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Affective Narration in *Little Fires Everywhere* and Aesthetic Pleasure in Its Readers

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Abstract: Every story depicts and inspires emotion, while the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence. In *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), Celeste Ng pours her emotions into the novel, vividly depicts the emotional course of the girls towards love and maturity, and sets up with her exquisite artistic techniques the sophisticated structures concerning the rewritten narrative prototype. Using the theory of gap-filling, originated from reader-response criticism, which examines the reading process of the reader, and the concept of the romantic love narrative prototype from affective narratology, which conforms to the reader's expectation, this paper explores how Celeste Ng applies unique narrative techniques to shatter reader's expectations and set the blank in the novel, and why these can cause reader's aesthetic pleasure. Meanwhile, it also endows the novel with unique aesthetic intensity.

Keywords: *Little Fires Everywhere*; Celeste Ng; Affective Narration; Aesthetic Pleasure

1. Introduction

In the context of the Affective Turn, Hogan emphasizes that “stories manifest feelings on the part of authors and characters” and “stories provoke feelings in readers”^[1]. Readers' reaction of aesthetic pleasure, originated from reader-response criticism, stresses not only that “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence”, but also it “brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader”^[2]. Filling the gaps in the process of reading is derived the aesthetic pleasure which the reader feels as he reads.

Additionally, Hogan puts forward “the prototypical romantic plot”. It begins with two people falling in the problematic love, which “involves some conflict with social hierarchy, commonly familial”. After the separation caused by conflict, the lovers will be reunited. The enduring quality of the comic ending, where the lovers live happily ever after, is a standard idealization^[3].

By rewriting romantic love narrative prototype, Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) shows the complex image of the heroine, Pearl, who is fearless and brave in love. She is caught in the complicated relationship and learns to grow and becomes mature. The adaptation of the romantic love narrative prototype contributing to the complexity of Pearl is one of the most basic triggers of aesthetic pleasure in its readers. This paper will concentrate on the difference between the universal romantic love narrative prototype and the unique story plot in *Little Fires Everywhere*, and the way it results in readers' aesthetic pleasure so that we can have a new interpretation of the relationship between the story structure and the readers' response.

2. The Instability in the Beginning and Ending

Using a flashback approach, the beginning of this novel tells the ending, neither a bad or a happy ending. The heroine Pearl chooses to leave, while the hero Trip is confined at home. Contrary to the prototype, the woman in this story is the one who takes the initiative to break up and leave, while the man is the person who stays at home and waits for her. In the beginning, the author doesn't focus on Pearl or Trip but describes the fire in Richardson's house. No one knows who burns the house down, including readers, which triggers their curiosity. Meanwhile, the author mentions Pearl and her mother Mia's leave, which plays a critical role in developing the doubt of the arsonist. The story stops here and turns to their first arrival. The author avoids depicting the heroine in detail in the beginning, making the image of Pearl more confusing and the readers more confused.

Furthermore, their separation is also the key underpinning of readers' pleasure. Based on the prototype, the comic ending where the lovers live happily ever after is the majority of readers' expectations and goals. Making goal inhibition result from the separations of lovers not only serves to enhance the emotional intensity of the story but also draws readers' attentional focus and prepares them for emotional arousal.

Meanwhile, the instability of the ending makes us reflect on the unstable outcome and the reason for Pearl's leaving. Hogan holds that "the fundamental change from the normalcy of the beginning to the normalcy of the ending is that the ending does not have the aspect of instability of the beginning"^[4]. Conversely, both the ending and beginning are full of instability. The open-end connects with the question what happened then? Will Pearl come back later? Can they see each other again? The story doesn't tell. The readers have to continue imaginative elaboration.

3. Pearl's Masculinity and Fertility in Love

As we mentioned before, Hogan believes that romantic love is interwoven with ideological issues. Females and males do not differ systematically in this novel. Pearl looks both masculine and feminine. Facing a love triangle, she is the one who makes the decision quickly and takes the initiative action. Moody and Trip, as men, flinch in the face of love. "The viewer's emotion depends on the emotion expressed by the character"^[5] and the characters' reactions to each other and complicated relationships acquire readers' thinking, leading them to consider and bring about their aesthetic pleasure.

