

Mythological Archetypes in *Moses on the Plain*

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Abstract

By examining the text from the perspective of mythological archetypal criticism and linking *Moses on the Plain* with *Exodus*, we can not only find out the theme of *Moses on the Plain*, but also observe the image archetypes and structural archetypes implied in the text. In *Moses on the Plain*, Shuang Xuetao quotes the archetypes in the *Bible*, artistically shifting and transforming the mythological archetypes, which greatly deepens the connotation of the work.

Keywords: Moses, Archetypal criticism, The Bible, imago

1. Introduction

The wave of mythological archetypal criticism was popular in the western literary world in the 1960s, and after more than half a century of development, it is now blooming everywhere in the literature studies of various countries. The word “Archetype” comes from the Greek “Archetypos”. According to the Canadian archetypal critical theorist Northrop Frye, literary archetypes appear repeatedly in works of different times and genres with images, themes, characters, scenes and other different forms as symbols or symbolic groups, and become a conventional joint group in a specific cultural environment. Classical literary works are composed of multiple archetypes, and these “literary archetypes” embody profound literary traditions, connecting isolated works with human myths, collective unconsciousness, and symbols, “making literature a special form of communication.” Myth is the earliest carrier of archetypes and has always been the focus of literature history research. A Brief History of Chinese Fiction by Lu Xun is also the first to start from the myth of NuWa Makes Man. Under the background of globalization, cultural exchanges and integration have further expanded the influence of mythological archetypes. From the description and analysis of ancient mythological stories such as the Bible and Greek Mythology and their various transformations in later generations, Frye extended that the narrative structure principle that runs through the entire history of Western literature is three kinds of mythological or archetypal symbolic modes, namely, ancient mythological mode, legendary mode and realistic, modernist or naturalistic mode. Through the literary transformation and application of archetypal theory, Frye weaves a work into a narrative surface structure composed of images and a deep structure composed of archetypes, and explores the true meaning of the work through the messy hints of archetypes.

2. Religious Elements in *Moses on the Plain*

Moses on the Plain mentions Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* many times, and Shuang Xuetao also mentions Faulkner’s influence on himself, he said: “I thank him, because his book is so difficult, but it still affects me.” Many of Faulkner’s novels draw on or quote the plots and structures of biblical stories, and transform them through artistic processing.

Although Shuang Xuetao does not believe in Christianity, he retains a reverence for religion. The religious images in his works appear repeatedly, constituting the inner metaphor of his works. The image of Christ is not the narrative center of Shuang Xuetao’s novel, nor is it the decisive factor of the plot development. However, the repeated occurrence of Moses, Christianity and the Bible constitutes a pluralistic interpretation space.

Moses is an important figure in the *Bible*, the leader of the people of Israel, and is considered the main prophet of Judaism. According to the *Bible*, Moses was born in Egypt, where his people were slaves. Moses was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and out of slavery. He received God’s Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, which became the cornerstone of Jewish law and culture. Moses also led the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years until they reached the borders of the Promised Land.

Many audiences and scholars have had a heated discussion about which character is the prototype of Moses in the novel *Moses on the Plain*, but they have ignored some things in the original work, such as the prototype of the fire and the cigarette box, which are not only important clues of the novel, but also the symbol of the theme of the novel.

3. Prototype and Symbol of the Image

3.1 *Fire: The Torch by Which God Led Moses*

Although the term “light of the Lord” does not appear in the Bible, the concept is very clear. Jewish rabbis created this extra-biblical expression. This Hebrew word literally means “He came to dwell,” and it symbolizes God’s visit from heaven or the Lord Jehovah’s coming to dwell on earth. The concept of the light of the Lord was first apparent in the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Then the Lord God appeared in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night: “They journeyed from Succoth, and encamped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. By day the Lord led their way in a pillar of cloud; By night he gave them light in the pillars of fire, so that they could walk day and night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night will not depart from the presence of the people.”

In the Book of Exodus, Moses fled to Midian to shepherd Jethro’s sheep, and was inspired by the Lord’s oracle “burning thorns” in Horeb to return to Egypt again to redeem Israel, and Jehovah also “appeared in the fire”. In *Moses on the Plain*, the two snow waves also set up such a fire. Fire plays an important role in this novel. Zhuang Shu family and Li Shoulian family have the fate of contact, precisely because Li Fei like to play with fire when he was a child.

