CHARACTERIZATION AND STORY-TELLING WITH "GOLDEN HUMOR" IN GISH JEN'S *TYPICAL AMERICAN*

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Abstract

Typical American, as Gish Jen says herself, is "tragicomic", which has won her a reputation as "lighthearted" and "delightful". It is also a typical example of "golden humor"---a specific kind of humor employed exclusively by some Chinese American writers. The characters in the text with "golden humor" possess such qualities as absurdity, inferiority, and marginality yet comic and extraordinary, these qualities being expressed in what they say--- the dialogue--- and what they do--- the action. As in story-telling, many writing techniques and strategies may be utilized such as parody, irony, pastiche, understatement, epiphany, open ending, etc. Utilizing "golden humor", Gish Jen tells us a story of immigration, assimilation, and occasional tensions both inside and outside of the Chang family. Gish Jen's intentional employment of narrative strategies in *Typical American* enriches the tradition of "golden humor" in Chinese American literature, through characterization and in story-telling, providing the readers with an optimistic view and a gleam of hope for a brighter and a better future.

Keywords: Gish Jen; *Typical American*; "golden humor"; Chinese American literature

Introduction

Gish Jen, known as a member of " the Gang of Four" and "an emerging author" in the Chinese American literary circle (Trudeau, 1999), has published four novels till now, among which are *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), *The Love Wife*(2005), *World and Town*(2010), and a collection of short stories *Who's Irish?* (1999).

Typical American, as Jen says herself, is "tragicomic" (Matsukawa, 1993), which has won her a reputation as "lighthearted" and "delightful" (Gates, 1999). It is also a typical example of "golden humor"---a specific kind of humor employed exclusively by some Chinese American writers---as is observed by some Chinese scholars. In Jen's own words, "It could be seen an Asian part of my sensibility, in the sense that it's a very Asian thing to imagine that opposites go together. Yin-yang, sweet and sour. There isn't the sense that something should be sweet or sour, one or the other…. In any case that Yin-yang quality certainly embodies a lot of these stories" (Weich, 1999).

Gish Jen's strategic use of "golden humor" in *Typical American* serves as a typical example of the kind. The following parts of the paper will carry out a detailed analysis of the novel just from two aspects --- characterization and story-telling --- discussing "golden humor", which is embodied in the story, in detail.

Differences between Black Humor and "Golden Humor"

A term coined by a Chinese scholar, professor Zhang Ziqing from Nanjing University, "golden humor" is used exclusively by some Chinese American writers, and has its own features in characterization and in story-telling, distinguishing itself from other forms of humor(Zhang, 2000). The characters in the text with "golden humor" possess such qualities as absurdity, inferiority, and marginality yet comic and extraordinary, these qualities being expressed in what they say--- the dialogue--- and what they do--- the action. As in story-telling, many writing techniques and strategies may be utilized such as parody, irony, pastiche, understatement, epiphany, open ending, etc. With the use of "golden humor" in characterization and in story-telling, the writer provides the reader with an optimistic view about and a gleam of hope for a brighter and a better future.

Along with the discussion of "golden humor", black humor as another notable and more frequently used type of humor in literature must be elucidated and clarified for the sake of comparison. In the history of world literature, black humor became more and more noticeable in the 20th century. It is strongly evident in modern American fiction from Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934) to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement. Baleful or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world play out their roles in a "tragic farce", in which the events are simultaneously comic, brutal, horrifying, and absurd. Displaying a marked disillusionment and cynicism, it shows human beings without convictions and with little hope, regulated by fate or fortune or incomprehensible powers. In fact, human beings are in an "absurd" predicament. At its darkest black humor is pervaded by a kind of sour despair: we can't do anything so we may as well laugh. The wit is mordant and the humor sardonic (Baldick, 1996).

In contrast to black humor, "golden humor" as a brand-new kind of humor is frequently and exclusively utilized by Chinese American writers as a narrative strategy. "Golden humor" not only inherits from or draws on the experience of the essence of "absurdity" of black humor but also transforms and improves itself so that it is endowed with more optimistic spirit to exhibit the brighter, shining or golden facets of the Chinese American life.

