Analysis of Postmodernist Literary Characteristics of Robert Coover's *Babysitter*

Guo Peng

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110036, China

Abstract: The short story *Babysitter* written by American writer Robert Coover uses nonlinear narrative method, self-negation plot design, fragmented text structure to bring the reader a novel reading experience and has obvious post-modernist literary characteristics. This paper uses postmodernist literary criticism theory to analyze the artistic characteristics of the text and to interpret uncertainty and absurdity reflected in the real world.

1. Introduction

American novelist Robert Coover's literary works have a profound influence in the 1960s. His works, from mythological stories to historical metafiction, from magic realism to postmodernism, involve a wide range of subjects and contents. He rarely uses traditional linear narration but uses more nonlinear narration, and forms indescribable uncertainty between the reader and the author, between fictional texts and the real world. His short story *Babysitter* is a typical representative of this kind of work. In the novel, Robert Coover uses 108 paragraphs to express the narrative plot, as if to form a jigsaw puzzle game to create a novel reading experience: in the process of reading, the reader is not only the experiencer of the text, but also the creator of the narrative structure. Different readers often arrange different text orders, form different plot arrangements, and then have different reading feelings. The writer gives the reader freedom to decide when and where what happened. Robert Coover shows no clear clues and hints to the reader from beginning to end, therefore readers read as they think and create. A sense of indeterminacy arises between fantasy and reality.

2. Postmodernist Characteristics in Robert Coover's *Babysitter*

2.1 Indeterminacy

American postmodernist critic Ihab Hassan thinks that indeterminacy is the first essential feature of postmodernism. It includes all kinds of ambiguities, fractures, and displacements that affect knowledge and society. The creation of literary works derives from the real world but has some sublimation. This creative concept of realistic literature points out the interdependent and inseparable relationship between the fictional text and the real world, and also highlights the creative principles of realism and certainty of literature. However, *Babysitter* goes beyond the limits of realistic literature, causing chaos between fantasy and reality. As Ihab Hassan points out that one of the postmodernist features is that indeterminacy penetrates into our behaviors and ideas, which constitute our world. The distinction between illusion and reality in literary works mainly depends on the two factors: time and space. If there is a clear temporal and spatial connection in the text, illusion and reality are clear at a glance. On the contrary, the two are vague and difficult to argue. The 108 paragraphs in *Babysitter* has no clear temporal and spatial connection, and each section can be regarded as a separate plot. For the reader, the reading process is full of challenges because the clues of reading are constantly disturbed and destroyed.

In terms of time, there are six time points in the novel: At 7:40 the babysitter arrives at Tucker's house in 1st paragraph. At 8:00 the babysitter runs water in the bathtub and gives Bitsy a bath in 19th paragraph. At 8:30 the babysitter lets Jimmy take a bath and brings Bitsy go to bed in 41st paragraph. However, in 17th paragraph the reader can find that the babysitter has already bathed Jimmy. It is

clear that the plot breaks reading linear logy and plot contradiction arises. One more example, at almost 9:00 in 51st paragraph the babysitter lets the children go to bed. At 9:00 in 65th paragraph the babysitter finds Bitsy asleep on the floor so she takes Bitsy to bed and lets Jimmy go to bed, which means the children have finished taking a bath. But in 68th, 77th and 88th paragraphs, the plots are still about that babysitter is persuading Jimmy to bathe. The reader has to think about the logic sequence and recreates time sequence to understand the plots. Another example, at 10:00 in 102nd paragraph the babysitter finishes the dishes and she begins to watch TV news. The content of the news is coincidentally about a babysitter. For the reader, it's not hard to realize that babysitter on TV is obviously not the Tuckers' babysitter. However, judging from Mrs Tucker's worries and Mark's look, the babysitter in the news in both 103rd paragraph and 104th paragraph could be the Tuckers' babysitter. It can be seen that the narrative order of the novel is not arranged according to the time when things happen. Even the specific six time points can not help the reader to clarify the logical relationship.

In terms of space, there are three clear places: Mr. Tucker's house, Mark's father's house and grocery store where Jack and Mark play together. According to the plot, Mr. Tucker at the party always imagines that he has returned home and Jack always imagines that he and the babysitter would stay at Mr. Tucker's house together. Therefore, following the fantasy of different characters, the reader' stable sense of space is greatly subverted, which means the stable sense of space in the traditional works no longer exists in this postmodernist works. It can be seen that the confusion of the concept of time and space obscures the distinction between illusion and reality. This narrative arrangements make the reader jump in thinking and logical confusion in the process of reading. It is difficult to believe that this is the novelist's true expression of real-world indeterminacy.

2.2 Self-negation

American scholar Brian McHale believes denying what has happened in the narrative process, which means something has never occurred in the narrative process, can be defined as self-negation. He thinks that self-negation in postmodernist literary works breaks through stereotypes and forms characteristics. Although self-negation has also appeared in previous literary works, it is limited to the depiction of character consciousness such as expectation, fantasy and memory. Self-negation of postmodernist literary works has extended to the portrayal of reality. In other words, self-negation of traditional novels is realized through the subjective imagination of characters, while postmodernist works directly self-negate the real world. Take the 35th paragraph as an example:

Not actually in the tub, just getting in. One foot on the mat, the other in the water. Bent over slightly, buttocks flexed, teats swaying, holding on to the edge of the tub. 'Oh, excuse me, I only wanted!' He passed over her astonishment, the awkward excuses, moves quickly to the part where he reaches out to—'What on earth are you doing, Harry?' his wife asks, staring at his hand. His host, passing, laughs. 'He's practising his swing for Sunday, Dolly, but it's not going to do him a damn bit of good!'Mr Tucker laughs, sweeps his right hand on through the air as though lifting a seven-iron shot onto the green. He makes a dok! Sound with his tongue 'In there!'

