

Fragmentation and Isolation — On the Narrative Analysis of Joan Didion's *On Going Home*

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Abstract: In *On Going Home*, Joan Didion demonstrates her deep concern and melancholy towards the 1960s' American society and describes a fragmented and isolated mental landscape of that time. She skillfully employs the narrative skills which include the collage, the foregrounding language, the confusion of tenses and repetition. In this way, the theme hidden in the essay is portrayed and resonate with the contemporary readers.

Key words: *On Going Home*; fragmentation and isolation; narrative skills

1. Introduction

Joan Didion, one of the representatives of new journalism, which focuses on “reporters’ complicated involvement in their own stories; a related argument over ‘objective’ presentation and ‘subjective’ interpretation continues in the popular press”. Her writing breaks the traditional documentary narrative that emphasizes the characterization, the center event, the conflict, the climax, the ending, etc. The whole writing, although from the first-person internal-focus perspective, is incoherent and fragmented at the first glimpse. While the fragmented narrative techniques employed by the author demonstrates the very purpose of presenting the landscape of American society after the World War II and her excellent mastery of language.

As it is known, during 1960s, American economy entered in its rapid development period, and more and more people were devoted to the pursuit of material accumulation. While the traditional values were challenged, the problem of morality was becoming more and more complicated. The relationship among people were alienated by the geographic or ideological distances. The traditional concepts were dim and even cast off, like a sense of lost haunted people. In order to present a reality of American society repleted with fragments and pieces and desolation, in *On Going Home*, Joan Didion portrays the isolation among family members, generation gap, bewilderment into presence to induce the reflection of what is home, where is the belonging and what is the essence of life. To explore how the theme is conveyed, the paper intends to analyze its narrative skills which include the collage, the foregrounding language, the confusion of tenses and repetition.

2. Collage Writing

Collage in literature is trope, namely connecting disparate materials and often rendering them seemingly center-less and meaningless the way by which a new kind of relations come into being. In this essay, the paragraphs are loosely linked,

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which seem void of logic required in story-telling, especially such title containing “home” which intrigues the readers’ suppositions on what will happen, who will meet and so on. On the contrary, the paragraph skips from “We live in dusty houses.....filled with mementos quite without value to him” of the first one, to unrelated “I saw a pretty young girl on crystal take off her clothes and dance for the cash prize in an ‘amateur-topless’ contest” of the second, from “I go aimlessly from room to room. I decide to meet it head-on and clean out a drawer” of the third, to the “I go to visit my great-aunts” of the fifth. The arbitrary skipping from one topic to another, which lacks association. The principle of story-telling is broken down, left only with the fragmentation without center. However, where there seems distortion of the accustomed, there lays the very craft of the author. In *On Going Home*, the theme of reflection on fragmented life of American society is exquisitely disguised by its collage, fragmented narrative lying in those unrelated, wandering paragraphs. Under such circumstances, home once harbored the lonely souls is conceivably vulnerable to the social tendency. And it is no wonder that the narrator “.....am trapped in this particular irrelevancy is never more apparent to me than when I am home. Paralyzed by the neurotic lassitude engendered by meeting one’s past at every turn, around every corner.....”

While the above part does analyze how collage and disconnection needle the irrelevant paragraph to illustrate the theme of the essay, the ensuing part will explore how the collage narrative skill is applied into the paragraph. In the paragraph of “.....going aimless from room to room”, the author uses listings to satisfy collage, “A bathing suit I wore the summer I was seventeen. A letter of rejection from *The Nation*, an aerial photograph of the site for a shopping center my father did not build in 1954. Three teacups hand-painted with cabbage roses and signed ‘E.M.’, my grandmother’s initials”. The listings presented are random pieces of life, but according to Mark Muggli points out, the author “..... fixed on these images so forcefully that they appear not as metonymic bits of observed history, even though nearly all of them were that once, nor even as symbols for groups of people or types of events. Instead, these images have become emblems that reverberate with an intensity that suggests a large world of meaning beyond the confines of the particular story”. All these listings refer to the past which the narrator once cherished. However, the disarranged listings presented at this time can be comprehended in the following ways. First of all, they are no comparatively important, and second, they are fragmented, broken imagery which are deliberately disarranged. This is such disarrangement discloses that the fact that the author’s separation from the past valuable memories. It further unveils that people at that time cannot find out a throughout thread to hook the past with the present. If those disconnected paragraphs demonstrate the synchronic rift, the separation from the past memories, the past times within this paragraph illustrates the diachronic split.

