

The Art of Describing the Appearance and Actions of Heroic and Villainous Characters in Southern Vietnamese Detective Novels in the Early of 20th Century

Truong Thi Linh

Faculty of Education, Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT: Southern Vietnamese detective novels in the first half of the 20th century played a crucial role in the modernization of Vietnamese literature, particularly regarding the techniques of human portraiture. This paper focuses on elucidating the art of describing the appearance and actions of typical character types within this genre. Based on textual analysis, the research findings reveal that the character system is distinctly portrayed through two main groups.

Firstly, the male character line is categorized into three types: the heroic character, possessing ideal traits and chivalrous actions; the anti-hero (half-hero), characterized by a complex inner world and edgy actions that reflect a multidimensional realistic perspective; and the villain, depicted with sharp, contrasting strokes that serve as a foil to elevate the good. Secondly, the emergence of the female hero line—with their robust appearances, resourcefulness, and courageous actions—marks a profound breakthrough, transcending the gender prejudices of contemporary Confucianism.

The study affirms that through the art of describing appearance and actions—which simultaneously inherits traditional conventions and assimilates Western literary techniques—Southern writers successfully constructed a vivid world of characters. This not only creates the distinctive appeal of detective novels but also profoundly reflects the cultural, social, and aesthetic transformations of the Southern region during a transitional era.

KEYWORDS: Southern detective novels, descriptive art, appearance and actions, heroic characters, villains, Vietnamese literature in the Early of the 20th century.

I. INTRODUCTION

The first half of the 20th century was a period that marked turning-point transformations in the modernization process of Vietnamese literature. Especially in Southern Vietnam – a pioneering land in the process of East-West cultural intersection, the introduction of Western literature gave rise to many new genres. Among these, detective fiction emerged as a unique literary phenomenon, satisfying the urbanites' taste for curiosity and entertainment, while simultaneously reflecting the complex turmoils of a society in transition.

The appeal of Southern detective novels during this period lay not only in thrilling plots, intricate cases, or techniques of creating suspense, but was also shaped by the art of character construction. This is where writers clearly demonstrated the combination of traditional moral thinking (a clear distinction between good and evil, good things come to good people) and the individualized, realistic descriptive techniques of the West. Within this, the central axis of conflict in all detective works always revolved around two core character lines: heroes (including both male and female) and villains.

To Southern writers, the appearance and actions of characters were not merely superficial sketches. They served as sharp artistic tools, a "mirror" reflecting the inner world, moral nature, and the aesthetic value system that the author wished to convey. While the heroic character line was often described with the beauty of an ideal hero and chivalrous actions, the villainous character line was depicted with harsh, cruel, and cunning strokes, creating a perfect artistic foil to elevate the good.

Stemming from this reality, this article delves into analyzing the artistic techniques used to construct these two contrasting human types. Through textual examination, the research aims to clarify the distinctive features in the artistic thinking of Southern writers, while simultaneously contributing to affirming the position and value of detective fiction within the overall landscape of modern Vietnamese literature.

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II. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Methods The article utilizes the textual analysis and synthesis method to conduct a close reading of the literary works, extracting representative quotes to substantiate the proposed arguments. In addition, the article applies the socio-historical research method—placing the works within the context of Southern society during the transitional period to provide objective and scientific assessments.

III. RESULTS

3.1. The Male Character Line

The Heroic Character Type

The chivalrous heroic characters in detective stories almost exclusively appear to resolve personal grudges, or if they help someone, it is within a small circle, involving family relationships; or their scope of activity is also limited by their vision and by different historical periods. We can list some characters such as: Hoàn Ngọc Ân, Đỗ Hiếu Liêm (*Châu về hiệp phố*, - 1926), Bách-Si-Ma (*Lửa lòng* - 1926, Phú Đức), *Tình trường huyết lệ* (Phú Đức, 1930), Trần Lý Trai (*Mảnh trăng thu* - Bửu Đình, 1931); *Tôi có tội* (Phú Đức, 1935)...

