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Analysis of the Narrative Features in *No Country for Old Men*

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Abstract: *No Country for Old Men* is a novel by Pulitzer Prize winner Cormac McCarthy. Set in the 1980s on the U.S.-Mexico border in southwest Texas, the story tells a chase and bloody killing between killers, hunters, and police officers.

This paper analyzes the narrative features in the novel *No Country for Old Men*. In the first place, a brief introduction of this novel and the author is given. Then the narrative features of this novel are explored from three aspects, they are narrative structure, narrative plot and narrative language. Finally, the narrative function is elaborated. With the exquisite narrative techniques applied in the structure, plot and language in *No Country for Old Men*, Cormac McCarthy successfully reveals the depravity and brutality of humanity, and vividly delineates a world of confusion and chaos, thus enhancing readers understanding of the theme.

Keywords: *No Country for Old Men*; Narrative feature; Narrative function

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is credited in the United States as Hemingway and Faulkner's only successor. His work helps American literature bid farewell to low-level mass entertainment. *No Country for Old Men* is a novel written by Pulitzer Prize winner Cormac McCarthy. Set in the U.S.-Mexico border area in the 1980s, it tells a "hide-and-seek" story between the old policeman Bell, the hunter Moss and the killer Chigurh as a result of a large sum of money left in a gunfight scene of drug trafficking.^[1]

The novel *No Country for Old Men* shows the dark side of blood, violence, crime and other dark aspects of American society, expresses the sense of helplessness in society for the lack of heroes. Hence, it has great practical significance, and is often served as selective reading for students. There are currently a considerable number of research results on this work. So far, the academic community's research topics on *No Country for Old Men* are diverse in depth, and can be roughly divided into five aspects, namely philosophy, Existentialism, Postmodernism, trauma themes and narrative strategy analysis.^[2]

On the basis of previous research, this paper will continue to analyze the novel *No Country for Old Men* from the perspective of narrative features, which is mainly divided into four aspects: narrative structure, narrative plot, narrative language and narrative function. The paper aims to explore the unique application of narrative skills in the novel, so that readers are capable of having a comprehensive understanding of the theme.

1. Narrative Features in *No Country for Old Men*

1.1 Narrative structure

Narrative structure is the content of a story and the form used to tell the story. In other words, the "story" is arranged into a sequence with conceptual significance through the combination of narrative language and the main idea of a work, which conforms to the readers' aesthetics and cognition, so as to achieve the emotional resonance of the author and the reader.^[3]

Fragmented narrative structure: McCarthy adopts various narrative points of view in *No Country for Old Men* and constantly change perspectives, thus making the story progressing in a fragmented way. Each chapter begins with Sheriff Bell's monologue in the first person, recounting what happened to his ancestors, the cases he handled, and what he read in the newspaper. The opening paragraph seems to have nothing to do with the main content of the book, but it is not. The cases that the sheriff has handled, such as the 19-year-old boy who killed someone without any confession, even knowing that he will go to hell exactly. Through the mouth of Sheriff Bell, the author strings those seemingly unrelated fragments of bloody violent stories together to demonstrate the degeneration of humanity and the chaotic society.

Parallel narrative structure: Each chapter begins with a first-person confession, then subsequently transits to a third-person narrative. The three characters are narrated separately in three lines, presenting a loose narrative style. Three people are chasing each other in plot, but in

fact, there is no intersection, the three lines develop in parallel, but each line is independent in normal conditions. Only Morse and Ziggy have an encounter at night but don't really have a real head-on fight. Moss just sees the tall, twisted shadow of Chigurh reflected on the body of the car by the glimmer of a street lamp. However, when he follows the blood trail to find Chigurh, only find the night and the empty alley are left. Bell comes to the scene of crime again following his intuition. Unexpectedly, Chigurh really hid in this hotel room. This time is the closest one, but at best they only have the intersection of shadows. When Bell enters the room, Chigurh behind the door is gone.

1.2 Narrative plot

Plot is the real substance of the story. Plot of a story is what actually unfolds in the story. It is how the author makes use of events inside the story to affect the audience or the reader. It is what happens inside the story.^[4]

Butterfly effect in the narrative plot: The characters and narrative patterns of the novel are related to the butterfly effect: butterflies gently vibrate their wings in Brazil, which will cause a hurricane in Texas. In the novel, the protagonist Moss encounters a drug dealer in the desert and picks up about twenty-four million dollars, but his accidental luck leads to a change of his personal life, which not only sends him to an irreversible road, but also affects many people who are related to him or even have no relation with him. Moss's family, the cashier of the hotel where he lived, the company executives, the police, the drug dealers, and the hired killer are all caught up in the road of no return, becoming the inexplicable "beautiful corpses". In other words, the moment Moss arrives at the spot of drug transaction, and even the moment he finds the stolen money, the "butterfly" begins to vibrate its wings. After that, this change of fate at that moment not only appear in his life, but also gradually surpass the world of others, resulting in a violent "hurricane" of the entire society.

