

Analysis of the Special Meaning Hidden by Unreliable Narrative in Covert Progression: In a Horseman in the Sky and Desiree's Baby

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Abstract: After the deconstructionism and ideology criticism prevail in Europe, the original criterion of unreliable narrative is challenged and then simply fixed by the following narratologists, such as James Phelan and Ansgar Nünning. With the discovery of covert progression, the criterion of unreliable narrative becomes more complicated, which makes readers have to make clear of whether the unreliable narrative happens in the plot development or the covert progression with the standard of visual reality or social justice. This paper will use "A Horseman in the Sky" and "Desiree's Baby" to point out the special situation of unreliable narrative, and the discussion of these two works will help readers to understand the new criterion of unreliable narrative.

1. Introduction

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce is famous for his novels about the Civil War, and he is entitled as "Bitter Bierce" for strongly criticizing the dehumanization of the war. "A Horseman in the Sky" is published in 1898, which consolidates Bierce's status in American literary field. Kate Chopin is a successful American female writer for her brilliant skills and reflection of the destructive power of the racial prejudice. "Desiree's Baby" is published in 1893 which points out the destructive catastrophes of the racism.

The unreliable narrative theory firstly appears in Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. It is an important part of Booth's narratology theory to analyze the relationship between the implied writer and the narrator who are the cores of classic narratology. Normally, by using the unreliable narrative technique, the narrative effect of reversal, surprise, understanding of the emotional complexities will be realized, but after the finding of covert progression, the deficiency of Wayne Booth's definition is obvious.

2. Special Unreliable Narrative in Covert Progression

No matter in "A Horseman in the Sky" or in "Desiree's Baby", the unreliable narrative happens in the covert progression, in which the criterion of unreliable narrative is different from that of Wayne Booth. After this paper's discussion, the transformation of unreliable narrative's criterion from distance which is between the implied writer and the narrator to visual reality and social

justice will be clear.

With the discovery of this special unreliable narrative in the covert progression, readers finally have the opportunity to reveal the veil of Maya. By this technique, Bierce silently praises soldier's fulfillment of duty and Chopin hides her racism. What's more, these special meanings are established on solid stylistic word choices, and they are realized by this special unreliable narrative.

2.1. Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce and "A Horseman in the Sky"

Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce (1842-1913) is a famous American writer, journalist, poet, and a veteran of the Civil War, known for his sardonic wit and sharp social satire.

"A Horseman in the Sky" is a classic Civil War literary work by Ambrose Bierce, firstly published in San Francisco Examiner on April 14, 1889, it is a successful literary work to criticize war and influences a lot of American writers. "Bierce's cynicism and critic realism inspire people to explore duty, family betrayal, and the dehumanizing effects of the destructive conflict between son and father, making it one of his most anthologized war tales".

2.2. Kate Chopin and "Desiree's Baby"

Kate Chopin (1850-1904) is an inspiring American author in the field of south literature. She is famous for her feminist literature and regional writing focused on the south of America. Her works often explore women's inner worlds, gender roles, and the restrictive social norms of the 19th century to challenge the conservative values in her time.

"Desiree's Baby" is a powerful literary weapon to criticize the racial prejudice, hypocrisy, and white people's control over colored people. It is published in 1893 to discuss how patriarchal society uses race to oppress women, which highlights Chopin's profound understanding of race, gender, and power distribution.

3. Literature Review

There are numerous thoughtful and valuable studies about "A Horseman in the Sky" and "Desiree's Baby" from different literary critics, such as Daniel Bormann, Brian Richardson, Kelly Marsh and so on. It seems that they unanimously share a common explanation of A Horseman in the Sky and Desiree's baby [1]. These literary critics mainly concentrate on the plot development and ignore the hidden unreliable narrative in covert progression, which keeps them away from the real creating intention of the writers.

Their explanation can be simply summarized as follows: Ambrose Bierce's "A Horseman in the Sky" is a searing exploration of war's cruelty. Bierce's stark realistic style amplifies the tension of Carter's internal conflict. Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby" turns its readers eyes to the racial hypocrisy in the south of America. She uses a devastating plot reversal to dismantle the myth of "racial purity" and exposes the violence of patriarchal society's power.

In China, with the covert progression discovered, the former explanations of "A Horseman in the Sky" and "Desiree's baby" are challenged. Shen Dan points out that the former literary critics' interpretations are not enough because they ignore the unreliable narrative hidden in the covert progression.

3.1. Studies at Home

With the discovery of covert progression, the existence of this special unreliable narrative is also discovered simultaneously and the negative ideology or meaning beyond words chosen by writers

finally has the opportunity to reveal itself with the unreliable narrative technique flowing under the covert progression.

