

A Narratological Study of Alice Munro's Short Stories

Cao Jing, Huang Yanchun

Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou, China, 310000

cjyuri@163.com, cynthia_els@126.com

Abstract

Alice Munro (1931-)’s stories present a set of recurring patterns, constructed by her irregular narrative order, the polytrophic narrative speed and flexible transformation of narrative focalization and distance that make every aspect of her narrative world worthy of serious studies. Munro’s short stories are seemingly simple but full of conflicts and paradoxes. This thesis tries to make a narratological analysis of *Runaway*, *Passion* and *Nettles* in terms of narrative time and narrative focalization, hoping to appreciate Munro’s marvelous narrative techniques and unique narrative style.

Keywords: Narratological study; Alice Munro; Narrative time; Narrative focalization

1. Introduction

The writer's stories and the way they are told not only construct the "self" but also constitute the character's relationship to the other. In Alice Munro's *Escape*, *Passion*, and *Nettle*, the women in the narratives seek liberation from or attempt to understand their object status within the micro-political system of family and friends. In her essay "What's Real," Monroe comments on her own reading habits: she doesn't necessarily read a story from beginning to end, preferring to pick it up whenever and wherever she can. She emphasizes that the meaning of a story - "the task of a story" - does not lend itself to the construction of a linear narrative or a fixed order of sentences. She prefers unconventional linear narratives, using flexible narrative time and shifting narrative focus to introduce a story that contains multiple layers of perspective, thus breaking through the constraints and limitations imposed by the length limit of short stories. This supports the essay's view that Monroe's narrative takes the form of an exploration: it is a narrative of infinite possibilities.

Monroe's unique narrative approach - a loose connection between the narrative structure and the sequence of events - makes it possible to approach the study from a narrative perspective. Most of her narratives maintain a fairly steady pace, with alternating background and plot descriptions and balanced dialogue, presented in a direct, almost linear fashion. Monroe, however, usually breaks the continuity of the story and rearranges the plot with new clues. As the writers and critics focus on language itself as a powerful tool for constructing and shaping reality, more and more scholars are focusing their research on narrative techniques. In his *Narrative Discourse*, Gennett constructs the most operational analysis of narrative discourse to date. He explains the relationship between story time and narrative (pseudo-)time, proposes the concept of "focus", and classifies the narrative situation of the novel. This paper attempts to apply this theory to the narrative interpretation of Monroe's three short stories, with the aim of revealing how Monroe skillfully constructed his stories and formed a paradigm through his masterful narrative discourse, especially his attention to narrative time and narrative focus, so as to better convey his concern for the female community.

2. Narrative Time: Order out of Chaos

Timing changes are related to the author's creative intent, usually to create a certain atmosphere or highlight important events. Time and narrative are inseparable. As Rüger says, narrative depends on time. In order to represent time, events should happen one after another, which means that time is the supervisor of the narrative. Without time the narrative would be empty and boring. The control of time is an important test of writing ability.

In the traditional narrative texts, "narrative time exhibits a one-dimensional and linear character, that is, narrative time and story time roughly coincide" (Lu Lixia, 2012: 64). Stories using this narrative structure usually have a clear beginning, middle and end. Monroe's narratives are still linear, but unlike tradition, her linearity is always short-lived. In her work, narrative time is complex because she often breaks the unity of her stories. Monroe's style has been described as diffuse (Clark, 1996), with a loosely connected sequence of events. The opening chapter is straightforward and immediately places the reader in a particular situation: there is no elaborate setting or detailed description of the characters. The movement from iteration to constant back and forth constitutes the impression that the story is constructed at random (Blodgett, 1988: 16). Neither the narrative structure nor the syntax presents a clear linear sequence. When reading her stories, the reader is always confused at first; she does not explain all the details at the beginning and then move on along this clear path of vision. Instead, reading her story is like walking around a house, connecting one enclosed space to another. As a result, the reader is inevitably dizzy during the unstructured time spent reading, making it more difficult to read. Her stories, though superficially disorganized and ambiguous, are essentially orderly, tense, and coherent. How a story begins, how it culminates, and how it ends are all prearranged.

