

Child's Point of View vs. Adult's in Melville's Early Two Stories

YANG Jiayun

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

This paper aims to study the functions of two different points of view from the perspective of narratology, namely, the point of view of the adult and the one of the child, in two of Herman Melville's early stories. By contrasting these two functions of the different perspectives, the author of this paper draws the conclusion that the child has a unique and significant perspective in Melville's works.

Keywords: point of view, child's point of view, adult's point of view

Introduction

Among all Melville's fictions, *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1957) is the only one written from the point view of a child, using the child's first-person narration. While *White Jacket* (1979) is also written by using the first-person narration, but from the point view of an adult. In a given situation, the adult may take matters for granted and lack sharp eyesight to such an extent that he or she will think what they have seen is commonplace and may not be worthy of comment at all. But from the child's perspective, things are totally different, because he or she is unlike the adult who has experienced too much and has become dull and indifferent. Therefore, the author of this paper intends to analyze the merits of the child's point of view by comparing these two kinds of perspectives.

Points of View in *Redburn* and *White Jacket*

Point of view is only the narrative technique employed by the author; the application of different points of view can have enormous effect on the writing's structure and meaning. According to F. K. Stanzel, the writer must distinguish "between the general meaning 'viewpoint,' 'attitude toward a question,' and the special meaning 'standpoint from which a story is narrated or from which an event is perceived by a character in the narrative'" (1972/1984, p. 9). Here, he displays two functions of point of view: One is the function of narration, that is to say, the function of transmitting something in words; and the other is the one of experiencing, perceiving, and knowing as a character what is happening in the fictional space. Both *Redburn* and *White Jacket* have been branded as having strong traits of autobiography, and both novels depict a story about an innocent, childish, or child-like youth setting his first foot into society and beginning to know its darkness and wickedness. The main difference between the two novels lies in the different narrators: One is a child, and the other an adult.

As we can see in these two novels, both *Redburn* and *White Jacket* are written in the first person narration. In the novel *Redburn*, Redburn is the main character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective; the

Yang Jiayun, M.A., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

whole story is narrated by "I", Redburn, and via his seeing and speaking, the whole story is opened and unfolded before the readers. In *Redburn*, the narrator is a child, and it offers retrospective narration. Like *Redburn*, in *White Jacket*, Melville narrated an awful, uncomfortable, and forbidding life in the American Navy frigate *Nervensink* through the perspective of a young man named "White Jacket" after his trouble-making and handcrafted white jacket. To him, the Navy was the source of evil, the asylum for the perverse, the home of the unfortunate.

In the novel *Redburn*, Redburn is the main character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective; the whole story is narrated by "I", Redburn, and via his seeing and speaking, the whole story is opened and unfolded before the readers. According to Norman Friedman's classification of points of view, "I" acts either as witness or protagonist. If "I" acts as witness, though he belongs in the narrative world, the narrator is a secondary character, and only has a peripheral perspective of the narrated events. Only if "I" acts as protagonist, he has the central perspective of the events. After analyzing the functions of Redburn in the novel, we know the Friedman's classification is quite accurate. Here, Redburn is a trinity of the narrator, the witness, and also the protagonist in the story, and the same is true in the novel *White Jacket*.

But there is a conspicuous difference of the narrator between these two novels, that is, one is a child and the other is an adult; at the same time, both of them offer retrospective narration, the veracity of which cannot be denied.

Needless to say, different techniques of narration will cause different narrative effects; even the same technique of narration with a little diversity can cause different narrative effects. Compared with the adult's point of view, the child's point of view contains other unique and striking functions.

The Unique Functions of the Child's Point of View Compared With the Adult's

Expressing Strong Humor or Irony Effectively

It cannot be denied that Herman Melville was one of the great humorists and satirists of the literary world. And thus, it is no surprise that *Redburn* and *White Jacket* also follow this track. However, employing the perspective of a child, the power of satire should be more effective and the motif of the novel is materialized better. Generally speaking, children are the symbol of purity and innocence. So, when they come into the world for the first time, their feelings towards the new world are, in some sense, the truest and most unassailable. On the contrary, adults, because of experiencing too much, sometimes become blind and indifferent towards what is happening around them.

In *Redburn*, all the sailors are required to address the captain, the first and the second mates as "Sir", and this is an inviolable rule on board. But according to the tradition, only the aristocrat should be called sir, or the word should be used only to show one's genuine respect (as opposed to mandatory respect). But on this merchant boat, in the boy's eyes, the second mate is not a very respectable person at all. Indeed, he "leads a puppyish life", and even the cook treats him haughtily. Furthermore, he is often assigned trifling work on the boat, and so he does not at all seem a man to deserve the respect the title bestows. In order to expose the second mate's hypocrisy, the boy adopts various pungent and satirizing comments, such as "His titles are the only dignities he enjoys", and "Besides doing many other things, which a true-born baronet of any spirit would rather die and give up his title than stand" (Melville, 1957, p. 37). So, a mean and hangdog figure is depicted.