In “A Horseman in the Sky”, the unreliable narrative is in the covert progression which is complementary to the plot development. “The criterion of this unreliable narrative is visual reality, the son just follows the officer’s order, and he also obeys the orders of his father to do what he thinks right”. In the plot development, the son kills his own father, so he is criticized as being indifferent and cruel, the visual reality is the dehumanization of the war, but in the covert progression, he perfectly fulfills his duty and maintains the honor of a soldier, which breaks the visual reality. In “Desiree’s Baby”, after analyzing some delicate words choices and technique arrangement, readers can find the positive and advanced ideology of Chopin to criticize racism, but the unreliable narrative in covert plot makes readers perform different narrative critiques and realize Chopin’s racial prejudice. Shen Dan thinks that the discussion of “A Horseman in the Sky” and “Desiree’s Baby” is significant because they respectively represent the unreliable narrative in complementary covert progression and the unreliable narrative in subversive covert progression. She makes a convincingly fascinating interpretation with the new findings of rhetoric narratology, which intrigues a lot of discussion about this two literary works.

Daniel Bormann makes an analysis of “A Horseman in the Sky” in his debate between Shen in Style, he thinks it is clear that Bierce wants to criticize the cruelty and dehumanization of the war by telling this cruel story, and he uses *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* of Bierce to support his reasoning [1]. Likewise, in Style, Kelly Marsh also uses *La Belle Zoraide* of Chopin to support the anti-racism position. Shen Dan points out that the shortcomings of Daniel Bormann’s and Kelly Marsh’s interpretations are their dependence on the intertextuality which is the typical symptom of rhetoric narratology’s self-restriction. In other words, they didn’t find the unreliable narrative hidden in the covert progression, so they can’t fully understand the writers’ real ideology, characters’ images, works’ themes and writing aesthetics.

3.2. Studies Abroad

In “A Horseman in the Sky”, the importance of unreliable narrative in covert progression can be ignored because the stylistic words choices are meaningless in plot development and the covert progression’s existence is doubted [2]. Daniel Bormann directly attacks the basis of unreliable narrative and wants to deny the existence of it. But according to Shen Dan, the covert progression is made up of the words which are just not important in the plot development, Bormann and Shen have different opinions about the unreliable narrative in the covert progression. Bormann also uses *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* of Bierce to make intertextual analysis. Like Bormann, the leader of unnatural narrative theory also wants to deny the existence of the unreliable narrative’s basis, Richardson invites Tung-An Wei to stress the importance of contextual and historic elements, and they think that the literary work’s whole narrative structure is used to criticize the war’s effects of alienation. *The Affair at Coulter’s Notch* should also be considered to make intertextual analysis about Bierce’s anti-war themes in “A Horseman in the Sky”. They are misled by the interruption of intertextuality and lose the right to have a full understanding of the literary work, what’s more, they are restricted into the plot arrangement stressed by Aristotle and not allowed to recognize the unreliable narrative in the covert progression [3].

In “Desiree’s Baby”, the conflict between males and females in the family should be paid attention to. Kelly Walsh’ explanation is tinged with feminism narratology. Marsh also makes distinction between the plot development and covert progression. She thinks in the plot development Desiree is forced to die because Armond can’t accept the baby’s genes of black people,

Chopin successfully criticized the racial prejudice and won the social reputation, but in the covert progression, Desiree is the white person persecuted by the black Armond, Chopin secretly adheres to her own racism against black people, and Chopin still nourishes grudge against northern values [3]. By contrast, we can find that Walsh gets closer to the writer's real intention than Barmann and Richardson because she finds the existence of covert progression which is the root for unreliable narrative, but she just stops there and doesn't move forward. Interestingly, if Walsh uses intertextual analysis, she will find the hidden unreliable narrative, which is different from the situation in "A Horseman in the Sky". These details will be discussed in the following chapters.

4. Unreliable Narrative in Complementary Covert Progression

In "A Horseman in the Sky", the mainly plot development can be concluded as this: A young Union soldier named Carter Druse is posted as a sentry. He falls asleep on duty but wakes to see a Confederate officer on horseback who is surveying the Union camp from a cliff edge. It turns out that this officer is a crucial scout for the enemy. But Carter recognizes the officer as his own father who joined the Confederate side. He is torn between his duty as a soldier and his love for his father. Finally, he shoots his own father to keep his army safe, a lot of literary critics draw their attention to the anti-war interpretations and the dehumanization effect of the war.

Bierce hides the unreliable narrative in the covert progression to stress the importance of soldier's duty, this kind of unreliable narrative is hard to realize because it is the accomplice between the implied writer and the narrator. The third person narrative serves as the metaphorical disguise to hide the unreliable narrative. It is clear that the covert progression is complementary to the plot development, paralleled with plot development in the same direction to complement the image of characters, narrative ethnics and esthetic forms [4].