It seems that to describe the physical appearance of heroic characters in historical and detective novels, the authors all follow a formulaic motif: age/appearance/behaviors, gestures, attitudes... to depict the hero. There are almost no exceptions. They still use prose structures with parallel and balanced characteristics (biên ngẫu), and still employ symbolic and conventional descriptive styles. We can see this in the novel *Châu về hiệp phố* (Phú Đức). Hoàn Ngọc Ân is described as having "an elegant and handsome demeanor, an extraordinary appearance, aged twenty-two" and Đỗ Hiếu Liêm "although younger than Hoàn Ngọc Ân, has an imposing and upright countenance, while his demeanor is deeply elegant" (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 251). Trần Lý Trai (*Mảnh trăng thu* - Bửu Đình) is described as "a young man of about twenty, fair-skinned. Dark eyebrows, a straight nose, a wide mouth, slightly large ears..." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 356). Bách Si Ma (*Lửa lòng* - Phú Đức) has a strict temperament, does not often joke, and is described as "Bách Si Ma, about thirty years old, is a man with thick eyebrows, deep-set eyes, and flabby facial skin that is pitted with dark spots and has many black marks, thus making him look fierce" (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 10). He represents the typical hero in detective novels, seeking to uncover a murder case where the victims of that crime are his own family. A crime that left his father's body dismembered, his mother dying of anguish, and his siblings wandering to far-off places.

Whether in historical or detective novels, the authors depict the attitude and gestures of the hero as always upright, incorruptible, and completely fearless in the face of power and violence. Minh Đường (*Mảnh trăng thu* - Bửu Đình), when investigating a case to exonerate his lover Kiều Tiên of the crime of murdering her husband on their wedding night: "Minh Đường's two eyes stared intently into Nguyễn Viết Sung's two eyes like a cat watching a mouse, causing Nguyễn Viết Sung to naturally change his complexion and immediately bow his face down." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 532).

The Semi-Heroic Character Type

This character type is multi-dimensional and complex, experiencing a struggle between good and evil, but inherently inclined towards goodness. In detective novels, there are characters with dual personalities. That personality changes without the character even being aware of it; the character can go from bad to good and vice versa. This character type is different from the hypocritical character type in detective novels (which we will discuss later). For example, Vương Công (*Tình trường huyết lệ* - Phú Đức), originally a callous man, addicted to gambling to the point of losing all his fortune and being unaware that his wife died of sorrow. However, this very same man is willing to engage in a life-or-death duel with others for a girl, and willing to cooperate with the authorities to hunt down the Quỉ Đen (Black Devil) bandit gang to save the people. This is a typical character with a dual personality. Yet, his personality change is not created by circumstances, but because he himself feels the need to change after the death of his wife. At this point, he "would rather die with honor than endure humiliation" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 89), or "if I cannot win the fight, then I will die" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 90)... This character type is not as numerous and typical as the heroic and villainous character types in detective novels.

Kì Đồng (the leader of the Quỉ Đen bandit gang) appears with the appearance: "This person is still a young man, incredibly strong, about twenty-five years old, with a high nose and broad forehead, a dark tanned complexion, and an unusually fierce face." (Phú Đức 1930), p. 103). With the attire: "This person wore a black silk outfit, his feet wearing Chinese-style shoes" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 103). This can also be considered a multi-personality character type in the story. At times he is truly gallant (saving Vương Công from Nguyễn Hảo Sanh's sword tip), but he is also a person who murders and robs without hesitation. No matter what his purpose is, his view on life is somewhat extreme. His life purpose is to take revenge on the world: "society is not for me, why must I be for society?" (Phú Đức, 1930, pp. 158-159). This saying is repeated by him many times, showing that this is a person dissatisfied with society. Therefore, he takes murdering and robbing as a profession: "I killed two Westerners, an Indian, and two Chinese." (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 159) with the notion: "You must know that those great wealthy men I killed, they were ten or a hundred times more ruthless and unethical than me!" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 159).

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The Villainous Character Type

This character type is depicted in stark contrast (both in their cunning appearance and cruel actions) to serve as a foil to highlight the heroic line. This character type is meticulously described from physical appearance to actions, gestures, attitudes, and even their psychology. However, there are also characters who only appear through the perspectives of others about them. Take the case of Nguyễn Viết Sung (Mảnh trăng thu - Bửu Đình) for example, whose outward appearance is only roughly sketched, "This person is over forty years old, with a flat forehead, deep but bright eyes, a slightly broken nose, and a black mustache..." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 488); or his unsightly face "... a grim and fierce face, thick black mustache..." (p. 530). Nevertheless, he is the primary cause leading to the case of Kiều Tiên murdering her husband, and to her younger brother being forced into a life of wandering. Or here is the description of an untrustworthy person:

"Lực is big, the length from his head to his back is longer than from his legs to his back, his two arms are long like an ape's, a broad chest, a somewhat elongated face, deep eyes, high cheekbones, a slightly broken nose; below his left eye there is a scar, and whenever he meets someone, he tends to look askance..." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 461).

