

# The awakening of humanism in scar literature: taking *Class Teacher* as an example

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**Abstract.** The emergence of Liu Xinwu's short story *Class Teacher* was like a fresh spring breeze sweeping through the Chinese literary world. It sparked ripples and caused a wide and profound social reaction. This work not only deeply reveals the scars of an era but also passionately calls for the brilliance of humanity. The reason why *Class Teacher* aroused such a strong resonance at that time is that the exquisite shaping of the two characters of Xie Huimin and Song Baoqi, it encourages young people to have the courage to break free from shackles and restore the most authentic and authentic human brilliance in their hearts, and profoundly demonstrates the humanitarian spirit with "people" as the core. This paper takes *Class Teacher* as its research object, focusing on how it demonstrates the humanistic spirit centered on "human-being" through the characters Xie Huimin and Song Baoqi, and explores its social and historical background. Starting from the text of *Class Teacher*, it studies the creation of scar literature during the transitional period of the literary world and its impact on the literary world and society.

## 1 Introduction

In October 1977, the editorial department of People's Literature held a "Short Story Creation Symposium" in Beijing. This symposium aimed to use the discussion of short story creation as a breakthrough to criticize and expose the dark rule over literature. It was one of the earliest attempts to reconstruct the literary order in the new era [1]. With the conclusion of the symposium, the space for literary creation became relatively free and relaxed, and the literary world gradually revived. It was during this time that *Class Teacher* was published in the 11th issue of People's Literature in 1977. Upon its release, it caused a tremendous sensation. This fresh breeze boldly dispelled the gloom over the Chinese literary world. For a long time, *Class Teacher* was considered the beginning of "new period literature [2]." *Class Teacher*, as a brilliant gem in the camp of scar literature, not only penetrated the historical haze with its keen insight but also painted a poignant picture of the resurgence of humanity during that special historical period with its profound humanistic sentiments. The work cleverly selects an ordinary middle school class as a microcosm. Through the intertwined fates of the class

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teacher Zhang Junshi and his students, including Xie Huimin, it showcases people's yearning for truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as the gradual awakening of humanistic spirit amid the pain of social transformation. Xie Huimin, in particular, stands out as a complex and realistic portrayal of a soul within the context of that era. With delicate strokes, the author delves into her inner world, revealing that even in an oppressive environment and an age of ideological confinement, the flames of kindness, conscience, and justice within humanity never fully extinguish. The portrayal of Xie Huimin's character profoundly reflects the process of self-recognition and the reshaping of values in personal growth, and vividly interprets Marxist humanism, which emphasizes the centrality of humans, respects human value and dignity, and pursues the comprehensive free development of individuals [3].

This paper aims to delve deeply into the humanistic spirit contained in *Class Teacher*, explore its historical background and underlying reasons, reveal its profound impact on society and humanity, and attempt to provide an in-depth interpretation and evaluation of the humanistic spirit in *Class Teacher* from a literary criticism perspective. Through textual analysis, this study hopes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the embodiment of humanism in literary works and its positive role in promoting social progress and perfecting human nature.

## **2 Scar literature represented by Class Teacher opened the literary trend of the new era**

*Class Teacher* boldly broke through the barriers of past "politicized" literature by creating the images of the loyal Xie Huimin and the ignorant Song Baoqi, directly exposing the spiritual poisoning of the extreme left line on young people and even the serious trauma caused to the spiritual world of the entire nation [4]. Liu Xinwu first brought the critical spirit into the novels of the new era through *Class Teacher*. His criticism of social reality broke the long-standing exaggerated and absurd social atmosphere in China and catered to the political slogan of "seeking truth from facts" in the new era. Therefore, on this basis, early scar literature attached importance to the reproduction of reality, intending to expose the absurd essence of the social status quo of that period. In terms of aesthetic tendency, it focuses on tragedy and criticism, and in terms of content, it affirms the value and dignity that people should have by exposing the "scars" that suppress human nature, so it also reflects a strong humanitarian spirit. "Scar literature" is literature that takes a fiercely critical attitude towards the "leftist" erroneous line. It can also be seen as people's catharsis for the social atmosphere in the 1960s and 1970s that suppressed human nature. However, due to its excessive emphasis on tragic fate and the author's subjective criticism, it still appears crude and emotional in terms of art, and its criticism of the past social status quo also appears too sentimental in terms of thought. Therefore, when scar literature was first born, the literary world often commented on it as "backward-looking literature", "immoral literature", "sentimental literature", etc. These terms together formed the trend of Chinese literature in the late 1970s - that is, it overemphasized the description of the suffering and the suppression of human nature, which can also be seen as the author's emotional catharsis for the past social status quo. For example, in Lin Dazhong's literary criticism of *Class Teacher*, he pointed out the falsehood of Liu Xinwu's novel, believing that everything he wrote was derived from the concept that "the leftist social status quo is the source of all evil". He regarded accusation as the exposing mission of revolutionary literature [5]. It can be said that the publication of *Class Teacher* and the huge response it caused were not because of its profound thoughts, but because the birth of this work catered to the realistic needs of the new era after the 1970s for rectifying the political chaos and pursuing the liberation of human nature. On this basis, "reflective literature" with deeper thinking and "reform literature" that strives for change followed. Reflective literature can be seen as a deepening of scar literature. Unlike scar

