

Analysis of Narrative Strategies in Colum McCann's Short Story "Sisters"

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As the opening work of "Fishing the Sloe-Black River Stories," Irish-American writer Colum McCann's short story "Sisters" has attracted scholars' interest with its profuse historical background and themes of the times. From the perspective of narratology, this paper considers that the writer uses narrative techniques such as non-linear narration and embedded structure to express multi-level narrative voices through a first-person narrator, Sheona. These narrative techniques help to fully reflect the theme of the work and endow the work with great aesthetic and ideological value.

Keywords: Colum McCann, sisters, narrative structure, narrative voice

Introduction

Colum McCann was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1965 and spent his childhood in Ireland. Later he immigrated to the United States and now writes and teaches in New York. After the publication of his book, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), McCann won the National Book Award and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His works have attracted the attention of academia, and his writing style has been widely studied. Most of the research on McCann's works focuses on the theme, and some studies analyze the space, points of view and narrative strategy from the perspective of narratology. Such extensive and comprehensive research results show that McCann not only gives his works profound ideological content, but also is good at using various writing techniques. Therefore, McCann's works are of great research value.

"Sisters" is the initial story in McCann's first collection of short stories, "Fishing the Sloe-Black River." The story tells that the protagonist Sheona, with the help of her ex-boyfriend Michael, smuggles into the United States and goes to a convent on Long Island, New York, to visit her sister Brigid, who is terminally ill due to anorexia and overwork. As the opening work of the collection of short stories, "Sisters" contains rich historical and cultural imprints, hence reflecting profound thematic ideas. Only for this short story, domestic scholars have published several relevant articles to study the characters, religious and cultural themes, etc.. "Sisters" not only involves the pursuit of cultural identity, but also includes the awakening of female consciousness, the growth and redemption of characters, the trauma of individuals and collectives and even generations, and so on. To illustrate almost all the issues that many Irish immigrant have experienced, and to reflect the state of the whole group in certain period in one piece of work, it requires very rigorous writing methods and profound

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writing skills. This paper selects two aspects of narrative strategies to analyze how McCann uses narrative structure and narrative voice to help the story better express the theme and convey thoughts and feelings.

Narrative Structure

Narratology is a theory of narrative study, generated under the influence of structuralism (Shen, 2004, p. 60). Whether within classical narratology based on structuralism or postclassical narratology centering on expounding meaning, the structural relation of narrative texts has always been one of the focuses of narratology. In "Sisters," McCann uses nonlinear narrative and embedded narrative structure to make the narrative well-leveled and rhythmically aesthetic, and lead the story step by step to the climax.

Non-linear Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of "Sisters" is rather characteristic. The jump in time and space adds difficulty and interest to the reading process. In the interspersed structure between the past and present, it is easy to simply regard it as a bi-linear narrative with two independent time lines. However, this story is not a simple multi-linear structure, but more in accordance with the features of non-linear narrative. The central narrative of the story is Sheona's slipping into America to see her sister, which is happening during the narrative. But it is split into several fragments, interspersed with memories of the past, extending the span of time and space in the narrative. The story even begins with the story of the past. In the narrative conversions of past and present, the main plot is spread in an orderly manner, and the story of the past is also revealed gradually. Finally, time and space is froze in the convent in Long Island, where Sheona's final interaction with Brigid takes place.

It is noteworthy that this story seems to be structured in a bi-linear narrative interwoven by the past and the present. However, the narrative of the past stories is not as consistent as the linear narrative. In general, several pieces of retrospective narratives together describe Sheona's growth process and life trajectory from childhood to adulthood. Although these fragments do not have plot coherence, to some extent, they form a background picture spanning years, reflecting the current of the times experienced by the Irish of Sheona's generation. The writer shows these grand historical background by fragments of memories, so as to avoid the length of environmental description, as well as the tediousness of historical writing.

Nonlinear narrative in the story can be found from the tense conversion of past tense and present tense. In addition to grammatical features, the writer also uses many time-indicating phrases to mark the shift between the present and past narratives. Furthermore, some of the switching is achieved through sentences with obvious highway features, such as "The car shudders to a halt," "Michael lifts me from the boot," and "We are off the highway now" (McCann, 2012, pp. 6, 9, 13). These statements suggest that the narrative scene has been switched to the highway on which Sheona and Michael are driving, from Canada to America. The passage from one country to another, symbolizes that Sheona's understanding of herself and her surroundings has also been "on the road" and has not yet reached a final destination, reflecting the theme of pursuit.

Embedded Structure

Genette puts forward the concept of "level" in the story in his book *The Narrative Discourse* (1979), and he believes that the best thing to explain the level relation of the story is the embedment of narrative (Genette, 1990, pp. 239-240). Embedded structure is a multi-level narrative structure, which embeds a second narrative

inside the first narrative. A complex text may contain more than two levels of narrative, which can make the narrative structure changeable and keep different levels connected.

