

The Symbiotic World of Humans and Animals: An Interpretation of the Dog Imagery in *A Village of One's Own*

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Abstract: Liu Liangcheng's first prose collection, *A Village of One's Own*, was published in 1998 and quickly attracted widespread attention in the literary circle. In this work, assuming the identity of a "rural philosopher", he employs a multitude of animal imageries to convey his unique insights into life. Particularly, the imagery of dogs occupies a prominent position in the text. It not only showcases his distinctive artistic style but also profoundly embodies the depth of his thoughts. Through diverse narrative techniques and the interweaving of memories and reality, Liu Liangcheng depicts the rich and three-dimensional life of dogs. Meanwhile, via this imagery, he presents the close yet complex relationship between animals and human life. Additionally, influenced by the geographical and cultural features of the borderland, Liu Liangcheng also reveals in-depth reflections on bioethics and the human living condition. These reflections encompass the relationship between humans and all things in nature, with "dogs" serving as a vivid carrier.

Keywords: Liu Liangcheng; *A Village of One's Own*; Dog imagery; Bioethics; Rural changes

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1. Introduction

The academic community has accumulated fruitful achievements in the research on animal imageries in Liu Liangcheng's prose, *A Village of One's Own*. As early as 2001, He Xiongfei described Liu Liangcheng as a "Son of Nature", laying a humanistic foundation for the research on his animal portrayal. Subsequently, Wei Zhiguo and Song Shaojing delved into the aesthetic and cultural values of animal imageries, while Li Yongzhen's research further focused on the life philosophy embodied in the "dog" imagery. These studies not only enrich our understanding of Liu Liangcheng's works but also provide a new perspective for us to examine the relationships between humans, nature, and animals. Therefore, the dog imagery in Liu Liangcheng's works is not merely a literary symbol but also a mirror for observing the rural social structure and the relationship between natural

ecology. Humans and all things in the world are interconnected. Humans do not exist solely in human society but more so in the natural world shared by all creatures. Liu Liangcheng describes this ideology of harmony and unity in his works: “The death of any tree is the death of humans, and the chirping of any insect is the chirping of humans.”^[1] This implies that to understand the animals in his works, a broader perspective that integrates “society” and “ecology” is required. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis with cultural ecology to explore the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

2. The group of animal imageries with “dogs” as the focus

In *A Village of One's Own*, Liu Liangcheng constructs a unique world where humans and animals coexist. In this world, animals are no longer mere backgrounds or tools but living beings equal to humans. The village he portrays is a vibrant ecosystem, and a vivid group portrait is composed of various animals. Before delving into the core imagery of dogs, it is necessary to first examine the common group of animal imageries in the village to understand the overall context of his animal portrayal.

2.1. The group of animal imageries in the village

Traditional Chinese villages are production communities primarily characterized by agricultural production. Livestock such as cattle, sheep, pigs, and dogs are indispensable means of production for the villages. Unlike the mass replication mode featured in large-scale socialized production, the breeding of livestock in these villages involves mutual dedication of labor and affection. Many livestock become members of the family in daily life. Farmers even place them in very important positions in the family to ensure the smooth progress of field production^[2]. For instance, in *The Postman, the Mountain, and the Dog*, the old postman entrusts the dog, his old companion, to guide the young postman; in *To Live*, Fugui and the old ox depend on each other for survival; in some literary works, animals serve as vivid imageries to express human emotions—for example, the dog in Zhang Xianliang's *Uncle Xing and His Dog* symbolizes the kindness of human nature; in Hai Zi's poems, “lonely horses” frequently appear to express the individual's spiritual state and emotional experiences. Some literary works even go a step further by directly adopting the animal perspective for narration. For example, in *Mo Yan's Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, a variety of animal imageries, such as donkeys, cattle, pigs, dogs, and monkeys, is used to reveal social changes. Here, animals have become imageries endowed with unique aesthetic connotations. These animal imageries are no longer just biological figures in the natural world; writers have endowed them with profound meanings, transforming them into literary imageries with unique aesthetic value and rich implications.