A bandit leader who murders and robs without hesitation is described as having "a burly physique, deep-set eyes, dark skin, and wearing a short but very thick mustache on his upper lip..." (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 321). The author remarks on him: "This person has a fierce-looking face and is not a righteous man; moreover, looking at his build, one can also recognize him as a martial artist." (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 321).

A boastful and fame-seeking man like Hồ Kỳ Phước (*Lửa lòng* - Phú Đức) appears before the readers' eyes "about fifty years old, the hair on his head already turning gray" (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 2). He likes to show off his wealth and considers himself the richest man in all of Nam Kỳ. "Currently, I have more than a million silver coins to spare in the cabinet, while the fields and gardens I bought cost seven vẹo of silver [a massive sum]. I am truly rich; I reckon in all of Nam Kỳ there are not many Annamese richer than me." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 3). Already rich, yet he wants to be even richer, so he urges his only daughter to marry into a wealthy family so that:

"I have observed that this boy is a very worthy match for you because he is a high-ranking official and originally from a noble lineage. He is the son of Mr. Nguyễn Thành Nhơn, a Đốc phủ sứ (a high-ranking provincial official) who has retired this year; he is wealthy with tens of thousands of silver coins to spare." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 7)

Being inherently a fame-seeker and not someone with honest behaviors, gestures, or attitudes, upon hearing the news of Hồng Sơn's accident, he laughed and said: "That guy Hồng Sơn got run over by a car, is gravely ill and broke his right arm...", "that useless rotten guy, he must have been falling asleep while walking so he ducked his head into the wheel, what else." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 10). His name is Phước [meaning "Blessing" or "Good Fortune"], yet his thoughts, actions, and gestures reveal that this is a character entirely devoid of compassion. And this is increasingly verified when the story of Hồng Sơn's family is brought to light. The author depicts Hồ Kỳ Phước's character as somewhat dubious right from the beginning of the story, even though he is a wealthy man, and this foreshadows that this character's life and past are intertwined with the entirety of the novel *Lửa lòng* that Phú Đức is presenting:

"The background of Mr. Hồ Kỳ Phước, who is Miss Bạch Liên's father here, is known by few; it is only known that he went abroad to stay in America (Huê Kỳ) for a few years and returned to Nam Kỳ to buy large rubber plantations, yielding tens of thousands in annual profit, while his real estate in Saigon ranks among the most beautiful." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 2)

As a character whose personality is distinctly portrayed, his gestures, attitudes, and behaviors... all fail to evoke any sympathy from those interacting with him. This character's personality is somewhat extreme in flaunting his wealth and taking pride in his assets; he has a solitary disposition, likes to harm others, and considers harming others a joy. Even regarding the money given to a woman (Ánh Tuyết), when necessary, he exhaustively recounts every single detail. This proves that he is a character with a dubious background, possessing great wealth but no virtue, and a personality driven by competitiveness and vanity:

"My beloved lady, please reconsider; from the day you tied the knot with me, you clearly saw how much I love you. Whatever jewelry and gems you wanted, I have bought them all without missing a single item; luckily, we have only been together for no more than two moons [months], yet I have spent over ten thousand dong on you, but I don't have the slightest *quảng sử* [regret/complaint] (?- TTL). My heart towards you is like that, so if there is anything that still dissatisfies you, please let me know." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 41)

Or, "May I ask you, thanks to whose protection are you now abundantly covered in clothes and lacking no gold jewelry? Can that guy Hồng Sơn provide for you like that?" (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 42). This further proves that Hồ Kỳ Phước is truly a person with a petty mind, unable to distinguish right from wrong, black from white, seeking every possible way to kill Hồng Sơn at all costs. At the beginning of the novel, the reader assumes that Hồ Kỳ Phước's enmity towards Hồng Sơn stems from the fact that his lover (Ánh Tuyết) and even his daughter (Bạch Liên) both like Hồng Sơn. However, the more they read, the more readers discover that this feud is not that simple at all. That enmity originated from long before.

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"Truly, that guy Hồng Sơn is very ruthless, you are dead to me, what trivial matter of land and property, either way you will die. I already had a car run over you once and you didn't die; let's see how much longer you can live against me." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 42).

He even incites Nguyễn Thành Mỹ to kill Hồng Sơn: "You must kill him dead; if you stab, stab right into the heart and make the sword tip pierce deeply, hear me?" (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 56).

