

The Characteristics of Metafiction in If on A Winter's Night a Traveler

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Abstract: *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* is the masterpiece of Italian writer Italo Calvino, which fully displays the characteristics of Metafiction in terms of narration, creative concept, and language. This novel that the narrative of the frame story is interlaced with ten embedded stories, deliberately interrupts the frame story and the embedded stories, breaks the continuity of structure, and completely destroys the integrity and closure of the plot, presenting a fragmentary feature in narration; this novel completely deconstructs creation, blurs the identity of the author and translator, involves the interaction between the (original) author, translator (forger), reader, and text, and occasionally comments on creation, deconstructing the concept and process of creation; this novel emphasizes reading, and the entire book revolves around the action of "reading" - "reading" is the only action of the male author "you", and the reading intentions and insights of various readers are quite different, and "reading" becomes the theme of the entire book; the novel engages in word play, and the embedded stories of different types, styles, backgrounds, and central events nest together, enhancing the reading effect through this fragmented collage and alternating between first-person and second-person narratives. In short, it is a classic example of Metafiction.

1. Introduction

The Italian writer Italo Calvino is represented by Metafiction, known as "the most charming master of postmodernism". *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) is his representative work, showing the narrative art of his novel. It does not constitute an ordinary novel, "but a novel about fiction, a story about telling stories, a book about reading and writing, a text about text, and a Metafiction with distinct postmodern characteristics." [1]

Metafiction, also known as "hyper-fiction", "self-conscious novel" or "post-fictional novel", means "the novel about novels". It is no longer a school of literature or a unified creative program, but a general term for a genre of fiction prevalent in the West in the late 20th century. The outstanding feature of Metafiction is that the writer reflects on the novel creation in the form of the novel and innovates the innovative creation at the same time. It is a novel about a novel, a novel that focuses on the fictional identity of the novel and its writing process. *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* is a model of Metafiction.

2. The Interruption of the Narrative

In Metafiction, the narrator often goes beyond the constraints of the narrative text and breaks the continuity of the narrative structure. In *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler*, the novel consists of two parts: a frame story and ten embedded stories. The external frame story is marked by "chapter", a total of 12 chapters, with the male reader "you" as the protagonist, narrated from the perspective of second-person narration. The male reader "you" and the female reader Lyudmila, while reading *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* discover that it is a misbound fake book, and they keep searching for the "rest of the story". In the process of discussing the novel, they gradually develop feelings for each other and eventually get married. They go to the publishing house to change the original because of the deranged binding of the text, go to the university to consult the literature professor, and then travel with the book. After that they are arrested and imprisoned because of reading the "banned book", and then they escape from prison, and so on. These things happen in the process of it and make the whole story amusing.

Within this frame are ten stories, all of which are very different, told between the previous and the next chapters: "If on A Winter's Night a Traveler" "Outside Marlborough" "Leaning out from a Cliff" "Not Afraid of the Cold, Not Afraid of vertigo" "Looking Down into the Dark" "In a Web of Interwoven Lines" "In a Net with Crossed Lines" "On the Moonlit Fallen Leaves" "Around the Empty Tomb" "What is the End?". Moreover, they are only the beginning of ten stories, which stop just as the "clues" unfold, the "clouds of suspicion" rise, and the reader is in suspense, they are wonderful pieces of fiction.

Italo Calvino occasionally interrupts the narrative of the frame story, breaking it into fragments and inserting ten different stories between the upper and lower parts; the ten embedded stories are not complete narratives either, just beginnings, followed by another interruption. The interruption of the frame story is a break that can be continued, a short pause in the integrity of the frame story; the interruption of the embedded story, on the other hand, is a complete break, a stop without an ending. These two different interruptions constantly disrupt the original rhythm of the overall narrative and completely destroy the integrity, closure, and enclosure of the plot. For example, the last few sentences of Chapter 1 and the first few sentences of Chapter 2:

Well, you are now ready to start reading the first few lines of the first page..... If you want to choose, you would choose this book you cannot even say the title of yet.[2]

