

Unit 3 Bereavement and Grief

Preparatory Work

(1) According to Britannica, Luigi Pirandello was winner of the 1934 Nobel Prize for Literature. With his invention of the “theatre within the theatre” in the play *Seipersonaggi in cercad'autore* (1921; *Six Characters in Search of an Author*), he became an important innovator in modern drama. Influenced by his catastrophic personal experiences, he developed a literary style characterized by “the exploration of the tightly closed world of the forever changeable human personality” (Britannica). “War” reflects this style of psychological realism, for instead of depicting external circumstances of the Great War, it chooses to underline the cruelty of war from the perspective of the soldiers’ anxious, grieving parents.

(2) The story was set in a train carriage at dawn. The war referred to in the story is most probably World War I, for during this war the author himself was a psychologically tormented father, both of whose sons were captured as prisoners of war. The World War I was an international conflict that resulted from clashes of interest among the world’s economic great powers assembled in two opposing alliances, the Allies (including the United Kingdom/British Empire, France and the Russian Empire) versus the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Italy was a member of the Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary, though it did not join the Central Powers (Willmott 15). It is generally believed by historians that World War I was “virtually unprecedented in the slaughter, carnage, and destruction it caused” (Britannica). It led to the fall of four great imperial dynasties (Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey), resulted in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and, in its destabilization of European society, laid the groundwork for World War II.

(3) Common symptoms of grief caused by bereavement include wistfulness, lethargy, hysteria, depression and so forth. According to the psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, people who have lost someone close usually go through five emotional stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

(4) Luigi /lu'ɪdʒi/

Perandello/ ,pɪrən' deloʊ; Italian ,pi rən' dɛllo/

Fabriano/Italian ,fabri'a, no/

Sulmona /Italian sul' mona/

Critical Reading

I. Understanding the text

1.

(1) Their argument was about what attitude parents should take towards their children going to war and killed in action. Of the passengers, the fat man appeared to have the strongest argument, who suggested that parents should withhold their own grief and feel proud and happy about their children who laid down their lives for the Country.

- (2) In Paragraphs 15 and 16, he is described as a “fat, red-faced man with blood-shot eyes of the palest gray”, who was “panting”, and “from [whose] bulging eyes seemed to spurt inner violence of an uncontrolled vitality which his weakened body could hardly contain”. In Paragraph 17, it is revealed that his two front teeth are missing. His eyes are once again mentioned in Paragraph 29, described to be “bulging, horribly watery light grey”.

These physical traits might suggest that the fat man was in poor health, and was grief-stricken by his son’s death.

- (3) The woman asked the question of the fat man because she was awed by his stoic response to his son’s death. She found it extremely difficult to cope with her anxiety over her son’s departure for the front, and wished to confirm the fat man’s feelings so that she might derive some strength from his example. She was the one who asked the question, rather than one of the other passengers, because she, as a focalized character whose inner consciousness was explored at great length, was trying to emphasize with the fat man. The fat man reacted strongly to this question, stupefied, brought into painful awareness of his son’s death, and reduced to uncontrollable sobs. This reaction indicates that the fat man, instead of calmly accepting the fact of his son’s death as he claimed, had been desperately rejecting this horrible idea.

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(1) D(2) A(3) A

II. Critiquing the Text

- (1) Instead of giving direct description of war action, the story depicts the emotional turmoil on the part of the soldiers’ parents. The author intends to send a message about the cruelty of war, by showing that war imposes great suffering in more ways than one, not only on the soldiers who go to the battlefield, but also on their parents who are extremely worried about their safety and may have to endure the pain of loss.

- (2) The fat, red-faced man started his part of the argument by putting a stop to the other passengers’ debate over the correlation between the intensity of the parents’ anxiety and the number of children they have on the battlefield. He insisted that parents gave life to their children not for their own benefit, and that they should respect their children’s wish to go to the front. He ended his argument by claiming that parents should accept their children’s death on the battlefield without grief, showing that he himself chose not to wear mourning for his son.

His argument is inconsistent, for at first he mentions all the glamour of youthful life, including “girls, cigarettes, illusions, new ties”, but then he talks about dying “young and happy”, “without having the ugly sides of life, the boredom of it, the pettiness, the bitterness of disillusion”. The latter statement overlooks the good sides of life mentioned in the former one. His argument is also somewhat illogical, because the awareness that children do not belong to their parents does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that parents should not grieve over their children’s death. Therefore, the reason he gave for not grieving was unconvincing.

His pause and hesitation in the middle of the sentence “Our sons are born because...well, because they must be born” might be seen as a revelation of his checked impulse to articulate his paternal affection. It is as if he were to blurt out “Our sons are born because we love them”. He refrained from saying something like this probably for fear that he could not check his emotion once letting it out.