3. The Foregrounding Language

In *Standard Language and Poetic Language*, Jan Mukarovsky, the representative of the Prague School, puts forward that the characteristic of literature language is foregrounding, a deliberate distortions and twist of standard language out of the aesthetic purpose. Compared with the standard language, the foregrounding language is more original and refreshing. It increases the reader’s interest and appreciation of literature reading. In this essay, one of the characteristics is the foregrounding language presented at the beginning, “We live in dusty houses (“D-U-S-T,” he once wrote with his finger on surfaces all over the house, but no one noticed it) filled with mementos quite without value to him.....and we appear to talk exclusively about people.....land, price per acre and C-2 zoning and assessments and freeway access”. The sentence is quite long, containing as many as 103 words. Yet the contents in such a long sentence are irrelevant. It gives rise to reflection on the function of it. First, its feature demonstrates visual infinity. Second, when mixed with those incoherent, the effect is strengthened to the extent which endless chaos emerge. Its specific imagery portrays the complexity of the life at that time. Besides, the sentence is often interrupted by the brackets which break its fluency. It can be observed that the contents in the brackets are obviously announced by the narrator. Therefore, there are literally three voices intertwined.

Multiple voices can be perceived as unity as well as chaos depending on the effect of the communication. In this contest, her husband and her brothers' communication fail. Nor can the narrator herself integrate into the family where she spent her childhood and her youth, illustrated in "That I am trapped in this particular irrelevancy is never more apparent to me than when I am home". The result of the inefficient communication among family members ironically silence to "regard the fire". This kind of description induce contemporary readers as well to ponder over the human relationship of society.

4. Confusion of the Tense

The misuse of tense is also a feature in the essay. It is written in the past and present tenses, but sometimes its tenses break the standard of grammar. For example, according to the content, it is known that the narrator's husband returns to LA earlier than she does. But the first paragraph depicting the communication between he and narrator's brothers is still used in the present tense. Its deliberate misuse renders the reader a sense of confusion that on the one hand, past and present is broken and on the other they seem interwoven, hard to separate. Thus, diachronicity is broken down and the present and past share the same time and space.

Another one is in the sentence like "I go to visit my great-aunts. A few of them think now that I am my cousin, or their daughter who died young". This sentence used the present tense, but the content discussed is obviously in the past. At the first sight, this usage conforms to the principle of coherence, for the last sentence of last paragraph is used the present tense. However, examined closely, it is not difficult to find that the inappropriate coherence indicates that not only her elder relatives, but also the narrator's own memory, narrative and senses become blurred. So she cannot express in the correct way. Besides, those misuses reflect the alienation among people, for they talk about "a relative last seen in 1948", and the narrator is not bothered to explain that she has moved to LA three years ago.

There are also one point deserved notice that the whole essay is lack of future tense which indicates the futurity. And this deliberate deprivation of future tense implies the narrator's disappointment towards the present and her uncertainty about the future.

In a word, all of the confusions in tense express that the narrator herself is inevitably, like her temporaries, bogged down the confused, and desolated social moor and therefore, future to her is full of unknown and doubt.

5. Repetition

Generally speaking, the purpose of repetition in the writing does not serve as the vehicle of rift or discontinuity. On the contrary, repetition is used to make up the disconnected, disharmonious rhyme of the sentences and paragraphs. However, the repetition in this essay delicately illustrates the signals of cracks. There are two prominent repetition. First, in the sentence "I would like to give her more. I would like to promise her that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups, would like to pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her home for her birthday.....", the repetition of "would like" seems render the sentence smooth and fluent. Yet the use of subjective "would" virtually indicates the difficulty of realizing the narrator's best wishes to her daughter, and even impossibility of realization. The emphasis led by repetition does affect in the reverse way. The second example of repetition is the occurrence of the word "home" up to eight times in the article. Psychologically, the high frequency use of a word expresses the user's eagerness to something. There is no exception in this case. The narrator aspires to return home and the warmth it once brought to her. And her concept of home is not only confined to the individual one in the context, but also embraces a broader field of the whole society. That warmth, harmony and unity play the paramount role in family and social life is her hope, yet it is against the grain of inevitable tendency towards estrangement, disconnection of her time. Therefore, home has transformed into some vague concept. And yesterday has passed way, her generation is undergoing such pain and it will be the heritage of her daughter's.

Therefore, the purpose of repetition of “home” is in coincidence with that of “would like”. Neither can be realized in the narrator’s time as well as her daughter’s. So she admits that “.....I can promise her nothing like that..... I promise her to tell a funny story”. A funny story of a joke making people laugh without reflection or a mock of the time that induces contemplation in silence, and the uncertainty is readers’ guess.

6. Conclusions

Through the distinguished new journalistic narrative technique, Joan Didion delineates the mental landscape of 1960s’ American society. Collage, the foreground language, confusion of time tense and repetition contribute to the construction of the theme in the essay. All in all, by the refresh writing method, the author demonstrates her deep concern and melancholy to a broken, alienated, disconnected and rootless world. While appreciating her mastery of language, the readers experience alongside the author the 1960s and meditate issues nowadays.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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