



The Significance of Structure in Analyzing Short Stories

Yujun Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology

Box 502, 69 Songling Road, Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: lyjlotus@126.com

Abstract

Structure is an important element in analyzing artistic work and literary works, especially in analyzing the short stories. The charming and unique set pattern of the short story structure could help readers to appreciate and create excellent short stories.

Keywords: Structure, Short story, Set pattern

1. How does the structure perform a function?

1.1 *Its function in artistic creation*

First let's see how structure functions in artistic creation. When an artist draws a picture, he will sketch the outline first, and then begin to delineate the details, and fill in the colors; writers follow a similar creative pattern. When they want to describe the colorful picture of life or express their emotional feelings and experiences, writers collect source material, portray the characters and arrange the scenes of the characters' activities exquisitely. The process can hardly go on without the artistic structure outlined in the writer's mind. The structure is a thread, which stitches together the plots, the depiction, the characters, and their dialogues together. It enables the story to unfold and arouse the audience's interest to follow the narrative units of different levels. This combination produces the aesthetic charm of the work.

The structure of literary works obeys the same aesthetic rules as other art pieces, as music, sculpture, drawing, and even dancing do. Take the performance of a dancer as an example. When she is asked to dance, her posture must be slow, curved and uncertain in balance if she wants to express the theme of "sorrow". It seems that her body is supported by the ground and not by herself. As a contrary, a merry character demands the dancer to stretch out her limber arms or legs which are controlled by her own strength and not by an outside force (Yu Jianzhang & Ye Shuxian, 1988: 244).

1.2 *Its function in literary works*

Then how does the structure function in literary works? Different structures give the audience different impressions. A fine piece of writing touches the reader's heart deeply; not only by its profound significance, choice phrases and skilled techniques, but also by its exquisite structure. Masters of language choose the structure as a container to hold the enormous words. The structure also serves as a thread to stitch together all the parts. The observant reader will perceive the visible structure in his mind or before his eyes.

Needless to say, there are various kinds of structures that carry different denotations. The function of structure is achieved by lines and circles so as to stimulate the reader's imagination. The common structures are straight lines, circles and oblique lines. The straight line reminds us of running water, passing time, or a road leading to a faraway destination. It is direct, coherent and simple. The tension it contains helps the artist express the stiff or shocked posture of an actor. Similarly, architects prefer design buildings with straight walls and square angles to give a sense of strength and stability (Yu Jianzhang & Ye Shuxian, 1988: 246).

Westerners in the fields of architecture, painting, and literature frequently employ both straight and oblique lines. Yet the Chinese prefer the circular structure in artistic creations. Both Taoism and Buddhism in China regard the universe as an integrated mass. Modern science testifies that the circle is the most stable shape as well. The circle is the meta-symbol of the universe, and the perfect shape to symbolize the Logos of the universe. Since the Chinese believe the principles of the yin-and-yang and the five-element, the structure of their literary works more or less agrees with the circular shape.

2. What is the structure of the short story?

2.1 Two levels of structure: external and internal

Structure is the central concept and one of the most frequently used terms in 20th century human sciences. The notion of structuralism first appeared in the field of linguistics. *A Course of General Linguistics* by a linguist, F. de Saussure, who founded modern structuralist linguistics, was first published in 1916. It gave the world a vision of an objective science of languages and provided a model for a feasible range of objective human sciences.

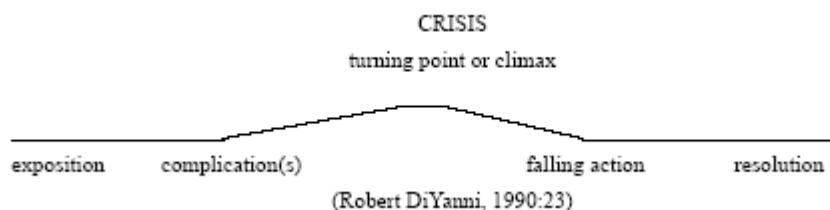
In his book, Saussure made three distinctions that continue to be significant to both linguists and literary critics. First of all he distinguished langue from parole. These are the two structures of a language. Textual structure belongs to the parole, for it is the embodiment of a language. Hence each literary work constitutes, to some degree, a language of its own, which can be seen as a self-regulating structure, from the time it is created. Xie Xiaohe (1997) argues that the structure of a literary text is not an innate property of the text before it is interpreted. The textual structure of a literary text is sometimes the same as that of natural language as it is constructed during the reading process.

