

Ljiljana Stevic¹
University of Banja Luka
Faculty of Philology
Department of Sinology
Gabriel García-Noblejas Sánchez-Cendal²
University of Granada
Faculty of Translation and Interpreting

LOTUS, OR THE FAILURE OF A LIFE: AFFECTIVE FRAGMENTATION AND ACTANTIAL DYNAMICS IN SU TONG'S NARRATIVE

Abstract: This study examines the affective development of Lotus, the protagonist of Su Tong's novella, through the dual lens of her interpersonal relationships and her emotional interiority. By adopting an actantial perspective, the analysis explores how Lotus's subjectivity is progressively shaped, constrained, and ultimately fractured within the social order of the household. The narrative is divided into three distinct phases, each corresponding to a transformation in Lotus's affective state and her position within the relational network that defines her existence. The First Part traces her initial integration into the household and the emergence of her expectations and strategies of adaptation; the Second Part examines the destabilization of these expectations during an anomalous winter marked by tension, rivalry, and psychological disintegration; and the Third Part follows the irreversible collapse of her emotional and existential coherence. By combining close textual analysis with attention to narrative structure, this study argues that Lotus's trajectory constitutes not merely a personal tragedy but a systematic "failure of a life," shaped by the interplay of desire, power, and confinement. The analysis is based primarily on Michael S. Duke's English translation Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas (2000), with occasional reference to the original Chinese text.

Keywords: *Lotus, actantial perspective, Raise the Red Lantern, Su Tong.*

¹ljiljana.stevic@ff.unibl.org.

²ggnoblej@ugr.es

1. Introduction

The figure of Lotus, as constructed in Su Tong's narrative, presents a compelling site for the exploration of affect, agency, and constraint within a highly codified social environment. Her story unfolds not simply as a sequence of events, but as a gradual and often imperceptible transformation of emotional states, mediated through her interactions with others and her shifting perception of herself. In this sense, Lotus is less a stable character than a process—an evolving configuration of desires, frustrations, and responses shaped by the structure in which she is embedded.

While Lotus in Su Tong's work has often been interpreted through the lens of patriarchal structures and the spatial politics of enclosure, most notably in the study by Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, *Space and Power: Reading the Cultural Images of Concubines in the Works of Su Tong*, the present analysis adopts a different methodological orientation. Deppman's reading foregrounds the ways in which patriarchal order, spatial confinement, and institutionalized hierarchies produce and ultimately determine the fate of female characters, including their psychological disintegration.

This paper does not take the patriarchal system as its primary explanatory framework. Rather than viewing Lotus's demise as a direct and inevitable consequence of an overarching social structure, we focus on the micro-dynamics of her affective life and her shifting position within a network of relationships. In this sense, the emphasis is placed on the processes through which Lotus internalizes, negotiates, and responds to her environment. Her "failure" is therefore not approached as a effect of oppression, but as the outcome of a complex interplay between relational tensions, emotional transformations, and limited forms of support within the narrative structure.

For analytical clarity, the narrative is divided into three parts, corresponding to three phases in Lotus's development. The First Part, extending from her arrival at the household to the onset of the autumn cold (pp.1–45), is characterized by a tentative negotiation of her new environment. During this phase, Lotus exhibits a degree of agency: she observes, learns, and attempts to position herself within the existing hierarchy. Her emotional responses oscillate between curiosity, calculation, and a fragile sense of optimism, suggesting the possibility—however limited—of adaptation and self-assertion.

The Second Part, which continues until the moment when various signs indicate the emergence of an unusual winter (p.71), marks a turning point. Here, the social mechanisms governing the household become more visible and more oppressive.

The competition among the women intensifies, and the rules that structure their lives reveal their arbitrariness and cruelty. Lotus's emotional state begins to shift: her earlier strategies prove insufficient, and her sense of control diminishes. The "unusual winter" functions not only as a temporal marker but also as a symbolic condensation of the growing tension and distortion within both the social environment and Lotus's psyche.

The Third Part, extending to the end of the novel (p.99), depicts the culmination of this process. The affective and relational pressures that have been building throughout the narrative lead to a breakdown that is both psychological and existential. Lotus's relationships lose their strategic dimension and become sites of pure antagonism or indifference. Simultaneously, her emotional life collapses into fragmentation, repetition, and, ultimately, emptiness. What emerges is not simply the tragic fate of an individual, but the exposure of a system that renders meaningful agency impossible.

Given that this study is addressed to a readership that may not be exclusively specialized in Chinese studies, all textual references are drawn primarily from Michael S. Duke's English translation *Raise the Red Lantern. Three Novellas* (Scribner, 2000). Where necessary, this translation has been collated with the original Chinese text 《苏童文集·结婚即景》 (Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House, 1993/1996:pp.107–161) in order to clarify nuances of meaning. Pagination indicated in brackets refers to the English edition.

