Candidate 1 evidence

To what extent does Lu Xun use a small everyday event in 'A Small Incident' to explore morality, compassion, and the narrator's personal awakening?

Lu Xun is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in modern Chinese literature (Wang, 2025), known for using ordinary people and everyday situations to expose moral weakness, social indifference, and the need for ethical renewal in early twentieth-century China (Jiang, n.d.). Rather than relying on dramatic events or heroic figures, Lu Xun decided to focus on small, seemingly insignificant moments in order to reveal deeper truths about human behaviour and conscience. This approach is clear in his short story "A Small Incident" (一件小事). Lu Xun's short story "A Small Incident" (一件小事) is a short story about a rickshaw ride interrupted when an elderly woman is knocked to the ground, an event which appears insignificant but gradually takes on moral importance. This essay argues that, to a significant extent, Lu Xun successfully uses the incident to prompt ethical reflection and self-criticism. Through the contrast between the rickshaw puller's response to the injured woman and the narrator's initial irritation, Lu Xun uses this small everyday incident to explore questions of morality and compassion. At the same time, the narrator's later sense of shame suggests a moment of personal moral awakening.

Before the incident, the narrator is presented as dismissive and increasingly cynical, shaped by repeated exposure to "国家大事" (鲁迅, 1923), that have left no meaningful impact on him. The narrator states, "我从乡下跑到京城里，一转眼已经六年了。" (鲁迅, 1923), and heard about numerous "so-called national events," but none have left a lasting impression. This opening reveals his emotional detachment and underlying arrogance, as he confesses to growing increasingly disdainful of others, including the vulnerable old woman who becomes part of the story. Analysis from an online source supports this characterisation, describing the narrator as "a self-centred, determined, discontent person." (IB English III E-Portfolio, n.d.). This portrayal sets up the narrator's moral baseline, intellectually aware yet emotionally cold and dismissive of ordinary human suffering. His initial reaction to the old woman's fall, suspecting her of exaggeration and wanting only to resume his journey, exemplifies this distance. The contrast between his internal cynicism and what follows emphasises how his initial mindset lacks compassion, making his later transformation more striking. This initial

indifference therefore functions as a critical starting point for the personal awakening that unfolds.

The so-called "small incident" in Lu Xun's story, a collision between a rickshaw and an old woman, seems insignificant on the surface, but it immediately acts as a moral test for the narrator. Lu Xun carefully stages this moment: "刚近S门，忽而车把上带着一个人，慢慢地倒了。跌倒的是一个女人，花白头发，衣服都很破烂。伊从马路边上突然向车前横截过来；车夫已经让开道，但伊的破棉背心没有上扣，微风吹着，向外展开，所以终于兜着车把。幸而车夫早有点停步，否则伊定要栽一个大斤斗，跌到头破血出了。" (鲁迅, 1923). The narrator was certain the old woman did not get injured, and the narrator's initial dismissal reveals his lack of empathy. According to an online analysis, Lu Xun uses contrasting perspectives - the narrator's cold reasoning versus the rickshaw puller's immediate concern - to highlight the difference in morals between these two types of people (品诗文, 2019). The narrator assumes the woman is faking her injury and views the whole situation as a mere hindrance to his journey. His instinct is to instruct the puller "没有什么的。走你的罢!" (鲁迅, 1923), demonstrating his prioritisation of convenience over compassion. Such a reaction reflects the numbness that arises from intellectual detachment and cynicism towards others. Yet the unfolding incident starts to affect him in ways he cannot ignore. As the narrative progresses, the incident becomes more than a simple accident.

In contrast to the narrator's hesitations, the rickshaw puller embodies spontaneous compassion. While the narrator views the old woman with suspicion, the puller instinctively stops, supports her to her feet, and asks her "你怎么啦?" (鲁迅, 1923), to check on her condition without complaint, despite the inconvenience and potential trouble. This contrast is significant because it places moral worth not in education or social class, but in spontaneous human kindness. This immediate moral responsiveness is described in such a way that it symbolises the puller's growing moral stature in the narrator's perception. lingjia states that "车夫对她的体贴和关怀，显示了劳动人民之间的阶级有爱和团结，" (lingjia, 2023), emphasising the morality of the working class who are not disdainful of others. The puller's actions are not driven by calculation, he neither seeks reward nor avoids trouble. Instead, he acts from a genuine sense of duty to a fellow human being. Such behaviour challenges the narrator's previous assumptions about humanity and forces him to confront his shallow moral judgments. In highlighting the puller's integrity, Lu Xun suggests that true compassion is not

tied to social hierarchy but to the ability to recognise and respond to suffering in others, a lesson the narrator will come to learn.

