

# Analysis of the Appealing Structure in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place"

LI Xing-yue

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

In the novel "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", Hemingway tells the story of two waiters in a Spanish café just before closing time, talking about an old man who drank heavily in the café every night and lived a wealthy life but still wants to commit suicide. Using the iceberg principle, Hemingway purposely omits the plot, characterization of the story, and uses symbolism and repetition to describe people's different attitudes facing the spiritual emptiness after the war, breaking the readers' expectations, and inspiring them to explore the meaning of individual life. Therefore, based on Wolfgang Iser and Zhu Liyuan's appealing structure theory, this paper will analyze the appealing structure in "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" at three levels: meaning construction, rhetorical techniques, and thoughts and themes. It is hoped that readers can find a new way to interpret the short story, better understand the author's creative ideas and dig deeper into the connotation of the work.

*Keywords:* Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", appealing structure

## Introduction

In the 1970s, the School of Constance, of which Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss are the two most important representatives, had constructed their aesthetic response. Iser believes that the meaning of the text is always to be constructed, because the meaning always remains to be updated, a role which obviously belongs to the reader. He proposed that the text created by the author contains many uncertainties and indeterminations. By mobilizing the subjective initiative of the reader, inspiring his imaginative potential, and broadening or even subverting his horizon of aesthetic expectations, the reader will become more active in the appreciation of literary works. Consequently, Iser gave a central place to the reader in the interpretation of the work. It is in this context that the theory of the "appeal" of the text was posed by Iser, who believed that the gaps and the indeterminations of the text appeal or solicit readers to participate in the construction of meaning of the text and thus to interpret the meaning of the work.

In 2004, supplementing Iser's original appeal theory, Zhu Liyuan systematically illustrated the appeal structure of text in his work *Introduction to Acceptance Aesthetics* and proposed that the appealing nature of the text is mainly reflected in the following five levels: the level of phonetics and intonation, the level of meaning construction, the level of rhetoric, the level of images and artistic conceptions, the level of thoughts and emotions.

Precisely, the succinct style of "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" by Ernest Hemingway leaves a lot of evocative space for readers to interpret, which corresponds to the gaps and uncertainties in Iser's views. The concordance of the text of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and the theory of appealing structure offers us an opportunity to explore the value of the novel from a completely new perspective.

### **Appealing Structure on Meaning Construction:**

As we know, among the essential components of the novel, the characterization, plot, setting and narrator are especially essential. However, in this novel, the café where the old man frequent at night does not have a name. Besides, the abundance of conversations gives the impression that the plot is almost non-existent. Hemingway consciously and skillfully plays on the ambiguity and indeterminacy of these elements. By providing less information to the reader, Hemingway mobilizes the latter to a freer and more autonomous meaningful reconstruction of the text.

#### **Indeterminacy of Characterization**

The characters in this short story are few and their names are omitted. The reader simply knows them by their social roles, such as the elder waiter of the café who knows the old man's attempted suicide, the younger one who is hurried to go home, and the customer, an old deaf man in despair, etc. And the novelist refers to characters either by personal pronouns "he" or "she", or by indefinite pronouns like "the waiter", "one waiter", "the man", "the girl". And the reader knows very little about their life outside the café, which makes their characters more mysterious and leaves more space for the reader to imagine.

Let's take the old man as an example, in the first conversation between two waiters, the author only lets us know that he tried to commit suicide last week and he frequents café late at night and always gets drunk. The reader knows almost nothing about the reason for his suicide. It is in their third conversation that we learn from the old waiter's mouth that he had a lot of money, and he had a wife once. Despite the reader's curiosity about the old man's experience and identity, the author's intentional reluctance forces the reader to delve into the text to search for the answer.

