



## Review Article

# Applying Literary Composition to Comparative Research on Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao, Two Authors in General Literature Education Program of Korea and Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This is a comparative study of two works by Nam Cao and Hyun Jin-Geon dealing with intellectuals, Hyun Jin-Geon's "My Destitute Wife" and Nam Cao's "A Redundant Life". I have focused on the comparison of the narrative perspective and the artistic view of the two works as the main part of this comparative study. These two works both deal with the story of a married couple. Also, both of the stories feature a husband who is a poor writer. Works of realism are created from an objective point of view. In accordance with such characteristics, Hyun Jin-Geon's work objectively and calmly depicts the narrator even though it is from a first-person point of view. On the other hand, Nam Cao's work is based on an objective narrative point of view in which the characters in the work, the wife and husband, appear in the third person perspective, but express Nam Cao's unique polyphonic voice through the movement of perspective. These similarities and differences contain the same artistic intention to create works with vitality that go beyond realism or narrative perspectives. Their views on art share a valuable literary idea sufficient to lay the groundwork for realism in both countries. It is true that the history and culture of Korea and Vietnam are different from each other in their views on art, but their artistic ideas have provided high value to the literature of both countries. They use their own language to capture the cry of those who suffer, face the cause of life becoming hopeless, and urge them to live their lives with all their might. As writers under colonial rule, they were writers who conveyed light in the darkness of history. Their artistic conception does not stop at targeting intellectuals as in this study but also conveys the same message in other works relating stories of women and the lower classes.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Realism, Intellectuals, Narrative Perspective, View of Art.

## 1. Introduction

Vietnamese writer Nam Cao (1917-1951) and Korean writer Hyun Jin-Geon (1900-1943)

are both great writers from their countries. Although the periods of literary activity of the two writers are different, one thing they have in common is that they are both writers of realist literature, especially in the colonial era. (Korea was colonized by Japan from 1919 to 1945). Western literature was introduced to

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both countries during the period when the two writers were active. Consequently, the concepts of Western literature influenced the creative activities of many writers at that time. They were both writers who contributed greatly to the development of literature in their motherland.

When discussing the world of characters in the works of the two writers, both Nam Cao and Hyun Jin-Geon left a deep impression on their readers through various character types, vibrant colors, and stories of human suffering. However, what is most notable above all is the image of the intellectual character they embodied. In Hyun Jin-Geon's work, the intellectual is someone who directly participates in modern society and at the same time plays the role of an outsider excluded from society. On the one hand, it can be seen that intellectuals at the time had both dreams and longings for the future, and also had a mission to enlighten the public. Nam Cao's works about these characters reveal the painful reality of intellectuals under colonial rule who have to wander in poverty, hunger, and despair because they cannot obtain what they have always dreamed of [1].

With the similarity of the two writers' souls and literary perceptions, several works about intellectuals by Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao were investigated. And in this article, by writing about these types of characters, I will try to deal with the two works from the point of view of literary composition. Literary composition is a way to deal with the structure of a work in depth, and it deepens students' ability to understand literature because it helps them understand the writer's way of thinking and the essence of the work.

## 2. Research Method

Comparative analysis method: A method of comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences between viewpoints/subjects/views of art in Vietnam and Korean colonies and realism literature are used.

## 3. Results

In this paper, I would like to dive into the works of Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao through a comparison of their narrative perspectives and artistic views. The characteristic of a novel is that the novelist expresses the author's intention while telling the author's story through the narrator, whether from the first or the third person perspective. And through such a description, the reader's participation is requested. In that respect, the social consciousness and artistic views of the two writers have many similarities. Externally, the two writers secure a firm position in the literary circles of both countries through short stories and have the same contribution to the modern literature of both countries. But internally, there are differences in their works, due to national characteristics and social and historical differences between the two countries. Based on that, I try to deal with similarities in various parts and differences in various parts as I get into the two works.

### 3.1. *Similarities and Differences in Circumstances and Artistic Ideals of Intellectuals through the Works of Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao*

Although there are similarities in the ways the two writers build plot and structure, there are many differences as well. Rather than unfolding the story in a chronological order, Nam Cao uses the 'stream of consciousness' technique, which was a new movement in the literary world at the time. Thus, although his work is identified as a short story, it can be said that it has the characteristics of a full-length novel in some ways. Attempting to change the form of short stories through the movement of perspective, then, was the literary trend of Vietnamese modern literature at the time of Nam Cao. On the other hand, Hyun Jin-geon's work fits the characteristics of a short story as it handles a single theme. In his work, the plot is formed through the interaction of the characters' actions and thoughts, and because the writing remains objective, it is hard to read the

author's intention; as a result, there is no change in the first-person point of view in this work.