Li Fei’s birth day is her mother’s good Friday, the lack of maternal love makes Li Fei silent, clever and precocious. “Fire” has a fatal attraction for Li Fei, she can’t walk when she sees a match. “Fire” carries all the spiritual sustenance of young Li Fei, “fire” is the beginning of Li Fei’s daily life, and the stove is the only partner who accompanies Li Fei when his father goes to work. Before getting to know Fu Dongxin, Li Fei’s “playing with fire” behavior was forcefully stopped by his father Li Shoulian. However, Fu Dongxin also likes fire, which helps Li Fei get a strong sense of identity. This kind of identity is similar to the identity from the mother, and becomes the first maternal care received by Li Fei in her life. Fu Dongxin sees the hope and possibility in Li Fei’s love of fire. Therefore, Fu Dongxin opened private school teaching, which is like a sermon. Fu Dongxin to Li Fei, not only to give her maternal love and care, to fill the absence of her mother in her life, but also to teach her knowledge as a mentor. This enlightenment, like Prometheus spread the fire to human beings the same significance. Li Fei threw the lit matchbox into the night sky. This burning flame cut through the darkness of her childhood, so that lonely Li Fei get salvation. In addition to loneliness, poverty accompanied Li Fei’s childhood. After knowing that the two families are about to be separated by moving, Li Fei wants to send Zhuang Shu a Christmas gift to say goodbye, which is questioned by Zhuang Shu “Can you afford it”. Firelight always brings up some other emotion. Fire is the hope, the fear, the impulse. Millions of years ago, fire induced human evolution as if it were an apple. Li Fei’s playing with fire again and again is constantly filling the gap in his heart and opening the valve of desire a little bit. Li Fei wants to burn a fire to Zhuang Shu to see, which however, lets their own in trouble. Should have been a gift of “prairie fire fireworks” not only did not wait for the spectator, but caused a disaster, the sound Li Fei forever in 1995 Christmas Eve. A burning match gives Li Fei redemption, while the imaginary “gift” fireworks destroy Li Fei. It is in line with the original meaning of “fire” in Western mythology: it is salvation and disaster. The fire of love can burn hands. Lonely Li Fei’s little vague love for Zhuang Shu brings her and her father endless pain. In this way, Li Fei and the Zhuang’s family are drawn into the vortex of fate by the fire: Fu Dongxin brings Li Fei the torch and salvation, and Li Fei is trapped in the way to send flames to Zhuang Shu. Just as Moses led his people out with God’s torch, he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

3.2 *Plain: Moses’ Staff, Dilemma, and Salvation*

Another important image that appears in *Moses on the Plain* is the “plain”. Researchers have always had different opinions on the understanding of the “plain” image in the text. The story structure of the novel is in the Northeast, and the Northeast plain is the largest plain in China, so it is reasonable to think that the first meaning of “plain” refers to the Northeast plain in the region, and it is also the place where the story of this book takes place.

The “plain” in the novel takes its name from a painting by Fu Dongxin in which Li Fei sits on the “kang”. This painting was later used by Zhuang Dezeng as the cigarette label on the “Plain” cigarette box, so we can think of the “plain” as the cigarette box in the text. It is the key to solving Jiang Bufei’s case, and it is also a symbol of hope when Zhuang Shu and Li Fei meet again when they grow up. In the end of “Moses on the Plain”, Zhuang

Shu throws the “plain” cigarette box on the lake to complete the “dividing the lake into the plain” in a disguised form, which is a distortion of the plot of Moses sharing the sea in the Exodus. The “Plain” cigarette box became the staff of Moses, making the 1995 Li Fei and the 2007 Li Fei instantaneously coincide. When childhood friends meet again, although their identities have been transformed into law enforcers and fugitives, the plain symbolizes the God’s protected people in Moses’ division of the sea and finally escape the difficulties, and its warm compassion is obvious. Therefore, the second meaning of “plain” is the key thing, the cigarette box, which is a metaphor for Moses’ staff of God sharing the sea.

