

Article

# A Comparative study of visual narrative in Chekhov's misery and Lu Xun's the New Year's sacrifice

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**Abstract:** This article is a comparative analysis of the short stories «Longing» by Anton Chekhov and «Prayer for Happiness» by Lu Xun, exploring the themes of social exclusion, grief and the impossibility of communication in society at the end of the XIX – beginning of the XX century. The article examines how both authors portray the struggle of the main characters to connect with other people in the face of personal tragedy and the indifference of society. The author analyzes the narrative techniques, symbolic images and character development used by Chekhov and Lu Xun to convey universal human experiences of loss, loneliness and the search for meaning in an indifferent world.

**Keywords:** Chekhov, Lu Xun, Longing, Prayer for Happiness, Comparative Literature, Social Exclusion, Grief, Communication, Symbolism

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## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on a comparative analysis of the short stories «Longing» by Anton Chekhov and «Prayer for Happiness» by Lu Xun, two prominent representatives of Russian and Chinese literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The choice of these works is not only based on their artistic value, but also on the similarities in their themes: loneliness, alienation, and the inability to communicate with others.

Both authors, each in their own national context, were deeply affected by social injustice and the tragic nature of human existence. In their works, Chekhov and Lu Xun create expressive images of characters who experience deep sorrow and face the indifference of the surrounding world. A comparative analysis allows us to identify common features in the artistic depiction of these issues, as well as to note the differences that are due to the specific nature of Russian and Chinese cultural traditions and the historical development of the two countries.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study used a range of methods to examine and compare the works of Anton Chekhov and Lu Xun. The main method is comparative-typological analysis, which helps to identify common and specific features in the themes, issues, imagery, and artistic techniques used by the authors.

To analyze the content of the short stories «Longing» and «Prayer for Happiness», the method of hermeneutical analysis was employed, which focuses on interpreting texts, identifying meanings and motifs, and reconstructing the author's intentions. When considering the socio-historical context of the works' creation, the historical and cultural method was used to understand the influence of social processes and cultural traditions on the formation of the author's position and the issues addressed in the works. In the course of the study, the method of structural analysis was applied to identify the

compositional features of the stories, the structure of the images, and the system of symbols.

When summarizing the results, the synthesis method was used to combine individual observations and conclusions into a holistic system of knowledge about Chekhov's and Lu Xun's works and the specific features of their artistic depictions of loneliness, grief, and the impossibility of communication.

### 3. Results

According to V. B. Kataev, the compositional cyclicity of the episodes in the story reveals the theme: «the loneliness of man among the crowd, the lack of response to other people's pain, inattention to the soul longing to pour itself out» [1]. Iona Potapov's four unsuccessful attempts to share his grief with those around him (a soldier, a walker, a janitor, a horse) form a structure where each repeated situation reinforces the feeling of existential deadlock [2].

The story takes place on a busy street [3]. First, there is the frozen composition of the opening scene: the cab driver Iona Potapov, «as white as a ghost» [4], with a horse resembling a «penny gingerbread horse» creates the effect of a living still life. The image of Iona captured in the work is the embodiment of physical and spiritual death. His hunched silhouette, demonstrating the extreme degree of exhaustion possible for a living being («bent over as far as a living body can bend» [4]), clearly reflects the years of exhausting labor that have fallen to the cab driver's lot. The suffering and wear and tear of the body caused by incessant work are a visualization of the burden of a miserable existence. At the same time, the swirling «large wet snow» is not just a description of the weather conditions. The description of the main character's appearance in this fragment accurately conveys his deep emotional state: Jonah is broken by grief, he seems to have frozen, losing the ability to feel. The verbs «bends» and «does not move» serve as an expression of heavy emotional distress: the man is bent under the weight of grief and does not even have the strength to move. In the noisy and bustling city, Jonah and his horse seem like foreign elements, looking ridiculous and out of place. Jonah is as ridiculous as his horse: they are both motionless, covered in snow, stretching their necks, evoking sympathy. Jonah is poor, as can be seen from his appearance and position. The story is filled with social subtext: Jonah is extremely needy, and even after a full day's work, he cannot earn enough money to buy oats for his horse, and he is forced to seek shelter in a dirty and stuffy room with other poor people who find themselves in a similar situation.

Consequently, we are presented with a frozen scene that visualizes existential coldness: Jonah's body, covered in snow, and his immobility, where even the death of a loved one does not disrupt the rhythm of everyday indifference. The dynamics of falling snow reinforce the tragic subtext: the snow cover not only symbolizes the cold weather, but also symbolizes the fact that Jonah's existence is absorbed by the environment, becoming pale and powerless, like a ghost.

