托尼·莫里森《最蓝的眼睛》的叙事策略

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is the most prominent and successful African American woman writer of the 20th century. She received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 for her outstanding achievement on writing, and became the first African American woman writer to win this award. She is clearly aware that the dignity and identity of the black are based on the relatively integrated African American culture. Most of her stories happened in the black community, where the daily life of the ordinary black people is connected closely with the myth and folk tradition of Africa. Morrison roots herself in black tradition, culture, history and reality and brings the black novels to a new degree both thematically and artistically.

The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s first novel, published in 1970, is still the best seller of the 21st century and shows her extraordinary talent, charm and her unique writing features as a great black woman writer. In the novel, Morrison subtly probes a distinctive theme—the practical way for the black to healthily survive in the dominant white culture is to retain the black ethical culture root so as to eliminate the internalization of white cultural value—a theme different from that of many other African American writers—racism and the conflict between black and white. In order to reveal the theme of this novel, Morrison applies some prominent narrative techniques such as multiple points of view, interior monologue and multiple narrative structures. Moreover, she makes skillful use of some techniques such as symbolism to depict the social environment and the characters.

This thesis is a detailed study of Morrison’s distinct narrative strategies in The Bluest Eye, including four chapters, besides Introduction and Conclusion. Introduction introduces the life and achievement of Toni Morrison, the writing background of the novel, and various literary criticisms about the novel. Chapter One is the analysis of alternated narrative voices, which make the narration objective and justified. Besides, diversified narrative structures are exploited to achieve a perfect artistic effect. On the one hand, its meandering narrative style can make the reader feel like sitting over a
cup of coffee, chatting with the narrator. On the other hand, the circulative structure suggests that everything occur in the novel will inevitably happen again like the endless repetition of four seasons. Chapter Two, from the viewpoint of symbolism, explores the various layers of symbolic meaning of flowers, colors and names of characters, exemplifying and enriching the theme of the novel. Chapter Three focuses on diversified the goddess mythology and diversified Afro-American traditional culture, varying from Greek myths to folk beliefs and superstitions, from folk speech to fairy tales and then to folk rituals, which show the importance of the comprehension of traditional cultures and the participation of community activities for black people. Chapter Four, from the perspective of folk blues music and gospel music, explains how black people in loss and depress console their mind by singing blues songs and gospel music, and the reason for totally different destinies for Claudia and Pecola, who are almost of the same age. Finally, the part of Conclusion briefly summarizes the strength of The Bluest Eye and its beneficial effect on readers. Generally, Morrison has forged a place for herself and opened a space for other African-American women writers in the American literary canon with her unique writing techniques and her sharp insight to the black world.

Key words: The Bluest Eye; Split Narrative; Symbolism; Afro-American tradition; Blues.
托尼·莫里森是二十世纪美国最杰出的非裔黑人女作家。因其卓越的才华于1993年荣获诺贝尔文学奖，这是首位黑人女作家获此殊荣。莫里森清楚地意识到，黑人的种族尊严和身份是建立在一个相对完整的黑人文化之上的。因此，她的大部分作品都是以美国黑人生活社区为背景，融美国黑人的日常生活和非洲的神话和民间传统于一体。莫里森的作品深深植根于美国黑人独特的文化传统、历史和现实生活之中，无论是在思想内容、还是在叙述手法的运用方面，都将黑人小说的创作艺术推向一个新的高度。

莫里森的处女作《最蓝的眼睛》(1970) 在二十一世纪的今天屡屡名列美国畅销书榜首，这再次证明了她的作品非凡的艺术魅力。与其他黑人作家揭示黑人和白人之间因种族歧视导致直接冲突的视角不同，这部小说探讨了一个独特的主题：在白人强势文化下，黑人更为实际、却更解放的生存方式是认同并保留本民族的优秀文化传统，以此消除白人价值观的内在化。为了展示这个主题，莫里森运用了一些显著的叙述策略，诸如多种叙事声音、人物的内心独白、多样化的叙事结构等。

