

Research Article

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The Comic Adaptation of Lao She's Short Story "Vision": A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The short story "Vision" stands as a singular romantic narrative within Lao She's (1899–1966) literary repertoire. Wang Shupeng undertook the adaptation of this tale into gouache comic strips, a rendition that garnered acclaim by securing the Second Prize in the Third National Comic Strip Painting and Creation Contest in China in 1986. Lao She held a particular fondness for this narrative, as it drew inspiration from his own experiences of first love. Adopting a first-person perspective, the author elegantly narrated a tale of love imbued with tragedy, employing a poetic language and employing a stream-of-consciousness narrative technique that underscored its creative ingenuity. In adapting the script for the comic strip rendition, Wang Shupeng accentuated the poignant fate of the protagonists alongside their unwavering perseverance. Through his evocative brushwork, the artist adeptly conveyed the characters' distinct personalities and internal thoughts, thereby setting a gloomy tonal ambiance for the comic strip's color palette. Such meticulous efforts culminated in the transformation of "Vision" into a masterpiece within the realm of comic strips.

Keywords: Lao She; Wang Shupeng; micro god; comic strip; adaptation

Among Lao She's literary corpus, the short story "Vision" (《微神》) stands as a singular exploration of romantic themes. The author describes a love tragedy with his poetic pen, elucidating the societal injustices faced by women within the context of traditional Chinese society, while also extolling the sincerity and significance inherent in one's experience of first love. In a testament to the enduring power of Lao She's narrative, the illustrious Chinese painter Wang Shupeng embarked upon a transformative journey to reimagine "Vision" through the vibrant medium of gouache comic strips. Published in 1985 by the esteemed Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing

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House, Wang Shupeng's adaptation captivated audiences and critics alike, securing the prestigious Second Prize in the revered Third National Comic Strip Painting and Creation Contest of 1986. Wang Shupeng's artistic vision breathes new life into Lao She's timeless tale, infusing each panel with a sense of palpable emotion and visual splendor. Central to the success of Wang Shupeng's adaptation is his masterful characterization, each figure imbued with depth and nuance that resonates with the reader's heart. Through his evocative use of a subdued color palette, Wang Shupeng conjures a haunting atmosphere that mirrors the emotional landscape of Lao She's narrative, suffusing each frame with a sense of melancholic beauty. Furthermore, Wang Shupeng's unique aesthetic composition elevates the comic strip adaptation of "Vision" to the realm of artistic masterpiece, transcending the boundaries of its medium to leave an indelible impression upon the collective consciousness of its audience.

Lao She's short story "Vision" was written in the late spring and early summer of 1933, and was originally published in *Literature* (Volume 1, Issue 4, November 1933). Its Chinese title "Wei Shen (literally "Micro God")" was a transliteration of "Vision" which implies how the author felt about romance: hallucination, phantom, dream, illusion and fantasy. Its English subtitle "Vision" was removed when the story was included in Lao She's first collection of short stories, published by Liangyou Book Company in September 1944. In 1947, when Chenguang Publishing Company published Lao She's novel collection "Vision", Lao She wrote in the preface: "This is a collection of selected short stories... its title is 'Vision', firstly, because 'Wei Shen' these two characters sound pleasing to the ear, and secondly, because it is a piece of my favorite ..." (Lao 1984, p.57) This is how Lao She shows to the readers in a written form that he favors this piece of work. The famous Chinese playwright Cao Yu (1910–1996) once told a Japanese professor, Keiichi Ito, that Lao She said to him that the best piece of work he had ever written was "Vision" (Ito pp. 33–37). Similar to Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past (Shangshi)", "Vision" is a novel related to Lao She's own love story. Luo Changpei, Lao She's close friend, once revealed that "you can find Lao She's first love in 'Vision' which he wrote later." In reality, Luo continued, "her father became a monk, and the daughter had to submit to Buddhist discipline while still wearing her hair." (Luo 1944, p.2) But in the novel, the heroine becomes a unlicensed prostitute. The daughter of Liu Shoumian was Lao She's first love. Liu Shoumian was also known as "Good Man Liu", who once took a poor child (Lao She) to school to study. Miss Liu was gentle, quiet, and graceful. She attended a normal school and later taught, along with Lao She, at the school for poor children opened by Liu Shanren. In 1924, Lao She left China to teach in England. Two years later, Liu Shoumian became a monk, and his wife and two daughters also became nuns. Later Lao She wrote an essay entitled "Master Zong Yue". "After he knew the news that she became a nun, Lao She became 'heart broken and emaciated', and buried his great

sadness in the bottom of the heart. It was recorded in both the novel 'Vision' (1933) and the essay 'Untitled (Because There Is No Story)' (1937), and became one of the reasons for his departure to England for six years without leaving anything behind." (Jiang 2007, p.48).

