

## The Irony of Cats in Literature: Comparison of the Works of *I Am A Cat* And *A Tale of Cat City*

Meiqi Liu

Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

**Abstract:** In Natsume Soseki's "*I Am A Cat*", the cat's point of view is used to criticize the current bad situation of the society, and rely on the unbiased standpoint to see the bourgeoisie's oppression of others and the status quo of being rich and ungrateful, as well as the intellectuals led by Bitter Shamisen's anger and helplessness towards the current situation of the society. Lao She, who was also in the background of an era, wrote "*A Tale of Cat City*", which also used the image of cats. As a normal person, "I" observed the life of cat people and saw the disorder and panic in their lives to express my disappointment in the times and my confusion about the future path. The two writers, who are not connected with reality, coincidentally use the same imagery to reflect the social reality. Based on the two works, comparisons are used to understand the struggles and contributions of the Chinese people on the road of eastern modernization, and to reflect their character as the initiators of the modern countries of the East.

**Keywords:** *I Am A Cat*; *A Tale of Cat City*; Literati Spirit; Critique of Civilization; Dissimilar Narratives

### 1. Introduction

Although there is no deeper connection between Natsume Soseki and Lao She in reality, and their literary karma is not as far-reaching as that of Lu Xun and Natsume Soseki's studies. But in fact, the two have similar life experiences, both born in the national capital, the same in the early twentieth century in the United Kingdom for further study, accepting the influence of similar foreign cultures, and both read a lot of British literature, especially Dickens and Swift, their humorous and satirical literary tradition to benefit the two exotic writers, but also have become the source of their creative work.[1]

Therefore, the literary relationship between the two authors mainly focuses on the comparative study of literary outlook, literary creation techniques, life experiences, and spiritual temperament. Meanwhile, because of the unique choice of perspectives, the comparative study of *I Am A Cat* and *A Tale of Cat City* focuses on the motivation, choice of perspectives, and the similarities and differences of the two "cats" in the works of the two authors. "From the heterogeneous perspective of homogeneous reality, the cat is used as a medium to critique various aspects of human society, politics, economy, culture, education, marriage, etc., so as to analyse the capture of the author's writing perspective." [2] This paper explores the similarities and differences between the two writers in terms of their critical stance and cultural tendencies in their critique of society and civilization through a compendium of their cultural backgrounds and a textual analysis of *I Am A Cat* and *A Tale of Cat Town*. At the same time, breaking through the simple textual analysis, from the works embodied in the deep spiritual criticism of the national nature, as well as the study of their own literati spirit, which includes the two "different narratives" in the treatment of the art of the different social environments, thus reflecting the articles of the different literary interest and the unique characteristics of the irony of the personal style.

"*A Tale of a Cat Town* and *I Am A Cat* are two novels of satire that appeared in the first half of this century, and both feature cats as protagonists." [3] The authors Lao She and Natsume Soseki criticized their respective societies through cats, and both novels have become the benchmarks of satirical literature in modern Chinese and Japanese literature. This paper tries to compare the shaping of literati spirit in *A Tale of Cat Town* and *I Am A Cat*, "focuses on analyzing the spirit of civilization criticism and the idea of reforming

the national nature expressed in the two works, and focuses on the two authors in the form of literary expression and the pursuit of the spirit of the two authors in order to dig out the differences between Lao She and Natsume Soseki in the satirical literary creation, civilization criticism, and the narration of the otherness and other aspects." [4]

