, Eroshenko returned to Siberia. Although the author has not heard from Eroshenko in a while, the four ducks are still quacking in the courtyard and pond.

Significance

During this time, Lu Xun heavily looked up to Russian writers and much of his writing was influenced by Russian literature. In fact, Lu Xun's "Diary of a Mad Man" was inspired by Nikolai Gogol's short story of the same name. In the short story, Eroshenko criticizes Beijing for being too quiet and not having enough "music" from insects/animals. Lu Xun becomes defensive and then says there are lots of frogs in Beijing. This interaction is symbolic at the time because it seems that Eroshenko looked down on China and reflects how he believes Russia is more superior than China in both its culture and literature, and Lu Xun feels the need to defend China since he loves his country.

Preface to Old Stories Retold

Summary

The author states that the following stories took 13 years to complete. He was making progress on the stories until he read a bad review of his work, O utor. He then resolved to reshape a volume to make it better in his style of "vulgarity" in order to "not lead readers further down the road of Cheng's (the critic) misjudgments". Over the years, although he wrote drafts of stories, he never had time to polish them, but finally in 1935, he has finished his collection of stories.
Mending Heaven

Summary

Nuwa creates the first humans from mud and in shock, begins to make more humans out of happiness. At first they were nearby her, but then they roamed off and Nuwa was no longer able to understand what they were talking about. Tired, she still continues to make humans and then decides to take a nap. When she awakens, she notices that the humans in a mountain have given her many offerings in hope that she will give them the elixir of life. Annoyed by their actions, she has turtles take the mountains somewhere safe. She then notices that humans have started fighting with each other in large-scale wars. She then decides that sky needed to be mended and piled a tower of reeds and lit it on fire. Once the heavens were uniform again, she took up the reed ashes and doused them in floodwaters. The steam that arises from this event covers her body and she dies.

Literary Devices

Narrative Perspective

Diary of a Madman

In the original text, the prologue was like a medical record written in Classical Chinese as a stylistic device in order to make it seem like it was an official document. However, the rest of the diary is in first-person written in "modern Chinese" by the "mad" brother. The contrast between the third person to first person is to distort reality for the reader. The prologue in written in Classical Chinese makes it appear to the reader to be a realistic, non-fiction account of a mental illness. However, once the reader switches into first-person from the perspective of the "mad" man, it becomes hard to discern reality from hallucinations and forces the reader to question if the man even had a mental illness or was the whole diary a work of fiction.

The Real Story of Ah-Q

The perspective of this story is in third-person with an omniscient narrator. The reason the story is in third-person is because Ah-Q is illiterate and from his actions, appears to be unintelligent and unaware of the current world events going around him. Thus, it becomes necessary for another person to step in and write Ah-Q's biography because the "omniscient narrator" is able to not only describe events from Ah-Q's perspective, but also discuss current events such as the Revolutionary Party taking over the town in order to allow the reader to have a better understanding of what is actually happening.

Satire as a Motif

Diary of a Madman

The references to cannibalism is a common motif used in social satire and the same applies to this story. The narrator's paranoia about cannibalism and the villagers planning to eat him is an analogy to the ancient Chinese feudal system where the nobility and royalty extract payment from their peasants living in the rural countryside. Here "cannibalism" refers to not the superficial act of eating human flesh, but of how the feudal lords "eat" the payments of the peasants at the peasant’s own expense, who are already in extreme poverty. The fact that the narrator accuses everybody of being a cannibal is symbolic of stating that everybody is a peasant in the feudal lord system. The author's paranoia that the villagers are going to eat him could perhaps symbolize the feeling of being trapped in the peasant lifestyle and never being able to break away from it. In addition, the narrator further satirizes traditional Chinese culture by mocking Confucius. For example, the narrator describes Confucius's values of "benevolence, righteousness, morality snaking their way across each page" (pg. 24) in a malicious way and then proclaims that Confucius is subtly telling everybody to "Eat people!" (pg. 24) By critiquing Confucius, who is a central philosopher in the development of Chinese values and thought, the narrator is also critiquing "Old China" and its antiquated values.

The Real Story of Ah-Q

The Real Story of Ah-Q is a prominent example of Lu Xun's use of political satire. Lu Xun uses satire in order to convey social commentary in a comedic way in order to make his opinions more poignant to the reader. During this time, Lu Xun has a strong desire for the people of China to become more progressive and no longer cling on to the "backwards" Chinese thought. Thus, he made Ah-Q representative of all that is wrong with traditional Chinese culture and puts Ah-Q in "ridiculous" situations in order to satirize his actions. For example, Ah-Q often picks fights with people and almost always loses; yet instead of being disappointed with his defeats, he quickly becomes excited again since had had a "habit of declaring moral victory over the ashes of defeat" (pg. 86). These incidents are to satirize how Chinese people would often "rationalize" their defeats such as when they suffer under imperialism from Europeans or lose to Japan.

Comparisons with Other Works

Candide by Voltaire
Both Lu Xun and Voltaire used satire and humor in their stories to challenge and question the preexisting beliefs of their time. For Voltaire, he is questioning and satirizing Leibniz’s philosophy of the “best of all possible worlds” through putting Candide in many unfortunate circumstances where he tries to apply Leibniz’s philosophy in rationalizing why the events happened; as the unfortunate circumstances grow worse and Candide still insists on believing the “best of all possible worlds”, it highlights to readers the absurdity and flaw in Leibniz’s philosophy. Lu Xun uses a similar approach in having Ah-Q represent all that is flawed with traditional Chinese culture and making him go through many trials that highlights all of Ah-Q’s faults. The differences in the authors are how they “solve” the problem they are critiquing. In Candide, Voltaire offers a resolution by having Candide, at the end, “cultivate [his own] garden” (pg. 88), which is symbolic of Voltaire suggesting that people be more responsible and take direct action in shaping their destinies. However, Lu Xun seems to only raise questions and highlight the problems without seeming to give a feasible solution.

Lu Xun was writing these stories when he was living a solitary lifestyle in an apartment in Beijing. In the Preface to Outcry, he compared his feelings of hopelessness to that of “an iron house” (pg. 19) and felt frustrated that his stories would not significantly impact and motivate most people in China. However, he eventually realized that the tiny hope that perhaps his stories would have an impact inspired him to write; it was during this time that he wrote “Diary of a Madman” and “The Real Story of Ah-Q”. Perhaps he wrote his stories without providing a solution because since he was living in China and felt suffocated by the problems of China, he was unable to distance himself from current events since he was living in the country. Voltaire on the other hand, was French, but was banished to England when he wrote Candide; as a result, he was not enmeshed in the country (France) when he was writing the novel. A theory on the author's differences in providing a solution is based on the location of the authors when they were writing their stories. When a satirist can distance him/herself from the thing he/she is satirizing against, the narrative voice becomes more aloof as the satirist believes him/herself to be superior to the thing they are criticizing (explaining why Voltaire provides a solution to the problem he is critiquing) whereas for Lu Xun, he is enmeshed in the culture of China and is personally feeling the consequences of what he is satirizing against, so it is harder for him to extricate himself out of the situation and provide a solution to the problems because he is burdened and feels hopeless/frustrated by them.

References

Books


Online

All online websites referenced are linked to a superscript footnote numbered from 1 to 12; they are located throughout this entry.

4. https://sites.google.com/a/storybrook.edu/lu-xun1/death-and-legacy