Genet points out that in a story, several events can occur simultaneously, so that the time of the story can be multidimensional. In narrative, however, the narrator is forced to disrupt the "natural" order of these events and put them in order, so that narrative time is linear. The different characteristics of story and narrative in the representation of time open up many possibilities for changing the chronological order to achieve certain aesthetic goals. He suggests that "narrative is a set of two sequences of time: the time of the thing being told and the time of the narrative (the time of the "referent" and the time of the "can refer"). This duality not only makes all temporal distortions possible, but more fundamentally, it requires us to recognize that one of the functions of narrative is to cash in one kind of time into another. In the light of this duality, Genet distinguishes three relations between story time and narrative (pseudo) time: the relation of sequence, the relation of speed (temporal distance), and the relation of frequency" (Genet, 1988: 12). Here, we emphasize the notions of sequence and duration in storytelling. Gennett considers temporal inversion as "various forms of incongruity between the chronology of the story and the chronology of the narrative" (Gennett, 1980: 40), which can be subdivided into flashbacks and pre-tellings. Foreshadowing, or pre-telling in time, is rare in Munro's fiction, while flashbacks, "evoking any event that occurred before the particular moment we are in" (ibid.: 40), are much more common.

Escape begins in the "present", when the heroine, Carla, hears her neighbor Sylvia's car going over the hill. Sylvia is an important character who appears at the beginning and is then shelved in favour of introducing Carla's life and her partner, Clark. The story generally follows a linear narrative, with clearer beginnings and climaxes. However, the steady pace of the story is interrupted by the character of Flora the sheep, which is the first flashback of the story. The flashback to Flora also appears in the third chapter of the book, where it is explained how Clark bought Flora back from the farm. By the end of the book, we gradually realize that the goat is a talisman of Kara's escape, and each flashback is an awakening to Kara's deep awakening and longing. At the same time, this kind of flashback changes the rhythm of the article, the author transforms the narrative level in the flashback, making the story present multi-dimensional narrative clues, and completes the strange hint of Carla's escape in the clever intertextualization of the two, leaving the reader with infinite possibilities of

imagination.

In the *Passion*, the narrative also follows a certain logic, starting with the "present", but the order of the narrative is not exactly the same as the initial order of the story. The story begins with Grace driving to the old summer house where she and her boyfriend's family used to vacation for many years, and continues with a memory sequence of how Grace met her boyfriend and his family, how a passionate relationship "grew out of the blue", and how the relationship ended. There is a flashback in the story, that is, on the way back to Grace's car, she remembers everything that happened in the old days, which is the starting point of the narrative, and its whole magnitude is outside the magnitude of the first narrative. And within the time field of the first narrative (the starting point of the story), the narrative roughly follows the order in which the story occurs, while including some very short flashbacks, or internal flashbacks, apparently in order to create cumbersomeness and conflict.

The *Nettles* follows a similar progression: "I" encounter my childhood friend Mike at the home of my friend, Sonny, which leads to flashbacks into the past, and ends with an encounter at Sonny's house (a chance encounter with nettles from a rainstorm). Again, the story follows a linear sequence of origin-development-climax-ending.

The linear narrative of the story is not difficult to understand because things happen all over again from the beginning to the end. However, the reader must analyze the narrative structure of the novel in order to gain insight into the novel's themes. In the *Escape*, Monroe's linear time line tells the story of his wife's break with her husband, how Carla is "seduced" by Sylvia to confront her normal and boring life, and how she retreats from her own path. On the bus, the fear of not surviving without her husband turns Carla from the strong to the weak. This clear sequence helps the reader to understand the psychological changes in the heroine. In the *Nettle*, Monroe chooses a first-person narrative, thus explaining the psychological activity of the characters more clearly. Since the basic structure of this short story is linear, it clearly reflects the psychological changes in the heroine during the reunion process. The heroine's growth coincides with the linear time from the past to the present and then to the future. In these short stories of Monroe, time is not only a tool, but also a structural and thematic function, and by manipulating narrative time, her short stories are highly condensed and malleable, "the distortion of time can help the narrative reach the past or the future and move away from the present" (Gennett, 1988: 24). By analyzing the specific features of narrative time in Munro's fiction, we can find order in the chaos.