The same are the two waiters in the story. The indeterminacy of the characterization calls the reader to positively construct his own image on them. In their second conversation, the topic turns to the guard and the girl outside the café and the reader can imply that the girl is a prostitute. From their different attitudes to the guard, the reader can know that one of the waiters is indifferent and only cares about people's primitive desires. And in their third and fourth conversations, as mentioned in the text: "He has a wife once too", "Everything but work", "it was not a question about confidence and youth", we can know from the elder waiter has realized the difference and despair of life. And the young waiter will also confront a period of life, without love, faith, and hope. In this sense, the omitted ending for three main characters also serves as a gap or blank which evokes the imagination of the readers.

#### **Indeterminacy of Conversations**

Unlike traditional novels, most of the story are devoted to the conversations of two protagonists, rather than narration and plot. Besides, we cannot know who starts each dialogue until their fourth conversation where Hemingway finally mentioned "said the younger waiter". In addition, it seems that there is not a specific topic in

two waiters' chatter. Though they talk a lot, but their words are quite fragmentary and full of indeterminations. Read this story is just like assembling pieces into a puzzle, it is after having gathered pieces of information in their conversations that the reader can have some discoveries about the story.

In their first conversation: "What is about?" "Nothing." From this conversation, the reader would wonder the uncertain meaning of "nothing": what's the implied meaning of "despair for nothing"? Then, with this question, the reader will read the subsequent conversations and draw a clear picture about this despaired old man: he is old, without hope and love, but still lives with dignity. Thus, the reader will learn the implied meaning of "nothing", which refers to the nothingness of life, a common mental state after the war.

In addition, Hemingway had abandoned the omniscient perspective and had adopted primarily an external perspective, which exposes the reader to many gaps and uncertainties in the text and encourages them to always use their brain while reading. The narrator only has a restricted focus of perception, limited to the dialogues and gestures of the characters, and very little information on their thoughts or feelings can be directly provided to the reader. In this case, the horizon of expectation and the consciousness of participation in the construction of the story are maximally mobilized.

To sum up, Hemingway' story consists of leaving a mystery he maintained from the beginning of the story to the end, while leaving the reader free to reconstruct the story of the old man and the two waiters. Which entirely corresponds to Iser's vision: by mobilizing the subjective initiative of the reader and inspiring his imaginative potential, by broadening his horizon of aesthetic expectations, the reader was made more active in the appreciation of the works literary, thus breathes vitality into literary works.

### **Appealing Structure of Figure of Speech**

The various figures of speech in literary works are essentially different forms that separate the language from its ordinary use. In other words, it is often a question of deviating words from the conventional meaning and turning them towards the meaning that the author wishes to convey, thus creating uncertainties of meaning to leave more space for reader's interpretation, namely, to reinforce the appeal of the work.

#### **Symbols of Light and Darkness**

In "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", Hemingway delicately designed meaningful images to appear at the most appropriate moment and accentuate the atmosphere of the story. Among them, the major symbol in this story is the café a clean and well-lighted place, which is mentioned for many times through older waiter's speech and his mental monologue. In this way, Hemingway allows readers to explore the deeper philosophical connotations of this mundane location. To some extent, the café can represent order, clarity, and pleasure that make people feel dignified and comfortable despite life's meaninglessness. It serves as a refuge from the darkness and chaos of the post-war world, a place where individuals can find temporary consolation and connection with others.

While the light symbols comfort and company of others, the darkness may serve as a symbol of fear and loneliness. In the opening of the story, Hemingway mentioned: "It was very late, and everyone had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light." This sentence introduces the setting of the story and reveals the psychology of the old man. He is lonely and wants to seek comfort in this clean well-lighted café The old man hiding in the shadow of the leaves is a detailed description which shows the old man's dilemma. On the one hand, he seeks light and order, on the other, he knew that the

café is just a temporary comfort, and his depression cannot be released and dispelled anyway. These symbols well imply the old man's loneliness, emptiness, and despair.

