

The Artistic Charm of Portrait Description in Zweig’s “Lev Tolstoy”

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Abstract: The biography of “Lev Tolstoy” in the second unit of the eighth grade Chinese textbook is a classic work by Zweig. At the beginning of the article, the author unreservedly describes the crude and ugly appearance of Tolstoy. This reflects the author’s ingenuity and is full of artistic charm. Firstly, it creates a shocking effect by suppressing and then uplifting the subject. Secondly, it brings Tolstoy down from the pedestal, leading the readers into the protagonist’s life. Thirdly, it cleverly uses contrast to emphasize the protagonist’s spiritual realm. Therefore, Zweig deeply understands Tolstoy’s moral cultivation and life realm.

Keywords: Textbook version; “Lev Tolstoy”; Portrait description; Artistic charm

1. Introduction

Lev Tolstoy was the greatest Russian writer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was a talented and insightful thinker, and wrote many classic literary works. At the same time, he was also a great humanitarian, shining with the brilliance of human nature. Therefore, there were many literary figures who wrote biographies about him, such as H.N. Bilyukov, Roman Rolland, Rosamund Bartlett, among others, but the most distinctive one is Stefan Zweig’s “Tolstoy”.

The biography ‘Tolstoy’ by Zweig is one of the “three writers”. The biography is divided into thirteen sections, including ‘Introduction’, ‘Portrait Sketch’, ‘The Vitality of Life and the Horror of Death’, etc.^[1] After being modified by textbook editors, the ‘Portrait Sketch’ was selected and included in the second unit of the Chinese language textbook for Grade 8, and it was renamed as ‘Lev Tolstoy’.^[2] This text is concise but captures the spirit and backbone of Tolstoy. In the annotations for this lesson, the editor writes, ‘The first four paragraphs depict Tolstoy’s ordinary and mediocre appearance layer by layer.’^[3] In the reading tips, it emphasizes the writing technique of the text, which ‘elaborately unfolds and progresses through narration in the first half, while suddenly changing the tone in the second half.’^[4] Therefore, it is evident that learning the writing techniques in this text will be the focus and difficulty for teachers and students, which is also one of the important reasons why Zweig’s biography has become a classic.

Zweig uses Tolstoy’s mediocre portrayal as the starting point of his writing, beginning with a merciless description of Tolstoy’s unattractive physical features. What is the brilliance behind this writing style? This article will attempt to interpret and analyze it.

2. The Artistic Charm of Portrait Description

2.1 First Suppress, Then Elevate, Shocking the Reader

The article describes Tolstoy’s “rough” appearance, using derogatory terms such as “country bumpkin,” “unclean,” “coarse,” “lion nose,” “ugly,” “disorderly, rugged, mediocre, vulgar,” “stupid and repressed,” “ignorant and gloomy, melancholy and ugly,” “dwarf,” etc. In fact, the real intention is to praise him in the later part of the article.

This is a writing technique of first suppressing and then elevating, and its effect lies in the surprise and shock when it shifts from derogation to admiration. By first belittling or even denouncing Tolstoy’s appearance, then extolling his overflowing talent and profound soul, the reverse foreshadowing in the previous text makes the admiration in the later text more able to shock the readers. Although the author uses countless derogatory terms to describe Tolstoy’s appearance, it does not diminish Tolstoy’s in the slightest, because the fervent and scorching words used to describe the protagonist’s gaze in the later text are what truly shocks the reader’s eyes and soul. In the later text, Zweig focuses on Tolstoy’s gaze, writing about his sharp as a steel knife side. Words and phrases such as “black panther-like gaze” “steel knife” “hitting the key point” “you can only endure the scrutiny of this gaze obediently” “penetrating the disguised armor” “diamond blade cutting through glass” describe Tolstoy’s gaze as how different it is from others!

Zweig’s whipping of the portrait did not damage Tolstoy’s image, but instead made the reader amazed at the content of the later text. This is the power of first suppressing and then elevating.

2.2 Pulling Down the Pedestal, Entering Life

The author pull Tolstoy down from the high pedestal by depicting Tolstoy as an ordinary Russian, so readers can better accept the protagonist’s life in a calm and peaceful manner. The author repeatedly emphasizes ‘s mediocre appearance to express that Tolstoy is actually

just like ordinary readers, nothing special, there is no need to be afraid, and even in front of him, we can have the advantage of appearance. This narrows the distance between the readers and Tolstoy. He is no longer an unattainable great man, but a “common Russian,” a friend, a neighbor around us. Zweig starts with Tolstoy’s most ordinary appearance, without praise but only derogation, which is his superiority. In the article “The Most Beautiful Grave in the World,” similar artistic charm can also be found. Let’s read the following words again:

“The disabled person’s tomb under the marble dome of the cathedral, Goethe’s tomb in the Weimar Duke’s tomb, Shakespeare’s sarcophagus in Westminster Abbey, none of them can shake the deep emotions hidden in everyone’s heart like the solemn and touching anonymous tomb in the forest, where only the wind whispers and there is no human voice.”^[5]

This paragraph lists the tombs of three great men for comparison with Tolstoy’s tomb, highlighting the unparalleled beauty of Tolstoy’s tomb.

