

Textual Introspective Deconstruction of Metafiction to Interpret Postmodern Phenomenon —Take Philip Roth's Novels as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Metafiction is suspicious of the world in which the novel is expressed, and the authors, contrary to the traditional view of realism, think that the realistic concept reflected in the novels is too naive and simple. In order to express this point of view, metafiction writers adopt a writing strategy of text deconstruction, which shows the diversity of text meaning through the postmodern deconstruction of anti-logos centralism. As a discourse strategy, the main function of text deconstruction is used to expose fiction, highlight the multiple connotations of the text, and deconstruct the conventions of realistic writing. This paper takes Philip Roth's works as an example to discuss the deconstruction of the text in the content and form of meta-fiction. Roth's works from *Goodbye to Columbus* to *Nemesis* are mostly postmodern experimental. He is deeply influenced by Henry James, Conrad, Tolstoy, Kafka and other psychological masters and spares no effort to explore various subtle social relations in postmodern society. By successfully dissecting the fracture, diversity and rambling between the metafiction texts, Roth also takes metafiction as a genre of hiding narrative strategy so as to vividly reflect the morbid situation of modern people from a counter-mainstream perspective.

Keywords: *Metafiction, Logos centralism, Narrative subject, Phenomenology, Multiple text.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a semiotic system, the linear features of language provide the basis for the linear features of text. Metafiction shows multi-dimensional material world and divergent thinking state by using the fracture and diversity between texts, thus deconstructing narration and destroying the one-dimensional chain of semiotics system. Metafiction, also known as "post-fiction", is a kind of postmodernist fiction. Yuan (meta) in ancient prose means "transcendence", representing the destruction and reconstruction of a certain convention. For example, "meta-language" refers to the language in which discourse expresses itself. David Lodge, a literary critic, defined metafiction clearly and succinctly :

Metafiction is a novel about the novel, which concerned about the fictional identity of the novel and its creation process (*The Art of Fiction*: 1998:230). Metafiction writers accept Wittgenstein's view of language philosophy. Wittgenstein doubts the nature of language and believes that attempts to reveal a logical correspondence between language and the world will ultimately fail. He believes that "language has many

uses, legitimate 'revelation disclosures', and none of them can be reduced to a clear, conceptual logic" (*Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* 1982:129). As a leading figure in introducing deconstruction into literary theory, Paul De Man also mentioned the deconstruction strategy of the overall structure of metafiction text.

It can be seen that meta-fiction identifies with multiple interpretation of textual meaning and advocates the deconstruction of the text. While the two basic characteristics of deconstruction are openness and uncertainty, its characteristics are exactly the characteristics of metafiction in meaning interpretation, reflected in the text is: the deconstruction of the central content of the narrative; the deconstruction of the form of text narration; Meta-fiction uses "text gap" to deconstruct the open content system. With the help of "combination of genres", the meaning and uncertainty of the text are enriched, so that the metafiction has a non-uniform and open-meaning dimension.

2. DECONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE SUBJECT AS A WAY OF POSTMODERN SOCIETY EXPLANATION IN ROSE'S METAFICTION TEXT

As a post modernist writer, Philip Roth (1933---2018) extracts writing materials from a writer's own real life, directly and bluntly reflects the relationship between creation and life. The metafiction writers analyse this relationship by means of a "text gap" to deconstruct an open content system, which is nonlinear, pluralistic and open. While as a semiotic system, language is the unity of a series of signifier and signified. The linear feature of language is the basic point of literary text, and many narratives in real literature are expressed in chronological order. The multidimensional material world and divergent thinking state of metafiction are described by multidimensional and nonlinear language produced by the "text gap" in order to deconstruct the logos core of narration. Compared with Logos principles, which mean that there is a fundamental principle behind everything, this ultimate and eternal thing constitutes the center of a series of things. The writers of metafiction break the existing monistic order and deconstruct the narrative content by using a series of text gaps, such as rupture, inversion and deformation, outlined by various concepts. To take *The Dying Animal* as an example, the book introduces the issue of death philosophy. The character David Kepesh desires to capture Consuela so much that he often falls into fantasy, even though the thought is morally humiliating. [1] (123-124)

Metafiction often hides away the author's narrative subject and thus deviates from the narrative. The narrative of the text mainly depends on other things, such as space, rather than events. [2] (89) the plot here is either small or vast. Although the text of *Anatomy*, one of Rose's early "Zuckerman Trilogy", is more than 100 pages long, the plot is not only a phone call threatening kidnapping, but also some fragmentary feelings, memories and dialogues about feelings. As the first part of the trilogy, Roth's short novel of *The Ghost Writer* is full of plots: fictional, realistic, or family conflicts, or dialogues between characters. However, the plot is too trivial and the narration of time and space is quite disordered, which makes readers feel the same centreless, and thus this kind of narrative deeply reflects the disordered phenomenon of postmodern society.