In virtue of what Redburn says, we know there exists a poignant satire on the sailors' tastelessness and torpidity. Melville's point behind the irony and humor is that anything, once you are used to it, begins to seem natural and normal, no matter how corrupt and perverse it truly is. And thus, we see the sharp contrast of attitude

between the sailors and the hero towards the filthy life on the vessel. On the surface, the young boy's light words express a kind of humor, but underneath, a slice of repulsion and discontentment is flowing from his point of view, which in some sense satirizes the sailors and adults' apathy in general. And his description of the sailors, especially the sailor Jackson, is so impressively vivid, simply because it is out of the mouth and eyes of a young boy, and the element of humor becomes stronger and more effective. If these words came from an adult, it would leave an impression of personal prejudice against these sailors. Thus, making them intentionally ugly, the effect of the humor and irony would be weakened. Of course, on one level the words do come from an adult—Herman Melville, their true author and creator. But, via the mouthpiece of the boy, they gain greater effect.

Engendering Sympathy Towards the Narrator

It is easier to stimulate greater sympathy from readers by unfolding the story from the point of view of a child than from the one of an adult. In *Redburn*, via the point of view of the child, the scene of departure and the setting are presented. And along with the shift of point of view between the setting of departure and the one of the environment, the sorrow of departure is enlarged. Here, nature is made, not as Ralph Waldo Emerson states, to conspire with spirit to emancipate us, but to impose melancholy on us. All of these impressions could not be obtained if not depicted from the point of view of a child. We have seen that the novel employs the retrospective point of view of a first-person narrator, so the tense in this novel is the past, except for direct narrative speech. But in the last sentence, the present tense is used. The employment of this narrative technique deepens the motif and helps the narrator win more sympathy from readers. If the setting of departure was delineated from the point of an adult, readers would think it was fictitious, and that would work against the writer's assumption.

When readers browse the chapter in *White Jacket* telling them about White Jacket's miserable circumstances, they could be interested in it and find it funny, but to the hero's chagrin, his feelings would be little considered. So, readers would not be overly concerned when they read that White Jacket tried his best to persuade the first lieutenant, but in vain, to let him use some black paint to cover his white jacket, even though that was the reason for his later misery.

It can be seen clearly that the two novels depict the severe hierarchical system on board. However, the different perspective of narration causes different effect. *Redburn* was brought up in a pampered environment before his father's death. So, it is impossible for him to understand the gap between the upper class and the lower class, as well as the hypocrisy of the adult world. While *White Jacket* recites the same ideas about the rigorous rank system in the Navy, the readers simply feel that the system should be revolutionized. This is because child's experiences and sufferings always breed great sympathy in the onlookers and also give readers an expanded space of reflection and aftertaste.

Enlarging the Distance Between Reality and Ideality

"The meaning of art is based on the ability to 'defamiliarize' things, to show them in a new, unexpected way" (Makaryk, 1993, p. 528).

For those well versed in the ways of the world, who have got used to what they have seen and what they have experienced, it may be taken for granted that whatever is, it is right. Such people seldom consider whether it is truly right or not, but accept it without a second thought. It is the artist's obligation to point out the illogicality of the world and its everyday injustices to make the audience contemplate this. As Bredahl Jr. (1972) asserted, "The purpose of the tales as of all Melville's fictions is to penetrate as deeply as possible into its metaphysical, theological, moral, psychological and social truths" (p. 4).

In *Redburn*, Herman Melville employs his protagonist to disclose for us a totally different world, one that is taken for granted by the other sailors but also runs against his own imagination and hopes. "His romantic obsession with ships and foreign lands", Bredahl Jr. (1972) pointed out, "results in large part from his lack of familiarity with them" (p. 16). So, Redburn's disappointment is unavoidable. At the same time, his journey from the new continent to the old one then back again becomes a metaphoric journey, and the oneness of cognition, where everything familiar is left behind, and should be forgotten. In this sense, the journey of his voyage equals the journey of his mind, and the adventure is the symbol of exploration.

Herman Melville mainly employs the child's point of view and by this internal narration, he reveals that the adult world is corrupted, while the child stands for the lost world of innocence. There is a gap between the adult corrupt world and the child's innocent world, namely, there is a gap between the reality and the ideal, which cannot be filled. "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12).

Conclusions

By comparing and contrasting these two types of the first person narration, namely, the child's point of view and the adult's point of view, it is obvious that the child's point of view can help Melville achieve his writing intention and help readers further understand the connotation and denotation of his novels. The object of his art is not to propose or impose anything directly, but to explore the core of life, the inner realities, thereby bringing out the unplumbed depths of human experience.

In Melville's works, life is never easy for the lower class, because it is always full of injustice, deception, and hardship. The adult may have become accustomed to all this, while the child, because he or she is innocent and pure, can feel more and can all too easily find the evil which is hiding beneath the drapery of life and often ignored by the adult.

References

- Bredahl Jr., A. C. (1972). *Melville's angles of vision*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Friedman, N. (1967). Point of view in fiction. In P. Stevick (Ed.), *The theory of the novel* (pp. 108-137). New York: The Free Press.
- Genette, G. (1972/1980). *Narrative discourse*. (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Makaryk, I. R. (Ed.). (1993). *Encyclopedia of contemporary literary theory: Approaches, scholars, and terms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Melville, H. (1957). *Redburn: His first voyage*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
- Melville, H. (1979). *White Jacket or The world in a man-of-war*. New York: The New American Library.
- Stanzel, F. K. (1972/1984). *A theory of narrative*. (C. Goedsche, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shklovsky, V. (1965). Art as technique. In L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis. (Ed.), *Russian formalist criticism: Four essays* (p. 12). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.