

A Discussion on the Tragic Core in the Comedic Expression of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*

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Abstract: As a representative masterpiece written by Yu Hua, *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* depicts the sufferings of folks. In this story, Xu Sanguan had been forced to sell his blood in exchange of money due to the changes caused by the macro social background in his life, reflecting the reality of a nobody, which is full of ironic elements during the specific era. The author tried to think about the meaning of life of the masses at the bottom of society when creating this novel. The following content will analyze the profound tragic connotation contained in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* based on the plot arrangement, language structure and some other forms of expression.

1. Introduction

The stance of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is simple and unadorned, drawing together the full picture of Xu Sanguan's life from his adolescence to his senium through his several experiences of selling blood. The historical background on which the novel is based is totally real. Historical events and social changes such as the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, three years of natural disasters, down to the countryside movement and so on can give readers a good understanding of mood of characters, showing real affection rather than the lofty scrutiny and pity. The appearance of Xu Sanguan is rarely described throughout this book. He is just a vague figure. As a result, Xu Sanguan can be regarded as an epitome of the massive underclass, which is representative and typical. The tone of this novel doesn't present explicit sorrow. Instead, the comic elements like black humor are interspersed. Yu Hua uses a variety of contradictions and conflicts to highlight a full sense of irony, meanwhile cleverly hiding the tragic core between the lines. The 'sadness' in this novel is multidimensional which originates from the deep-rooted traditional feudal ideas and the material constraints due to living in poverty and also stems from the inferiority feelings of characters that cannot be shaken on a psychological level. Based on the above three aspects, the following parts of the paper will further analyze the tragic significance of this novel in combination with its original text.

2. A deep-rooted mark under the influence of traditional feudal ideas

The characters portrayed by *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* are mostly short-sighted and poorly educated workers. Due to the shackles of living environment and personal ideological inside information, they have no opportunity and ability to broaden their horizons. They can only let the traditional feudal thoughts passed down from generation to generation brainwash themselves and constantly deepen the impression of cultural dross. Therefore, the harrowing and irrefutable imprint of feudal thoughts can be seen everywhere in the novel. For example, when He Xiaoyong learns that Xu Yulan who should have married himself is going to get married with someone else named Xu Sanguan, he says,

'How can you expect me to pay your debts when we are not married?'

'You're talking nonsense! How could I possibly be a live-in son-in-law? It is impossible to give my sons the last name Xu!'

This piece of content reveals the falsity of the seemingly beautiful love between Xu Yulan and He

Xiaoyong. Actually, profit is the dominant factor in their relationship. From He Xiaoyong's point of view, the most important meaning of marriage is to earn more money and to procreate. Both the sense of shame brought by being a live-in son-in-law and the desire for the right to decide the surnames of his descendants have inadvertently revealed the ancient concept that men should be superior to women in his heart.

What's more, the scene when Xu Yulan and He Xiaoyong mocking each other in person was impressive.

Xu Yulan sees He Xiaoyong's wife sneering, she also sneers and says, 'there is a woman who has done a lot of bad things, her life will be retrievable. She can only give birth to a daughter instead of a son. When this daughter grows up, she will belong to another family and carry on the family line for someone else. However, their own family line cannot be perpetuated.'

Xu Yulan also says, 'A woman who has given birth to three sons in succession should certainly be proud of herself.'

Although Xu Yulan is a female, she naturally defines the value of women's life as 'bearing', which is absolutely narrow. She emphasizes 'giving birth to a son' and 'giving birth to three sons' in her words, negating the objective fact that women exist as independent individuals in the world. She believes that a mother is more welcomed and valued if she has her own sons. Also, she regards a large number of sons as a badge of honor to elevate her family status. It can be seen that such a kind of mindset created by feudal social customs is deeply rooted in the bone. People are immersed in the pain of inequality without self-knowledge, and even naturally choose to follow the so-called 'truth'.

In addition, when Xu Sanguan visits Xu Yulan's father for discussing their marriage, what really wins his father-in-law's favor is that they share the same surname, so their future kids will definitely be surnamed Xu. In consequence, the family lineage of both families will be carried on. Two birds can be killed with one stone. This conversation is about Xu Yulan's lifelong happiness, and it is sad that her personal thoughts are never included in the consideration of two men. Later, when Xu Sanguan found that his favorite eldest son Xu Yile is not biological, he cannot accept this fact. He betrays his wife on impulse, achieving a psychological balance through 'tit-for-tat'. However, the equivalent betrayal which breaks through the ethical bottom line alleviates the contradiction between two people to the greatest extent and shows the stupidity in their minds.

