

The Narrative Characteristics and Stylistic Expressions of Philip Roth's Neo-Realist Literary Works

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ABSTRACT

As one of the leading figures in American neo-realist literature, Philip Roth integrates elements of realism and postmodernism into his neo-realist literary works while incorporating modernist ideas, and demonstrating humanistic concern grounded in ecological aesthetics. This paper explores in Roth's neo-realist literary works the spatial narrative, the traumatic narrative, the ecological narrative, and the ethical narrative, as well as the thematic implications combining reality and fiction, and the aesthetic tone embodying criticism and reflection. Thereby it reveals Roth's unique narrative characteristics and stylistic expressions. Roth's works reveal concerns and appeals for natural ecology and human spiritual ecology, providing important insights and reflections for ecological civilization construction.

KEYWORDS

Philip Roth; American neo-realist literature; narrative characteristics; stylistic expressions

Philip Roth's neo-realist literary works not only inherit the profound connotations of realism but also incorporate the ideas of modernism and postmodernism. In his journey back to neo-realism, Roth focuses on re-examining the turmoil and alienation of humanity in social reality with rational humanistic care and scientific contemplation. He combines grand narratives based on social environments with trivial daily matters, realistic settings with the portrayal of representative characters, neo-realist literary perspectives with black humor, and irony with social criticism. Thus, Roth skillfully connects real historical events with fictional characters, literary ecosystems, and social life situations, and mercilessly exposes the ugliness of the idealistic American Dream and American society, presenting readers with a fresh perspective to interpret the real world^[1]. In his neo-realist literary works, nature is not only the backdrop of human life but also an important object for humans to reflect on their own actions. With delicate brushstrokes and profound thinking, Roth reveals the survival state of humans in the natural environment and the harmony and conflict between humans and nature. This attention and reflection on nature coincide with the core concepts of ecological criticism.

1 The Narrative Characteristics of Roth's Neo-Realist Literary Works

1.1 The Spatial Narrative

The intricate spatial narrative strategy is one of the typical narrative features of Roth's neo-realist literary works^[2]. This narrative characteristic integrates spatial-temporal, artistic, and subjective elements, highlighting the writer's distinctive literary stance and ingenious narrative rules. At the spatial-temporal level, the novel is not confined to a specific time or space for narration. It attempts to blend fictional situations with real life to maintain narrative integrity and structural ingenuity while gradually breaking the geographical and temporal constraints on narrative scenes, restoring to readers the special significance and reflections embedded in the novel as much as possible. At the artistic level, Roth conducts a writing experiment that synergistically applies the creative technique of combining fiction with reality and mainstream literary creation techniques. This greatly enriches the novel's historical flavor and contemporary connotations and makes some fictional scenarios appear less abrupt and alternative. Subjectively, Roth's novels do not adhere to established narrative theories and value systems, nor deliberately consider the connections between different narrative scenes. Although they seem to be casually arranged and arbitrarily edited, the plot fragments actually contain unique philosophical insights and narrative techniques, promoting the theoretical and practical development of American new realism literature.

In Roth's nearly half-century of creative endeavors, *The Counterlife* stands out as a remarkable example of spatial narrative. This novel devotes considerable ink to the themes of "sex," "race," and "Jewish identity." Through the intricate spatial narrative, it reveals Roth's reflections on Jewish identity, the history of specific races, and the connections between cultural phenomena, reflecting the unique ethnic identity of Jewish Americans and their struggle and resistance concerning identity issues. The narrative space in this novel is diverse, with story settings incorporating elements from the United States, Britain, and Israel, giving readers an overall bewildering impression. In fact, this design of narrative situations is intentionally done by the writer to express the Jewish diaspora's restless and unstable life state. The

constantly shifting and changing spatial environment corresponds with the Jewish people's reflection on identity, which not only aligns with the novel's theme of "The Counterlife", but also reflects Jews' pursuit of identity recognition. In the narrative strategy, temporal and spatial inversions are also common. For example, the protagonist dies on the operating table. According to conventional narrative principles, the novel's narrative should be progressive and orderly. However, the writer unexpectedly turns the tide, and the protagonist mysteriously resurrects, which shocks and subverts traditional narrative principles. The "death" in the story, through carefully orchestrated narration, acquires more metaphorical significance. That is, "death" signifies the demise of an unrecognized identity, followed by the birth of a new identity^[3].