2. Theoretical Framework

By situating Lotus's trajectory within an actantial and affective framework, this study aims to move beyond a purely thematic reading of the novella and to demonstrate how the narrative systematically constructs what may be understood as the "failure of a life." This failure is neither accidental nor solely individual; rather, it emerges from the structural conditions that govern the protagonist's world, revealing the intricate relationship between narrative form, emotional experience, and social constraint.

Our pagination (numbers between brackets) therefore refers to that English translation.

This paper proposes to analyze the affective development of Lotus through two fundamental actantial dimensions («le modèle actantiel» that was set and articulated by R. Barthes, U. Eco, T. Todorov, Cl. Brémont and A. Greimas—see below—), to analyze her relationships with other characters and her internal

emotional landscape. These two axes are inseparable. Her relationships—marked by rivalry, dependence, manipulation, and occasional solidarity—constitute the external framework within which her subjectivity is formed. At the same time, her feelings—hope, jealousy, fear, resentment, and eventual despair—reveal the internalization of that framework and its consequences. By examining the dynamic interplay between these dimensions, the analysis seeks to illuminate how Lotus's identity is constructed, destabilized, and ultimately undone. Actantial method in the Barthes (1966), Eco (1966), Todorov (1966), Brémond (1964) and Greima's (1966) structuralist and semiotic theory provides a systematic approach to uncovering the deep structures of meaning underlying narrative texts, moving beyond surface-level interpretation toward the organization of significance. The actantial model has six fundamental roles (Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, Opponent) and we will use them as structural positions to reveal the relational dynamics within the narrative. It will help us to reconfigure the character not merely as an individual psychological entity but more a node within a network of power relations.

3. Note on Possible Literary Affiliations of the Novel

A work of art does not exist and does not convey significance alone. Every work of art is a part of a whole, a piece of a system. A *literary* work of art creates significance by itself only in relation to other literary works. The whole of the works constitutes a system, a network of «simultaneous order» of significance in which every new work redefines the past and creates the present. As T. S. Eliot stated in «Tradition and the Individual Talent» (1919), the past is constantly reshaped by the new work, and the new book only gets its full significance as rooted in the past. No new proper piece of literature can convey its meaning alone, and *Wives and Concubines* is no exception to the rule.

The first affiliation of Su Tong's novella links it to other great works of the Chinese literary tradition, namely, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (《红楼梦》) for obvious reasons: the depiction of a closed familial world, descriptive realism, and detailed attention to actions and emotions more than to the variety of adventures that are the narrative core of many other Chinese classical novels that constitute the literary network, such as *Journey to the West* (《西游记》) or *Water Margin* (《水浒传》). Within the novel, it is worth recalling the figure of Qin Keqing (秦可卿), one of the concubines who is killed (or commits suicide) and is surrounded by a cloud of possible sexual infidelity in a way that reminds the death of the concubines killed in Su Tong's narrative. The second affiliation situates it within the

zhiguai xiaoshuo (志怪小说) tradition, in which countless relationships between living characters and spirits of the deceased are described, as happens between Swallow's spirit and Lotus.

3.1. First Part: *The Autumn Cold*

3.1.1. Lotus' interactions

Throughout the First Part, Lotus interacts with:

1. Various unnamed servants
2. Her personal maid, Swallow
3. The household master, Chen Zuoqian
4. The first wife (Joy) and the two concubines, Coral and Cloud
5. The children of the household, Yirong, Yiyun, and Feilan
6. The eldest homosexual son, Feipu
7. Doctor Chen Zuowen

She has interactions with virtually all the characters in the novel. Moreover, it should be emphasized that she begins to establish a particularly important and affective relationship with one of the fundamental actants in the narrative of her life: *The Well of Death* (p.23).

Her interactions with all of them are varied and variable. Let us briefly review the principal ones.

With her personal servant Swallow, Lotus maintains a relationship consistently marked by superiority—that of mistress to servant; within it, tension and aggressiveness increase day by day, interaction by interaction. In an initial encounter, Swallow notices Lotus's student-like appearance and, consequently, does not treat her with the respect due to a third concubine. Offended, Lotus humiliates her the following day when she orders: *squat down; let me look at your hair. You don't have lice, do you?* (p.13).

There are further interactions between them, and the narrator states that *Lotus is increasingly annoyed with Swallow* (p.25). She becomes jealous upon discovering how her husband *fondle Swallow's breasts* (p.27), that is, when she perceives in her a possible sexual rival in relation to her husband. Lotus continues to mistreat her, *but not too harshly* (26), until the day when she accidentally discovers that Swallow possesses a voodoo doll of her into which many needles have been stuck (pp.37–41). A notably violent crisis then erupts between them.