本文拟详尽探讨《最蓝的眼睛》一书的各种叙事策略，除了导言和结语部分，文章由四章构成，导言部分介绍了托尼·莫里森的生平、艺术成就。这部小说的写作背景以及评论家对这部小说的各种评论。第一章分析了交替出现的叙事声音，使故事的讲述更为公正、客观。此外还探索了多样化的叙事结构以及由此达到的艺术效果。一方面，漫谈式的叙述方式让读者和叙事者间的距离拉近了，好像坐在一起边喝咖啡边聊天。另一方面，循环式的叙事结构暗示了小说里发生的一切事件都将像四季循环一样永无止境地重复。第二章从象征主义的角度，探索小说中反复出现的植物，颜色和人名的象征寓意，以此丰富小说的主题，使之更加具体。第三章着重阐述了小说中出现的各种美国黑人的文化习俗，从希腊神话的故事原型到民间信仰和迷信；从黑人语境到各种童话故事原型的使用再到民间仪式履行的复杂过程，都充分体现了了解黑人传统文化和参与社区活动对黑人的
重要意义。第四章从非洲传统的蓝调音乐和福音音乐的角度研究了生活巨大失落和重压之下，黑人是如何通过吟唱来抚平心中的忧愁的，由此也解释了两个同龄少女克劳迪亚和佩科拉的不同命运。最后，结论部分简要地概述了《最蓝的眼睛》的独到之处及其艺术效果，总而言之，莫里森以其对黑人世界的敏锐洞察力和独特的叙事技巧确立了她在美国文学中的重要地位，并且也为其他黑人作家的创作拓宽了视野。

关键词：《最蓝的眼睛》 碎片叙事 象征寓意 非洲传统 布鲁斯
Introduction

Toni Morrison, who frequently focuses on black, Midwestern communities in her fiction, was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, and was raised by working-class parents in the small town of Lorain, Ohio. Morrison once explained in an essay in Black Women Writers at Work, the influence of her early years in Ohio on her writing: "I am from the Midwest so I have a special affection for it. My beginnings are always there…. No matter what I write, I begin there…. It's the matrix for me…. Ohio also offers an escape from stereotyped black settings. It is neither plantation nor ghetto" (Tate 158).

It provided Morrison with an ideal site for her analysis of the struggle for freedom in which so many of her characters engage. She grew up in a lively family and was surrounded by songs, fairy tales, ghost stories, myths, music, and the language of their African-American heritage. Adults often tell the stories first and let the children tell their own. The importance of both listening to stories and creating them influenced Morrison deeply and cultivated her habit of reading and writing.

After graduating from Howard University in 1953, Morrison went north to Cornell University, where she received a master’s degree for a thesis on the theme of suicide in the fiction of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. While she was teaching at Howard University, she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, and gave birth to two sons, Harold Ford and Slade. In 1964, she separated from her husband and moved with her children first to Syracuse, New York, and then to New York City, where she worked as a senior editor at Random House. There she helped shape such autobiographies as those by the activist Angela Davis and the boxer Muhammad Ali, as well as an anthology entitled The Black Book, a collection that reflects the breadth of the anonymous Black man’s experience in America. In an 1974 interview, Morrison asserted, “I want to participate in developing a canon of black work” (Stepto 219). Indeed, Morrison has not only participated in the evolving of Black American Literature, but has done much to influence, expand, and solidify the place created by
its vanguard, including Phyllis Wheatley, Fredrick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Richard Wrights, Zola Neale Huston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison.

The African American literature has been placed outside the white-centered literature for a long time. It thrived in 1920s, when many excellent writers appeared, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Eugene O’Neil. In their works, they just described the life and struggle of the black male characters, and mainly talked about how the black male characters were tortured in the white society and explored how they could survive wholly. The black women were only arranged marginal characters.

Not until 1970s, along with the achievements that the African American women writers got, did more and more people pay attention to their creative activities. Unlike their predecessors, African American women writers have paid more attention to the inner world of their women characters. They depict life and thoughts of the black women (girls and adults) vividly. Among them are Jessie Faucets, Zola Neale Huston, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Alexander Walker and Toni Morrison. All these African American women writers achieve greatly and express their ideas and thoughts through their works. They are the representatives of the black women and call for the rights for the voiceless black women. Among them, Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent African American women writers.