You have read about thirty pages and are gradually developing a strong interest in it...[2]

Chapter 1 ends just as "you" are about to start reading, and Chapter 2 begins after "you" have read over thirty pages. Between them is a story inserted by the author "If on A Winter's Night a Traveler", and the following chapters are in a similar format. It is clear that the framework story of Chapters 1 and 2 is naturally connected, and the transition is the embedded story "If on A Winter's Night a Traveler". This story tells the story of a winter night, an unidentified "I" wandering around an unknown town's train station, and ultimately, "I"'s spy identity is exposed, "I" leaves the town by special express train under the supervision of the police chief, and the story ends abruptly. In Chapter 2, however, the story begins by explaining that the story was lost due to a printing error, only 30 pages into it, which leads to the story of "you" going to the bookstore to exchange the book and meeting the female reader Lyudmila. At the end of Chapter 2, "you" open the exchanged book, only to find that it is a new novel called "Outside Marlborough", which tells a new story and once again interrupts. The embedded story only has an introduction, no ending, and a new story appears again...

Italo Calvino said, "We live in a world of stories that begin but do not end." [2] He believes that a work with a complete and sealed form seems to imply "comforting truths" [2]. He adopted a writing style that cut across time and space and did not develop the plot according to the common narrative

logic. He intentionally interrupted and stopped the stories, which makes the narrative of the novel show the characteristics of fracture. The American postmodern theorist Jameson holds that "the very existence of postmodernism relies on a fundamental rupture or disruption." [3] This kind of multiple interruptions of the narrative fully reflects the characteristics of Metafiction.

3. The Deconstruction of Creation

As "a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism" [4], Metafiction is a kind of novel that reflects upon and deconstructs the creation of novels. The deconstruction of creation is extremely outstanding in *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler*.

The deconstruction of creation is mainly reflected in the ambiguity of the identity of the author and translator and the comments on the creation. In the frame story, the author directly explores various issues related to the creation and reading of novels, involving the interaction between the (original) author, the translator (forger), the reader, the text, and so on. For example, in Chapter 6, "You" go to the press and ask to read the subsequent chapters of Marana's book "Looking Down into the Dark", but the old editor tells "you" that Marana's manuscripts were missing but some letters he wrote were left, so "you" ask to read these letters to find answers.

These letters came from different places, including one that tells a legend of an old Indian known as the "Father of Stories":

A blind old man whose age no one knows and unable to read a word but able to tell stories that happened in places he had never been, times he had never lived without rest. This phenomenon has attracted many anthropologists and spiritual scholars to investigate, proving that many famous writers' novels were told verbatim by the "Father of Stories" in his husky throat a few years before their publication. [2]

A blind Indian man of unknown age can sing various stories of times and places, and even many famous novels are told verbatim. Clearly, Italo Calvino thought about the relationship between creation and the individual writer through a so-called legend here. Is creation an individual activity? Is the author plagiarizing the original author? What is the relationship between the different authors? Italo Calvino did not answer, insisting only that it was a "legend".

It is also mentioned that Marana's search for a writer named Flanner, who wrote the novel "In a Web of Interwoven Lines" but seems to have plagiarized the work of another Belgian writer, Vanderveld, in Chapter 6; Marana is the author of the novel "Looking Down into the Dark" and the translator of the novel "Not afraid of Cold Wind, not afraid of Vertigo", but his works are translations of Vanderveld's novels; when he appeared before Flanner, he is a representative of a publishing company... Who is the author? Who is the plagiarist? Who is the translator? It is a little vague. This ambiguity shows the complexity of creation and the interrelation between texts. What is the relationship between the original legend and the novel text, the translated text, and the plagiarized text? Is this intertextuality in another sense?

