

An Analysis of Narrative Perspective and Modes of Presentation in *Beloved* within the Framework of Postclassical Narratology

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Keywords: Post-classical narratology; Narrative perspective; Character discourse form; Race and gender awareness

Abstract: the post-classical narratology takes the classical narratology as the theoretical basis and provides a new perspective for the interpretation of literary works. It pays more attention to how the social and historical context plays a role in the creation and reception of works and the interpretation of readers. *Beloved* is an important work written by the black woman writer Toni Morrison, which reveals the evil of the racial discrimination. In the framework of post-classical narratology, this paper analyzes the novel from the perspective of narrative and the form of characters' discourse, and explains how these two narrative strategies are used to achieve the political purposes of race and gender in the historical context at that time.

1. Introduction

Postclassical narratology was born in the middle and late 1980s. It's theoretically based on classical narratology and supported by the concept and mode of classical narratology (Shen Dan & Wang Liya 6). The difference between post-classical narratology and classical narratology lies in that the former emphasizes that the analysis of works should focus not only on the text itself, but also on the social and historical context, the author's creation context and the reader's acceptance context. While the latter only focuses on the text itself and regards it as a closed and self-contained system, ignoring the social, historical, cultural context and other factors outside the text. In view of the limitations of classical narratology, the emergence of post-classical narratology provides a more objective and comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing and interpreting literary works.

Beloved, a novel written by Toni Morrison, a black female writer, depicts the story that Sethe, a black slave, killed her newly-born baby called *Beloved* with her own hands because she did not want her child to repeat her fate of being a slave. After 18 years, the ghost of *Beloved* returned to the world. Recently, the accusations of black women living conditions, the revelation of evil of slavery and the black slaves physical and mental pains suffered from the slavery have always been the focus of academic circle. However, few reviews and studies of *Beloved* have been made concerning how the narrative strategy and narrative techniques are combined with and involved in ideology category such as identity and gender to construct black women of racial and gender consciousness. Therefore, this paper will focus on what narrative strategies and techniques the author adopts in her works, why such narrative strategies and techniques are used, and what rhetorical effects it achieves. Under the theoretical system of post-classical narrate theory, combined with the social and historical context, this paper examines the narrative voice of the work and discourse of characters and explores the theme, characters' behavior characteristics, psychological expression and ideological significance of the work through narrative voice and free indirect speech presented in the text.

2. The narrative voice

In *Fictions of Authority*, Susan S. Lancer divides narrative voices into authorial narrative voices, individual narrative voices and collective narrative voices (17). Authorial narrative voice is the third person omniscient narration of classical narratology. This narrative state of heterodiegetic, collective and self-referential is helpful to combine the form of narrative voice with the form of

ideology (Tang Weisheng 78). *Beloved* just adopted the author narrative voice, which was determined by the social and historical context at that time the novel of *Beloved* was written.

The story takes place after the end of the civil war in the United States, slavery has been officially abolished in law, but the harm and pain caused by slavery to black people still hasn't disappeared, and the shadow of slavery still hangs over the hearts of black people. Morrison once said, "I thought this was going to be the least read of all my novels, because it's about things that people don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, the black don't want to remember, the white don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia"(Taylor-Guthrie, Danille 257). Morrison was writing at a time when the white male superiority was dominant and the work of black women writers was characterized as "insignificant", "irrelevant", "everywhere" and "indecent". The uncertainty, inconsistency, ambiguity and unexplainability of postmodernism provide a new narrative perspective and means for Morrison's novels. Therefore, under the influence of the post-modern context characterized by race, gender and "deconstruction", the authorial narrative voice of *Beloved* presents the following characteristics.

Authorial narrative voices adopt and rely on African American culture to gain authorship and highlight African ancestral culture. *Beloved* came out of the water, through the trees, and appeared at Sethe's door. In African religions, water and trees represent a source of rebirth and life, a link between the physical and spiritual worlds. From the perspective of African culture, *Beloved* is the person who is in harmony with ghost, implying that *Beloved* has the identity of African culture. "Beloved returns to the soul" integrates African cosmology because *Beloved's* identity and character represent the soul of all Afro-American black slaves, and returning to the world is the group belief of African Americans. There are images of "trees" and "water" and myths of African ancestors in the novel. African-American culture permeates the whole novel. Compared with the process of other African American writers' literary creation at the same time, *Beloved* shows the exotic and metaphorical style of African culture and deviates from the Western culture and knowledge system. The novel adopts the author's narrative voice to promote the excellent culture of the African American nation. On the other hand, the narrator constructs discourse authority for the black community through African culture and African elements, and deconstructs narrative authority in western civilization.