1.2 The Traumatic Narrative

Influenced by the immigrant background and Jewish upbringing, "Holocaust literature" takes root in Roth's novel creation, becoming an important source of his ethnic traumatic narrative. Traumatic narratives are primarily expressed in the forms of ethnicity, culture, and humanity in his novels^[4]. At the ethnic trauma level, Roth, a representative of immigrant writers, bears the heavy traumatic memories of the Jewish nation. The nightmarish Holocaust for the Jewish nation, the unforgettable and irreparable trauma, and the traumatic experiences activated by the times give Roth's novels a unique memory of trauma. In his novels, whether describing from the perspective of Jewish families or narrating Jewish religious beliefs, Roth integrates genuine ethnic fear and nightmares into the novel's settings and stories, profoundly influencing Roth's novels. At the cultural level, Jews, who have suffered severe humanitarian disasters, are not only victims but also silent "acquiescers." They maintain a high faith in and pursuit of Jewish culture, but have to leave their homelands and wander in various corners of the world, deviating from their native culture. Culture is the "root" of a nation, and the trauma of Jewish cultural origins makes Jews who are made "rootless" people constantly seek recognition of their identity from others.

The Plot Against America is an alternative portrayal of American history that contradicts the facts. In this work, Roth starts with a child's first-person perspective and autobiographical elements, telling the story of how American Jewish families fell into abyss after Roosevelt was defeated by Lindbergh in the presidential election, subsequently enduring the shadow of fear and the torment of painful memories day after day. The novel introduces a fictional protagonist, Lindbergh, and the real-life plight of Jewish Americans, revisiting the disintegration of millions of Jewish families. The novel chooses a first-person narrative perspective, drawing on memoir and autobiographical elements, and allowing the tragic events of Jews to be recounted by a seven-year-old Jewish boy named "Phil Roth." When he narrates that Lindbergh calls for people not to believe Jewish propaganda, signs a "memorandum of understanding" with the Axis powers, surrenders "Europe" in exchange for a brief peace in North America, and grovels to his Nazi friends, the narrator embeds his anger, sarcasm, and sorrow in every word, filled with irony towards Lindbergh's shameless behavior as a "phantom ruler" and sympathy for the living conditions of Jewish Americans under anti-semitic sentiments. In the narration, there is also a distinct contrast and juxtaposition, namely that the narrator's childhood idol was Lindbergh while after the dismantling of Jewish American power and the full unfolding of anti-Jewish actions, this childhood role model appears ridiculous, hinting at the ugly faces of politicians who often deceive the public by any means necessary. In the process of the fusion of ethnic trauma, cultural trauma, and human trauma, the influence of traumatic emotions on the writer's narrative technique is self-evident. Combined with the use of spicy and humorous styles, the novel expresses the heartfelt cries of Jews to the fullest extent^[5].

1.3 The Ecological Narrative

In his novels, Roth excels at focusing on human subjectivity, rebellion against the development of the times, and the boundaries between life and art, from dimensions such as temporal-spatial treatment and discourse intervention. He creates numerous imageries and desire-laden situations. Supported by a harmonious "great ecology," his narrative style is flexible and varied, directly pointing to the essence of literature and the ills and contradictions of real life. From the perspective of imagery, Roth's use of image elements in his novels does not stop at the simple level of social life, but instead focuses on the depths of human evil and fear, seeking out carriers and forms of expression for latent imageries. In novels, imageries not only embody characters and significant social events but also reflect the writer's profound reflections on the issue of human alienation. From the perspective of desire, desire is one of the common narrative themes in American literary history, and human desire is the foundation that drives behavior. Roth uses the protagonists' twists and turns in their experiences to actively explore the roots of human desire, the impact of desire on human subjectivity, and the tendencies of alienation caused by desire. He meticulously displays the contradictions and gaps between human rationality and desire, instinct, and restraint. From the perspective of ecological narrative, Roth has generally conducted profound ecological considerations in his creative ideas, narrative structures, logical relationships, and the creation of fictional and real scenes. Based on humanism, he has formed an open and sustainable ecological literary concept, which constitutes the foundation of Roth's ecological narrative system.

