

Narrative Technique in Katherine Anne Porter's *Old Morality* and *Noon Wine*

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In the first half of the 20th century, a great number of modernism literary works emerged. Katherine Ann Porter, a famous short story writer and stylist, has positive thoughts and keen insights, and her unique artistic features in her works are innovative and attractive. Her works also have a good reputation both at home and abroad. This paper selects Porter's famous collection *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* including *Old Morality* and *Noon Wine* to analyze and explore their narrative technique.

Keywords: Katherine Anne Porter, *Old Morality*, *Noon Wine*, narrative technique

Introduction of Katherine Anne Porter and Her works

Katherine Anne Porter was born in the 1890s, where an era between old order and new order fights against seriously. Porter's literary ideas can be traced back to her childhood. "Those early readings began in Texas, just before World War First before ever I left home, they ended in Paris, twenty years later, after the longest kid of journey" (Porter, 1970, p. 84).

Porter has spent most of her life to travel abroad, and the travel experiences make her well have a good understanding of contemporary literary features of art and thought. In the 1920s, Porter was invited to work as a journalist in Mexico and was involved in the Mexican revolution, which also became the historical background of the later *Hacienda* and the famous short story *Flowering Judas*. During Porter's time in Europe, she completed her important works, such as *The Grave* and *The Circus*.

"Throughout her long life, she gained much of the political awareness and artistic kaleidoscope of the twentieth century from her reading" (Stout, 1995, p. 219). Porter's review articles and her correspondences with literary friends show her keen insight into other writers and works, which helps us better appreciate Porter's literary creation. From Porter's novelettes, there are various roles, many of whom are strange, disabled, and non-speaking people. All of these people are Porter's caring characters. To some extent, these roles also show Porter's modernism consciousness. Porter admired Woolf's acknowledgment of "love of life itself and of daily living, a spirit at once gay and severe, exacting and generous" (Porter, 1970, p. 71), which manifests that Porter noticed the complexity of life. For the novel's form or writing skills, Porter admires Woolf and Joyce's experimental innovations in the form of novels and applies them to her own works. With her life experiences and

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career needs, Porter has demonstrated the unique feature of narrative technique in her works.

Narrative Technique

Narrative theory occupies an important position in many literary theories of the 20th century. In narrative form, modernism writers abandon the omniscient point of view; however, they adopted a more objective, real, and convincing internal focalization model where one or more of the characters in the works describe everything he knows from his or her own point of view, while external focalization patterns are those that one observer describes everything that he witnesses, and keep the emotions and ideas of the main characters in secret. "Shifts of perspective and moment impressions are flexibly used and interspersed in the works, greatly avoiding the intricate limitations of language narration, expanding the tension of language and enriching the means of language expression" (Gao, 2000, p. 10).

This paper explores the narrative techniques embodied in her works from the narrator's point of view. The concept of "narrator" here comes from Isell, who proposes it that the author is not equal to the implied author which is equal to the narrator. And he states:

Although the story of a novel usually has to be described by one author, the author is not the same person as we know through his or her life experiences, so in this case, calling the author as narrator is more precise. (Wang, 1991, p. 39)

Among the two novelettes selected in this paper, the third-person point of view is applied most. In the third-person point of view, there are two narrators: One is the text narrator, and the other is the character narrator. The relationship between the text narrator and the character narrator is not the same. There are roughly three kinds of relationships: the text narrator agrees or sympathizes with the character narrator; the text narrator does not agree or criticize the character narrator; the text narrator completely disagrees with the character narrator.

The Third-Person Point of View in *Old Morality*

From the narrator who appears in the novelette *Old Morality*, the omniscient narrator in Porter's work ceases to be omnipotent and omniscient, but "limited omniscient narrator". In *Old Morality*, Miranda's age spans from 8 to 18. She often fails to figure out why the adults are always inconsistent with the reality: Aunt Amy is a perfect Southern lady in the eyes of Harry and the clan's elders, and all the people in the family have the slim body, but from the limited omniscient narrative in the novel can be seen, the facts are always opposite.

It was a reckless indifferent smile, rather disturbing to her nieces Maria and Miranda. Quite often they wondered why every older person who looked at the picture said, "How lovely"; and why everyone who had known her thought her so beautiful and charming. (Porter, 1979, p. 173)

Aunt Amy is not as dignified and beautiful as the elders said, but rather "indifferent" and cannot really be described as "lovely" from the view of Miranda. The elderly in the south chose not to see these facts, just living in their own memory. In Dad Harry's world, his family never had a fat person, but in the next Miranda's confusion, the truth cannot be covered up. Obviously, there are great-aunt Eliza who could not pass the door and great-aunt Keziah who was not allowed to ride the horse. By the limited omniscient narration, the conservative image of Harry and the elderly generation in the South is sketched out. In a mocking tone, Porter implicitly expresses her irony of Harry's family to maintain and beautify the old tradition and the old forces.

