

From the artistic conception of people to the art of depicting the mood in the short stories of Thạch Lam

Thành Đức Bảo Thắng¹

¹ Hanoi Pedagogical University
Hanoi, 100000, Vietnam

Abstract

Thạch Lam is a writer of *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*, but he was able to create his own, unique path. With an artistic and modern conception of man, Thạch Lam has created for himself a world of unique characters, rich in spiritual life and sensitive to all the changes of creation and human heart. His characters appear familiar, close and loved by readers because of their simplicity, gentleness and sophistication. His works, from the situations to descriptive art and language, always focus on portraying the world of feelings in a delicate, soft and flavorful way. All of which have helped in the creation of a talented and unique author of modern Vietnamese short stories.

Keywords: *Thạch Lam, short stories, feelings*

Thạch Lam is a notable writer of *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* prose and is especially successful in the short story genre. Together with Nguyễn Công Hoan, Nguyễn Hồng, Nam Cao, Tô Hoài, Thạch Lam has contributed significantly to affirm the modernity of the short stories genre of Vietnam in the process of literary modernization. Thạch Lam's short stories show a unique, unmistakable style. As researcher Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh commented: Thạch Lam has created his own type of short story - "heart-wrenching short stories" (Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, 1998). Having this, we must first discuss Thạch Lam's creative sense. He is one of the few writers who built for himself a complete theoretical system as a fulcrum in artistic creation such as: The writer's concept, vocation or the concept and value of novels... It is impossible not to mention the artistic conception of man when learning about the world of characters in his works. Thạch Lam's artistic conception of man is really new, modern and rich in humanity. It strongly dominates the artistic elements of the genre such as plot, situation, characters and language...

The artistic conception of man is "the explanation, interpretation, and the feeling of man that has been transformed into principles, means, and formal methods of human expression in literature, creating

artistic and aesthetic values for the characters in them" (Trần Đình Sử, 1998). As a specific form of human expression in literature, the artistic conception of man has a social, historical and cultural basis. It is not only a product of social and cultural history but it also bears the mark of the artist's creativity. In the context of Vietnamese society in the 1930s, the bourgeois intellectuals, petty bourgeois (mainly living in urban areas) were able to approach and get used to the Western bourgeois civilized lifestyle, and people gradually changed to match the increasingly modern rhythm of life. Replacing the concept of a hierarchy that has existed for thousands of years under the feudal period was the concept of individuality. The value and beauty of a human being must first be self-worth, independent of caste and equality. That spirit has seeped deeply into Thạch Lam's works and has become the criterion for expressing humanity in his stories.

The concept of an individual person with a rich psychological life.

In the essay *Theo dòng*, Thạch Lam writes: "Among the reasons for the novel's acclaim, I can point out this one: the flourishing of life in each person's own soul. When people begin to have an inner life, or to examine the states of their own soul, they like to read novels. On the contrary, the novel helps to enrich and deepen people's inner life." (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). In Thạch Lam's profound awareness, paying attention to personal life is paying attention to spiritual life. As such, the characters in his short stories are people with a rich inner life. From this concept, the spiritual life of people becomes the object of Thạch Lam's pursuit and discovery. This is also the criterion for assessing the immortal value of literary works in his opinion: "First of all, we must venture deep into our souls to find true temperaments and feelings: that is, to find the soul of everybody through our own souls, and go to immortality unknowingly" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001).

The concept of people being related to the situation and is influenced by the situation.

