

Love's Illusions and the Disenchantment of Nostalgia: Irony in Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*

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Abstract

The masterpiece of Wang Anyi, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, is frequently interpreted through the framework of Shanghai's nostalgic revival. Yet beneath its seemingly elegiac surface lies a sustained and penetrating irony directed at nostalgia itself. Drawing upon Cleanth Brooks's theory of irony and focusing on Wang Qiyao's three pivotal romantic relationships—with Director Li, Kang Minxun, and Old Colour—this study examines the persistent tension between the characters' perceptions and the realities that ultimately unfold. Each relationship embodies a distinct amorous illusion: love reduced to an object of exchange, love divested of responsibility, and love sustained through nostalgic projection. At the same time, the novel's prophetic mode of narration establishes a framework of prior negation, subtly foreclosing the fulfilment of these illusions before they have fully taken shape. Together, these two levels of irony converge in a dismantling of the mythos of love associated with Old Shanghai, effecting, in the end, a profound disenchantment of nostalgic aesthetics.

Keywords

Wang Anyi; *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*; ironic narrative.

1. Introduction

Since its publication in 1995, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* has been deemed as a central text in the study of contemporary Chinese literature. For appearing at the height of Shanghai's nostalgic revival, the novel was often received as an affectionate recollection of the city's vanished past, and Wang Qiyao's fate was frequently mistaken for an elegy to historical Shanghai. Yet such a reading overlooks a crucial dimension of the work. Although Wang Qiyao functions as an image through which the city is refracted—alongside the alleyways, the circulating gossip, the secluded boudoirs, and the pigeons that drift across the skyline—Wang Anyi herself has remarked: "On the one hand, I felt that none of the characters in *The Song* were people I truly admired or held in esteem. Yet I spent the entire novel writing about them. In the end, the only thing I could do was to give them an ironic ending, to overturn their destinies." [1] The novel, therefore, is not a nostalgic reconstruction of Shanghai through the life of Qiyao. What is more, its irony is rarely overt. Rather, it operates in a restrained and oblique manner, so that readers may easily be carried along by the surface current of nostalgia while missing the critical undercurrent that runs beneath it. The present study approaches the novel through Cleanth Brooks's conception of irony as the distortion imposed by context upon an utterance, whereby a statement may come to "signify precisely the opposite of its literal meaning within a particular situation". [2] Taking Wang Qiyao's relationships with Director Li, Kang Mingxun, and Old Colour as its point of departure, the discussion first examines the novel's ironic treatment of three corresponding illusions of love: love as objectification, love divorced from responsibility, and love sustained by nostalgic projection. It then turns to the novel's prophetic mode of narration—manifest in its omniscient perspective, the recurrence of emblematic scenes, and the deliberate arrangement of characters—to show how these romances are subtly

foreclosed in advance and subjected to authorial negation before their tragic conclusions unfold. Through the interplay of these internal and external layers of irony, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* ultimately dismantles the myth of love associated with Old Shanghai and effects a thorough disenchantment of nostalgic aesthetics.

2. Irony and the Illusions of Love: Appearance and Reality in Three Relationships

Wang Qiyao, throughout her life, becomes involved in three significant romantic relationships: those with Director Li, Kang Mingxun, and Old Colour. On the surface, she appears to be pursuing little more than love and a settled existence. Yet the narrator's detached gaze reveals that each of these relationships is marked by a profound departure from the very essence of love. The discrepancy between what Wang Qiyao believes herself to possess and what, in fact, confronts her constitutes one of the central mechanisms of irony in the novel.

2.1. Love as Objectification: Director Li and the Alice Apartments

Qiyao first encounters Director Li, a powerful political and military figure, after gaining recognition as the third-place winner in the Miss Shanghai Pageant. For a nineteen-year-old girl from the alleyways, Director Li signifies not merely the promise of romance, but the possibility of crossing the boundaries of class. Within a remarkably short time, she is transformed from an admired beauty with a public presence into a woman whose existence is defined by waiting in the Alice Apartments.

