

The Centennial Love: Narrative Structure under the Intersection of Time and Space -- on the First Night in Soseki Natsume's *Ten Nights of Dreams*

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Keywords: Soseki natsume, Ten nights of dreams, Time and space, Narrative structure, Value on love and marriage, The other's ethics

Abstract: *Ten Nights of Dreams* is one of the representative works of Japanese writer, Soseki Natsume, at his peak of art creation. The first night, as the opening work, reflects on the relationship between men and women, the relationship between self and the others, human survival dilemma and hope, as well as social and ethical issues through the love of a man and a woman for a hundred years, which lays the foundation for the overall style and philosophical connotation of the book. The first night constructs a narrative structure under the intersection of time and space through the visualization of time and space and the transformation between space and time. Through this article, Soseki Natsume asks questions about the times and Japanese society, and expresses his views on marriage and love of advocating “pure love”, “equality” and “being the others for each other”. He also agrees with ethics of “the other” proposed by Emmanuel Levinas, and conveys his deep humanistic care.

1. Introduction

Ten Nights of Dreams (1908) is the representative work of Soseki Natsume (1867-1916). It is composed of ten independent but interrelated short stories. At the beginning of each short story, the author starts with “I had such a dream” and narrates in the form of “dream”. The book contains deep philosophical thinking on human ideal, destiny, history, love, art and other themes through the form of fantastic narration. Scholars at home and abroad have discussed it from various aspects for more than 100 years. Shihara pointed out that the core of *Ten Nights of Dreams* should be time and space, or the product of the combination of time and space. Paying attention to the time and space in the work is the key to understanding the story about “the others' world”, and the imago world contained in *Ten Nights of Dreams* as a unified whole.[1] This view is very insightful; “time and space build the framework which associates with all things” [2]. This paper will analyze the narrative structure of space-time intersection in the first night of Soseki Natsume's *Ten Nights of Dreams* from two aspects of visualized time and space, and the transformed space and time, so as to appreciate the space-time aesthetic and philosophical implications contained in it.

2. Visualized Time and Space

The first night in *Ten Nights of Dreams* tells a story (dream) that happened in a hundred years in a very short space. Bakhtin believes that “when we observe things from the perspective of time and space, the existence there no longer appears in the abstract form, but in the form of living affairs.” Therefore, when writers create texts, they often express the abstract time and space relations in visual form. *The First Night* tells the story that “I” had a dream, in which the woman said she was going to die soon. She ordered the man to bury her and agreed to meet again in 100 years. After the woman died, “I” buried her according to the agreement, and waited by the tomb for a hundred years. Finally, a lily grew under the tombstone. After kissing the lily, “I” realized that 100 years had passed. Soseki Natsume condenses the story of a hundred years in the dream into the specific space beside the woman's tomb. Through specific intentions of the sun, stars and lilies, and the time of

conversation between the woman and man before she died, Soseki Natsume creates an orderly time interval, which forms a visual effect of time and space.

The protagonist “I” was waiting in front of the tombstone. Here's the scene in front of “me”.

“The sun rose in the East. It was a huge red sun. Then, as the woman said, the sun began to set again from the west. The round sun turned the whole sky into bright red. I counted to myself, this was the first one.

Before long, the red sun rose slowly again. Then, it fell quietly from the west. I counted to myself again, this was the second on.

In this way, counting and counting, I could not remember how many suns have been counted. No matter what the number was, the red sun still went through the top of the head endlessly...” [3]

