

Realization of Function of Literature through Literary Style: An Inquiry Into the Style of James Joyce's *The Dead*

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Abstract

The function of literature is instrumental and functional towards producing effects upon specific readers. In order to achieve this, deviation is usually applied. In this paper, the author exemplifies this with the analysis of the literary style of James Joyce's *The Dead*.

Key words: Function of literature; Deviation; Literary style

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1. THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE

According to Zhao (1993), literature is an imitation—but an imitation only instrumental and functional towards producing effects upon readers. Ever since Socrates, art has been viewed and judged according to its effects of beauty and goodness upon its audience. Plato also suggests that the effects of good poetry are to lead the youth to follow the correct path permitted by the laws and in agreement with the experience of the most outstanding elders of ours.

It seems that it is the Roman poet and critic Horace who first articulates in the clearest terms the pragmatic theory of literature. Influenced by Epicurean ethics, Horace holds that art imitates only as a means to the proximate end of pleasing, and pleases, in turn, only

as means to the ultimate end of teaching. According to scholar Sir Philip Sidney (Zhao, 1993), in order to teach and delight, poets imitate not what is, hath been and shall be, but only what may be, and should be. Since the Renaissance, the dissolution of religious belief created a moral vacuum where fetishism, egoism and amorality were to be the substitutes. Thus literature serves as the means to educate and form a man, give him serenity, make him see things and know himself and the world as well.

Among those scholars who hold a pragmatic theory of literature, Aristotle pays special attention to the effect of tragedy upon the audience. Through the representation, the tragic downfall of the protagonist, the pity and fear of the audience would be aroused. As a result, these emotions would exercise a therapeutic effect upon the audience. According to Corneille (Zhao, 1993), when we watch tragedies, we see how the characters of our kind fall to their tragic downfall. Misfortune of those heroes arouses our pity and fears that the same misfortune might possibly befall us. That fear gives rise to a strong desire to evade the misfortune, and that desire, at the last stage, impels us to purify, curb, modify and even thoroughly stamp out the same passions and emotions in our heart, which, in the play or story, bring about the tragic falls of the suffering heroes.

The Dead, written during 1906 and 1907 by James Joyce, is somewhat a tragedy, of the individual, the people and the country. In the story, the moral, political, or spiritual paralysis of Irish people is presented. The story gives the accounts of angry, frustrated men and women against the miserable background of Dublin. It seems that the author tends to make the Irish see the death and living death in their life, to induce them not to be like those people in the story (especially the protagonist Gabriel Conroy), to evoke the national spirit of the Irish people and to fight for their own freedom.

2. THE REALIZATION OF THE FUNCTION THROUGH THE USE OF THE STYLE OF DEVIATION

The function of “teaching” of literary works is usually realized through the application of deviation. In *The Dead*, James Joyce successfully uses the language and text deviations to create an illusory world—a society of death. Through interactions at levels of language, text and world (especially the change of the schemata of the protagonist Gabriel Conroy) and their counterparts in readers’ schemata, a schema refreshment that awareness of the spiritual paralysis, lifeless or “dead” society and the death of the traditional culture, arts, values and marriage etc. is to be brought about among the projected readers—Irish people. The author will analyze how this function is realized in detail in the following parts.

2.1 Projected Readers

Cook (1995) suggests that the interpretation of literary discourse is reader dependent. Each reading is true only for one reader or a group of readers who share values and interpretative strategies: an “interpretative community”. The specific effect can only be brought about among a specific group of people.

Because the story is intended to change the Irish people at that time, the author of this paper tries to analyze *The Dead* from the point of view of the first readers—the Irish people at the end of nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The majority of Irish people are descendants of the original Celtic people who inhabited the British Isles before the Romans arrived 2000 years ago. They have their own traditional culture and values. Yet the whole island of Ireland has been politically integrated with Great Britain since 1801, the Britain’s domination of Irish dated back centuries even before the date. Some Irish desire for an independent Irish state. And one of the key issues in the late nineteenth century in British politics is the campaign in parliament for what is called “home rule”—Irish political control of Irish affairs. But there are also some spiritually paralyzed Irish people who lost their Irish identity, loyalty to the nation, hope for true love and aim of life. It is those who lead a life of paralysis the author intends to awake through the application of the deviation in the story.

2.2 Language Deviation

The deviant language structures are the most frequent methods used to achieve the specific effect. The deviant language structures exploit lexical, grammatical deviations for the realization of schema refreshment among the readers.

2.2.1 Lexical Deviation

Lexical deviation exploits application of the words and expressions with symbolical meaning in the story at the

relatively fixed semantic level of denotation, and at the discourse level of meaning in context.