In *A Village of One's Own*, Liu Liangcheng devotes a large amount of writing to depicting the animals in the countryside. In the first section, “A Village Where Humans and Animals Reside Together”, he describes animals such as the donkey in “The Man Who Understands Donkeys”, the horse in “The Escaped Horse”, the insects in “Sleeping with Insects”, and the wolf in “The Remaining Matters.” These animal imageries in literature transcend the traditional roles of symbols or fables and demonstrate their value and vitality as independent living beings. Their existence and behaviors no longer merely serve human needs or carry in-depth symbols but reflect the independent value of their own lives. For example, “When I returned after searching for the donkey the entire afternoon, the donkey was standing in the yard, looking as if it had been waiting for me the whole time. The donkey stared at me, and I stared back at the donkey”^[3]. “Horses must have their own things to do. When horses come into this world, their purpose is definitely not just to pull carts or serve as mounts for humans”^[3].

2.2. The prominent dog imagery

Among numerous animal imageries, the “dog” imagery is particularly prominent. The imagery of “dogs” runs through the entire book, appearing repeatedly and closely intertwined with human life. Taking the version of *A Village of One's Own* published by Jiangxi Publishing House as an example, dogs are mentioned 382 times in the book. Among all livestock, dogs can be said to have the closest connection with humans. Most writers have had inextricable ties with dogs in their life experiences. For example, Zhang Xianliang once stated: “The first animal I came into contact with was a dog... I have had a deep affection for dogs since I was a child... The first novel I attempted to write was *Uncle Xing and His Dog*.” Chi Zijian also mentioned dogs when recalling her childhood life; dogs, as her good companions in childhood, have always remained in her memories ^[4]. In contrast to dogs, Liu Liangcheng mentions in the article “The Escaped Horse”: “I have never had a long-term close contact with horses, not even a simple experience of riding a horse from one village to another” ^[3].

Dogs frequently appear as childhood companions, and their imageries often serve as an emotional carrier for individuals to recall their childhood days. Within this framework, dogs are no longer just simple animal figures but important bridges connecting the past and the present, innocence and growth. For example, in rural society, it seems to be a common, trivial matter for children to be bitten by dogs, but these unforgettable experiences often leave a deep impression throughout one's life and become triggers for memories in adulthood. In the chapter “Chasing Dogs”, the author points out that almost everyone in the village grows up amid the barking and chasing of dogs, thus giving rise to many interesting childhood stories related to dogs. Liu Liangcheng also mentions in the text that the black dog in his hometown became his “mentor” and accompanied him during his growth. In Liu Liangcheng's prose, it is not difficult to find that whenever childhood memories are mentioned, there are always the figures or barks of dogs, which have become an indispensable part of childhood life.

People's feelings toward dogs are rather complex, and dogs themselves are full of contradictions. For instance, in the book, dogs can act as the most loyal servants of their owners. “In the eyes of a dog, any face other than its owner's must be unfamiliar and dangerous” ^[4]. The loyalty of dogs makes them objects of human reliance, while also revealing the submissive and subordinate status imposed on them. “In the countryside, every household ties a dog at the door, and the purpose is clear: to guard the house. The door of humans is controlled by dogs, as if the house belongs to the dog. Visitors do not come to see the dog, but they first have to confront the dog for a while” ^[3]. In “Huangshaliang”, it is also mentioned that when people in the village work in the fields during the day, they only look up at the sound of dogs barking and then continue with their work. “No one would drop their hoes and run back to the village to check what was happening just because a dog barked a few times. People confidently leave the entire village in the wilderness during the daytime” ^[3]. This fully reflects people's trust in dogs.

With their loyal and selfless nature, these dogs have become companions that villagers firmly trust and deeply rely on. When facing external visitors, dogs are the first to “confront” them; only when they confirm that the visitors are harmless will they allow them to pass. Dogs are not only loyal guardians of the village; their role goes beyond guarding the home, and they have established unique and profound emotional connections with every resident in the village. In the article “A Village Where Humans and Animals Reside Together”, there is a sentence: “Dare you say that Zhang San's dog does not recognize you, Li Si? It just cannot call your name.” ^[3]. The barking of dogs may implicitly contain people's names, although people may not be aware of it. The status of dogs in the village is completely different from that of other animals. The original purpose of people raising dogs is not for food but to guard the home and provide protection, which fully demonstrates the unique role and status of dogs in village life.

However, dogs are also very likely to arouse people's disgust. "The shadow of the dog is always scurrying before our eyes, and the barking of the dog can be heard from time to time during conversations, making the visitors feel uneasy" [3]. "When I was a child, I would be so scared that I would run away whenever I encountered a dog" [3]. The understanding nature of dogs is their greatest strength, but it can also be their weakness. Lin Yutang once bluntly stated: "The reason why I dislike dogs is precisely because they are so understanding" [5]. It is also mentioned in the chapter "Chasing Dogs": "As soon as a dog sees a person crying, it stops barking. The dog knows that as soon as a child cries and shouts, an adult will immediately come with a stick, so the dog has to quickly choose a direction to run away" [3].