literature that simply tells of suffering, reflective literature more reflects the author's rational thinking and emphasizes reflecting on the twists and turns of the development of New China since its founding from a theoretical perspective and the social and political reasons behind it. For example, early reflective literature works such as *The Story of the Wrongly Edited* and *Black Flag* have a longer-term vision. The theme jumps from criticizing the social status quo in the 1960s and 1970s to criticizing the "communist" style, exaggeration, and blind command that appeared in the late 1950s [6]. On this basis, "Reform Literature" is closer to the ultimate form of scar and reflective literature. It is born on the ideological basis of the two, advocating active reform and keeping up with the times. "Reform" literature writers can be simply summarized as: they are writers who do not "serve politics" but write for politics [7]. Therefore, reform literature has a strong "policy nature" and its content reflects all aspects of national policies and social life. For example, Jiang Zilong's *The Record of Director Qiao's Taking Office* as the pioneering work of reform literature describes the struggle of Chinese society in the transition to an industrial society. From the perspective of content, reform literature came with the upsurge of economic system reform and has a relatively detailed and positive description of the society and people in the reform era. In terms of ideology, it is full of people's positive attitude towards the economic take-off in the new era.

It can be said that scar literature, reflective literature and reform literature are of the same origin and together constitute the development context of the literature of the new era. As the first enlightenment of New China after the 1960s and 1970s, the literature of the new era has shifted from the initial emotional catharsis to rational thinking and has more deeply reflected on past political mistakes. The reason why Liu Xinwu's *Class Teacher* has a special status is that *Class Teacher* is both the origin of scar literature and the forerunner of the literature of the new era.

### **3 The awakening of humanism in *Class Teacher* and related literary criticism**

#### **3.1 The awakening of humanism represented by *The Class Teacher***

After experiencing the "Seventeen Years" of "Literature and Art Serving Politics, Serving Workers, Peasants and Soldiers" and the decade that followed, the literary world needed reconstruction. How to quickly clear away the inner trauma brought to the people by the decade, and the barrenness and turmoil brought to literature became an urgent problem to be solved in the literary world at that time. *Class Teacher* created by Liu Xinwu, which has the significance of ideological liberation, undoubtedly brought hope to the literary world.

As the pioneering work of "Scar Literature", *Class Teacher* uses a people's teacher and a realistic approach to show readers how much the country has been hurt. Xie Huimin, as described by Liu Xinwu, is obviously a child deeply affected by the decade from 1966 to 1976, poisoned by wrong ideas, and formed "mental internal injuries". Under the guidance of wrong ideas, Xie Huimin had no hobbies, mediocre academic performance, and weak athletic ability. As a class monitor, she was obsessed with class "discipline". Whether a classmate brought back wheat ears or regarded a good book as a poisonous weed, she would report it to the teacher. Even in her understanding, books that were not sold in bookstores and available for borrowing in libraries were pornographic and bad. The policy made young people gradually narrow their horizons and blurred right and wrong. In Xie Huimin, people see the image of a child who was narrow-minded, blindly obedient, and lacked vitality due to the poisoning of the ideology. By depicting the typical image of Xie Huimin, the work makes people pay attention to the inner trauma suffered by young souls and makes the harm of the cultural dictatorship concrete. In the end, the author used Teacher Zhang's mouth to

issue a strong call to "save the children who have been killed by the pit", expressing the concern of the general public for the fate of the motherland.

### 3.2 Literary Criticism on Humanitarianism in *Class Teacher*

"At the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lu Xun opened a new era of literature with his call to 'save the children'. More than half a century later, Liu Xinwu once again called for 'save the children'. This is by no means a simple coincidence. Although the two calls for 'save the children' have different historical backgrounds, they both mark the awakening of man [8]". Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* exposed the cannibalistic nature of feudal ethics. Although Liu Xinwu's *Class Teacher* did not reach the height of Lu Xun, its naked display of the inner trauma suffered by young people during the decade from 1966 to 1976, its concern for the fate of young people, and its worry and resistance to the poisoning of society by authoritarian ideas also showed a profound humanitarian concern, once again highlighting the status of "man" as a literary subject in literary history. It can be said that *Class Teacher* is another promotion of "human literature" since the May Fourth Movement. This is undoubtedly of guiding significance to the literary and art circles that were in confusion after the 1970s.