Metafiction deconstructs the narrative by using the text gap sometimes formed by a parody or a Chinese box flashback. A Parody is a funny imitation of some traditional subject matter or classic works, which embodies the gameplay of meta-fiction and emphasizes the ontological meaning that the text is different from reality. Deconstruction criticism is well-known for its textualization. It interprets the meaning of the text

through parody, games and other deconstruction strategies to achieve the interpretation of text meaning.

In Philip Roth's metafiction, we can find obvious traces of parody techniques. In *Ghost Writer*, Roth intersperses with the classic literary work *Annie's Diary* tampering, and uses the protagonist Nathan's imagination to revive Anne as Amy. This resurrection is a deconstruction of the diary genre. Annie's pseudonym Amy, self-righteous lone daughter who survived the Nazi concentration camp, broke off news with her family, took refuge in the United States, and accidentally read the diary published by her father, suffering excessive distress mingled with happiness. Anne here is not only a ghost writer, but also an extramarital lover with Lanov and eventually assumed by Nathan as his wife, which shows Roth's rereading and renewal and extension of *Annie's Diary*. This parody makes the whole content of novel confused and chaotic, thus deconstructs a variety of possible realities, and denies the certainty of reality. Since 2016, measures have been taken toward immigrants and domestic issues, the prospects of the racial relationship in America is still not settled. There is still a long way to go for America to cash the promise as "a city upon a hill" (Winthrop, 1630) [3].

As Patricia Waugh points out: in a sense, metafiction relies on Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle". The observer always change the observed, so it is impossible to describe an objective world. Another kind of narrative deconstruction in metafiction, namely Chinese box flashback, refers to another kind of fragments in narration outside the main body of the story. The nesting of stories creates a multi-level relationship between the author and the reader, by which views are expressed from different perspectives, indicating the reader's freedom to interpret the text in his own way. Examples include Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, Joseph Gard's *The Mystery of Cards*, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

In Roth's *Opposite Life*, there is an infinite retrospective structure with layers of stories. In the fourth chapter, he embeds a realistic detail description, which is about the love and marriage life with Maria as the core, and this even has nothing to do with the original narrative, not related to any front or back narrations in any case. This narration takes Zuckerman as the title interface, is incorporated into the original narrative disruptively. But with the deepening of the story, readers seem to gradually forget the original subject of the story with Henry as the center. In this interspersed episode, the author, again, nested another story, the unfortunate life of Maria and her ex-husband. It can be seen that Chinese box-type narration breaks the narrative center. The deep and infinite retrospection technique highlights that the postmodern meta-novelists destroy the specific novel tradition with the gap caused

by multiple texts, and interweave and shuttle in different time and space, which is one of the basic characteristics of deconstruction art, that is, no termination or uncertainty.

3. DECONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE FORM IN METAFICTION TEXT THROUGH INTROSPECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN WRITERS AND WORKS

The author of metafiction enriches the meaning and uncertainty of the text with the help of “genre merging” in narrative form. The combination of various genres and languages produces intertextuality, resulting in compatibility and deconstruction of multiple texts. Roth not only reflects the relationship between creation and life from the writer's own life, but also shows the weird and morbid living situation of the characters in the works by means of such topics as the frustrated desire and paralyzed hope that deviate from the mainstream in the postmodern society. Roth, through naked fantasy and textbook like explanation, as well as crazy interactive leap forward and other means, reflects vividly the hybrid state of this pluralistic society. While the genre of metafiction, blending various stylistic elements, breaks through this boundary between fiction and criticism of postmodern society, and produces the diversity of meaning in the process of text reading. In her theoretical analysis of the structure of metafiction, Linda Hutchin, a Canadian literary critic, said: “The reader of the post-historical novel is always a positive character, and the reality of the text is established by her reaction and reconstructed by his active participation.” (Narcissistic Narrative: The Meta-fictional Paradox.1980:141)

The act of reading is a creative process that becomes part of writing. The author of metafiction is no longer the authority that endows the text with single meaning. The meaning of the text becomes uncertain by forming an open text, waiting for the reader to participate at any time. As a Jewish writer, Roth takes the art of “literary amalgamation” to the extreme. He also combines the Yiddish language of Jewish poetics with the folk language. His narrative techniques, the choice of words and sentences, and style of writing in Zuckerman’s novels all have a strong Yiddish literary tradition. In a word, the author of metafiction boldly deconstructs the meaning of multiple texts through rich language forms and diverse literary genres, and puts forward a set of strategies for the elimination and disintegration of logos centrisim.