People often endow dogs with certain cultural connotations based on their biological characteristics. Therefore, dogs possess dual meanings, such as loyalty and servility, kindness and evil, and even more.

3. The narrative discourse represented by "dogs"

The profound connotation of the dog imagery stems not only from its rich symbolic meaning but also from Liu Liangcheng's exquisite narrative art. Instead of depicting in a straightforward manner, the author employs multi-dimensional narrative strategies, including language, perspective, and structure, to jointly construct a "dog" discourse world filled with philosophical thoughts and emotions. Among these, the exquisite and poetic narrative language serves as the foundation, directly endowing dogs with spirituality and depth.

3.1. Narrative language

Through meticulous and poetic narrative language, *A Village of One's Own* endows dogs with depth and a soul. Liu Liangcheng's words not only capture the appearance and behaviors of dogs but also convey the profound emotional bond between dogs and humans between the lines. For example, "A dog chases a cloud that looks like a dog, running wildly on the sand dune" [3].

Huangshaliang, as a relatively primitive natural land, provides a vast space and freedom for dogs, enabling them to demonstrate their autonomy. In this context, the similarity between the imagery of a dog and a cloud is cleverly used as a symbol, endowing the dog with human emotions and behavioral characteristics. On the vast Huangshaliang, a dog regards a cloud similar in shape to itself as its kind and chases after it. This behavior not only indicates the loneliness of the dog but also emphasizes the desolation of this land. In "The Pace of Spring", Liu Liangcheng, with his delicate writing style, demonstrates the different living states of dogs and cattle. He meticulously depicts the tranquility of dogs when they are basking in the sun, enjoying their leisure time. Such descriptions not only showcase the peace and ease of dogs but also subtly express an attitude toward life of conforming to nature and being content with one's lot.

In addition, Liu Liangcheng skillfully enriches the language level and expressiveness of the work through the descriptive use of dog imagery. He describes people falling asleep peacefully to the barking of a dog, uses "running like a dog" to depict the surging of clouds and mist, and even vividly describes the size of a hole as "big enough for a dog to pass through." This ingenious use not only adds interest to the work but also allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the philosophical thoughts and emotional world that the author intends to convey.

3.2. Narrative perspective

Through the well-designed switching of multi-dimensional narrative perspectives, *A Village of One's Own*

skillfully endows the “dog” imagery with vivid and three-dimensional vitality. This narrative technique enables the imagery of dogs to deeply touch the readers’ hearts from multiple dimensions and perspectives.

“An old dog that has endured years of hardship will eventually have the iron chain binding it rusted and broken without struggling. The owner who raised it also enters old age”^[3]. When describing the intimate relationship between dogs and their owners, Liu Liangcheng adopts the first-person narrative perspective, depicting the imagery of dogs through his own observations and experiences. This narrative method allows readers to more directly feel the author’s emotional attitude and concern for the living conditions of dogs, thereby enhancing the appeal of the work.

Liu Liangcheng also employs the third-person perspective to present the behaviors and characteristics of dogs in a more objective manner. This narrative method provides readers with an overall view, making the imagery of dogs more three-dimensional and rich. For example, he mentions: “In the eyes of a dog, any face other than its owner’s must be unfamiliar and dangerous”^[3]. When revealing the loyalty and trustworthiness of dogs, Liu Liangcheng adopts the third-person narrative perspective to objectively observe and describe dogs. In the author’s writing, dogs are no longer ordinary livestock for guarding the door; they are endowed with the qualities of tenacity, endurance, generosity, and loyalty. This narrative perspective allows readers to more objectively understand the characteristics and qualities of dogs, thereby triggering in-depth thinking about the relationship between dogs and humans.

In “The Life of a Dog”, the author comprehensively demonstrates the role and emotional significance of dogs in human life from a human perspective. For example, it is written in the text: “It is really not easy for a dog to live to an old age. Being too fierce is not good, being too timid is not good, and neither is being understanding nor too understanding”^[3]. Here, requirements are put forward for the character of dogs from a human perspective, reflecting that in people’s minds, dogs need to possess qualities that meet human expectations to survive. This embodies humans’ scrutiny and expectations of dogs.