The two works to be covered in this paper, Hyun Jin-Geon's "My Destitute Wife" and Nam Cao's "A Redundant Life" are the stories of poor writers, and the story of the writer's wife also appears in them. The structure of the work consists of several episodes that the main character, the writer, and the poor wife of Hyun Jin-Geon, who went to study abroad, experience in their daily life. A pretty parasol and silk shoes are literary devices that show the wife's small longings. In the life of a poor writer couple, the writer's wife's simple dream about material things, which is sometimes shown while meeting people, and the writer's low self-esteem as he feels that he is a husband who cannot satisfy his wife's longing are depicted in the work. For that reason, he instead complains to his wife. In the concluding part, there is a dramatic reversal in the structure, realizing how his good wife waits and endures for her husband who is a poor writer.

Unlike this, Nam Cao's "A Redundant Life" has a structure in which the protagonist, a writer named Ho, reflects on the shabbiness of his life and the weakness of his will compared to his literary aspirations. The two works begin with the first scene with the wife. However, Ho's wife was abandoned by another person, and the generosity shown by the main character, who accepted her daughter and mother and even completed her mother's funeral, lies in the background of the work. However, alongside this, he goes out to collect the fee for his manuscript and meets his fellow writers. He is excited when he hears that a certain writer's work will be translated into English. And while drinking with his co-workers, he forgets the good he was trying to do for his family and ends up in anguish regretting his attitude.

Comparing the two works, both stories' main character are writers who write in poverty under colonial rule. The main characters' wives are also important in both stories. It is also similar in that the story develops through the psychological confessions of the two writers.

Another similarity is that the two writers have ideals. Their ideal is not only to find their own identity through literature, but also to persuade others to a humane life through the power of literature, help the weak, and share the vitality of life. However, bemoaning themselves for not realizing more than that, the two protagonists get angry at their wives and lament how pathetic they are.

In Hyun Jin-Geon's work, the main character himself is called 'K', and his wife's name is not even mentioned. In "A Redundant Life", the couple's names, Ho and Tu, are clarified. This part also shows one aspect of Korea's Confucian characteristics. At the time, it could be a remnant of the strong idea that men were noble, and women were lowly due to the idea of male superiority over women. And as the title "My Destitute Wife" suggests, a wife who does not reveal her presence has a more noble existence. It could be that the intention was to conceive the work so that his wife does not even have a name. In contrast, the psychology of Ho's wife, who is called by her name, and her husband, Ho, is revealed in the work. The psychology of Tu is clearly revealed even though it is from a third-person observer's point of view. The nameless wife in "My Destitute Wife" is not highlighted in the work except by the description of her husband, the narrator. While the name of the wife in "A Redundant Life" is revealed; her past is revealed, her love is revealed, and her anguish., Her face is evident through the description of Nam Cao who depicts a human being called Tu, who is equal to a human being called Ho.

Their ideals as writers and artists also appear similar but different as the work progresses. Let's look at the first part of the work. Hyun Jin-Geon's "My Destitute Wife" begins with a first-person narrative perspective of 'I'. However, Nam Cao's "A Redundant Life" begins with a third-person perspective. However, what is unique in the first-person narrative perspective in "My Destitute Wife" is that the perspective of 'I' maintains an objective distance, even though it is a first-person narrative point of view.

3.2. *The Difference in the Way in Which the Image of the Intellectual Character is Created in the Works of Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao from the Narrative Point of View*

*“Why wouldn't it be?”*

*My wife opens her closet door and finds something, and she mumbles to herself.*

*What's missing?*

*I was sitting at the corner of the table, rummaging through the bookshelf.*

*“There is still a raw Jeogori (traditional hanbok) shirt but.....”*

*I keep silent. My wife was looking for a shirt and suddenly realized what she had to do. That is to find an old lady next door.*

*For the past 2 years, my family has not had a dime in my pocket. When we were hungry, we only know how to stay hungry for days, only know how to sell some household tools and clothes to pawn shops or secondhand stores to exchange. few coins. Even the duffel Jeogori was left, but my wife looked for it, just for breakfast.*

*I smacked my lips a few times and then closed the book. I let out a long sigh,...*

*“My Destitute Wife”*

A conversation between the couple begins. The wife who pawns the clothes in her closet and uses the money to prepare breakfast, and the husband who sits and reads a book in silence, who has nothing to say, which is expressed as just “a sigh comes out”. It starts as the protagonist, who knows the hardships of his wife, who raised money by pawning furniture and clothes in the house or selling them to second-hand shops because of her husband, who has been unable to earn money for the past two years while obsessed with writing novels, sighs. Although it is a first-person narrative point of view, it is describing the situation objectively.