"Vision" narrates a tragic romance from a first-person perspective. The story begins with the male protagonist who is lying on a sun-drenched hillside after the Qingming Festival, and dreaming of spring amidst the verdant willows, blossoming flowers, and soaring swallows: it was our first date at her place while her parents were not at home. "When I arrived, she flew out from under the curtain like a swallow," wearing embroidered white flower slippers. "When her parents were at home, she could only watch me from behind the window." Her family fell into decline, and after "I" graduated and became a principal of an elementary school, she sent "me" a congratulatory letter but asked "me" not to reply. "I" went to the South Seas and lost touch with her. Upon returning to the country, "I" heard the news that she had become a unlicensed prostitute. "I" desperately wanted to help her, but her family had already sold their house. Eventually, "I" found her. Smoking with heavy makeup on her face, "she never looked directly at me". "I" sent some money to her through a friend, but she didn't respond. I asked my friend to tell her that I was willing to marry her. "She didn't say anything, just laughed hysterically." She later died from an abortion. The story presents "my" enduring affection for the first love, depicting a heart-wrenching scene of romantic tragedy.

The "Vision" portrays the hero and heroine in this tragedy with poetic language. The hero "I" was an affectionate and charming man, kindhearted and booksmart, sincere and fantasy-loving, who cherished the true feelings with his first love. He became an elementary school principal and offered her a position to teach some courses so that he was able to see her often. Then he went to the South Seas and missed her a lot, because "it was always 'her' in his dream". Upon his return to China, he knew that she had become a unlicensed prostitute, and he sincerely wanted to help her in distress, and was willing to marry her even after he knew that she was a prostitute. When seeing her coffin and knowing her death was brought by abortion, he "completed his first love and dived into a lifelong emptiness" and "she will never die in his heart anyway". The heroine was a who was forced to make a living in the brothel, changing from an innocent girl to an aimless woman in prostitution, she still treasured her first love deep in her heart. As a seventeen-year-old girl, she was overjoyed at the arrival of her lover, like a swallow flying out from under the curtain, and her face "overflowing with rosy rouge". After her family had fallen, "she lost the innocence and vivacity of her age". Then her mother died, and her father went bankrupt. "She sold herself to a rich man, in order to provide money for her father." She always missed her lover in the South Seas, and her husband finally found out that her heart belonged to another man and kicked her out of the house. Her father,

addicted to drugs, continued to demand money from her, and she had no choice but to become a prostitute, “serving people as much as she could with her body”. She had four abortions, and she eventually chose to commit suicide.

In “Vision”, Lao She showcases a notable departure from his typical realistic narrative style through the adoption of a stream-of-consciousness-like and hallucinatory narrative structure. This departure is particularly noteworthy given Lao She’s established oeuvre, which predominantly adheres to a realistic tone. Within this narrative framework, the protagonist, denoted as “I”, serves as the conduit for the unfolding events, beginning with a vivid portrayal of sensory experiences amidst natural scenery, such as the gentle swaying of willow branches and the fluttering of butterflies. The protagonist’s subjective consciousness guides the narrative trajectory, from initial encounters to subsequent revelations and disillusionment. The depiction of encounters, such as the protagonist’s rendezvous with the enigmatic female figure in the small room with ivory-white curtains, imbues the narrative with an ethereal quality, accentuated by recurring motifs such as the imagery of swallows and the transformation of seasons. Lao She deftly elucidates the protagonist’s emotional journey, juxtaposing moments of longing and pursuit with stark revelations of societal harshness and personal tragedy. The protagonist’s quest for the mysterious woman leads to the sobering discovery of her descent into prostitution and eventual demise, serving as a poignant commentary on the fragility of human connection amidst societal upheaval.