On the one hand, Pearl possesses the traits of a little girl in love. After the first date, "she tried to replay every moment of that afternoon: every movement of their hands, every word they'd said and breath they'd taken. Should she talk to him, or avoid him until he sought her out? These questions spun through her head all night", and "her heart was pounding as if she were a child playing tag—though she wasn't sure if she was being chased or doing the chasing"^[6]. Although Pearl is proactive, she displays shyness in love and thinks about going to him.

On the other hand, as males, Trip and Moody seem to be more timid and cowardly in this relationship, while Pearl is the dominant power. In the love relationship between Trip and Pearl, she works up the nerve to tell him at first. Trip is the hesitant one who feels nervous. On their first date, Pearl takes the initiative to leave. Trip is reluctant, asks her to wait, and "gently untangled her hair from her collar". In their relationship, Pearl "is the one who started it with him" and "watches Trip, like a mouse watching a cat, longing to be eaten"^[7]. Trip, who used to be a playboy, turns out to be the prey of Pearl. The sense of fear, nervousness, regret, and despair is always in Moody and Trip when confronted with obstacles in love. And Pearl is the one who acts decisively and solves problems proactively.

Romantic prototypes enhance "masculine" virtues such as bravery and fortitude in male characters^[8]. However, the patriarchal ideology is contradicted by the actions and words of the heroine. In this story, the woman is brave and decisive, but the man is hesitant and passive. Her bisexuality is contradictory to the female stereotype's traits and different from readers' expectations. Unexpected pattern isolation as a feature of beauty is bound up with reward system activation so that readers' aesthetic pleasure is triggered.

4. Pearl's Ambiguous Attitude to Social Hierarchy

Readers might "expect parental authority to be less of an obstacle than is commonly the case in romantic plots"^[9]. According to Hogan, love should supersede social hierarchies and oppositions, and the imperatives of love are of a higher order than the imperatives of social stratification. Compared with these, this novel doesn't obey the prototypical rules.

First, Pearl's attitude toward the Richardsons, the symbol of the upper class, is admiring and resentful. Second, facing parental authority, Pearl resists at first but yields at last. The discrepancy between these runs in the opposite direction of readers' expectations. Pearl longs for the upper classes' lives and envies their happiness. "In all her years of itinerant living, Mia and Pearl got as much as they could use—or better yet, free", while Trip and Moody "had never thought much about money, because he had never needed to". We can see that they come from different classes and live in two worlds seemingly. She regards Trip's mother Mrs. Richardson, who forces them to separate later, as another source of fascination. She takes Lexie's old things happily, even if Lexie doesn't want them. Wearing Lexie's old clothes, she feels Lexie's confidence fizzing in her veins. Confronted with parental authority, all that welled up inside her was a mixture of grief and rage. She shouts angrily: "It isn't fair"^[10]. But she is powerless about all these things, which implies the ending of the story.

Social class turns into an inevitable barrier and love cannot overcome parental authority. Their romantic love cannot cross boundaries between antagonistic or hierarchized groups. Pearl's ambiguous attitude to social hierarchy makes her image more vivid. Ineluctably, the complexity of the image aggravates readers' cognitive burden and incurs their aesthetic pleasure.

5. Conclusion

The study of affective narratology should not be pursued in isolation and focus solely on the author and the act of writing, but also needs to consider the nexus between the text and the reader, between the presenting, thematizing, or alluding to emotions in the text on the one hand, and the evoking of the reader's emotions on the other. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, by Pearl's depiction in the beginning and end, her specific behavior in the love triangle, and her vague attitude to social hierarchy, this paper elaborates on the instability of the beginning and ending, Pearl's bisexuality, and her mixed feelings and behaviors to social hierarchy, which is different from narrative prototype and beyond readers' expectation. Ineluctably, all these factors trigger aesthetic pleasure in its readers naturally.

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