Fu Dongxin’s illustration of the “Plain” cigarette box is Li Fei sitting on the “kang”, so we can even think of the “plain” as the earth kang in the north. The diet and daily living of the Northeast people can be completed on the kang, which is built of brick and adobe. It is the support of the bottom civilians to survive in the winter. Further speaking, the “plain” can also be interpreted as the bottom plight of the laid-off workers in the text, as if they were in a deserted plain. Some laid-off workers encounter a wasteland period in their career, but also a wasteland period in life. The technology they master has lost its use, and they have experienced all kinds of frustration. Moses of the plain was the man in the bottom of the Northeast Plain; When Moses went out of Egypt, people went out of the wilderness. This kind of departure is not an escape in the geographical sense, but as previously analyzed, only by getting rid of the bondage of the heavy memory of the father can this land truly gain a new life. Therefore, the third meaning of the plain is the plight of the people at the bottom, which contains the desolation of life and the pain of memory.

In the novel, “plain” is Fu Dongxin painted for Li Fei’s, which becomes smoke mark of the “Plain” cigarette box, and the end becomes the “plain” created by Zhuang Shu thrown into the lake for Li Fei. As the story progresses, “Plain” gradually reveals its essential meaning: holding on to inner faith, returning to pure love and beauty, and contemplating the possibility of salvation from a religious point of view. In the sacred space of the heart “plain”, to gain calm in the life. Just like the story in the Bible, Moses opened the way and led his people away together, “As long as the thoughts of your heart are true and sincere, the mountains and the sea will give way to you, and those who drive you and cannot tolerate you will be punished.” This is the “escape” of the group, or the “plain” established in each person’s heart to settle for a new life after being abandoned by the times. The final meaning of the plain is the faith in people’s hearts, which hides the author’s hopes and blessings for the future.

From the Northeast Plain to the plight of people in this region to their inner beliefs, the meaning of “plain” has undergone multiple changes with the development of the story. *Moses on the Plain*, the title of which is the main idea of this essay. The plain is the land, corresponding to “Moses divided the sea”, which means that Moses defeated the Red Sea (alluding to someone’s predicament) and obtained land survival (being liberated). No matter what has happened to a person, what kind of crime and punishment he has undergone, he must finally get spiritual salvation. Thus Moses on the plain implies a “holy man” who can lead everyone out of difficulties (including spiritual difficulties) and finally cross the barrier of the sea to reach the “plain” of victory. Finally, the author also named the “saint” is not a person, but a belief: as long as your heart is true, as long as your heart is sincere, the mountains and the sea will give way to you, those who drive you, those who cannot tolerate you, will be punished.

3.3 Artificial Lake: The Red Sea

“Artificial lake” is also an important image in the novel. The whole story begins in the lake and ends in the lake, and the lake is not only the beginning and end of the plot, but also the displacement of the Red Sea in mythology. Li Fei and Zhuang Shu met on the artificial lake. Li Fei likened the artificial lake to the Red Sea. “Red Sea” and “Artificial Lake” echo across time and space. In the *Bible*, when Moses led the Hebrews across the Red Sea, God separated the water to reveal a dry field. In the novel, Zhuang Shu said: “I cannot separate the waters of the lake, but I can make this plain for you to walk across.”

In the Bible story, the Egyptians wanted to follow the Israelites into the sea, but the Lord threw the army of the Egyptians into confusion and made their wheels fall off. God told Moses to stretch out his staff over the sea. When Moses did this, the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, and there was not one man left of all Pharaoh’s army that had followed Israel into the sea. The Bible notes that Pharaoh and the Egyptian army were buried in the sea. This is a clear picture of the burial of Satan and tyranny at the time of baptism.

In the novel, Li Fei questioned whether Zhuang Shu can let the water separate. Li Fei has thought that salvation is impossible, but Zhuang Shu more subtly used cigarette box of which Li Fei on the picture to float across the lake to show that redemption is possible. The Bible says that Moses means “he who was saved from the river” in Hebrew. When Moses was a baby, he was put on the water in a basket, and it was Pharaoh’s daughter who rescued Moses from the water. In contrast to the end, one interpretation is that Zhuang Shu cleansed Li Fei’s sins

and Li Fei realized redemption.

The shore at the end of the novel is the shore of the plain, the shore of the meaning of physical space, and the shore of spiritual redemption. The “Plain” cigarette box is a metaphor, it is not devoid of beauty (“There she was, eleven or twelve years old, barefoot and smiling, staring into space”), but also in order to let Li Fei ashore and go out of the plain. This story begins with Zhuang Dezeng and Fu Dongxin dating on the ship, and ends with Zhuang Shu and Li Fei talking on the ship. As Li Fei floated across the lake on the “Plain” packet, “Moses” also parted the Red Sea and walked out of the Northeast Plain.

