

The Application of Symbolism in Domenico Starnone's Novel *Lacci*

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In the Italian novel *Lacci*, the young husband abandoned his wife and lived with another woman. Although the marriage has been maintained under the stress of tense relations, friction and cracks have long existed and broken their peaceful life. This betrayal story restores the whole story from three perspectives through the eyes of the husband, the wife, and the memory of two children. It also reveals the indifferent and uncommunicable situations experienced by everyone in the family. The shoelace that appeared repeatedly in this article not only symbolizes the entangled and chaotic relationship between husband and wife, but also symbolizes the parent-child relationship that has long been broken but still tied up with each other; another image, the cat, not only symbolizes the seductive lover in the eyes of the husband, but also represents himself who pursues the satisfaction of desire. At the same time, cat also implies the disintegration of this marriage from inside to outside. In short, in this suffocating marriage novel, shoelace symbolizes order, while cat symbolizes chaos. The cat who keeps breaking in wore away their trust and emotion, and in the end, the two people in marriage can only bind reluctantly with shoelaces and hurt each other.

Keywords: Domenico Starnone, *Lacci*, symbolism

Introduction

“*Lacci* is like a mystery, it sets up a building to hide family secrets cleverly and then dug them out one by one”, commented by *The New Yorker* on the novel *Lacci* to Italian writer Domenico Starnone.

Domenico Starnone is a famous Italian writer. His brush strokes sharply and deeply reveal the complexity of marriage and family life. In this ordinary but not common story of marriage, the author does not focus on the appearance of moral condemnation, love, and marriage (Tuzzi & Cortelazzo, 2018, p. 694). Instead, like a scalpel, the author accurately analyzes the impact and changes of wife, husband, and two children on such a marriage accident. In the narrative structure, the author jumps out of the description from the perspective of God and uses an unusually ingenious narrative structure to modify the trivialities of marriage very deeply with suspense occurring one after another (Maciej, p. 37). At the beginning, the author first uses the way of wife Wanda's letter to tell the established fact of her husband's betrayal. Then, with a big jump, he went directly to the perspective of the husband Aldo to talk about their chaotic home after vacation, and then recalled the past through the process of cleaning up the chaotic house. Finally, from the description of the daughter Anna, readers learn the truth of the destruction at home, and the sliced narration naturally gives the novel a sense of suspense. At the same time, the author outlines the whole story by constantly switching the perspectives of the narrators through what they

see, hear, think, and feel, during which the description reveals the helplessness and bitterness brought by this marriage to everyone (Sheena, p. 23).

This story took place in the city Naples, which was a city where hate and love can be a bit over the top in Italian literature. Starnone has been writing novels about family themes for years, his male protagonists are often images of “toy boy” who go from Naples to Rome, Milan, or elsewhere, and they encounter various perplexities. The relationship of the couple in *Lacci* is also more Neapolitan style. Although this couple moved to Rome later, it is very different from the Roman relationship that Moravia used to write about, and Starnone also mentions Aldo's Neapolitan growth experience several times in the novel (Francesca, 2020). What's more, *Lacci* is not only limited to families; otherwise the narrative space would be cramped. The family lived first in Naples and later moved to an upscale neighborhood on the banks of the Tiber because their mistress Wanda was good at saving money, which showed two different lives and last for several decades in terms of time. Thus, this novel naturally shows the relationship among man, time, and society in Italia, which involves the bandwagon such as pension, sexual liberation, individualism, and so on.

The Definition of Symbolism

Most writers of literary works use symbolism to develop the plot or elaborate a point of view. Many classic works are full of symbolic meanings, which make the novel leave a deep impression in the reader's mind and the work itself has become classics. Barnett has pointed out, “when we read, we feel that there are some specific characters and things transcend themselves or hide a greater meaning in the novel”. For example, we all know that some specific things or ideas mentioned by the author are to make us think about their deeper meaning. This is because sometimes it is difficult for writers to express their feelings for certain things concretely, accurately, and meaningfully, and doing so may make readers lose interest in reading, or even worse, make them feel that writers are deliberately alienating themselves and unwilling to share this feeling with themselves (Mei, 2017, p. 200). However, through symbolism, the writer enables the reader to apply his cognition to the specific situation in the text to trigger the reader's own unique experience, rather than the author's feeling when writing. As long as this feeling is based on the evidence in the text, it is the correct interpretation of the novel.