In the first-person narrative, embedded structure is mostly used to elicit relevant content from other characters besides the narrator. As in "Sisters", the nuns tell Sheona about the good deeds that Brigid has done. Such arrangement can not only guarantee the integrity of the external narrative structure, but also insert a new narrative, and use other levels of narrative to shape the characterization of Brigid more complete and convincing. According to the story of the nuns in the convent, Brigid used to live in a convent outside a coffee plantation in El Salvador. She prayed for the shot nuns, helped the poor and maintained their dignity. It shows that Brigid spent her whole life preaching and martyring for her faith, caring for the poor and sacrificing herself. She seemed to be portrayed as a suffering Jesus, "which shows that her fate is closely related to the fate of Ireland, and her life indicates the ups and downs of Ireland" (Gao & Gan, 2011, p. 14). And it is in the internal narrative here that the nuns reveal Brigid's changes, saying that "she did some of the strange things" (McCann, 2012, p. 22)—such as having pebbles in her mouth, learning to dance, raising piglets. And most crucially, just like Sheona, "she had taken to wearing some very strange colored socks" (ibid., p. 22). "Yellow socks" is an accessory that Sheona used to wear from childhood to adulthood. It has become a symbol of memorial and attachment to Irish culture. When she learns that her sister has begun to wear "yellow socks", it also symbolizes that her sister is trying to get closer to and return to her own culture after so many years away from home.

Another embedded structure in this short story does not have the obvious mark like "they tell me that", but it is manifested by the illusion of the narrator Sheona. After arriving in New York, Sheona and Michael have to spend a night in his friend's house. Sheona sees a series of images on the sheet, such as "red-beaked hawks", "a bouquet of boys", "father father", "nun with dough" (McCann, 2012, p. 18) and so on, which make her toss and turn. These appalling images are the embodiment of the trauma she has experienced. Returning to America, a place that does not accept her at all, the trauma still accompanies and afflicts her body and spirit.

It is easy to bewilder readers with complex narrative structure. With an interspersed narrative of past and present, this story contains a multi-level, jumping narrative structure. If not carefully treated, it will bring confusion and disorder in narrative and affect readers' feelings and experiences when reading. But McCann's arrangement of the narrative structure avoids these problems. Through the grammatical conversion of tenses and the repetition of narrative elements, the writer guides readers to pay attention to the current narrative from time to time. In addition, his arrangement of thematic associations in the narrative structure reflects the writer's writing proficiency.

Narrative Voice

"Voice" in narratology refers to the voice of various types of narrators telling stories, which is an important formal structure (Shen, 2004, p. 140). Susan S. Lanser, the founder of feminist narratology, argues that narrative techniques are not only products of ideology, but even ideology itself. In *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (1992), Lanser proposes three types of narrative voices: authorial, individual and collective voice (Lanser, 1992, p. 23). This chapter will explore the ideology conveyed by these three voices individually in this short story "Sisters".

Authorial Narrative Voice

Professor Shen points out that the so-called authorial narrative voice is actually the traditional omniscient narrative, which has more authority (Shen, 2004, p. 143). In the first person narrative, the narrator "replaces" the author, which reminds us to pay attention to the distinction between the two when analyzing the text. The author of "Sisters" is Colum McCann, a middle-aged male writer from Ireland; while the narrator is Sheona, an Irish adult female. The gender difference between the author and the narrator determines the identity of the female narrator in the story. The authorial narrative voice endows the female characters with the power of discourse, and hides the male identity of the author in the narrative.

Personal Narrative Voice

"Sisters" has the first-person retrospective narrative. As a narrator, Sheona tells the story of being born and raised in Ireland, experiencing the Irish famine, the American immigration, and finally returning to Ireland to find her own cultural identity. Through the retrospective narration, readers get to know the living environment of the two sisters in their childhood and what they did during adolescence. Most importantly, readers can find out the contrast between Sheona and Brigid through Sheona's narrations but not judgement. Different from flashback, retrospective narration is to review the past events from the present perspective. The phrase "I remember" appears many times in the text, emphasizing the objectivity of memory, rather than returning to the past scene and describing the past experience from a subjective perspective. The first-person narrator is usually regarded as an unreliable narrator. Narratologist Wayne Booth proposes "unreliable narration" in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, that is, "I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not" (Booth, 1983, p. 159). In this text, Sheona, as the first-person narrator, can almost be the author's spokesperson, so the main voice in the text is Sheona's personal voice. As the first-person narrator, she may not be absolutely omniscient in describing historical events or Brigid, but her narrative is true and objective enough to make her characterization more authentic and credible. Sheona always stands with the reader, which narrows the distance between the reader and the text, even the characters.