A comparison is introduced that blurs the contours of the human figure. Absolute immobility («sitting on the goats and not moving, he did not find it necessary to shake the snow off himself» [4]) contrasts with the «lazily swirling» [4] wet snow, reinforcing the image of numbness and powerlessness. It turns out that the contrast between the dynamics of the snow and the absolute staticity of the character creates the effect of frozen time, as if all the pain of severe poverty has frozen into the evening twilight of St. Petersburg. Here, «lazily swirling» gives the snowflakes a human-like laziness. Furthermore, Iona's static and absolute immobility, contrasting with the moving crowd («running people» [4]), creates a visualization of existential loneliness. At the same time, the «grey» and «monstrous lights» [4] depicted by the writer emphasize the harshness and strangeness of the environment.

It is worth noting that the numbness of the body caused by the cold creates a mirror image between the horse and its owner, Iona, showing their common predicament.

However, despite all the outward immobility, «the image of the horse is humanized». We believe that the description of petrified immobility highlights not only the effect of the cold, but also the situation of Jonah, who is oppressed by his surroundings and his experiences.

Moreover, the «evening mist» [4] creates a transition from twilight haze to deep darkness, intensifying the feeling of melancholy. Interestingly, the transition from the «pallor of the streetlights» to the «vivid colors» [4] of nightlife reveals a color contrast: artificial light, dim and lifeless, is contrasted with the liveliness of the city.

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In the story, physical plasticity becomes the key to understanding the characters. On the one hand, Jonah demonstrates reduced motor skills: his «bent body», «immobility», and repetitive, mechanical movements («jerking the reins, smacking his lips, rising up, waving his whip» [4]) testify to his habitual reactions and also become a physical embodiment of his inner numbness. However, his posture to a lesser extent («stretches his neck like a swan») indicates an instinctive desire for communication. In addition, the horse's slow movements («hesitantly moving from the spot» [4]) are unnatural, demonstrating its lifeless state, reflecting the hardships of the lower class workers' lives. On the other hand, the passengers (a soldier, tall young men, a hunchback) display exaggerated motor activity: sharp gestures, aggressive facial expressions, and restless movements within the carriage. This dissonance between static and dynamic elements metaphorically reveals the gap between genuine experience and the false bustle of the world, where movement replaces empathy and noise drowns out the silence of a stranger's soul.

Note that the contrasting dynamics create a visual counterpoint: the frozenness of grief collides with the bustle of everyday life. For example, the scene where Jonah «fidgets on the box like a man on pins and needles» and «rolls his eyes like a madman» [4], both comparisons emphasize Jonah's anxiety and suffering through bodily reactions, visualizing his physical and psychological discomfort. These signs are a manifestation of deep inner disharmony, the inability to find peace even in a static pose. His chaotic, unfocused gaze reveals his existential anxiety, and the comparison with «wild» is not just a comparison, but a physiologisation of anguish, which manifests itself as «a feeling of suffocation, an inability to breathe freely, a prolonged constriction of the spirit, exhausting the soul». In our opinion, these details emphasize not just temporary excitement, but a deep existential crisis, where the body becomes a mirror of the gap between inner pain

and the external cruelty of the world. Chekhov, being a doctor, transforms medical observations (physiological symptoms of illness) into a literary device, revealing the spiritual stupor of the hero.

Moreover, verbal aggression (swearing) and visual intimidation («glaring maliciously») combined with physical confrontation («rammed his shoulder into the horse's face» [4]) create an atmosphere of hostility and ill will. The rudeness and aggression of the people around them clearly demonstrate the cruelty of the environment in which the characters have to survive. Even the passenger's use of derogatory nicknames such as «old dog» and «Zmey Gorynych» [4] (a mythological three-headed dragon) in reference to the coachman Iona carries a deep ironic meaning. It is well known that Zmey Gorynych is a folkloric image of evil. The comparison of Iona with a fantastic monster reveals society's distorted perception of the suffering of the lower classes: genuine grief is transformed into a «threat» that must be suppressed. The rude expressions directed at Iona reflect an unfriendly attitude towards drivers and demonstrate the arrogance and disrespect of the passengers. Thus, the hunchback «breathes down his neck» and hits him on the neck, exposing Yona's humiliation.

It is necessary to mention the gestures in the story, which form a system of failed dialogues, where every bodily movement becomes an attempt to break through the wall of silence. For example, he «looks back at the passenger», but the latter closes his eyes; he «moves his lips», but only emits a wheeze. His «moving his lips» [4] is a gesture, a kinetic metaphor for suppressed speech, where physical movement replaces verbalization. However, instead of words, only a «hiss» [4] escapes from his throat. This sound, devoid of semantics, becomes a symbol of the futility of any attempt to express suffering in a world where human pain has become background noise.

Another detail catches our attention. The phrase «Iona twists his mouth into a smile, strains his throat and wheezes» reveals the hero's deep inner state. Iona's smile is distorted because sincerity comes hard to him; he tries to express it as best he can at the moment. The tension in the cab driver's throat indicates that it is difficult for him to begin his story; perhaps subconsciously he already senses that no one will want to listen to him. The wheezing in Iona's voice reflects the insecurity that has arisen in him under the influence of universal human indifference.