"Golden Humor" Embodied in characterization

Typical American narrates a story of three Chinese immigrants, Ralph Chang, Helen (Ralph Chang's wife), and Theresa ((Ralph's sister), as they pursue the American dream and struggle against the pressures of assimilation, greed, and self-interest. Both a comedy and a tragedy, the novel brilliantly turns the notion of what it means to be "typical American" on its head. As the three get involved in their American life (study, love, marriage, children, business, tenure), they try to understand their place in the American dream and just what it means to be a "typical American".

The characters in *Typical American* are distinctly categorized into two kinds, the Americans and the Chinese immigrants, almost all of whom are labeled a nickname or something in one way or

another, each possessing a fairly vivid peculiarity, which presents a striking contrast. The following diagram suggests the classification:Ralph—"a doll"

Lao Chao--"a large man"

Chinese immigrants
- Men Grover—"a scoundrel"
- Xiao Lou—"an absorber"

Women
- Helen—"dragon lady"
- Theresa—"*a pig head three*"

"Typical" Americans
- Men
  - Mr. Fitt--"a carnivorous fish"
  - Pete—"*fan tong*"
- Woman- Cammy—"barbarian"

All these vivid characters form a group of caricatures, reflecting Gish Jen's intentional and flexible manipulation of "golden humor". As the main character in the novel, Ralph is pictured as "a doll":

> Young, orotund. Longish hair managed with grease. A new, light gray, too dressy, double-breasted suit made him look even shorter than his five feet three and three-quarter inches. Otherwise he was himself--- large-faced, dimpled, with eyebrows that rode nervously up and up, away from his flat, wide, placid nose. He had small teeth set in vast expanses of gum; those round ears; and delicate,

> almost maidenly skin that tended to flush and pale with the waxing and waning of his digestive problems. (Jen, 1991)

Originally named Chang Yifeng in Chinese, he obtains his English name "Ralph", which means "wolf" or "a kind of dog" in English from Cammy, the Foreign Student Affairs secretary, who is delineated as a "barbarian" by Ralph. On his way to America, Ralph has six subsidiary goals, carefully listed. Two are resolutions to cultivate virtue and bring honor to his family. The succeeding four, culminating in a resolve to have nothing to do with girls, are abandoned without recall as Ralph comes to realize that he is alone, that he has journeyed "to the completely other side of the world", when he immediately falls in love with Cammy.

With a name shared with Emerson whose ideas he lives out, and with mixed success and disaster, Ralph is "a thinker", "a doer", "an engineer" and "an imagineer" as well. To say he is "a thinker" and "an imagineer" refers to his habit of dreaming whenever he is faced with difficulties and doesn't know what to do. The only thing he does on those occasions is to sink into his ridiculous and absurd dreams. In the second year of his staying in the US, he loses contact with his family--- his parents disappear, never to be heard from again--- which makes him "as mad as anyone". He dreams of his family and his relatives, imagining his father being tortured, "His voice is faraway, a sound heard through a wall; yet the corners of his mouth crease and tear with effort. Pained, he blinks. His eyelids crackle like candy wrappers. We are dead" (26).

Ludicrously enough, the time when he forgets to renew his visa and has to work in a fresh-killed meat store, Ralph dreams about Pinkus, chairman of the department, while working in the store, "Sometimes at work, he'd see Pinkus step out from behind the chicken crates, apologetic. He'd see Pinkus kneel down beside him, offer to help with the plucking" (38).

Ralph's habit of "imagineering" is illustrated more vividly when he is in the hospital looking after his sister Theresa after the car accident caused by him. Remorsefully and sorrowfully, he does nothing but "fingers the beads" to pray and resume his habit of "imagineering":

> Sometimes he watched unmoving Theresa, and saw her move again. He saw her walk and talk and read. Her saw her recite her lessons, he saw her tease the servants… how she swung, all tilt

> and pivot, how she stretched up with her mitt and plucked balls from the air like a fruit picker… He watched her examine a patient, her authority impeccable. He watched her kiss Old Chao (285).