Through introspective reflections and dreamlike sequences, Lao She artfully navigates the labyrinthine corridors of human despair and the elusive quest for redemption. The protagonist’s journey is not merely a physical one but a profound exploration of the inner landscape, where layers of emotion and existential questioning converge. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist’s empathetic understanding of the woman’s inner turmoil and sacrificial choices unveils a tapestry of intricate emotions, resonating with themes of love’s transient beauty and the stark reality of loss. In the novel’s climactic moments, Lao She orchestrates a symphony of fragmented memories and poignant symbolism, with the haunting image of the small green slippers serving as a poignant reminder of the ephemeral nature of existence amidst the relentless march of time. Through his deft narrative craftsmanship, Lao She intertwines disparate strands of consciousness and emotion, inviting readers to delve deeper into the complexities of the human psyche and confront the enigmatic essence of being.

Born in 1946, Wang Shupeng graduated from Tianjin School of Arts and Crafts with a major in decoration design in 1967. Since 1968, he has served as an art editor and director of the art editing department at Tianjin People’s Publishing House and Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, mainly responsible for book binding work, creating covers and illustrations for books. He is an expert in gouache and oil

painting. He has also served as an art editor at Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, vice president of Tianjin Artists Association, director of the Oil Painting Art Committee of Tianjin Artists Association, and member of Illustration and Binding Art Committee of China Artists Association.

Representative works within Wang Shupeng's corpus of oil paintings encompass a diverse array of thematic explorations. These include seminal pieces such as "The Year of My Zodiac Sign" (1991), "Hard to Leave the Homeland" (1994), "Over the Mountain" (1997), "The Holy Miracle of Mother Ancestor" (2002), "A Hundred Years of Stormy Clouds" (2004), as well as the esteemed "Country Series": "Companions", "Cotton Ground", and "Ruts" (2006–2008). Noteworthy additions to this list are "The Rising Tide of Venice" (2007), "Catching Chinese Workers" (2012), "The Remaining Snow" (2013), "The Red Skirt" (2013), "Let the Horse Run Wild" (2014), "Farmer's Wife of Ningxia" (2015), and "Autumn in the Thistle" (2016).

Moreover, Wang Shupeng's prowess extends beyond the realm of traditional oil painting, demonstrating a multifaceted talent through his adeptness in crafting comic strips. This facet of his artistic repertoire is exemplified in works such as "In the Days of the Duel" (1977), "The Imperial Envoy" (1981), "Stealing Guns from the Tiger's Mouth" (1984), "Dancing Boys and Dancing Girls" (1987), "Thousand Knots of the Heart" (1987), "King of Golden River" (1989), "Sons of Hunan" (1993), "A Hundred Years of Great Changes" (1999), "Prequel to Tiemu" (2 vol, 2012), "The Decameron" (volumes 1–5, 2013), among others. These multifarious creations collectively underscore Wang Shupeng's indelible mark on the artistic landscape.

Wang Shupeng's gouache comic strip, "Vision", stands as a testament to his artistic prowess and creative vision, representing a significant endeavor embarked upon independently by the author. In the introductory exposition accompanying the work, Wang Shupeng not only provides a succinct overview of the narrative but also delves into the thematic essence and historical milieu that underpin its intricate tapestry. Within this narrative prism, the adaptor masterfully delineates the central plot, which revolves around the clandestine and poignant romance between a young man and woman during the tumultuous late 1920s. Their yearnings for union are tragically stymied by the omnipresent societal strictures of feudalism, rendering their love an elegiac lamentation echoing through the annals of time. Against the backdrop of this societal discord, subsequent events unfold with poignant gravity, mirroring the harsh realities of the era. The young man's departure abroad for academic pursuits serves as an intense juxtaposition to the young woman's descent into the grim underbelly of prostitution, symbolizing the systemic oppression and societal decay endemic to the epoch. Upon his eventual return from the distant

shores of the South Seas, the young man is confronted with the shattering revelation of his beloved's fate, catalyzing a crescendo of despair and existential reckoning.

In Wang Shupeng's deft hands, the concise retelling of the novel's narrative arc transcends mere summarization, serving as a thematic microcosm that casts an illuminating spotlight on the dark and turbulent socio-political landscape of semi-colonial and semi-feudal China. Through meticulous attention to textual nuance and visual detail, Wang Shupeng endeavors not only to faithfully capture the essence of the novel but also to imbue his artistic rendition with a richness and depth that resonates with audiences on a visceral level, thereby enriching the visual storytelling experience and elevating it to the realm of profound artistic expression.

