

The Power of Faith:

Comparative Researches on Ah Q and Gimpel

LA PUISSANCE DE CROYANCE:

LA RECHERCHE COMPARATIVE SUR AH Q ET GRIMPEL

Ye Mingzhu¹

Abstract: Schlemil is a classical theme in world literature. By employing Ah Q and Gimpel as examples, this paper seeks to examine the differences and similarities between them, which is influenced by different cultures and religious background. Through the analysis, this paper points out that Gimpel shows a spirit of humanitarianism, owing to his belief in God.

Key words: Schlemil, belief, Gimpel

Résumé: L'image des gens "stupides" est un sujet classique de la création littéraire de tous les pays. Tout en essayant de découvrir la similitude et la différence des personnages sur le même thème, ce texte cite l'exemple de Ah Q et Gimpel, pour enfin dégager l'influence de la culture et de la religion sur les personnages littéraires. Ce texte montre également le rayonnement de la bienveillance humaine grâce à la croyance du Dieu. A travers la recherche de ces deux oeuvres sous de différents systèmes des valeurs, ce texte approfondit la compréhension sur la culture occidentale et orientale

Mots clés: les gens stupides, la croyance, Gimpel

Schlemil is a classical theme in world literature. The successful characterization of schlemil can reflect the writer's understanding towards the ethnic spirits from social and cultural aspects. Many writers have shown great interest in the theme. There are such examples as Benjy and Vardaman who are created by Faulkner, the silly son by Chinese writer Ah Lai, Ah Q by Lu Xun and Gimpel by Singer. Some of those "schlemils" are clowns while some are protagonists with different cultural connotations. This paper makes a comparison between *Gimpel the Fool* and *The True Story of Ah Q* and then, examines them under different value systems to get a better understanding.

Gimpel the Fool is a short story which makes Issac Bashevis singer famous. In the story, he depicts the whole life of Gimpel who was fooled and mocked all the time. His life shows the ethnic and religious consciousness behind the Jewish Zilch. Coincidentally,

the motive of Lu Xun to write *The True Story of Ah Q* is to "expose the weakness of our people" and creat a figure standing for the soul of modern people. Based on their own cultural background, Ah Q and Gimpel become the classic figures in world literature. By employing Ah Q and Gimpel as examples, this paper seeks to examine the differences and similarities between them, which are influenced by different cultures and religious background. Then, the paper points out that Gimpel shows a spirit of humanitarianism because of his belief in God.

1. ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES UNDER SIMILAR ENCOUNTER

Ah Q is one of the most famous Chinese literature

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, China.

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figures. This short-time employee has no name, nor hometown. He lives a meaningless life and later is shot without any reason. As for Ah Q, not only his surname, personal name and place of origin, but also his "background" is uncertain. "This is because the people of Weizhuang only made use of his services or treated him as a laughing-stock, without even paying the slightest attention to his "background".(Lu Xun 107) In Isaac Bashevis Singer's "*Gimpel the Fool*", a poor bread maker named Gimpel is harnessed and teased because of the fact that he is gullible to whatever others said. The townspeople look at Gimpel as if he is a fool, which leads to them taking advantage of him. He was forced into a life created for the merriment of the villages. When Gimpel was still in school, he has "seven names in all: imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, ninny, and fool. The last name stuck."(Singer 3) Both Ah Q and Gimpel are nobody living in the lower class of society and represent the weak bullied by the upper class.

However, after making a careful comparison of the two novels, we realize there are some differences between Ah Q and Gimpel. Although Gimpel gets so many nicknames, he still has his own name. The name "Gimpel" is still called, even when others try to bully him. "Gimpel, the czar is coming to Frampol; Gimpel, the moon fell down in Turbeen; Gimpel, little Hodel Furpiece found a treasure behind the bathhouse."(Singer 3) "Gimpel, there's a fair in Heaven; Gimpel, the rabbi gave birth to a calf in the seventh month; Gimpel, a cow flew over the roof and laid brass eggs." But Ah Q is not as lucky as Gimpel. He has no idea about his name and his origin till his death. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, Ah Q's social position experiences a process of up-and-down. But even at the peak of his position, only "old fellow" by Lord Zhao is called. We know, ever since the ancient times, a name has been the symbol of the self-reputation and self-value. What's more, it symbolizes the acceptance of man for modern order in the modern society. Ah Q has no name, which shows that he is outlawed by the civilization and at the marginal place of the society. From this sense, Gimpel is luckier, because he still lives with those people sharing the same nationalities and has his own name.