Theresa also plays an important role in the novel. Ralph is not alone in America for long. Jen quickly sets beside him his contrasting partner in the form of his older sister, Theresa, who escapes to America in the company of a school friend, Helen, and finds Ralph just in time to save him from suicidal despair over his lost country and family. Ralph responds to the coincidence with a comical, incredible feeling:

> "Was miracle"… anyone could… hear in his voice all that the word meant to him--- rocks burst into blossom, the black rinsed from the night sky. Life itself unfurled. As he apparently, finally, deserved... Saved! Know- It- All in his arms! Impossible! (46).

Theresa's appearance is both a grace and a curse. She saves Ralph from suicide and restores him to family life, sharing a flat with him and her school friend, Helen, whom he marries, but she also inadvertently renews family jealousies and quarrels. As Ralph calls her "know- It- All" (4), Theresa is "a paradigm of western influence gone wrong" in Jen's words, "So smart, so morally upright, but she talked too much, in a voice that came from too far down in her chest, and she was *homely as a pig head three*, like her father. Drawn face, brown hair, big mouth, freckles" (47).

While Ralph struggles drearily to win tenure as a professor of mechanical engineering, a field he himself considers colorless, Theresa proceeds smoothly through medical school. Classified as homely and unmarriageable in China, she infuriates Ralph further by attracting his oldest Chinese friend, Old Chao, a married man, senior to him on the engineering faculty, until at the end of the story, she is made a victim in the car accident caused by Ralph.

Ralph's wife, Helen, is a "typical" Chinese woman and the most traditional Chinese of the three, the "dragon lady" (241) as is described in the novel:

> … around her, China… delicate feet. Sturdy calves. Slight figure overall. A contained way of moving… Shoulder- length black,

> curly hair (a permanent). A heart- shaped face that, with its large forehead, and small mouth, and slightly receding chin, seemed to tilt forward. She had large eyes… shy… The considering type. Not a talker (56).

Helen embodies the traits of the ideal Chinese woman, and is, in all appearance, submissive to her husband. However, her outward fulfillment of the traditional role is merely a manifestation of a vanity that neither seeks to resist nor conforms to the role. Together with Grover, she cuckolds Ralph who is in the same house busily evading taxes in the basement, but controls her unexpected affair with Grover in the end for the sake of the whole family.

The antagonist, an American-born, self-made millionaire, Grover Ding, is "a scoundrel" in a word (116). At first admired by Ralph, loved by Helen and hated by Theresa, he represents the opportunities as well as the greed that America encourages. He personifies the good life, living luxuriously as a successful businessman, and also demonstrates the seamy side of business, as he widely uses fraud and deceit to achieve his aims. He seduces Helen, and cheats Ralph into a suspect business, which leads to almost the collapse of the Chang family. Here, Jen enacts a double subversion of "typicality"; notions of both "typical American" and "typical Chinese" are complicated by Grover, who, according to the prevailing definitions, is neither American by dint of his race nor Chinese by dint of his behavior.

The phrase "typical American" in the novel is derived from the comment "Typical Pete", which is used by the Changs to mock their landlord Pete. Railing against Pete's "typical Americanness", Ralph calls him a "fan tong", "(Pete)fly open, feet up on his legless desk, dog at the door, he'd often be thumbing through course catalogs, exchanging one for another, sometimes working through two at once… As if he could be an engineer! As if he could get a Ph.D.! " (66).

The Changs create the stereotypical American "other" by their playfully defensive recital of "typical American" characteristics, such as "typical American no-good", "typical American don't-know-how-to-get-along", "typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-the-things", "typical American no-morals!", "typical American use-brute-force!", "typical American just-dumb!" (67).