This description brings strong visual impacts to readers, like appreciating painting works. In the reading process, readers follow the hero “I” in the dream beyond time and space, forming a visual representation of time and space. First of all, the story background is like a picture. The description shows an oil painting of time and space in thick and heavy colours. Next to the tombstone is the main space for character. “I”, as a man who loves “woman” deeply, dug a pit and buried the lover with “huge pearl shells” when she died. The man covered the earth with “star fragments falling on the ground” to make a tombstone. In the time of night and the space of dark brown land, facing the woman's “death”, the author shows readers a picture of “shells shining brightly in the moonlight” when the hero “digging up” and “covering” layers of soil; he also describes the smell of “fragrance of soil in the air”, and the tactile touch of “warmth” through “round star fragments which are polished when falling in the space”. The way of dark blending with light shows us the extensive artistic conception. The lovers agreed to meet again after a hundred years. Due to symbolic symbols like “moonlight”, “shells”, “stars” and “the sun”, the whole picture fades away from the sad tone of “the death of the beloved”, but highlights the illusory and romantic features of a dream. Even though they were in different worlds, because of “true love”, the man still waits for the agreement with the woman for 100 years. This is the symbol of “pure love” between men and women advocated in the Meiji Restoration period.

The second point is the camera image depiction. In this paragraph, the theme image is placed in the broad and distant background. The environment is very extensive, which makes the “sun”, namely the main object of description, more prominent. The main image of “the man” changes from the close-up view of background description to long-range perspective under the contrast and change of camera lens. The first two days have long time interval; but the following 100 years skate over with the sentence, “counting and counting, I can't remember how many suns have been counted”. The “loneliness” and “righteousness” of the man are vividly revealed on the paper. Readers have the same doubt with the narrator: “a hundred years will never come”; “I stare at the mossy pebble and wonder that I may be cheated by that woman.”[5] From the sun “rising in the east and setting in the west” to round stones changing from smooth to be “covered with moss”, these visual pictures are very vivid and condense the time and space. It not only completes the narration, but also changes the time and space, which is a beautiful omission. This kind of treatment provides the novel with unique art features of the combination of open beauty and abstract beauty. The speed of story development changes orderly; the unfolding of the plot has a degree of relaxation, with Soseki Natsume's unique aesthetic mood of “surplus beauty”.

3. Transformation of Space and Time

Kant pointed out, time is different from space in a significant feature. Time is the form of “internal feeling”; it is the expression of the subject's own internal state. Space is the representation of the subject's “external feeling” of external things; time and space are mutually conditional. In the dream of the first night, the conversion of “space” and “time” from “external feeling” to “internal feeling” has profound philosophy. In the novel, the dialogue between the protagonist “I” (the man) and the woman shows the transformation of space and time.

At the beginning of *The First Night*, the narration is carried out from the perspective of the first person narrator “I”. “I sat by the pillow with folded arms”; “the woman lay on her back”. The

sentences define the intimate relationship between the main characters. “The woman's long hair scattered on the edge of her pillow; an oval face appeared. Her cheeks were pink; her lips were undoubtedly ruddy.” It clearly depicts the woman's appearance: she is a typical Japanese woman with Oriental beauty. The woman repeatedly stressed that she was “dying”, even though the “pink complexion” and “red lips” looked healthy. Although “I” doubt this, I also have the tacit understanding: “maybe she was really going to die”. In the face of her own death and the separation with the loved one, the woman's “calm” and her explanation of everything after her death can be regarded as the independent temperament of “new women” in Meiji period. Although the man doubted for the first time according to “what he saw” and “what he experienced”, he still chose to communicate and talk with women on an equal basis. It can be seen that in Meiji society in Japan, the feudal male chauvinism thought which held that men were superior to women was abandoned. It is a portrayal of intellectuals' pursuit of equality between men and women and the outlook of marriage based on love. In addition, at the beginning of this description, “dying” is the time; “the depth of her eyes clearly reflected my figure” is the space. This echoes with the “hundred years” (time) and tomb side (space) after the death of the woman. The two “parallel worlds” constitute the mutual transformation of “time” and “space”, as well as “self” and “the other”.