At the same time, the turn «with his whole body towards the passenger» [4] becomes the culmination of his physical expression: it may indicate a desire to be heard and understood, but the passenger's response is indifference. Further on, Jonah's eagerness for dialogue (turning, glances) contrasts with the passenger's apathy (sleepy posture, indifference): Jonah looks back at the passenger several times, hoping for a human response, but encounters only «closed eyes» [4]— a visible metaphor for society's blindness to the suffering of others. Further on, he «looks at the sleeping passengers», but is met only with snoring. Analysing this failure to establish contact, we can refer to the work of A.D. Stepanov's work «Problems of Communication in Chekhov», which emphasizes the instability of communication in the world of Chekhov's works. Stepanov notes that in Chekhov's world, the law of potential interruptibility of any dialogue operates, and there are many obstacles to successful communication, which is fully realised only in exceptional cases. This explains the loneliness of Iona, who seeks dialogue but finds no response. The indifference of the passengers contrasts sharply with Iona's sincere desire, emphasizing the deep alienation that prevails in society.

Through repeated attempts at gestures, the author achieves generalisation through the oxymoron «heavy grace» [4], where the two poles of Iona's existential being collide: physical exhaustion («exhausted body», bent under the weight of grief and exhausting labor) and a futile attempt to maintain the appearance of professional dignity.

The repeated sounds «gy-y... laughs, smirks, laughs, cheerful» [4] performed by Iona Potapov serve as a complex gestural gesture, where physiological reflexes replace verbal communication. Iona deliberately reproduces the expected reaction to the rude jokes of

the passengers («cheerful gentlemen»), imitating merriment in order to hide emotional pain under a socially acceptable form. At the same time, the intermittent sounds of «gy-y» (reminiscent of a guttural growl) and «hi-ho» (artificial playfulness) are devoid of emotional content.

In conditions where words are powerless to overcome the wall of indifference, laughter becomes the last mechanism for maintaining the appearance of participation in the conversation. However, this strategy only emphasizes the tragic paradox: the more actively Iona «laughs», the deeper his existential isolation becomes.

Thus, the chain of gestures, facial expressions, and sounds forms a triad of failed communication, where the body becomes a medium, bridging the gap between existential loneliness and social indifference.

Through the passengers' responses (from the soldier's mechanical nod to the hunchback's aggressive jabs), Chekhov creates a whole series of images of indifference. The city is filled with «restless noise» [4], but Iona's voice is lost in this chaos, his pain does not reach the audience.

As the plot develops, secondary characters appear: two of them are tall and thin, the third is small and hunchbacked [4]. The hunchback's quivering voice («it quivers») [4] bursts into Iona's space like a piercing dissonance, reinforcing his existential isolation.

The work notes that, observing those around him and listening to their swearing, the cab driver Iona feels relief: «the feeling of loneliness gradually begins to lift from his chest». This moment comes when the hero takes three young people as passengers, who mock him in every way throughout the trip. Despite their rude and dismissive attitude, he feels his painful loneliness gradually receding [4]. Perhaps this feeling arises because the presence of other people temporarily alleviates his isolation, and Chekhov uses this irony to show the complexity of the character's psychology.

Then he tries once again to express his pain. The gesture of «looking back once more» [4] is a last reflexive glance in search of an echo in the eyes of the listener. In addition, the intermittent speech («this week... tovo...») [4] is a physiological embodiment of trauma, where words literally «stick» in the throat, torn between the need to express oneself and the fear of being rejected.

In the end, loneliness strikes again. The spatial images of the «dark stairwell» and «silence» [4] create an atmosphere of existential isolation. The silence that follows their departure is not an absence of sound, but a metaphysical emptiness where even Iona's breathing sounds like an echo in the abyss. In this episode, the author uses various rhetorical devices to vividly describe loneliness and longing. For example, the epithets «boundless longing» and «insignificant shell» [4] form a paradox that reveals the conflict between the immensity of inner suffering and the insignificance of its social perception. At the same time, hyperbole («flooded the whole world» [4]) materialises abstract grief, but antithesis («you won't see it even with a torch» [4]) ironically emphasizes the blindness of society, expressing the idea that the stronger the pain, the less noticeable it is in a world blinded by vanity.

In addition, bodily details complete the picture of tragedy: the frozen gaze («He looks back» [4]) fixes the gap between the illusion of connection and the reality of loneliness, and the chaotic movement of the gaze («His eyes dart about» [4]) reflects the breakdown of cognitive connections, when consciousness flits between the crowd and inner emptiness. The poses «moves a few steps away» and «bends over» [4] emphasize the hero's attempt to distance himself from the pain, but the pain remains inside. Thus, body language becomes a direct externalisation of the psychological state.

In the finale, the stifling and oppressive atmosphere of the room further emphasizes Iona's isolation. The horse's «bright eyes» [4] in this context symbolize the understanding and lively response that the main character finds only in communication with the animal, while in the world of people surrounding him, he encounters not the slightest sympathy.

By interacting with the horse, Iona tries to find meaning in his existence, and her response (breathing and listening attentively) is his last consolation.