3. The material restraints caused by a poor standard of living

The story of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* took place in a particular era, disasters like Great Chinese Famine lead to a desperate lack of materials and a situation in which people's living standards are deteriorating. The poverty of Xu Sanguan's family represents the struggling living state of most ordinary people at that time. When property was extremely scarce, everything has to be carefully calculated. If Xu Sanguan takes Xu Yulan out on a date, he will report the spending during the whole day to her, '24 cents for the steamed buns, 9 cents for the wonton, 10 cents for the preserved plum, 23 cents for the candies because we have bought them twice, 17 cents for half of a watermelon which weighs 1.7 kilograms. I have spent 83 cents in total.....so when will you agree to marry me?' In Xu Sanguan's cognition, he has paid so much precious money for Xu Yulan, the equivalent exchange is marriage, otherwise all his efforts are in vain. This kind of idea relates closely to the original sin of poverty.

Throughout the novel, Xu Sanguan sells blood for eleven times totally, from which the tragic color of his life is portrayed incisively and vividly. The reason why he begins to sell blood is the pure curiosity caused by crowd mentality. Other people have made a lot of money through selling blood, so he does it too. He says, 'According to what you say, is the blood on my body a ready source of money?' Blood is the origin of life, coordinating the operation of all organs in one's body, continuing the human breath and carrying the human soul. But Xu Sanguan sees blood as a cash cow, suggesting that the regular salary he earns from delivering cocoons is not enough to make ends meet, so he is forced to explore the possibility of making money in an unorthodox way. It lays the groundwork for the more extreme poverty that appears in the following article.

There is also a dialogue as follow.

‘Did you say that we have to be drawn a tube of blood for a test at the hospital?’

‘Yes.’

‘No money for this tube of blood?’

‘No.’ his uncle says, ‘This tube of blood is sent to the hospital for nothing.’

Xu Sanguan does not care whether selling blood will harm his health at all. The excessively detailed calculation is really amusing. The phrase ‘sell for nothing’ also contains a sense of humor. This extra tube of blood is clearly used by doctors to check the condition of blood, so as to determine whether the blood provider is qualified to sell blood. However, his uncle thinks it is just ‘for free’. It shows that the high attention paid to earning money has been integrated into daily details.

Needless to say, the great Chinese famine period and the Great Leap Forward bring on disaster after another to Xu Sanguan and his family members who are fooled with by destiny. Xu Sanguan’s behavior of selling blood has gradually transformed from a simple means of making money into a tragic approach targeted at survival. The meaning of the word ‘life’ is expanded radically to the struggling process of ‘looking for a way to survive.’ Through the arrangement of Yu Hua’s writing, subtle comic elements are cleverly interspersed. For instance, Xu Sanguan uses his mouth to cook for his children on his birthday. The three hungry children all want to eat braised pork in soy sauce, so he repeats the same description of the process of making this dish several times, creating happiness of feeding on fancies and illusions. Readers are filled with tears while laughing. Yu Hua is good at retelling which can strengthen the emotional impact contained in the absurd plots.

‘I’ll keep selling my blood even if it kills me some day.’ As Xu Sanguan goes to sell blood more frequently, the stir-fried liver and yellow rice wine served in Shengli Restaurant have already become a serious ritual that he must abide by. Regardless of the fact that blood-selling is illegal in the 21st century, even in the epoch in which the novel is set, blood-selling is not considered honorable in mainstream. This argument can be verified from Xu Yulan’s reaction when she learns that Xu Sanguan is selling blood for money, ‘In my father’s words, a person’s blood is handed down from his ancestors. A man can sell deep-fried dough sticks, houses or fields, but he shouldn’t sell his blood. He may sell his own body, but he cannot sell his ancestors. Xu Sanguan! You have betrayed your ancestors!’ Yet, when there is no other way out, blood-selling saves this poor family from the abyss of despair again and again.

The sense of tragedy implied by the lack of material resources is also reflected in every aspect of the novel. Xu Yulan saves the worsted gloves from Xu Sanguan’s work and then uses them to knit clothes for the household. Such a life is hard for today’s readers to imagine, but it is common for those people living in that era and that place, even having more worsted gloves than anyone else is something to be envied. Except for clothes, food also cannot meet the normal needs of people. ‘When will this misery end? It’s so bitter that children haven’t forgotten what flavor is sweet and when they eat something sweet, they don’t remember that it is just sugar!’ Sighs of pain are hidden in the seemingly humorous ridicule.

The sentence ‘We must endure this hard life’ is likened to a dagger by Yu Hua, which mercilessly pierces the peaceful disguise of real life, exposing extensive social problems. So the core of tragedy is embodied.