The Alice Apartments function as an extended metaphor throughout the novel, embodying a state of objectification. Every detail of the apartment's arrangement serves this symbolic purpose. The mirrors are there so that Qiyao may prepare herself before Li arrives; the telephone allows advance notice of his visits; the doorbell announces his appearance. Each object is subordinated to a single act: waiting. As the narrator observes, "What she did not know was that every room in the Alice Apartments was filled with waiting, each of a different kind." [3] Within this carefully ordered space, Qiyao gradually becomes less a subject than an ornament of desire, a gilded songbird whose daily occupation is not the shaping of her own life but the anticipation of another's arrival.

Yet in her later years she looks back upon this relationship with a striking sense of affirmation: "If there was ever a marriage in my life, it was with Director Li. There was neither a formal wedding nor a lifelong union, yet there was affection and there was loyalty." [4] Such a judgment reveals the extent to which her understanding of the relationship diverges from its reality. It is possible that genuine feeling existed between them; nevertheless, the relationship never ceased to be unequal. The love she cherishes is a love confined to secrecy, hidden away within the walls of the Alice Apartments and denied any public legitimacy. What she takes to be the substance of love—the apartment itself, the gold that Director Li leaves behind—proves instead to be evidence of its absence.

The irony becomes most apparent in the fate of the gold. Intended as the material safeguard of her later years, it ultimately becomes the immediate cause of her death. The object that once appeared as a token of affection is transformed into the instrument of destruction. Through this reversal, the novel radically overturns Qiyao's understanding of the relationship. The symbolic economy upon which she has built her understanding of love collapses under the weight of its own contradiction.

What she believes she experiences, therefore, is love; what the narrative discloses is something quite different: a relationship structured by asymmetrical power and sustained through material exchange. She interprets Director Li's patronage as devotion, whereas the narrator

quietly reveals that the relationship is unequal from the outset, compromised by dependence, and destined, in the end, to culminate in ruin.

2.2. Love Without Responsibility: Kang Mingxun and a Language of Hints and Evasions

During her years in Ping'anli, Qiyao became acquainted with Kang Mingxun. He was a young man constrained by the circumstances of his family. Though the only son of the household, he had been born to the secondary wife and consequently occupied an ambiguous position within the domestic hierarchy. Caught between the interests of the principal and secondary branches of the family, he spent much of his life attempting to satisfy both. He had witnessed his mother's silent weeping behind closed doors and had seen at first hand the helplessness that accompanied her marginal status. Against this background, her beauty and self-possession exerted a powerful attraction upon him. Yet from the outset he understood that their relationship could have no future. Indeed, the stronger and more resilient Wang Qiyao appeared, the more irresistibly she drew him towards her. Their attachment thus unfolded beneath the shadow of an impossibility already foreseen.

The course of the relationship itself reveals this contradiction. Kang Mingxun visited Wang Qiyao far more often than she visited him. In fact, the novel records only a single occasion on which she went to the Kang household, and even then only after repeated invitations from Mrs. Yan. The reason lies in the disparity of social standing between them. Kang's family background, together with the obligations imposed by his position within the family, left little room for any action that might compromise familial respectability. As the Third Miss Shanghai, she carried with her a reputation whose implications were readily understood by those around her. A woman with such a past would scarcely have been accepted into a traditional household, and Wang Qiyao herself was fully aware of this fact. For that reason, she never sought entry into his world. Their relationship proceeded through a series of tentative advances and withdrawals, sustained by mutual desire yet constrained by mutual recognition of its limits.