It is worth noting that “I”, as the hero in the relationship, has no description of “face”. The man who lacks self existence can only confirm his image and existence from the woman's eyes. Levinas' theory of “the other” means to break the real “self” in the ontological sense, and deduces the principle of the relationship between the self and the others. The meaning of the “face” of “the other” is beyond existence. Through the “face”, the relationship between self and others can be re-established. Therefore, for the man, the woman is the other. When “I asked again and again: Well, can you see my face? She smiled a little and said: do you ask me? Look, aren't you reflected there? I didn't speak, and silently left my face from the pillow. I held my arms and thought, 'does she really have to die?’” [5] This is the second time that the man asks his “face” and the second time he “holds his arm” and has “doubts” about the woman - “does she have to die?” On one hand, it shows that the man is reluctant to give up the woman who is about to die; on the other hand, he establishes and identifies himself by projecting his “face” onto the “other”. Levinas thinks that the “face” of “the other” is the most expressive part of “the other”, and “face” shows a kind of “speech”. In the relationship between “face” and “the other”, I accept and feel something different from me, that is, the enlightenment of the other. [4] Throughout *The First Night*, the man and woman are always engaged in an equal dialogue. The man looks for the reflection of his “face”, and he actually seeks a kind of self-expression and others' enlightenment. In this regard, Tanaka points out that in the literary space of Tanaka, the “self” in the beginning part believes what the women say; on the other hand, he thinks that the woman is not about to die, so he is suspicious of the woman. With the unfolding of the story, the common sense of reality gradually disappears. On the deathbed of the woman, the man's “self” finally completes the transformation of time and space [7]. Through the mirroring of the woman's eyes, the man's self is established. In addition, the “dying eyes”, as well as eyes like “water” and “mirrors” bring readers into a dream like an “alien world”. “Dying eyes” can be regarded as both “time” (= dying) and “space” (eyes, mirror images). “Water” in eyes such as “deep water” and “tears” can be regard as the concept of “time” in the category of Chinese philosophy. In addition, the woman called the reflection of the man's “self” image in her eyes as “there”, not “here”. The generation of this sense of distance highlights that the woman split her bodies and souls, and the relationship between self and the other of the man and woman change with time and space. This transformation highlights the self reconstruction in the context of Levinas' ethics; the subjectivity of “I” is awakened [8]. Therefore, in the face of the dying lover, “I” promised and waited for the agreement of the “other”. In the waiting time of 100 years, “I” had doubts for the third time. “100 years will never come”; “I was probably cheated by the woman.” But at that time, the woman turned into a “lily” and “a star in the starry sky before dawn”; she came to meet me for the centennial agreement. Finally, I realized that “a hundred years has come.”

4. Conclusion

Dreams can represent the “inner experience” of human subconscious. The metaphor of dream constitutes the deep meaning of Soseki Natsume's *Ten Nights of Dreams*. *Ten Nights of Dreams* take the “night” as the background, but on the first night, the author did not mention the “dark” world. He tells a romantic story of the man and woman who love each other and keep their promise. In the surface context, it presents the narrative structure of time and space crossing. The transformation of “space” and “time” indicates the dilemma of human existence, the relationship between self and others, and the construction of subject identity. With the passage of time, this kind of feeling extends from “external feeling” to “internal feeling”. In the Meiji Restoration period, Japan learned from the West and advanced rapidly on the road of modernization. In the face of constant collision between eastern and western cultural traditions and modernity, can people's spiritual establishment and growth be coordinated with the development of economic level? Can Japan persist in the attitude of self doubt and self-examination, and wait for the arrival of the light of hope in the “night”? Soseki Natsume expresses these thoughts in the marriage concept of “pure love”, “equality” and “being the others for each other” in *The First Night*. Moreover, in the deep semantic sense, it embodies the others' ethics similar to Levinas' view. The other is established as the ethical subject to oppose the self view in ontological philosophy. He put forward the thought that the other is prior to the self, and strongly requires the self to face the other, to sacrifice self interests and pay attention to the other, and be responsible for the other, so as to change the status of high self and low others. It can be said that Soseki Natsume's thought of “giving your will to a higher being” in his later years began to appear in this book.

Acknowledgment

This paper is the phased achievement of the project supported by the Social Science Fund of Jiangsu Province (Project Number: 17WWD003), the Foundation for Scientific Research Projects of Tianping College of Suzhou University of Science and Technology (Project Number: 2018JJXM006) and the Foundation for Projects of College Students' Entrepreneurship and Innovation Training Program of Jiangsu Province (Project Number: 202013985008Y).

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