

An Analysis of Autobiographical Narrative Techniques in Katherine Anne Porter's Short Stories

Ru Wang^{1, *}, Jianfu Liu²

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

Abstract

This paper will choose Porter's four short stories "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", "Theft", "The grave" and "Flowering Judas" to analyze her unique narrative techniques, which include non-linear narration, fixed internal focalization, spatial autobiographical narration and other techniques in order to enjoy Porter's detailed, vivid, independent writing styles in her authentic descriptions of her stories.

Keywords

Autobiographical Narrative Techniques, Non-linear Narration, Fixed Internal Focalization, Spatial Autobiographical Narration

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1. Introduction

Most of Porter's works are related to her own experiences. We can classify her works into two categories, one is called "Experienced Stories", which is based on the outside world's things she sees or hears, these works include "Rope", "He" and "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" and so on. The other category is called "Autobiographical Stories", such as "Theft", "Old Mortality", "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and "Flowering Judas", where the protagonists' background and life experiences are extremely similar to Porter's. The majority of these stories' protagonists are named Miranda, who is essentially the incarnation of Porter herself, both of whom share a bitter poor-stricken childhood and early career as a journalist, a woman who is involved in a fruitless romance that is inevitably destroyed by influenza and entanglement in the Mexico Revolution. We may also call this category Fictional Autobiographical Stories.

However, Porter's Fictional Autobiographical Stories are different from the typical autobiographies, According to

"Author=Narrator=personage" of Philippe Lejeune [8], the narrator, author and character are the same person in autobiographies, whereas in fictional autobiographies, only the narrator and character are the same person. In her fictional autobiographies, Porter uses non-linear narration, fixed internal focalization, spatial autobiographical narration and other narrative techniques to prevent readers and critics from forming intimate connections between the protagonist and herself, this strategy also allows for more objectivity in writing. This paper will focus on "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", "Theft", "The grave" and "Flowering Judas" to enjoy Porter's excellent mastery of fictional autobiographical narration, thus exploring her authentic philosophies towards life.

2. Non-linear Narration

Taking Porter's 20 short stories published in 1964 into consideration, there appears to be no linear narration. This phenomenon cannot be attributed to the reason that these stories were written at different periods in Porter's life, even

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: 13804582603@163.com (Ru Wang), 616447125@qq.com (Jianfu Liu)

though her separate short Stories Collections such as "Flowering Judas and Other Stories", there is also no noticeable time sequence in these stories. Included in this stories collection are the stories consequently following "Theft" "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" and "Flowering Judas". "Theft" can be seen as Porter's real life as a journalist in America during the Great Depression, which is the time period that Porter witnessed the Mexico Revolution. In "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall", the heroine is an 80 year-old woman, whereas the time period of "Flowering Judas" is when Porter witnessed the Mexico Revolution, which is approximately the same time period as "Theft". Furthermore, in "The Grave" story from her later Collected Stories, the autobiographical heroine is a child of 9 years old. It is clear that most of Porter's fictional autobiographies do not rely on any particular time sequence, Porter seems to have casted away the time altogether. Time no doubt is an important factor in the traditional autobiography, but to a modernist, an autobiographer's inner mind is a more important factor than the outside historical or natural sphere, and therefore the inner mind is perceived as the real truth. An autobiography, to a larger extent, is the writer's memory hidden in his /her mind, and this memory has the unconscious, according to Freud, "Our psyche is a dynamic model", [4] where memory is very unique and the image or memory that flows in the mind is not in accordance with the physical time sequence. Basically what the modernists want to portray is the true flowing of mind instead of merely the physical facts. The mind is the major area for gathering the autobiographers' thoughts, re-considerations, analyses and explanations. As autobiographers will inevitably be influenced by their own philosophies, these autobiographies can be emotional and subjective. As a modernist writer, Porter adheres to the inner truth rather than outside realities, she disregards the linear narration, instead using non-linear strategy to create her fictional autobiographical works.