Another supporting character in the story, although not present throughout the entire narrative, also emerges as a typical villainous character. As a lawyer (*trạng sư*), yet Nguyễn Thành Mỹ finds joy in dueling and killing people. He is described as having a physical appearance that is "tall and burly, wearing a gray felt suit" and his gestures and attitude are arrogant, disrespecting everyone, "forcefully throwing a handful of confetti into his (Hồng Sơn - TTL) face" (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 24). The author's method of naming characters in the novel *Lừa lòng* (Phú Đức) also defies conventional logic. Normally, Hồ Kỳ Phước [Phước meaning Blessing/Fortune] should be a person with a humane heart; however, in this story, it is the exact opposite. Except for the names Chút Chít and Lục Tặc, the names of the other characters in the work do not represent their characteristic traits or personalities.

Another villainous character lives under the role of the first gigolo (kept man) in Vietnamese literature. That is the character Háo Sanh (*Tình trường huyết lệ* - Phú Đức), originally a chief judge, yet he takes pleasure in fencing to kill people, and acting as a young lover for Mrs. Phú Thanh purely aiming at her wealth: "that is a scoundrel infatuated with the sexuality of an old monster, and for the sake of money to fatten himself, using the pretense of aunt and nephew as a facade" (Phú Đức (1930), *Tình trường huyết lệ*, p. 98). Inherently, he is described with an appearance matching his name, "wearing a black felt suit" and is "a young man about twenty-eight years old, with dark skin, a pointed nose, thick eyebrows, deep-set eyes, and a very burly physique." (Phú Đức (1930), *Tình trường huyết lệ*, p. 26). Perhaps, in the modern Southern novels of the early 20th century, Háo Sanh is the first man to make a living by relying on an older lover, under the role of an authentic gigolo.

3.2. The Female Character Line

Detective novels, similar to historical novels, feature beautiful young women alongside the aforementioned gallant heroes. They are heartbreakingly beautiful, possessing a proud and magnificent beauty. Their personalities also change somewhat according to circumstances. At times they are the victims, while at other times they are the perpetrators. This proves that the authors somewhat recognized how circumstances can affect a person's personality, morality, and lifestyle. Depending on the circumstances, people behave differently; they are not static and immutable as in traditional Eastern novels. Perhaps, the imprint of the realist novel originates from such character types.

Kiều Tiên (*Mảnh trăng thu* - Bửu Đình) is inherently a beautiful young woman of high status, hailing from a wealthy and aristocratic family. Her physical appearance unfolds before the readers' eyes through her attire: "She wore a white velvet tunic, black silk trousers, a pink shawl, green velvet shoes, and a necklace set with sparkling diamonds." Yet, the way she smiled, the way she cast a glance at a man: "She bowed in greeting to everyone, then took a seat on the wooden bed, a coy smile on her lips, her eyes stealing a glance at Thành Trai..." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 361). This suggests that there seems to be some connection between this woman and Thành Trai. Furthermore, she is depicted as: "A woman around twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with a slightly round face, very dark yet sparkling eyes, a nose small but straight as a drawn line, slightly hollow cheeks, a small mouth with lips as bright red as rouge, her head draped in a black shawl, wearing black clothes and black velvet shoes..." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 364).

Accompanying that beauty is an unnamed sorrow hidden within the young woman's soul: "She was beautiful, but in an indescribable way, a beauty unlike anyone else's. That beauty resembled an evening painting—half bathed in the rosy glow of the setting sun, half illuminated by the pale yellow light of the moon—brimming with a myriad of emotions and melancholy. The more one looked, the more evident her beauty became, a profound and intense beauty. Within that beauty, there seemed to be a slight revelation of the anguish and sorrow of an insider." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 364).

That beauty outwardly projected a sorrowful nature, so readers, upon looking, listening, and reading, could already feel the deep-seated sadness of this main character in the work. Or regarding the description of Kiều Tiên's beauty:

"She is very beautiful, beautiful in a dreamy way... She is as beautiful as a lifelike portrait. She has a petite and slender figure, her facial features carry a look of sorrow, yet her beauty is hidden within; she has a charming mouth when she speaks, seemingly possessing a power that binds people." (Bửu Đình, 2015, p. 591).

Lệ Thủy (*Châu về hiệp phố* - Phú Đức), through the eyes of an infatuated man: "Wow! How is it that her beauty is such that even Xi Shi of the past would not dare to compare? Oh my! Her sidelong glance is so affectionate and as bright as the stars." (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 251). She also has "a face as fresh as a flower, a spirit as pure as snow" (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 273), and as for her attire:

"She wore a snow-white sleeveless top made of Bombay silk, while the neckline was cut deep down in a heart shape halfway down her chest; looking closely, one could see the shape of her breasts, both white and rosy..." (Phú Đức, 1999, pp. 273-274).