## **2. Inheritance of the Literati Spirit in Chinese Culture**

*I Am A Cat* is divided into two groups of people, the intellectuals led by Bitter Saya and the capitalists represented by JinTian. The intellectuals hate the capitalists for pursuing profits too much, disregarding human nature and even using non-compliant means to achieve their own goals, treating human values with capital and disturbing the social atmosphere. Kaneda, on the other hand, holds a grudge against Bitter Saya for rejecting his request with the noble look of an intellectual. [5] In Chapter 4, he sneaks into Kaneda's house as a cat and says from the cat's point of view, "Kaneda-kun is an industrialist. .... But as far as I know, he has the problem of treating people as less than human beings. If he doesn't treat people as people, he'll naturally treat cats as cats." A cat knows that he always treats other people with arrogance, and even thinks that a person with some knowledge is self-righteous, and when coupled with poverty, he is competitive, and such a critique of intellectuals shows how condescending and smug he is about his lack of being an intellectual. Suzuki-san's visit speaks loftily of the theory that property matches a degree, wanting to belittle HanYv but fearing that he has failed in his purpose of matchmaking, and can only contradict himself many times in giving his opinion. The smooth words reflect Suzuki's sly, condescending image, which makes it all the more ironic to read with a sense of humour. In the face of Suzuki's aggressiveness, Bitter Saya uses straightforward language to speak Suzuki's semantic depths in a single sentence, which is a better way to understand the straightforwardness and simplicity of these intellectuals.

HanYv's attitude towards those in power can also be seen in the spirit of Chinese literati culture, cynical and never complicit, "Nowadays, the more powerful those in power

are, the more uncomfortable the oppressed feel, and the more they rise up against them. Thus, unlike the past, it is a time when there is a new atmosphere in which there is nothing that can be done just because there is a supreme government. It's a society where incredible things can pass unimpeded by the people of the past." HanYv looks at the new changes in Japanese society from a new perspective, where the only way for the oppressors to have their say is to rise up against them. This is Natsume Soseki's reflection on Japanese society in transition, expressing his exploration of the development of the whole era. He clearly knew that the reforms of the Meiji Restoration were incomplete in nature, and that many of the problems behind them would gradually be exposed in the lives of the people, which became the driving force for him to create this novel, which is a biting satire and evaluation of the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalism from the perspective of a cat. [6]. Cats are allowed to arbitrarily vent out their thoughts, intellectuals can also sit around and express their views and whining, but they are powerless to change this status quo, JinTian's wanton harassment, eavesdropping, and taunting of Bitter Shamans are powerless to change, and they can only comfort themselves to keep their own heart, and even the cat comes to the conclusion that, "Although I don't know what role makes the Earth always revolves around the earth's axis, but I now understand that what makes everything in this world move is indeed money." Money and power are intertwined in such a way that the intellectuals who are on the fringes can only remain true to themselves. [7]

In Lao She's "Cat City", Lao She puts a normal person strayed to a city made up of cat people, these cat people in order to fan leaves without any concept of shame, mutual suspicion and betrayal, and even take advantage of "my" difference in the process of bathing charges for other people to watch, the absurdity of the behaviour everywhere reveals the author's helplessness and anger, small scorpion. In the face of the country's decline, he also rebelled and even made a lot of actions with the cat people's behaviour is not the same, but also had a cynical confrontation with all this, but finally faced with the end of the country's fate, and finally he to suicide to end his life. The

author uses Scorpion's death to give an insight into the relationship between the nation and its citizens "Scorpion had a reason to die. But what is the reason for dying with the nation or not? In this world, there is a force that governs life, the nation and the state. The disappearance of this power is death, and the one who refuses to die has to turn his body into wood and stone and surrender his soul to hell."

The intellectuals in both novels reflect their resentment and helplessness in the face of national decline, this attitude of not joining in with the world not only comes from the Western spirit of rationality, but also the inheritance of the spirit of the traditional Chinese literati, the struggle for sobriety in the quagmire is very much like the literati of the Wei and Jin dynasties, there are sober looking at the powerlessness of the world, and there are also chaotic living and finally choosing to end their lives. The two writers coincidentally chose to portray the same group of literati to express the same era background of literati's concern about the future of their country and the spirit of grief and indignation about their own inability to do anything about it.