For Thạch Lam, the concept of an individual person is not a romantic one, escaping from the real life situation. The characters in his short stories all have their own lives and are governed by specific circumstances. Readers can encounter the pitiful plight of poor students in short stories such as *Người bạn trẻ*, *Người bạn cũ*, *Đói*. Or the poor and unhappy life of the women in *Nhà mẹ Lê*, *Tối ba mươi*, *Hai lần chết*, *Một đời người...* Or it could be the monotonous, boring living situation of the poor families in the district town (*Hai đứa trẻ*). Just as Thạch Lam once wrote: "For me, literature is not a way to bring readers escapism or to make them forget, on the contrary, literature is a noble and effective weapon that we have in order to both denounce and change a false and cruel world, and at the same time make people's hearts more pure and richer" (Phong Lê, 1988; from *Gió đầu mùa*). Dialectically in the concept of man when he said: "People do not live alone, and are closely related to others, to society". Elsewhere he asserts: "People are always very deeply influenced by circumstances and people are first and foremost made to live with circumstances" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). The concept of people associated with the situation of Thạch Lam is close to the concept of people of realist writers (notably Nam Cao). Writer Nam Cao did not directly state his views on literature and people. Nam Cao's conceptual system is expressed through the thesis of the story and through the characters' words (*Sao lại thế này?*). In this thematic short story, borrowing the character's words, Nam Cao explains the impact of circumstances on one's personality: "An errant woman and an honest woman are not that far apart. There are only other circumstances. If the circumstances change, it is possible for changes to occur in people and in their minds" (Hà Minh Đức, 1975). Basically, in the conception of human beings by realist writers, there is a rule: Circumstances change personality. Thạch Lam's concept of people also has regularity, but it does not come from the principles of realist writers, but from a sense of wanting to be honest with life. Thạch Lam said: "A dishonest writer never becomes a valuable writer. Being honest is not the same as being an artist. But an insincere artist is just a skilled craftsman" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). Thạch Lam disagrees with the artist's attitude of turning away from reality, because it seems to kill art itself. He wrote: "There are many writers who never dare to look directly at the truth. In their works, the depictions are made up, not real, the characters all have psychological stereotypes available in previous books" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001).

Reading the short stories of Thạch Lam, the reader does not meet characters that have a specific shape or face to their appearances but rather, they see the characters through the description of moods, feelings, and emotion. It can be said that the characters in Thạch Lam's short stories are characters of emotion and state of mind. Indeed, the researchers, when they were studying the short stories of Thạch Lam, stated: His specialty is to discover, perceive, and describe in a "meticulous and profound" way the subtle metamorphosis in human mood. And "the author Thạch Lam usually gravitates toward the inner world of one's "ego" with delicate sensory analysis. That is the fragile feeling like a "flutter silently of a butterfly's wing" in the moment of confusion of a man who is going to become a father, it is a soothing and cool feeling in a garden filled with the scent of orchid, it is a quiet and sad feeling of waiting anxiously, vaguely for when the afternoon falls in the district" (Nguyễn Hoàn Khung & Thạch Lam, 1984). As such, the attractiveness of Thạch Lam's short stories lies not in the various situations that create conflicts, nor in desperate, surprising and comedic situations like from the short stories of Nguyễn Công Hoan, Nam Cao but rather in the throbbing of emotions.

Under the gaze of Thạch Lam, every human being has an inner depth with distinct shades of mood. Humans appear as individuals. From an awakening of a deep sense of individuality, Thạch Lam describes his characters as particular people with different feelings in each scenario. His characters seem normal, with nothing special, but underneath that normalcy is a constant contemplation of life. The image of the mother Lê (*Nhà mẹ Lê*) struggling with poverty throughout life. Poverty became an unending obsession inside her soul. Even when she was delirious (when she is forced to lie down on the floor...), she still felt the presence of poverty following her like a destiny that clings to a lifetime: "While delirious, Mrs. Lê recalled her entire life from when she was a child to now, filled with days of misery and toil. Poverty entered her house from who knows when, she was greeted by poverty the moment she was born, and since then it kept following her ..." (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). By using internal monologue (directly or indirectly) in a flexible way, the characters of Thạch Lam have expressed their own feelings. That can be a recollection, or some fleeting thoughts that are illustrated through the characters themselves or the words of the author.