Comments on the creation are also found throughout the book, such as "The power of literature lies in deception" [2] "There can only be a complementary relationship between the book to be written and what already exists" [2] "The authenticity of literature lies in the physiological properties of the act of writing" [2] "The meaning of writing is always to hide something and then let people find it" [2], etc. These comments analyze the idea and process of creation, and understand the creation itself, which is a prominent manifestation of the characteristics of Metafiction.

Throughout the novel, Italo Calvino periodically reminds the reader that he is entering a fictional state. The first sentence of the novel is "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler*." [2] The last sentence of the novel is "Wait a little longer. I have just finished reading Italo Calvino's novel *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler*." [2] There are also hints for

readers to read fictional texts in the middle chapters, such as "Now you have read about thirty pages"[2] in Chapter 2. Compared with traditional realist writers who always emphasize the authenticity of their works, Italo Calvino reminds readers at the beginning and the end of the novel that they are reading the novel, highlighting the fictional nature of the novel creation, and strives to dissolve the distance between the reader, the author, and the text, fully reflecting the characteristics of Metafiction.

4. The Emphasis on Reading

Metafiction not only emphasizes the reflection of creation, but also attaches great importance to the understanding of reading. Creation and reading are a pair of interrelated binary opposite concepts. Before the 1960s and 1970s, people often believed that creation was more important than reading and that reading was an insignificant element in literature. However, Italo Calvino did not accept this idea and deconstructed and reversed the traditional idea of creation and fully demonstrated the importance of reading.

The frame story of *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* begins from Chapter 1, and emphasizes the only action of the protagonist "you" - reading. The word "reading" alone appears 137 times in the book.

In the process of reading, the way "you" read, the lighting when reading, the process of buying books, the process of looking for follow-up books, the acquaintance with other readers and authors because of reading... and so on, they all revolve around "reading". Along with the action of reading, various types of reader images gradually appear: Male reader "you", female reader Lyudmila, feminist reader, professor, old editor, writer, official, and so on.

As far as reading itself is concerned, due to the different reading purposes and opinions of various readers in the book, their understanding of reading and creation is also very different, showing the feature of polyphony - "Numerous independent and nonfused voices and consciousnesses emerge, and form a genuine polyphony composed of many voices (parts) of full value." [5] As Italo Calvino said: "The movement of reading seems monotonous, but in fact, it is constantly changing and fluctuating." [2] This variety of sounds, like multipart music, abandons the centrality and presence of logocentrism and elevates reading to the forefront of the book. The characters constantly keep thinking, "Are you reading letters or fantasizing?" [2] The author also thinks about the relationship between creation and reading: "Reading should be more of an individual activity than writing. If writing can transcend the limitations of the individual author, then the significance of writing still lies in the fact that its works are read through the reader's individual thinking. Only when a work is read by a certain reader could it be proved that the work has the function that the author gave it." [2] This kind of thinking is undoubtedly influenced by reception aesthetics and reader reflection theories and validates the central position of readers.

There is also an interesting plot in the novel. Rotaria writes a paper on the novel of Cilla Flannery, and comes to find the author's confirmation: her research method of the work is to use a computer to record all the words in the book in the order of their frequencies, so that the book becomes a vocabulary arranged with a high frequency of appearance. But the author is deeply disturbed, recognizing that Rotaria's interpretation of the novel is beyond recognition, "to find what was in her mind before she read it" [2]. However, in the face of the author's denial, Rotaria thinks that the author requires a "passive, problem-avoiding, backward reading method" [2], it should be eliminated. Her sister Lyudmila, however, thinks that her sister's views are too one-sided, and her reading is more of a curious challenge. In conclusion, "the entire reading process makes the originally definite meaning erratic" [6], and it seems to corroborate the postmodernist view on reading: All reading is misreading.