Morrison skillfully applies the authorial narrative voice to create a narrator who knows the holy spirit. "Beloved returns to the world" is the main line of the novel, and the narrator has narrative responsibility for this supernatural event: the novel adopts the author narrative voice and takes "Beloved's return to life" for granted, otherwise the whole narrative will not exist. This narrative voice knows the soul of all the spirits and the unknown world, firmly believing that the ancestors' souls returned to the human world in traditional African beliefs and the ancestors' souls of American black slaves transcend the narrators in western literature written by white people. It tells us that this ghost and "60 million or more" (*Beloved* 1) souls on the title page of the novel were victims of racism, and that "every home in this neighborhood, from top to bottom, is filled with the cries of the black victims"(*Beloved* 5) . White readers can't help but feel embarrassed between the lines when heinous crimes of the racial discrimination carried out by white people against the blacks are so obvious. Morrison gradually turned white readers away with the help of old African myths and traditional African cosmology passed down from one generation to another. The western cultural elements recognized and understood by white readers in the novel are gradually disappearing and the intertextuality between the text content and western culture is also increasingly weak, and the mainstream white culture and white readers are increasingly marginalized. The narrator deconstructs western civilization with this unique African cosmology, because western civilization breeds white racial discrimination. Only by cutting off the historical, intellectual, and cultural relations associated with western civilization can the narrative authority of African-American writers be achieved.

Morrison questions and refuses to explain events that should be explained by the authorial narrative voice. This unexplainability is declared by the narrator, and the authorial authority is not fading but the unpredictability of events is strengthened. At the beginning of the novel, it tells us

that “124 was spiteful “ (Beloved 3). The narrator does not tell the readers what the malice is. What malevolence will there be?” A woman comes out of the water, fully dressed” (Beloved 50), without telling the readers who it is. The narrator does not explain Beloved’s attempt to return to the world, nor does he use his own voice to affirm that “the new soul returns with guilt”(Beloved 267). However, the narrator has a firm belief in this when telling the story itself, narrating the word “Beloved” with a strong voice at the end of the novel. This unintelligibility and unexplainability give the novel a bright color of post-modernism.

3. Free indirect discourse

With the development of western narration, narrative criticism since the 1990s is heavily on discourse structure and techniques. Different discourse expression can produce different narrative and aesthetic effect, make the novel narrative life- authenticity and strong dramatic effect, therefore the ideological significance is derived. Free indirect speech is a typical form of discourse, which has been widely used in western novels since the 19th century to express the thoughts and consciousness of characters.

Free indirect discourse is a form of “hybridization,” to use Bakhtin’s term, representing a character’s utterance and inner thoughts without syntactical indication that the character actually expressed them.(Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 113). In free indirect discourse the narrator “places him/herself, when reporting the words or thoughts of a character, directly into the experiential field of the character and adopts the latter’s perspective in regard to both time and place” (Royal Pascal 9) . This use of free indirect discourse simultaneously allows the author/narrator “to preserve the expressive structure of the character’s inner speech, its inability to exhaust itself in words, its flexibility, which would be absolutely impossible within the dry and logical form of indirect discourse.” When the author’s /narrator’s voice fuses with or appropriates the language of one of the characters without syntactically signaling that the fusion or appropriation has in fact occurred, the result is an “erasure of boundaries between authorial speech and the speech of others”(Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 319) . The narrative strategy of free indirect speech is widely used in *Beloved*, which is naturally incorporated into the text through irony, empathy and multiple voices, leaving the discourse space of racial discrimination for the narratee.

3.1 Free indirect discourse and irony

Due to the advantages of free indirect speech, the voices and comments without the narrator’s intervention reflect the strong ideology of the characters. When the attitude of the narrator is opposite to that of the character, the voice of narration reflects a strong irony to the character and produces alienating effect, which strengthens the authority of the narrator and weakens the authority of the character’s discourse. In this way, free indirect speech is used to condemn the white readers.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator’s perspective is used, “they” as the subject, and then the free indirect speech slides directly from the narrator’s narration into the characters’ discourse. The narrative focuses on four horsemen as well as runaway slaves through the perspectives of the slave hunter, and places the remarks of white racists in an implicit double quotation, making the readers aware of all the “alienated and ironic examples”. “It was the nigger with his head down and a little jam smile on his face who would suddenly shout like a bull and start doing incredible things” (Beloved 148). The use of derogatory terms “nigger” and “shout like a bull” (Beloved 148) shows the animalistic, inhuman image of black slaves from the white men’s perspective. The slavery discourse in the text is very strong, and the inhumane discourse power is largely realized through animal images. The constant use of animal images highlights the inhuman life state of black slaves. And then the narrative focus shifts from schoolteacher to his nephew. “What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’s been beaten a million times and he was white” (Beloved 150). The question mark in the text is a typical feature of free reported speech, which expresses the young white man’s unmediated thoughts of racism without any interruptions of narrative voice. Stamp Paid, a witness to the infanticide, gives his account of the events from his own perspective. Here Morrison uses free indirect speech to reflect Stamp’s inner thoughts, through whose perspective

readers see clearly the process of infanticide, and the narrative tone is obviously different from those of the four white men. The four horsemen are described by Stamp as “Four. Riding close together, bunched up like, and righteous.... The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognized along with his ma’ma’s tit. Like a flag hoisted” (Beloved 157) . From the readers’ point of view, the past tense of free indirect speech and the third person create a distance between the readers and character’s discourse, which enables the readers to analyze and appreciate the absurdity of the characters’ discourse and the ironic tone of the narrator with a calm and objective perspective.