If in the short stories of Nguyễn Công Hoan, the nature of the characters are shown through dialogues (between the characters, between the storyteller and the readers...) and actions, then in the short stories of Thạch Lam, characters' feeling are expressed through thoughts, through internal monologues. With

the internal monologue method, Thạch Lam explored the effective depth of the human soul. Thạch Lam was very delicate when he described the fluctuation in the feelings of the Son siblings (*Gió lạnh đầu mùa*). That is the psychological transformation which was sensitively described by Thạch Lam. Starting from the sudden change of the weather, the outside cold was felt by Son's entire soul, but Son also felt warmth from the family atmosphere. When looking at Hiền "shivering" in the cold due to not having any warm clothes, Son felt that his heart had become cold. And when warm clothes are brought to Hiền, the feeling in Son's heart became "warm and happy". In *Gió lạnh đầu mùa*, the psychological conflict is conducted through the principle of two polar opposites, often mutually exclusive: warm and cold.

Thạch Lam's penmanship is always pointed toward the harsh and cruel life of kind people. They appear with feelings of sadness, humiliation, and stalemate of the impoverished life of many in contemporary society. Characters that feel sad and stuck in life are a prominent factor in the short stories of Thạch Lam. That is the feeling of Liên (*Hai đứa trẻ*) before the afternoon in a poor district: "Liên sits silently next to the black paint, her eyes are filled darkness and the sadness of the countryside afternoon seeps into her naive soul; Liên does not understand why, but she felt a deep sadness at the hour of the end of the day" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). And when the dark has covered the district town, every lonely and feeble light that comes from the many small light bulbs of the district reminded Liên of the memories of Hà Nội with "bright and colorful areas". But those brilliant lights only exist in the flashback and the coincidental passing of the train, leaving behind only darkness. And to create a depressive mood caused by the harsh life in the district: "The feeling of the day subsided in Liên's soul and the image of the surrounding world blurred in her eyes. Liên finds herself living in the midst of so many unknown distances, like Miss Ty's small lamp illuminating the grave of a small land" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001).

Or perhaps that is the feelings of the two women in the house during the quiet New Years' Eve (*Tối ba mươi*). Huệ's remembrance of traditional Tet, Liên's distant memories of childhood: "On the morning of the first day of Tet - she did not remember which year was Tet, but it had been a long time, she wore a new dress and watched the peach blossom bloom in the garden ... she just had a vague feeling of something cool, fresh ... completely different from now ..." (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). The traditional Tet holiday both reminds and separates them from human society but only leaves behind a sad, bored and humiliating mood. And how painful it is for their room to not have a suitable

place to burn incense and to place an ancestral altar due to everything being filthy, dirty. Appearing in "*Tối ba mươi*" is the feeling of shame before the ancestral spirit, before the traditional life that the women must bear. Then: "Liên felt an immense sorrow pervade her entire body, a never ending grief" (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). They still rely on each other despite the loneliness and shamefulness - people with unfortunate lives rely on each other and survive through the day. Truly a vicious, unchanging cycle.

Vicious and unchanging are an element, a clear trait of the characters' mood in the short stories of Thạch Lam. This is not only encountered in the short stories about life filled with misfortunes (*Nhà mẹ Lê*, *Gió lạnh đầu mùa*, *Tối ba mươi*,...) but also in stories describing human excitement when standing in front of rich, natural scenery (*Dưới bóng hoàng lan*), the readers can still feel the restraint, unchanging feelings of the characters. The beautiful, dreamlike scenery, the calmness of a village, a small house, a silver-haired old woman, a kind neighbor with a scent similar to that of orchids, all of which awaken in Thanh a feeling of brightness and purity. But reading "*Dưới bóng cây hoàng lan*", the readers can still feel restricted due to the stagnation, the narrowness of space and time.

When describing the emotion of the characters, Thạch Lam does not lean toward describing the evolution process of personality but rather expressing the vibes of emotion like: Situations that change one's position in life (*Đứa con đầu lòng*); situations that cause one to return to an old scene and old acquaintances (*Dưới bóng hoàng lan*); situations that challenge one's moral and personality (*Sợi tóc*); unfortunate situations (*Nhà mẹ Liên*; *Tối ba mươi*); "The dark areas" of space and time that capture the life and mindset of the characters (*Hai đứa trẻ*).