The two vivid literary characters live their life in other people's mocking and fooling. And women play an important role in deepening their tragic life. A desire for women, once, breaks the peace of his life and causes abuses, atonement and his loss of work. It depicts his going to town, stealing and being shot in near future. In Gimpel's life, the marriage to a pregnant woman is a great tragedy. It is totally a trick. The shrewd never treats him as a human being. She scolds her, calls his names and refuses to sleep with him. During his whole life, Gimpel becomes the father of a group of children, but none of them are his. Despite this, he never loses his hope for better life nor his belief in God. After his death, he is ready to an afterworld "without complication, without ridicule, without deception" because "there

even Gimpel cannot be deceived."

The two "schlemils" have enough reason to hate women. Objectively speaking, women are destructionists in their life. But, their different attitudes towards women make the levels of their tragic life totally different. Ah Q is a firm supporter of feudal proprieties, although he is suffering from them all his life. When he gapes after a woman or a wife, he explains to himself that the desire for women is to "have descendants to sacrifice a bowl of rice to his spirit."(Lu Xun 118) In his opinion, woman is a menace to mankind and has ruined men whose majority could become saints and sages.(see Lu Xun 118) By describing Ah Q as a man with strict morals, Lu Xun discloses the great harms of feudal proprieties to Chinese people, even to such illiterates as Ah Q. On the other side, Gimpel is a person who is always ready to believe others. He loves and believes his wife blindly. Even when his wife sleeps with others before him, he can comfort himself to forgive his wife. His thought goes like this—there is bound to be a slip sometimes, you can't live without errors. In Gimpel's opinion, "today it is your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it is God himself you won't take stock in."(Singer 9) Living by the faith in God, Gimpel lives a life with self-reputation and self-value.

2. DIFFERENT RESULTS FOR DIFFERENT CHARACTERS

When a person loses his nature and social position, there will be only servility left. Under the oppression of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism, the Chinese people tend to be greedy and mean, easy to bully the weak and flatter the powerful. Ah Q is such an example. He is short-sighted, always proud of himself and easy to forget. He is also famous for his "Moral Victories", which illustrate the bad nature of Chinese people well. Poor as he is, Ah Q can comfort himself with the statement that he used to be much better off; If beaten, he can say to himself that he were beaten by his son; If losing money, he can say that it was robbed by his son; If still unhappy, he can slap his won face, which is similar to slap some other self with one self. The most ironical thing is that he feels greatly honored to be the "Number One Self-belittler". Ah Q's moral victories use the past to take the place of the present and indulge him in reveries, which holds back ah Q to fight against the oppressor. This is also what Lu Xun tries to criticize.

Gimpel is cheated by townspeople, maltreated by his wife and bullied by the apprentice. Even the schoolmaster tells lies to hide the fact for his wife. However, Gimpel never complains about the hard and cruel life. He accepts everything without murmur. As the saying goes, "you can't pass through life unscathed, nor expect to". (Singer 5) Living by his pious faith, he hopes for a better life in the after world. A Chinese writer named Yu Hua once said that when Gimpel was

faced up with those oppressing and cheating him with kindness and honesty, Singer shows the power of weakness. Such power comes from inside and also from the long history. Therefore, it can overcome all those powerful. It is the God-ruling world in Gimpel's mind helps him stay far away from being mocked and fooled and succeeds to conquer the evil in the world.

Ah Q's character is coward, ignorant and greedy. He also has undefeatable moral victories. To be exact, "moral victories" is a kind of defeatism in nature. It is greatly influenced by the servility under the oppressor. After making a careful consideration, we get to know that Ah Q is easy to forget his enemy — his oppressor, and tends to have a revenge on the weaker. It seems like he himself to be an enslaver. That's what Lu Xun criticizes and castigates. As an oppressed person, Ah Q suffered a lot. But whenever he can find any chance, he will bully or take a revenge on Young D or the little nun to amuse those senseless onlookers and win other people's sympathy. And then, take a look at Gimpel. He is indeed a nonesuch to return good for evil and never revenge others on the weaker. At her deathbed, Gimpel's wife, Elka, confesses to him: none of the children are his. Even if the matter goes like this, he "takes his board from its hiding place, and divides it among the children". (Singer 13) He succeeds in resisting the temptations from the Spirit of Evil not to deceive the world. The Spirit of Evil advises that he "accumulate a bucket of urine every day and at night pour it into the dough. Let the sages of Frampol eat filth." (Singer 13) Was Gimpel really a fool? The townspeople surely think so. But we know that he is not. The reason for him to do so is that he chooses to believe in God instead of the Spirit of Evil; he chooses to believe others instead of revenging them. He believes whatever they said, and he "hopes at least that did them some good". (Singer 4)