Toni Morrison writes novels not only for describing the present world, but also for thinking about the life of black woman in history and reality. As she said in an interview:” My responsibilities are to do the best work I can do and to be the human being I can be…. What the Novel does—which is one of my assumed responsibilities—is to make it thinkable, doable for others, other African-Americans and other women” (Mori 2). Since her first novel The bluest eye was published, she has published several novels, a number of critical essays and one drama, among which the most celebrated including: Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), and Paradise (1998). Using unconventional narrative techniques, poetic language, myths and folklores, Morrison in her stories address as such issues as
black victimization, the emotional and social effects of racial and sexual oppression, and the difficulties African Americans face in trying to achieve a sense of identity in a society dominated by white cultural values. Her oeuvre is constant in her exhaustive exploration of the history and reality of Black Americans, yet at the same time richly variegated for her superb narrative technique, shifting from novel to novel, and marked by its originality, although it’s related to Faulkner and to the Latin American tradition.

Morrison has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among which the most prestigious are the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993 for her giving “life to an essential aspect of American reality” in novels “characterized by visionary force and poetic imports” (Frangsgmyr 69). While giving a lecture at Princeton University, Morrison was asked by a student who she wrote for. She swiftly replied, “I want to write for people like me, which is to say, black people, curious people, demanding people---People who can’t be faked, people who don’t need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria (Kuenz 421). To this day, Morrison continues to employ her “very, very, high criteria” to challenge herself as both an educator and a writer. Until now, the most important contribution Morrison makes for American and world literature, however, maintains Toming, is that “She has fictionalized---thus culturally carved out ---a territory in which black people are not marginal anomalies but a genuine human society” (Toming 338-9). This is clearly evidenced in her first novel, “The Bluest Eye”, which sets for the keynotes for her later works.

*The Bluest Eye* sets in the town Morrison grew up, contains a number of autobiographical elements. It’s told from the point of view of a nine-year-old girl, the age Morrison would have been when the story of the novel takes place (1941). Like the MacTeer family, Morrison’s family struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Morrison grew up listening to her mother singing and her grandfather playing the violin, just as Claudia does. In the afterwards of this novel, Morrison explains that the story developed out of a conversation she had had in the elementary school with another little girl, who longed for blue eyes. She was still thinking about
the conversation in the 1960s, when the black is beautiful movement worked to reclaim African American beauty, and she began this first novel.

The Bluest Eye received a moderate amount of attention, for the most part appreciative, with critics praising Morrison's exploration of complex themes, her accessible narrative, and her use of poetic language. Many reviewers recognized a brilliant novelist in the making, emphasizing the beauty of her prose, her authentic dialogue, and her insight into black life. But they also criticize what they saw as an excess and abuse of those same qualities. In the New York Times (13 November 1970) John Leonard provided the most enthusiastic appraisal of The Bluest Eye, characterizing Morrison's prose as "so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry” (Leonard 30). Leonard identified the book's subject as "institutionalized waste...of children who suffocate under mountains of merchandised lies" (Leonard 30). Liz Gant, in Black World, identified a more specific theme: "an aspect of the Black experience that many of us would rather forget our hatred of ourselves” (Susan L 192). To Ruby Dee, in Freedomways, who agreed that the novel was "not...a story really, but a series of...impressions,” the important thing was that they were “painfully accurate impressions” that made the reader “ache for remedy” (Susan L 192). Black American Literature Forum contributor Phyllis R. Klotman commented, “The Bluest Eye is an extraordinarily passionate yet gentle work, the language lyrical yet precise--it is a novel for all seasons” (123-25).

However, several reviewers were less laudatory, criticizing her for what L. E. Sissman in the New Yorker called “an occasional error of fact or judgment” (Denise 282) or what Haskel Frankel saw as “fuzziness born of flights of poetic imagery” and lack of focus as “the narratives branch out to assorted portraits and events” (Frankel 46). But even reviewers who are most critical of Morrison's first novel sense her potential. The Choice reviewer stated that The Bluest Eye may not be the “best first novel ever published; it is, however, a sympathetic and moving portrayal of human beings...and for this alone it deserves to be read” (Denise 282). Sissman concluded that, in spite of Morrison's penchant for “an occasion false or bombastic line,” none of
it matters “beside her real and greatly promising achievement” (Denise 282). Frankel conceded that, though Morrison “has gotten lost in her construction,” she is a writer “to seek out and encourage” (Denise 283). Whether for praise or blame, most reviewers singled out the same characteristics of Morrison's writing---qualities. They have continued to remark upon in her subsequent novels: the impact of her vision of black life, her poetic prose, and her construction of a narrative out of discrete scenes and stories. Critics agreed that *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, showed a high degree of skill. They also agreed that the author had a promising career ahead of her if she worked on eliminating the flaws in her writing style.

