

# An Analysis of the Existentialist Theme in Pangs of Love

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**Abstract:** Lei's work explores the theme of existentialism, reflecting the anxiety and uncertainty that modern people experience in the face of a rapidly changing world. The stories explore the dislocation and suffering experienced by modern people in a heterogeneous cultural space, the anxiety of existential existence, and the alienation and dislocation of interpersonal relationships.

**Keywords:** *Pangs of Love*; Existentialism; Mental Crisis; Generation Gap

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## 1. Introduction

The title of the collection, "Pangs of Love," is a reflection of the intense emotions and struggles that the characters experience in their relationships. Lei's writing style is introspective and thought-provoking, inviting readers to delve deeper into the complexities of the human experience. The stories delve into the inner turmoil of the characters as they struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives, grappling with questions of identity and belonging in a diverse and heterogeneous cultural space. The theme of alienation and dislocation of interpersonal relationships is also prevalent in Lei's work. The characters in his stories often struggle to connect with others and experience deep feelings of loneliness and isolation. These themes are not limited to Chinese-Americans but are relatable to a wider audience, making Lei's work accessible and universally appealing.

In *Pangs of Love*, Ah-Wee's struggle to find meaning and connection is further complicated by his status as a Chinese-American in contemporary society. His cultural identity adds an extra layer of complexity to his search for a sense of belonging and purpose. He feels disconnected from his heritage and struggles to find a place in a society that often marginalizes people of color. The theme of isolation and disconnection is also present in the protagonist's romantic relationships. He is unable to fully connect with his current girlfriend, and he longs for a deeper, more meaningful connection with someone else. His fear of commitment stems from his fear of losing that connection and being left alone once again. Lei's use of a Chinese-American protagonist highlights the challenges faced by individuals who are caught between two worlds. The protagonist's struggle to find meaning and connection in a society that often marginalizes people of color is a reflection of the broader challenges faced by immigrants and people of color in contemporary society.

## 2. Existentialist themes

### 2.1 Dislocation and pain in a heterogeneous cultural space

The protagonist's struggle to reconcile his heritage with the dominant culture of the United States is a reflection of the broader challenges faced by many Chinese-Americans and other immigrant groups. The tension between cultural identity and assimilation is a common theme in Chinese-American literature and speaks to the universal experience of immigrants and their descendants.

Language is the first aspect to express the conflicts. Lei's use of a bilingual narrative in "Pangs of Love" highlights the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by many immigrants and their children. The protagonist's inability to communicate with his mother in English underscores the challenges faced by immigrants as they try to navigate a new language and culture. At the same time, Mrs. Pang's inability to communicate in English reveals the generational divide that can emerge between immigrant parents and their Americanized children. A strong sense of alienation of Mrs. Pang and Ah-Wee is implied at the beginning of the story in a foreign culture. In this short story, David Wong Louie narrates that "My mother has lived in this country for forty years and, though what must be monumental act of will, has managed not to learn English." Mrs. Pang likes watching TV each night but almost can not understand

what the comedy means for language barriers. Coupled with different world views and values, the language problem leads to that although they are in the same room, the spiritual distance is extremely distant. Such a residence brings two people not the warmth of the family and the consideration of the family, but full of loneliness, pain and alienation.

If Ah-Wee is a symbol of division, his ex-girlfriend Mandy is the epitome of integration. Mandy is a native American girl, but she manages to bridge two very different cultures. As a graduate student majoring in Chinese, she can speak the language fluently and can communicate with Mrs. Pang normally. When there are some problems, Mandy chooses to write notes to ensure smooth communication. In addition to having a common language, Mandy accepts the Chinese traditional culture with an open mind. For example, she and Mrs. Pang planned for Chinese festivals together and cooked various Chinese dim sum and dishes, which won Mrs. Pang's favor and trust. Breaking the long-standing antagonism between the two cultures, Mandy has successfully integrated the Eastern and Western cultures by virtue of mutual understanding and positive awareness of cross-cultural communication. Although Mandy does not appear directly in the article, readers only gradually understand the image of Mandy through Mrs. Pang and Ah-Wee's memories and comments on her. However, from the perspective of the two people, Mandy successfully captured the heart of the mother and son, and truly crossed the cultural barriers to achieve cultural integration.

Through the protagonist's journey, Lei highlights the importance of cultural identity and the need to embrace one's heritage while also navigating the challenges of assimilation. The story speaks to the human experience of longing for a sense of belonging and connection, while also highlighting the challenges of bridging the gap between different cultural traditions and ways of thinking.

"Pangs of Love" is a powerful exploration of the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges faced by many immigrants and their descendants. Through the protagonist's journey, Louie highlights the fragility of human relationships, the importance of cultural identity, and the universal struggle to find meaning and connection in a world that can often seem cold and indifferent.

