

# Analysis of Hemingway's Short Story "The Killers" From the Perspective of Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle

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**Abstract**—The spiritual enjoyment that literature brings to you is not only due to the beauty of the words, the twists and turns of the plot, but also due to the skillful writing of the author, as can be seen from Hemingway's many short stories. The novel "The Killers" is full of character dialogue, without too much environmental and psychological description, and Hemingway's iceberg theory is shown vividly in it. From the perspective of pragmatics, this paper analyzes the characters' dialogues, interprets the characters' images and reveals the themes of the novel by using the principles of cooperative and politeness.

**Index Terms**—"The Killers", cooperative principle, politeness principle, character images, theme

## I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the excellent literary works are good at shaping characters. The characters in good works are lifelike and vivid. In order to achieve this artistic effect, the successful use of dialogue is often the pursuit of the author, which can make the character images depicted incisively and vividly in simple words. Hemingway's short story "The Killers" tells the story of two professional killers, Max and Al, who come to Henry's restaurant to have dinner, waiting for the assassination of the Swedish boxer Andresen. However, Andresen does not show up and finally the two killers leave the restaurant. The novel ends with Nick, a young shop assistant, angrily leaving the city. There are many dialogues involving two killers and shop assistants, a young shop assistant Nick and the boxer Andresen, and two shop assistants and a cook. The plot and development of the story unfold in the dialogue between the characters. According to the iceberg theory, one eighth of "The Killers" is conversational, and seven eighth are hidden conversational meanings. Philip Booth (2007) argues that "The Killers" like many of Hemingway's short stories, gets the most drama from the least amount of words. The author analyzes the conversational meaning of the novel with the help of the cooperative principle and politeness principle, making the characters' image vivid and theme clear.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS

### A. Pragmatics

#### 1. Development

In the 1930s, American logicians Morris and Carnap firstly put forward the concept of pragmatics. In the process of conversation, objective reality is transformed into subjective information through human cognition. Only a set of systematic language can meet the needs of communication. Based on this, In 1938, Morris published the Book "Fundamentals of Symbol Theory" and the core content of which is the three components of semiotics: firstly, the study of the relationship between different symbols; secondly, the study of the relationship between symbol and the reality they refer to; thirdly, the study of the relationship between the symbols and their users. Language and its characters are the most common symbolic system. Morris's semiotics views were used in linguistics, bringing up the emergence of new sub-linguistics: syntactics, semantics and pragmatics. This is known as the "three facets of language study".

In the 1950s, Austin and his student Searle put forward "Speech Act Theory", pointing out that language has the difference of "illocutionary act", "illocutionary act" and "post illocutionary act". In the 1960s, Grice, an American philosopher of language, put forward the theory of cooperative principle in conversation, which injected new research validity into pragmatics.

The publication of The Journal of Pragmatics in 1977 marked the emergence of pragmatics as an independent discipline. The journal clearly conveys that the object of pragmatics is not grammatical relations but verbal communication. Among the core theories of pragmatics, the principle of cooperative and the principle of politeness play an important role.

#### 2. Contents

As a branch of linguistics, it mainly studies the use of language. Pragmatics research content including four parts: discourse, context, speech act and pragmatic rules. Among this, discourse is the carrier of the pragmatic communication,

context is the environmental conditions of communication, speech act and pragmatic rules are the key to ensuring smooth communication content. They are interdependent and unified on the entire process of pragmatic communication, which guarantee the smooth completion of the language communication.

Generally speaking, Pragmatics studies the proper expression and accurate understanding of utterance meaning in different contexts and seeks and establishes the basic principles and maxims for the proper expression and accurate understanding of utterance meaning (Su Zhenyu, 2000).

### *B. Cooperative Principle*

Grice, an American philosopher of language, proposed the principle of cooperation in 1975, believing that interlocutors in a conversation must abide by certain rules in order to make the conversation work smoothly. There are four maxims under the principle, and there are corresponding sub-maxims under each maxim. A. The Maxim of Quantity. Firstly, make what yourself say reach the detailed degree that communication requires, that is, provide enough information. Secondly, the amount of information provided should be no more or no less. B. The Maxim of Quality. Firstly, don't say anything you think is false. Secondly, don't say anything for lack of evidence. C. The Maxim of Relation. What you say should be relevant to the theme. Don't say anything that is irrelevant. D. The Maxim of Manner. What you say is clear. Avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be concise, and be organized.