As realism first occurred in Hyun Jin-Geon's time, the writing of novels in the 19th-century style of Enlightenment was converted into writing dealing with the awakening of the modern self. Therefore, the attitude that realist writers tried to maintain at the time was

objective calmness. However, Hyun Jin-Geon's view of literature was not only contained in his works. He worked as a newspaper reporter for more than 10 years. In his ‘View of Literature’, which he contributed to Gaebyeok Magazine, he revealed that there is no need to obsess even with the “principle” of realism in order for the work to effectively take on artistry and capture the spirit of the Korean people [2, 3].

*“Isn't the Kenari flower, a flower that blooms coldly around us, wherever we go we can reach out and grab it, a sign of the coming spring? Romanticism is also good. Realism is also good. Symbolism isn't a bad thing either. Expressionism will not be abandoned either.*

*We have to write a work while grasping the spirit of our country and the spirit of modern times. We have to get away from writing or imitating the ideas that are fixed to us in excitement. He requests that we should go one step further, calmly observe our surroundings, and write in the language of life that contains our own colors with a cool-headed consciousness”.*

*“The Joseon Spirit and Understanding the Modern Spirit”.*

This part shows that the two writers have different views of art to maximize the effect of literary works by allowing movement of narrative perspective in Nam Cao's work and using a polyphonic voice in style. Hyun Jin-Geon uses a first-person observer's point of view in his work “My Destitute Wife”, so the main character, an intellectual, tells his story in his own language. Mainly, he expresses his psychology through an inner monologue and coolly faces his absurdity and himself as he treats his wife unreasonably.

The start of Nam Cao's “A Redundant Life” also begins with the first scene with his wife. However, there is no significant shift in narrative perspective after expressing distance from a third-person observer's point of view. Instead, the direct narration is made as if from a first-person point of view. It is revealed to his wife, Tu, what kind of person her husband, Ho, is.

*“From looking up at Ho three times. Three times, Tu wanted to speak but did not dare to speak. He's reading too hard. His bushy eyebrows were drawn together and slightly raised. The bright eyes seemed to bulge out. Wide forehead slightly wrinkled. The two fists standing tall on the banks of two deep holes in their cheeks were shiny. Even the tall and straight nose was also shiny. That gaunt face, leaning over the book, looked grim as hell. From being scared,...*

*From loving her husband with a love that is very close to that of a dog for its owner. From a very gentle nature, very devoted. Besides, Ho is also a benefactor for Tu. Ho had bowed down to Tu's suffering. Ho had bent down and reached out a hand to take Tu's soft hand, in the midst of Tu's endless pain: Tu was abandoned by her lover with a newborn baby”. “A Redundant Life”.*

Unlike Hyun Jin-Geon's “My Destitute Wife”, the wife in “A Redundant Life” raises her head and looks at her husband Ho three times. She wants to say it three times, but she does not have the courage because her husband is too focused on reading. As his wife, she observes her husband. They observe each other just as Ho, her husband, observes his wife, Tu, at the end. The observation is the acceptance of each other, and it is conveyed that the couple sees each other with compassion, just as they see themselves even though they are not themselves. In the first scene.

“The emaciated face leaning over the book looks contorted to the point of ferocity”.

The wife's point of view, which is not recorded in Hyun Jin-Geon's “My Destitute Wife”, is vividly presented not only to the reader's imagination but as his wife Tu's point of view in Nam Cao's “A Redundant Life”, providing readers with multiple understandings. Not only the author, the main character but also his wife, the awakened consciousness, is expressed as it is in her voice in the work. On the back of the work, contrary to Ho's intention to entertain his wife and children after receiving the manuscript fee he spent it all on drinking alcohol with his colleagues. And when he came

home, he started a fight with his wife, beat her, and kicked her out, then closed the door and fell asleep.

Dissatisfaction with himself in his consciousness is expressed in this way. His wife, who has accepted all of her inner pain, tells her husband, Ho, that he is the one who suffers because of her when he describes himself as a “bastard”.

