

Analysis of the Characterization of the Old Man in “The Law of Life” from the Narrative Perspective

ZHANG Jing-xi

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

“The Law of Life” is one of Jack London’s representative works, depicting the story of an elderly Native American abandoned by his family, alone and waiting for life to fade away. This paper, based on narrative theory, aims to explore how the author employs narrative techniques to present the image of the old man in the short story. The narrative techniques of dual focalization and dual narrative timelines in the text demonstrate the abandonment of the old man’s homeland and his inescapable death under a naturalistic view of life and reflect a desolate life picture of resignation towards death under naturalistic determinism, depicting a grim elderly world under the naturalistic concept of “survival of the fittest.” Studying this short story helps us reflect on the living conditions of the elderly and provides insights into how to better care for the elderly population amid the global trend of aging.

Keywords: “The Law of Life”, focalization, narrative time, elderly image

I. Introduction

“The Law of Life” is one of the classic short stories by Jack London, an American realist and naturalist writer. “The Law of Life” fully embodies Jack London’s artistic talent and unique life experiences as a writer during the “Gilded Age.” As a typical representative of naturalistic novels in American literary history, Jack London’s works are imbued with a strong naturalistic flavor. He never praised or condemned humanity for behaviors beyond human control, a trait vividly reflected in any one of his novels when analyzed individually (Wilcox, 1973, p. 107). “The Law of Life” draws its material from life in the northern territories, narrating the story of an elderly, weather-worn man abandoned by his tribe as he approaches death. Throughout the story, contemplation on the “law of life” permeates the old man’s entire process of awaiting death, making it particularly thought-provoking. This paper, grounded in narrative theory, aims to explore how the author employs narrative techniques to present the image of the old man in “The Law of Life.”

II. The Interweaving of Internal and External Focalization

“The Law of Life” employs a dual focalization—internal and external focalization. Within the text, there exists a predominant fixed internal focalization in the third person, alongside a less frequent external focalization by the authorial narrator. The interaction between these two constructs the entire narrative fact, shifting the

narrator away from assuming a god-like position and transferring certain narrative tasks to Old Koskoosh, an elder of the Native American tribe. This shift focuses on the old man's acute auditory senses and conflicting psychological activities, portraying the dilemma of the old man facing abandonment from his home and the inescapable nature of death under a naturalistic view of life and revealing Old Koskoosh facing death with acceptance, defending the dignity of "death".

Internal focalization is the most important of the three narrative focalization types identified by Genette, as it captures the natural limitations of typical narrative situations (Jahn, 2005, p. 174). "The Law of Life" extensively employs a third-person fixed internal focalization narrative. The narrator strictly confines the narrative within the consciousness of the character-focalizer, refraining from intervening in the focalizer's observations and experiences. Instead, the story is focused through the character-focalizer, Old Koskoosh, emphasizing what he hears and feels, depicting a harsh world governed by natural selection and the harsh realities of life. In this adversity, the frail Old Koskoosh gradually accepts death, becoming a part of nature with resignation. In the beginning, the author first focuses on Old Koskoosh, highlighting his characteristics as an elderly individual: diminished eyesight due to old age, unusually acute hearing. Therefore, the narrative emphasizes sensory descriptions, particularly through the sense of hearing: "Old Koskoosh listened greedily" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 114). Using the word "greedily" to describe Old Koskoosh's hearing depicts the old man's fear in the face of the imminent abandonment by his family, striving to "listen" intently to observe the movements of his tribe. As recipients of sounds, characters tend to react upon hearing noises, allowing these reactions to vividly portray their personality traits, even further defining their characterizations.