The narrator's personal awakening crystallises at the moment he reflects on the rickshaw puller's retreating figure. "我这时突然感到一种异样的感觉，觉得他满身灰尘的后影，刹时高大了，而且愈走愈大，须仰视才见。" (鲁迅, 1923). This marks the precise point at which the narrator's internal transformation begins. The description of the puller's back becoming "suddenly tall" and "becoming bigger and bigger" is not a literal observation, but a metaphor describing his psychological and moral re-visioning. The rickshaw puller, who was previously socially insignificant, is elevated to a position of moral authority, to the extent that the narrator must "look up". The narrator realises that the rickshaw puller was being the bigger person, causing him to feel worthless and recognise his contempt for the surrounding world (IB English III E-Portfolio, n.d.). Moreover, the puller's presence becoming a "威压" (鲁迅, 1923), signifies that this awakening is not comfortable or flattering. Rather than feeling inspired, the narrator feels exposed, as "甚而至于要榨出皮袍下面藏着的'小'来。" (鲁迅, 1923). The "fur coat" symbolises his social status and intellectual self-protection, while the concealed "small" suggests moral pettiness or inner weakness, which is being "squeezed out". Through this metaphor, Lu Xun demonstrates that the awakening is deeply self-critical, as the narrator becomes conscious not only of the puller's compassion but of his own moral inadequacy.

After witnessing the puller's compassionate behaviour, the narrator begins to experience internal conflict. Although he initially tries to rationalise his response, even "没有思索的从外套袋里抓出一大把铜元，交给巡警，说，"请你给他……"" (鲁迅, 1923), to end the interaction, he cannot suppress a growing sense of discomfort and self-doubt. Lu Xun frames this moment as an internal confrontation between the narrator's cynicism and his emerging compassion, suggesting the start of a significant internal shift. The narrator reflects that, "几年来的文治武力…背不上半句了，独有这一件小事，却总是浮在我眼前，" (鲁迅, 1923), suggesting that the awakening is enduring rather than momentary. The repetition and persistence of the memory illustrate how the "small incident" has a lasting impact, where the narrator says it has "教我惭愧，催我自新，并且增长我的勇气和希望。" (鲁迅, 1923). The narrator's newfound qualities demonstrate that he is no longer emotionally inert; rather, he is beginning to interrogate his values and assumptions. Lu Xun also employs the

symbolism of the wind, which appears throughout the story, to reinforce the narrator's personal awakening. At the beginning, "大北风刮得正猛," (鲁迅, 1923), reflecting the narrator's emotional coldness and detachment from those around him. However, by the end of the story, after the narrator has reflected on the incident and recognised his own moral shortcomings, "风全住了," (鲁迅, 1923). This shift is symbolic of the narrator's inner change, suggesting that the dissipation of the wind mirrors the softening of his previously cold and indifferent heart (Cristy, 2021). The contrast between the violent wind at the start and the calm at the end reinforces the magnitude of the narrator's awakening. Through this subtle natural imagery, Lu Xun deepens the impact of the "small incident," using the external environment to echo the narrator's internal moral transformation.

In "A Small Incident" (一件小事), Lu Xun uses a usually subtle moment to explore complex themes of morality, compassion, and personal awakening to a significant extent. By contrasting the narrator's initial detachment with the puller's spontaneous kindness, the story demonstrates how everyday occurrences can expose deeper moral realities and ignite self-reflection. This seemingly unobtrusive incident carries layered meaning, challenging readers, like the narrator, to recognise virtue in ordinary human interaction. Ultimately, Lu Xun's story highlights that genuine moral growth often arises not from grand historical events but from everyday moments that prompt individuals to confront their own weaknesses and develop empathy.

Word Count: 1276

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