Arthur Simmons, an American poet and critic of literature and art, said: “Symbol is the conventional expression of form to thought, tangible to intangible”. Eliot advocated that the poet should find an “objective counterpart” for his thoughts and emotions in reality, in other words, such as animals and plants, colors, sounds, and so on, to hint and convey the writer's thoughts and feelings. Symbolic meaning lies in the combination of concrete and abstracts, which are a pair of contradictions. And symbols successfully reconcile this contradiction and transmit abstract ideas with colorful concrete images (Wang, 2016, p. 18). From the definition, we can conclude that symbols are everywhere. There are quite a lot of symbols in daily life. For example, the national flag symbolizes a country; a dove symbolizes peace. But the symbols in literary works are different from this. Generally speaking, symbols in literature do not have a common standard of social identity. It is a way adopted by poets or writers to express the theme of their works, and can only be understood in the specific context of the works.

The Symbol of Shoelaces

The shoelace is not only the title of the novel, but also the image that appears repeatedly in the novel.

First, shoelace symbolizes the lace that maintains the falsely decent marriage of husband and wife. From the

perspective of his wife, in order to pursue stimulation, Aldo, her husband, cohabited with another young woman regardless of her wife's feelings. After being discovered by his wife, he either changed the topic, made unbridled excuses for himself, or talked about the tragedy of his native family to win her sympathy. The wife could not believe the fact at first, but finally fell into collapse. However, husband Aldo still wants to maintain a false peace. "However, you say you still want to maintain the relationship" (Starnone, 2020, p. 20). The wife's attitude is also ambiguous. She doubts and questions with fantasizing about maintaining this relationship. "Well, I have nothing against it, but the key is how to keep it. You have excluded me from your life, do you still want to be a real father?" (p. 20) Here, the relationship that should have been broken is kept, just like two shoelaces entangle with each other and form a dead knot.

From the husband's perspective, the wife is neurotic and indifferent. As for his own behavior, he explained, "I tried to explain to her that that was not betrayal. I respected her very much, and the real betrayal was betraying my instinct, needs and body" (p. 86). "Every time we met—usually after my long absence—she always calmly and honestly told me what she thought" (p. 91).

Now she tried to impress me, sometimes she made me angry, sometimes begged me, and sometimes frightened me. You shouldn't keep me like this, I said to her. She replied very angrily: who kept you? Go out. But two minutes later, she began to mutter: wait a minute, sit down, your madness is driving me crazy. (p. 95)

The wife tried her best to save this unreliable relationship, even to the point of madness. The husband is very indifferent, because he is living with Lydia happily. He shirks his responsibility by lying to his wife to protect that magical state. Mismatched shoelaces should be uncovered, but both sides are tying them in an unhealthy way. The two pieces of shoelaces are bound to each other and trip up the pace of moving forward, and his well-dressed family is about to tumble down.

Second, shoelace refers to the way of tying shoelaces and symbolizes the tie between father and children. The father, who returned to the family after his liaison, tried hard to repair his relationship with his children, and children also tried to get back familiar with their father. Sandro, the eldest son, wanted to maintain a real relationship with his father by tying his shoes, but he found that he was wrong. His father did not remember to teach him to tie his shoes at all. The father also knew that the children wanted to prove that he was still the original father through the way of tying shoelaces and give him the identity of his father again. The father then showed the method of tying shoes again in front of the brother and sister.

I straightened the two ends of the shoelaces, crossed them, tied a knot and tightened them hard. I looked at them, and they were staring at my shoes with their mouths half open. I pulled the two ends of the shoelaces in a circle nervously, and I stopped for a moment without confidence. (p. 110)

Even after the father demonstrated and the children imitated the way of tying shoelaces, the atmosphere on both sides could not warm up. Finally, the father had to tear off his weak disguise, "I'm determined to be honest, and said: Maybe I didn't teach you, but you followed me to learn" (p. 124). The shoelaces here symbolize the irreparable parent-child relationship, and the image of father who is once thought to be the backer has collapsed. The behaviour of father who wanted to heal the wounds is so pale and weak with disguised coincidence.

Aldo, as a father and husband, was not fulfilling the responsibilities of those two roles. He was selfish to abandon family and lived with his lover, but he determined to return family when he was in middle age, and maintained this fragile tie by destroying himself and obeying his wife docilely. On the other hand, he was absent from the upbringing of his two children from the very beginning, and tried to regain the position and dignity as

a father through the ridiculous way of teaching them tying the shoelaces. Little did Aldo know that the two precious ties he was supposed to maintain had already broken.