The story comprises a lot of words and expressions indicate the reality of Irish people—the paralysis of death-in-life. Aunt Julia is “grey”, with “darker shadows”, “slow eyes” and “parted lips”, displaying that “she is not aware where she is and where she is going” (D 162). Aunt Kate is “feeble”. Her face is all “puckers and creases”, like a “shriveled” red apple. These two old women give us the impression that they are dying soon. Gabriel even senses “a shade” (death) in the end of the story. It is those two old women offer “annual dance”—a banquet. Yet people are blind to the suffering of these old people, though Gabriel feels discomfort about “the stamping and shuffling of feet on the floor” (D 162), is “irritated by the floor, which glittered with beeswax under the heavy chandelier” (D 168) and imagines “How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first by the river and then through the park!” (D 173). He still cannot reason out why he has this kind of feeling. All he can do to be to praise the “three graces” in the speech after dinner. The fact is that the banquet provided by the two old women symbolizes the concession of the Irish people which disturbs him continuously without being realized. They give way to the control of English in Britain and Catholic Church in Italy for centuries. They even take this as “Irish tradition”, “hospitality” and “humanity” which are “have handed down by their forefathers and which they in turn must hand down to their descendents” (D 183). Those who are “actuated by new ideas and new principles or even misdirected by these new ideas and its enthusiasm” (D 183) symbolize the people who hold loyalty to Ireland and start to fight for its political and cultural independence. Miss Ivors is the typical one of this kind of people.

The word “eye” is depicted in detail in the story. Gabriel has “restless eyes”, revealing his uncertainty of his identity. In the end of the story, the eyes are washed by “generous tears”, making him see the truth and reality of life. Freddy Marlins has “heavy-lidded sleepy eyes” (D 167) and often “rub the knuckles of his left fist backward and forward into his left eye” (D 167), showing his aimlessness in life. Miss Ivors has “prominent brown eyes” (D 170), bearing a sense of sharpness and sensitivity. Michael Furey has “big, dark eyes” (D 197), manifesting sincerity and the passion for true love.

There are several place names which symbolize that the marriages of Irish people are of no love. These toponyms are “Monks town”, “Nuns’ island” and “convent”.

The story mentions “galoshes” several times in the story. This is most typical symbol of Gabriel’s “different grade of culture”—“continental culture”. The zeal to be different from his own people makes him ask his son does dumb-bells and force his daughter to eat the stirabout. This also makes him refuse to be admitting his wife’s

Irish identity (coming from Connacht) and Irish being his language. Thus, it is not surprising that Miss Ivors calls him “West Briton”. His loss of identity and lack of passion for his “own people” and “own country” will surely cause his failure in the marriage.

The word “snow” appears most frequent in the story. It is most disputable. Most critics think it symbolizes death due to the coldness or rebirth due to its whiteness and purity. However, the author of this paper agrees with the latter. It symbolizes the revival of Irish nationalism and the ascending national movements. The people in the banquet to celebrate great tradition (concession) while fear the coldness of the snow outside. Gabriel even scrapes his feet vigorously to get rid of the snow (the influence of the movements). But “a light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat still slides in”, bringing “a cold, fragrant air from out-of-doors” (D 161). This means the influence is too strong to resist. Finally the “snow” is “generally all over Ireland” and “everybody has colds” (D 189). Under such strong influence, people have to say “good night” (farewell to “tradition”) to each other, rolling over their celebration.

2.2.2 Grammatical Deviation

Literary discourse usually employs ungrammatical expressions to create ambiguity and novelty, achieving the purpose of catching the reader’s eye for the sake of building new schema and achieving the specific effect easily.

There are two typical examples in “The Dead”. “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” (D 162), says the caretaker’s daughter Lily in response to Gabriel’s condescending interrogation with great bitterness, is the first example. This sentence is ungrammatical and is difficult to analyze. The copular “is” should be “are” if it is to be put in a grammatical way. But “men” still do not collocate with “palaver” and “what they can get out of you”. Gabriel is also “discomposed by the girl’s bitter and sudden retort. It has cast a gloom over him...” (D 163). This question keeps the reader thinking through the process of reading until Gabriel delivers his speech in fear and trembling about the “hospitality of the ‘three graces’” when the readers can figure out the intention of the author. The British government colonizes Irish for centuries only to get “what can get out of them”. In the story, only Lily, Miss Ivors (leave the banquet abruptly) and Gretta (refuses to have sex with her husband because he only possesses libidinal desire without true passion of love) realize the evil intention of the “men” (symbolize British). James Joyce deliberately uses the ungrammatical sentence to make the readers think and solve the problem in the process of reading.