The Breast is narrated in the first-person voice of the protagonist Kepesh, who recounts his own transformation from a lustful literature professor into a female breast. After turning into a breast, the protagonist, with a weight of up to 150 pounds, is forced to maintain life through intravenous infusions in the hospital due to the mutation of the breast. This also brings more people to see the breast, such as family members, superiors, medical staff, and so on, which accelerates the transformation of Kepesh's self-awareness^[6]. The ecological narrative thoughts in this novel are mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, the clever imagery setting. The breast is a sensitive body part of women. In terms of the origin of breasts, they are body parts that humans have gradually evolved to meet the needs of human lactation in the fierce competition of nature. Although the rapidly developing industrialized society has accelerated industrial takeoff, the environmental pollution problems it has brought are the inducements for breast mutations, which can turn breasts from "nourishment" for survival into "poisonous assets." The integration of this imagery throughout the novel's title and content implies the unfavorable ecological environment in which breasts are located and the factors threatening breast health. Second, the reflections on desire. The characters and scenes in the novel complement each other perfectly, but Roth seldom employs commentary descriptions. Instead, he tries to express the Jewish people's stubborn adherence to tradition through the dialogues of the main characters, revealing his criticism of and deviation from tradition. The mutation of the breast is a symbol of the protagonist's desire inflation and transformation. Professor Kepesh's transformation into a breast signifies not only the blurring of his gender boundaries and the disappearance of his own appearance but also the contradictions and conflicts after self-heterosexuality. From the initial anxiety about mutating into a breast to accepting becoming a female breast, and then to reconfirming one's identity in reality and wanting to "live according to one's own desires," Kepesh's psychological journey reflects the deep-seated insecurity and fear in the Jewish soul. This painful memory branded with a national label becomes an innate trait of the Jewish people. Third, The value orientation of ecologism. Guided by the orientation of ecologism, Roth criticizes anthropocentrism, advocates the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, and demonstrates the unique charm of the ecological narrative in this novel through his descriptions of Kepesh's psychology, subjective acceptability, and value confirmation after transforming into a breast^[7].

1.4 The Ethical Narrative

The ethical narrative is a narrative technique commonly employed in Roth's neo-realist literary works, with hypocrisy and idealism frequently featured in the narration of novels. Roth strives to unfold human subjectivity and affirm the existence of independent self-awareness by depicting human ugliness, bare desires, and uncontrollable sexuality. He believes that the existence of desires in individual life is a common occurrence, but these desires are often constrained by racial relations and criticized by ethical morality. When people suppress their emotional desires, they inevitably reveal hidden hypocrisy. In Roth's novels, hypocrisy and desire initially possess natural attributes, but gradually acquire social attributes under the influence of social environments, psychology, and external changes. Individuals are prone to difficulties in acquiring and recognizing their self-identity due to the assimilative environment. Idealism represents a special emotional expression in Roth's ethical narrative, which is intricately linked to the social environment and developmental changes in the then United States.

In *The Human Stain*, Roth portrays Coleman, an American Jew, who leads an illustrious first half of his life in the United States under an assumed name. He serves as the chairman of the Classical Literature Department at a college, but unfortunately, a tragic fate awaits him in his later years. During a class in his twilight years, Coleman refers to two absent black students as "ghosts," leading to accusations of racism against him. Unfortunately, not only was Coleman falsely accused, but the "nigger" incident continued to escalate. Subsequently, Coleman maintains an affair with a female janitor, although this relationship does not last long. Soon, through the deliberate plotting of Les, who had been married before, Coleman and the female janitor perish in a car accident, ultimately leading to their physical destruction and death. The narration of this novel takes an abrupt and swift turn, with the life of the protagonist Coleman plunging from greatness to despair, transitioning from a prestigious university professor to a racist, and ultimately to destruction through an affair and inflated desires. Among all this, what is even more despicable is that Coleman himself is a member of an African-American family but brazenly mocks black students as "niggers," thereby revealing his hypocritical facade. On the one hand, Coleman's stained humanity and his desperate need for recognition make him realize that living like a normal black person is extremely difficult. Only by hiding his identity can he enjoy a life free from racial prejudice. It could be said that this is Coleman's pursuit of the American Dream centered on equality and harmony. However, the arrogance and prejudice in real life are constantly stifling Coleman's individuality and subject consciousness, turning him into a walking "human puppet." This is the reason for the protagonist's hypocrisy^[8]. At the idealist level, the protagonist chooses to sacrifice his soul to lead an "American" life in pursuit of his American Dream. Coleman's dream of living in a society without racial prejudice is obviously absurd. The disillusionment of idealism marks the beginning of the protagonist's demise, while society continues to adhere to existing norms and customs. This includes racial discrimination, prejudice,

intense desires, and selfishness, all of which are undeniable examples of sinful life in American society. It encapsulates the writer's reflections on the hypocritical American Dream, fragile idealism, and unequal society^[9].

