

Study on Narrative Skills in John Irving's Novels

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Abstract—American contemporary writer John Irving is one of the few famous for his unique artistic skills. He appreciates traditional novels and criticizes modern novels, and all of them embody metafiction skills in his creation. Through detailed analyses of his several representative works, the writer of this essay explores John Irving's perception of novel writing and elaborates his own writing practice including his repetitive narration of the same image. With the help of contemporary trauma theory, this paper also analyzes the recurring image of "Broken Arm" in his novels to restore the symptoms of the narrator's post-traumatic behavior so as to explore John Irving's outstanding artistic talent in narrative skills and characterization.

Index Terms—metafiction, intertextuality, postmodernism, trauma theory, repetitive narration

I. INTRODUCTION

John Irving (1942-), who is called "the most important humorist in America" by American post-modern novelist Kurt Vonnegut, is a famous contemporary American novelist. Since his first novel *Setting Free the Bears* came into being in 1968, He has won the attention and favor of western academics and readers. His superb narrative skills and beautiful language have made him named "Master of Magic Realism" and "Contemporary Dickens by critics" (Hansen, 1986, p. 76). American suspense writer Stephen King, Japanese writer Haruki Murakami and other famous novelists are full of praise for his artistic attainments.

John Irving has created a large number of excellent classic works, including *The Water-Method Man* (1972), *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974), *The World According to Garp* (1978), *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), *The Cider House Rules* (1985), *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989), *Widow of a Year* (1998), *Until I Find You* (2005), *Last Night in Twisted River* (2009), *In One Person* (2012) and *Avenue of Mysteries* (2015). In his works, Irving delivered his exquisite narrative skills. This paper analyzes Irving's perception of novel writing through detailed exploration of his writing practice.

II. GENERAL INTRODUCTION OF IRVING'S LITERARY WRITING

As early as when he was a student, Irving became interested in literature. Dickens and Shakespeare (especially the former) played a vital role in the formation of Irving's aesthetic taste and view. At the age of 26, Irving published his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968). This novel has received some attention. Later, he systematically studied writing under the guidance of Kurt Vonnegut, one of the leading figures in American postmodernist literature. In 1972 and 1974, Irving published his second novels *The Water Method Man* and *The 158-pound Marriage* respectively. The two novels still aroused great attention from the public.

In 1978, Irving's *The World according to Garp* won wide attention and great controversy for its creators. It was a finalist in the 1979 National Book Awards for fiction, and won the award when it was shortlisted again in 1980. The adaptation of the novel was also a great success, not only attracting big-name movie stars like Robin Williams to play the leading role, but also winning many Oscar nominations. This novel makes John Irving from an obscure serious literary writer to a well-known serious literary writer.

Three years later, Irving published his sixth novel, *The New Hampshire Hotel*. The novel still sells well overseas and has been made into a film, but critics have different views. In 1985, Irving published another landmark novel of his own, *The Cider House Rules*. This epic work has been brought to the same height by critics as Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. The novel was remade into a film in 1999, and was nominated for several Oscars again, and Irving himself won the award for best screenplay.

Irving's seventh novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, published in 1989, has once again reached the level of *The World according to Garp* because of its concern about Vietnam War. This novel has been compared with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* by many critics for its strange storyline and breathtaking narrative skills, and it is also the most appreciated novel by the author.

After *The Pray for Owen Meany*, Irving published the eighth novel, *The Son of the Circus*, which was published in 1995, and also the most deviated from its style. Not only does the scene of the novel leave Irving's iconic New England

for India, but the narrative structure of the novel also reveals the obvious detective story mode. In 1998, Irving's ninth novel, *A Widow for One Year*, was published. The novel once again presents obvious Irving's artistic features.

Irving's tenth novel, *The Fourth Hand*, published in 2001, is his shortest novel so far. After that, Irving published novels *Until I Find You*, *The Last Night in Twisted River* and *In One Person* in 2005, 2009 and 2012 respectively.

Irving's novels are all narrated by third-person omniscient narrators, with the exception of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and *The Water-Method Man*. Overlapping technique and black humor are obvious common skills.