Lotus also interacts with the first wife and with the other two concubines. She does so in various contexts and with a certain normality. She first deals with Joy, about whom she had felt curiosity since arriving at the house (p.15), and whom she *laughed at* (p.15) upon seeing her *fat body crouching down* (p.15). Contacts between them—both in this part and throughout the novel—are so scarce that the text does not mention further direct interactions.

She has more extensive dealings with Cloud and Coral. With Cloud, everything begins well and with considerable respect: Lotus *very quickly addressed Cloud as Elder Sister* (p.17), and Cloud welcomes her with a valuable gift of silk for dresses (p.23): *Real Suchou silk; it's for you to make a dress with*. They engage in conversations of confidence about the *Well of Death*; Lotus criticizes, with a certain familiarity, the deficient education of Cloud's daughters (p.25), and Cloud, at another moment, advises her on how she should behave upon the arrival of the eldest son: *Eldest Young Master has come home, aren't you going to go to meet him?* (p.27). However, their interactions culminate in a point of notable aggressiveness when Lotus discovers that Cloud is responsible for the voodoo doll representing her and that she therefore wishes her harm. Lotus cuts one of her ears while trimming her hair (p.42–44). The relationship deteriorates significantly.

Coral is the third woman of the household, and Lotus relates to her more than to any of the other women. Lotus begins to engage with Coral driven by great curiosity to see her *extraordinary physical beauty* (p.16). When she finally meets her, she immediately calls her *Elder Sister* (p.16) as a gesture of closeness and trust. However, their first encounter had already occurred earlier, albeit without dialogue: Coral was looking out from behind the curtains, and Lotus approached the window out of curiosity, opened the curtains, and found herself face to face with Coral, whereupon Lotus *ran away in dismay* (p.16).

It is noteworthy that Lotus also maintains a kind of *in absentia* relationship with Coral, to such an extent that, on one occasion when Lotus is making love with her husband (p.17), she closes her eyes and sees Coral. From that moment on, Lotus pays close attention to all of Coral's movements: when she gets up (p.18), how she feigns illness (p.18), to the point that *Lotus could never control her curiosity about Coral* (pp.29–30). She constantly asks various characters about her, especially Chen Zuoqian (p.29); and upon hearing and seeing her sing, she weeps with emotion (pp.30–31).

A constant interaction of long dialogues (p.31) is established between the two concubines, and a warm friendship develops: *Lotus and Coral had some lukewarm contact* (p.33). They play mahjong together as good friends (*Coral took Lotus by the*

arm, p.33), and Lotus discovers the flirtation between Coral and the doctor under the table: *When Lotus bent down to pick up [a tile that had fallen off] she discovered that their four legs were wrapped in a tight embrace* (p.34). That discovery strengthens their friendship. It becomes even more firmly established in two further interactions in which Coral confides to Lotus her most secret ideas and intimate feelings: after the incident of Cloud's ear injury (p.45), and when Coral tells her how Cloud attempted to kill—by means of secretly administered abortive medicine—the child she was carrying (p.45). The relationship between them is close, sincere, frequent, and marked by great trust.

The character with whom Lotus interacts most is Chen Zuoqian. In the opening scenes of the novel, he takes Lotus to greet and meet the other women of the household, so that her interactions with them are mediated by him. He spends the first night with her, but that night is interrupted when Coral feigns illness, forcing him to leave Lotus's bed and attend to her.

The narrator's voice—through a flashback—also recounts how Lotus and Chen Zuoqian first met. In that initial encounter, he imagined Lotus as a woman with *skill and passion in bed, which came to be confirmed in practice*: their sexual relations are generally pleasurable, and Chen Zuoqian *was very pleased* (p.21). Lotus herself explicitly confirms this in one of their many sexual encounters, when Chen assures her that she is the one he likes most in bed, *of course* (p.29). In their encounters, they speak mainly about the other women in the household. He promises her a *beautiful gold chain necklace* (p.35) and mentions the deaths that occurred in the Well—former concubines who committed suicide (p.36). The relationship is good, balanced, respectful, pleasurable, and based on trust.

The trust and equality in their relationship are so evident that Chen Zuoqian humbles himself before her when he apologizes for having disposed of Lotus's flute (pp.41–42). Likewise, when she rejects his sexual advances to express her anger over the same matter (p.42): *Chen Zuoqian reached over and caressed her but did not receive any response* (p.43). In sum, she maintains with him a fluid and trusting relationship that allows them to discuss numerous topics and to enjoy sexuality when both desire it.

A final character with whom Lotus begins to interact is Feipu, the eldest son of the household. It is he who goes to greet her, as her status is higher (p.26 ff.). Their initial interaction is pleasant and kind: they speak about flowers and music with a certain depth and sincerity: *it seemed as though from that day on she and Feipu had some sort of secret understanding between them* (p.29). Moreover, Lotus begins to feel attracted to Feipu's musical abilities—specifically, his flute playing.