The Symbol of Cat

Cat symbolizes the betrayal husband. In the novel, when the couple came home after their vacation, they found the house in a mess and the cat disappeared. The officer joked that the cat had gone to find a girlfriend, which touched Aldo's sensitive nerves because he remembered that he had left home because of his sexual desire. "When I chose to leave home, I don't know how many acquaintances or friends laughed at me secretly. They must think it's funny: Aldo fornicated outside, ha ha!" (p. 148) The fleeing cat symbolizes the fleeing husband, but the cat did not come back and the husband came back. The husband who returned to the family has been secretly keeping his lover's photos in the Prague box; in other words, he has not returned mentally even for a moment. Similarly, although his wife has been looking for the lost cat, she cannot find the cat again, just as she cannot find her husband's love again.

Cat symbolizes the cursed marriage. In the third part, the novel was stated from the perspective of children. Sister Anna found from dictionary that the real meaning of the cat's name "Labes" is disaster and destruction, while her father has always claimed it to be the "domestic animal". Over the years, the ominous word "Labes" has been echoing at home due to the gloom of his father's mind. This word is the concentration of his inner feelings because he is reluctant to return to the family and has been firmly controlled by his wife Wanda for a long time (Liu, 2021, p. 28). He collapsed in the unequal marriage relationship and the compromise towards his wife, so he put his inner resentment and dissatisfaction upon the cat's name and hid all this in a terrible calm. But ironically, the wife discovered the secret more than 10 years ago, "I always call the cat's name with love, and you secretly rejoice behind me because I don't know the truth. The bad meaning of the name echoes throughout the room: chaos, misfortune, dirt, hate and shame" (Starnone, 2020, p. 159). The wife also knew that the reason for bringing a man back to marriage was never love, so she retaliated against her husband by means of torture. But the more she tortured her husband, the more tolerant he was. In this decades long play of marriage, their relationship has already become a disaster, which finally confirmed the name of the cursed cat "Labes".

Cat symbolizes the temptation of the outside world. Lydia is like a cat breaking into the family, destroying the peace of it. Young and beautiful, she traces the trend of the times and gives Aldo a completely different and novel experience. At first, Aldo thought it was just a moment of passion, and his desire for Lydia would soon weaken, but as time went on, he fell in love with her and even could not be separated with her. "At the thought of leaving her and returning to my family, I will lose my desire to live" (p. 90). Even though her husband was forced to separate from Lydia, he always cherished the photos taken for Lydia. "A square photo came out of the camera, and her slender and graceful figure slowly emerged from the thick fog in the photo. I took a lot of photos of her in those years" (p. 147). Lydia is like a sexy and enchanting cat, always haunting Aldo and arousing his desire. These photos are the joy of his life and he has never pinned his joy on his wife. The defects of Aldo's native family lead to his childish mind, and he never knows what responsibility is, and only blindly pursues the satisfaction of desires. In the end of the novel, Lydia left like a cat and the chaos of the marriage stopped; everything seemed to return to the surface of peace. But children who took the cat Labes away were deeply affected by the chaos created by Lydia. One child developed a flattering character, suppressing the longing for beauty and the expression of real feelings, the other learned the character of distrust and irresponsibility like his father, and they both made an extreme mess of their life after becoming adult.

In the end, the cat was stolen by children in chaos. In order to understand the text meaning of this plot, we need to fix our eyes on children. As victims of the indifferent father and furious mother, their life was no better than their parents after becoming an adult. The daughter Anna, fearing being suffered like her mother, chose not to set up family, while the son Sandro, losing the ability to love, chose to mingle with several woman like his father (Sedda, 2022, p. 184). Children mechanically copied their parents' marriage patterns, and the cat, which was stolen by them, continued to curse children's life generation by generation like a ghost.

Conclusion

Without the application of symbolic, *Lacci* could not be a novel with such vivid image and exciting plots. Italian famous writer Domenico uses sharp strokes to present the tragedy of marriage and family. A pair of shoelaces are woven into a huge and expanding net. Children who break the net with cats realize that this fetter is fatally inescapable and choose to throw themselves into the net again, while parents who stay in the net feel that their life is always unfortunate. The net that accompanies human civilization is always full of researchers, and the novel *Lacci* as one of them utters a less optimistic voice.

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