The author portrays the old man's acute sense of hearing and emphasizes two distinct soundscapes: the sounds of nature and human voices, each representing the harshness of nature and the abandonment by the family. These soundscapes, perceived and analyzed through the auditory system, evoke feelings and closely link with a person's psychological state. The natural and human sounds heard by Old Koskoosh reveal a complex psychological journey, reflecting his changing attitudes toward the natural law of "survival of the fittest," from fear and indifference to eventual acceptance, portraying his role as a native "son of nature" among the Native Americans. The soundscape of nature encompasses non-artificial sounds found in the natural environment, primarily including sounds emitted by plants and various animals, such as the dull crackling of ice, dogs' mournful cries, wolves' howls, restless livestock murmurs, and the sizzling of burning wood, among others in the text. Specifically, the sounds of animals crying in the snowy wilderness are a source of fear for the feeble Old Koskoosh, representing a harbinger of death. Meanwhile, the burning wood acts as the hourglass of his life—each burnt piece signifies a fragment of his life slipping away. The crackling of the wood serves as both a reassuring shield and a warning of danger in his ears. The moment the wood burns out marks the end of his life. In this isolated elderly man's "ears", nature doesn't signify a harmonious coexistence with humans but rather an overwhelming sense of despair. Humans, governed by the laws of genetics and the environment, perceive nature's desires as cruel and hostile toward humanity. He understands that "to perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 122).

The human soundscape mainly originates from the initial part of the short story, when the old man is about to be abandoned by his family, and it represents the last sounds he hears before the abandonment. These include sounds of Sit-cum-to-ha, his granddaughter, screaming and scolding the dog, sounds of women packing tents and

luggage, the chief (his son) angrily reprimanding the slow actions of the tribe members, children crying, and women whispering soothing words, among others. Fearing abandonment by his people and facing a lonely death in the snow, the old man greedily listens to the voices of his tribe to determine if they have departed, preparing himself for the slow decay of life that is about to follow. Later on, "He alone took breath in the midst of the great silence" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126), as Old Koskoosh quietly sits by the fire, awaiting the inevitable end of his life. "He waved his brand wildly, and sniffs turned to snarls" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126), which is a subconscious expression of self-defense and Old Koskoosh's fear of death. In his vulnerability, surrounded by hungry wolves, he instinctively confronts them with a torch, as history repeats itself—the struggle for survival, reminiscent of the old caribou facing death with a desperate will to live. Ultimately, the author uses inner monologue to reveal the old chief's inner world. "What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126)? Realizing the law of survival and death, he chooses to embrace death, dropping the firewood—a stance not of helplessness or despair in the face of adversity, but rather an acceptance of death, upholding its dignity.

In external focalization, the narrator and the focalizer are the same entity. The narrator, as the focalizer, simultaneously stands outside the story, observing and perceiving events. Objective narration provides readers with more imaginative space and analytical leeway. "The Law of Life" predominantly uses internal focalization narrative, delving deep into Old Koskoosh's intricate and dynamic inner world. While external focalization isn't the primary mode of narration in the text, Jack London cleverly intertwines external focalization within the internal focalization. The conversation between the old man and the son before the tribe's departure exemplifies the characteristics of external focalization. Despite the limited information readers gain from external focalization, further insights into character portrayal can be gleaned from visible language and actions. Old Koskoosh's son didn't exhibit sadness at the prospect of leaving his father alone in the icy wilderness, knowing the irreversible and enduring natural laws at play that no amount of pain endured in the struggle against nature could change. When the chief asked, "Is it well with you" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 120)? Upon receiving an affirmative answer, he promptly packed up and headed toward the survival path, leaving his father abandoned in the chilling snowy weather. Meanwhile, Old Koskoosh, despite harboring fear of the unknown of death, believed in the natural cycle of life and death. Acknowledging his old age and declining health, he embraced the consistent fate of the tribe's elders, choosing to peacefully accept his solitary fate in the snow, understanding it as the best arrangement given his condition. This portrayal reflects the Indigenous belief in "survival of the fittest" as natural beings.