Porter's story "Theft" is a good example of non-linear narration. The first paragraph is the heroine's thoughts about her purse. The middle part of the story is not about the protagonist's stolen purse, but about the protagonist's reminiscence of what happened in the past. In the last few paragraphs, narration returns to the subject of the stolen purse, this kind of narration is called analepsis which is the narration of a particular event at a point in the text after later events have been told. In the first paragraph, the heroine "surveyed the immediate past and remembered everything clearly." [1] (CS 1979:59) Readers are anxious to know what will happen next, but the narration veers off course from the second paragraph, returning to things that happened a few days before. Then she conflicts with three men. On the face of it, these events have no relation with the theme of the story, but looking closer to

these three incidents with men, it shows the heroine's servitude to men's power, even though she has received much injustice from them. Porter explores the deep reason of her frustration, foreshadowing her "epiphany" in the end. Camilo was once a rich man but now is as poor as the protagonist "She", however, he still wishes to maintain his identity as a gentleman. He doesn't want to take off his hat in front of the heroine to symbolize his superiority towards women, since the hat is a symbol of old tradition. When the heroine notices he is hiding his hat, she feels guilty. This feeling of guilt is telling evidence of her lower social status. The heroine doesn't want to take taxi because she doesn't have much money left, but she can't resist Roger's invitation, which results in her spending ten cents. Bill is the most shameless man she knows, in order to avoid paying her compensation, he makes up many lies and even pretends to weep in order to cheat her, but once again she yields to men, and says "let it go then" [1] (CS 1979:63). Through these three incidents, Porter explores the heroine's weak, incompetent character, since she just obeys everything. After these experiences, she begins to realize that only by protecting her own interest can she protect herself from the harms of the outside world. Although the purse isn't worth much, it is a symbol of friendship and dignity, and so she can argue with the janitress bravely. Considering the heroine's past experiences, Porter analyzes the reasons for her unjust treatment by society, and at the end of the story, she returns to reality and realizes she herself is the real theft. Through this analepsis narration, readers and the heroine begin to search for reasons of weakness, and finally both the reader and the heroine come to the same "epiphany" and face reality. This analepsis narration provides a stage to explore the heroine's inner mind.

To demonstrate the non-linear narration, let us look at "The Old Order", "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as a group to see how Porter explores the inner truth of the protagonist and the fundamental themes of her short stories. According to the normal time sequence, the three stories should be arranged as "The Old Order", "Old Mortality", "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", which is the natural development of Miranda's family. However, in the text, Porter rearranges them as "Old Mortality", "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", and then "The Old Order". Porter violates the time sequence purposely to emphasize she is not concerned with the particular time order of these incidents, but rather the fighting spirit in three generations of women. "Old Mortality" is about the story of Miranda's aunt Amy, who according to her father's narration is a classical southern belle and a treasure to her family. She is deeply oppressed by southern norms, which eventually leads to her rebellion. Amy wants to live truly to herself and cast away the restrictions that are applied to the southern woman, so she treats herself brutally, inflicting torture on her own body,

riding horses for days. Unfortunately, this retaliation to patriarchy fails, which ultimately leads to suicide two weeks after her marriage. Although she fails to rebel against the norm in this patriarchal society, she realizes that women will be oppressed by Calvinism and southern patriarchy. Aunt Amy's independence has not been achieved, but in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider", Miranda further searches for her own liberation, after witnessing aunt Amy's tragedy, she becomes determined to break off with southern society completely, making no compromises to the old family. In the west, Miranda suffers much, including the loss of her lover, battles with influenza and starvation; she goes through many hardships to become a tough, independent woman. Compared with these two stories, Amy and Miranda, both of whom are fighting for their own freedom from patriarchy, and paying a heavy price for this fight. Miranda's grandmother in "The Old Order" also revolted against Patriarchy and Puritanism. She was aware of her "marginality" in this society and the unjust treatment towards white women, but southern norms have been so deeply rooted in her heart that she finally becomes a protector of this patriarchal society. In all, three generations in these three stories fight for their own freedom, by breaking apart from the southern order, and travelling to the outside world to seek their own identities. Instead of viewing the three generations as separate units, they mirror each other's independent spirit such as Miranda's future will be seen from Aunt Amy, and the image of grandmother will be seen from Miranda, their tough, persevering spirits are essentially the same. Instead of showing the three heroines in chronological order, Porter follows the flowing of her mind, she reconsiders, contrasts and compares the past, present and future. Porter changes the linear order of narration and even changes the irreversibility of time, folds different period's incidents together to show the reality of mind and the features of fictional autobiographical narration.