5. Words Play

Words Play is very common in Metafiction. Most of the authors of Metafiction are academic writers, who like to shuffle books in their works, play word games, ironic parodies, fragment collages, arbitrary time and space, etc., and are their best. In *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino uses a nested structure to divide the frame story and the embedded story, and the ratio is 1:1. He interleaves the concepts of reality versus fiction and creation versus reading, which fully shows the characteristics of postmodernism. The ten embedded stories, with their types, styles, backgrounds, and central events, are completely different and fully show the talent and imagination of the author. "If on A Winter's Night a Traveler" describes an unidentified night pedestrian wandering in the town station; "Outside Marlborough" traces a family's generational feud; in "Leaning out from a Cliff", "I", who work in the weather station, tells the story of a break prison by my dairy; "Not afraid of the Cold, Not afraid of vertigo" is full of revolution, partisanship, and espionage; "Looking Down into the Dark" tells a story that the killer tries to destroy the body of the victim after a murder; "In a Web of Interwoven Lines" is about the behavior and psychology of a nervous professor who is tormented by a ringing phone; "In a Net with Crossed Lines" focuses on the world images with a kaleidoscope; "On the Moonlit Fallen Leaves" permeates the Japanese young men in the process of growing up in the face of sexual temptation impulse and confusion; "Around the Empty Tomb" describes the experience of a man who goes to an Indian village to search for the spirit of his dead mother, after his father's death; "What is the End?" expresses the reverie and feeling of a world-weary person walking in the street.

These stories with different backgrounds and different central events are inserted into a frame story, from Indian to Japanese, from revolution to murder. They contain different genres such as detective fiction, magical realism, stream-of-consciousness, political fiction, and psychoanalysis, and form a "system containing numerous systems"[7], demonstrating a random collage, temporal and spatial transformation, and a kaleidoscopic and colorful effect. This narrative "reflects Calvino's efforts regarding the extent to which the form of the novel can grasp the complexity of the world." [8] Simultaneously, the protagonists are all in an uncertain atmosphere, wandering, confused, anxious, suspicious, and tense, highlighting the distress and nothingness of life and touching upon the core of postmodernism.

Italo Calvino also deliberately adopts a relatively rare second-person narrative, with "you" as the protagonist, so the narrative always has a sense of intimacy and distance from the observer's perspective. As in the first paragraph of the novel:

You are about to start reading Italo Calvino's new novel If on A Winter's Night a Traveler. First, relax and then focus on it. Throw away all irrelevant ideas and hide the world around you. Better close the door, because the TV is always on next door. Immediately tell them, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Speak up, or they will not hear you. "I am reading! Don't bother me!" Maybe they cannot hear you because there is too much noise, so speak up and say, "I am going to start reading Italo Calvino's new novel!" You don't have to say it if you don't want to; I hope they don't bother you. [2]

The phrase "You" here has three meanings: the male reader in the novel, the "implied reader" of the entire novel, and the reader who reads the novel in reality. The effect of the triple meaning is uncertainty, coupled with the author's relaxed narrative tone, making the identity of "you" more ambiguous and making the reader more easily attracted.

In the embedded stories, Italo Calvino mainly uses a first-person narrative. With the eyes of "I", the story gradually unfolds. "I" am the hero and the narrator; "I" am the spy who escapes the police chief and the Indian who searches for my identity; "I" am a weather station worker and also a Japanese young man in lust; "I" am a man who kills my friend and a writer who concentrates on

writing.....This kind of first-person narrator can increase the reader's sense of involvement extremely well, and make reading more intimate.

James Phelan, the American narratologist maintains that "every story is a form of communication between the author and the reader." [9] From the perspective of narratology, the narrative person "signifies the establishment of a narrative pattern, which is related to the dialogue mode between the author and the reader." [10] Throughout the book, the embedded stories and the frame story alternately employ the interlaced narration of first-person and second-person. The constant changes of the narrator make the dialogue mode between the author and the reader highly fluctuating, serving as "an invitation for readers to experience ambiguity and slippage" [11], enhancing the effect of Words Play.

6. Conclusions

As a work with textual tension and open structure, *If on A Winter's Night a Traveler* fully displays the characteristics of Metafiction in the narrative and text, creation and reading concepts, and adequately demonstrates the worldview of postmodernism, which is a classic work of Metafiction.

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