In adapting the script of the comic strip, Wang Shupeng meticulously adheres to the novel's first-person narrative perspective, thereby immersing readers in the intimate world of the protagonist's inner thoughts and emotions. While streamlining the detailed scenery descriptions found at the novel's beginning part, Wang Shupeng astutely preserves the core essence of the narrative, remaining faithful to its overarching plot trajectory. Central to this approach is the incorporation of excerpts from the novel's text, ensuring a seamless transition from literary source material to visual storytelling. A prime illustration of this fidelity to the original text is evident in the script of the comic strip's first panel: "One day after the Qingming Festival, I was sunbathing on a hillside, with no thoughts in my mind at all, and naturally some beads of poetry dripped out, but half a day didn't make a whole sentence." Wang Shupeng's approach to adaptation showcases a meticulous editorial finesse, characterized by a deliberate curation that prioritizes the emotive essence of the narrative over extraneous scenic embellishments. By deftly excising expansive scenic descriptions from the opening sequence, he directs the viewers' focus on the visceral immediacy of the characters' actions and the intricate nuances of their primary psychological states. Moreover, Wang's editorial decisions extend to the adapted scripts, where he eschews elaborate environmental portrayals in favor of a laser-like focus on the characters' dynamic interactions and the intricacies of their innermost thoughts and feelings. Through this deliberate editorial strategy, Wang Shupeng navigates the delicate balance between textual fidelity and artistic interpretation, imbuing his adaptation with a compelling depth and resonance that resonates with viewers on a profoundly visceral level. For example, the script for the 4th panel of the comic strip goes: "Gently pushing the door open to take a look, my heart almost jumped out! For I saw again the small green slippers embroidered with white flowers. It reminded me of that day again ..." In the novel, rich details such as the long table, the circular arrangement of chairs in the outer room, and the adorned pine pot and twin bronze mirrors atop the cabinet serve to embellish the setting with vivid imagery.

Similarly, the inner sanctum is adorned with a bed draped in verdant green carpeting, a small basket nestled at its head, and the fragrant presence of jasmine blooms within. Even the rectangular futon mat, an unassuming yet integral fixture, adds to the atmospheric richness woven throughout the narrative. However, in the transition to the script format, these elements have been omitted, save for one touching detail: the “pair of small green slippers embroidered with white flowers”. This deliberate choice underscores the thematic significance of this singular item, serving as a potent symbol that transcends the boundaries of the physical setting. Through this selective omission, the script distills the essence of the novel's imagery, inviting readers to focus on the evocative power of this singular motif as it threads its way through the narrative tapestry, imbuing each scene with layers of emotional resonance and symbolic depth.

In his adaptation of the comic strip “Vision”, Wang Shupeng intricately weaves three distinct layers of interaction between the male and female protagonists, each contributing to the complex tapestry of their intertwined destinies. Firstly, the rendezvous within the modest confines of the small house emerges as the primary locus of their shared experiences and the myriad obstacles obstructing their path to love. Secondly, the narrative unfolds to encompass the poignant longing that consumes the male protagonist upon leaving for the South Seas, only to be confronted with the bittersweet resurgence of old emotions upon his return to the country – a melancholic trajectory culminating in the devastating tragedy of her descent into prostitution and subsequent suicide. Lastly, the dream sequence within “my” subconscious realm serves as a conduit through which she articulates the harsh realities of her prostitute existence, illuminating the depths of her enduring love for “me” amidst the trials and tribulations of her tumultuous life. Throughout the adaptation process, Wang Shupeng exhibits a propensity to eschew intricate psychological descriptions in favor of foregrounding the characters' actions and behaviors, thereby accentuating the stark contours of their unfortunate circumstances and unwavering perseverance in the face of adversity. This deliberate editorial choice imbues the narrative with a raw, visceral intensity, compelling readers and viewers to confront the harsh realities of the protagonists' plight while simultaneously celebrating their indomitable spirit and resilience.

Some scholar has commented very pertinently on Wang Shupeng's comic strip “Vision”: “In a masterful fusion of 32 images, the dream of beauty intertwines with the flower of evil, creating a mesmerizing tapestry where the beginning part and the ending part correspond harmoniously. The conclusion, with its “wakening” moment, resonates with a profound twofold meaning, igniting a cascade of introspection and emotional turbulence among the readers and viewers. Each painting within this collection mirrors the novel's essence, imbued with a saddening

lamentation and sorrow that reverberates through the narrative. As a contemporary painter, his remarkable skill in capturing the characters' moods and the era's ambiance underscores his exceptional prowess in the realms of human figure and environmental depiction, elevating his creations to unparalleled heights of artistic expression."

