Characteristics Of Tao Qian’s Philosophy Of Life

How would you characterize Tao Qian’s philosophy of life? Optimistic? Pessimistic? Or a combination of both?

Stylistically, the poet Tao Qian emulates optimism; his diction and style capture a way of peaceful living and lack a sense of inhibition. The content of his work, however, is consistently ridden with an implicit, and sometimes explicit, debate concerning various internal conflicts. With the contradiction of the former (an optimistic style) and the latter (pessimistic subject matter), it would be accurate to state that Tao Qian’s philosophy of life is a combination of both optimistic and pessimistic. While his writing technique resembles that of the plain, casual poet, the substance of his poems concerns far more philosophical ideas and often does so through a pessimistic perspective. The contradiction of cynical substance delivered within a jovial writing style is significant in determining Qian’s personal philosophy for three reasons: First, the content of Qian’s poetry is vital in understanding the specific motivations of his work. Second, by considering a poet’s style of writing, the analysis can extend beyond their work and into their conscious choices as a writer. Third, the juxtaposition of these concepts supports the conclusion that Qian’s philosophy of life is neither solely optimistic nor solely pessimistic, but a combination of both attitudes.

Tao Qian’s poetry contains a variety of subjects, though his poems are constant in their depictions of choice as a concept that contributes directly to one’s state of being. The Return captures this idea as the subject, presumably Qian himself, returns to a life of simplicity and finds contentment in doing so. Though the poem is relatively positive in the development of its plot, the conclusion and its implications reflect a rather dismal paradigm of Qian’s. With “no expectation of Heaven,” the subject is given dimension, specifically in his way of thinking (NAWL 1006, 54). To be indifferent toward one’s afterlife indicates a philosophy detached from the religiously conscious norm of the time period in which Qian lived. The subject also declares that he “[manages] to accept [his] lot,” which is admittedly optimistic in context but is still in reference to a rather pessimistic subject. To exercise a pessimistic attitude is to focus on the more negative aspects of life; the inevitability of death and the unlikeliness of heaven can both be considered as such.

Substance, Shadow, and Spirit is another example of Qian using his poetry as a means of presenting his own philosophies. This poem uses internal conflict far more explicitly as a narrative tool than Qian’s other poems, literally presenting three conflicting philosophies presented by the personifications of three belief systems with varying degrees of pessimism in their arguments. As Substance argues that any one man’s existence leaves little impact on the world, Shadow reminds the reader that the inevitable “darkness” in which we will “vanish” is reason to strive to leave an impact (NAWL 1008, 10). Both perspectives, while different in their assumptions, agree that life is finite. Spirit furthers this with its specific mentions of death and its inescapability. Choosing again to focus on a subject such as death, and particularly man’s inability to overcome such an outcome, Qian’s themes are overtly pessimistic in nature.

Conversely, the writing style of these poems often distracts the reader from the dreary subject matter at hand. Known for his simplicity as a poet, Qian delivers heavyhearted messages rich

with philosophical purpose in a casual and buoyant manner. In consideration of this, Qian's own choices as a poet can be considered optimistic. By choosing to discuss themes of death and worldly purpose in a lighthearted manner, Qian's unbothered confidence regarding such themes is revealed. Basic techniques and plain diction serve to contradict the seriousness of his topics, and thus support the argument that Qian is also optimistic in his worldview. The development of plot structure in The Return, as previously mentioned, is one example of Qian's juxtaposition of style and content. The subject is met with a conflict (the desire to return home) which is promptly met with a resolution (returning home), allowing for a "happy ending" to occur and the subject to achieve contentment. The basic narrative follows a structure consistent with storytelling, a choice that fails to match the heaviness of the themes in Qian's poetry. Basic techniques such as repetition and auditory imagery are also prevalent in Qian's writings, seen in lines such as "Sometimes I call for a covered cart/ Sometimes I row a lonely boat," (The Return, 41-42) and "A dog is barking…/ A cock crows…" (Returning to the Farm to Dwell, 15-16).

Admittedly, these techniques are common and do not necessarily promote any significant takeaways for analysis. However, it would be imprudent, if not insulting, to assume that such techniques are not purposefully used when considering the complexity of Tao Qian as a poet. Such a philosophically advanced writer who concerned much of his poetry with the importance of choice would be unlikely to overlook the significance of style in his work; both subject and delivery are key components that any great author would consider, and Qian is no exception. In Finding Fault with My Sons, Qian takes a serious implication (that he is not only unimpressed by but disappointed in his own sons) and delivers it casually. The poem itself is short (only 14 lines), which can be assumed to be Qian's way of delegitimizing the poem's content. Humor is also utilized in the poem as Qian describes his sons as lazy, unintellectual, and unable to "add up six and seven," further diminishing the pessimistic nature of the piece (NAWL, 1013). These conscious choices, allowing simplicity and humor to overrule the sensitive topic at hand, further support the argument that Tao Qian has an optimistic philosophy of life.

Tao Qian's poems are driven by a pessimistic attitude, focusing on topics that, at their core, lack hope and positivity. His style as a poet, however, exemplifies an optimistic way of addressing such topics casually and indifferently. Both attitudes, then, may be used to describe Tao Qian's personal belief system. In truth, it is fair for the opposition to this argument to insist that one, either subject choice or writing style, overrules the other. An author's main purpose is to convey a message; however, that message is conveyed is irrelevant when considering the ultimate purpose of their work. If this is true, then Qian is pessimistic. On the other hand, an author is more than their writing; active, real-life choices are far more reflective of one's beliefs than what he or she is writing about. This would mean that Qian is optimistic.

Philosophy, however, is not limited to either thought or action but encapsulates both simultaneously. Therefore, for one to accurately determine a "philosophy of life" practiced by another, two things must be considered: their motivations in thought and subsequent choices in action. Tao Qian is motivated in his writings by inherently pessimistic ideas: death, disappointment, man's lack of purpose, etcetera. Even so, Qian intentionally chooses to address such ideas in an optimistic manner by conveying unfortunate themes simply and humorously, simultaneously invalidating their seriousness and displaying a carefree point of view. Ultimately, his motivations result from a pessimistic attitude while is choices are the product of an optimistic one. Unfortunately for the opposition, both Qian's motivations and choices must be considered when determining the characterization of his attitude.

A philosophy of life is essentially the belief system one life in accordance with and cannot be determined solely through either actions or thoughts exclusively. The philosophy at its core is far more complex than that, and Tao Qian's personal belief system is a prime example of this complexity. By identifying the messages delivered in his poetry, his motivations for writing contribute to understanding his attitude toward life. Additionally, acknowledging how the messages are delivered is another key aspect in answering the question at hand. By recognizing both aspects of his authorship, it is made clear that Tao Qian emulates the opposing attitudes simultaneously. It is to be said conclusively, then, that Tao Qian's philosophy of life is characterized as a combination of both optimistic and pessimistic attitudes.