### **Repetition of Words, Images and Scenes**

Repetition is a figure of speech which consists of repeating the same word or the same group of words, thus giving an impression of emphasis to the subject. One notable instance of repetition is the reiteration of the phrase "nada" (Spanish for "nothing") by the older waiter. The repetition of "nada" serves to underscore the existential theme that pervades the story. The older waiter, who sympathizes with the old man sitting alone in the café seems to grapple with the idea of nothingness and the emptiness that life can sometimes entail. The repetition of "nada" emphasizes the bleakness and desolation that the characters experience, highlighting the futility and meaninglessness that can be inherent in life.

Additionally, the repetition of certain phrases and ideas throughout the story contributes to the rhythmic and contemplative tone. For example, the repeated description of the café as a "clean, well-lighted place" becomes a mantra, emphasizing the importance of such a space to the characters, especially the older waiter. This repetition reinforces the contrast between the well-lit café and the darkness outside, symbolizing the solace and refuge that the café provides against the harshness of the world.

In Hemingway's minimalist style, repetition is used not for ornamentation but for appealing the reader's connotation on thematic resonance. By repeating certain words and phrases, he invites readers to reflect on the deeper meaning of the story and the existential questions it raises. The repetitive language becomes a powerful tool in conveying the emotional and philosophical undertones of "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", thus reinforce the appealing structure of the short story.

### **Appealing Structure of Themes**

According to Zhu Liyuan, in a literary work, the ideological or emotional level is the deepest. Compared to other levels, it is also the one that contains most of the uncertainties and blanks, which can be explained by two factors. The first is that an intelligent writer would never directly and clearly show his ideological and emotional tendencies to the reader. His ideas and feelings are always hidden deep in the text, which requires the reader to discover and decipher. Apart from the part of the author, the factor of the reader is also significant since the experience, knowledge and emotion of the latter are all different from those of the author. This is why at the level of emotions and themes, a work can present so many uncertainties to the reader and invite him to give his own interpretation.

### **Existential Despair in Post-war Wasteland**

The title, "A Clean, Well-lighted Place," may evoke certain expectations of a pleasant or orderly environment. Readers may anticipate a story set in a serene locale with positive connotations. However, the underlying theme of existential despair and isolation of human beings challenges these expectations.

The waiters, particularly the old one, are individuals who seek refuge from the chaos and darkness of the world. The café in the story serves as a microcosm of the post-war society located with people who struggles to seek for the meaning and purpose. The old waiter who empathizes with the old man's need for a clean, well-lighted place, convey a sense of isolation and existential despair of that time. The story explores the idea that

even in the company of others, individuals can still experience profound existential despair and a sense of disconnection. The characters, despite being in a well-lit café grapple with a sense of emptiness and disconnection, which highlights the futility of existence and the difficulty of finding purpose.

As a leading figure of the lost generation, Hemingway expressed his disillusionment and detached feeling with social, political, and economic turmoil after the first world war. For example, in the short story "In Another Country", by depicting the daily routine and conversations of the wounded soldiers who accepted the therapy in the hospital, Hemingway expressed a commonplace existential despair and alienation within the soldiers and the local people in Italy, just as the people in "A Clean, Well-lighted Place".

### **Disillusionment of Religious Belief**

In "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", the barman said "Otro loco mas", which implies that this short story happens in Spain. Spain is one of the traditional Catholic countries in Southern Europe and Catholicism has played an important role in its history. Therefore, we have enough reasons to speculate that these three characters from Spanish are Catholics. And for Catholics, committing suicide is a blasphemy against God. Death by committing suicide leads one's damnation to hell. However, people in this short story regard suicide as nothing. The old man used to be bent on suicide and the two waiters show no surprise to that. For example, when the young writer took the brandy bottle and another saucer to the old man, he said: "you should have killed yourself last week", which indicate that he is careless about the aftermath of suicide. For the old deaf man, his attempt to kill himself is a sign of disappointment with God. For the young waiter, his insouciant attitude shows the disillusionment of the whole society with religious beliefs.