The language they share is one of implication rather than declaration. Certain words possess meanings known only to themselves, while Mrs. Yan's indirect inquiries further envelop the relationship in an atmosphere of ambiguity and conjecture. Kang once assured her that he would not overstep the bounds of propriety, yet events unfold otherwise. Wang Qiyao becomes pregnant, and the child emerges as the decisive test of the relationship's substance. At this moment Kang's weakness is laid bare. He fears responsibility because he is incapable of bearing it. Faced with the realities of pregnancy outside marriage, Wang Qiyao finds herself abandoned by the social order that surrounds her. In the end, she is forced to turn to Sasha as a nominal substitute, while Kang Mingxun retreats from the situation altogether, leaving her to confront its consequences alone.

The irony of this relationship lies in the disparity between emotional intimacy and moral commitment. Both Wang Qiyao and Kang Mingxun seem to believe that their unspoken understanding, their private warmth and mutual sympathy, are sufficient foundations for love. Yet the moment responsibility arrives, the relationship disintegrates. Wang Anyi does not condemn Kang Mingxun through overt authorial judgment. Instead, she allows his evasions and Wang Qiyao's helplessness to speak for themselves. The reader is thus led to recognize that an attachment incapable of assuming responsibility is not, in any meaningful sense, love at all, but rather an ambiguous game of mutual depletion sustained by sentiment and destined to dissolve when confronted by reality.

2.3. Nostalgic Love: Old Colour and the Phantom of Old Shanghai

At the age of twenty-six, Old Colour is fascinated by all things associated with Old Shanghai. When he encounters Wang Qiyao, now past sixty, he is captivated by the lingering grace she

seems to embody. Their first meeting is described in strikingly visual terms: "In the corner of the room sat a woman with fair skin, lightly made up, dressed in a pale mauve silk-and-linen suit. Her arms folded, she leaned slightly forward, her eyes fixed upon the television screen. Now and then the curtain brushed against the hem of her skirt without distracting her. When the light from the screen suddenly brightened, one could glimpse the slight droop beneath her eyes, and her age revealed itself. Yet it vanished almost at once, carefully concealed, folded deep within her very bones. Time had crept upon her quietly, anxious to leave no trace, though traces had inevitably remained. This was Wang Qiyao in 1985." [5] Old Colour is genuinely drawn to Wang Qiyao, but what attracts him is less the woman herself than the aura she carries. She appears to him as a surviving relic of Old Shanghai, a living testimony to a vanished world of elegance and prosperity. Through her, the past seems momentarily recoverable.

Yet love cannot remain indefinitely on the level of symbols. Once Old Colour approaches her as a real person rather than as an emblem, the illusion begins to dissolve. He notices the stains left by hair dye upon her pillow; he becomes aware of the stale odour lingering in the room. The novel records the moment with characteristic precision: "There was a stale smell in the room, the sort that dampens one's spirits. He remarked that the air was bad and went to open the window. As he drew back the curtain, the sunlight struck his eyes. Rallying himself, he said that it was nearly time to prepare lunch... He stood facing the curtain for a moment before turning and leaving the room." [6] What had once been fascination gradually gives way to aversion. Wang Qiyao's response is even more revealing. In an effort to preserve his companionship, she attempts to use her gold as a means of retaining him. The irony of the situation is profound. The former Third Miss Shanghai now finds herself pleading for a young man not to abandon her, which exposes the fragility of the illusion on both sides. Old Colour loves not Wang Qiyao herself but the phantom of Old Shanghai that he imagines her to represent; Wang Qiyao, in turn, mistakes his passing fascination for a final chance at emotional salvation. Once age reveals itself and the illusion is broken, the supposed romance between generations immediately discloses its emptiness.

The relationship thus serves as a critique of nostalgic projection. Old Colour does not love a living person but an image constructed from memory and desire. At the same time, it exposes Wang Qiyao's own predicament. As one of the surviving remnants of Old Shanghai, she is destined to share the fate of the world she embodies: to be gradually forgotten and abandoned. In this respect, Wang Anyi's treatment of Wang Qiyao stands in marked contrast to Bai Xianrong's portrayal of Yin Xueyan, whose allure seems suspended beyond the reach of time. Wang Anyi refuses to preserve her heroine as an ageless emblem of nostalgia. Instead, she allows Wang Qiyao to age, to decline, to suffer humiliation, and ultimately to die. Through this insistence upon mortality and ordinariness, the novel dismantles the romanticized vision of Old Shanghai so often perpetuated by nostalgic discourse.