4. The inferiority feelings and the sense of submission on a psychological level

In the macro historical background of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*, people’s individual life meaning and belief are ignored. The demands of the underclass are often unable to be heard by the authorities, so what they can do is to try their best to struggle forward. At the same time, they understand the value of life and love subconsciously, and will never give up the affection among family members or their own life even when they are undergoing unconquerable suffering. This is why ordinary people are worthy of respect. Because of Xu Sanguan’s personal ideological realm and attainment, he cannot accurately judge the situation and policy, he doesn’t make any attempt to resist the cruel fate from beginning to end. He is always calm, showing shocking strength in the face of cruelty and helplessness of life. Xu Yulan is criticized for her unwarranted ethical conduct and her family is asked to hold a separate criticism and denunciation meeting for her at home. No one has the

courage to question and refute it. They are usually recipients, but they get sublimated in the process of redeeming each other. For example, when Xu Sanguan urges Xu Yulan to cover up his mistakes, he says, 'You are already in the water and I'm the only one in the world who still wants to save you. If I'm dragged into the water, no one will save you.' When the leader of the production team in which Xu Erle is working visits their home, Xu Sanguan does not hesitate to sell blood for money to entertain him well, even though he has just sold his blood two days ago without having a good rest. Xu Sanguan risks his life to accompany this leader to drink liquor, so as to request him to take care of his son, Xu Erle overtly and covertly. This is humbling. This is yielding. Also, this is his deep love for his son.

The combination of good and evil is a great highlight of the characters in this novel. Xu Sanguan is not perfect. After he knows that Xu Yile is not his biological son, though this is his favorite child, he is no longer willing to spend money for the innocent kid, even trying to get rid of Xu Yile. But in the end, Xu Sanguan accepts Xu Yile with selfless fatherly love. When Xu Yile gets hepatitis, Xu Sanguan sells blood all the way so they can go to an advanced hospital in a big city. He has to drink eight bowls of cold water in a row in the chill weather, shivering feebly under the heavy quilt. Such kindness is another effect of Xu Sanguan's humbleness and yielding underneath. He never rebels, so he is unable to master how to intrigue against each other like those delicate egoists; he is simple and honest, so he always shows his real sentiments at the most critical moment. These qualities can be seen through the plot that regardless of past grievances, Xu Sanguan allows Xu Yile to climb on the roof to call back the spirit of his sick biological father and the plot that Xu Sanguan borrows money for curing Xu Yile of his disease and gives He Xiaoyong's wife and daughters a bow of thanks.

The novel contains the following paragraph, 'His destination is Shanghai, and he will pass through Linpu, Beidang, Xitang, Baili, Tongyuan, Songlin, Daqiao, Anchang Men, Jingan, Huangdian, Hutou Bridge, Sanhuan Dong, Qili Fort, Huangwan, Liu Village, Changning, Xin Town. Among all these places, Linpu, Baili, Songlin, Huangdian, Qili Fort and Changning are counties. He will go ashore at these six places and sell his blood. He is going to do this all the way to Shanghai.'

This narrative measure which lists place names directly demonstrates a map in readers' minds, highlighting the long journey. 'His destination is Shanghai.' And 'He is going to sell blood all the way to Shanghai.' Shows Xu Sanguan's firm determination to sell blood, making readers sorrowful. 'He feels the wind moving from his chest to his stomach, making his chest twitch. He pinches the clothes around his chest with two hands, as if he is pulling himself forward on his own.' A humble person who only knows to yield to the authorities can be tolerant and tenacious to such an extent, absolutely showing his tragic heroic spirit.

5. Conclusion

The ending of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is very different from that of Yu Hua's another novel, *To Live*. It leaves no room for the misery in *To Live*, while the ending of *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* is a happy reunion. Although Xu Sanguan is too old to sell blood, his family's living condition has improved and he no longer needs to sacrifice his own life for money to support the family. So Xu Yulan takes Xu Sanguan to Shengli Restaurant and orders three plates of stir-fried liver, a bottle of yellow rice wine and something else. But Xu Sanguan minds that he does not manage to sell blood in the future. It shows that his soul has been sunk in pain and can never get rid of it, even forming a habit. From his perspective, the target of life is to constantly struggle against endless suffering. Closing the story with this plot makes the tragic implication last forever.

In Yu Hua's words, his works are free from excessive flowery language and complex embellishments. The novels are plain, like a pool of warm water, but they are filled with subtle ideas. Almost all the characters' actions are without adverb modification, which makes the communication authentic and natural, isolating the subjective thoughts of the author to the greatest extent and letting the characters decide their own fate. Therefore, the stories created by Yu Hua are realistic. The characters' language is usually vulgar and easy to understand, which accords with their social status and living habits. He expresses the common characteristics of people at the bottom society with humorous and funny writing styles. The duplicity and nosiness of the townfolks are irony. As the sentence in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* goes, 'Her neighbors walk away like a drama is over.' The

whole novel is a complicated play of absurdity and reality. It carries the sense of tragedy of ordinary people through daily jokes and scolds, showing the indomitable strength of life while conveying sadness.

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