

Original Paper

Brief Analysis on the Artistic Technique of Blurring Narrative

Subject and its Extension

—Take Yu Dafu’s “Degradation” as an Example

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Abstract

As a representative work of vernacular novels in Chinese new literature, “Degradation” sets up an unnamed protagonist and focuses on his inner world for a deep and comprehensive portrayal, thus forming the main content of the novel. This paper will explore the reason why the protagonist of the novel unnamed and the design idea behind it, discuss the revolutionary significance of this method of vague narrative by contrasting with previous literature, and its extension in other art forms today.

Keywords

Chinese new literature, Chinese vernacular literature, micro narrative, vague narrative

Yu Dafu’s masterpiece, “Degradation”, was created in 1921. With its profound and delicate style, the novel depicts the image of a depressed young man who is a “superfluous man”. The young man, from China, felt repelled and oppressed while studying in Japan and fell into depression. Faced with the multiple blows of self-abasement, self-reproach, sexual perversion, depression and other mental problems, the youth felt powerless to change the status quo and finally walked into the sea and drowned himself. In the novel, through the character of the young man, Yu Dafu expresses the sentimental mood, the anxiety that individuals cannot fit into the group, and the feelings of worrying about the motherland.

The inspiration for the topic of this paper comes from a question that came into my mind when I first read “Degradation”: why is the protagonist of this novel just called “He”, or even this role does not deserve a specific name? After thinking, based on the general theory that “Degradation is Yu Dafu’s self-narrated biography”, the author’s preliminary conclusion is that because the protagonist of

Degradation is a projection of Yu Dafu himself, theoretically the protagonist does not need to be named. Which brings us to another question: Since it is so why isn't the protagonist called "me"?

Before opening up the discussion this problem, we should first understand that the whole story of Degradation creates a kind of "ademonia" of young people in that historical period, which is universally representative. Therefore, "he" in Degradation can be regarded as a typical image. By horizontal contrast, we can see the vernacular novels of this period also gave birth to a lot of successful typical image: such as Mistress Xiang Lin is a representative of persecuted women, Kong Yiji is pedantic Confucian characteristics of concentrated embodiment, behind the role of Run Tu, is the author's mourning for the innocent and pure humanity that strangled by the feudal ethics, these roles do have their names; Meanwhile the "He" in "Degradation" is the New Youth, an educated young man with ideals at the beginning of the Republic of China.

In my opinion, the difference between the two is that the former describes the direct victims of imprisonment by the surroundings, which shows the tragedy of the times; The latter are intellectuals who are willing and able to break away from the old order, and who also have ambitions but have difficulties ahead. This can be derived from another layer of artistic difference between the two sides: the former is like a scene to the unenlightened society, with half of condemnatory and half of pity, so these representative characters need to have a name, so that the audience can remember them. The latter kind of character is more like a metaphor for the mutual understanding of intellectuals, written for people in the same community. In addition, the author also expects that the mood he conveys through the characters, which seems to belong to the mood of the author rather than the character, can be recognized by his peers in the community.

In other words, the target audience of "Degradation" is the New Youth, intellectuals and other groups like that. Because they can understand the "ademonia" shaped by Yu Dafu's words, they can reach mutual understanding and resonance with the "he" in the novel, and even put themselves into it. When they are confronted with the novel, what they think of (or rather, what the author hopes to make them think of through the design of the text) is not someone around them in reality, but that they see themselves, or some other possibility of themselves, in reference to the novel. Once such an "emotional contract" is reached between the reader and the writer, the "signified" for the protagonist in the novel who assumes the function of "signifier" can be anyone who can empathize with the character.

Therefore, I believe that "he" in "Degradation" is decided not to have a name for this level of artistic effect. Because he is excepted not an individual and cannot have a distinct personality that is not directly related to the theme of the novel, he is designed by the writer to assume the function of "general reference", so this kind of character must be made vague. And in the end, the quality that remains is that they will become a spectator, or a "camera", with a particular point of view that the author intentionally places in front of the reader of the novel. Although these characters are actually

involved in the story, they seem to stay out of it.

In terms of Chinese literature, the author believes that this technique can only appear after the late Qing Dynasty literature. The reason comes from the relationship between Chinese novels and “speaking memory”: in ancient China, literature was mainly presented to the middle and lower classes of the general public through storytelling, opera, drama and other forms. Therefore, the system form, expression and attraction of ancient Chinese novels all focus on “how will audience hear it”, which is the most important influence of speaking memory on ancient Chinese novels. This leads to strong traces of oral performance remaining in the text of the novel. This gives rise to the greatest narrative characteristics of the ancient Chinese vernacular novel: the storyteller must know everything about the story which is called God-like perspective nowadays, as if someone in the text is speaking to the audience. The influence of this feature on Chinese novels are as follows: first, the characters must have distinct personality so that the audience can distinguish between different characters without written records; second, for the works which accumulated by generations, the process of replaying or teaching the story will become a new secondary creation, like a snowball, the story will be more and more detailed than the original version; third, most importantly, for performance’s sake, the story should not include long paragraphs of “He thought...”, which lead to the long-term loss of psychological description in the history of Chinese literature; There is only one way to tell a story, the God way. In my opinion, the biggest characteristic of Chinese vernacular novels produced under such narrative mode in the classical period is that their dramatic is dominant and it exclude other artistic attributes of novels, such as implication, indicative, and sense of design.

This situation was not broken until the western literary theory, psychology and other new things were introduced into China, which reformed the traditional narrative thinking of vernacular novels. “You”, “me” and “he” or “she, who is nobody, can also become the person who “holds the microphone” in the narrative just like “Tom”, “Sam” and “Jose”. As a kind of art, the novel has more space for design, and the writer can transform from a simple storyteller to a role approach to the “director”. From the *Diary of a Madman*, which first adopted the narrative in diary form, to the *Degradation*, which blurred the narrative subject while strengthening the psychological description, I believe that in terms of artistic techniques, this kind of works has revolutionary and innovative significance.

As for the artistic technique of blurring narrative subject that this paper intends to discuss, in the author’s experience, this technique is mostly used in the field of video games. Because video games as the ninth art, the nature of the most different from the first eight art forms is interactive and participatory. That is to say, in contrast to the previous “show-see” relationship between the work and the acceptor, in a video game the player, also the acceptor, his or her experience of enjoying the work is as if participated in the story of the work. Unlike the audience of film and television works and readers of literary works, they can only be guided into the designed and arranged stories by the director and

author. In the narrative of a video game, the player actually has the active power to choose whether or not to advance the story. In other words, during the production of a game, the player's experience is also part of the design consideration. It might even be said that in video games, the "accepter" becomes part of the "text".

So what we can see is that the more story-based games are made, the more they tend to blur the player's role in the game, the narrator of the story, in order to reinforce the player's sense of engagement. We can see that the protagonist of the love game has a face of Miss or Mr. Average, the protagonist can customize the name, the protagonist can customize the appearance, the protagonist in the game process is a "dumb mouth" unless selecting a certain option... I believe that these techniques of expression can be traced back to the art of writing. Such a "time-honored" technique reflects the integration and mutual growth of different artistic genres, and also provides an effective experience for today's literary and artistic creation.

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