Beyond these three relationships, the novel also contains a quieter and largely overlooked form of affection in the figure of Cheng. Throughout the years he remains devoted to Wang Qiyao, accompanying her with unfailing patience and discretion, yet his devotion is never reciprocated. Even in death, his thoughts remain fixed upon her. The tragedy of Cheng's unfulfilled love stands in sharp contrast to the three relationships Wang Qiyao actively pursues. Genuine affection remains close at hand, yet she fails to recognize it; illusory forms of love, by contrast, draw her with irresistible force. This contrast deepens the irony surrounding her understanding of love. What she seeks is not love itself but the promises she associates with it—vanity, security, or the lingering dream of Old Shanghai.

3. Irony in Prophetic Narration

If the irony embedded in the romantic relationships is explicit, then the function of prophetic narration in the novel is implicit. Before the reader has even entered the love stories, the narrative has already established a framework of negation. This prefiguration is itself ironic: the reader is aware of the ending from the very beginning, while the characters remain unaware throughout.

3.1. Zero Focalization

The novel opens with a bird's-eye view from the perspective of pigeons: "Seen from a commanding height, Shanghai's alleyways present a magnificent spectacle." [7] This omniscient mode of zero-focalized narration grants readers a cognitive advantage over the characters before the story has even begun. According to Gérard Genette, narrative may be divided into zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization[8] on the basis of the difference between the information provided by the narrator and that available to the characters. The perspective of the pigeons is precisely such a "God's-eye view," namely what Genette terms zero focalization. Under zero focalization, "the narrator both speaks and sees; events may be observed from any angle, the inner thoughts of any character may be penetrated, and the narrator may occasionally adopt a character's internal perspective or feign the position of an observer." [9] It is through this objective and detached perspective that the novel presents the development of the story and the fluctuations of its characters' lives.

As spirits of the city, the pigeons know every rumor and witness all those hidden acts that take place in the silence of the night. They become mute witnesses to injustice and suffering. This omniscient narrative perspective is established from the very beginning. It functions almost as a prophecy, foreshadowing Wang Qiyao's tragic fate. Consequently, the author's attitude at the outset already establishes a critical tone and casts a somber, oppressive shadow over the entire work. On the surface, the story is narrated in a calm and unobtrusive manner through zero focalization; in reality, however, these narrative hints have already announced Wang Qiyao's death and, simultaneously, the death of the prosperous Old Shanghai she represents. This early foreshadowing forms a subtle contrast with the subsequent depictions of splendor and vitality, thereby generating an understated ironic effect.

The discourse established through zero focalization frequently contradicts the evaluative discourse of the characters themselves, thus highlighting the ironic nature of the narrative. For example, although Wang Qiyao generally approaches the people and events around her with composure, she is displeased when she first sees the photograph of herself published in Shanghai Life under the title "Shanghai Lady." In her view, the woman in the photograph does not correspond to her ideal image of herself. The photograph appears provincial and lacking in elegance, which leaves her deeply disappointed. She subsequently hides the magazine beneath her pillow, feeling as though she has made a fool of herself. The narrator, however, tells the reader: "The Wang Qiyao in the photograph was not beautiful; she was pleasing to look at ... there was something genuinely comfortable about her appearance." [10] This discrepancy in perception recurs throughout the novel. Wang Qiyao consistently harbors unrealistic expectations regarding her beauty and her destiny, whereas readers, through the privileged position afforded by zero focalization, are already able to perceive her limitations.