4. Analysis of Mythological Structure

Given the title of the novel, *Moses on the Plain*, most critics focused on the question: Who was Moses in the novel? But they ignore the more important question: Why “Moses”? Shuang Xuetao chose Moses because Moses represents salvation. Moses was the prophet of the Israelites who led them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

In addition to *Moses on the Plain*, one of the protagonists of Liu Zhenyun’s *One Sentence top ten thousand sentences* novel is called “Wu Moses”, Mo Yan’s novel *A Late bloomer* is called “Liu Moses”, Zhou Wanqing’s *Taking out the Mad Stone* even has a short story directly named “Exodus”. Many contemporary Chinese works love to write about “Moses”, which makes people wonder how the religious theme of “Exodus” is related to contemporary literature. The theme of “leaving” in literature may have some interaction with this religious theme, both of which are essentially the structure of “leaving—returning—leaving again”, and the works using this structure often reflect the survival predicament and spiritual dilemma of human beings.

Frye summarized the narrative structure of Bible stories as “U-shaped narrative”, which follows the U-shaped cycle of “paradise—sin—suffering—repentance—salvation”. Shuang Xuetao’s *Moses on the Plain* also contains such a “U” shaped narrative structure. Time and space background are the indispensable basic elements of the narrative of the novel, and the transformation of time and space in the plot of *Moses on the Plain* is the embodiment of the U-shaped narrative structure. In the novel, Shuang Xuetao did not deliberately do too much systematic description of the city (Shenyang) in the novel, but pieced together the basic landforms and changes of the times through different perspectives of individual characters.

The most obvious U-shaped structural prototype in the text is presented in the spatial narrative chain of “beginning on the lake—separating the plain—wandering on the bottom—ending on the lake”. Combing the time line and space scene, the first plot of the novel is Zhuang Dezeng and Fu Dongxin dating on the artificial lake, followed by Zhuang and Li two families in the worker community adjacent to each other; Then came the wave of laid-off workers, factories downsized, the two families separated; After the taxi incident, the two families of Zhuang and Li completely lost contact, and Father and daughter of the Li family survived at the bottom; At the end of the novel, Li Fei and Zhuang Shu meet again on the artificial lake. The beginning and end scene of the novel is the artificial lake in Beiling Park, where two generations, two pairs of men and women meet and talk in the lake, and two different time and space blend here. Like the sea separated by Moses, the reader stands on the empty road and looks right and left. From this point of view, the narrative structure of the novel fits perfectly with the U-shaped narrative structure of the Bible that Fry summarizes: “betrayal—disaster and slavery—the divine drama of repentance.”

In addition to the artificial lake, there are many places and spaces in the novel, which more obviously suggests that the story is a “U” shaped narrative chain. Red Flag Square is a gathering place for laid-off workers to sell tea eggs, it is the beginning of the sin of Li Shilian, it is a place for old industrial workers to sit and cherish the memory of the past, and it is a place where the Chairman statue has gone and come again. 15 years later it is like a wandering place of reincarnation. The private clinic opened by the Sun family in 1995, 13 years after the death of the father and the son inherits the business, here is the pure land of the Li family and the Sun family, and the place to live under the wave of layoffs for two generations.

Frye also draws inspiration from the cycles of nature and believes that there is a similar cycle in literature. He identified four narrative modes: dawn, spring, and birth, which correspond to comedy and symbolize birth, resurrection and love; Noon, summer, marriage and victory correspond to legends, representing adventure, growth and victory; Sunset, autumn and death correspond to tragedy, which is a metaphor of suffering, end and death; Darkness, winter and destruction correspond to irony and mockery, showing a world where heroes have been defeated and gods have fallen. The story of *Moses on the Plain* begins in the fall of 1980 and ends in the fall of 2007, and the tragic atmosphere of the autumn has cast a tragic color on the story of the struggle, fall and redemption of the two generations on the plain.

5. Summary

American scholar Theodore Ziolkowski pointed out that although form and content cannot be completely separated, writers can treat the story of Jesus as a myth or fiction, and freely change and create as they wish. Shuang Xuetao's artistic transformation of the archetypes of the Bible stories and the repeated emergence of religious images constitute the inner metaphor of the works. The ancient creation myth and the modern bottom story echo each other across history and country because of the common motif. Novels and myths transmit ideas through text, and text becomes an important carrier of their connection. *Moses on the Plain* and *Exodus* realize the cross-ethnic, cross-language and cross-text dialogue.

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