Through the confusion of the hero Miranda, readers know that the family used to indulge in memories of past good things. Sensitive Amy hated life's emptiness, but she did not know how to resist, only indulging herself at the ball, dealing with men in order to fight this boring world. Her rebellious way eventually ended up with death. From Miranda's limited perspective, the two young girls entered the monastery to learn. Gabriel, a key figure in the novel, appeared. While portraying Gabriel in the novel, Porter uses the limited omniscient perspective: "He was a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes, sad beaten eyes, and a big melancholy laugh, like a groan. He towered over them shouting to their father" (Porter, 1979, p. 197).

When Miranda has grown up and had her own independent thinking, and would not be childish to allow the family to misinterpret the facts. On the train to Uncle Gabriel's funeral, she met Cousin Eva and suddenly eclipsed her childhood memories in the southern family filled with nostalgia and backwardness. The third-person narrative mode of combining the limited omniscience narration with limited character narration in *Old Morality* shows the conservative, pedantic, and hypocritical of the old generation headed by Harry in the southern family. she did not compromise, refusing to believe the facts in the mouth of Cousin Eva about those of the past.

The Shifts of Limited Viewpoint in *Noon Wine*

In *Noon Wine*, the writer mainly uses two characters to apply the shifts of limited perspective: Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Thompson. This is a major strategy in Porter's novels and a usual narrative technique used by modernism writers.

Mr. Thompson saw a narrow-chested man with blue eyes so pale they were almost white,...a long gaunt face, under white eyebrows. Mr. Thompson judged him to be another of these Irishmen. (Porter, 1979, p. 223)

Porter described the first impression of Mr. Helton from Thompson couple's perspective. The careful readers can have a well understanding about the appearance and body shape of Mr. Helton through the shifts of the limited viewpoint. However, when the readers keep reading, they would find that Mr. Helton is definitely a good helper in this farm:

In the second year, he showed Mr. Thompson the picture of a cheese press in a mail order catalogue, and said, "You buy this, I make cheese."

In the third year, he raised Mr. Helton's wages, though Mr. Helton had not asked for a raise.

The fourth year, when Mr. Thompson was not only out of debt but had a little cash in the bank. (Porter, 1979, p. 235)

The readers are easily disturbed by the narration of the Thompsons. However, the following parts show that Mr. Helton not only managed to keep this dilapidated farm under its own terms but also made Mr. Thompson profitable. This narrative technique can produce unexpected results. Although readers can get more clues from the shifts of the limited viewpoint, sometimes it is difficult to determine what is wrong and what is right. From Mr. Thompson's point of view:

Mr. Thompson saw it coming, he saw the blade going into Mr. Helton's stomach, he knew he had the ax out of the log in his own hands, felt his arms go up over his head and bring the ax down on Mr. Hatch's head as if he were stunning a beef. (Porter, 1979, pp. 255-256)

Here, readers will certainly conclude that Mr. Hatch is guilty of deeds, and Mr. Thompson killed only to protect the Mr. Helton. The description of the shifts of limited viewpoint towards the same event provides the readers with the possibility of multi-angle understanding and also allows the readers to know each individual's

mind. Now, the tragedy changed his fate; he lost the ability to fail to distinguish the reality and the illusion; he does not understand the source of the evil force just as he does not understand the indifference of the surrounding environment. Moreover, this tragedy, in the eyes of Mrs. Thompson, a gentle and timid woman, seemed bloody and cruel; she could not know men's violence and could not forgive her husband.

Conclusion

Katherine Anne Porter is a talented writer whose creative attitude is rigorous and serious and her works are distinguished. Edmund Wilson once applauded her "a first-rate artist" who wrote "English of a purity and precision almost unique in contemporary American fiction" (Unrue, 2008, p. 9). In Porter's life, she creates many outstanding novels that earn her a worldwide reputation. Many researchers begin to focus on the writing styles and techniques in her works because she is a recognized and remarkable stylist. Some commentators consider Porter as a realism writer, because most of the writing materials in her works are derived from her own personal experiences, as well as a portrayal of the real world. Nevertheless, some of her works are rich in the features of modernism.

The narrative technique is different from the traditional omniscience narration, which is omnipotent and omniscient. Based on this, Porter pays more attention to the inner world of the characters in the novels; at the level of thought, it shows the profound sense of crisis toward modern western capitalist cultures and civilizations that has led to the anti-traditional themes in modernism literature. One of the most prominent is the exploration of the comprehensive distortion and severe alienation between man and man, man and society, man and nature, man and self, the paradox and the new understanding of the death theme. Both the features of narrative techniques and the features of thought are reflected in Porter's works, especially in the texts discussed in this paper and *Old Morality* and *Noon Wine*.

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