Grice holds that discourse has two levels of meaning: literal and conversational (Huang Guowen, 2000). In order to achieve the purpose of communication, the speaker will try to abide by the principle of cooperation, but in some occasions, for a certain purpose, the speaker will say something against the principle of cooperation, which also produces special conversational meanings. Special conversational meanings refer to "In conversational communication, one side obviously or intentionally violates a certain principle of cooperation principle, thus forcing the other side to deduce the meaning of the discourse" (Yang Xinzhang, 2005). The speaker's seemingly "uncooperative" utterance hides an intention that he wants the listener to deduce his reasons for breaking a rule so that the listener can understand its meaning.

Conversational meanings are hidden between the lines and need to be deduced by the hearer according to the specific context. The violation of the cooperative principle will produce specific conversational implications. Conversational implications enrich the form of language expression and enhance the vitality and expressiveness of language (Li Ping, 2005).

In this novel, countless situations are a violation of the cooperative principle.

### *C. Politeness Principle*

But why do people violate the cooperative principle to express meaning indirectly? Leach's politeness principle provides some explanations and can be regarded as a complement to the principle of cooperative. Politeness is a code of conduct with moral and ethical significance in people's daily life, including people's efforts to maintain harmonious interpersonal relations (He Zhaoxiong, 2000). Politeness involves both sides of communication, which Leech calls itself and other. Politeness is to harm oneself and benefit others. By implementing the principle of politeness, "Make oneself benefit the least and others benefit the most; Maximize the damage to oneself and minimize the damage to others" (He Zhaoxiong, 2000).

Leach (1983) believes that politeness principle is altruistic. This is perfectly reflected in his six maxims. A. The Maxim of Propriety. It refers to that speech communicators should minimize the expression of opinions harmful to others in communication. B. The Maxim of Generosity. It refers to the need for speech communicators to minimize the expression of self-interested views in communication. C. The Maxim of Praise. It refers to that speech communicators should minimize their derogatory remarks to others in communication. D. The Maxim of Humility. It refers to the need for speech communicators to minimize self-praise in communication. E. The Maxim of Consistency. It refers to that speech communicators should try to reduce the inconsistency between their views and those of others. F. The Maxim of Compassion. It refers to that speech communicators should minimize the emotional opposition between themselves and others in communication.

In this novel, the conversation between the two killers and these shop assistants violated the politeness principle. The killers didn't take a good attitude toward others.

## III. DIALOGUE ANALYSIS OF "THE KILLERS"

The novel can be divided into three scenes according to the development of the plot: Henry's restaurant, Andersen's house and Henry's restaurant. The author analyzes each part one by one to see if there is any violation of the principle of cooperative and politeness, so as to help readers better understand Hemingway's characters and social themes reflected in the novel.

### *A. Scene One: Henry's Restaurant*

The dialogue is mainly between the shop assistants and the two killers. It can be divided into two smaller parts: before and during the meal of the killers.

#### *1. Before the Meal*

George: What's yours?

Max: I don't know. What do you want to eat, Al?

Al: I don't know, I don't know what I want to eat.

This is the beginning of the novel. The killers Al and Max walked into a restaurant and the waiter asked them what they wanted to eat. You are required to imagine such a situation. A person who walks into a restaurant and says he doesn't know what to eat. This is a clear violation of the maxim of quality. Even if you really don't want to eat anything, you also should express it clearly. So it violates the maxim of manner. They repeatedly replied that I didn't know. It was obvious that enjoying a meal was not the real purpose of the two killers. The violation of the maxim sets up suspense to stimulate the reader's interest and thus advance the development of the story.

Max: What have you got to eat?

George: I can give you any kind of sandwiches. You can have ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver and bacon, or a steak.

Max: Give me chicken croquettes with green peas and cream sauce and mashed potatoes.

George: That's the dinner.

Max: Everything we want's the dinner, eh? That's the way you work it.

Al: Got anything to drink?

George: Silver beer, beer, ginger-ale.

Al: I mean you got anything to drink?

George: Just those I said.

Max: This is a hot town, what do they call it?

George: Summit.

Al: Ever hear of it?

Max: No.

Al: What do you do here nights?

Max: They eat the dinner. They all come here and eat the big dinner.

George: That's right.

Al: So you think that's right?

George: Sure.

Al: You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?

George: Sure.

Max: Well, you're not. Is he, Al?

Al: He's dumb. What's your name?

Nick: Adams.