In sum, Lotus's interactions encompass all the characters on multiple occasions, and all of them are varied and generally normal. No conflict arises within them, except in the exceptional cases of the servant Swallow and the second wife Cloud: Lotus discovers that both hate her and wish for her death.

3.1.2. Lotus' Feelings

The narrative voice explicitly presents, on numerous occasions, the feelings that Lotus experiences in the interactions we have just reviewed. What follows is an enumeration of those feelings that the text itself identifies as such and that may be inferred without the risk of subjective overinterpretation.

Here it is offered a short list, which will be elaborated soon:

- Curiosity about the First Wife (p.15)
- Discomfort in Cloud's room (p.15)
- Desire and fright at seeing Coral in person unexpectedly (p.16)
- Fear, embarrassment, and excitement during her first sexual encounter with Chen Zuoqian, shifting to pleasure, then disappointment and sorrow when he abandons her for Coral (pp.17–18)
- Despair and emotional blockage recalling her father's death, alongside calm rational planning (p.19)
- Troubled, oppressive feelings upon noticing the Well of Death (p.22–23), combined with alarm and puzzlement
- Anger at the children (p.24) and increasing annoyance and jealousy toward Swallow (p.25)
- Unpleasant awkwardness in public (p.24)

Lotus feels curiosity about the First Wife (p.15); discomfort in Cloud's room (15); and a desire to see Coral's beauty, while also feeling *frightened* when encountering her face to face unexpectedly (p.16). During her first sexual encounter with Chen Zuoqian, upon seeing him naked and with his *penis as taut as a well-drawn bow* (p.17), she feels *frightened, embarrassed, a little bit out of breath*, before experiencing something distinct during the act itself: *Lotus seemed to fall from a high place into a dark valley where pain and dizziness were accompanied by a feeling of lightness* (p.17). However, these feelings immediately give way, after the act, to *disappointment, sorrow, and sleepless feelings* (p.18), when she sees that her husband abandons her to go to another woman—Coral. Pleasurable sexuality thus leads to frustrating solitude. This pattern will recur.

The scene in which Lotus recalls her father's death portrays her as feeling *despair* and an affective blockage that renders her *unable to cry* (p.19). At the same time, she appears as a woman with a strong capacity for reasoning, insofar as this tragedy leads her to *calm planning the future* (p.19).

The first scene in which she notices the well reveals her feelings as *troubled, oppressive*, accompanied by a sense of weakness and long sighs (pp.22–23), as well as *alarmed, puzzled, and wanting to know more*. Unease. Weakness. Alarm. Disorientation. Lack of knowledge and a desire to understand.

In other social interactions, she feels anger toward the young children of the household (p.24) and, with respect to Swallow, becomes *increasingly annoyed* and *jealous* (p.25). In public, among the children, she sometimes experiences an *unpleasantly awkward* feeling (p.24).

Yet she also experiences pleasant and agreeable emotions. This occurs especially with Feipu (with whom she feels *happy inside*, p.29) and with Coral (*emotions aroused*) when listening to her sing a song about a woman who hangs herself—just as her father had done (pp.30–31). In general, her feelings toward Coral can be summarized as *lukewarm emotions* (p.32). However, she also feels, at times, *a little irritated, a little apprehensive, a little nervous and a little exultant* (p.34), particularly when she discovers Coral's legs intertwined with those of the doctor beneath the table in an amorous posture: *Lotus was so irritated that her temper began to flare up; just as she decided to tell her off and the curses were already boiling up onto her tongue, she swallowed them back again, bit her lip, and thought for a few seconds* (p.33).

Her feelings then begin to become *turbulent and complex* (p.34). She experiences heightened sexual desire: *she simply could not understand why every time it was dark and rainy her sexual desires were heightened* (p.35). At the same time, she develops resentment and contempt toward the other women of the household (*The others? Who the hell are they? I do not give a damn about them*, p.35).

She then turns her attention, for the second time, to the garden and the well, and feels: *This garden is a little spooky* (p.36). She learns that it is called the Well of Death, asks about the deaths that occurred there, and sees, in its waters, dead women who bear her own face (p.36): she sees herself dead in the well. She even engages in dialogue with the spirits of the dead (p.36), linking the novel to the tradition of Stories of the Strange (志怪小说) in the lineage of Pu Songling (蒲松龄), and Yuan Mei (袁枚). From that moment onward, a sense of death begins to take root and grow within her—a feeling that continues that same day after speaking about the Well with Chen Zuoqian, and that extends into other areas

of her life, permeating even the most intimate moments of her sexual union: *their lovemaking had an aura of death about it* (p.37).

Other feelings mentioned in the narrative include shyness at certain moments (p.44) and anger upon discovering the voodoo doll.

