

Interpreting the National Crisis in *The Public Burning* from the Perspective of Historical Metafiction

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Abstract: The novel *The Public Burning* written by Robert Coover, one of America's most innovative writers, profoundly reveals the crisis of American national identity through a series of perspectives such as the metaphor of the end of the world, the decline of American beliefs and the tragedy of anti-heroes. At the same time, with the help of the narrative strategy of postmodernist novels, Coover proposed a reflection, criticism and deconstruction of the "national identity" centered on the mainstream American-Anglo-Saxon white Protestant culture. This novel not only provides important enlightenment for the current review of "American Faith" and "American Image", but also provides important enlightenment for the current thinking and criticism of US global bullying.

1. Introduction

The Public Burning is hailed as a classic of American postmodern fiction. This novel, with real historical figures such as Nixon as the main characters, has attracted widespread attention once it came out. Since Pan Xiaosong's translation and publication in 1997, the book has undergone many changes in research perspectives in domestic academic circles. Most of the initial research focused on meta-fiction narrative techniques such as parody, collage, and montage, or interpreted the text from the perspective of narratology and Bakhtin's carnival poetics. In recent years, there have been interdisciplinary studies using cultural theory, new historicism, space theory, semiotics and other theories. This article analyzes *The Public Burning* from the perspective of a historical metafiction, reveals Cooper's critique of "American Faith", and finally restores to the problem of "American Image" to deconstruct it, thus launching research and discussion on Cooper's creation.

2. Parody of historical form

First, continuing the creative strategy of the previous novel, *The Public Burning* takes the "Bible" motif as its object, and uses Christianity as a target for mockery and parody. It uses metaphorical methods to ridicule the image of Christ, atonement, duel between good and evil, scapegoat, etc. And criticism, and from the standpoint of realism, questioned the origin of the "Western Christian heresy"-the religious belief of the American people. Coover mentioned in an interview that Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) used "group boiling" to describe the story of religious gatherings^[4]. However, unlike Durkheim's standpoint that the function of highlighting sacred symbols (ie religion) can not only help people feel the existence of social entities, but also can maintain society and promote social integration, Coover stands in doubt, deconstruction, and criticism of sacred symbols (ie, religion) to explore the "collective boiling" that originated from primitive society and return to "dreamtime".

The so-called "dream time", according to Coover's interpretation, is a ritual for people to return to the origin of mythology. The rituals of human society and the return of dream time have the same effect. The artist's fictional process is an example of dream time. They provide another choice to look at the world, weaken and break the ancient narrative structure, in order to reconstruct and revive it. Explain the pattern of the human world. This stance came to "Public Burning" where Robert Coover cleverly invoked the scene of "collective boiling", thus constructing a scene of "general carnival". In the novel, everyone in the square is caught in a hysterical collective carnival,

trying to satisfy the deep psychological needs and establish their own national identity by executing the Rosenbergs. Second, unlike the biblical story, which is simply quoted and metaphorical, the biggest absurdity highlighted in *The Public Burning* is the direct use of the religious "end of the world" story of the battle between good and evil to exaggerate the post-war America. All behavioral norms are inverted and disordered, and order is transformed into disorderly chaotic scenes, revealing the extreme national mentality of the United States under the control of the official media.

Historically, in the 1960s, the United States successively broke out the racial equality movement, the women's liberation movement, and the anti-Vietnam war movement, all letting the so-called "American identity" or "American faith" be on the verge of disintegration. By ruthlessly weeding out innocent dissidents—Rosenbergs are Jews—to strengthen national identity, maintain social cohesion, and become an inevitable choice for the United States, which prides itself on democracy and freedom, and is the "promised land" of God's grace. Although the illusion of national unity can be sustained by sacrificing scapegoats for a while, the crisis of national identity, especially the crisis of "American Faith" has not disappeared.

In the end, Robert Coover also adopted a "carnival narrative" to ridicule and criticize the decayed, corrupt and extremely deceptive American beliefs, revealing the sense of crisis of American national identity. In the climax of the novel, Robert Coover deliberately moved "the death row in Sinsin Prison to the center stage of Times Square", and deliberately described the historical activities of the Rosenbergs before their execution as an American national carnival. "The practice of carnival is spread through Menippu's satirical genre. It was originally developed in direct contact with the mass carnival, and in the course of history has been intermittently reflected as a dialectical reflection of the 'official' monologue literary genre. Reconstruction was carried out."^[5] In this way, a solemn and ruthless execution was alienated into a celebration of the U.S. power establishment built on capitalism, Christianity, and military power, and transformed into an unprecedentedly grand collective event in Times Square in New York City. . This kind of narrative strategy of Coover coincides with Bakhtin's concept of "carnival" in "Rabelais and His World" ^[5].