Al: Another bright boy. Isn't he a bright boy, Max?

Max: The town's full of bright boys.

This is a long dialogue between two professional killers who asked George, the shop assistant, about the food and drinks in the restaurant. There are many violations of the principle of cooperative. Whether it's Max asking George the food in the restaurant, or Al yelling at George to tell him the drinks, their responses all violated the maxim of quantity. They needn't have asked so many questions and they were just picking on George. Al repeated the question that he asked George before. What was his real intention? Al obviously didn't pay attention to George's answer. His focus wasn't in the order of the meal. Readers can check their foregoing suspicions that they are here for other, deeper purposes. Max even turned the conversation around and started talking about the town's name. He violated the maxim of relation by saying something irrelevant. We all know that people come to restaurants to eat, but Al pretended to ask, which means he's not there to eat. What he said was unclear in his intention and violated the maxim of manner. In the latter part of the conversation, they came to the question of whether George and Nick are smart. Everything they said were full of sarcasm. What they really wanted to say was that the two shop assistants were extremely stupid. They told lies and broke the maxim of quality.

## 2. *During the Meal*

Max: What are you looking at?

George: Nothing.

Max: The hell you were. You were looking at me.

Al: Maybe the boy meant it for a joke, Max.

George laughed.

Max: You don't have to laugh. You don't have to laugh at all, see?

George: All right.

Max: So he thinks it's all right. He thinks it's all right. That's a good one.

Al: Oh, he's a thinker.

After Max and Al started eating, George found that they were both wearing gloves and stared at them out of curiosity. The killer Max was very sensitive and immediately asked George what he was looking at. He was even so angry that he said rude words. It is very rude of the customer to behave like this to the waiter. Here, Max violated the maxim of

propriety and said something harmful to others. George replied that he didn't see anything. He lied and violated the maxim of quality. So did Al. On the surface, he hurried to cover up something for George. In fact, his aim is not to let Max reveal the purpose of their trip. Then the killers praised George for his beautiful words and called him a thinker, which violated the maxim of quality. Satire after satire shows their arrogance and rudeness. At the same time, the tension and panic shown by the killers are in sharp contrast to George's calmness and composure, which promotes the development of the story.

Max: We all know that, bright boy. Talk about something else. Ever go to the movies?

George: Once in a while.

Max: You ought to go to the movies more. The movies are fine for a bright boy like you.

George: What are you going to kill Ole Andresen for? What did he ever do to you?

Max: He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even saw us.

Al: And he's only going to see us once.

Here Max told George the real purpose of their visit - to assassinate boxer Andresen. But Max suddenly changed the topic into going to the movies, which makes readers feel confused. It is a violation for the maxim of relation. Actually, there are a lot of assassination shots in the movie, and they're giving George a hint about who they are. Then George tries to figure out why the two assassins want to kill Andresen. Instead of answering directly, the killers gave redundant and unnecessary information, violating the maxim of quantity and relation. A man is going to kill a man he's never met and who hasn't hurt them? Readers can see the darkness and turbulence of the society.

Max: That was nice, bright boy. You're a regular little gentleman.

Max: Bright boy can do everything. He can cook and everything. You'd make some girl a nice wife, bright boy.

Al: So long, bright boy. You got a lot of luck.

Max: That's the truth. You ought to play the races, bright boy.

This conversation took place in the process of waiting for Andresen, is marked by the killers lavishly praising George. These four paragraphs all violate the maxim of quality, thus producing special conversational effect and adding a thick and heavy color to the shaping of character image. They're arrogant and think they can do whatever they want in this town.

#### *B. Scene Two: Andresen's House*

Nick: I was up at Henry's, and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you. They put us out in the kitchen. They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper. George thought I better come and tell you about it.

Andresen: There isn't anything I can do about it.

Nick: I'll tell you what they were like.

Andresen: I don't want to know what they were like. Thanks for coming to tell me about it.

Nick: That's all right.

Nick: Don't you want me to go and see the police?

Andresen: No. That wouldn't do any good.

Nick: Isn't there something I could do?

Andresen: No. There isn't anything to do.

Nick: Maybe it was just a bluff.

Andresen: No. It isn't just a bluff.

Andresen: The only thing is, I just can't make up my mind to go out. I have been in here all day.

Nick: Couldn't you get out of town?

Andresen: No. I'm through with all that running around. There isn't anything to do now.

Nick: Couldn't you fix it up some way?

Andresen: No. I got in wrong.