In conclusion, although it is noteworthy that feelings related to death recur in three scenes—her father’s suicide, Coral’s song, and the Well of Death—the general pattern is that Lotus experiences a wide variety of emotions: both pleasant and unpleasant, pleasurable and unpleasurable, calm and angry, marked by both intimate friendship and hostile resentment—in short, of many different kinds. There is a great abundance of feelings, and interactions with all characters. There is no single predominant emotion, nor even two or three. Nor are there selective interactions.

3.2. Second Part: *The Unusual Winter*

3.2.1. Lotus’ Interactions and Feelings

In this Second Part, we observe changes in the characters with whom Lotus interacts.

First, Lotus interacts on several occasions—described at considerable length—with groups of characters in the household: with the maids who burn dry leaves (pp.45–51 and pp.54–57), with the entire family during Chen Zuoqian’s birthday and the episode of the broken vase (pp.51–53), and with Feipu and the flute teacher (pp.59–63). These interactions cover almost the entirety of this Second Part.

The other two notable interactions occur individually with Feipu and with Chen Zuoqian. We thus observe a clear reduction in both the number of interactions and in personal, one-on-one interactions. As will become evident in the analysis of her feelings, this reduction parallels a decrease in the variety of emotions experienced by Lotus. Interactions become fewer and begin to repeat themselves. Feelings also become fewer and begin to repeat themselves.

The episode of burning leaves provokes *anger* in Lotus (p.45), but this is not a momentary anger; rather, it is increasing, as one of the servants expresses: *Fourth Wife’s temper is getting worse and worse* (p.46). This observation perfectly defines the evolution of Lotus’s affective state: progressively worse. Moreover, she becomes increasingly alone and isolated. In the same episode, Lotus expresses a growing sense of insignificance: *What the hell do I amount to?* (p.47), after which she *locked herself in her room the entire afternoon* (p.49).

That afternoon, alone, she once again experiences death: *everyone had gone to join the party; only a certain loneliness remained behind, falling drop by drop. Like*

water dripping off the dead branches and dried leaves, it soaked right into Lotus's heart (p.53). She walks toward the well and *she felt incomparably light, as though walking in a dream [...] Lotus was suddenly seized by a frightening thought: there was a hand holding the wisteria leaf* (p.53). *She felt as though she was hearing an apocalyptic voice* (p.53). At this point, we must disagree with the translation of “听见了某种启迪的一生”; we believe that translations such as *she was hearing an enlightening / awakening voice* better capture the meaning. In any case, the general feeling of the scene is one of fear, but also of revelation.

In the birthday scene, Lotus cries and asks herself: *What did I do wrong this time?* (p.55–57). She is then filled with a sense of *apathy* regarding Chen Zuoqian's love: she quite literally does not care whether he wishes to sleep with her, nor does she care about her future anymore (p.58). She again becomes aware of her absolute insignificance and asks: *what do women amount to anyway? What sort of creatures are women? We're like dogs, cats, goldfish, rats... We're just like anything except human beings* (p.58). This sense of apathy is reinforced when she later has the opportunity to leave the house and enjoy herself with Feipu, but declines, as she feels the same inside as outside: *I do not want to go. I do not want to leave the house. I've got only one heart, and it feels the same no matter what; what good it do to relax?* (p.59).

By contrast, her interactions with Feipu and the flute teacher bring different feelings. Lotus finds the latter *quite interesting* (p.60). His presence elicits pleasant smiles from her on several occasions (p.60; p.62), and she looks at him *sympathetically* (p.62). With Feipu, Lotus experiences *a sort of elemental comfort* (p.65). With them, therefore, she feels trust, joy, and security.

Lotus experiences different feelings in her private scene with Feipu. It is a scene marked by *sexual feelings and loneliness*. Shortly before Feipu visits her to take leave for a time, Lotus recalls the image of Coral's and the doctor's legs intertwined erotically under the mahjong table: *When she thought about it, she felt both frightened and excited*. Fear and sexual excitement. Then Feipu bids her farewell, after suggesting that both he and the flute teacher share a fear of women, and she feels even more alone: *With Feipu gone she would be even more lonely and isolated in the Chen household* (p.67). Shortly afterward, when she is in bed with her husband, Lotus looks at his body but thinks of Feipu.

Finally, the feelings Lotus experiences in her private interaction with Chen Zuoqian are, once again, those of apathy—an apathy and weariness that lead her to say to him: *if [you] can't tolerate me either, then I might as well die and be done with it* (p.68). Lotus comes close to preferring death. On the night when she discovers Chen Zuoqian's impotence, her feelings are intense and painful: *She understood that*

Chen Zuoqian's body had suffered a tragic transformation and she felt very strange. She didn't know if she were happy or sad; she felt quite at a loss what to do (p.69). Shortly thereafter, Lotus weeps silently: *Chen Zuoqian heard her sobbing softly* (p.70). She continues sobbing for a long time, and her sobbing turns into full crying: *She heard the sound of her own crying ceaselessly reverberating in her ears* (p.71). Anger and despair take hold of her, along with hatred toward the other women: *she trembled violently all over; slammed her fist furiously into the bedding, stared at the darkness, and shouted, "Who's a whore?"* (p.71).