It is important to note that the visual opposition between the eyes of the protagonist and the horse acts as a key structural element in revealing existential loneliness. Iona's «running» gaze, symbolizing his active but socially rejected attempts at dialogue, contrasts with the «shining eyes» of the horse — silent but present in the communicative field. If the metaphorical sparkle in the animal's eyes embodies «alert consciousness» (where a physiological detail is transformed into a symbol of immediate existence), then the closed or sleeping eyes of the passengers («the people are snoring» [4]) visualize a complete absence of dialogue.

Chekhov uses a limited but semantically rich color palette. Firstly, the dominant white color («white as a ghost», «the snow paints everything white») performs a double function: on the one hand, it becomes a symbol of the emotional emptiness of urban space. On the other hand, it materializes the very substance of silence, in which the human voice drowns. Secondly, the absence of warm tones (with the exception of the vivid color of the streetlights) creates an effect of coldness. It is noteworthy that the only source of organic heat (the horse's breath «breathing on its owner's hands» [4]) exists outside the color scheme, emphasizing its non-social nature.

In addition, Chekhov builds a visual score through the contrast of image scales. First, he observes general shots («a street with people running», «a large dirty stove» [4]), then shifts the focus to close-ups («eyelashes covered with snow» [4], «the horse's shining eyes») to bring details to the fore. It can be said that the editing rhythm intensifies this conflict: the accelerated editing of street chaos («the crowd moving back and forth» [4]) with its flitting shadows and shouts conveys the speed of the city's development, while the slow motion of Jonah's inner world, where time seems to have frozen in the «stifling» of anguish, reveals existential paralysis. Thus, the author does not characterize the hero directly, but paints his image through a series of details: posture, facial expressions, gaze, gestures, laughter. Iona's static posture, contrasted with the dynamic bustle of his surroundings, becomes a symbol of his inner stagnation and helplessness; gestures replace verbal communication, becoming a marker of unspoken pain, while the contrast between static and dynamic emphasizes the character's loneliness [5].

Iona's attempts to find empathy through his gaze are shattered by the indifference of those around him to his sadness or anger, and only the gaze of the horse's shining eyes and warm breath at the end of the story give him a faint consolation [6]. Iona's indistinct voice and laughter reflect his marginalized position in society and his inability to express genuine feelings, while the noise of the city swallows up his feeble attempts at outpouring. The multi-layered conflicts of «staticity-dynamism», «gaze-indifference», and «confession-noise» ultimately form the image of Iona's existential loneliness [6].

Now let us turn to an analysis of Lu Xun's story «A Prayer for Happiness». The story was written in 1924 (included in the collection «Wanderings») during the late period of the New Culture Movement, when Chinese society was experiencing a sharp clash between old and new ideas. The work tells the tragic story of a village woman named Saning, who successively experiences the death of her husband, forced resale into remarriage, and the death of her son. Finding herself at the bottom of society as a beggar, the heroine dies alone amid the noise of the New Year's «blessing» ceremony in Luzhen.

The story begins on New Year's Eve. At first, «ash-grey clouds» and flickering firecrackers («fireworks» [7]) form a visual contrast. The sound («deafening roar» [7]) and the smell of gunpowder in the air create an atmosphere of contrast between the heroine's depression and the noisy holiday. This contrast also symbolizes the superficial joy and inner heaviness of the character. Lu Xun often uses such lively scenes to contrast with the tragedy of the characters. For example, her isolation («she keenly felt her loneliness» [7]) was further intensified during the collective carnival. The prayer, which was supposed to bring her spiritual comfort, became a catalyst for her, confirming her loneliness.

At first, the ash-grey color is the dominant tone, referring to both traditional mourning colors and symbolizing the emptiness of the spiritual world. Then the cold white tone of the snow covering the roof tiles enters into sharp visual conflict with the warm vermilion hue of the calligraphic print («red print with a large character «sho» [7]) in the interior, enhancing the visual expressiveness. At the same time, the contrast of temperature palettes is exacerbated by a dramatic play of light and shadow: the impenetrable fog of the snowstorm outside is unexpectedly interrupted by the abnormal clarity of the office space, where the light reflected by the snow exaggerates the brightness, turning the contours of objects into graphically clear silhouettes. The dynamic contrast adds to the cinematic effect: the falling snow («Large flakes, the size of a plum blossom, fluttered in the air» [7]) outside the window contrasts with the static interior.

The artistic space of the story acquires narrative weight through the dialectic of contrasts: in the houses, «people were still bustling about under dim lights», while on the street «such silence reigned» [8]. The chromatic conflict between the warm but faded lights («dim lamps») and the cold «thick white blanket» of snow creates visual tension. The acoustic perception «it seemed as if the rustling of snowflakes could be heard» [8] reinforces the feeling of absolute silence through the exaggerated perception of the slightest sound – this is a technique of synesthesia, transforming a visual image (snow cover) into an auditory experience (rustling). At the same time, the description of the landscape serves not as a background, but as an active conduit of emotions: the character's growing «melancholy» is materialised through the metaphorical white snow, where even the sound of falling snowflakes becomes a symbol of existential loneliness.