Take the following text for example:

“It is just a small rectangular mound in the forest, covered with flowers, without a cross, without a tombstone, without an epitaph, and even without the name Tolstoy. This great man who feels more burdened by his own reputation than anyone else, is buried like a homeless wanderer or an unknown soldier, without a name.”^[6]

The words “occasionally discovered,” “homeless wanderer,” “unknown,” “without a name” in this paragraph reflect the “most beautiful” in Tolstoy’s ordinary tomb. This is very similar to the expression effect of “Leo Tolstoy” in the article: readers will get to know and understand the protagonist’s life with a friendly and equal attitude. Without the condescending view of the great man, we can feel his vivid life. Similarly, in Zhao Yu’s “Small Matters: Lu Xun in Love,” the author also tries to pull Lu Xun down from the pedestal, thus writing a lively and vivid image of Lu Xun.

2.3 Clever Use of Contrast, Emphasizing Spirit

Zweig captures the spirit of Tolstoy, and therefore, he is able to write this text. Tolstoy’s talents are all in his writing. And it is very appropriate to use the words of Ji Yun from the Qing Dynasty, “If a person’s character is high, then his poetry will be high; if his heart is right, then his poetry will be right”^[7] to describe Tolstoy.

The reason why Tolstoy’s works can withstand the test of time and readers’ scrutiny is not only because of the story plots, but also because of Tolstoy’s character cultivation and ideological realm. In his later years, Tolstoy scattered his wealth, left his family, and ran away alone. This was because he saw through the hypocrisy of the world, turned the searchlight on himself, took the initiative to enter the world of the working people, let himself blend with them, and finally transformed himself. Perhaps his abandonment, choices, and active adventures did not win the understanding of many people at that time, but truly great people will never live in their own ego, drowned in personal emotions. They want to become the most ordinary person, completely immersed in the masses, deeply rooted in the land. Therefore, Zweig seized Tolstoy’s mediocre appearance that “cannot be found in the crowd” to write about Tolstoy. This must be the result of the heart-to-heart understanding between Zweig and Tolstoy. Yes, Zweig understood him, so he wrote him well.

As he said in “The Most Beautiful Grave in the World”:

“The funeral was arranged in accordance with Tolstoy’s wishes; his tomb became the most beautiful, impressive, and touching grave in the world.”^[8]

Tolstoy’s mediocrity made him who he is, making him Tolstoy, not anything else. This is also reflected in Xiao Hong’s “Memories of Mr. Lu Xun.” The most approachable Lu Xun is the great Lu Xun. Reading such biographies of great people suddenly makes us feel that we are so close to them!

At the same time, the emphasis on Tolstoy’s spirit also responds to the “steel knife” gaze of the previous article. If Tolstoy does not have a strong character, the power to see through all the hypocrisy, the courage to resist, the spirit of rebellion, the courage to destroy nothingness, and the breathtaking talent, how could he have such a sharp gaze?

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Zweig is indeed a biographer who excels at capturing the protagonist’s physical features, essence, and other details. Under his pen, each character is a unique and vibrant existence. This not only stems from his exquisite artistic techniques but also benefits from Zweig’s profound understanding of life and deep insight into human nature.

In fact, Zweig himself once said, “Contrast is always an inspiring and creative factor for me. I like this method because it can avoid forced associations.”^[9] As he said, the use of contrast is one of the important reasons why “Leo Tolstoy” become a classic. Firstly, it starts from the protagonist’s mediocre image, lowering the reader’s reading expectations, and the subsequent reversal is so thrilling. Secondly,

it pulls the great man down from the high pedestal, eliminating readers' worship and even mythological psychology towards great figures, allowing readers to look at this world-class great man from a different perspective and attitude. Thirdly, by contrasting the mediocre appearance with the great and profound spiritual essence, it highlights the protagonist's character cultivation and life realm. At this point, readers cannot help but marvel at that Zweig understands and loves Tolstoy - he understands him and loves him, just like understanding and loving himself.

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