The amalgamation of the external focalization by the author-narrator with the internal focalization of the story characters creates suspense. Although the narrator knows the entire story, at times, deliberately conceals information, allowing readers to enter the characters' inner worlds through their subjective and limited internal focalization. This leads readers to understand unknown events alongside the characters, intensifying the tension experienced by the characters. The intertwining of these two focalization generates multidimensional effects in the text. When the firewood is almost depleted, Old Koskoosh also faces the "law of nature." "Not a stir, nothing. He alone took breath in the midst of the great silence. It was very lonely. Hark! What was that? A chill passed over his body. The familiar, long-drawn howl broke the void, and it was close at hand" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126). Through the old man's auditory perception, we sense the imminent danger in the snowy surroundings. External focalization at this point does not reveal more content than internal focalization; hence, our perception of the

current predicament is solely through the old man's auditory perception. The internal focalization of the character shortens the distance between readers and characters. The convergence of these two focalization allows us to feel the tension and despair Old Koskoosh faces when confronting death through a limited narrative perspective, contrasting with Old Koskoosh's calm acceptance of death later in the story, rendering a more comprehensive portrayal of the old man.

III. The Interlacement of Reality and Memories

Narratologists conduct the study of narrative time mainly from the relations between the story time and discourse time. Story time is usually the chronological order of the narrated events in the story, while the time of the discourse is the time narrator spends on the rearrangement of the same events in the discourse level. Discourse time is measured in words or pages of text or in the hours of reading time, whereas story time represents the temporal duration and chronology of the underlying plot (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2010, p. 608). This short story employs a dual narrative time of intertwining reality and memories to sketch a nonlinear narrative time network. Pauses in the narrative speed allow the old man to recall various deaths surrounding him in the process of reminiscence. Repetitions in the narrative content portray the old man's inevitable journey toward death and return to nature under determinism, depicting a bleak, resigned life scene regarding death within Jack London's naturalistic writing technique.

The author often manipulate the chronological order at the level of discourse, employing narrative techniques like flashback and flashforward to serve the characters, structure, and theme of the story, thereby enhancing the narrative effect. In "The Law of Life," Jack London does not strictly adhere to the story's chronological time but extensively utilizes discourse time. Through skillful time arrangement, London imparts specific significance to the narrative, guiding and influencing the reader's reading direction to achieve the desired artistic effect.

The main storyline of the short story revolves around the real-time abandonment of Old Koskoosh by his tribe in the desolate snow, where he awaits death alone. Through the use of flashbacks and interjections, Old Koskoosh reflects on the cyclical nature of the seasons in the wilderness, ultimately arriving at a conclusion about death: "Nature did not care. To life she set one task, gave one law. To perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 122). Additionally, he reminisces on his childhood memories by the fire as he nears the end of his life. These elusive memories showcase fragments of his past life intertwined with death: the death of missionaries, his mother, elderly tribe members, children, his childhood friend Zing-ha, and even a moose. The author extensively portrays these death-associated memories, which wander fragmentedly in the old man's thoughts. Whether through natural aging or unnatural demise, death is a natural choice; all living beings eventually meet their end. Using his past recollections as solace and persuasion, the old man ceases to struggle and calmly faces his impending death. The third-person narrator mimics the protagonist's stream of consciousness, continuously flashing back to the past, providing story details while rendering the narrative more vivid. Within a world that oscillates between dreams and wakefulness, Jack London utilizes the intertwining narrative time of reality and memory to paint a nonlinear narrative network. The temporal narrative space continuously shifts between reality and memory, the past and present, the former place and the current location. By juxtaposing different times and spaces, creating connections, references, and contrasts, the narrative

establishes a mode where reality and memory intersect, inviting the reader into a realm of imagination and deepening the understanding of the "law of life" London depicts. Old Koskoosh, in his contemplation of life and destiny, ultimately accepts humanity's powerlessness in the face of nature.