- (3) When he mentioned “girls, cigarettes, illusions, new ties”, he was referring to the elements of youthful life that were more alluring to young people than their parents’ affection. He was trying to say that young people had so much to enjoy that their lives would never be centered around their parents. His thoughts about being young can barely support his subsequent view that there should be no mourning for someone who died young and happy. On the contrary, the fact that young people have many good things in store for them makes their death all the more lamentable.
- (4) The fat man’s feeling for the “Country” was more likely to be a cliché conveniently used to advance his argument, for he used the “if” clause instead of stating it as a matter of course. This indicates his awareness that the Country being a natural necessity is merely a popular notion. However, there might be an element of sincerity in his feelings for the “Country”, as he repeatedly spoke of “decent boys” that chose to fight for their country. But on the whole, the notion of the Country might just be a convenient platitude to veil or suppress his bitterness about his son’s death.
- (5) The reasons offered by the fat man when he said a young man could die happy were poorly grounded and hardly convincing. He was indeed trying to rationalize the death of his son, so as to assuage his pain of bereavement, but the rationalization was too fragile to be of any comfort to him. The son might have mixed feelings about his father’s words. On the one hand, he might be able to understand his father’s inner struggle, but on the other, he might feel uncomfortable about his father saying he died satisfied.
- (6) The question is considered “silly” and “incongruous” from the passengers’ point of view. In the eyes of other passengers, the fat man already made his point clearly, and the woman appeared absent-minded. Her question was considered silly because the answer was already evident. And it would seem incongruous with the whole atmosphere. While other passengers were voicing their agreement with the fat man, the woman’s question was abrupt and unexpected. This point of view has an emotional effect that reinforces the fat man’s loneliness. He had to battle with his emotional turmoil all on his own, with all the other people believing he was coping really well.
- (7) All these four definitions are common denotations of the word patriotism, which is a controversial notion. It is morally valuable, for it can arouse noble sentiments of heroism within people and unite them together as a whole nation. But whether it should be mandatory is disputable, for it may be pushed to an extreme and require people to sacrifice their personal interest for the “greater good” that might sometimes be questionable.
- (8) One possible version:

January 1st, 1918

Dear Father,

I wish you and Mother a happy new year. Perhaps you're in no mood for celebrations for it has been almost three years since we celebrated the new year together as a family. I am in no festive mood either. The campsite here is cold and dreary, and is permeated with an atmosphere of mourning. I myself was lucky enough to survive the horrible battle in Caporetto, but hundreds of thousands of my comrades lost their lives in it. This is a nightmarish new year for me.

Several years ago, I thought it a glorious thing to go to war in defense of our country. I would become a national hero if I fought valiantly. And now, I've come to realize that war is seldom about heroism; it is nothing but a massacre of innocent lives. I knew little about the enemies we killed, but I did know that some time before they had been allies with us. It is most likely that they, just like us, are innocent, naïve young people with an enthusiasm for heroic action.

I used to say it would be a bliss to lay down my life for the Country. I still think so, but for a different reason. I never know when exactly I will get killed, but to be killed instantly is so much better than to take a bullet that cripples me for life, to get my face burnt beyond recognition, or to suffer any other kind of serious wounds with lifelong aftermaths. Such disasters happen to my comrades every single day, and I can only pray that they do not fall upon me. So, if I get killed someday, I will die satisfied at having ended my life in the best way I could wish.

Remember me to all our friends back home, and do not wear mourning if I can never come back again.

Your loving son

Language Enhancement

5.

- (1) Pirandello employs the linear structure in the story, and develops the plot mostly through conversation. He includes so much conversation probably because he intends to "show more than tell", to have the characters voice their own opinions instead of speaking for them himself. In this way, he can present a variety of clashing views and characterize each individual more effectively. The author's narrative style can be characterized as internal focalization that places the woman at the center of consciousness. He describes the woman's feelings and thoughts in great detail, while characterizing other passengers through external depictions.
- (2) The words that describe feelings and emotions include "sad" (Paragraph 6), "in distress" (Paragraph 18), "deep sorrow" (Paragraph 24), "harrowing, heart-breaking, uncontrollable sobs" (Paragraph 24), etc. Besides the use of adjectives, Pirandello builds up emotional intensity by delineating the gloomy setting ("stuffy and smoky second-class carriage" in Paragraph 2). Also, he does so by describing each character's gestures and facial expressions. For example, the woman is portrayed as a pitiful sight, "twisting and wriggling, at times growling like a wild animal" (Paragraph 8), and the fat man "shook his light fawn coat" as to show he did not wear mourning, and "his livid lip over his missing teeth was trembling, his eyes were watery and motionless, and soon after he ended with a shrill laugh which might well have been a sob" (Paragraph 22).