## 4 The reappearance of humanism in scar literature

"Scar literature" is directly derived from the exposure and criticism of the social status quo in the 1960s and 1970s. This is mainly manifested in the young generation who are easily guided as a rude and arrogant attitude towards things, narrow-minded and rigid political views, and ignorance and blind loyalty that lack the ability to explore and recognize themselves. Therefore, when Chinese society was about to enter the "reform and opening up", the "scar literature" trend of thought first focused on the mess in the field of social thought, and sought the liberation of humanity by catering to the literary and artistic policies after the reform and opening up [9]. Liu Xinwu's *Class Teacher* is the origin of scarism. It created two "deformed children" who seem different but are actually deeply poisoned by extreme ideas - "good child" Xie Huimin and little gangster Song Baoqi, and for the first time issued the call of the times to "save the children". Teachers are the key role in guiding the thoughts of the next generation. Class teacher Zhang Junshi personally experienced that the humanity of the younger generation is extremely suppressed and distorted. Their thoughts are empty, lack of rational discrimination, and reckless and fanatical style of doing things. This can be seen as an appeal from the perspective of educators to express the urgent need for the liberation and discovery of rational thoughts of the younger generation and to restore true humanity.

Lu Xinhua's *Scars* is an important work after *Class Teacher* and is also the naming work of "Scar Literature". Different from the expression order from outside to inside, from discovery to appeal in *Class Teacher*, *Scars* directly reveals that the harsh political struggle suppresses instinctive human relations and family affection. The image of "Wang Xiaohua" is portrayed as a tragic figure of blind loyalty, which reflects the absurd nature of meaningless struggles in Chinese society in the 1960s and 1970s. Through Wang Xiaohua's awakening at the end, the Chinese people expressed their inner desire for family affection.

In addition, representative works of "scar literature" such as Mo Yingfeng's *General's Song*, Zhou Keqin's *Xu Mao and His Daughters*, and Zheng Yi's *Maple* all focus on describing the suffering and struggle of various people in Chinese society during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as their tragic fate of succumbing to the pressure of the times [10]. Subsequent scar literature tends to regard ideological repression and political despotism as "perpetrators", and calls for the return of humanity and affirmation of human values from the perspective of expressing the lack of human nature, thus reflecting a strong humanitarian thought.

In summary, affirming the special value of human beings, understanding human instinctive emotions, and advocating the return of rational thinking are the reflections of early "scar literature" on the social turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s and the humanitarian tendencies they show.

## 5 Conclusion

The development of literature is inseparable from the influence of social, political and economic factors. After the end of the decade from 1966 to 1976, the literary and art circles gradually regained vitality. Writers represented by Liu Xinwu used realistic methods to describe the sufferings of the people, show the spiritual trauma of the people in a specific era, and reflect deeply on the mistakes of the times. As the pioneering work of "scar literature", *Class Teacher* portrays children who have been poisoned by wrong ideas and shows the harm of cultural authoritarian policies. Whether it is Xie Huimin, who is dedicated to her duties in *Class Teacher*, or Song Baoqi, a problem student, they are all objects that were covered up during the decade from 1966 to 1976 and are people who are in urgent need of rescue. The call to "save the children who have been killed by the pit" at the end of the work is a continuation of the humanitarian thought since the May Fourth Movement. Different from the criticism of feudal ethics revealed by Lu Xun's "Save the Children", Liu Xinwu expressed the negation of cultural authoritarian policies and the exposure of the pain of the decade from 1966 to 1976, showing his concern for the fate of young people and full of deep humanistic care.

Scar literature originates from the reproduction and reflection of the social status quo in the 1960s and 1970s. The current social reality was essentially the suppression and distortion of human nature, which led to the loss of people's free thoughts and the loss of human relations and family affection. The subsequent reflective literature and reform literature further deepened on the basis of scar literature. The former focused on reviewing history, while the latter tended to be close to reality. Scar literature, as a precursor of literature in the new era, caters to the literary and artistic policies after the reform and opening up, and focuses on anti-cultural despotism and liberating human nature. Scar literature writers attach importance to highlighting the absurdity of human repression by reproducing dark reality and suffering experiences, so as to call for reflection on the meaningless ideological despotism in Chinese society in the 1960s and 1970s, affirm the value of human beings from the perspective of thought, and call for the return of human nature.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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