Furthermore, Liu Liangcheng adopts the animal perspective narrative method, allowing dogs to tell their own stories. For example, in the article “Two Dogs”, the author presents the difficult life of a dog after being abandoned from the dog’s perspective, highlighting the dog’s loyalty and tenacity. In this narrative method, dogs are not only participants in the story but also become the “narrators” of the story, presenting the story world and characters through their eyes and feelings. The innovation of this narrative perspective lies in that it provides a new perspective for observing and understanding the human world, thereby increasing the depth and complexity of the work.

3.3. Narrative structure

In the depiction of dogs in *A Village of One’s Own*, a variety of narrative techniques are employed. In the chapter “The Life of a Dog”, Liu Liangcheng adopts linear narration, meticulously depicting the life journey of a dog from birth to old age in chronological order. He captures the playfulness of puppies when they are young, the loyalty of adult dogs, and also meticulously portrays their frailty and dependence in old age. This chronological narrative method allows readers to systematically track the life trajectory of the dog and personally experience the twists and turns of its life.

“I stood dumbfounded in the snow, watching the fire grow bigger and bigger. The huge fire dragon surged and rolled from south to north, as if it was going to devour everything. I do not know how long I stood there in a daze. Finally, the fire died down, and the night once again enveloped the blackened wilderness. The village was

still quiet; no one woke up, no dog barked, and no chicken crowed”^[3].

In “The Great Fire on the Horizon”, the silence of dogs symbolizes the sleeping state of the villagers. The author attempts to wake the villagers by setting a fire, but ultimately fails, which shows the symbolic meaning of the author as an awakened person. At the same time, through the description of dogs, Liu Liangcheng also subtly metaphors the human living conditions and social interactions. “Those who wanted to be village heads each gathered a group of people, canvassing votes all night long, knocking on doors from house to house. The commotion made the dogs bark all night. Many dogs died of exhaustion before the village head was elected.”^[3]. The status and fate of dogs in the village reflect the complex aspects of human society, including the praise of loyalty, the abuse of power, and the attitude toward life. This symbolic narrative strategy makes the description of dogs go beyond a mere portrayal of animal life and become an in-depth reflection on human behavior and social norms.

This narrative method allows readers to clearly feel the growth, aging, and eventual lonely death of dogs, reflecting the fragility and inevitable demise of life. Throughout the book, dogs appear repeatedly as symbolic beings, forming a circular structure. For example, in different chapters, plots such as the barking of dogs, the guarding of dogs, and the abandonment of dogs by their owners appear repeatedly, forming a symbolic narrative of village life. This circular narrative makes dogs not only exist as animal imagery but also become a part of village life, symbolizing the guardianship and loneliness of the countryside.

The depiction of dogs in *A Village of One's Own* skillfully combines linear narration and symbolic narration, endowing the text with the authentic texture of life and injecting profound metaphorical meaning. The application of this narrative technique greatly enriches the literary connotation of the work, making it a memorable literary piece.

4. The spiritual dimension centered on “dogs”

It is worth noting that since the new era, the trend of animal narrative in literary creation has become increasingly intense, and dogs have been endowed with multiple symbolic meanings. Writers such as Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, Chi Zijian, Yang Zhijun, and others have all used dogs as the main imageries to construct the meaning of their texts. Literature is about humans; the depiction of “dogs” actually points to humans, covering the dual dimensions of human relationships and the relationship between humans and animals^[4].

The animal narrative perspective has demonstrated unique flexibility and depth in literary creation, such as Zhang Chengzhi's *Black Steed* and Wang Xiaobo's *A Unique Pig*. Within this narrative framework, another noteworthy attempt is to construct stories through the perceptions and experiences of animals themselves. For example, the section “The Man Who Understands Donkeys” in a certain work takes the interaction between humans and donkeys as the starting point, profoundly revealing the parallel yet conflicting life rhythms of the two: “It was the busy season for humans to sow seeds, and also the crucial period for donkeys to be in heat (male donkeys are in heat all year round, just like men). These two extremely important matters coincided. When humans needed to use the donkeys, the donkeys were also busy with their own business, which was even more tiring for the donkeys than pulling carts and plowing fields”^[3].