Intercultural Reflection

1. Grief is doubtless the dominant emotion in both Western and Chinese memorial services. Interestingly however, there is a difference as to whether grief is required to be displayed in public. In China, at least in the past, public demonstration of grief was considered mandatory for those in bereavement, especially for those who lost their spouses, parents or masters. There might even be professional mourners hired to weep funerals (take Grandfather Gao's funeral in Ba Jin's *Family* for example). It is extremely unorthodox behavior to replace heart-rending weeping with light-hearted rituals. Chuang-tzu's affection for his wife was questioned when he played at a basin and sung after her death. Ruanji deliberately chose to conceal his grief and feast in front of mourners at his father's funeral, an act that was considered eccentric. In the West, it is not a strict moral obligation to weep at funerals of one's close relations. Upon Old Earnshaw's death in *Wuthering Heights*, for example, each member of the younger generation had their own way of processing grief.

Tomb-visiting is a common way to pay respects to the deceased both in China and the West. For example, Oskar Schindler's grave was visited by the Jews whose lives he had saved. In "Thoughts on a Visit to an Ancient Battlefield", Li Hua depicted scenes in which the dead soldiers' families placed offerings and poured wine over imaginary graves while contemplating the distant horizon in tears ("布奠倾觞, 哭望天涯"). There is a difference between these two mourning rituals, though. The Schindler Jews were to commemorate their deceased benefactor, while the dead soldiers' families in Tang Dynasty wished to guarantee the well-being of the deceased in the underworld ("吊祭不至, 精魂何依"). Tomb-visiting is also an effective way to cope with one's own emotional problems, for the deceased can be regarded as an omniscient, non-judgmental listener. Zhang Wuji, hero of Jin Yong's *Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber*, visited his parents' grave after a severe fault in his decision-making. Christine Daye in *The Phantom of the Opera* also went to her father's cemetery to assuage her emotional turmoil.

Both Chinese and Western mourning customs would impose restrictions on entertainment. In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the domestic theatrical troupe of the Jia household was dismissed when an elder concubine passed away. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlet O'Hara was prohibited from wearing colorful clothing and dancing in public after her husband's death, which was suffocating for her. This tradition is passed down to the modern era, though not as rigorous as before. After Wenchuan earthquake, for example, entertainment activities were suspended for three days in mourning for the deceased victims.

2. 元稹《遣悲怀（其一）》

谢公最小偏怜女，自嫁黔娄百事乖。
顾我无衣搜荻箠，泥他沽酒拔金钗。
野蔬充膳甘长藿，落叶添薪仰古槐。
今日俸钱过十万，与君营奠复营斋。

陶渊明《拟挽歌辞（其三）》

荒草何茫茫，白杨亦萧萧。
严霜九月中，送我出远郊。
四面无人居，高坟正嵯峨。

马为仰天鸣，风为自萧条。
幽室一已闭，千年不复朝。
千年不复朝，贤达无奈何。
向来相送人，各自还其家。
亲戚或余悲，他人亦已歌。
死去何所道，托体同山阿。

苏轼《江城子·乙卯正月二十日夜记梦》

十年生死两茫茫，不思量，自难忘。千里孤坟，无处话凄凉。纵使相逢应不识，
尘满面，鬓如霜。
夜来幽梦忽还乡，小轩窗，正梳妆。相顾无言，惟有泪千行。料得年年肠断处，
明月夜，短松冈。

These ancient Chinese poems, compared with their Western counterparts, tend to express grief of bereavement in a more reserved manner, choosing mild expressions over exaggerating ones, and depicting bitter-sweet memories that may evoke smiles in the midst of tears. Yuan Zhen's poem does not have a single word of sorrow in it, but its light-hearted recollection of the poet's impoverished early life with his wife is just as touching, resembling Tennyson's line "The tender grace of the day that is dead/Shall never come back to me". Tao Yuanming's poem, instead of appealing to its readers for more grief, suggests at the end that no more woeful words need to be said, for the deceased has been restored to Mother Nature and respects have already been paid adequately. Su Shi's poem does witness tear of woe, and yet it attaches qualifiers to sorrow, by saying the poet would be heart-broken when the moon shines brightly upon the pine hills. Chinese poems seldom use passionate expressions such as "unseen grief" and "everlasting watch and moveless woe".

In addition, Chinese poems are more inclined to use concrete imagery instead of direct appeals to emotion. While the excerpted lines by Shakespeare and Browning are filled with explicit elaborations on the pain of loss, the three Chinese poems employ, for a large part, concrete scenes of past events and memorial services. Yuan Zhen recollects his wife's tender solicitude for him in spite of his poverty, Su Shi gives a vivid portrayal of his wife dressing herself up at the window, and Tao Yuanming depicts the burial process and the desolate surroundings. This contrast of poetic style is correspondent with that of temperament, as Chinese people are known to be more reserved than Western people.

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