A literary text can be analyzed from either of two aspects, the external structure or the internal structure. The external one is the manifest or surface structure. It is the form of the literary text and reflects the external relations of the linguistic signs. The internal structure refers to the network of internal relations underlying the surface structure of the literary works.

2.2 The set pattern of traditional short story structure

In a number of cases the modern short story is charged with a lack of narrative structure. In another article "The Structure of the Modern Short Story" by A. L. Bader, we meet the common complaint that modern narrative structure is still visible in the form, although its presentation is so indirect that the readers must make greater effort to find the perceived relationship of the parts of the short story. James Cooper Lawrence stated in *A Theory of the Short Story* that: "The only difference between modern short story technique and that of the Middle Ages is a verbal one. The only development that can be traced is not an improvement in any distinctive essential of the art of story-telling, but is merely a general development in the knowledge of words and the ability to see them." (Charles E. May, 1987: 57)

Some modern short stories with ongoing tradition have traditional elements of structure. The principle of unity enables the reader to perceive the relationship between the individual units. Each incident contributes to the perception of that relationship; there we can find an ordered arrangement of the parts. If the story were written in accordance with dramatic pattern, the traditional structure of conflict, sequential action and resolution would stand fourth distinctly. Traditionally, the typical feature of the realist short story plot can be diagrammed in the following manner:



Its plot is based on probability or causality, illustrating a sequence of casually related incidents. This structure resembles the four steps of traditional Chinese in composition: introduction, elucidation of the theme, transition to another viewpoint and summing up.

3. Why is the structure of short stories important?

A short story, though short in length and simple in characterization, can also reflect its writer's characteristics of narration and thought with its narrative structure. Writers and critics of short stories share the similar idea to the westerners. For example, Gao Erchun stated in his *The Theories and Techniques of the Short Story Structure*: "A short story is like a cross section of wood. It is short in length, varied in both structure and material source; simple in characterization and plot progression. Traditional short stories mushroomed all over the world. The variations of short story increased rapidly. They influenced on each other and compete with each other." (1976: 39)

We can be alert on a story's structure even as we read it for the first time, primarily by paying attention to repeated elements and recurrent details of action and gesture, of dialogue and description, and to shifts in direction and changes of focus. Repetition signals are important connections to the relationships between characters, and connections between ideas. Shifts in direction are often signaled by such visual or aural clues as a change of scene, a new voice, and a blank space in the text. They may also include changes in the time and place of action or alternations in characters' entrances and exits, or in their behavior. Or they may appear as changes in the pace of the story and in its texture of language. The structure of stories can never be regarded as a matter of little importance. It is an aesthetic problem waiting for each

writer or reader to ponder upon. The structural analysis of the short story can be focused on the arrangement and distribution of each part of the story.

The plot is the carrier of the structure. The plot is the sequence of unfolding action, and structure is the design or form of the completed action. Structure satisfies our need for order, proportion, and arrangement. A story's symmetry or balance of details may please us, as may its alternating of moments of tension and relaxation.

Although the sense of form and gift of style are secondary to the idea, conception, and subject, they are essential to the writing of a good short story. Neatness of construction and polish of execution are more necessary in the writing of short stories. The consciousness of form is called "the highest and last attribute of a creative writer" (Charles E. May, 1987: 107). The construction must always be logical, adequate, and harmonious. The framework of a narrative embodies symbols, which function to question the world of appearances and to point to a reality beyond the facts of the world.

The short story requires the reader's utmost attention, a focus of the mind on each detail like a fine lyric poem. It seems boneless, unlike the bone-structured novel. But A. L. Bader stated in "*A Theory of the Short Story*" (Charles E. May, 1987: 109) that a story of traditional plot means any story which derives its structure from plot based on a conflict and issuing in action, and whose action finally resolves the conflicts, thus giving the story a "point". The structure of a traditional plot is essentially dramatic. There may be a geometrical quality to its plot structure. It follows Aristotle's statement that a proposition is stated, developed by arguments and finally proved. Therefore a conflict, either internal within the character or external in which the character struggles against frustration, is stated at the beginning of a story, developed by a series of scenes, and resolved at the end. Each scene, incident, and its resolution, but most also carry its bit of significance in the progression that it occupies.

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