## **2.2 The anxiety of existentialism**

The sense of confusion is the second element due to the outer complicated conditions. The collection "Pangs of Love" explores the existential themes of mortality, isolation, and disconnection. As a typical second-generation immigrant, Ah-Wee grew up in the United States, and his impression to China is vague. After years of Western education and environmental influence, he has gradually formed an American-style world view and values. But racial prejudice against minorities, coupled with a deeply ingrained notion of white supremacy, has inexorably kept him out of the white mainstream. After he found himself was marginalized, he tried to erase his Chineseness but he failed.

It's common in Lei's writings. For example, Hank, the main character of "Warming Trends", is unemployed and forced to stay at home, living an isolated life. The novel is devoted to the details of his activities at home, such as watching TV, talking with his wife and daughter and smoking, which reveal his inner desolation, disappointment and anxiety. He is not able to face the absurd world openly, so that he is in a state of fear. Besides, in "One Man's Hysteria", the anxiety is revealed from the intellectual concern for civilization and the fear of the future. Although the writer is constantly searching for peace and meaning in his poetry, the growing Cold War keeps him in fear of the outbreak of nuclear war and the destruction of the entire world.

Through these protagonists' journey, Louie sheds light on the human condition and the struggle to find meaning in a world that can often seem meaningless. The story speaks to the universal experience of mortality and the existential questions that arise from it. In conclusion, "Pangs of Love" is a powerful exploration of the complexities of the human experience and the universal struggle to find the meaning and connection in a world that can often seem devoid of both.

David Wong Lei's writing style in "Pangs of Love" is introspective and encourages readers to delve deeper into their own experiences with love and relationships. The stories' exploration of the universal themes of love and relationships, as well as the experience of existential angst, reflects the human condition in modern society. These themes are not limited to Chinese-Americans but are relatable to a wider audience, making the weakened treatment of ethnicity in Lei's work an intentional choice that expands the narrative space and connotation of Chinese-American literature. Through his nuanced portrayal of the complexities of love and relationships, Louie invites readers to reflect on their own experiences and emotions, giving the story a universal appeal. The fear of losing a loved one, the struggle to find the meaning of life, and the existential angst that comes with these emotions are all experiences that readers from different cultural backgrounds can relate to. The weakened treatment of ethnicity in Lei's work is a conscious choice

that expands the narrative space of Chinese-American literature beyond the constraints of cultural stereotypes and expectations. By exploring universal themes and emotions, Lei's work becomes more accessible to a wider audience, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese-American literature and culture.

### 2.3 Alienation and Dislocation of Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationship is the third problem due to social conventions. "Pangs of Love" delves into the theme of emotional dislocation and the struggle to find meaningful connections in romantic relationships. In the essay "Pangs of Love", Ah-Wee falls in love with an American girl Mandy, and Mrs. Pang likes her very much too. But Mandy broke off their engagement and loved a Japanese just in a year. "It's a sad day for love, Mandy, everywhere." Ah-Wee bears in mind constantly to her. "I wonder how she has managed since she left."

Ah-Wee once said: "I can call her but she's not coming back." Louie put eyes on the complexity of romantic relationships and the challenges of finding meaningful connections in a world that can seem cold and indifferent. The story speaks to the universal experience of longing and the human desire for emotional fulfillment. His fear of loss of love underpins his anxiety about relationships and his difficulty in finding meaningful connections with others. From the protagonist's perspective, Louie emphasizes the fragility of human relationships and the challenges of navigating the emotional landscape of love and loss. In the collection, another essay called "Birthday". The hero lives with a white woman who is divorced and with a child, despite his parents' opposition. He loves this woman so much that he loves her house and her children. However, her ex-husband takes away the custody of the child, and the mother leaves in anger, which makes the hero's happiness disillusioned and leaves only anxiety and hesitation. In the novel, Frank says to Wallace, "You know what Welby thought when he first came here? He felt he was being punished for the breakup of our marriage. What do you think it made me think of? We both did things we didn't want to do and ended up hurting people. I hurt her, she hurt me; now even you are hurt." The conflict between different culture and social conventions can strengthen the pain. There is always a gap between integration and diversity. All aspects of the unsatisfactory gather together, shaping the protagonists of the inner misery and struggle.

### 3. Summary

"Pangs of Love" is a universal portrayal of the daily existence of people in contemporary society. The story touches on themes such as emotional dislocation, mortality, and the struggle to find meaningful connections in family relationships. The author's dual identity as an insider and outsider in American society allows him to wander freely in the American living space and deeply observe and examine the life around him. Scrupulous readers will find that the main characters in the various stories of Lei's novels often have only English names, and some characters need to be read carefully to discover that they are of Chinese descent. This weakens the ethnicity. "I believe that the themes of American and Chinese cultural differences and Asian alienation run through these ethnically weakened short stories." David Louie Wong said. This is where the theme of dislocation and suffering in heterogeneous cultural spaces comes into play. While alienating and downplaying ethnicity, the author focuses more on American society and the survival of ordinary Americans. He uses his novels to write and locate the Americans in his own ways.

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