III. IRVING'S PERCEPTION OF NOVEL WRITING

Looking at the American literary world after World War II, John Irving is the writer who did not swim with the tide. In an interview in 1986, Irving once mentioned that he follows the form of 19th-century novels. He himself is an old-school writer and a storyteller. He confirms that he is neither an analyst nor an intellectual (Hansen, 1986). He divides writers into "real writers" and "academic writers", and thinks he belongs to the former. He appreciates the characteristics of traditional novels, and thinks that readability, entertainment, and purification are the values of stories, and that clarity and profundity can coexist in the works. Irving repeatedly stresses that works of art must be entertaining, and in order to be entertaining, they must be readable.

His novels are funny realism in mode and soap operas rich in wisdom in content. Traditionally speaking, it comes down in one continuous line with Shakespeare's and Dickens's works. Irving thinks *Great Expectations* is a soap opera. The reason why it is serious and worthy of praise is that "it is well written" (Priestley, 1979, p. 499). Irving felt that Dickens dared to create works that could have an emotional impact on people in the name of sensationalism, and his courage was commendable. Irving's absurd and eccentric characters, humorous style of writing and funny names all have the shadow of this 19th-century literary master. For example, in *The Cider House Law*, Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* are recited every night in the orphanage. For young Homer, these two books are already his *Bible*. Despite these details, Dickens' deeper influence on Irving is reflected in the tolerance of Irving's novels. Concerning about the broad reflection of reality, the rich detail design and the diverse characterization, it is difficult to find the second one who can compare with John Irving in contemporary American literary world. Irving even took the great risk of affectation to expand the content of his novels.

On many occasions, Irving shows disdain for all kinds of creative philosophy and practice of postmodernism. What he despises most is metafiction skills. He thinks that metafiction is just a text that has no narrative, no characters and no information. The theme of this novel is skill, and what can readers see through this novel? Nothing! There is no world outlined by the author, only the author's views on style and skills (Hansen, 1986, p. 94)! Such novels are meaningless except for the author himself and a few writers. Irving once criticized some writers for holding a "difficult aesthetics, or obscure aesthetics" (Priestley, 1979, p. 502). He didn't name names, but it was obviously pointed at metafiction. Irving himself drew a clear line between his works and metafiction in the interview. When looking back at his novel *The Water-Method Man*, Irving mercilessly criticized himself for writing this complicated novel to "show off".

In addition to this positive and serious criticism, Irving often jokes about metafiction in his works. Most outrageous is his creation of a character called Heimbart in the novels *The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-pound Marriage*. The name of this character is Helmbart in English. There is a famous metafiction master in America named Donald Barthelme. The name of the character Heimbart is much suggestive of the image of this metafiction master, or is obvious association of the combination of the names of Donald Bashalem and another John Barth, who is famous for his metafiction skills. Besides, in Irving's novel in *The 158-pound Marriage*, this Heimbart is a writer who is devoted to creating so-called "new novels". The novel portrays two characters who question Heimbart's creative view. The novel portrays two characters who question the narrator's creative view. They said that when the theme of novels becomes how to write novels, readers lose interest because readers are very interested in words, but the theme of words cannot be words themselves. In *The Water-Method Man*, there is also a writer. Trumper, the hero, thinks the inconsistency of his plot is unreadable.

IV. IRVING'S METAFICTIONAL PRACTICE

What is surprising is that Irving, who repeatedly emphasizes his tradition and criticizes post-modernity, uses a lot of post-modern skills in his works, especially the metafiction skills that he runs on.

Concerning about the definition and characteristics of metafiction, in Patricia Waugh's words (1984), metafiction explores the function of language in the process of constructing and maintaining our daily sense of reality, while language can be regarded as an independent, self-sufficient system that can produce meaning by itself. The most obvious feature of a novel created by using metafiction skills is that the story pays attention to itself and has obvious "introspection".

The best way to use metafiction skills is to push *The World according to Garp*. The structure of this novel is highly "introspective": Garp's novels and narratives of Garp's life alternate, annotating the relationship between reality and art. Waugh thinks that metafiction constantly asks a question about the framework: What framework separates fiction from reality? And this question is also explored in Garp's stacked stories. The title of the novel itself is the first time that Garp shows his metafiction role: Garp's narrator is asking readers to accept Garp's narrative authority in his novels, although

doing so highlights the narrative position and weakens this authority. This introspective topic reminds us that Garp's voice is the voice under the framework of another person. This person is the "novelist" of novelist Garp. Garp's own life and Garp's novels are just the "reality" created by this person.