Furthermore, the pauses in the narrative speed within the text allow the old man to recall various deaths around him during his reminiscence, thereby demonstrating his helpless acceptance of the law of nature. After describing the conversation between the son and the old man, the son departs with the tribe, leaving Old Koskoosh deep in thought. "He bowed his head in content till the last noise of the complaining snow had died away, and he knew his son was beyond recall" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 121). Subsequently, there's a lengthy passage describing Old Koskoosh's views on the law of nature: "But one task did Nature set the individual. Did he not perform it, he died. Did he perform it, it was all the same, he died. Nature did not care; there were plenty who were obedient, and it was only the obedience in this matter, not the obedient, which lived and lived always" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 121). Whether one obeys the law of nature or not, everyone is destined to die. Humans originate from nature and will eventually return to it. The pauses in the narrative speed allow the old man to recall various deaths around him during his reminiscence, ultimately ceasing futile struggles and resigning to the law of nature. This reflects the bleak life panorama of the old man under naturalistic fatalism regarding death. Although the fatalistic notion carries a strong tragic sense, the conclusion of death being inevitable is more humanized compared to the "survival of the fittest" law, as everyone is equal in the face of destiny. Old Koskoosh, in the final moments of his life, realizes with mixed emotions that regardless of one's past brilliance or misfortunes, the ultimate outcome for all is death, which is also one reason why he chooses to give up fighting the wolves.

The repetitive narrative content demonstrates the old man's eventual acceptance of his own fate of death. Frequency refers to the relationship between the number of times a narrative text is presented and the number of times the story occurs; these two are not necessarily in equal measure. Genette termed this relationship as "the relationship between the frequency of the story and the frequency of the narrative" (Genette, 1990, p. 73). Moreover, he categorized frequency into four types: "occurring once and narrated once, occurring once and narrated multiple times, occurring multiple times and narrated once, occurring multiple times and narrated multiple times" (Genette, 1990, p. 74).

In the text, the image of the moose appears twice. The first instance is within the old man's dying memories, where the scene of the life-and-death struggle between the wolves and the moose is vividly portrayed. The wolves, relentlessly pressing for sustenance, while the moose, striving with all its might, fights for its own survival and that of its species. The second occurrence is when the matches are about to burn out in reality, and the wolves approach the old man. At that moment, the old man envisions the moose from his memories: "Then on his darkened eyes was projected the vision of the moose—the old bull moose—the torn flanks and bloody sides, the riddled mane, and the great branching horns, down low and tossing to the last" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126). The intentional repetition of the moose in memories serves the author's purpose. The life-and-death battle between the moose and the wolves epitomizes the law of nature. Similar to the moose the old man witnessed in his childhood, despite struggling repeatedly, succumbs to the jaws of the wolves. The author deliberately equates the lives of tribal residents and wildlife, suggesting that both humans and wildlife are subject to the dictates of nature. As an indigenous child of nature, Old Koskoosh, in witnessing the moose during childhood, actually symbolizes his own destiny—death is his fate. He faces the harsh reality of life, death, and isolation. Abandoned in an

extremely hostile environment, weakened physically, and sensing the impending end of his life, despite his loneliness and aging, the story exhibits the resilience deep within him and his acceptance of his fate: "What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life" (Peng & Pu, 2000, p. 126)? This portrayal of the old man represents the fragility of human life and the inability to alter the laws of nature, simultaneously reflecting human contemplation on life and death and acceptance in life's final moments.

IV. Conclusion

"The Law of Life" primarily adopts an internal focalization, vividly displaying the old man's inner emotions and subjective worlds through his extensive and boundless memories. Interwoven within are instances of external focalization, mutually enhancing and progressing the story from diverse perspectives. The objective narrative of the external focalization realistically depicts Koskoosh's insignificance faced with nature, achieving the utmost realism in storytelling. The interplay between these two focalization renders a multi-dimensional narrative structure that breathes life into the narrative voice of the story, forming a multi-layered narrative structure centered around inner consciousness. Additionally, by utilizing the interwoven dual narrative timelines of reality and memory, it sketches a nonlinear narrative temporal network. Pauses in narrative speed allow the old man to recall various deaths that surrounded him during his reminiscences. The repetitive narrative content signifies the old man's eventual acceptance of his own destiny, portraying a stark and desolate vision of life and death under the naturalistic doctrine of fate. This highlights the story's unique artistic charm, showcasing the inevitability of death faced by the old man, and the overarching helplessness in the face of death within naturalistic fatalism, ultimately revealing the distinct artistic allure of this short story.

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