This direct description of the sexuality of donkeys not only reflects the natural attribute of animals driven by instinctive desires but also indirectly explores the complex aspects of human nature through a metaphorical approach. If such a direct description of low-level desires were applied directly to humans, it might imply a

certain derogation of human nature, comparing humans to “livestock that cannot even control their basic desires.” Therefore, the adoption of the animal perspective for narration not only avoids the narrative limitations that may be encountered when directly starting from the human perspective but also explores the commonalities and differences between humans and animals, as well as the subtle and ineffable aspects of human nature, in a novel and insightful manner.

Liu Liangcheng has stated more than once that what he writes about is an “idle person.” From the unique perspective of this idle person, he uses poetic brushstrokes to meticulously depict the natural scenery in a village—plants, animals, and those intangible yet deeply felt elements such as wind, night, moonlight, and dreams. Within this framework, the state of the “idle person” becomes a spiritual catalyst: when the body is at leisure, the mind and spiritual world begin to become active, seeking satisfaction. This sense of dissatisfaction does not stem from material scarcity but from a deep spiritual desire. Precisely because this “idle person” does not work in the fields all day long like ordinary farmers, he has ample time for thinking and introspection, thus cultivating the spiritual wasteland and opening up spiritual territories that are sparse yet full of imagination.

Furthermore, with this perspective, Liu Liangcheng constructs a village world that is both real and transcendent. It not only includes the existence of a physical space but also endows the creatures in the village with souls. In addition, the unique literary characteristics brought about by the vast and barren land of Xinjiang—“On the vast land of Xinjiang, large areas of barren land surround scattered patches of green space. The distribution of human culture is isolated, scattered, and sparse. Isolated villages, isolated towns, isolated cities, and small groups of or single-family ‘independent houses’ have loose connections and scarce communication. The time spent communicating with nature is far more than that spent communicating with members of the same species.” In such an environment, the communication between humans and the natural world becomes frequent and in-depth, far exceeding that between humans ^[6].

Therefore, in Liu Liangcheng’s writing, animal imageries are inevitably endowed with humanistic characteristics. They are not only part of the natural world but also carriers of the author’s emotions and thoughts, reflecting the complex relationships between humans and the environment, and between humans and themselves. Through these “humanized” animals, Liu Liangcheng explores the profound themes of loneliness, the meaning of existence, and the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, presenting readers with a literary world that is both real and philosophical.

4.1. The contrast between humans and dogs

From the very beginning, dogs have been carefully shaped as animal imageries with strong humanistic traits. Their existence goes beyond simple biological descriptions and becomes a profound carrier for exploring human nature, life, loneliness, and social changes. In “The Life of a Dog”, the life of a dog is described as follows: “When a dog lives to an old age, its life becomes relatively safe. This is not because the dog has gained any life experience... At this time, the dog is very much like an elderly person who has gone through many vicissitudes of life. The world can no longer do anything to it, so it has to let go and leave the dog to time and fate.” ^[3]. This description not only reveals the life trajectory of dogs but also implies similarities with the fate of humans. Although Liu Liangcheng clearly points out that dogs do not accumulate capital for their old age when they are young, a deeper analysis reveals that the fate of dogs bears a striking resemblance to that of the broad masses of people at the bottom of society. For these people, the future is full of uncertainties, and they can only focus on the present and struggle for a living. Young people sell their labor and are exploited by capital and society. When they grow old and weak, and

their surplus value is completely extracted, no one will pay attention to their existence anymore. The remaining years can only be spent in “waiting for death.” Here, the fate of dogs becomes a mirror of human fate, reflecting the hardships and helplessness of survival.

The text further describes: “An old dog that has endured years of hardship will eventually have the iron chain binding it rusted and broken without struggling... It is really not easy for a dog to live to an old age.”^[3] These words not only express the hardships and confusion of a dog’s life but also reflect humans’ confusion about the meaning of life and their deep feelings about the hardships of life. As a symbol of guarding the home, dogs cannot even ensure their own safety, and the fragility of their lives is fully demonstrated here. Liu Liangcheng uses the humility and helplessness of dogs to symbolize the predicament and living conditions of the people at the bottom of society. Through this imagery, he reveals the reality of humans being oppressed and exploited.

In “The Life of a Dog”, Liu Liangcheng shows the life course of a dog from birth to death from the dog’s perspective. This dog witnesses the changes in the village and the rise and fall of its owner’s family. It loyally guards the home but is abandoned in its old age due to frailty. The life of this dog reflects the hardships and helplessness of farmers’ lives, and also reflects the living conditions of the people at the bottom of society.