"Golden Humor" in Story-telling

Typical American chronicles the bittersweet journey of Ralph Chang, a Chinese engineering student who comes to the U.S. for his doctorate, of his wife Helen and his sister Theresa. The Changs initially disdain the lack of tradition they describe as "typical American" behavior, but soon they are stir- frying hot dogs. They also fall under the spell of Grover Ding, an American- born "scoundrel" of free enterprise, who leads Ralph into a dubious fried-chicken business, seduces Helen and causes Theresa, the family loyalist, to leave home. The happy ending for the Changs comes not in abandoning the American dream but in finding a way to make it their own.

With her strategic use of golden humor, Gish Jen creates "an irresistible novel… suspenseful, startling, heartrending, without ever losing its discerning comic touch" (Entertainment Weekly). The following parts attempt at examining Jen's strategic use of "golden humor" in story-telling from four aspects: irony, understatement, epiphany, and open ending.

Story in Narratology

The term story seems to be so popular and controversial that it has long been widely debated though a unanimous opinion on it hasn't been set up till now. Theorists fail to reach an agreement on story for the reason that it is regarded as "the lowest and simplest of literary organisms" and also "the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels" (Forster, 1987). Some well-known dictionaries of literary terms even avoid supplying a definition of story for the lack of a generally accepted view and for fear of mis-defining, such dictionaries including M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1971) and J. A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1979), etc.

Although Aristotle never brought forth a complete and integrated definition of story, we may still extend his opinion about story by a few isolated words and phrases of his as mentioned in "Poetics". Aristotle implied that telling a story was closely related to "the art of feigning", which emphasized the fictional part of story in ordinary usage.

Percy Lubbock also touched on the subject of story though he didn't offer a comprehensive argumentation with regard to the definition in *The*

Craft of Fiction (1921), in which he taught us to believe that "the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself" (62).

In his *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster put forward his marvelous and distinguished explanation of story by comparing "story" with "plot":

> "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. … Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: "and then?" If it is in a plot we ask: "Why?" That's the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel (87).

He thus defined story as "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence", which could only have "one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next" (Forster, 1987).

According to Boris Tomashevsky, a story "requires not only indications of time, but also indications of cause" that "may be told in the actual chronological and causal order of events." The notion of the story, as he wrote, was "the aggregate of mutually related events reported in the work. No matter how the events were originally arranged in the work and despite their original order of introduction, in practice the story may be told in the actual chronological and causal order of events" (Lemon 66-8).

Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms (1990) describes the definition of story as "in everyday sense (is), any narrative or tale recounting a series of events. In modern narratology, however, the term refers more specifically to the sequence of imagined events that we reconstruct from the actual arrangement of a narrative (or dramatic) plot" (Baldick, 1996). Viewed from two different angles, this definition provides a relatively objective approach to the resolution of the problem. To sum up, in ordinary usage, similar to the definition of story in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* for reference, story refers to happenings or events, either real or imaginary, which is regarded noteworthy of being told (cf. That's a good/ funny/ exciting story, etc.). Stories, whether fairy or oral folk, have a distinct structure, and a set of participants (characters) and series of events or actions. In narratology, however, story has come to be used by some theorists (e.g. Chatman) as a translation of the French term *histoire*, itself equivalent to the Russian formalist term *fabula*, which takes on a narrower meaning than in

ordinary usage. Bal made it clear that "a *fabula* (story) is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors (characters)" (Bal, 1985).

Irony: Verbal and Dramatic

As Nelson comments in *People, Typical American* is "a terrific novel… full of winning ironies" (1991). For the convenience of discussion, the irony employed in the novel may be roughly sorted out as verbal irony and dramatic irony.

Irony is found when the words actually used appear to mean quite the opposite of the sense actually required in the context and presumably intended by the speaker. It is "a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance" (Baldick, 1996). In literature, from the tragedy to the novel, irony may appear in various forms such as verbal irony, structural irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony, cosmic irony, and the irony of situation. This thesis will discuss verbal irony and dramatic irony that are used in *Typical American*.