3. Narrative Focus: The Same Root Cause but Different Last

In Narrative Discourse, Genet criticizes most theoretical works on the subject of perspective because they regrettably confuse what he calls modality and morphology, i.e., the separate questions of who is the character whose point of view determines the direction of projection and who is the narrator, or, more succinctly, who is looking and who is speaking. (Genet, 1980: 186)

Gennett broadly distinguishes three types of focus: unfocused or zero focus, internal focus, and external focus. In reading Monroe's work, the reader can see that the novel used a variety of types of focus, each with its own advantages, and none of them dominates the narrative. This chapter used Genet's The theory of focus as a basis for analyzing narrative focus in terms of both internal and external focus. Two types of focus constitutes a specific mode of writing, which is effective in building suspense and creating an atmosphere of Mystery.

"When a novelist deals with narrative point of view, he always discusses individual works: the story that one of the characters will tell, or some part of that story, the degree of precision with which it will be told in terms of plausibility, unrestrictedness, freedom of the round, and so on." (Booth, 1983: 164) According to

Booth, the choice of viewpoint has great influence on the accuracy of credibility. In order to create such an illusory level of reliability in *Escape*, Monroe employs a third-person narrative, as well as an extra-narrative layer (Genet distinguishes between the outer and inner layers of the story according to whether the narrator is inside or outside the story). The narrator in "Escape" is outside the story and does not play a role in the story being told, but waits for the development of the story like readers. In the first half of the story, he is a narrator \leq character most of the time. We hardly ever leave the point of view of the heroine, Carla, whose limited vision is particularly striking in this story, enhancing the reality and objectivity of the article, creating suspense and giving readers a strong sense of substitution. However, near the end, when Flora appeared for the second time, the focus of the story changed significantly. On the night that Clark negotiated with Sylvia, Flora came at them like a creature from unearthly places" (Monroe, 2019: 40). Flora's reappearance not only defused the conflict between Clark and Sylvia, but also played an important role in promoting the development of the story plot in the novel. The end of the story clearly narrowed the focus further and the use of external focus is particularly evident. Flora's end is uncertain. It might have been killed by Clark on its second appearance, and now a small, dirty skull remained in front of the dead tree where the vulture gathered. But "that may not be the case. There is nothing in there" and "other things can happen. It could have been let go" (ibid.: 48). When Carla discovered Flora's skull, there was no statement to indicate or suggest what Carla was thinking, and we do not know whether she is shocked, grief-stricken, or desperate, or whether she is forced to accept it all openly. When Carla stood in front of the "dirty, tiny bones", the character's own thoughts were removed, and the ending only described such a picture, without providing an internal analysis. The protagonist was moving right in front of our eyes, but we were never allowed to know what she was thinking or feeling. As Michele Lemon pointed out, "it is interesting because of the existence of a mystery". Uniquely, most of the external focus was placed at the beginning of the story, with a curious eye on the characters from the outside, slowly unraveling the mystery as the story progressed, while Munro's story ended with a cloud of fog. The author did not account for Carla's disposition of Flora, and such unknown, plausible outcomes were the norm in life.