4.2. The exposure of the essence of life

Ordinarily, people’s understanding of dogs is limited to their external behaviors and interactions with humans, and they rarely delve into the life course of dogs and the state and significance of dogs at different stages of life. Liu Liangcheng’s focus on the natural death of dogs goes beyond the simple understanding of dogs and explores deeper issues such as the impermanence of life, the inevitability of aging, and the value and mode of existence of life at different stages. Here, dogs also represent the information about life and death throughout a lifetime. This theme is exquisitely demonstrated through the living state and end of dogs, profoundly reflecting humans’ fear of the fragility of life and death, as well as their contemplation on the essence of existence. The work points out that although the fate of dogs is subject to human will, it is even more difficult for them to escape the laws of nature. The concept of birth, old age, illness, and death not only applies to dogs but also is a profound reflection of the common destiny of all living beings. In “Two Dogs”: “The black dog died. It died in its kennel. My father said it died of old age. At that time, I did not know what kind of death was death from old age. I thought it died of starvation or loneliness. It often did not come out, and sometimes we even forgot to feed it when we were busy.”^[3] When dogs are unable to continue living due to illness or old age, the only fate awaiting them is death. Regardless of the circumstances, whether they are noticed by humans or not, death is the only path. For dogs, this situation profoundly reflects the fragility and impermanence of life, as well as the powerlessness and inevitability of all living beings in the face of death. Therefore, the author naturally raises a question about the meaning of life here: “Is there any meaning in us living like this?”^[3]

Natural death is inevitable, but the hardships of life are even more tormenting. The opening of *A Village of One’s Own* takes “It is really not easy for a dog to live to an old age” as the prologue, subtly setting the tone for the entire work^[3]. This sentence reveals the distinct contrast in living conditions between rural guard dogs and urban pet dogs, and at a deeper level, reflects the fragility of life in harsh environments. The living state of guard dogs is portrayed as a marginalized existence. They cannot be too fierce to the extent of threatening humans, nor can they be too timid to lose their value as guard dogs. Their lives and deaths often hang by a thread, thus highlighting the fragility and unpredictability of life itself.

Human civilization is dominated by individuals, and this concept is reflected in the attitude toward living

beings, which is the so-called “species discrimination.” Therefore, the reflection on humanitarianism initially starts from revealing the painful situation of animals. However, this work mainly demonstrates the humanistic care for animals, and its emotional influence exceeds rational thinking. When the focus of creation is placed on the experiences of animals, the attention naturally falls on the essence of humans. Animals are used here as a medium for humanitarianism and human nature, but the emphasis is on “human nature” rather than the “nature of dogs” itself.

Faced with the death of the black dog, Liu Liangcheng has a profound question about the meaning of life. Although humans and dogs share the same sunshine and go through the process of birth, old age, illness, and death together, humans cannot judge whether their own lives are meaningful from the perspective of dogs. This part of the content prompts readers to reflect on the value and purpose of life, and also makes us think about how the meaning of life is defined and perceived in the interaction between humans and animals.

From the author’s perspective, the existence of dogs and their attitude toward human life may not be related to the complexity of human life, but more about the simple pursuit of survival instincts. It is more of a revelation of the fragility of life, which belongs not only to dogs but also to humans. As Liu Liangcheng reflects: “I think when I grow old, I will gradually understand what it means to be old”^[3]. He connects the death of dogs with the human life process, demonstrating the universality and inevitability of aging and death.

4.3. An important carrier of social and historical changes

Dogs are not only livestock raised by humans during the day but also the “occupants” of the night. At night, the village becomes a world of dogs. “As soon as humans fall asleep, the village becomes a world of dogs. After a day of noise, humans have no more words to say. Both the land and humans are tired. At this time, the barking of dogs fills the air, and the sound of dogs drifts back and forth in the night sky, connecting villages far and near together”^[3]. At this time, humans become secondary existences. Hearing the barking of dogs at night is the most important feature that well represents the existence of this village. Dogs, with a history of thousands of years, can undoubtedly represent the social changes of a village. They have witnessed the passage of time and carried the memories and stories of the countryside. As witnesses of time, dogs have witnessed the changes in the village. For example, “This dog walks back and forth, its eyes filled with the old events and past scenes of people from many years ago”^[3].