Increasing loneliness, increasing isolation. Unfulfilled sexual desire. Awareness of her own insignificance. Tears and sobbing. Weariness of life. Sadness at her husband's impotence. Sexual desire for Feipu that cannot be fulfilled. And, once again, feelings of death associated with the well.

3.3 Third Part: *I Will Not Jump Into the Well*

3.3.1. Lotus' Interactions and Feelings

In this Third Part, the tendencies already observed in the Second Part become more pronounced. The scenes are considerably longer than before, and the number of characters with whom Lotus interacts is further reduced to the following: Chen Zuoqian, the new servant Mama Song, Feipu, and Coral. A long family scene is also described.

Lotus's relationship with Coral is reduced to watching her sing songs of death, unrequited love, and suicide, and to engaging in brief yet profound dialogues on loneliness, death, and the meaning of life. It is a relationship marked by sincere friendship, free from manipulation or hatred. However, it becomes increasingly associated with death: first, because Coral sings near the Well of Death; second, because the themes of her songs revolve around death. *Coral, you are always making those macabre jokes* (p.75), Lotus remarks. In this Third Part, Lotus speaks little with her and instead observes her more: she watches her sing, recalls her in memory, and ultimately sees her being dragged to the well and murdered. Each time Lotus sees her, Coral appears in a worse state: *Lotus watched Coral leave and come home on the same day, but it was not the same Coral in the morning and in the afternoon. As Coral was dragged into the north compound, her hair was dishevelled, and her eyes glowed with anger as she cursed everyone who was dragging her along* (p.94). The penultimate interaction is reduced to Lotus listening to Coral sing a song of female loneliness and death (p.95) and watching her being dragged to the well, where she disappears: she is murdered (p.97).

With Swallow, the relationship deteriorates to such an extent that Lotus punishes her so harshly that Swallow dies in the hospital. With her replacement, Mama Song, a constant, fluid, and private relationship develops, characterized by sincere questions and answers. Mama Song obeys Lotus's wishes without resistance.

The interaction with Feipu undergoes a crucial transformation. Lotus, drunk and alone, recalls her birthday. Feipu visits her. Completely intoxicated, she steers the conversation toward love and attempts to approach him sexually, but is rejected, and he leaves her room.

With Chen Zuoqian, the interactions are more numerous than with the other characters and are of crucial importance for the development of the narrative. The first occurs following Swallow's hospitalization, when he reproaches Lotus for her behaviour toward the servant, leading her to question how she should conduct herself: *Chen Zuoqian walked out the door; he heard Lotus speak softly behind him. "Good God, how am I supposed to live then?"* (p.80). The second occurs when Lotus is drunk and sad (p.91 ff.), and she begs him to spend the night with her, offering to please him sexually in ways she had previously refused: *Please don't go. I'll do anything you want tonight; I'll stroke it; I'll suck it; I'll do anything you ask me to, only please don't go* (p.91). Yet he abandons her. Thus, both interactions end badly, resulting in frustration, loneliness, and incomprehension.

The third and final interaction takes place when Lotus witnesses Coral being forcibly dragged to her quarters and ultimately taken to the Well of Death, where she disappears forever. Chen Zuoqian comes to Lotus, denies the evidence of the murder, and utters the final words of the narrative: *You're out of your mind* (p.98). They never speak again.

As can be observed, the number of Lotus's interactions in this Third Part is reduced exponentially, primarily to three characters: Feipu, Coral, and Chen Zuoqian. All of them end negatively for Lotus. A fourth interaction also concludes disastrously: with Swallow, whose death results from Lotus's treatment of her. Coral sings songs of death and is murdered. Lotus desires Feipu and is rejected. Lotus desires Chen Zuoqian and is rejected and moreover labelled insane. An atmosphere of death grows inexorably around her, accompanied by an increasing sense of sexual frustration.

The feelings attributed to Lotus in the narrative correspond to these interactions. With regard to Coral, feelings of profound sadness dominate when listening to and watching her sing (p.72), along with *pity* (p.97), and a state of being *extraordinarily depressed*, accompanied by an anxious desire to know the punishment for Coral's unfaithfulness (p.95). On the night she witnesses the murder, she experiences deep depression (p.95), confusion, and passes a *restless night* (p.95).

Regarding the Well, Lotus's feelings become increasingly intense and unified: feelings of horror *when knowing who died in the well* (p.73). She *cannot escape nightmare hallucinations* (p.74) after having been near it. When she speaks with Mama Song about the deaths associated with the well, she feels *curiosity* about who died there previously (p.83), and upon learning the truth, experiences *a nameless terror* (p.85) that leads to total apathy and abulia: she loses interest in speaking, interacting, defending herself, or expressing herself (p.84).