The beginning of this paragraph describes the fantasy of Mr Tucker. When the reader is still immersed in it, the question 'What on earth are you doing, Harry?' from Mrs.Tucker draws the reader back to reality. This is the self-negation of Mr. Tucker's fantasy. Obviously, this arrangement does not affect the overall stability of the novel, but the subsequent narration is even more bizarre. For example, the babysitter drives away Jack and Mark in 76th paragraph, but in 80th paragraph Mr. Tucker find the babysitter flirting with Jack. Logically, Mr Tucker couldn't have seen the scene because Mark has been sent away. Another example, in 85th paragraph when Mr. Tucker comes home and finds the babysitter, Jack and Mark watching TV in the living room, he completely negates the flirtation between the babysitter and Jack in 61st paragraph.

Self-negation of narration subverts the integrity, stability and lifelike nature of literary works and makes the certainty of narrative text disappear completely. This self-negation narrative style makes it impossible for the reader to determine any accurate meaning completely. To a large extent, self-negation reflects the fundamental characteristics and main writing principles of uncertainty.

Uncertainty is the result of center disappearance and ontology disappearance. In the absence of essential and ontological centers, man creates himself and his world only through language. However, language is illusory and the world is ethereal. Postmodernist works are to make the reader realize that the text is only a chaotic combination of language, which can not reflect the real world. If they can, it means that the real world itself is messy and disorderly.

2.3 Fragmentation

After World War II, American have been greatly influenced in social, political, and cultural life. Americans began to doubt, get tired of and mock at previous thoughts and lifestyles. They sensed that the world is fragmented. Fragmentation has undoubtedly become the best way to show the current situation of the world at that time. Ihab Hassan points out that uncertainty is often caused by fragmentation and fragmentation is what they have it all.

Babysitter brings fragmentation to the extreme and forms art. The 108 fragmented text strongly shows the artistic impact of the work, producing a unique artistic effect. First, fragmentation extends the infinite imagination space. *Babysitter* is cleverly fragmented, creating various possibilities to interpret the text, making the plot colorful under the guidance of the perspective of multiple characters. Second, fragmentation negates the certainty of reality. Take 35th paragraph as an example, the reader are frequently to change thinking between fantasy and reality and it is difficult to grasp the uncertainty of reality. Influenced by the traditional concept of novel writing, the reader is used to regarding fictional plots as a portrayal of reality. The linear narration of traditional novels, the complete plot, the typical characters and the typical environment can create a sense of reality simulating the real world, thus satisfying the reader's expectations. However, fragmentation in postmodernist literature hinders the way to reality and the reader cannot read the text as a real world. Text can only be read as an autonomous language object. This is the third effect of fragmentation. Fourth, the fragmentation breaks down the linear narrative. Linear and horizontal narrative are two basic narrative discourse. Linear narratives often allow the plot to form a closed circle to ensure the so-called fidelity. Horizontal narrative is not closed and easy to form open structural clues, of which the most distinctive feature is without ending, or with multiple endings.

$108^{th}, 107^{th}$ and 104th paragraphs of *Babysitter* can all be considered as endings because 108 paragraphs are arranged horizontally and the writer adopts synchronic rather than diachronic narration. Many plots can occur at the same time. For example, when the babysitter went to Tucker's house, Jack might be wandering the streets. While Mr Tucker was fantasizing at the party, the babysitter might be playing with the children or flirting with Jack. *Babysitter* uses the present tense throughout the narrative, as if all the plots are happening together as the time the reader feel has been "present". In the process of reading *Babysitter*, the reader frequently enters and leaves the fiction and reality of fragmented structures. the reader can interpret fragmentation more effectively only by alerting their own position. Fifth, fragmentation helps the reader actively participate in creation. *Babysitter* uses a third-person perspective throughout, as if to objectively report what happened to the reader, letting the reader feel the fantasy and behavior of different roles. Although the names of the main characters are clearly defined in the novel, the frequent use of pronouns "he" and "she" creates the effect of character ambiguity, and the reader must be able to identify the identity of the characters. The disorder of fragmentation in time and space makes some plots occur in impossible time, and requires the reader to actively participate and think in reading to understand the text, coupled with an open ending. All these give the reader great imagination and creative space. If we want to understand *Babysitter*, we must actively participate in the selection, arrangement and adjustment of fragmented texts, and the reading process has evolved into a literary creation process.

3. Conclusion

With his bold innovations in language, writing skills and content, Robert Coover uses anti-traditional writing methods to get the reader lost in a labyrinth of uncertainty, self-negation and fragmentation to reflect on what they are in the real world. If the previous literary schools are more

inclined to let the reader "read" to understand the certainty and reality of the real world, then postmodernist literary works are more inclined to let the reader "experience" the uncertainty and absurdity of the real world. From another point of view, the fictional world created by Robert Coover is no longer important in itself. He shows the reader exactly the absurdity of the fictional world, even the absurdity of the writer's creative process. To reflect our real world. It can be said that postmodernism reproduces reality through the subversion of text, and makes the reader feel the essence of reality directly through creative reading experience.

References

[1] Ihab Hassan *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* [M] Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987

[2] Wang Xianpei, Wang Youping. *Dictionary of Terms of Literary Criticism* [M] Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1999:667

[3] Brian McHaIe, *Postmodernist Fiction.* (New York and London: Methuen.1987), p.109

[4] Hu Quansheng, Lin Yuzhen, Hukaibao. *Selected Literature and American Literature in the 20th Century ——Postmodernism* [M] Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong University Press , 2003:328

[5] Zhu Liyuan. *Contemporary Western Literary Theory* [M] Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2005:

[6] Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) , p.14.