In this scene, the narrator's recollection is accompanied by the image of Xianglin's impoverishment. First of all, her appearance has changed dramatically: five years ago, her hair was just beginning to turn grey, but now it is completely white making her look extremely emaciated, even though she is only forty years old. This portrait testifies to the enormous suffering and pressure she has endured, leading to premature ageing. She has a «face with an earthy hue» [8], usually associated with illness or exhaustion, it looks as if it has been carved out of wood, a double metaphor illustrating gradual physical and mental degradation: on the one hand, it refers to ill health, and on the other, it symbolizes frozen emotions (the materialisation of the spirit). Only her eyes betray her as a living being, suggesting an inner numbness or deep emotional trauma that has caused her to withdraw into herself. Then we see the beggar woman's appearance: she is holding «a bamboo basket with a broken bowl and a long bamboo staff» [8]. These items not only indicate her low social status, but also symbolize poverty and the hardships of existence. Furthermore, the sudden sparkle in her previously dull eyes may signify a glimmer of hope or memories triggered by the appearance of the «I». Here, the contrast between her current appearance (grey hair, earthy face, beggarly clothes) and her former state five years ago emphasizes the destructive effect of time. The forty-year-old woman, looking like a deep old woman, becomes the embodiment of tragedy – an image reflecting the suffering of the lower classes.

The change in her gaze is significant: the sudden sparkle in her eyes («A sparkle suddenly appeared in her dull eyes» [8]) may symbolize a flash of hope, but against the backdrop of general numbness, this fleeting glimmer only reinforces the tragedy, pointing to the inevitability of her situation. This is followed by a depiction of her first arrival in Luozhen. In this scene, Xianglin, as the visual embodiment of socially conditioned self-sacrifice, demonstrates a paradoxical synthesis of physical strength and existential fragility. Her portrait as «twenty-six or twenty-seven years old», dark-skinned, with «strong arms and legs and a modest appearance» [8], as well as her clothing («black skirt, blue jacket, blue sleeveless jacket» [8]), form the image of a grieving woman, where the white ribbon in her hair serves as a symbolic marker of widowhood.

The heroine's actions confirm her «exemplary» nature: mechanical efficiency («worked without rest») and physical strength («strong arms and legs» and «not inferior

to a man») [8]. At the same time, the laziness of other maids is used to contrast her diligence. However, her workaholicism, approved by the Lu family, is in fact a form of existential escape – an attempt to fill an inner void with ritualised activity. Here, the submissive gaze mentioned in the text completes the portrait of a victim of the patriarchal order. Thus, through Xianglin's external attributes and actions, Lu Xun creates not just a character, but an allegory of oppressed femininity in traditional society. Her black and blue outfit becomes the uniform of social invisibility, and the white ribbon is the label of a widow.

However, acts of resistance were hidden beneath her obedient characterisation. In the episode about the widow getting married. Xianglin's gestures – crying, breaking the wedding candles [9], refusing to perform ritual bows, acts of fierce resistance («she threw herself onto the sacrificial table <...> blood gushed out» [9]), as well as incessant swearing («she swore all the way, until she lost her voice» [9]) demonstrate suffering and determined resistance. Finally, she gave up.

Furthermore, after the death of her son, Xianglin's appearance, who became a servant in the Lu family, remains unchanged from her first appearance: a cold color scheme (black, blue, light blue) creates a feeling of depression and grief. Her face is darkened and colorless, her gaze submissive, but her eyes have lost their liveliness from frequent tears [9], and her movements have lost their former agility, her memory has weakened, and even «a smile no longer appeared on her lifeless face» [10], her gestures and facial expressions reflect the emotional numbness that came after the loss of her son.

It is worth noting that a widow who remarried was considered «impure» in the society of that time. This idea, rooted in feudal Confucian morality, which required women to strictly observe chastity, was directly reflected in the behaviour of her uncle and aunt. The most striking confirmation of this is their refusal to allow Xianglin to participate in ritual ceremonies. Their actions demonstrated not only everyday discrimination, but also ritualised rejection, since sacrifices, as a sacred connection with ancestors, required absolute purity. Therefore, the prohibition on touching candlesticks and sacrificial gifts serves a dual function: first, it reinforces the stigma of «impurity»; second, it visualizes social isolation by depriving the heroine of access to sacred practices.

At the same time, Xianglin's reaction to the double prohibition («she shyly withdrew her hand» and «she recoiled in fear» [10]) reveals the duality of her position: on the one hand, it is a manifestation of helplessness and fear, and on the other, it is an acknowledgement of her externally imposed social status. Moreover, the aunt's actions take on special significance: her haste and insistent repetitions of «I'll arrange it myself!» and «I'll take it myself!» [10] are not so much a manifestation of distrust of Xianglin as blind obedience to traditional norms. As a result, Xianglin, at the bottom of the power hierarchy, finds herself in a vicious circle: her life is limited to physical labor, while at the same time she is alienated from key family rituals, which finally consolidates her marginal status in society.