Verbal irony is a statement in which the implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from which he ostensibly asserts, or in another word, what is said is different from what is really meant. A famous instance of verbal irony is the opening sentence of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (1978).

Jen's use of verbal irony is highlighted in Theresa's engagement to a Shanghai banker's son. Tall and "homely as a pighead three," Theresa is considered unmarriageable in China; however, Jen narrates all these in extravagant and exaggerating words and repetition to bring about the ironical effect:

> The female of the species performs her mating dance. This specimen carries her parasol on her left, toward the gate and her fiancé, though the sun inflames her right… A modern type… (50).

> What if (the fiancé) he'd just come back from France, or Japan, sleepless with ideas, only to find that he'd been engaged to some sweet country miss? Of such fine family! What then? He'd sit down with his father, his mother. A capable girl, and so sweet-tempered... A capable girl, and so sweet-tempered, and so graceful! (51).

In the quoted lines above, repetition is made by Jen to further intensify the irony as the first sentence is repeated once again in the following several lines while "a modern type" is even repeated four times and "a capable girl, and so sweet-tempered" twice.

As to dramatic irony, the greatest feature of it is that it involves a situation in which the audience (reader) shares with the author knowledge of which a character is ignorant or, to put it in another way, that "the audience knows more about a character's situation than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary to the character's expectations, and thus ascribing a sharply different sense to some of the character's own statements" (Baldick, 1996).

Dramatic irony is heightened in *Typical American* by Ralph's ignorance but our knowledge of his wife's love affairs with Grover. Ralph is obsessed with his habitual "imagineering" schemes and plunges himself into the "typical American" entrepreneurial enterprise, which is proudly named "Ralph's Chicken Palace"--- the fast food business--- unaware of his wife's affairs. He is indulged in the pursuit of money as he covers the basement walls with motivational quotes: ALL RICHES BEGIN IN AN IDEA. WHAT YOU CAN CONCEIVE, YOU CAN ACHIEVE. DON'T WAIT FOR YOUR SHIP TO COME IN, SWIM OUT TO IT. FOLLOW THE HERD, YOU END UP A COW (198).

Yet ironically, while he locks himself in the basement busy with tax evasion, Helen and Grover carries on their liaison as Grover's presence pervades the room. While "wooing" Helen, Grover "tantalizes" the house with traces of himself, flooding Helen with ideas of cheap romance and infidelity. Such a barrage of American influences, all occurring within the presumably safe confines of their house, further disrupt the already unstable foundations of the Chang family.

Understatement

Understatement, overstatement, and verbal irony form a continuous series, for they consist, respectively, of saying less, saying more, and saying the opposite of what one really means. Since verbal irony has been discussed in the preceding part, this part will concentrate on understatement used by Gish Jen while skipping over overstatement, which is not characteristic of the novel. Understatement, as defined in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, is "restrained statement in ironic contrast to what might be said: studied avoidance of emphasis or exaggeration" (Gove, 1996).

Jen once clearly expressed her preference for understatement in an interview when she said "I just prefer understatement" (Snell, 1991). Jen seldom touches on the issue of prejudice which puzzles the Changs since America allows the immigrants to create economic space but there is still a long way for them to gain access to the mainstream as is appropriately implied in the phrase "the intimate outsider" (Snell, 1991). The prejudice encountered by the Changs is addressed indirectly by her, but one of the few and most poignant moments is when Jen talks about baseball, the great American pastime, with understatement:

> "We are family," echoed Helen. "Team," said Ralph. "We should have name. The Chinese Yankees. Call Chang-kees for short." "Chang-kees!" Everyone laughed.
>
> Ball games became even more fun… "Let's go Chang-kees!" This was in the privacy of their apartment, in front of their newly bought used Zenith TV; the one time they went to an actual game, people had called them names and told them to go back to their laundry. They in turn had sat impassive as the scoreboard. Rooting in their hearts, they said later. Anyway, they preferred to stay home and watch. "More comfortable." "More convenient." "Can see better," they agreed (127-8).