Natsume Soseki consciously returned to Confucianism in the middle and late Meiji Restoration, constructing for himself the cultural identity of "Edo child", and even reflecting the ethical values of the times according to his own understanding of Confucianism, the author's thinking at that time can also be found in *I Am A Cat*, which emphasizes the position of intellectuals in the society through the reconstruction of the family, and highlights the value of personal and family narratives for ordinary people in the contemporary times. Through the narrative of individual and family, it highlights the value of Confucianism to ordinary people in contemporary times. And Lao She was born in Beijing, a city with a strong Confucian atmosphere, which cultivated Lao She's spiritual inclination towards Confucianism in his childhood and youth. His study abroad career in adulthood also allowed Lao She to reflect on and criticize Confucianism, and he expected Confucianism to become a modern and democratic culture, which could truly inspire the nation and make China awaken. In *The Cat Town Story*, "The civilization of the cat country in my mind is by no means a tragic

interlude or set; I hope to see the underpinnings of a civilization, and thus to gain some more experience of life. .... If the reading of history can bring us to tears, what a sad thing it is to have a piece of civilization to be cut off in front of us." Lao She to cat in the city of "earthlings" in the tone of Chinese traditional culture will be eroded and extinction, want to wield their fists and feet to tear down the shackles of the declining society, but at most only involved those long and short sighs, this is a man of letters soberly watched proud of civilization to the decline of the lament.

### **3. The Pessimistic Spirit of the Literati**

In 1903, Natsume Soseki returned to Tokyo from the United Kingdom in the most resentful and depressed year, in the middle of this year, he repeatedly in a trance, and even transgressions, *I Am A Cat* was also created in such a background, of course, this book is not a summary of nonsense, but reflects the author of the most original heart, full of bizarre imagery, but also experienced as a man of letters of introspection.[8] For suicide Natsume Soseki in this novel also thought, in the tenth chapter of the bitter satsuma in "death, is painful, however, death is not, more painful. Nervous breakdown of the national living than death is more painful. That is why death is suffering. It is not the fear of death that makes death bitter, but the worry about how best to die." Natsume Soseki's disillusionment with society led to a pessimistic view of misanthropy, as well as the influence of foreign misanthropic ideas "Henry Arthur Jones wrote a play in which there is a philosopher who constantly advocates suicide ....." Literally, he has also studied Swift's misanthropic ideas in detail. Such a whole direction also affects the ending of the novel, was given a "personality" of the cat after listening to the group of "peaceful people" talk about the end of the cat felt very lonely, so steal alcohol and fell into the water tank died. After struggling in desperation and no one noticing, the cat, who is so critical of current affairs, dies silently. At this time, the author may have predicted his own future outcome on the cat, and at the same time, the pessimism and absurdity of the novel reaches its peak.[9]

And Lao She in the "cat city story" also

arranged the small scorpion and big eagle suicide, when found the cat city was attacked these two sober, intelligent cat people know that struggle also no good end, "pessimistic people are afraid to live, not afraid to die. Our people are all very happy to live, and the two skins of the hungry city are still happy, because they were born to not be pessimistic." The same pessimistic view of death can be seen in Lao She's pessimism and misanthropy as the only sober person in the tin house, and death has become the best ending.

Because the two authors were in different times and different countries, their pessimistic and misanthropic approach is also different. *I Am A Cat*, which looks at this time with laughter and mockery, also reflects the disappearance of civilization in traditional Japanese society and the impact of capitalist egoism on the future.[10] While *A Tale of Cat City* is darker and more desperate, like a black cloth that covers the cat city and can never be lifted, it is even more depressing for the readers and expresses Lao She's concern and despair over the disappearance of Chinese civilization.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *I Am A Cat*, Natsume Soseki repeatedly reflects the problems of the whole society with the behaviour of ordinary people, and with "cat", which is not a species of animal with human beings, it is more general and interesting, which makes the novel more readable and literary. For example, when the cat sees a small act of sharing sugar between two little girls in the scholar's house, the cat comes to the conclusion that "the principle of 'fairness' introduced by human beings from egoism may be more progressive than the cat's concept, but when it comes to human wisdom, it is worse than the cat's." Lao She, on the other hand, looks at the incorrigible behaviour of the cats from the perspective of a sober and different "earthling" in *A Tale of Cat Town*, and at the same time, while implicitly criticizing them, he appreciates even more the author's pain of sobriety. Lao She and Natsume Soseki share a common understanding of national transformation and criticism in their two works. In Natsume Soseki's work, one sees the courage to face up to the contradictions of life and society, as well as the conception of an ideal human