In terms of point of view and level, *Passion* and *Escape* have much in common. Both are told in the third person and outside the story, with the narrator outside the story, but at some point able to "empathize" with the protagonist emotionally and psychologically, thus allowing the reader to get a glimpse into the protagonist's true inner thoughts. In *Escape*, Carla was on a bus, expecting to embrace a new life, but recoiling from it because of the strange and scary unknown. The excitement and anticipation as she prepared to escape was real, as was the hysterical desire to return. The impact of this intense change of feeling was brought on by the very change of perspective. While Carla was in the car, we could understand Carla's inner activity through the changed perspective (from outward focus to inward focus) - her desire to escape was not really an escape, but more like a vent and refreshment to combat a long and tedious life. The way the pace of the story was changed by changing the focus also applied to other short stories. In *Passion*, Grace ran away with Neil as soon as she met him because she's tired of the same old, arranged life such as knotted wicker chairs and arranged marriages. She took a lot of "useless classes" in a high school and chose to work as a waitress for the summer instead of making a living by knitting chair. She kept putting off going back to her uncle's house because she always wanted to do something, something big or different. When Neil appeared, these subconscious minds were stimulated to resurface. But because the author used third-person external focus, we do not directly observe these subtle psychological changes. However, as Grace waited for Neil in the car, the author chose to reveal the heroine's thoughts, allowing us to understand how she experienced a moment of epiphany that ultimately and naturally led the story to its conclusion. This choice of perspective was undoubtedly one of the important factors in the success of these stories, where the narrator did not intervene in the story, with an external observation that held a certain distance, but at the climax, the author appropriately revealed the psychological struggles of the women

and analyzed the events from the inside, making the story achieve a delicate balance between detachment and intervention, critical irony and romantic passion.

In contrast, *Nettles* seemed unique among the three stories in that it used a first-person narrative, but an analysis of the story's focus and layers revealed that Munro used the same paradigm she was known for. She still arranged the first outer layer of the story, describing the man making a sandwich at the counter at the beginning, followed by a brief introduction to the location where the story took place - her good friend Sonny's house - before moving on to the starting point of the story, laced with internal flashbacks to memories of her childhood. In this story, the focus is much more restrictive, with the protagonist telling her story and the narrator appearing as a character in the plot. There is no doubt that a great deal of internal focus is employed throughout, with the narrator = character and a fixed form of internal focus. However, as Genette pointed out, "uncompromising so-called internal focus is very rare, since the principles of this narrative style are extremely strict in requiring that the focal character never be described or even mentioned from the outside, nor that the narrator objectively analyze his thoughts or feelings" (Genette, 1980: 191). In fact, the narrator almost always "knows" more than the protagonist, even if the narrator is the protagonist, and thus the focus on the protagonist is a restriction on the narrator's vision, which is artificial, whether in the first or third person.

In these three stories, despite the differences in "who says", we can see the similarities: the main focus is similar, as is the level of the story. These stories portray fragments of women's lives, presenting the details of real life for the reader's scrutiny and revealing the cultural and social problems the women face. The heroines in all three stories are caught in a troubling and confusing dilemma, absurd and inescapable, with their true selves and aspirations oppressed by the invisible discrimination of the outside world. In order to better represent the daily lives of the female characters, Munro chose an objective narrator to represent the external world and an internal narrator to represent the inner world experienced by the women. The flexible use of multiple focuses changes the pace of the novel, placing the narrator outside the story, recording her own observations truthfully, accurately, and objectively, with no (or little) opinion or comment on the surroundings, characters, or events. Through this arrangement, Munro gives the reader a realistic understanding of the state of women's existence in small-town Canada and the gendered reality embodied in men's perceptions of women.

4. Conclusion

Unlike the sharp, simple and restrained style of modern fiction, Munro's work is slower and less clear. It is like being enveloped in a fog and the reader must run through the fog to the end of the novel without seeing a miracle, only to be shocked by the fog itself. This fog is constituted by Munro's narrative language, which she identified as "plot" and "drama" not as the tumble of the story itself, but as the use of language to construct and shape it.

She carefully selected pieces of life and used complex narrative techniques to create a unique speaking voice that not only enhanced the authenticity of the novel, but was more easily resonated and made it easy for the reader to identify with the main character. The major event in the story is also all-important to the reader when it happened, not because it is in itself an event so great that it can change the world, on the contrary, it is usually the most mundane and banal thing. But it is the reader's involvement that makes it so important.

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Biography

Cao Jing, undergraduate of English Language and Culture School of Zhejiang International Studies University, Research interests:English and American literature.

Huang Yanchun, Associate Professor (PhD.) of English Language and Culture School of Zhejiang International Studies University, Research interests: Western language and culture, British and American literature and tourism culture.