The long conversation took place in Andresen's house, which was shown between Andresen and Nick. After the killer left the restaurant, Nick listened to George's advice and immediately ran to report to Andresen. Nick gave Andresen a detailed account of what had just happened in the restaurant and told Andresen that someone was going to kill him. However, unexpectedly, his response to the matter was simple, which is contrary to the maxim of quantity. This is obviously contrary to common sense. After all, most people will express their worries and uneasiness. Then, Nick suggested that Andresen should take actions and gave him a lot of suggestions. This shows Nick is kind and simple. Andresen's repeated refusal not only violates the maxim of quality, but also violates the maxim of consistency in the politeness principle. In the face of the coming danger, he felt helpless and numb, resulting in unwillingness to act. At that time, it was not easy for people to change their situations.

Mrs. Bell: I'm sorry he doesn't feel well. He's an awfully nice man. He was in the ring, you know.

Nick: I know it.

Mrs. Bell: You'd never know it except from the way his face is. He's just as gentle.

After persuading Andresen to no avail, Nick went downstairs to say goodbye to Mrs. Bell. No one asked about what kind of person Mr. Andresen is, so Mrs. Bell didn't have to say it one by one. Therefore, she violated the maxim of quantity. In fact, the author of the novel uses Mrs. Bell's words to tell the readers something about the boxer. In such a

small town, even if you live in a clam life, it also will inevitably lead to death, which is enough to highlight the depth of social darkness.

### C. Scene Three: Henry's Restaurant

George: Did you see Ole?

Nick: Yes. He's in his room and he won't go out.

The cook opened the door from the kitchen when he heard Nick's voice.

Sam: I don't even listen to that, he said and shut the door.

George: Did you tell him about it?

Nick: Sure. I told him but he knows what it's all about.

George: What's he going to do?

Nick: Nothing.

George: They'll kill him.

Nick: I guess they will.

George: He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago.

Nick: I guess so. It's a hell of a thing. It's an awful thing.

Nick: I wonder what he did. Who was cheated by him? That's what they kill them for.

Nick: I'm going to get out of this town.

George: Yes. That's a good thing to do.

Nick: I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful.

George: Well, you better not think about it.

The perspective of this conversation turns again to Henry's restaurant. Nick went back to the restaurant to inform George and Sam the response of Andresen. Sam suddenly said "I don't want to hear it" before he participated in the dialogue, which violated the maxim of relation. Sam's timidity and prudence were exposed from his reaction. Combined with the background of the times and Sam's identity, it is not difficult for us to see the reason for his reaction. As a black man working in a restaurant managed by the white race, trying not to get involved in right and wrong is a good way to survive. Then the conversation almost revolved between George and Nick. At the end of the conversation, Nick said something irrelevant to the topic - I'm leaving town, which violating the maxim of relation. It was this sentence that showed that Nick realized the terrible reality and started to take actions. It is also in this part that the theme of the novel is revealed. An innocent boy realized the darkness of reality. His young heart was destroyed, and he fled the city.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Having many dialogues is a major feature of Hemingway's novels. Readers can understand the theme conveyed by the author from the concise and clear character dialogue. Hemingway once said, "I think I left as much content in" the killers "as any other work I wrote. I even left the whole city of Chicago (1966)." The short story "The Killer" is praised as a classic short story in the American critics, and is also one of Hemingway's representative works with dialogue art. It has been selected into American students' reading materials for many times. At the first reading, readers may find the story simple and lack in literary color. But if you read it a few more times, you'll find its deep meaning. And its extraordinary artistic charm is shown from its concise narrative. From this novel, we can see Hemingway's "tough guy" image and his unique writing style, as well as the deep meaning behind the short text.

In recent years, pragmatics theory is an innovative perspective to analyze literary works. It makes the study of texts closer to verbal facts and helps people understand the characters and the themes reflected in novels. In authentic conversation, people always break the convention and violate certain maxims, so as to produce unexpected conversational effects. Cooperative principle and politeness principle provide a new critical perspective for the interpretation of literary works, so that readers can dig into deep things and finally understand the real intention of the characters in this scene. In this novel, the characters repeatedly violate the principles of cooperative and politeness. The two killers are arrogant and ruthless, which is an epitome of this dark society. Andresen is helpless in the face of danger. He is a typical victim of this society. Nick is the protagonist of the novel. He is innocent. After realizing the evil of society, he can't face it calmly. Eventually, he can only get away from the city.

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