3. Fixed Internal Focalization

The concept of "Fixed Internal Focalization" is advocated by Genette, he described it as "narrator=character (The narrator says only what a given character knows)" [6], namely, the information the narrator knows is the same as what the character does. The unique feature of this narrative method is the narrator renounces his/her perspective and uses the perspective of one character to observe the world. "The jilting of Granny Weatherall" and "Theft" are stories told by third-person fixed internal focalization. In "The jilting of Granny Weatherall", Porter concentrates on the protagonist-Granny's inner feelings as well as on the people and incidents observed by her eye. Porter uses Granny's stream-of-consciousness to intimately connect the reader with her inner world and therefore there is no interference from the

author so that we can see Granny's strong, brave and persistent character vividly, portraying her fighting spirit. In "The Grave", Porter also uses the protagonist-"she" to observe the men's world, which shows Porter's defiance towards the traditional male narrative voice.

"I want you to find George, find him and be sure to tell him I forgot him, I want him to know I had my husband just the same and my children and my house like any other women, a good husband that I loved fine children out of him...tell him I was given back everything he took away and more...oh, no, oh, God, there was something..."[1] (CS 1979: 86)

In the above cited paragraph, Granny had once been jilted by her fiancé at the wedding ceremony, but after years of hard work, she became strong and responsible for taking care of the whole family alone. At the same time, Granny's heart is full of contradiction. On the one hand, she is tough-minded, independent, pious, and hard working; on the other hand, she is tender and sensitive as most normal women are. Through her direct inner speech, we see that she wanted to show her husband that she is capable of taking care of the family without him and that she has forgotten him. However, if she has truly forgotten, why is there the need to tell him anything? Therefore she still hasn't forgotten her husband, the painful experience of being jilted 60 years ago. Deep in her heart, she still wants to rely on her husband despite being independent for the last 60 years. The second-person deictic "you" has a command tone, depicting Granny's strong character, and can also be a self-reflective word informing us the story is a fictional autobiography written by Porter looking back on her earlier experiences. Porter uses Granny's flowing mind to erase the overseeing and distancing narrative presence from the text, instead to be in intimacy with Granny's mind alone. This fixed internal narration is more suitable for portraying the autobiographical character's inner mind than other narrative strategies.

In "Theft", Porter use of stream-of-consciousness to describe the heroine's perspective of the men's world is very obvious. When Camilo is leaving, she thinks he may blame her for his hat being dirtied, "she felt she had betrayed him by seeing, because she would have been humiliated if he thought she even suspected him of trying to save his hat." [1] (CS 1979: 60) When reflecting on the past, Porter also uses the stream-of-consciousness to show her inner feelings, she thinks of many things that have been lost before the loss of her purse. Porter does not merely use the heroine's focalization to show her kind-hearted and servile personality, but more importantly, Porter wants to show the men's world through the eyes of a woman, Porter focuses on the heroine's mind, where men are observed through this perspective. The men she knows are all selfish, hypocritical and unreliable. Camilo is very poor but he pretends to be a wealthy gentleman, and so the scene of him

hiding his hat under his overcoat is rather farcical. Roger is both mean and hypocritical. As her lover or boy friend, he insists on taking a taxi to avoid getting wet, but when paying, he asks the heroine to pay a part of the fee. Bill the editor shamelessly pretends to weep to win sympathy from the heroine when she asks for payment. All three men's behavior seen through focalization of the female protagonist's eye can show a lack of friendship, responsibility and love in men. All of these things make her feel distressed, and so she finally realizes "I was right not to be afraid of any theft but myself, who will end by leaving me nothing" [1] (CS 1979:65). After all these frustrations, she begins to accept reality and becomes more independent. Like the heroine, Porter divorced 4 times and remained single the rest of her life, because she wanted to rely on herself and her writing instead of men.

4. Spatial Autobiographical Narration

Spatial autobiographical narration is a narrative method using the relationship between the fundamental living space and the construction of self-identity. Human beings are eager to leave a familiar space for the undiscovered world to find their potential. Through connections with different areas, we re-evaluate ourselves, and find out the relationship between different travel space and the meaning of life. Through stimulation of different spaces and cultures, we change our philosophy and life attitude.