About the illustrations, Wang Shupeng once commented, "In the realm of literature, both Chinese and foreign, myriad iconic characters have been brought to life through the written word. The paramount responsibility of the painter lies in transmuting these diverse characters into tangible visual representations through their artistic creations, thereby imbuing them with a palpable sense of reality." In the comic strip "Vision", Wang Shupeng meticulously delves into the novel's text, employing a detailed and comprehensive approach to craft portraits of the male and female protagonists. Through his masterful brushwork, Wang Shupeng deftly captures the essence of each character's personality and psychology, evoking a profound sense of depth and authenticity. The character denoted as "I" is depicted as a scholarly individual, featured by honesty, kindness, and a touch of stubbornness, alongside a sincere and sentimental disposition intertwined with a penchant for fantasy. Adorned in a dark-colored long shirt paired with a light-colored scarf, "I" exudes a handsome yet melancholic aura, reflecting both sincerity and a hint of helplessness. Often portrayed with a book in hand, "I" traverses the labyrinthine hutongs and stands amidst the doorways of ancient courtyard houses. Wang Shupeng skillfully renders "I" with a furrowed brow and a hunched posture, symbolizing the relentless pursuit of love amidst repeated frustrations. In the quest to rekindle past romances, "I" is perpetually met with disappointment, leading to an overarching sense of depression and melancholy that permeates the character's essence. Against the backdrop of formidable societal forces, "I" emerges as a figure marked by vulnerability and resignation, underscoring the theme of human frailty amidst overpowering circumstances. In the painting, the character of "she" undergoes a profound transformation, evolving from an innocent individual persecuted by society to a tragic figure compelled to sell herself on the streets. The painter meticulously captures this journey, portraying her initially as a demure figure concealed behind a curtain. Clad in a dark-colored cheongsam adorned with a moonlight-white jacket, she emanates an aura of purity, with bright eyes, white teeth, and a subtle blend of shyness and vivacity. Her thick and lengthy braid, coupled with a few strands of bangs framing her face, accentuates her youthful innocence, while her slender, green onion-like fingers convey a delicate gracefulness. The painter's keen focus on her eyes is evident, particularly in a poignant moment as she bids farewell to "me", her hand gently covering her lips. Beneath the veil of her long bangs, her eyes speak volumes – imbued with a myriad of emotions, ranging from profound depth to a hint of resentment and reluctance. However, amidst this emotional turmoil, there remains a glimmer of warmth and affection, beautifully captured by the painter. Of particular note are the delicate details

meticulously rendered by the painter, such as the small green slippers embroidered with white flowers adorning her feet. Amidst the dim confines of the room, these vibrant hues stand out as beacons of warmth and comfort, symbolizing a semblance of innocence and purity amidst the harsh realities of her circumstances. Through these subtle yet evocative touches, the painter imbues the scene with layers of depth and poignancy, inviting viewers to contemplate the intricate interplay of emotions within the narrative tableau. Upon “my” return to China, the painter’s portrayal of her undergoes a profound metamorphosis, capturing her transformation into a woman seasoned by life’s hardships. Her once-luxuriant braid is now severed, replaced by a short, practical hairstyle, symbolizing a departure from innocence and a confrontation with harsh realities. Clad in a dark green robe and a somber black shawl, she exudes an air of worldliness and resignation, lounging languidly in a chair with furrowed brows and downcast eyes. In her right hand, a cigarette dangles casually, emblematic of a rebellious defiance against fate’s cruel whims. The expression etched upon her face is a complex interplay of fearlessness and nonchalance, encapsulating a profound sense of helplessness tinged with a hint of indolence. Through this touching portrayal, the painter deftly captures the character’s inner turmoil and the inexorable passage of time, inviting viewers to contemplate the ephemeral nature of human existence amidst the relentless march of fate.

In the painter’s rendition of “her” recounting her experience within “my” dream, she appears transported back to a period of pure love, retaining her trademark long black braid trailing behind her and her large eyes peering from beneath her bangs. Yet, a subtle transformation is evident in her countenance – her eyes, once brimming with happiness, now exude a melancholic aura; the affectionate gaze replaced by one tinged with helplessness; the yearning replaced by resentment. Through meticulous scrutiny of the novel’s text, the painter has adeptly captured the nuances of the character’s emotional landscape, presenting a vivid portrayal that encapsulates the complexity of her inner turmoil.