An even more representative example is her death. When Long Legs strangles her for the gold, readers witness, through the narrator's omniscient perspective, the complete trajectory of the former "Third Miss Shanghai," from splendor to decline. Wang herself, however, does not arrive at this recognition until the very moment of death, when she vaguely recalls the girl who played a corpse in the film studio more than forty years earlier. This disparity—where the reader has

long foreseen what the character only comes to understand at the end of her life—constitutes the internal tension of the novel's ironic narrative.

3.2. The Recurrence of Particular Scenes

The repeated appearance of certain scenes throughout the novel continually suggests the inevitability of her tragic fate in love. This is manifested primarily through the recurrence of three specific settings: the film studio, the dance hall, and the city at night.

The film studio scene first appears when Wang Qiyao sees a young girl playing the role of a corpse, though it is unclear whether the death is the result of suicide or murder. "Strangely enough, the scene was not eerie or terrifying; rather, it felt oddly familiar." [11] More than forty years later, when Long Legs is strangling her and the only thing left in her vision is the swaying electric light, she suddenly realizes that the girl was herself. The recurrence of the film studio scene forms a closed narrative circle: what initially appeared strange ultimately becomes an act of self-recognition. The irony of this structure lies in the fact that the warning was present from the very beginning, yet Qiyao saw only the glamour of the film studio and overlooked its prophecy of death.

The dance hall functions in a similar manner. As a student, Wang Qiyao first enters the dance hall and, though not yet its center of attention, already displays a certain brilliance. After becoming "Miss Shanghai," she occupies the spotlight at such gatherings. By the time of the Ping'anli period, however, she appears only in a modified old-style qipao and has retreated to the margins as a spectator. The setting remains the same, as does her identity as "Miss Shanghai," yet her position gradually shifts from the center to the periphery. This transformation does not occur suddenly; rather, it is repeatedly witnessed through the reappearance of the dance hall itself. The narrator never directly laments that time spares no one. Instead, through the repetition of the setting and the changing position of the character within it, irony emerges naturally.

3.3. Prophetic Characters

Three figures in the novel may be regarded as prophetic characters: Wang Qiyao's grandmother, Ah Er, and the film director. The warnings they offer stand in ironic contrast to the choices Wang Qiyao ultimately makes.

Wuqiao is a place marked by a distinctive sense of destiny. For its inhabitants, life revolves around the simple fact of living, with an emphasis on the modest pleasures of ordinary existence. Life in Wuqiao is monotonous; today differs little from tomorrow, and daily routines repeat themselves endlessly: "All these are testimonies to a kind of eternity. Though rivers may flow on and the world may change, it remains unmoved, almost a truth of human life and of time itself." [12] After leaving the Alice Apartments, Wang Qiyao comes to Wuqiao, yet although her body is there, her heart remains in Shanghai. When her grandmother sees her, it is as though she can already glimpse the next forty years of her life. She feels that Wang Qiyao has made a poor beginning, and that once the course of her life has been bent in the wrong direction it will be difficult to correct. In her view, the root of the problem lies in one thing alone: Wang Qiyao is too beautiful. Beauty is deceptive, yet the person it deceives is not others but oneself. Shanghai, moreover, assists her in sustaining this dream. Everything else may change, but the dream remains unbroken. Only at the end of the novel, when readers learn that she dies because of the gold left to her by Director Li, does it become clear that she had taken the wrong path from the very beginning. Her life ultimately confirms her grandmother's prophecy. The forty years that follow unfold exactly as foreseen: her grandmother knew that her future would be difficult, and that each step would be harder than the last.