Irving's metafiction tendency can be exemplified in most of his novels. The novel *Setting Free the Bears* concerns the two men's plan to liberate animals in the Vienna Zoo. The two characters are Graff, an Austrian college student and Siggy, an eccentric man from a second-hand motorcycle store. The novel *Setting Free the Bears* can be divided into three parts, and its core part "The Notebook" is kind of hodgepodge. It contains Siggy's observations at the zoo and some short stories drawn from his highly selective autobiography. Siggy's life is embedded in Graff. The narrator's description of the real story produces an extremely complex narrative structure and reveals how the past and present events create meaning in the interaction. This "embedded genre" is a very typical symbol of metafiction.

Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* created after *The World according to Garp*, is also a highly experimental work. This novel is the story of the Berrys, a peculiar New Hampshire family of a married couple, Win and Mary, and their five children, Frank, Franny, John, Lilly, and Egg. In the process of narration, a perfect world where fatherly love and maternal love, understanding, tolerance and cruelty, absurdity and loss coexist. Therefore, it is a fairy tale that denies fairy tales and questions fairy tales, showing how fairy tales explain the reality of contemporary American families in some areas, and how they can't do this in some places. This kind of introspection is also possessed by metafiction.

Even Irving's more modest novel, *The 158-Pound Marriage*, contains the metafiction technique of "story within story". However, in his 12th novel, *Last night in Twisted River* published in 2009, the central character recently made many readers question the identity of the narrator of the novel because of its strong meta-fictional nature. The narrative of this novel finally forms an end-to-end circular structure. At first reading, it was a third-person narrator telling the experience of growing up from a child to a writer. However, after reading it, readers can find that he is also conceiving a novel called "*The Last Night in Twisted River*", and the words quoted from this "novel in novel" are actually consistent with the content of "novel containing novel". So, it can be said that Irving imitates a character in his mind and uses his tone to create a novel about own aesthetic growth experience, but it uses the third-person omniscient narrative. This inference leads to another problem: if the novel is not narrated by Irving, but by the narrator, then as a part of the story, he cannot have the ability of omniscient narrator. That is, he cannot directly narrate events in which he is not present. It can be seen that the account of the development of his own philosophy of art must be "fabricated" by imagination in many cases. This kind of narration directly points to the fictional nature of novels, which is a typical feature of metafiction.

The other two metafiction features embodied in Irving's books are the "writer" characters appearing in almost every story and their evident intertextuality. Irving's concern for writing not only goes beyond the creative worries of realistic novelists in the 19th century, but also does not have the seriousness of modernism's "supremacy of art", which obviously belongs to the category of postmodernism.

The post-modernity of Irving's books is also manifested in the strong intertextuality in his works. This intertextuality is mainly reflected in the mutual guidance between Irving's different books, which blatantly declares the fictional nature of his works. The evocative phrase "madness and sadness" in *The Cider House Rules* is copied from *The World According to Garp*. Besides, the intertextuality of Irving's novels is more manifested in some plots and images shared by his different works: clever bears, circus, women raping men, amputated limbs, strong-bodied women with domineering personalities, etc., which can jump between other novels with bit of change.

V. TRAUMA THEORY BEHIND "REPETITIVE" NARRATION

The repetitive narration of the same image is also a kind of meta-fictional skills, which can be exemplified in. A *Prayer for Owen Meany*. These repetitive images finally got the meaning return at the end. Readers not only perceive the existence of repetitive narration, but also find it difficult to find the intention of repetitive narration.

Taking the image of "Broken Arm" as an example, the narrator has made five deformed repetitions: In the first chapter of the novel, when introducing the history of a small town in New Hampshire, the main scene of the novel, Willet mentioned the totem of the local Indian chief: an armless man.

The individual with "broken arm" for the second time is a pangolin specimen. Willet gave Meany a pangolin specimen when he was a child. In an accident, Willet's mother Tibby was killed by a baseball hit by Meany. They expressed their guilt and understanding for each other by exchanging their most precious items. This pangolin specimen is what Meany gave John. This is a pangolin with a broken front foot.

The third "broken arm" image appears after Tibby's death. Meany suddenly has a special liking for a dummy model used by Tibby, and this dummy model is always around, and this dummy model is also armless. In the following narration, the description of "Broken Arm" takes place in a statue of a saint. Meany vented his anger on him. The fifth "broken arm" image happened to Meany himself. In order to save Vietnam War orphans from a deranged terrorist, he asked Willet to throw his short self-high and put the ignited grenade on the high windowsill with his hand. Lest the grenade fall, Irving pushed his hands desperately to the inside of the windowsill. The grenade exploded at this time, breaking Meany's arms and killing him.

