The Narrative Structure of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* from the Perspective of Binary Opposition

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**Abstract**

As one of the important works of a British writer, Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a typical descriptive novel concerning character and environment. In this work, the author portrays full and vivid characters, applies delicate and profound methods to carry on the psychological description, and highlights the unique charm of Hardy’s novels. Henchard, the protagonist of this novel, has a complex and changeable character. However, due to the constant changes in time and environment, he gradually shows different personality traits. Because of his character, his fate goes up and down, and he is difficult to get rid of the tragedy ultimately. For this reason, the complex personalities of the characters in the novel and numerous narrative techniques have become one of the hot topics of modern literature researchers. Based on the perspective of binary oppositional, this article analyzes the narrative structure of this novel in order to further interpret its profound meaning.

**Keywords:** Binary Opposition, Narrative Structure, Analysis, Interpretation.

1. **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

1.1 Literature Review

The *Mayor of Casterbridge*, published in 1886, adopts superb narrative tactics to create unique characters and a storyline and cleverly sets the narrative method of time and space. Since its publication, this novel has drawn wide attention from all walks of life. A number of scholars and literary workers have conducted an in-depth analysis on the works. For example, the narrative technique that analyzes the contrasts and conflicts, chance and coincidence in the novel as well as the circular narrative art of time and space can not only reveal the theme of the novel, but also greatly enhance the tragic feature of the novel and make it easier for readers to understand the novel (Zhang, 2012). Based on the analysis theory of structuralism, the father-and-daughter relationship in the novel is explored and the literary theme of lost-seek-lost is identified. Through the unanimous approval of both the father and the daughter, this theme is deepened. The father experiences gain and then loss, but the daughter experiences loss and then gain, revealing the manipulation of destiny by natural laws and social orders (Dai, 2008). One of the salient features of the novel is its narrative perspective. As the narrator is familiar with everything, the author, Thomas Hardy, uses unique narrative techniques to combine the narrator with the characters in the story and to transform the narrative perspective (Deng, 2000). A hidden clue of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is faith. Faith refers to the value system constructed by the standards that judge everything. The author relies on the faith to depict the mental activities and behaviours of the characters and to control the direction of the storyline, especially in the narration of the fate of the characters. The dominant power of faith is given a full expression. It is found out that those who follow their faith and standards have a successful fate, while those who deviate from this system of values eventually end with tragedies. Especially in the protagonist’s thoughts and behavioural narratives, he shows his struggles to persevere and violate his faith and eventually overcomes the weaknesses of his faith, and consequently returns to faith (Zheng, 2012).

1.2 Research Objective

In fact, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* follows the mythical tragedy pattern of Oedipus the King, further shapes a tragic heroic image of Henchard in Victorian times, combines with Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, and reinterprets the tragic fate of Henchard, the protagonist of the novel. At the same time, Bakhtin’s carnivalization theory is applied. Along the narrative structure of this works, it is found out that, in this works, the prototype of Bacchus is remodelled in the image of Henchard from the deep narrative structure (Lu, 2010). The study of
Hardy’s novels indicates that binary opposition is his typical narrative style, especially when shaping the literary characters, such as Thomasin and Eustacia in The Return of the Native, Angel and Alec in Tess, Arabella and Sue in Jude the Obscure. The narrative style that applies binary opposition can reflect the reality, deepen the theme and ultimately enhance the appeal of the works (Kong, 2010). In Hardy’s carnival novels, The Mayor of Casterbridge can be said to be highly rich. The author arranges four carnival episodes including selling the wife, banquets, court hearings and rape, and repeatedly re-crowns and crowns the main characters to realize the carnival art effects and show the ups and downs of the story, profoundly revealing the philosophy of a fableless life (Chen, 2017). Through Frye’s prototype shift theory and the narratology theory, we could analyze the situation of the heroine in The Mayor of Casterbridge and then summarize the narrator’s ideal attitude toward life under the double absence of rationality (Wei, 2005).

2. BASIC THEORY OF THE PERSPECTIVE OF DUAL STRUCTURE

Around the 1960s, the structuralism literary theory that centred on France became the master of the formalistic literary theory. Hence, structuralism turned into one of the significant literary genres in the modern western literary world. In structuralism, the method of binary opposition analysis is of cardinal importance, which divides objects into two parts and summarizes some type of structural relationship to recognize the complex structure of objects (Zhou, 2008). In the structuralist theory, binary opposition is applied to explain the basic thinking of mankind and belongs to an extremely powerful cultural language tool, and a classic example is rationalism and sensibility. In western philosophy, rationalism is more highly evaluated than sensibility in most cases. Besides, existence holds a higher status than absence. Similar to these advanced ideas, there are men and women as well as speaking ability and writing ability. All of these are regarded as the impact of logocentricism on the western philosophy. Binary opposition in the structuralism literary theory indirectly reveals the diversity, multi-dimensionality and complexity of human beings. At the same time, structuralism also has three major characteristics, namely, integrity, transitivity and self-adjustment. Specifically, transitivity refers to that, in the structure of any object, various parts can be replaced and changed according to certain rules, so personalities of humans are not invariable.