The criterion of this kind of unreliable narrative is visual reality, and the word "visual" means the reality in the fictional world. In the covert progression, Druse doesn't kill his father for the dehumanization of the war but for his responsibility, it is clear that the motivation of Druse's killing is contrary to the war's dehumanization effect on him stressed in the plot development as visual reality. In the value axis, the character and the narrator fully understand what happened, but in the fact axis, the unreliable narrative makes its function to twist the reality because of the accomplice between Bierce and narrator, what's more, the word "twist" can also be explained as being misled by writer's metaphorical disguise of unreliable narrative.

A lot of Bierce's stress on the importance of soldier's duty can be found in the delicate word choices and the narrative structure based on the hidden unreliable narrative. In this kind of work, it is unavoidable for literary critics to break the stereotype of traditional figure of the writer, and readers should combine the writer's own life experience and the exterior features of his living time. Then, the hidden unreliable narrative will be discovered and another important aspect of the theme will be revealed, that's Druse's fulfillment of his duty and adherence to his father's order.

In the ending, "Oh my God" is the comment of Druse's leader, with the effect of unreliable narrative in covert progression, it can be interpreted in double way, it expresses the officer's surprise and amazement of Druse's killing of his own father, and it can also be interpreted as officer's praise of Druse's determination to fulfill his duty and responsibility as a soldier [5].

5. Unreliable Narrative in Subversive Covert Progression

The plot of "Desiree's Baby" goes as follows: Desiree is a woman without parents and she is adopted by the Valmond who is rich and benevolent, then Desiree marries Armand Aubigny who is a wealthy plantation owner. They have a baby boy, but as the child grows, it turns out that the boy has the genes of black people. What's worse, Armand is a cruel racist and immediately assumes

Desiree is the cause because her origins are unknown. Armond rejects her and the child in disgrace and wants to cut the connection between them. Finally, Desiree desperately takes the baby and disappears into the river.

The criterion of unreliable narrative is social justice, in plot development, Desiree has to die because of the racism of her husband, she is foregrounded and used by Chopin to criticize racism, the interpretation which Chopin leads readers to make is on concord with social justice. But in the covert progression, Armond is foregrounded in the stage, he is the person to blame who has black ancestry. In the value axis Armond makes wrong analysis of Desiree's ancestry, in the fact axis Armond blames Desiree for the child's genes of black people, in the moral axis Armond has little realization of his own fault because of the accomplice between Chopin and narrator [5]. The unreliable narrative is simultaneously endowed with subversive features of the covert progression going against the plot development.

Kelly Marsh's explanation is not enough because she ignores the unreliable narrative hidden in the covert progression, with the help of unreliable narrative in covert progression readers will have a full understanding of Chopin's real opinion of racism, the black people are making racial judgement and suffering a lot because of themselves. After the civil war, the slavery system is abolished and black persons' rights are protected by the social system, the social justice advocates equality and democracy especially for black people. Chopin still maintains the myth of white people's dominance but she needs to get the "Desiree's Baby" published, so Chopin hides the unreliable narrative in the covert progression to defend for the racism silently [5].

In the end, Chopin uses Armond's mother to lastly give hints to readers about the existence of the unreliable narrative in the covert progression. According to Lacan, Chopin uses Armond's mother, the big Other of the Symbolic to make the reversal. "Night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery". This description echoes with the beginning of Desiree's situation of being adopted by Valmond, the truth is that only black people make racial prejudice and white people have charismatic benevolence.

6. Conclusion

After the analysis of "A Horseman in the Sky" and "Desiree's Baby", the special meaning hidden by the writer will be discovered. Bierce uses the unreliable narrative in the complementary covert progression while Chopin uses the unreliable narrative in the subversive covert progression. In "A Horseman in the Sky", Bierce hides the praise of Druse's fulfillment of his duty. In "Desiree's Baby", Chopin hides the racial prejudice to black people and deifies the dominance of white people, whose whiteness is actually contrasted with the black.

As long as real readers realize the existence of unreliable narrative hidden in the covert progression, the real readers can reach the ideal reading position of implied reader and share the same cognitive frameworks and schemes with the implied writer, then the real reader can enter the literary work with the help of this special unreliable narrative. The stress on analysis of writer's experience and living environment is also beneficial to the development of rhetorical narratology. The analysis of hidden unreliable narrative in covert progression is not only necessary for readers to fully understand the story but also important to break the self-limitation of rhetoric narratology established by R. S. Crane who ignores the historic environment of society and excludes stylistic word choices from literary analysis.

References

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