*The Bluest Eye* was first introduced to me in the American Literature class. Toni Morrison in the novel discusses how the African Americans should treat their self-existence and self-identity in American society, and puts this problem as the theme of the novel. Toni Morrison doesn’t focus on direct white oppression of a black community, but how whiteness is ingrained in the mind of the black individual and serves as a destructive force. At the same time, the writing techniques Morrison use in this novel helps to express the theme successfully, which also makes the novel more attractive to me. Overwhelmed by the tragedy of Pecola, the protagonist of the novel, and moved by Morrison’s sincere technique by means of Claudia’s narrative into the survival of a minority in the dominant white culture, I started to collect relevant materials about this novel. According to my survey mainly concentrated on the domestic journals, I found that few of the articles comprehensively represent the relationship between its narrative strategy and theme in *The Bluest Eye*: the theme makes the narrative strategy unique, and the narrative strategy to the most reveals and sublimates the theme. The study really enlightens me and makes it possible for me to understand and interpret the novel from a wider perspective. Therefore, this thesis will give a detailed study of *The Bluest Eye* through the exploration of four dominant features of Morrison’s narrative strategies in the novel.

This thesis consists of four chapters besides Introduction and Conclusion. Chapter One is the analysis of the alternated narrative voices and Multiple-textual narrative structure. The first section is about Multiple-Voice Narrators. In this novel,
the first-person narrator and the third-person narrator intermingle with each other. The point of view shifts from the child to the adult Claudia when the author wants readers to have a more mature and objective view of the characters and their stories. The second section of this chapter covers the structural features of the novel: the repeated use of American primary reading materials—the story of Dick and Jane, as the primer of the novel, enable the reader to compare and contrast the condition in society lower-class family with that of the ideal European white family. Instead of conventional chapters and sections in novels, *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four chapters named as four seasons—Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer. Linda Dittmer in her article “Examining form in *The Bluest Eye*” says, “Inherent in the notion of the seasons is the fact that they are an annually recurring condition from which there is no escape” (Bulter Evans 143). This kind of organization suggests that the events described in the novel will occur inevitably just like the circulation of the four seasons in a year.

Chapter Two devotes to the ubiquity of symbolism represented in the novel. Section One mainly deals with the symbolic meaning of two flowers—marigolds and dandelions, expressing complicated social environment and ideology. Besides, the most prominent symbols—colors are also discussed in this section, which sometimes are associated with beauty and cleanliness, sometimes with happiness and solace, but sometimes with loss, injustice and self-loath. The second section of this chapter examines the symbolic meaning of the names of the characters in this novel. Respectively, each symbolic figure is filled with multi-layers of meanings. Together, they provide the novel with various levels of interpretations to enrich the theme.

In Chapter Three, Afro-American traditional cultures and Greek myths are introduced to exemplify the theme of the novel. From Greek myths of mother-daughter relationship to traditional beliefs of sickness and death, from folk vernacular used as an outlet to express the emotions of theirs souls to fairy tales concerning magic power, again to complicated but ordered process of social rituals in Aunt Jimmy’s funeral, these traditional culture ties most blacks to their own culture and makes Pecola’s being exiled from her society a doom.
Chapter Four explains how secular African folk music blues and gospels sustain character’s confrontation with the oppressing social and cultural conditions. The lyrics and structure of classic blues “The St. Louis Blues” will be discussed first to lay foundation for the ensuing part about female blues singer and their subjectivity in this novel. Among them, Mrs. MacTeer’s “Saturday blues” shows her art of living through loss. Poland’s “Mealbarrel Blues” combines the language of sexual desire and the desire for freedom from poverty. Pauline sings “color blues” when she is in retrospect of her good old times. Ivy’s gospel songs are also introduced to imply that Pauline’s living-through songs is only temporary and exist only in her memory.

Conclusion is a summary of Toni Morrison’s unique narrative techniques and the appeal of *The Bluest Eye*. Although the *story in the* novel *happened* in the 1940s, and most of the events that occur mirrored that period, its positive significance last until this age, encouraging people to *live* in darkness and poverty to respect and love themselves and their own community.
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