As the plot develops, the repeated words («I've become stupid, completely stupid, really...» [10]) indicate that she is stuck in her traumatic past. These moments deepen the readers' understanding of her tragic fate. Her obsessive repetition of the story of her son's death is an attempt to find catharsis through verbalising her trauma. At first, this elicits formal sympathy, but it quickly turns into annoying «noise» that people rush to interrupt. This transition from pseudo-empathy to aggressive rejection reveals the ritual nature of «compassion»: the old women, listening to her with «frozen tears», are in fact only satisfying their own curiosity, turning someone else's grief into an emotional spectacle. At the same time, Xianglin's silence in the finale represents a final act of resistance. Meanwhile, the name «Xianglin» remains unchanged, but the intonation with which it is pronounced becomes a marker of the change in the attitude of those around her: from pity to cold alienation, and then to open ridicule.

After the cold ridicule, her gaze («dull eyes») acquires a multi-layered symbolism: it becomes a material metaphor for spiritual death. Her eyes, losing focus, reflect not just a loss of hope, but a break with reality, where a gaze deprived of focus reflects spiritual emptiness. The cyclical repetition of tragedy, initially a subconscious cry for recognition, under the pressure of ridicule has the opposite effect: society, chewing her pain like «gum», finally marginalizes her. Even the static gesture of «looking at the sky» and the sound of «mumbling» [10] reflect her helpless situation.

Realising that the tragedy has become a subject of ridicule Xianglin gradually sinks into silent self-isolation — from avoiding direct eye contact to a complete break with the outside world. Her clenched teeth and «mark of shame on her forehead» [10] materialize her inner agony, turning physical tension into a mirror of mental turmoil. Even routine work («washing floors, cleaning vegetables and washing rice» [10]) becomes not just a struggle for survival, but an escape into mechanical automatism, where monotonous actions drown out the unbearable reality.

It is worth mentioning that the donation of copper coins at the temple threshold, a ritual of «purification from sins», reveals her deep acceptance of the logic of the system: instead of denouncing social oppression, she tries to «wash away» the stigma imposed by society, as if the blame for the tragedy lies solely with her. The «mark of shame» here is a double stamp: both the scar of personal loss and the social label that makes her an outcast.

The final episode demonstrates the total disintegration of Xianglin's personality through the prism of social violence. Her aunt's prohibition, «Don't touch!» becomes an act of ritual excommunication, turning Xianglin into an «unclean» person, deprived of the right to the sacred. Her reflexive pulling back of her hands («as if she had been burned» [10]) reveals how social taboos have become ingrained in her flesh, turning shame into a physiological reaction. The body rapidly decays («she turned black all over», «her eyes sank deeply», «grey hair in six months») and the psyche plunges into darkness («fear of shadows», «trembling with fear, like a mouse», «sitting motionless, as if wooden» [10]). Lu Xun constructs a clear logic of decay: social rejection burns out the soul, leaving only a shell where one can see the rare movements of the eyeballs — the last sparks of a fading consciousness. The author weaves the details into an inexorable logic of destruction: rejection — mental collapse — biological decay.

The story ends with an oppressive atmosphere, which the author creates through a synthesis of sounds («crackling and rumbling» [10]) and visual images («heavy clouds», «snowflakes» [10]). Snow, a traditional symbol of purity, takes on a dual meaning here: its lightness contrasts with the oppressive density of the clouds, and its whiteness conceals the tragedy of Xianglin, buried under a veil of collective oblivion. This contrast is a metaphor for existential isolation: human suffering is intensified against a backdrop of indifference, and the inner cry dissolves into the ritual silence of society. Thus, Lu Xun builds a circular composition in the story, beginning and ending the text with snowy landscapes. At the beginning, the snow has not yet fallen, and heavy grey clouds and the hustle and bustle of ritual preparations create an oppressive backdrop, where social order and a sombre tone foreshadow Xianglin's tragedy. The finale shows how the snow warms the heroine's body at the height of the ritual madness. In addition, the «purity» of the snow and the 'noise of firecrackers' create an ironic meaning: society masks blood with whiteness, and death is covered by the roar of celebration.

The image of Xianglin should also be considered. The author reflects the course of her tragic fate through changes in her portrait. When she first appears in Luzhen, she is described as «a woman of twenty-six or twenty-seven, very ruddy, despite her greenish-yellow skin. She wore a black skirt, a blue jacket, and a blue sleeveless shirt, her hair tied with a white cord» [10]. Here the color of her face indicates malnutrition but her «rosy cheeks» retain the remaining warmth of life.

After her son's death, her appearance repeats the previous details: «As before, she had a white cord in her hair. And she was dressed the same: a black skirt and a blue

sleeveless jacket over a blue blouse. Only her face seemed to have darkened and her blush had disappeared. Her gaze remained as submissive as before, but her eyes, apparently because she cried so often, had lost their former liveliness» [10].