Wang Shupeng imbued his comic strip, “Vision”, with a solemn color palette, a choice reflective not only of the tragic destinies that befall the characters within the narrative but also of the profound melancholy that pervades the psyche of the narrator, “I”. For “I”, who laments that he “completed his first love and dived into a lifelong emptiness”, and the somber hues serve as a visual manifestation of the emotional void that consumes him. Through this deliberate tonal aesthetic, Wang Shupeng not only captures the external struggles and tribulations faced by the characters but also delves into the existential despair that haunt the depths of the protagonist’s soul. Indeed, at the outset of the novel, Lao She employs a vivid array of colors to evoke the vibrancy of early spring: the ethereal white clouds, the verdant expanse of fields painted in clear green hues, the presence of a few diminutive white goats, and the majestic dark green pine trees. One should also

not lose sight of Lao She's depiction of "the front of the dream": a kaleidoscope of golden yellow and crimson flowers intermingled with shades of gray and purple wildflowers, adorned by a delicate shelf of trailing moonflowers. These colors, ranging from "grey and purple" to "red and yellow", and even "light pink", create a visual symphony akin to witnessing the transition from autumn to the dawn of spring. Amidst this vivid tapestry, nestled at the heart of the scene, lies a patch of lush green grass – dark, soft, and slightly damp – forming a tranquil oasis amidst the bustling hues of nature's palette. The painter deliberately departs from the lush color palette of the original novel in their depiction of "I am sunbathing on a hillside". Instead, hues of dark blue and grey-green dominate the picture, serving as a somber backdrop against which the silhouette of "I" emerges, distant and solitary. Eschewing the customary depiction of sunlight, the painter opts for a gloomy ambiance, where melancholy permeates every stroke, casting a pall over the entire comic strip. Similarly, in their portrayal of the small house where the protagonists convene, the painter conjures a scene steeped in desolation. A bed adorned with a green blanket, a dark blue mantle, and a black table and chairs – each element contributes to the pervasive sense of gloom and despair that hangs heavy in the air. Amidst this melancholic tableau, however, one vibrant detail stands out amidst the gloomy tones: the pair of small green slippers embroidered with delicate white flowers. Against the backdrop of desolation, these two warm colors serve as an impressive reminder of the flicker of warmth and hope amidst the prevailing darkness. In the 5th panel of the comic strip, the moment "she" hears "I" approaching is depicted as a vivid burst of color amidst the prevailing somberness. Like a graceful swallow taking flight, she emerges from the shadows, a vision of radiant beauty. Adorned in a pair of small green slippers embroidered with delicate white flowers, she gracefully lifts the ivory white curtains to peer outside. Her countenance exudes a captivating allure, with rows of bangs framing a pair of large, luminous eyes suffused with sentimentality. A straight nose and cherry-red lips further accentuate her exquisite features. Draped in a dark blue cheongsam beneath a moonlight-white coat, she embodies a gentle yet poignant demeanor, tinged with a palpable sense of anticipation and shy expectancy. In this moment, the tender sentiments shared between the young lovers find vibrant expression through the vivid imagery of her character. In the predominantly somber palette of the comic strip, the 18th panel stands out as a tableau of grief and lamentation. As "I" seeks out her presence, he is confronted with the heart-wrenching sight of her lying in a slender coffin. The scene unfolds with solemnity, as wisps of incense curl upwards from the altar, casting a soft glow upon the sorrowful countenance of "I". Clad in a long shirt and scarf, his features are etched with palpable anguish and despondency, illuminated by the flickering light of the burning paper. In this very moment, the painter masterfully captures the depth of

“my” sorrow as “I” grapples with the irreparable loss of “my” beloved. In the 19th panel, as “I present a basket of the freshest roses on her grave,” the scarlet blooms of roses carry a weighty significance, for they symbolize that “the petals carry the tears of my broken heart”. Throughout the depictions of “her” within “my” dreams, a somber hue permeates each scene. Whether it be her heartfelt confession while nestled against “my” chest, her unfortunate entanglement in a marriage to a wealthy suitor, or the heart-wrenching ordeal of being kicked out from the house by her husband, or her helplessness on the streets; whether it’s her self-pity at becoming old and ugly or her confession that “I can’t even find myself”, a sense of melancholy prevails. The color palette employed by the painter – comprising blacks, dark blues, brownish yellows, and greys – eschews warmth and brightness in favor of conveying a profound sense of weightiness. Each stroke, intentionally imbued with a sense of heaviness, imparts a depth reminiscent of oil painting, despite being rendered in watercolor. In this manner, the painter deftly infuses each panel with an overarching atmosphere of somber reflection.