In "The Grave", there are two different settings that highlight the development of the heroine Miranda. The first setting is the grave, "the family cemetery had been a pleasant small neglected garden of tangled rose bushes and ragged cedar trees and cypress, the simple flat stones rising out of uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass." [1] (CS 1979: 362) The grave is a symbol of American southern tradition, and it not only represents a physical place, but also represents a cultural space of the southern tradition. In this society, women are dominated and oppressed by men. The death of mother habit and her babies is a tragedy of the southern woman inflicted by Paul, who represents the oppressing southern patriarchal society's violence towards women. So the rebellious Miranda inevitably runs away from this suffocating environment and tries to forget the dreadful experiences there. Then 20 years later at another place, "one day she was picking her path among the puddles and crushed refuse of a market street in a strange city of a strange country...a scene that had not stirred nor changed since the moment it happened." [1] (CS 1979:367) Like all Bildungsroman's stories, the protagonist will go to a new place to increase one's knowledge and gain new experiences, and thus this cognitive development will push the progress of narration. Miranda

leaves her hometown, walking into a strange city, and suddenly "remember always until now vaguely as the time she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves." [1] (CS 1979: 367) In this town, stimulated by a similar sight and smell 20 years earlier, Miranda compares these two places in her mind to create a third space, "she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleasant sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hand." [1] (CS 1979:368) Porter ends her story by making the narrator an artist who witnesses a vision of art shaped by patriarchy. In another place, Miranda finally finds her identity as a writer with rich imagination and artistic temperament. Here, the art of the female prevails, as the grown-up Miranda not only obtains a ring her brother finds, but also recaptures the scene of her brother holding the dove, so the ring, dove and even her brother are essentially a part of her. The mental space is what Miranda truly achieves, but fundamentally all of these spaces are generated from the earth where human beings come from. These two different physical places witness Miranda's development in time sequence. The mental space generated from these two places shows the feminine's subtle and sensitive emotions. Therefore alternating places not only reveal Porter's spatial autobiographical narrative method, but also capture women's allusive and fugitive emotions.

5. The Similarities and Differences Between Fiction and Facts

As a fictional autobiography, "Flowering Judas" is a mixture of Porter's true experiences in Mexico and her excellent narrative abilities. According to Xu Jinde, "there are distinct differences between traditional fictions and fictional autobiographies in terms of narration...in fictional autobiography, we should not only analyze how the author rearranging the text stories, but also should consider the differences between text story and real life experiences." [7] The protagonist Laura in "Flowering Judas" is the incarnation of Porter, her story describes the experiences of Porter in Mexico. Combining her own experiences and artistic imagination, Porter creates this widely celebrated work.

In 1920, Porter went to Mexico and witnessed the revolution there. She was enthusiastic toward the revolution at first, but after seeing much corruption, assassinations, treachery and government oppression, she began to loath it and turned back to her writing. Porter once stated that in the "Flowering Judas", "all the character and episodes are based on real persons and events, but naturally, as my memory worked upon them and time passed, all assumed different shapes and colors..." [2]. These words can be seen as the "Biographical contract"

brought forth by Philippe Lejeune. [8] Porter acknowledges the archetype of Laura is the combination of her friend Mary, Doherty and herself. Mary was a teacher in an Indian school. She is the same as Laura who “spends part of her days in Xochimilco, nearby, teaching Indian children to say English.” [1] (CS 1979:93) The scene of Braggioni singing to Laura is Porter’s memory of a girl with a fixed look of melancholy and confusion on her face. But Porter does not know the exact story of the girl, so she makes up the story of Braggini to reveal the “symbolic truth”. [2] In “Mexican Trinity” and “Where Presidents have no Friends”, Porter reveals her uneasiness about the chaos of the revolution. She was faced with starvation and banishment, this horrifying feeling is reflected in Laura, “Laura feels a slow chill, a purely physical sense of danger, a warning in her blood that violence, mutilation, a shocking death, wait for her with lessening patience.” [1] (CS 1979:93) This is the truthful inner state of Porter in Mexico. Apart from these, there are many other materials that describe her experiences in Mexico.

But after all, this is a fictional autobiography, therefore Porter uses objective narrative strategies to distinguish herself from Laura, she uses interior monologue, free indirect discourse, direct discourse and avoids using the first-person narrative “I” to tell Laura’s story. Porter writes her own experiences and her unique emotions, but through these artistic creations, she pretends to write someone else’s story, which makes her story appear more objective. Real experiences and fictional artistic rhetoric are equally important in fictional autobiographical narration.

6. Conclusion

Porter is not a prolific writer, but she uses her own experiences and her strong, persevering character to produce classical fictional autobiographies.

In these self-insisting, self-exploring works, she converts her materials into a new human experience, and by using many

narrative strategies she explores the relationship between the artist and the world. In a word, her autobiographical narration mode can be an authentic way to establish the truth of our experience.

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