3.2 Free indirect discourse and empathy

Free indirect speech can not only enhance the effect of irony, but also increase the sympathy for characters. When the narrator’s attitude is consistent with the characters, it produces the effect of empathy by integration the voice of the narrator and characters. Since free indirect speech itself is characterized by the past tense, the third person and the non-leading sentence, which are similar to narrative description, the views of the narrator will affect readers, forming a resonance.

“IN THE BACK of Baby Suggs’ mind may have been the thought that if Halle made it, God do what He would....”(Beloved 135). The phrase “IN THE BACK OF Baby Suggs’ mind” syntactically belongs to the omniscient narrator, and even though the pronominal references indicate that Baby herself is not speaking, the narrator appropriates Baby Suggs’ language to signal Baby Suggs’ attitude. “God do what He would” evokes not only Baby Suggs’ thoughts but her admission that it would take more than ordinary human strength for her son to get to her.

After the infanticide of Sethe, the calmness and fear of the white men are in sharp contrast to the reaction of the black slaves. The narrative immediately shifts to the perspectives of Stamp Paid and Paul D, which develops by adoption of the dialogue made between Stamp Paid and Paul D. By adopting Stamp Paid’s speech pattern while maintaining her own narrative distance, the narrator can comment on Paul D’s reaction to the news of Sethe’s infanticide. “THAT AIN’T her mouth” (Beloved 154). Paul D was unwilling to believe in the tragic events that had happened to Sethe.

“Go there. Away from this place, where they can find safety”(Beloved 163), which are the words typically belonging to Sethe. In the process of narration, the narrative description of the past tense of the third person is integrated with the character’s discourse, and Sethe’s voice is permeated with the objective narration. Finally, the narrative discourse is gradually influenced by the characters’ discourse, more and more close to the characters’ discourse, retaining the characters’ subjective consciousness, and increasing readers’ sympathy for Sethe and hatred for slavery.

3.3 Free indirect discourse and multiple voices

Because of its own characteristics, free indirect speech is uncertain and ambiguous. Third person, past tense and non-leading sentences are similar to narrative description and swing between the voices of the narrator and the characters. This multiple voices requires readers to participate in the construction of the text and make moral judgments on the characters in the works through narrative distance, and analyze the use of the author’s narrative strategy and the ideology to be conveyed.

The infanticide is told from multiple perspectives, so that it provides information and interpretation of infanticide from different levels. Multiple narrative perspectives respect the relativity of experience and emphasize the active role of readers, which requires readers’ involvement in the generative interpretation of reading and recombine intermittent fragments together. Through the analysis of the text, the readers may see Sethe’s infanticide from the perspective of the white and black people respectively. Through the free indirect speech of white characters, white readers will restore the miserable life of black people under slavery and discrimination and slavery of some white people to black people. Those white readers who oppose racial discrimination will sympathize with black slaves, hate the white people mentioned in the novel and feel ashamed of them. At the same time, we can do something for black people to make up for the harm caused by racial discrimination. Black readers will naturally read the implied meaning encoded in the text and arouse the awareness of independence, self-esteem and self-respect among their fellow black readers. By means of this method, Morrison not only makes readers understand the sufferings of the black nation, but also makes readers feel the power of the black

nation and see the hope of the nation through the characters with fighting spirit. Only by the reconstruction of blacks' past tragic history, can the black boldly face up to the past, face up to the history and heal their hearts. Only by facing the past can the black have a bright future.

4. Conclusion

Roger Fowler said in *Language and Control*, "it is impossible to achieve a neutral position when using language to describe, because the meaning to be expressed by language is inseparable from ideology, which depends on the social structure"(Fowler & Roger 2). Morrison creates the novel through authorial narrative voice and free indirect discourse, whose intention is to hope the readers can decode the real subtext in the social and historical context, inviting the readers to enter the situation that contains materials from the black culture, while including and reflecting the white mainstream culture. Connecting the history of black women with issues of freedom, responsibility, and women's status is to teach black people, especially black women, should be independent, self-esteemed and self-respected. Only in this way can African Americans get equal and free rights with the white people.

Acknowledgement

In this paper, the research was sponsored by the "13th Five-Year" Social Science Research Project of Education Department of Jilin Province: "Studies on the Postclassical Narrative Strategies in Toni Morrison's Novels"([2016] no. 409)

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