3. INTERPRET THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE BASED ON BINARY OPPOSITION

3.1 Binary Opposition of Characters’ Image-Building

In Hardy’s many Wessex novels, he adopts binary opposition to shape the characters. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy makes use of binary opposition to create two male protagonists, Henchard and Farfrae, achieves the ups and downs of the conflicting plot and makes the story doubly appealing (Wang, 2015). Henchard and Farfrae are respectively the new mayor and the old mayor of Casterbridge, of which Henchard represents the old ideas and traditions while Farfrae stands for the modern science, fully indicating the mutual opposition between old ideas and new thinking, traditional hand-operated agriculture and industrial mechanization, tradition and modern, as well as the backward and the advanced. In the struggles between the old and the new, Henchard is in a passive position. His philosophy and mode of management which he believes in can not adapt to changes in the surrounding environment and he finally faces death due to the cruelty of destiny. Farfrae is of a gentle nature and composed character, pursues scientific and rational production and management philosophy, is good at using modern management knowledge to adapt to environmental changes, and eventually becomes the new mayor of Casterbridge, a comprehensive replacement of Henchard. On the day of the marriage of Farfrae and the step-daughter of Henchard, Henchard showed up to send congratulation yet felt deeply left out. In the end, he died desolately in the dilapidated wilderness lodge. The fateful outcomes of Henchard and Farfrae form a sharp and cruel comparison, which significantly strengthens the tragedy power of the works and highlights the binary opposition of character images (Wang and Zhang, 2015).

3.2 Binary Opposition of Character and Environment

In Thomas Hardy’s novel series of Character and Environment, the writer’s belief that character is destiny is highlighted by depicting the close connection between character and destiny. The author believes that the destiny of a character is inseparable with the suppression of the surrounding environment, but whether or not to adapt to the environment is the fundamental factor that determines the destiny of the character (Zhou and Liu, 2010). Therefore, the tragic fate of most figures portrayed by Thomas Hardy is caused by the opposite conflicts between character and environment. In The Mayor of Casterbridge, the protagonist, Henchard is also the victim of social changes, but the root cause of his tragedy lies in his stubborn character. Henchard’s narrow-mindedness and inability to accept changes make it difficult for him to meet the requirements of environmental changes and
eventually become the main factor in his tragedy. Moreover, since Henchard still applies the traditional concept and mode of production to run business and stand in the opposite of the social environment, he ultimately comes apart from the social and economic development. In addition, Henchard’s opinionated character also becomes a key reason for his defeat in politics, business and romantic relationship.

3.3 Binary Opposition of Social Environment

The social background of The Mayor of Casterbridge is the British Industrial Revolution which was in the dissolution phase of the old rural social economic system. At that time, the natural economic system in rural areas had a sharp and strong antagonistic relationship with the capitalist mode of production and management. While operating food and hay, Henchard still uses the original operating philosophy, insists on manual sowing and verbal agreement, weighs the hay by hand, determines the quality of hay to by means of Fan’s experiment, namely tasting by mouth, and measures the size of the haystack through manual measurement. On the contrary, Farfrae measures the weight of hay based on tools such as scales and steelyard and introduces planters and accounts management system at the same time to ensure the stability of the business. In the novel, Henchard represents the backward production mode of small-scale peasants and Farfrae represents the advanced mode of industrialization, forming another sharp contrast.

4. AN ANALYSIS ON THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

The Mayor of Casterbridge, as one of the classic works of the series of Character and Environment, has experienced numerous controversies. Since the compilation of the novel, a number of literary critics at home and abroad have analyzed its characters and narrative techniques. These multi-faceted studies also indicate from another perspective that Hardy’s works have profound an ideological content and an academic value. In general, binary opposition is one of the key research methods in the field of literary criticism. The Mayor of Casterbridge has a mass of phenomena of binary opposition. For example, the binary opposition of the story theme depicts the confrontation between tradition and modernity and between human and destiny. Throughout the storyline, the protagonist has always insisted on fighting fate, but has been subjected to endless merciless torment. The story inevitably ends in tragedy. However, the story of the characters described in the novel is actually the result of being influenced by the supernatural forces and reflects the microcosm of human destiny, which incisively and vividly displays Hardy’s pessimistic thinking. In moulding and setting up the image of the characters, Hardy designs the conflicts between two characters—Henchard and Farfrae. Specifically, Henchard represents the traditional and conservative ideology and Farfrae stands for the advanced productive forces. Eventually Henchard is replaced by Farfrae, which dramatically reflects the opposition between tradition and modernity, but also writes the inevitable result of the history. The author uses the method of binary opposition to describe the personality and image of the characters in detail and mainly deals with the opposition of reason and emotion, good and evil, stubbornness and flexibility. Concerning the personality of Henchard, he constantly pulls and struggles between good and evil. In the end, kindness wins the upper hand, and the character finally achieves his return and improvement of morality. Unlike Henchard, the faithful and kind Farfrae finally becomes selfish and hypocritical as the story progresses. Henchard is impulsive and stubborn, while Farfrae is rational and flexible. Such a personality makes Henchard eventually lose everything. In addition, Lucette and Elizabeth are also a group of characters with opposite personalities. Lucette and Henchard have similar personalities while Elizabeth and Farfrae are more consistent. The comparison of the personalities of these two women further proves the theme that character determines density.

5. CONCLUSION

The above analysis and research indicate that, compared with other literary criticisms, structuralist literary criticism lays more emphasis on the analysis of the inherent structure. By summarizing the constituent elements of the works and the interdependence among various elements, the works can be analyzed and understood more fully and comprehensively. The method of binary opposition allows us to focus more on the overall grasp of the composition and laws of works and to better comprehend the essence and the depth of the works. In the novel The Mayor of Casterbridge, the author adopts a series of binary oppositions to successfully characterize figures, environmental descriptions, storylines and novel themes. This narrative technique sets off by contrast the narrative atmosphere of the novel and the appeal of the works, thereby enhancing its overall artistic effect.
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