In "Sisters", the "personal voice" tells the reader about Sheona's growth experience from childhood to adulthood. As a woman, Sheona has been a plaything under the male gaze from her adolescence to adulthood. Her boyfriend and foreign environment fail in bringing stability and security to her life. She is still a victim of the patriarchal society. As scholars analyzed, Sheona is the "conspirator," victim and also the ultimate resister of male power (Gan & Gao, 2011, p. 34). Sheona's "personal voice" reflects the loss, confusion and awakening of a woman as she grows up. When telling the story of her sister and parents, Sheona stands in a third person perspective. She tells her sister's anorexia, self-mutilation and other behaviors in a very objective manner, and make comment by her own voice as a sister. She thinks that Brigid "lived a strange sort of martyrdom" (McCann, 2012, p. 3). She does not intervene in other's events, which increases the reliability of the narrative.

Communal Narrative Voice

According to Lanser's definition, communal voice is a way of narration, which endows a certain group of people with narrative authority. This narrative authority is set up in the text through a collectively empowered narrative voice, as well as through the voice of an individual visibly empowered by the group (Lanser, 1992, p.

22). There is no collective narrator in "Sisters", but Sheona speaks of her group. Therefore, the communal narrative voice here is conveyed through the representative narrator with collective empowerment.

The awakening of Sheona's female consciousness has undergone three quintessential stages: promiscuity in adolescence, being raped in America, and resistance after returning Ireland. Born in the poorest and most traditional county of Mayo in Ireland, Sheona does not believe in religion like her sister. She has a teenage rebellion and "my promiscuity is my autograph" (Lanser, 1992, p. 2). Exactly, there must be such a group of underage girls like Sheona. Because of the lack of care and guidance, they are emotionally ignorant and then find comfort in a wrong way. This group are prone to lose themselves in the growing process. In the foreign country, Sheona gets close to Michael step by step, seeking for someone to rely on. But the seemingly happy affection relationship is probably only a realistic need to fill in. Finally, after the gang rape, Sheona realizes her weak and passive position as a woman. Even she is accompanied by a man, she could not change the passive position in the confrontation between the sexes. Her sex consciousness begins to change. Back in Dublin, Sheona says "I didn't miss the men" (Lanser, 1992, p. 12). It shows her rejection and aversion to men, marking the awakening of Sheona's feminine consciousness and her resistance to male authority.

Professor Shen believes that the real contribution of feminist narratology lies in the combination of gender and context to explain the social and political significance of narrative forms in works (Shen, 2003, p. 144). Sheona at this time speaks out her past memories, and speaks for her former self in trouble and for the same group of women. Sheona's voice as a female narrator is very prominent in the story. The three stages she goes through represent the awakening of women's consciousness from obedience to resistance, which is a successful deconstruction of patriarchal society.

In addition to representing the "voice" of the female group, Sheona is also a member of Irish immigrants. Rather than directly telling the history of the Irish famine, Sheona uses a series of profile descriptions to imply the great impact of the famine, for example, the death of her mother who was blown off a cliff by the wind because she was too thin, her sister's anorexia and Brigid's concern for the hungry and the poor. These painful experiences reflect the historical trauma left by the Irish nation's disaster. The 1978 raid mentioned in the article was a shock to Irish immigrants on their way to identification. In the cycle of departure, pursuit and return, not everyone is fortunate to find destination and redemption. In American mainstream society, ethnic groups have always been marginalized. As Lanser points out, "communal voice seems to be a narrative phenomena basically about marginalized or suppressed groups." In the face of such oppression and predicament, the writer explores the theme of identity pursuit and political identity of specific groups by giving representative characters communal voice.

As an Irish writer, McCann himself also immigrated to the United States, so he can deeply understand the difficulties and confusion faced by the immigrant Irish. The loss and confusion of identity directly affect the self-cognition and behavior of individuals and even the group as a whole. Therefore, this short story uses Sheona's personal voice to speak out the identity dilemma of the entire Irish immigrant group.

Conclusion

In literature works, subject matter and theme of times are inseparable from the writer's narrative strategy. Colum McCann's short story "Sisters" uses a wealth of narrative techniques. In the seemingly prosaic

first-person narrative, the writer integrates nonlinear narrative, nested structure and retrospective narrative techniques to make the narrative structure more varied and rhythmic. At the same time, with the tone of the first person, it hides the voice of the writer, and conveys the personal and communal voices of the group, which deepens the spiritual connotation of the story. Based on the study of classical, post-classical narratology and feminist narratology, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of the short story from two aspects: narrative structure and narrative voice, and explains how these narrative strategies serve to express the rich themes of the text. To summarize, the ideology contained in this story is not only the writer's personal norms of religion, life and world expressed by the characters, but also the consciousness and values of these female groups and Irish people in the history of immigration. By interpreting the writer's exquisite design, the reader can better feel the aesthetic and ideological value of this short story.

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