In the realm of illustration, Wang Shupeng holds firm to a particular ethos, guided by his belief that literature should possess a robust narrative strength, with characters that are vividly distinctive. In his approach to illustration, he places less emphasis on the interplay of light and shadow, instead prioritizing a meticulous attention to structural composition. For Wang, the essence of a successful illustration lies in capturing the essence of the narrative and imbuing the characters with a palpable sense of life and individuality, thereby ensuring that they resonate deeply with the viewers. Through this deliberate focus on character portrayal and structural composition, Wang Shupeng crafts illustrations that serve as compelling visual companions to the literary works they accompany, enriching the readers’ experience through their evocative storytelling prowess. Focusing on the structural composition, Lao She’s comic strip “Vision” belongs to the works of pure literature with distinctive characters, and Wang Shupeng’s highlight on the structural composition is reflected in three aspects during the conception of the painting:

Firstly, the structural composition of lonely human figures serves to underscore the protagonist’s plight and the profound solitude that permeates their psyche. In Lao She’s novel “Vision”, the narrative unfolds akin to a monologue poem, wherein the tragic tale of love is revealed through the protagonist’s candid exploration of their innermost thoughts and emotions. Through a fluid and unrestricted portrayal of the hero’s psychological journey, Lao She intricately weaves a tapestry of human experience, capturing the essence of longing, despair, and ultimately, redemption. Each panel unfolds as a lyrical meditation on the complexities of love and the profound impact it exerts on the human soul, imbuing the narrative with a timeless and haunting beauty that lingers in the readers’ mind long after the final page is turned.

Amidst the desolate backdrop of withered trees and a solitary hut, a diminutive figure stands in quiet contemplation. The final panel portrays the slanting rays of the sun casting long shadows across the slope, where the figure of “I” stands, embodying a palpable sense of frustration, disillusionment, and even despair. Within the realm of “my” dream world, she recounts her harrowing journey, depicted in poignant vignettes that often portray her as a solitary figure, emblematic of her profound isolation and suffering. Cast out from her home by a callous husband, she resembles the forlorn leaves scattered upon the ground, her plight mirroring the desolation of her surroundings. Alone and vulnerable on the unforgiving streets, she is compelled to sell her body in a desperate bid for survival. The series of abortions she endures further underscores her solitary anguish, as she languishes in the bleak confines of her bedroom, engulfed by a pervasive sense of desolation and despair. Through these evocative images, Wang Shupeng captures the profound loneliness and hardship endured by the protagonist, infusing each scene with a haunting poignancy that resonates deeply with the viewers.

Secondly, structural composition of objects and human figures in a symbolic way to present the repression of society on the characters. In select panels, the painter skillfully employs unique imagery to highlight the theme in a symbolic way so as to deepen the narrative’s resonance. In the 11th panel, a colossal stone lion dominates the composition, embodying the formidable societal barriers obstructing the protagonists’ love. As “I” descends the steps clutching a book and “she” retreats homeward against the backdrop of a dilapidated doorway, the stone lion stands sentinel, emblematic of entrenched feudal forces and societal norms that tragically shape their fate. Transitioning to the 12th panel, “I” bids farewell to “her” before embarking on his journey to the South Seas, only to find her absence. The painter employs the bird view perspective that poignantly captures “my” solitary figure amidst the decrepit alleyway, with weathered stone walls and moss-covered rooftops evoking a palpable sense of desolation and yearning. In the 14th panel, “I” returns to China in search of her, “only to find out that her home now occupied by other owners”. Clad in a navy-blue tunic and scarf, carrying a suitcase, “I” stands forlornly in the courtyard doorway, while a beggar extends a hand nearby – an arresting tableau symbolizing societal decline and the harsh realities of life. Through these meticulously crafted compositions, the painter deftly layers each scene with profound symbolism, offering insights into the characters’ struggles and the broader societal milieu.