Feelings of horror and fear related to death also haunt her following Swallow's death. When she discovers that Swallow wishes her death, she trembles with fear (p.78), yet also feels cruelty toward her (pp.78–79), followed by coldness (p.79), and then disgust (p.79). Once Swallow has died, *Lotus thinks that death is better than life* (p.86) and feels completely *unhappy* (p.87). She again contemplates suicide (p.87). Furthermore, she experiences visions of Swallow's corpse (93) and dialogues with her spirit (p.93), linking the narrative to the long tradition of 志怪小说 *zhì guài xiǎo shuō*, *Tales of supernatural*.

The feelings she experiences with Feipu, once pleasant and joyful, are transformed into *an unfamiliar desire* (p.89)—a sexual desire—which turns into weeping when she discovers his homosexuality and the impossibility of fulfilling the sexual relationship she so strongly desires (p.91).

Finally, her feelings toward Chen Zuoqian involve dissatisfaction with her social conduct in his eyes, as well as profound sexual frustration when he is unable to satisfy her. This results in the loss of hope of becoming pregnant (p.77), in addition to the loss of sexual pleasure (p.91). This dissatisfaction expands into a feeling of total loneliness, to the point that Lotus begs Chen Zuoqian: *stay with me tonight. Nobody cares about me. Love me tonight* (p.91), which he does not do.

The feelings that dominate Lotus in this Third Part are therefore loneliness, terror of death, sexual dissatisfaction, and sorrow, leading her to a state of existential apathy in which she asks herself: *why am I still alive?* (p.93). The answer she provides is definitive: *dying is better than living* (p.86).

Lotus ultimately experiences loneliness, isolation, and frustration in the three relationships that initially seemed satisfactory—with Coral, Feipu, and Chen Zuoqian. In this state, she witnesses Coral's murder with horror and experiences how Chen Zuoqian attempts to convince her that no one has killed anyone and that, if she believes so, she is insane (p.98–99). From that point onward, her behaviour is characterized by total isolation and by speaking alone to the Well of Death—or to the spirits of those murdered there—repeating tirelessly that she will never jump in, that she will not become one of them. Is she mad? The narrative voice tells us

that she is declared mad, that everyone assumes she is. Yet, at the same time, her clothing suggests a perfect composure far removed from conventional madness.

Her increasingly pronounced isolation leaves the reader with a final question: is she truly mad, or has she been declared so—perhaps because she is no longer useful in fulfilling the functions expected of a wife, as suggested by the narrative's conclusion with the arrival of a new Fifth Wife?

The narrator states: *Why would the young, perfectly healthy, and refined Fourth Mistress Lotus suddenly lose her mind?* (p.99). The limited society of the Chen household explains it simply as a feeling of longing for her beloved friend Coral, now gone (p.98). The final verdict of the servants is: “脑子有毛病” / crazy (nǎo zi yǒu máo bìng)

4. Conclusion

Since Aristotle's *Poetics*—and in structuralist narrative analysis by Roland Barthes (1966), Umberto Eco (1966), Claude Bremond (1966), Claude Bremond (1964), Tzvetan Todorov (1966), and Algirdas Julien Greimas (1966)—we know that the plot of any narrative is structured around a protagonist who seeks to achieve a goal and performs various actions in pursuit of it. Our narrative features Lotus as its protagonist insofar as it begins with her, ends with her, and focuses on describing all her interactions and feelings (as analysed above). However, the narrative voice does not explicitly state that Lotus has any specific goal, it only states that she decides to marry as a concubine in a rich family—in quite an unconventional way for a university student in the middle of the May the Fourth movement times—as Su Tong (2026) has stated orally when describing Lotus' decision as typical of a very unconventional woman «非常规的». (*fēi cháng guī de*)

Lotus is an outsider entering a new world in which she knows she must be a wife—a role she voluntarily accepted when her stepmother gave her the choice between marriage and another path. The narrative does not specify whether she has a clear objective. Her actions consist, as we have seen, of interactions driven by varied and minor goals, ranging from getting to know the other wives in the household to fulfilling conjugal duties. We may venture to suggest that the only goal attributed to Lotus by the narrative is to live as a wife in her new home.

If we now consider the actions expected of a wife according to the Chinese society of the time—or, more specifically, those inferred by the reader from observing how wives behave within the micro-society of the Chen household—and analyse whether Lotus achieves these goals, we must conclude that she fails. Lotus

does not achieve her ends at all. As we have seen, her actions with all characters result in profound frustration. This is especially true in relation to her husband. Her role as a wife is an absolute failure. Her life, in general, is also a failure. This is not merely a case of failure vis-à-vis a man due to being a woman; rather, it is a total failure across all her human relationships. If, as a wife, society expected her to produce offspring, it must be noted that this failure is not solely due to the deterioration of her relationship with her husband, but above all to his impotence; thus, it cannot be attributed to her alone. Failure, then.