In the novel, Times Square is transformed into a festive medieval bazaar and becomes a place for "sacred inequality"; high culture and popular culture intersect each other, "Uncle Sam's Sadism and Nixon's Sadism", historical documents and fictional narratives Merged into one, the opposites are also mixed together; facts and fiction are competing, and they are vying to be treated as truth; different voices compete with each other and strive for the status of equal dialogue.

3. American faith is declining

Robert Robert Coover once mentioned in an interview: "When it comes to breaking rules, breaking traditions, changing old methods, not confined to traditions, not confined to the beliefs, myths and dreams imposed on us by previous generations, I'm very excited."^[2] Correcting that, as Hollywell pointed out, the era when Robert Coover was engaged in literary creation, "accompanied by the extreme fear of the doomsday bomb but also a quite optimistic era, this is an unprecedented prosperity that caused great poverty. In this era, this is also an era of flamboyant rhetoric about equal rights, and rampant racism and gender discrimination."^[6] What followed was that the American image in American literature began to be alienated, the ideals of American convictions were weakened or even distorted, national characteristics became social ills, and literary creation became cultural reflection. Rooted on the 'American faith', a sharp contradiction has arisen between the traditional American characteristics of the United States and the complex reality of society.

It was during this period that Robert Coover accepted the influence of postmodern thoughts and avant-garde experimental spirit. Based on the experience of living in the UK for a long time, he adopts a calm and objective "other" perspective to evaluate the history, culture and traditional memory of the United States, and uses an "irony" way to doubt or deny the freedom and equality that the United States admires. And the principles of democracy, criticizing the so-called "Americans" or "American convictions." Robert Coover's "doomsday" narrative criticizes the crisis of "American Faith" and is finally implemented at the level of "characterization". Nixon and Uncle Sam in *The Public Burning* are prominent representatives.

In the novel, Nixon is diligent, practical and hardworking. Although he believes in pragmatism and is a thorough opportunist, he always adheres to the Protestant ethics and Puritan spirit. As far as identity is concerned, Nixon has the power of vice president for a while, under one person and over ten thousand people, but in the eyes of Eisenhower's core cabinet members, he is just an outsider from a small town in California and should be guarded and hostile. The dissidents are the "poor little people" who have been excluded from the White House gathering. As far as character is concerned, Nixon kept falling down and making a fool of himself. Before the execution of the Rosenbergs, Nixon ran to the prison to make love to Ethel Rosenberg, and put Ethel's snow-white buttocks with "I AM A SCAMP" written in lipstick at everyone, exposing his own clown nature. . Nixon not only lacked the noble character of a hero, he was also extremely insignificant and humble, and he could not get rid of the stigma of being a "marginal man."

Nixon fell in love with the police chief's daughter and pursued love as if he were pursuing a career, but he always restrained his desires and tried to prove to Uncle Sam that he was the son of God and the best candidate for the president. In history, Franklin enacted nine clear rules and precepts, Nixon imitated them, showing strong Puritanism enthusiasm. However, Nixon's success stems from his adherence to Protestant ethics and Puritan spirit, but it is also undeniable that he was looking forward to the "American Dream." That's why Nixon said bluntly: "I believe in the American dream, and I believe in it because it has become a reality in my own life." ^[1]

Faced with such a crisis of national identity, Robert Coover experienced a process from the identity of American nationality to the process of reflecting and questioning nationality, and then criticizing and deconstructing the nationality of the United States, relying on postmodernism. His artistic technique deeply criticizes American cultural traditions, production mechanisms and narrative modes, and makes his own literary creations present a unique and reverse charm.

4. Conclusion

The novel *The Public Burning* describes the Rosenberg Case as a historical event, and the novel actually cares about history, mythology, and the formation process and operation methods of various doctrines, which makes this novel Getting rid of the traditional mode of simple satire and criticism, it has become an important work of introspection and reshaping of American history and American beliefs.

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