Thirdly: To compose the figures in a lukewarm relationship highlights the tragic theme of this love story. While the 6th panel exudes the warmth and innocence of their first date, subsequent images reveal a stark shift towards a more casual and detached dynamic between the man and woman. In the 9th panel, “I” visits her amidst funeral preparations at her home, yet their interaction is marked by a profound sense of emptiness – mere insignificant words exchanged as she dons a white

cloth on her head. The 15th panel captures their reunion, with “she” jesting absent-mindedly, juxtaposed against the eerie glow of a red fire in the lower corner – an unsettling contrast to “my” inner coldness.

In the 21st panel, “she breaks down in tears”, seeking solace in “my” embrace. Despite her vulnerability, “I hold her hands tightly”, and remain emotionally distant, “and I am not able to offer words of comfort”. The painter portrays her as eternally 17, her braid twisted as she seeks refuge in “my” arms, while “I” wears a visage of insensitivity, underscoring the emotional chasm between them. Through these compositions, the painter depicts the erosion of intimacy and the profound disconnect plaguing their relationship, evoking a sense of melancholic reflection on the fleeting nature of love and human connection. The 23rd panel portrays a scene where a daughter sacrifices herself for her father’s sake by entering into a relationship with a wealthy man. The composition captures the emotional distance and inherent tragedy of the situation. The rich man, depicted with glasses and smoking a cigarette, sits casually at a round table, symbolizing his wealth and power. He gazes away, seemingly indifferent, while the woman stands with her back turned, her short hair and downcast eyes reflecting her resignation to her fate. The jade bracelet on her wrist hints at her lost dignity and the stark contrast between her impoverished background and the opulence surrounding her. The divide between them is palpable, underscoring the transactional nature of their relationship. In the 30th panel, the narrative takes a haunting turn as it delves into the dreamlike realm of intimacy denied. “I”, depicted in a long shirt, kneels before her, gently removing her socks. The act, usually intimate and tender, becomes surreal and unsettling as “I” discovers the absence of flesh on her foot, revealing only a stark white bone. Despite the intimacy of the gesture, she remains indifferent, perhaps reflecting her emotional detachment or resignation to her circumstances. This surreal portrayal underscores the tragic disconnect between desire and reality, highlighting the profound loneliness and despair of both characters trapped in a loveless transaction. Wang Shupeng emphasized the importance of imbuing illustrations with a sense of ambiguity, steering away from overly realistic depictions and singular interpretations. He advocated for a certain haziness in the artwork, allowing for nuances and suggesting rather than dictating. By maintaining a subtle approach, Shupeng believed in granting viewers space for their imagination to flourish, fostering a collaborative effort between creator and audience to conjure the imagery. This approach not only enriches the viewing experience but also encourages a deeper engagement with the narrative, as viewers become active participants in shaping the visual landscape of the story. While Wang Shupeng’s adaptation of Lao She’s novel may have overlooked the vibrant hues and sunlight described in the original text, resulting in a somewhat somber tone and a departure from the source material, his comic strip “Vision” suggests a deliberate pursuit of haziness and implication. Despite the dislocation

from the text, Shupeng's approach invites readers and viewers into a realm of ambiguity, where interpretation is not confined to literal representation. Instead, the comic strip unfolds with a subtle, implicit quality that encourages engagement and imagination. Through this artistic choice, the painter prompts viewers to participate actively in shaping the narrative, allowing for a richer and more collaborative reading and viewing experience.

One observer has remarked that "Wang Shupeng's artistic oeuvre consistently leaves a profound impression upon its viewers. Be it through the medium of oil paintings or book illustrations, Shupeng has steadfastly pursued an ideal of 'authenticity'. This conception of authenticity transcends mere superficial resemblance; rather, it aspires to encapsulate the intrinsic essence of the work, thereby articulating the nuanced thoughts and emotions that the artist endeavors to convey to the viewers through his creative endeavors." Drawing from a rigorous examination of Lao She's short story, Wang Shupeng undertook a comprehensive process of adaptation, script development, character visualization, tonal establishment, and structural framing within the comic strip medium. His meticulous efforts were dedicated to authentically capturing the essence of the original work while effectively conveying the nuanced thoughts and emotions of the artist. This meticulous approach culminated in the creation of "Vision", a comic strip that stands as a testament to Shupeng's artistry and mastery, ultimately emerging as a masterpiece in its own right.

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