In metafiction, the large collage of many styles, such as novels, poems, essays, letters, diaries, etc can be found everywhere. For example, in *The Opposite Life*, apart from a small amount of plot fragments recalling the past, it consists of eulogy, diary, note, letter and

related comments. *The Ghost Writer* is packed with various genres: fictional inner monologues, real family conflicts, or ten letters from judges or long dialogues or conversations between characters.

In addition, Roth adds a series of popular cultural materials, such as songs, poems, movies and advertising words, to the narration of one of his famous metafiction work *Anatomy*, which makes the overall organizational structure of the text disintegrate.

The deconstruction of narrative form in metafiction text is not only reflected in the compatibility of different genres, but also in the generation of pluralistic meaning in the process of text reading. The language of metafiction is nonlinear, that is, it has at least two language chains, one narrative language chain and one critical language chain. When reading a meta novel, the author’s comments on the text itself haunt the reader's mind, subconsciously encouraging the reader to think deeply.

In *The Opposite Life*, Roth invites readers to participate in his creation in two ways. First of all, the unique dialogues between Henry and Maria in the fourth chapter of “Gloucestershire” are basically in the form of one question and one answer, question and answer, just like the protagonist's confession to the psychiatrist in Ross's previous book *Pittnoy's Complaint* which shows his thoughts and puzzlement about how to create the novel. Then, the writer changes the order of dialogue in the process, so that readers can't cope with it and constantly have to adjust their reading angle. As Henry asked, “how to explain his love to you in the Christian world?” This is a blatant demonstration and declaration of the reader's freedom of reading, which makes the reader wonder this passage is not a dialogue within the text, but a fierce debate and evaluation of the creation of Nathan by two different kinds of consciousness.

Another example is that in *Anatomy*, the author uses the internal and external perspectives at random, highlighting the imprint of metafiction creation and stimulates readers' reflection. In addition, in order to make the text appear multi-dimensional openness, metafiction deconstructs the existence of the central meaning of narration, and even has a variety of different interpretations of a problem. In *The Opposite Life*, the first three chapters portray Nathan Zuckerman and his brother Henry Zuckerman in traditional narrative ways. But in the following chapter, the narrator suddenly overturns the original narrative: Henry came back from the dead, Zuckerman seemed dead, and even Carol turned into another ugly woman. We can see that Roth is here to remind the reader that all the stories he is telling are false. In the first three chapters of the novel, Zuckerman’s novel world as the protagonist is subverted by Zuckerman's “real” world as the author in the fourth chapter. When Roth deconstructs the existing narration, another new possibility has been revealed, which makes

the pluralism and uncertainty of the text meaning more obvious. It implies Jewish identity: a dynamic presentation that never stops and always in the process of internal development and change [4].

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a matter of fact, the significance of metafiction is far from the “alienation” understood by postmodern novelists, but also different from the “anti-tradition” of postmodern anti-fiction, which deepens Heidegger’s “subversion and destruction”. Western postmodernist researchers believe: “Behind this new novel, there is a kind of sincere effort and a new pursuit.”[5] There is not only a meaning in the world of metafiction, but also no center as a whole. the center of the whole. In Derrida's words, deconstruction is not a presence, but a trace. It is difficult to define, and is invisible, once defined, it itself will be deconstructed.

Therefore, the two basic characteristics of deconstruction are openness and infinity which have no termination. Its characteristics are also the characteristics of meta-fiction in meaning interpretation. Metafiction shows the diversity of text meaning by means of postmodern deconstruction of anti-logos centralism, and unfolds literary materials in various possible ways to open up readers' thoughts. All in all, the text deconstruction strategy of metafiction directly challenges language, the carrier of human culture communication, and holds that the deviation in writing and reading always exists. It takes the removal of “presence” as the starting point of theoretical thinking, and takes the rupture of the unity of the text as the deduction of its own theory, boldly innovates the post-modern writing, and triggers unlimited reflection on the form of artistic expression.

Philip Roth uses a unique blended narrative form of metafiction to crack up various diseases of contemporary postmodern societies. By transcending and breaking the traditional solidified narrative, and hiding away author's multiple narrative texts, Roth subtly reflects the living situation and social characteristics of people in vast postmodern culture. This paper, from the creation, the art and social relations, from a variety of possible types of morbid psychology, from the inconceivable contradictory assumptions, analyzes various phenomena and symptoms of post-modern society, and provides readers with a multidimensional perspective of soul reflection.

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