Putting his own characters in situations that elicit feelings, emotions; combined with the flexibility in using internal monologue, author Thạch Lam described the changes in feelings and emotions in the characters' mood. Reading "*Sợi tóc*", we encountered the feelings and emotions of the characters' mood in between the fragile boundary of kindness and cruelty. He describes each step by step the changes of different feelings in the human soul. Particularly, each feeling is described with unique shades, intertwined and complex (A soothing feeling that relaxes the mind; the feeling of pleasure which is soft and silent, the feeling of regret that is creepy and deep). It is as if Thạch Lam has poured his talent and mind into describing the feeling of the human soul by utilizing his own sensitive and delicate feelings.

The character world of Thạch Lam is a world where feelings mix together, sympathize with nature and creation. The scent, color, and sound of nature, of

life were felt by the author's soul and described using an inspiring language system. Truly, it is a language of feeling, subtleties, and nuances. That is possible the feeling of a "youth" who has just crossed the line of dishonesty in (*Sợi tóc*): "My mind stretches like a bent bamboo returning to its usual uprightness. I feel a strange, "soft", "silent thrill" of pleasure in my body. and a brooding regret, which I did not confess to myself and also intended not to think about, made that feeling in my soul "creepier" and "deeper" (Phong Lê, 1998). And even the sound and color of life are described using expressive words. It is the "soft and weak chirp" like that of an "earnest call" of a baby bird (*Tiếng chim kêu*), it is the dreary "whoosh" of the north wind at the beginning of the season, with a "crunching" sound coming from the dry leaves (*Gió lạnh đầu mùa*). Or it could be a familiar countryside scent with a "warm" smell of buffalo dung, creating a "wet" smell familiar with Tâm and "warm her heart" (*Cô hàng xén*). Or the "faint, sweet" smell of orchids... Thạch Lam used many expressive words: sweet, warm, fragile, immense ... in combination with phrases expressing uncertainty such as: seems like, looks like ... to convey the characters' feelings and emotions.

In Thạch Lam's works, aside from the rich vocabulary is the usage of narrative language in describing the inner self of characters and the emotional dialogue. Almost as if each sentence carries within itself an emotion of the characters. It is truly ingenious when Thạch Lam describes the feelings of pity and shame of the women in the house with short yet full of hidden meaning:

"The two sisters looked around the room, deep in thought. Liên suddenly shouted: Pour into this cup.

She stopped silently. The dirty image just entered her mind. The filthy cup in the corner of the house that even visiting guests would not use, she planned to use it as an incense bowl ..." (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001). In dialogues, Thạch Lam pays special attention to the expressive values of silent moments. This has made the dialogues in his stories to be short but fascinating.

With just a short sentence through the waiter's congratulations, the readers can feel the regrets and embarrassment of the village girls on New Year's Eve: "Oh, I almost forgot, congratulations to the two

of you! I hope that next year you can ... can ..." (Phan Trọng Thường & Nguyễn Cừ, 2001).

In combination with language focused on portraying the inner self is the unique tone of voice, a specialty of Thạch Lam's short stories. The critic Vũ Ngọc Phan accurately pointed out this particular characteristic: That is a "simple, charming", "soft, discreet, and beautiful" style of writing (Vũ Ngọc Phan, 1994).

That tone is "always soft, almost like a whisper" no matter what situation the character is in. Language and tone in the short stories of Thạch Lam have contributed in creating a uniqueness in the art of depicting characters' emotions.

Conclusion

The characters of Thạch Lam are characters of states of mind, of personality in different circumstances. Thạch Lam's short stories remain in the reader's soul because of the feeling of sadness coming from the lives struck by poverty and misfortunes. And what people see hidden underneath those images and sentences is the delicate soul of Thạch Lam, sensitive with every change in humans and creation.

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