2 The Stylistic Expressions of Roth's Neo-Realist Literary Works

2.1 The Thematic Implications Combining Reality and Fiction

The combination of reality and fiction is one of the primary styles in Roth's neo-realist literary works, evident in numerous pieces. In his creations, Roth consistently adopts real-life materials, social situations, and historical backgrounds as his foundation, extracting typical elements for integration and utilization. By employing literary techniques and modifications, Roth's novels attain a thematic connotation that blends reality and fiction, allowing the novel's plot to transcend the limitations of time and space, freely wandering between the virtual and the real. The "fictional" elements in Roth's novels are not baseless fabrications or groundless inventions, nor are they piles of loosely connected materials. Instead, they are the coordinated utilization of fictional elements based on comprehensive consideration of the real environment and the temporal development, possessing strong rationality and practicality. Similarly, the "real" elements in Roth's novels are all designed and arranged closely around the historical background, with an emphasis on the use of metaphorical and symbolic techniques, making the overall application relatively natural and flexible. Taking *The Human Stain* as an example, Roth integrates contemporary elements and typical events into his creation while infusing his unique creative inspiration, thereby promoting the sublimation and extension of the ultimate writing theme^[10]. At the level of era-specific factors, Roth combines the multi-ethnic and multicultural background of the United States. Starting with the longstanding issue of racial discrimination, he introduces the social environment where slavery still could not be eliminated in the United States despite the abolition of slavery in 1865, and where blacks continued to live in dire straits. During World War II, over 900,000 African Americans were enlisted, but the US military enforced strict racial segregation with evident racial and skin color discrimination. In the unequal America where multiple races and skin colors coexist, Roth focuses on the high-profile Clinton sex scandal in the United States, in which the female protagonist had an affair with the US President for 18 months. Combining the special historical background, the sex scandal, and the acute racial issue, Roth utilizes his novel to showcase the marginalization and oppression faced by ethnic minorities in the United States, embodying the writer's pity and sympathy for the living conditions of American ethnic minorities.

2.2 The Aesthetic Tone Embodying Criticism and Reflection

The aesthetic tone reflected in Roth's novels embraces both critical and reflective flavors. In his creations, Roth re-examines the historical process of the United States, the environment and roots of terrorism, and the triggering factors of human tragedies, and connects them with social, epochal, and political factors to highlight the characteristic of cultural pluralism. Roth emphasizes the unity of internal and external aesthetics by utilizing external environments and ecological elements to embody his own harmonious and unified aesthetic view. His view transcends time, race, culture, and spatial constraints and thus makes the criticism and reflection in his novels more realistic and objective. At the critical level, Roth vigorously criticizes the dark social environment of post-war America, the anxiety of the people, and racial discrimination under brutal politics. It is not difficult to find the writer's sarcastic discourse and comic rhetorical devices in his works. Meanwhile, drawing on and innovating upon the literary narratives, creative techniques, and aesthetic ideas of such writers as Kafka and Joyce, Roth exhibits innovative and diversified stylistic characteristics in his works. Roth also emphasizes showcasing the aesthetic connotations and realistic insights of the works through the protagonist's life experiences or the implantation of the writer's personal viewpoints. Taking *I Married a Communist* as an example, the novel unfolds through the crisscrossing memories of two old persons, introducing the protagonist's American Dream, from its rise to setback and eventually to destruction, under McCarthyism in post-war America. The protagonist, Ira, is a communist who becomes a famous radio star after World War II and later marries Eve, but their relationship falls apart due to family disagreements. Eve fabricates documents and falsely accuses Ira of being a Soviet spy, bringing his life to an end. The novel uses a slightly humorous tone to present a three-dimensional portrayal of the hypocritical American Dream and the loathsome faces of hypocrites after World War II. The protagonist holds lofty communist beliefs and is willing to fight for the lives and dreams of the working people. However, unfortunately, in the inhumane living environment after World War II, the American Dream ultimately shatters. This is not only a fierce mockery of McCarthyism but also a self-reflection on the social ecology^[11].

3 Conclusion

The creative practice of Roth's neo-realist literary works presents readers with a distinctive neo-realist literary style,

where Roth showcases intricate spatial narratives, national trauma narratives of sorrowful memories, ecological narratives intertwined with imagery and desire, and ethical narratives of hypocrisy and disillusioned idealism. Moreover, relying on the thematically rich implications that blend the real and the fictional, and the aesthetic tone that demonstrates both criticism and reflection, Roth's works embody the writer's probing inquiry into the living predicaments of the underprivileged and the American Jews in contemporary society. It can be said that Roth's literary creations have had a groundbreaking impact on the narrative art and stylistic innovation of American neo-realist literature.

It is particularly noteworthy that Roth's works contain profound concern for and contemplation on ecological issues. Through his depictions of the natural environment and explorations of the relationship between humans and nature, Roth reveals the destructive impact of human activities on the ecological environment. Simultaneously, he conveys through the characters and events he creates the profound idea that humankind should respect nature and protect the ecology, which is fully embodied and promoted in his works, providing readers with deep thoughts and inspirations.

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