The second prophetic figure is Ah Er. During Wang Qiyao's stay in Wuqiao, Ah Er is an ambitious young man unwilling to accept a life of repetition and stagnation. He admires Wang Qiyao and

harbors boundless aspirations toward Shanghai. Eventually, he leaves Wuqiao and sets out for Shanghai alone. After that, he never reappears in the novel. Yet a conversation between him and her reveals much about her future fate:

Ah Er continued: "Poetry is really a picture. Take 'The moon above Han and Qin casts its shadow upon Mingfei'—is that not a picture? 'Called a thousand times before she finally appears, still half-concealing her face behind the pipa'—is that not another picture? 'Her jade-like face lonely, tears flowing down, like a pear blossom touched by spring rain'—is that not also a picture? And what of 'Peach trees flourish in their youth, radiant with blossoms'?" [13]

The first three poetic lines respectively refer to Li Bai's poem on Wang Zhaojun, Bai Juyi's depiction of the pipa player, and Bai Juyi's verses on Yang Guifei after her death. All are imbued with sorrow. The final line, "Peach trees flourish in their youth, radiant with blossoms," appears to describe a joyful scene, yet it functions as a contrastive image that foreshadows Wang Qiyao's fate: throughout her life she seeks love but never attains a secure and lasting home. As a prophetic figure, Ah Er's words implicitly correspond to the trajectory of Wang Qiyao's life. She is beautiful like the peach blossom and spends her life pursuing stable love and belonging. Yet from the moment she enters the Alice Apartments, the tragic undertone of her destiny is already fixed, and all her expectations of happiness and romantic fulfilment ultimately come to nothing. Ah Er's longing for Shanghai constitutes another level of prophecy. Not only Wang Qiyao, but countless others who approach the glamorous metropolis with romantic fantasies will eventually find their aspirations worn away by the desires of urban life, leaving only illusion and disappointment.

The final prophetic figure is the director. Before Wang Qiyao enters the Miss Shanghai competition, he advises her not to participate. In his view, "the crown of Miss Shanghai is but a floating cloud. It dazzles the eye, yet vanishes in an instant. It is passing smoke, a fleeting landscape, a basket lowered into water only to return empty. It blinds you, and when at last you open your eyes, there is nothing there." [14] This warning itself possesses a prophetic quality. The director has already seen through the emptiness concealed beneath worldly glamour and has foreseen that Wang Qiyao's hope of transforming her fate through the title of Miss Shanghai is ultimately an unrealistic dream. As a prophetic character, the director's clear-sighted judgment stands in sharp contrast to her persistent determination. This contrast further intensifies the novel's irony: while those directly involved remain intoxicated by illusions of splendour and fail to perceive the outcome, the observer has already exposed the truth that all such expectations will end in disappointment. As a result, the entire narrative is enveloped from its beginning in a tragic irony marked by a sense of inevitability.

All of these characters possess a clearer understanding of reality than Wang Qiyao herself, yet their warnings are consistently ignored. By introducing these prophetic figures, the narrator reveals Wang Qiyao's fate to readers in advance, thereby creating a persistent tension throughout the reading process: readers remain aware that the protagonist is moving steadily toward a trap, while she herself remains entirely unaware. This juxtaposition of the informed and the deceived constitutes one of the defining mechanisms of ironic narration.

4. Conclusion

The representation of romantic relationships in *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* vividly demonstrates the central mechanism of ironic narration. In each of Wang Qiyao's three major relationships, there exists a clear rupture between the character's understanding of her situation and the reality that confronts her. Through these ruptures, the narrator dismantles the illusions that material wealth, ambiguity, or nostalgia can themselves constitute love. Prophetic narration is not an independent theme but rather a framework of prior negation that serves the novel's irony of love. Zero focalization grants readers a cognitive advantage over the

characters; the recurrence of scenes such as the film studio and the dance hall foreshadows the tragic outcome; and the prophetic figures repeatedly suggest the inevitability of that tragedy. Together, these narrative strategies intensify the tension of irony.

Wang Anyi refuses to create an ageless nostalgic icon, thereby standing in fundamental opposition to the romanticized imagination commonly associated with the nostalgic revival. The two layers of irony ultimately converge upon a disenchantment of Shanghai's nostalgic aesthetics. The true target of the novel's irony, therefore, is neither a particular individual nor a particular romance, but the entire mythology of love and the nostalgic illusion attached to Old Shanghai itself.

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