The Changs become observers rather than participants in the great American pastime because of prejudice, though they describe the matter with a delicate touch instead of flying into a rage. Understatement is well embodied in their agreement that to stay home and watch is "more comfortable", "more convenient" and "can see better".

Epiphany

Epiphany means "a manifestation", which is used in Christian theology to signify a manifestation of God's presence in the world. In modern poetry and fiction, epiphany has become a standard term taken over by James Joyce to denote the description of the sudden flare into revelation of an ordinary object or scene. Joyce defined an epiphany as "'a sudden spiritual manifestation' in which the 'whatness' of a common object or gesture appears radiant to the observer" (Snell, 1991).

Ralph's revelation at the end of the novel is not the disillusionment of a Chinese nor an American, but simply a man confused by the complexity of the new context that surrounds him, thus he experiences the moment of epiphany, "What escape was possible? It seemed to him at that moment, as he stood waiting and waiting, trapped in his coat, that a man was as deemed here as he was in China" (295-6).

Ironically, Ralph's disillusionment with the American dream comes by way of a very "typical" American realization, that "a man was the sum of his limits", and his conclusion of it is that "America was no America", indicating his rootlessness in America. In the end, he realizes that America is not the idealized version of itself: *Kan bu jian. Ting bu jian.* He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America (296).

Open ending

A novel may be close ended with a definite resolution of the conflicts at the end of the story, or open ended when it provides no definite resolution but leaves room for the readers' imagination. Realizing gradually the advantages of open ending, more and more writers are making use of it intentionally, among whom Jen is certainly a "typical" writer as far as her novel *Typical American* is concerned.

There is no redeeming quality or a sense of closure at the end of *Typical American*. Near the end of the novel, Ralph's business fails, Theresa has been driven from home, and Helen nearly loses her marriage. When Grover contemptuously lets it slip to Ralph that he has been sleeping with

Helen, Ralph violently forces a confession from her, and in his rage, runs his car into the too prescient, too talented Theresa, nearly killing her in a moment he himself recognizes as half accident, half seized opportunity.

Rising from failure to despair, the novel then moves toward an open-ended possibility of renewal, as the Changs recognize the significance of family and faith. Ralph frees himself of the spell of Grover, and even considers giving up his fast-food business to return to teaching. Theresa, after a painful but liberating affair with Old Chao, decides to move into an apartment, stepping literally into the world. Even Helen, the most traditional Chinese of the three, controls her unexpected affair with Grover.

At the closure of the novel, Ralph lifts his hand in the snow to flag down a cab, his gesture both protesting and greeting. Ralph anticipates getting Theresa out of the hospital, restoring his failing marriage, recovering his morality. In this frozen moment, the novel ends without resolution, but with hope:

> Outside, he realized that he should have called one (cab) from the apartment, but he was reluctant to go back in; to go back in would seem somehow to be making no progress. Instead, then, he raised his weighty arm… *shuo bu chu lai*. Who could begin to say what he meant, what had happened, what he'd done? And yet Ralph held his arm up in the snow all the same… (295-6).

Conclusion

Gish Jen's intentional employment of narrative strategies in *Typical American* enriches the tradition of "golden humor" in Chinese American literature, through characterization and in story-telling, providing the readers with an optimistic view and a gleam of hope for a brighter and a better future. In *Typical American*, Gish Jen's strategic use of "golden humor" not only inherits from or draws on the experience of the essence of "absurdity" in black humor but also transforms and improves it so that it is endowed with more optimistic spirit to exhibit the brighter, shining and golden facets of the Chinese American life. With the use of golden humor, Gish Jen questions the definition of the so-called "melting pot" America, depicts the Chinese immigrants' struggle in pursuit of "the American Dream" through conflicts

and reconciliation, and discusses the Chinese American ethnic double cultural identity transformation and construction, with the hope of subverting the prejudice against ethnics in mainstream American Society.

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