nature and a civilized society. Although Lao She had a negative attitude towards the future of society, and even this work was criticized by a large number of literati as a failure, and because of "A Tale of a Cat Town", Lao She's destiny was much mocked, and he finally went on the road of suicide, but these did not prevent this work from being widely acclaimed by the people of the world, because this novel is a novel of Lao She, as a literati, to realize the principle of "ruling the country, keeping the family together, and leveling the world". The novel is a true portrayal of Lao She as a man of letters who realized the ideal of "ruling the country, aligning the family and leveling the world". He constantly emphasized the importance of "national character" and "personality" in his writings. "When a nation loses its personality, the nation slowly loses its national character. No one wants to co-operate with a nation without a national character." "He even predicted that a nation that loses its personality and national character will only be greeted with death." This pessimistic mood cruelly exposes the courage of a nation's weakness, which comes from Lao She's deepest feelings of "saving the country and the people". Through the comparison with Natsume Soseki, Lao She's high degree of introspection and strong sense of national responsibility as a Chinese intellectual is highlighted.

It is noteworthy that Natsume Soseki's criticism of the deformed parts of Japanese society did not attract the attention of the powers that be, and Japan still embarked on the path of militarism without a second thought. But China because of the emergence of many responsible literati, especially in the criticism of civilization, Lao She's sympathy for the Chinese lower class people, with humane feelings against the insults and ravages of others, the higher literary influence on the Chinese people to stand as an independent and self-reliant nation has a positive effect. This is an in-depth reflection on the value of Natsume Soseki's and Lao She's criticism of civilization to the contemporary times.

Of course, limited to space, this paper does not discuss the superiority of Natsume Soseki's novel's antithetical irony technique and the failure of Lao She's humour instead of satirical writing technique from the aspect of artistic

performance, which does not mean that this research topic is not important, and the current research still lacks the depth, if it can be researched from the two works through the influence of antithetical irony on the novels, so as to deconstruct the two novels afresh, it will obtain more relevant and valuable comparative research results.

## References

- [1] An Young hee. (2019). Acceptance of the Modern World by Lee Hyo-soek and Natsume Soseki: Based on Their Experiences Majoring in English Literature at Imperial University. Hanminjok Emunhak. doi:10.31821/hem.85.8.
- [2] Shen Yaping. (2008). Heterogeneous Perspectives on Homogeneous Reality: A Comparison of I Am a Cat and A Tale of Cat City. Anhui Literature (Lower half) (08), 40-41+45.
- [3] Wang Cheng and Jin Zhong. (1993). Cats and Satire - A Comparison of "A Tale of Cat City" and "I am a Cat". Journal of Shandong University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition) (02), 38-44+108.
- [4] Gao Xvdong and Hao Xin. (2022). The Influence of Natsume Soseki's Critique of Civilisation in I Am a Cat on Lu Xun's Transformation of Nationality. Journal of Humanities (04), 90-98. doi:10.15895/j.cnki.rwzz.2022.04.009.
- [5] Hua Yv.(2022). An analysis of the similarities and differences of the spirit of introspection in Natsume Soseki's I Am a Cat and Lu Xun's Weeds. Masterpieyce Appreciation (18), 176-178.
- [6] Douglas Christopher C. (2020). "Sideways-Written Words": Appropriations of the Eighteenth-Century British It-Narrative in Natsume Sōseki's I Am a Cat. Journal of Narrative Theory (2).
- [7] Li, Xiaoxia. (2012). Unique Perspective Profound Criticism - A Comparison between I Am a Cat and A Tale of Cat Town. Manson (23), 63-64.
- [8] Zhang Lele. (2018). A Comparative Study of Natsume Soseki's Novels and Lu Xun's Novels From the Perspective of Criticism and "Yuyu" Thoughts..(eds.) Proceedings of 2018 International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018) (Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, VOL.283) pp.588-590.
- [9] Li Yvjin. (2014). "Same Roots": A New Paradigm for Impact Studies-Centred on Natsume Soseki and Lao She. Seeking (12), 128-133. doi:10.16059/j.cnki.cn43-1008/c.2014.12.026.
- [10] Wang, Cheng (1992). Exploration of Modernisation in the East-A Comparative Study of Natsume Soseki and Lao She. Japanese Studies (00), 100-112.