The climax comes in the scene of her expulsion from the altar during the «blessing' ritual»: «The next day, her eyes were deeply sunken. She was afraid of the dark, afraid of any shadow. She was afraid of people, even her master. At the sight of a person, she trembled with fear, like a mouse that had run out of its burrow during the day. She could sit motionless for a long time, as if she were made of wood. Less than six months later, she had grey hair, and her memory was completely gone» [10].

In the end, she becomes a beggar: «Five years ago, she was just beginning to turn grey, but now she was as white as a hawk. Her emaciated, earthy-colored face no longer showed the sorrow it once did. It seemed to be carved from wood. Only her eyes showed that she was a living person. A bamboo basket with an empty, cracked bowl in one hand and a long bamboo staff, split at the bottom» [10].

We draw attention to important details. Appearing twice at Lu's house, Xianglin is dressed in a strict mourning outfit: a white ribbon in her hair (a symbol of widowhood), a black skirt, a blue jacket and a blue sleeveless jacket. This unchanging attire is not merely a detail of everyday life, but a visual code of social rejection. In the context of traditional society, where widows were often stigmatised and restricted in their rights, such attire served as a constant reminder of her «impure» status and singled her out from the general social flow, thereby condemning her to alienation and isolation. Clothing not only reflects her personal tragedy, but also becomes a marker of her social exclusion.

Lu Xun records the stages of Xianglin's physical and spiritual decline with anthropological meticulousness. The greenish-yellow color of her face is not just a consequence of poverty, but also a visualization of chronic hunger as the basic condition of her existence. The disappearance of her blush after her son's death signifies the loss of signs of vitality.

The culmination is her transformation into a beggar: «an emaciated face with an earthy hue» and the metaphor «a face carved out of wood» visualize the process of a living person becoming insensitive.

Thus, the transformation of Xianglin's portrait from a rosy-cheeked peasant woman to a wooden statue becomes a visual chronicle of her social death. In the story «Praying for Happiness», changes in the characters' portraits are revealed step by step as their life paths develop. The peculiarity of his descriptions lies in the fact that he rarely gives static portraits of characters, but reveals their image through actions. The characteristic features of their portraits are emphasized through the actions of the characters in specific situations.

In the portrait painting of the artist Gu Kaizhi, special attention was paid to conveying and expressing the «spirit» of the character. In his opinion, «the beauty or ugliness» of the limbs had nothing to do with the «spiritual essence»; the key lay in the depiction of the eyes. Lu Xun agrees with his opinion: «To convey a person's characteristics as concisely as possible, it is best to depict their eyes». For example, in the story «Praying for Happiness», Lu Xun documents the stages of the heroine's spiritual demise through changes in her eyes. When she first appears in Lu's house, her «submissive gaze» reflects her acceptance of her social role as a widow. The submissive gaze and silence become a visual code prescribed by tradition. After the death of her son, her «extinguished eyes» [11] reflect the loss of vital energy and the collapse of her emotional framework: the loss of motherhood burns out the last sparks of inner light, turning her gaze into an empty vessel where tears have washed away even the shadow of hope.

Another glance catches our attention. Old Woman Liu smiled, her «faded eyes» [11] intently studying Xianglin's scar — this is a visualization of social surveillance: through a physical mark, society conducts a moral archaeology of her past. However, «the smile disappeared from her face, and she began to watch the falling snow» [11] is not just a

gesture, but a semantic explosion: snow as an ambivalent symbol: purity represents the illusion of a moral absolute, which is contrasted with the «tainted» victim. Coldness as a metaphor for social isolation, where the silence of the snowfall becomes louder than words. It can be said that the falling snow hints at an inexpressible psychological trauma.

Later, her open mouth and frozen posture («with her mouth open, she watched with a fixed gaze and a long look») visualize her complex inner state. Then, her expulsion from the «blessing» ritual leads to a physical change: «deep-set eyes» [11] — the result of constant fear of condemnation. The phrase «only her eyes said that she was a living person» is a bitter paradox. The gaze, which formally confirms life, in fact demonstrates her empty inner world: it fixes not the presence of the soul, but its absence. Consequently, the absence of a meaningful gaze emphasizes the complete degradation of the personality: even fear is replaced by apathy.

In the episode where Xianglin asks the narrator about the existence of life after death, the look «the sparkle in her eyes» here symbolizes the last attempt to find meaning in the world. The narrator's answer («Maybe...») does not offer comfort, but reveals a metaphysical emptiness. After donating the temple threshold, a sparkle flashes in her eyes for a moment («her eyes shining»), serving as a symbol of hope. However, this illusory hope is shattered by the indifferent environment: society, with its deeply rooted stereotypes, ultimately rejects her again.