On the contrary, there are also some people suffer a lot without being aware of it. “What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?” (D 174) is the

second example that can prove grammatical deviation. This sentence is actually said by James Joyce. It is very strange that there is no explicit addressee of this question. It is ungrammatical because “what did he care?” is a complete question. It is weird to add the object after the predicate verb because “what” is the object in the question. The sentence may be put in another way “What did he care when his aunts were only two ignorant old women?” to form a rhetorical question. The author is deliberately intended to tell the readers a matter of fact by using the deviant ungrammatical structure, which will draw the readers’ attention easily. The fact is that the old suffering women (symbolize the suffering Irish people) get used to the exploitation and take them as the “tradition”. These old people do not sense any shame even Gabriel says they are “on the wane” and have “faults” (which are truly the ideas of James Joyce). The readers cannot be “ignorant” any more. The readers must read between the lines with “critical quizzing eyes” to realize the paralysis of Irish people.

2.3 Textual Deviation

Literary discourse usually employs deviant text structure to achieve the schema refreshment effect. James Joyce intends to depict a society of paralysis, arousing the Irish people’s awareness of the “death”, reshaping their ideology and revive the nationalism. This is a very serious topic. The author does not write a lengthy speech in the homiletic style. *The Dead* depicts the details of the trivial commonplace in life—the annual gathering. However, a lot of styles of discourses are combined together to achieve a remarkable schematic refreshment effect among the projected readers. These different styles of discourses comprise the narrator’s narration of the gathering, the conversation of the characters, a speech given by Gabriel, the insertion of the author’s comments and the stream of consciousness of the Gabriel. The various text structures enable the story to depict a society of paralysis from different point of view, helping the readers to understand the implied meaning of the author easily.

2.4 The Specific Effect Among Readers

The specific effect (schema refreshment) is realized through the interactions not only between the language and text and their counterparts in readers’ schemata but also between the illusory world (the society of paralysis, mainly through the schematic change of the protagonist Gabriel) and the world schemata of the readers to effect a change.

Through the application of the language and text deviation, a society of paralysis is depicted. The “three graces” (Misses Morkan) suffer from the annual “tradition” (exploitation) without being aware of it. Other guests dance, drink, sing and chat at the party, with no definite aim in their life just as the horse Johnny walks around the statue round and round. Gabriel senses a “gloom”

over him because of Lily's "bitter and sudden retort". He becomes "perplexed and inattentive due to a "row" with Miss Ivors. But he dares not to go outside (join the national movements) because he wants to maintain the status quo of his prestige in the community. He feels condescending towards other people because he has the privilege to give the annual speech (as a spokesman for the British government) and to "carve the goose" (helps to carve the plunder and mediate the disputes). It is only when his wife's heart has been captured by the dead Michael Furey that he realizes that he is "ludicrous", "clownish" and "fatuous" through a "mirror" (introspection). Thus, the schema refreshment of Gabriel happens naturally. He makes up his mind to "set out on his journey west westward" (D 200). It is only through the search for his lost Irish origins (to take part in the national movements) and confrontation with Gretta's past can he learn to "know" Gretta and win her back.

It is the depiction of the paralysis of Dublin by the application of language and text deviations and the schematic change happens to Gabriel that effects a schema refreshment among the readers who share the similar schemata with Gabriel or the other characters in the story.

CONCLUSION

It is found that the function of literature is to effect a change in the schemata of its readers. And the interpretation of literary works is reader dependent. The analysis of *The Dead* in this paper is from the point view of readers during the turn of the nineteenth century. However, different readers or the same reader at different times may interpret it differently. It is not surprising to find that some readers consider it as a love story or story about Christmas revelry. These different interpretations do not exclude from each other. They are complementary. All these interpretations together help the readers at different times to enjoy the aesthetic beauty of James Joyce's works more comprehensively.

The author in this paper still contends that the primary function of *The Dead* is to effect a change in the schemata of its first readers. Wang (2001) once mentions that Ireland, which is like a harp, is played and scourged by the harpist (the British colonists). Ireland in this story is likened to suffer women, exploiting by the people at the party (the British colonists). The Irish men are blind

and insensitive, lacking chivalry spirit. Actually, they are feminized and castrated. It is only when their own women are deflowered by other men (Gabriel's wife's heart is captured by another man Michael Furey in the story) that they begin to take action to resist and win their loss back (fight against the British colonization and revive the Irish Nationalism).

It is the humiliation of losing their women that awakes the paralyzed people in the story and in reality. Under great influence of the schema refreshment caused by the story like *The Dead*, a great force, combining "the living and the dead (paralyzed people) together" (D 201), is forged to fight for the independence of Ireland. In 1976, the Easter Rising happened. In 1921, the southern 26 countries formed an independent "free state", bringing to an end 700 years of British rule in southern Ireland. And the struggle for an independent Ireland is still under way till today.

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