In sum, what defines Lotus is failure. Failure to fulfil her objectives in her relationships with the other wives—except for Coral, and even that relationship ends in frustration, as it culminates in death, leaving Lotus in complete horror and solitude. There is also failure in her relationship with her main servant, Swallow—which ends in death. There is also failure with Feipu, with whom an initially pleasant bond of friendship transforms into unfulfilled sexual desire. And finally, there is also failure with her husband, whose relationship of trust and sexuality deteriorates until it becomes non-existent whether because she sometimes rejects his advances, because he disapproves of her behaviour, or because of his impotence. Lotus encounters failure and frustration in all her possible life goals. If her initial aim was to live as a wife, it must be concluded that she does not achieve it.

The plot, therefore, presents a narrative of failure in which the protagonist does not attain her primary objective. The theme of the narrative is none other than the depiction of a female life utterly thwarted—unsuccessful and failed in everything it sought to achieve.

The friendships that Lotus seemed to begin forming in the First Part with the women of the household either disappear (with Joy), disappear and become poisoned (with Cloud), or end in death, sorrow, and solitude (with Coral).

Her interactions with the men of the house also evolve with the family's eldest son, the warm feeling of sincere friendship that arose in the First Part strengthens and deepens in the Second Part until it transforms into painfully unfulfilled sexual desire and loneliness in the Third Part. With her husband, although their relationship begins excellently, that satisfaction diminishes in the Second Part and disappears in the Third, and sexual intimacy vanishes completely in the Third Part, both because of his impotence and the conflicts between them. Thus, both relationships with men also end completely ruined. Frustration. Loneliness. Sexual dissatisfaction.

Finally, her interactions with her two servants are very different. With Swallow, they begin poorly in the First Part, worsen in the Second, and end in death caused by Lotus herself in the Third Part — and this continues insofar as Lotus encounters

the spirit of the deceased. In short, this relationship is also destroyed. The same does not occur with Mama Song, whose interactions remain stable, without significant depth or conflict. She is, we believe, the only exception in the entire novel.

From the perspective of emotions, Lotus evolves from a notable variety of feelings in the First Part (pleasant, unpleasant, amusing, boring, of every kind) to the Third Part, dominated by feelings of loneliness, isolation, sorrow, fear, horror, grief, and madness. It is a journey from light to darkness, from the hopefulness of life to total disappointment, which leads Lotus to prefer death over life: *dying is better than living* (p.86), she ultimately feels and says so. Her feelings become fixed on a single focus: the fear of dying in the well, and the constant reaffirmation that she will not be thrown into it: “我不跳，我不跳，她说她不跳井。颂莲说她不跳井”。 Thus, the text ends: *I will not jump, I will not jump, I will not jump into the well.*

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Ljiljana Stević
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci
Filološki fakultet
Katedra za sinologiju
Gabrijel Garsija-Noblehas Sančes-Sendal
Univerzitet u Granadi
Fakultet za prevodilaštvo

LOTUS ILI NEUSPJEH JEDNOG ŽIVOTA: AFEKTIVNA FRAGMENTACIJA I AKTANCIJALNA DINAMIKA U NARATIVU SU TONG

Rezime

Ova studija ispituje afektivni razvoj Lotus, protagonistkinje novele autora Su Tong, kroz dvostruku prizmu međuljudskih odnosa i njene emocionalne unutrašnjosti. Usvajanjem aktancijalne perspektive, analiza istražuje kako se subjektivitet junakinje Lotus postepeno oblikuje, ograničava i na kraju fragmentira unutar rigidnog društvenog i simboličkog poretka domaćinstva. Narativ je podijeljen u tri jasno izdvojene faze, od kojih svaka odgovara transformaciji afektivnog stanja glavne junakinje i njenog položaja unutar mreže odnosa koja određuje njeno postojanje. Prvi dio prati njenu početnu integraciju u domaćinstvo, kao i formiranje očekivanja i strategija prilagođavanja; drugi dio ispituje destabilizaciju tih očekivanja tokom jedne anomalne zime obilježene tenzijom, rivalstvom i psihološkom dezintegracijom; treći dio prati nepovratni slom njene emocionalne i egzistencijalne koherentnosti. Kombinujući detaljnu analizu teksta sa pažnjom usmjerenom na narativnu strukturu, ova studija pokazuje da putanja protagonistkinje Lotus ne predstavlja samo ličnu tragediju, već sistematski „neuspjeh jednog života”, oblikovan međudjelovanjem želje, moći i ograničenja. Analiza se primarno zasniva na engleskom prevodu *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas* (2000) u prevodu Michael S. Duke, uz povremeno pozivanje na originalni kineski tekst.

► **Ključne riječi:** Lotus, aktancijalna perspektiva, *Raise the Red Lantern*, Su Tong.