The consciousness of suffering in Judaism dominates Gimpel. He endures every difficulty in this cruel world for his next life. Although he is always living in being cheated, he spirits surpass everything cheating and harming him. To a certain extent, his death is not a tragedy, but a certain spiritual freedom, distillation in belief. But when we look at Ah Q, we find that his moral victories and action of bullying the weaker show his bad nature in most Chinese people. He died, leaving us nothing to remember him by. All the people in Weizhuang agreed that "Ah Q had been a bad man., the proof being that he had been shot; for if he had not been bad, how could he have been shot?" (Lu Xun 154) Even his death can not satisfy most onlookers because "a shooting was not such a fine spectacle as a decapitation." Ah Q's short life is full of misery and hardship; and it is meaningless. Just because of realizing the fact, Lu Xun tries every means to disclose the bad aspects of our nature. Therefore, owing to different characters and attitudes to others, Ah Q and Gimpel experience different results.

3. THE POWER OF FAITH

Why do Ah Q and Gimpel show different characters and attitudes when they are faced up with similar situations? Why can we find a spirit of humanitarianism in Gimpel instead of Ah Q when both died miserably? This is owing to the belief in God that exists in Gimpel's mind. Facing the trouble, he says that shoulders are from God and burdens too; Experiencing the difficulty, he thinks that it is "better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil", "for he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself." (Singer 4) In Gimpel's opinion, there are no lies in the world. "Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one "if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year." (Singer 14) Only one's faith lasts forever.

When a person has no faith, he will have no heart of love. As a pious Jewish people and "chosen people by God", Gimpel regards difficulties in this life as the only way to heaven. Under his faith in God, Gimpel begins his spiritual journey, returning those fooling him with boundless love. This is the toleration and humanitarianism which Judaism prevails. Just in his faith in God and pursuit for better life, he wins his eternity. But in feudalism-dominating Weizhuang, there is a rascal named Ah Q. He has no faith, no pursuit. Although he once pursued for revolution and wanted to join the revolutionaries, revolution is just a means, a way to turn the oppressed into the oppressor; although he knows a little about Confucianism, he accepts only those draffy things but throws away the distillate. Such examples are "there are three forms of unfilial conduct, of which the worst is to have no descendants"; or "we should observe strict segregation of the sexes" etc. This is also the harms of feudalistic thoughts and "official standard"².

The results of Ah Q and Gimpel show writers' opinions about the future and way-out of their own nation. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, the protagonist's death is like a breeze blowing over a dead pond, without causing any ripples. This shows that XinHai Revolution in 1911 cannot make China independent and strong. As for Gimpel, his life-long endurance wins the agreement from God at last, which reflects Singer's spirit of humanitarianism. Singer believes in the existence of God and holds the view that rights and wrongs are closely related to God's arrangement. In this sense, we, human beings, cannot satisfy ourselves. Only by all powerful can we be rescued, let alone the schlemils. Throughout the history of Jewish people, they are forced to leave home and wonder about, experiencing homelessness. The Jewish people has suffered too much and shouldered too much. In the novel, Gimpel goes to the heaven while his wife suffers in the hell after death. Undoubtedly, this gives a slim hope to those who are

² It refers to a harmful feudalistic thought. In Chinese feudal society, every person wants to become officials.

suffering misery, enduring the hard life and waiting for the coming of God. At the same time, it implies Singer's dream and thirst for "peaceful humanitarianism".

By comparing two famous schlemils in world literature, we can get to know the difference between Ah Q and Gimpel. Because of his firm belief in God, Gimpel is more like a saint and carries a spirit of humanitarianism. This is also the result of religious and cultural background. By comparing two, we do not

mean to conclude which one is good or bad, but to get a better understanding about two novels. Every novel will carry different ethnic characteristics, even under the same theme. Lu Xun discloses the bad nature of our Chinese by creating such a figure as Ah Q, but he doesn't point out the way-out for us; while Gimple is provided for us to stand for a new way to live with reputation and self-value. And this is the power of faith.

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THE AUTHOR

Ye Mingzhu, the postgraduate of English at School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, P. R. China.