This kind of image repetition abounds in novels. This kind of image repetition through deformation repeatedly transforms some details of Meany's death like nightmares and makes them become repeated narrated images. The

significance of these images is also revealed only at the end of the novel. For example, the narrator Willet repeatedly mentioned the dunk game created by him and Meany: Meany, who is extremely short, throws the ball high and accelerates to jump to the standing Willet; Willet propped up Meany with his hand and threw it up, so that Meany could buckle the ball into the basket. This comic plot is given meaning at the end: Meany saved the child and sacrificed himself by dunking and igniting grenades with the help of Willet.

Before discussing the significance of these bizarre repetitions, it is necessary to make two points: First, John Irving himself is a fatalist. He once publicly declared in an interview that "I don't believe in accidents" (Hansen, 99), and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* can be regarded as John Irving's perception and exploration of the ultimate meaning of life. Second, John Irving is a typical determinate creator. He once said, "I always see the end before designing the beginning ... I like to design the plot, but if you don't know the end first, how can you design the plot of a novel? You can say that I write novels in reverse" (Hansen, 79-80).

Based on Freud's research on the shock bomb disease suffered by soldiers, scholars have a deeper understanding of "trauma". Carut (1996), a representative of contemporary trauma theory, once defined, "traumatic experience as the response to unexpected or extreme violence. This situation is not fully understood when it happens, but it will appear as flashes, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena after it happens" (p. 13). Meaning, that is, the final understanding of traumatic events by traumatic experiences, will "the memory clues repaired by repetitive behaviors will finally appear in consciousness" (Freud, 1950, p. 19). At the same time, this repetitive behavior is accompanied by the "repression" of traumatic events by traumatic experiences, that is, traumatic experiences will avoid recalling and describing traumatic experiences in a paradoxical way, and on the other hand, they will deform some details of trauma under the action of subconscious.

John in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* narrates the text after experiencing the death of his friend Meany's broken arm and predicting the magical and tragic coming true. That is to say, narrative behavior occurs after traumatic behavior, and it must reflect the characteristics of post-traumatic behavior in order to make readers feel true. As mentioned earlier, in the novel, the narrator Willet always makes strange deformation and repetition of the details in some traumatic experiences. Finally, under the healing effect of repetitive behaviors, he integrates these messy images and accepts the trauma with fatalistic cognition. It can be said that the most important significance of repetitive images is to increase the authenticity of the narrator and consolidate his narrative authority.

John Irving's superb artistic skills and profound understanding of human nature are revealed in this novel. In the post-traumatic narrative behavior of *A Prayer for Irving Meany*, his narrative structure, narrative voice, and inexplicable narrative repetition, all of which together, not only do not weaken but enhance the authenticity and enlightenment function of the work. John Irving has undoubtedly exemplified his superb narrative skills shown by his application of trauma theory in narrative design or the combination of literariness and society of his works.

VI. CONCLUSION

Irving's abandonment of metafiction is not a complete break. Its incompleteness leads Irving to misread Dickens, and adds metafiction techniques that Dickens himself can't agree with. Misreading contemporary meta-novelists has changed the focus of meta-novels. This behavior of "saying one thing and doing another" has gradually solidified into the unique aesthetic charm of Irving's novels. The contradiction of Dickensian novel or metafiction blends perfectly and complements each other under Irving's unwitting construction. It can be said that Irving "explored and pushed forward the boundaries of traditional novels through experiments. This attempt is to find out how malleable and adaptable traditional novels are in the face of this completely different life experience of modern life" (Harter, 1986).

Irving's firm attitude of "novels should reflect reality" is an important reason, but what is more interesting is that this behavior can also be regarded as Irving's nostalgic return to Victorian times out of discomfort with postmodern works. Irving himself has witnessed many traumatic events, both from the experience of the times and from his personal experience. Victorian novels, or Dickensian novels, are characterized by moral system prior to narration, behavior existing outside language, and certain behaviors will have predictable moral results. Irving yearns for the sense of stability brought by this novel. Postmodern novels think that reality is only constructed with language, not transcendental truth, which is in line with Irving's own traumatic experience and American history in the 20th century. Therefore, the metafiction in Irving's novels is characterized by its contemporary and post-modern epistemology, which invades its traditional and Victorian aesthetic value consciousness in an unconscious way.

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