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Lê Thủy's figure is compared by the author to: "a butterfly landing on a flower" (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 251)—absolutely stunning yet possessing a gentle, soaring demeanor that makes a certain someone's "soul leave his body" (referring here to Hoàn Ngọc Ân, whose mind is driven crazy by Lê Thủy's beauty):

"Oh my, what a charming smile. A talented man and a beautiful woman in this situation, anyone seeing them would say they are entangled by the force of love; however, it is merely 'the heart is already willing, but the outward appearance is still shy'... Hoàn Ngọc Ân is so distracted by her beauty that he does not know which act the play has reached. Even while the actors and actresses are performing intimately, teasing the moon and flirting with the flowers, causing the audience to stare with wide eyes, Hoàn Ngọc Ân pays no attention at all, only ceaselessly exchanging amorous glances with this woman." (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 252).

Or she possesses a beauty enough for men to drown in, possessing a lethal power, a beauty laden with lust (at the very least, the fact that the two brothers of the Đặng Thất Tình family had to commit suicide because of her is proof enough): "Her two arms are as tender as bamboo shoots, plump and perfectly rounded like a pair of ivory tusks; looking at her chest, one's mind becomes half-drunk, half-awake." (Phú Đức, 1999, p. 276).

In the novel *Lửa lòng* published in 1928, Phú Đức describes a beautiful young woman, Bạch Liên: "flower-like face and powdered skin," "the moon and flowers yield to her face, apricots and willows fall short of her figure. Heavenly fragrance and national beauty, a graceful demeanor..." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 1). Her attire:

"She wore a white Bombay silk outfit, her feet wearing a pair of yellow Japanese sandals. On her two wrists: a gold bracelet set with diamonds, and a precious green jade bracelet. Around her neck was a uniquely styled necklace, made of platinum inlaid with radiant gems. Jet-black hair fluttering in the wind, with wavy curls like clouds resting on a mountain. Rosy cheeks, bright and alert eyes, a radiant face, snow-white teeth, lips like rouge, a secretly charming mouth, moth-like eyebrows lightly resembling spring mountains; even with a brush in hand, it would be difficult to fully capture her beauty." (Phú Đức, 1928, p. 2)

Also in this novel, the author's way of describing Ánh Tuyết (*Lửa lòng* - Phú Đức) follows the same motif as above. Ánh Tuyết appears before the reader's eyes with "peach-pink cheeks, a flower-like mouth, and jade-like eyes" (Phú Đức, 1928, *Lửa lòng*, p. 40).

Di Lê (*Tình trường huyết lệ* - Phú Đức) is described: "Reflecting upon this maiden's beauty, even Xi Shi of previous eras could not compare," "truly a woman of absolute beauty" with magnificent jewelry: "Is she originally from an aristocratic lineage, wealthy across the four seas, that the ornaments on her body amount to over ten thousand silver coins?" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 22). This maiden has "affectionate eyes," a "charming smile" (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 25). Or describing her figure seen from behind, realistic and vivid, with a "plump, white neck with a few strands of hair curled like snail shells scattered about, down to her rosy heels, each step taken seeming like lotus flowers blooming." (Phú Đức, 1930, p. 50).

In conclusion, when describing the heroic character in historical or detective novels, the authors never forget to describe the villainous character as a counterbalance to the hero. Alongside the hero, there must indispensably be beauties of heavenly fragrance and national beauty to help make the story more romantic and captivating. The common motif when describing the physical appearance of heroic characters is: from age to appearance, gestures, personality, and actions; even the character's thoughts are revealed sharply and in detail.

IV. CONCLUSION

Besides the technique of constructing thrilling and captivating plots that begin with a robbery-murder or a certain mysterious case, Southern authors of this period also astutely utilized the art of describing the physical appearance and actions of heroic and villainous characters. Furthermore, the art of character construction is one of the outstanding achievements, contributing to shaping the profile and the appeal of this genre. Southern writers demonstrated keenness in flexibly applying techniques of describing appearance and actions to portray a rich and vivid system of characters, clearly delineated across two gender groups.

The art of describing appearance and actions created a multi-dimensional, intense, yet highly realistic axis of opposition: male and female character types, heroes and villains, highlighting the heroism of the characters.

In general, the art of describing characters' appearance and actions in Southern detective novels during this period is a unique intersection between the conventionality and idealization of traditional Eastern literature, and the individualization and realism of Western literature. The success in the art of sketching character portraits not only affirms the talent of Southern writers but also proves the undeniable position of detective fiction within the modernization process of Vietnamese national script prose in the first half of the 20th century.

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