By using the perspective of a polyphonic statement, Nam Cao awakens the consciousness of intellectuals by aiming for the effect of reading the mind of the intellectual's wife, so the reader reads the mind of the intellectual's wife as well. It has the effect of blaming the husband himself for treating such a good wife carelessly.

The wife in Hyun Jin-Geon's work, “My Destitute Wife” is portrayed as a wife who suffers because of her husband because she is a person outside the work and her voice cannot be heard because it is from the first-person narrator's point of view. But in Nam Cao's work “A Redundant Life”, the writer's wife expresses her voice inside the work, so there is a difference in letting the readers hear the wife's voice.

### *3.3. Differences and Similarities in Artistic Views of Hyun Jin-Geon and Nam Cao as Reflected in the Image of an Intellectual*

The two writers' views on art also have similarities and differences. Hyun Jin-Geon's “My Destitute Wife” is a story written about a husband who aspires to be a writer. He has been living with his wife and has been unable to achieve his dream for a long time, experiencing conflicts and resolving them. He is an intellectual who went to study abroad where his consciousness was awakened [2]. His ideal is to rise in the world through good works. And because he has his own ideal as an artist, he can't even accept that his wife has simple dreams about material things.

In Hyun Jin-Geon's “My Destitute Wife”, there is a part where the main character, a writer, records what he does from the perspective of his parents.

*“People do not know that there are blessings that come late.”, “Such a person becomes like that”.*

In the preceding paragraph, all the cousins praise T, a bank teller, a relative of a similar age, while swearing that he, an aspiring writer with no money, is “a worthless bastard”. In many ways, this comparison with others is a factor that causes the protagonist to feel belittled and frustrated. But above all, it is easy to understand as this is Hyun Jin-Geon's early work. Considering that he had just gone abroad to study at just over 20 years old, it is undeniable that his view of art is in some ways connected to his simple yet personal view of success.

*“She deeply, deeply recognizes me as an unknown artist who has not yet been acknowledged by anyone!”.*

What his wife hopes for is for her husband to live a life where his name shines as an artist. For him to become an artist with a sound and simple dream for art and life. Wanting to drink the fountain of knowledge, during the Japanese colonial period, many young intellectuals like Hyun Jin-Geon went to Japan to study. They were introduced to Western literature, which was just becoming available. At that time, reading literary works translated into Japanese opened the eyes of poets and novelists to the world. Young intellectuals became excited about getting out of the narrow world that they had been confined to in Korea due to the closed policy up to that time. They began to create writings that indirectly resisted through literature, lamenting the situation that lost their country and their sovereignty.

After Hyun Jin-Geon published “My Destitute Wife”, his life as a reporter began in 1922, and his outlook on life and art changed markedly. After creating his three early works, “My Destitute Wife”, “The Society that Drives You to Drink”, and “The Corrupt”, he was also directly influenced by ‘Korea Artista Proleta Federacio’ (KAPF), the faction of contemporary literary trends because he was a journalist. After that, he created works that had a great influence on Korean realism literature,

such as “One Lucky Day”, “Hometown”, and “Fire”.

The individualistic view of art throughout Hyun Jin-Geon's early works is evaluated by critic Kim Yun-shik as the perception of the world by an intellectual who has not found a way out. But Chun Yi-du [3], another critic, gives a different evaluation, saying. Hyun Jin-Geon's social consciousness and artistic awareness are more profound than anyone else's. In comparison, when Nam Cao was writing “A Redundant Life”, his view of art was ambitious. The view of art he embodied in this work will forever influence Vietnamese artists [1, 4].

*“He had to print many hastily written books. He had to write articles for people to read and then forget as soon as they read them. Then every time he re-read a book or a passage signed with his name, he would blush, frown, grit his teeth, crush the book and scold himself, as an asshole,... Damn it! Damn it! Woe to him! Because he is an asshole! He is a dishonest man! Negligence in any profession is dishonorable. But literary sloppiness is despicable”.*

He deeply regrets that he wrote as a means of earning a living. He says he is a son of a bitch. He brings his wife, who was an abandoned woman, to live with him, and raises her daughter as his child. But he laments that his ideal view of literature and art has gone far away. He blames himself for being this extra person, having to live by selling frivolous writings that express only very light and shallow emotions. However, the price he paid to support others was not an easy one. He was about to return quietly to his family after receiving money for his writings at the newspaper office. But his colleagues suddenly appeared and told him the news that a certain writer's work would be translated into English. This made him realize what he thought was valuable literature, and he talked about that work.