At the end of the article, in the older waiter's soliloquy, all the nouns and verbs such as "father" "heaven", "bread" and "forget", are replaced by "nada". The prayer of holiness, reverence and cheering becomes a cathartic expression of nothingness, not only emphasizes nada which occupies the older waiter's mind, but also reveals a widespread disillusionment with religious belief of the post-war generation. When facing trouble, it is useless to ask God for help. The older waiter is in nada, distrusts in the original spiritual pillar.

### **Seeking for Dignity and Hope in Contemporary Time**

The characters in this story all seek solace in the clean, well-lighted place. However, the café will close, and the lights will eventually go out. In this sense, there is not "a clean, well-lighted place" anywhere. In this sense, Hemingway's clean and bright place is an attitude against nothingness, a pure and powerful inner world. Although the old man lived a life of pain and despair, he was clean and lived with dignity. The older waiter joked that he had nothing but work, but he clearly understood himself and the world, and he had understanding and kindness towards others. These reflect Hemingway's main thoughts and are also the main theme of this novel: living in an illusory world, human beings still need keep a bright and clear place in the heart to re-establish their self-esteem and to overcome that terrible spiritual crisis.

In the gloomy background of war, human nature began to be gradually alienated under the shadow of loneliness and death. They have lost courage and hope in life and future. Most of Hemingway's stories are about frustrated and lonely heroes, but they are all pioneers who insist on finding light for people in darkness. For example, the major in "In Another Country" is typical tough hero of this kind. In the face of the devastating loss of his wife and his disabled hand, he still decides to continue with the potentially pointless therapy, just like the

old drunk in "A Clean, Well-lighted Place", who struggles to march through the difficulties and nothingness of life with great dignity and courage, regardless of the doomed failure and tragic ending. Although the world is nihilistic, there are still sober people who have the courage and perseverance to face the reality and to live towards death and transcend life.

### Conclusion

Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" was written in 1933, during a time marked by social and economic challenges, including the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression. In today's context, where societal progress and technological advancements have brought about relative peace and prosperity, the story might subvert the expectation of contemporary reader. The existential questions raised by Hemingway—about the meaning of life, the inevitability of aging and loneliness—may still be relevant even in a more peaceful era.

From Wolfgang Iser and Zhu Liyuan's theory of appealing structure, we can find a large number of gaps and uncertainties in the text, which stimulates readers' interest, evokes their thinking, and invites them to jointly complete the construction of the novel. By providing readers with just the tip of the iceberg, Hemingway invites them to engage in a deeper, more introspective reading of the story. The submerged elements, such as the characters' inner struggles and the existential questions are left for readers to contemplate and interpret, emphasizing the power of subtext and reader engagement in making the story meaningful and thought-provoking.

### References

- 胡亚敏. (2004). 《叙事学》. 武汉: 华中师范大学出版社.
- 童庆炳. (2008). 《文学理论教程(第4版)》. 北京: 高等教育出版社.
- 沃尔夫冈·伊瑟尔. (1991). 《阅读活动——审美反映论》. 北京: 中国社会科学出版社.
- 朱立元. (2008). 《接受美学导论》. 合肥: 安徽教育出版社.
- Bennett, W. (1973). The new text of "A Clean, Well-lighted Place". *Literary Half-Yearly*, (14), 115-125.
- Colburn, W. E. (1959). Confusion in "A Clean, Well-lighted Place". *College English*, (20), 241-242.
- Hallett, C. W. (2000). *Minimalism and the short story—Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*. Seattle: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Hemingway, E. (1933). A clean, well-lighted place. *Scribner's Magazine*, March, 149-150.
- Iser, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Iser, W. (1989). *Prospecting: From reader response to literary anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kroeger, F. P. (1959). The dialogue in "A Clean, Well-lighted Place". *College English*, (20), 240-241.
- Reinert, O. (1959). Hemingway's "Waiters Once More". *College English*, (20), 417-418.