

Ivalon Wells

Steve Lewis

Lit 230

04-08-16

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, much tension was bred by the variance in mentalities between time-honored philosophies and up-and-coming viewpoints. This period of time was one filled with radical world changes and an increase in global awareness. Lu Xun largely used his writings as a thinly veiled social commentary and is still one of China's most celebrated authors (Puchner 1236). Machado is considered "Brazil's greatest writer" as he was excellent at depicting the multiple facets of Brazilian society (Puchner 910). Machado and Lu Xun similarly use their narrators to explore the tension caused by traditional attitudes that inhibited progress in society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Lu Xun uses his narrator, the Madman, to explore the enduring traditional attitudes that he found limiting progress. The madman suffers from the delusion that his fellow townsfolk resort to cannibalism as an allegory for the way they devour innovation. Rather than engage in new ideas, they prefer to remain as they are and embed themselves into the pre-approved masses. Foley describes how the Madman has created a social "hierarchy within the category of human...with the cannibals on the bottom, those being eaten in the middle, and the enlightened individual...the madman--on the top" (382-83). This is part of the madman's explanation of evolution in which in order to evolve, one must desire the transformation and endeavor to make it occur. The madman views the cannibals as those who refuse improvement and are content at their "primitive level" even though some of their brethren have discovered

lucidity (Xun 1244). He relates this to those in his neighborhood, feeling that they are unwilling to advance and believes that improvement of one's self is the essence of growth as people. His neighbors are too afraid to pursue alteration and remain content in their current existence. Lu Xun uses the phrase "'but it's always been that way'" to show this reluctance (1243). The Madman pleads with his brother as well as the others to consider changing, telling them that it is indeed possible. Foley refers to this as a reciprocal natured evolution, regression is as much a possibility as is progress (389). This infers that the innate vicious side of humans can resurface at any time. It is truly a choice to fight against this impulse and select instead to take steps forward, but yet too often a lackadaisical attitude persists.

Machado uses his omniscient narrator to portray the events surrounding Damiao's leaving the seminary or, in essence, the ways of old. When Damiao abandons the seminary he is not just rejecting the lifestyle of a priest, he is turning his back on the tradition of obedience and the pre-established molds of society. He chooses to approach his godfather's mistress- Sinha Rita- for assistance instead of approaching his godfather or his father. Rather than adhere to whom society would believe holds power, Damiao elects to pursue the one who he sees truly holding omnipotence. He sees past the currently held dogma and recognizes the influence Sinha Rita has on her surroundings. Tate shows that this is how Damiao may obtain advancement, as "The...powerful bestower of favour is often motivated by acts of flattery and deception..." (341). Damiao manipulates Sinha Rita by informing her that she is able to initiate change, and then suggesting that her power has limitations when she refuses to help (912-13). Tate continues by explaining that due to the "societal limitations placed [on] them", women

from this time period “...use the tools...” of “...beauty and charm” in order to obtain “...positions of power and influence” (341-42). Sinha Rita applies these means to bend Damiao’s godfather to her will, gaining influence over the situation. This is fortunate for Damiao; however, in recognizing Sinha Rita’s command, Damiao also places himself at her mercy. This comes to a point when Sinha Rita asks Damiao for the rod which she uses to assail her slaves and he must choose between his morals and his freedom (Machado 916). Damiao struggles with the decision to hand Sinha Rita the rod, as it symbolizes the submission to authority he has been desperately fighting against all along. In the end however, he recognizes that he must submit in order to retain Sinha Rita’s assistance and escape his current fate.

Lu Xun’s Madman also suffers the epiphany of seeing his own role in his society’s current state. The Madman refrains from his fight and becomes part of the ideology he was so adamantly against. Both Damiao and the Madman decide to submit to authority however much they wish to fight it. They both wish for change in their worlds and hope to fight against pre-established mindsets, yet they also realize they are accountable themselves. Damiao cannot bring himself to disobey Sinha Rita while the Madman confesses to the deficits of his human nature and the resistance present in his own family (Xun 1246). They both have fed off the system they want to reject. Here is an example of the way the intersection of tradition and innovation creates tension; as much as these self-proclaimed revolutionaries strive for change, they are simultaneously incapable of attaining such a conversion. Foley denotes that the Madman did not attain the stage of a better self, due to his return to the masses and ponders if it is difficult to determine what this better self is in light of it being previously “unrealized” (391-

92). The Madman is able to see the potential in the future though. Even as he loses hope for himself, he mentions the chance to spare the children from the restrictions of tradition (Xun 1246) while Damiao realizes that one rebellion against Sinha Rita will do little to stop the slave trade present in his community and will only prevent his freedom from becoming a possibility (Machado 916). They know change is achievable but it is difficult to obtain on the part of the individual and requires the crowd. Society, however, is aware that it is simpler to sway one than the collective whole, and instead disregard their ideals and notions. This is where tension arises, between the obstinance of the group and the wishes of the individual.

The tone of these works is not entirely negative, though, as they are meant to open mindsets rather than berate those established as un-enlightened. Hongsheng illustrates that Lu Xun is not strictly anti-traditional, but that Lu Xun intended for his works to be didactic. He continues to describe Lu Xun's views that a culture can retain tradition while discovering new aspects of the world (346-48). The exploration of progress-inhibiting attitudes present in the late 19th century and early 20th century by Machado and Lu Xun was their contribution towards paving the road for modernism.

Works cited

- Foley, Todd. "Between Human and Animal: A Study of New Year's Sacrifice, Kong Yiji, and Diary of a Madman." *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 6.3 (2012): 374-392. *Humanities Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
- Hongsheng, Jiang. "The Ancient Wellspring and the Source of the Future: The Creation of New Poetry and the New Man in Lu Xun's On the Power of Mara Poetry." *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 6.3 (2012): 337-353. *Humanities Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
- Machado de Assis, Joaquim María. "The Rod of Justice." Trans. Helen Caldwell. Puchner 910-916
- Puchner, Martin, ed. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013. Print.
- Tate, Julee. "A Feminine Approach to Favour in Two Novels by Machado de Assis." *Romance Notes* 47.3 (2007): 341-349. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.
- Xun, Lu. "Diary of a Madman." Trans. William A. Lyell. Puchner 1236-1246.