It is important to note that by creating the «proper» image, Lu Xun implies the conciseness of artistic means: the selection of the most characteristic details to reveal the character, especially through changes in the gaze that reflect the inner world. Using the transformation of Xianglin's gaze as a visual code of systemic dehumanisation: from accepting the role — through the loss of hope — to death, the author illustrates the process of transition from accepting the role through the loss of hope to death. It is telling how tradition gradually extinguishes the human in a person, leaving only a physical shell.

Chinese writer Liu Xinyu offers his interpretation of the story: «The value lies in the fact that it shows the need for expression». In his opinion, the hope of expressing one's opinion can be accepted by those around them. In fact, Xianglin's repeated confession in the text evokes indifference.

Xianglin repeats: «I've become stupid, completely stupid, really...» [11]. After the terrible blow of fate — becoming a widow again and the death of her son — her consciousness is caught in a vortex of grief, remorse and self-flagellation. Her thoughts are filled with memories of Amao and a gnawing sense of guilt. However, the reaction of those around her, which at first expressed sympathy, gradually gave way to indifference and then ridicule. People began not only to ignore her suffering — they responded to her pain with joking remarks, turning the tragedy into a vulgar joke. At that moment, her loneliness and despair reached their peak. Lu Xun uses this detail in the story to reveal the indifference and ruthlessness of the people of that era. In that era, every person was a potential spectator who could be indifferent to the suffering of others or even respond to it with ridicule.

In the story, the dominance of cold tones creates an atmosphere of oppression. The surroundings are immersed in a grey-white color palette: «grey-white evening clouds», «a gloomy snowy day», «thick snow cover» — these details not only convey the winter landscape, but also become a metaphor for false purity. Snow, symbolizing prosperity and positive phenomena, reveals its duality here: its outward whiteness hides the icy indifference of society.

Moreover, the contrast of colors in clothing reinforces the tragedy. Xianglin, with a mourning white ribbon in her hair and wearing a black skirt, exists in a black-and-white world of an outcast, while the scarlet decorations of the rituals («red fabrics», «sacred candles») create the illusion of a holiday. This dissonance between mourning and «bloody» festivity is a hint that individual grief cannot be dissolved in collective hypocrisy.

At the same time, the symbolism of light deepens the theme of spiritual death. The yellow light of the lamp reflects the futility of the heroine's hopes: the faint flame of her existence is extinguished in the pitch darkness of tradition. Even the festive fireworks («tiny flames», «explosions of firecrackers» [11]) serve as an instrument of irony — their flashing brilliance emphasizes the darkness of her death, and the noisy madness of the ritual turns human death into a backdrop for general merriment. Thus, color and light in Lu Xun's work serve not only as visual rhetoric, but also as a visual metaphor for oppression. Cold tones and disharmonious light contrasts materialise the abstract evil of the system.

Overall, the work uses «linear editing, but fragments related to the interaction between «I» and Luzhen and episodes of Xianglin with Luzhen form a parallel montage». Both plots share a common physical space (Luzhen's ancestral temple, snow-covered streets). At the same time, Lu Xun creates a dialectic of oppression in the structure of the montage: Lu's fourth office, filled with Confucian folios, becomes a metaphor for spiritual asphyxiation: books here are not a source of knowledge, but instruments of ideological control. This symbolic interior is brought to life through specific details: dusty treatises from the Kangxi Dictionary, Commentaries on the Records of Contemporary Thoughts, and Remarks on the Four Books [11], worn scrolls with the inscription «Understand the essence of the matter — calm your soul» [11], symbols of «high morality», have long since become decorations of hypocrisy. Even the red character for «longevity» on the wall, traditionally signifying prosperity, works here as a mockery: it emphasizes not eternal life, but eternal oppression.

On the other hand, the ritual space reveals the mechanics of religious violence. The kitchen with its ritual utensils materialises physical bondage. Moreover, the threshold of the temple, which Xianglin desperately tries to «cross», and the bloodstained altar, against which she beats herself, are not sacred objects, but slavery and bondage of the spirit. Moreover, the parallel between the festive carnival and death is realised through contrasts: sacrificial dishes, wine and fragrant incense contrast with the whiteness of the snow, exposing Xianglin's ritual sacrifice. Thus, Lu Xun, in a laconic realistic manner, builds a step-by-step transformation of Xianglin's portrait, using static details to convey the dynamics of internal changes. The four stages of her appearance's evolution — through an emphasis on clothing, complexion, and eyes — reveal spiritual degradation under the yoke of feudal Confucian morality. In addition, the contrast between her silence and the noisy ritual carnival of Luzhen exposes existential loneliness and social indifference.

The description of the landscapes creates spatial and colour-light antitheses: the cold whiteness of the snow outside the window and the blood-red interior details, the flickering of the lamps and the blinding brightness of the festive fireworks, together with the synthesis of various sensory perceptions (the noise of firecrackers, the smell of gunpowder, the tactile cold) create an oppressive background that highlights the heaviness of internal experiences. Snowy landscapes, the play of light and shadow, and interiors form a coherent system of symbols to enrich the visual world and deepen the reader's understanding of her tragic fate.

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