Antilogical elements in the narrative plot: this work subverts the logical relationships of cause and effect and succession of the narrative. The best embodiment is Chigurh. The book can be said to be Chigurh's killing manual in general. Chigurh is a ghost living in the dark. The death he brings about is sudden, comes straight to the point without the slightest hesitation, and seems to require no reason at all. Human life is as casual and unpredictable to him as the coin he tossed. For those unfortunate ordinary people, their only right is to choose whether or not to participate his game—guessing whether the coin he tossed is on the front or the back. The book is full of "accidents": the hunter dies suddenly; the killer leaves in a car accident; and the "kind" teenager who borrows clothes for Chigurh and gets a sum of money finally also has a dispute over the money.....Fragmentation of events subverts the logic of the narrative.

1.3 Narrative language

Narrative language refers to the ability to use language to tell a story. Cormac McCarthy is widely known as a great master of language and has established his own distinctive style.

Desertification of language: *No Country for Old Men* frequently uses the clean, fast-paced dialect of the Southwest United States and the fragmented language of the postmodernist novel. The "desertification" of language echoes the truth of *No Country for Old Men* in the American border area.^[5]

The unique sentence structure of this novel is very noticeable. The sentences separated by periods in the novel are actually phrases, and those phrases do not satisfy a minimum set of subject-verb structures. Examples in this article are numerous, such as:

He raised his head and looked out across the bajada. A light wind from the north. Cool.

Sunny. One o'clock in the afternoon. He looked at the man lying dead in the grass. His good crocodile boots that were filled with blood and turning black. The end of his life. Here in this place. The distant mountains to the south. The wind in the grass. The quiet.^[6]

There are twelve sentences in this whole paragraph, but there are only two sentences that really conform to the syntactic rules, and the remaining ten "sentences" are actually words or phrases. McCarthy discards the logical relationships of sentences, takes words or phrases as units of sentences, and binds them together. Hence, from this paragraph, "A light wind" and "The distant mountains" are equal, even they are equal to "life". The words are scattered, revealing a sense of brokenness, loneliness, and powerlessness of death.

Besides, the language of this novel is mostly repetitive. Such as the conversation between Moss and a man:

La puerta, the man said Moss looked at him.

La puerta. Hay lobos.

There aint no lobos.

Sí, Sí. Lobos. Leones.^[7]

Violence of language: *No Country for Old Men* indicts the violence of modern American civilization is revealed in the text in a casual language. The spread of violence in American society makes people feel that the United States is simply a killing ground which is covered by the so-called civilization.

The large proportion of this novel focuses on depicting how killers kill people, and describes guns, drugs and blood many times. A great

variety of these depictions are impressive, a case in point is that the depiction of how Chigurh kills people.

He was gurgling and bleeding from the mouth. He was strangling on his own blood.

Chigurh only hauled the harder. The nickel plated cuffs bit to the bone. The deputy's right carotid artery burst and a jet of blood shot across the room and hit the wall and ran down it.^[8]

In this paragraph, the word "strangling" shows a lot of blood is shed, and the words "shot" and "hit" demonstrate the brutality of the scene and Chigurh's cruelty.

2. Narrative Functions in *No Country for Old Men*

2.1 Manifestation of a world of depravity

The seamy side of American society, the drug trade has crossed the borders of the United States and drug crimes have even become international. Drugs are sold to students who are still studying in school, and such drug sales involve many civilians in drug crimes. Moss and a killer called Wells are good examples: the former was a law-abiding citizen, but he is tempted by money, and the latter degenerates from an army lieutenant colonel to a professional killer hired by drug companies.

Degeneration of humanity, humanity is complex and changeable, especially in the materialistic modern world. People are no longer bound in an ethical and moral system and legal provisions, but with a dashing freedom to do terrible acts of violence. Bell, as the savior of humanity, is powerless against the continued degeneration of humanity, nor can he understand why human nature can be so terrible.

2.2 Manifestation of a world of brutality and chaos

A brutal and chaotic realistic world, just like the narrative structure of the novel, it is a fragmented narrative, with two parallel lines. The book has a traditional way of the beginning, but there are two different perspectives, which make the narrative feature with novelty and unpredictability. And these characteristics correspond to the uncertainty of the realistic world, a world with chaos and randomness. Secondly, the novel subverts the logic of plot, using the butterfly effect to amplify the protagonist's actions, and at the same time, it is full of unexpected events. Everything in the novel tells us that the world is random, chaotic, and illogical.

A spiritual world of contradiction and confusion, contradictions and confusions in people's spiritual world are also embodied in the narrative. Chigurh's violent act of killing people is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is that he makes people shudder when he decides the fate of people's death without mercy; the other is that he determines people's fate by guessing the heads and tails of the coin he tosses. He seems to be the master of fate, but in fact, he is trapped by fate. He is also following the rules of "heads or tails". Moss's indecision and inner split, Chigurh's maniac killing and Bell's bewilderment and disillusionment, all embody their spiritual confusion and crisis in the chaotic world.

3. Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy displays his remarkable command of narrative techniques in *No Country for Old Men*, which contributes to the recognition of the novel as a literary classic in the world literature. Through the analysis of narrative structure, narrative plot and language, and function, *No Country for Old Men* is demonstrated to be a novel with heightened consistency of style and narrative integration. The thematic insights, and the plot development are made memorable by McCarthy's extraordinary command of narrative techniques.

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