*“A truly valuable work, must transcend all boundaries and limitations, must be a work common to all mankind. It must contain*

*something big, powerful, both painful and exhilarating. It praises mercy, charity, justice... It makes people closer to people. That would be such a good work, do you understand?"*

Good works he says are universal and objective works that all mankind can relate to when they read them. They transcend boundaries and limitations, contain big things, and have the power to hurt, strengthen, and excite, so they get closer to people and make people human. The work that gives is what he seeks. In fact, Nam Cao's work, which contains all these elements, can be called "Chi Pheo", and he is neither a "redundant life" nor a 'redundant person', but a great writer who gains sympathy beyond Vietnam. It can be said that the dream has been fulfilled.

His thorough artistic consciousness is strongly expressed through his artistic views in "A Redundant Life" and "A Bright Moon". Art is not deceiving moonlight.

*"The sound of suffering resounded strongly. Wow! Wow! Art doesn't have to be the moonlight that deceives, art can just be the sound of suffering, escaping from miserable lives, resounding strongly in Dien's heart. There's no need to go anywhere. Dien does not need to hide, Dien just stands in labor, opening his soul to receive all the vibrations of life,..."*

Just as 'Ho' in "A Redundant Life" laments that he has to write superficially to feed his family, 'Dien', a writer in "A Bright Moon", has no relation to his family's pain, his artistic taste has nothing to do with true art. He recognized that it was a deceiving moonlight. Nam Cao captured in these works the voices of intellectuals suffering in the midst of contradictions in life that are different from their views on art.

#### 4. Discussion

The similarities and differences between Nam Cao and Hyun Jin-geon's narrative perspectives and art views are summarized: In terms of embodying the existence of two wives, Nam Cao's "A Redundant Life" is more direct and specific, and her wife is portrayed as a

woman accompanied by a specific name, as her psychology is revealed. In contrast, Hyun Jin-geon's "My Destitute Wife" does not have a name, and the wife is embodied only from the husband's point of view. This approach was different from trend of literature at the time. Nam Cao built his own way of writing that highlights a stream of consciousness and various narratives within a story. In contrast, Hyun Jin-geon, who wrote realistic short stories, revealed the objective method in his unique way through his works.

The concept of art reveals more commonalities than differences between Nam Cao and Hyun Jin-geon. Nam Cao's artistic creation idea that he should serve humanity with a broader worldview was firm from the beginning to the end. On the other hand, Hyun Jin-geon also revealed a view of art with his own success in mind in the early days of creation.

#### 5. Conclusion

Nam Cao (1917-1951), a Vietnamese realist writer who is being studied by many researchers, is said to be a thinker and an artist was brought into the high school curriculum as an author with typical and classic works. He pays the most attention to "daily life" and seeks the human within humans [5]. In addition, renowned Korean critic Kim Yun-sik evaluated the value of Hyun Jin-Geon's (1900-1943) literature as the best representation of daily life in Korea in Korean [6]. And is also a major author in the Korean Literature program.

From comparative research we found that Hyun Jin-geon and Nam Cao are writers of everyday life that effectively capture the inner conflict and irony of intellectuals' lives in their work. The great similarity between the two writers is that no matter what ideology, style, or descriptive point of view, they both write with the pain and suffering of the people of the era.

Hyun Jin-geon comes from a rich family, and Nam Cao is a writer from a poor countryside, but both writers vividly express the joys, sorrows, and hopes of their lives in a

colony through their short stories. So, over time, their social consciousness, profound humanism and dedication to the arts have been recognized and respected by the national literature for a long time.

These two writers are specially featured in textbooks of both countries. Because Nam Cao's "Chi Pheo" and "Old Man Hak" are in the textbook, it can be a meaningful literature class if you read the entire work after class and discuss the author's ideas of respect for human beings and art ideas together. Hyun Jin-geon's three works, "My Destitute Wife", "Lucky Day", and "Hometown", deal with the reality of Korea 100 years ago and are featured in middle and high school textbooks. Since all three works have been translated into Vietnamese (even though they have not yet been published), reading them together can be an opportunity to approach foreign literature. It can also arouse interest in comparative literature.

The German Nobel Prize-winning writer, Günter Grass, not only writes good works, but also works hard to rebuild Germany after its fall and loss of creditability as a result of WWII. He once said: "Historians write stories of winners,

but writers must write stories of losers" [7]. Nam Cao and Hyun Jin-geon are also genuine writers of such stories. They deserve to continue to be selected as major authors in the general education programs of Literature of the two countries.

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