In traditional rural society, dogs are not only animals that guard the home but also important guardians of the order of village life. “A long time ago, dogs were not tied up. Except during the mating season, dogs generally did not run around randomly. They lay at the door all day long, each guarding their own courtyard”^[3]. This passage reflects the well-ordered role of dogs in the village in the past; they independently take on the responsibility of guarding the village. This order symbolizes the stability of the rural society at that time and the harmonious relationship between humans and animals. Dogs do not require human restraint and maintain the safety and order of the village by virtue of their instincts. This social model relies on the close integration of humans and nature, reflecting the tranquility and stability in the traditional life of the village.

However, with the advancement of modernization, the process of urbanization has led to the decline of the countryside. Coexisting with the fate of the countryside, the role of dogs has gradually changed. From being the maintainers of the original village order, they have gradually been marginalized by society and become silent witnesses of changes. They are not only a part of the village but also symbolize the loneliness and decline of the village in the process of modernization. In the chapter “Huangshaliang”, Liu Liangcheng further reveals

the connection between the fate of dogs and the village: “Throughout the day, only the elderly and dogs are left guarding the empty village. The sun moves step by step over the treetops and rooftops”^[3]. Dogs and the elderly jointly guard the empty village, becoming silent symbols in the process of social and historical changes, reflecting the decline of the village and its marginalized status in society. The silence of dogs and the emptiness of the village reflect each other, expressing the loneliness and loss of village life.

The political and social changes brought about by modernization have made the fate of dogs even more tragic. Liu Liangcheng mentions in “All Dogs Died from Exhaustion”: “Every three years, when it comes to the village head election, a batch of dogs will die from exhaustion”^[3]. The death of dogs is no longer just a biological event but a victim of the traditional village order in the power struggle. The fate of dogs is closely intertwined with the political conflicts of the village. In the power struggle of modernization, the traditional, simple human feelings are consumed by interests. As the thing that best represents the traditional village culture, dogs will naturally also be consumed, which indicates the demise of traditional culture and values in the process of modernization. The death of dogs not only symbolizes the breakdown of social connections in the village but also represents the gradual disappearance of rural culture in the process of modernization. The disappearance of dogs reflects the collapse of the traditional way of life and values in the village, becoming a symbol of the loss of rural culture.

When the social structure changes, dogs will naturally face the survival dilemma brought about by the new environment. “The dog knows that it has neglected its duty, so it raises its head and howls at the sky as if crying”^[3]. In this description, the dog fails to fulfill its duty of guarding and feels helpless, which symbolizes the collapse of the old order of the village and the sense of powerlessness brought about by social transformation. The dereliction of duty and predicament of dogs not only reflect the deepening of individual loneliness but also reveal the marginalization of rural society and the impact of modernization.

In the chapter “Kengwa Di”, the imagery of dogs further deepens the theme of cultural inheritance: “It is not easy for a village to have a good dog, just as it is not easy to have a capable person... Generally, a village produces two capable dogs every thirty years and one outstanding person every three hundred years”^[3]. Here, dogs not only symbolize the guardians of the village’s history and culture but also become witnesses of collective memory. Through the description of dogs, Liu Liangcheng expresses his deep memory of the village’s social history and cultural heritage, demonstrating the loss of collective emotions in the process of social changes.

The fate of dogs not only symbolizes the loneliness of individuals but also reflects the social collapse and cultural decline of the entire village under the impact of modernization. Through the imagery of dogs, Liu Liangcheng reveals the breakdown of the rural social structure and the complex relationships between humans and the environment, and between tradition and modernization. In his writing, dogs are not only the guardians of the village but also important carriers of social and historical changes, bearing the memories and loneliness of rural society.

5. Conclusion

Through the dog imagery in *A Village of One’s Own*, Liu Liangcheng profoundly reflects the complexity of rural life and the impermanence of individual fate. Here, dogs are not only an animal imagery but also a complex cultural symbol formed through the accumulation of Chinese civilization over thousands of years. Dogs are not only loyal guardians of the village but also contain multiple dimensions of social contradictions, cultural changes, and human emotions. Through delicate narration, Liu Liangcheng endows dogs with profound philosophical

significance, making them a key carrier for understanding life and death, loneliness, and the predicament of human nature. From a deeper social-ecological perspective, the fate of dogs is closely intertwined with the fate of the village. The changes in their roles are not only a microcosm of the marginalization of traditional rural culture in the process of modernization but also a direct response to the ecological ethics issue of “the coexistence of humans and nature” in modern society.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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