

A Study on the Narrative Strategy of *Roads of Destiny*

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Abstract

Roads of Destiny is regarded as the most unique one of O. Henry's works. The reason lies in its unique narrative strategies. The ingenious application of the two artistic methods of the classic "O. Henry Ending" and the novel "polyphonic narrative" in this work not only breaks O. Henry's conventional narrative method, but also fully shows the artistic charm of polyphony and the artistic tension of O. Henry. More importantly, the combination of the two provides multiple perspectives for examining the protagonist's fate, thus arousing the readers' multidimensional and dialectical thinking on destiny, which achieved sublimation from structural aesthetics to philosophy.

Key words: *Roads of Destiny*; Narrative strategy; O. Henry Ending; Polyphonic narrative

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nearly 300 works of O. Henry, *Roads of Destiny* written by him in 1903 is quite different from his other works. Its unique features are mainly reflected in the following two aspects. On the one hand, in terms of creation background, *Roads of Destiny* is a story based

on France, which differs from O. Henry's other works which mainly reflect the reality of modern western capitalist society in the background of the United States and Latin America. It describes the social panorama of medieval France far from the theme of modern society. It is the only one in O. Henry's novels that points to the French Emperor. Furthermore, to some extent, it is a story based on O. Henry's own life experiences. On the other hand, in creating *Roads of Destiny*, O. Henry was in the exuberance of artistic creation. He broke his conventional linear narrative and adopted the non-linear narrative, specifically, the application of the two artistic methods of the classic "O. Henry Ending" and the novel "polyphonic narrative", which was really a breakthrough in terms of his writing style.

Since its initial appearance, *Roads of Destiny* has garnered voluminous critical commentaries. The majority focuses on the tragic destiny of the protagonist David, some of which concern the minor characters, but few of them pay attention to O. Henry's narrative strategies. Domestically, in 1994, the Chinese scholar Ruan Wenling uttered: "O. Henry's *Roads of Destiny* is a masterpiece that has never been explored in China" (Ruan, 1994). Until now, some Chinese scholars have discussed "surrealism" (Ruan, 1994), "Bible archetype" (Wang, 2011), "conceptual metaphor" (Qiu, 2017) and "fatalism" (Chen, 2008) on it, but its charm is much more than that, especially O. Henry's talent in artistic creation. Undoubtedly, all these interpretations and commentaries help, from different perspectives, to reveal the significant potentialities of *Roads of Destiny*. However, if we interpret the story on the whole, we will find that these commentaries have failed to account for a conspicuous element in this story, that is, narrative strategy. In fact, most of O. Henry's stories, like *The Cop and the Anthem* (1904), *The Furnished Room* (1904), *The Gift of the Magi* (1905), *The Four Million* (1906), *The Last Leaf* (1908), are full of special narrative methods that any neglect

of them would result in inadequacy in explaining his artful design in the stories, especially when O. Henry's "philosophy of composition" is taken into account.

Then, how are the classic "O. Henry Ending" and the novel "polyphonic narrative" applied in *Roads of Destiny*? How are they combined? What are the artistic effects of their combination? In this paper, these questions will be discussed.

1. THE CLASSIC "O. HENRY ENDING"

The Chinese scholar Jin Jianren once pointed out that "Classics must meet two requirements: For one thing, in time, classics must be able to work for a long time, can 'live' among several generations or even dozens of generations. For another, in space, classics must be able to function broadly and beyond the boundaries of geography, nationalities, and even countries" (Jin, 2018, p. 240). Undoubtedly, the influence of the "O. Henry Ending" has spread throughout the world and was already regarded as a classic.

With its gentle narrative plot, humorous narrative language, unexpected but reasonable ending, "O. Henry Ending" has occupied a unique place in the literary world. In O. Henry's works, the development of the story is advanced through the gentle narrative plot and humorous narrative language, which makes the reader to consciously infer the coming ending. However, when the reader is urgently looking forward to the coming ending, the plot is suddenly reversed, and there is an opposite ending which beyond the reader's expectation. At this moment, the reader is suddenly enlightened, the character's image is more profoundly engraved into the reader's mind, and the plot and the theme of the story is clearer. In *Roads of Destiny*, this arrangement of ending is perfectly used.

First of all, on the left branch: because of an accidental opportunity to marry Mademoiselle Lucie de Varennes, David could have thus stepped into the upper class and then changed his destiny. However, to the reader's surprise, David offered to fight with Marquis de Beaupertuys, but unfortunately was shot by him in the end. Such a final setting is beyond the reader's expectation, but through the reversal of the plot, the author portrays a valorous, righteous and honest man who is so different from people who are faineant, greedy and just rely on charity.

Secondly, on the right branch: after enduring untold hardship and suffering, David finally reached a big city (Paris) and settled down, and began to write poetry. Fortunately, he came across a young woman of a beauty that should baffle even the justice of a poet's imagination. The subtle perfume about her filled him with strange emotions. This lady of whom he knew nothing drove him to lyrics of eyes, chansons of swiftly conceived love, odes to curling hair, and sonnets to slippers on slender feet.

However, the innocent and verdant young man did not know that it was a conspiracy. Shortly afterwards, he was deluded by the beautiful conspirator, and caught up in an armed rebellion, and finally slain by a ball from the pistol of Monseigneur, the Marquis de Beaupertuys.

Finally, on the main road: after two failed choices, David stood, uncertainly. He began to suspect that his choice was too hasty. Why should he leave Yvonne and his home because of a few hot words had come between them? Was love so brittle a thing that jealousy, the very proof of it, could break it? He believed that mornings always brought a cure for the little heartaches of evening. Therefore, he returned home and married Yvonne in the end, and lived a happy life. However, the arrival of spring touched his heart again. He started to write poetry, and was introduced by the old notary M. Papineau to a famous learned man, Georges Bril, but was not appreciated by him, and eventually committed suicide.

Henry's stories are usually short. "The plots are exceedingly clever and interesting; humor abounds, and the end is always surprising. Often there are two endings: first an unexpected ending, then another, which is quite a different one and a still better surprise" (Wu, 2013, p. 53). When we view the three stories in *Roads of Destiny* as a whole, "O. Henry Ending" can be embodied in two levels. First, unilaterally, it is used in the end of each story. At the beginning, David's fate was tough, and then he regained the hope of life by accident, but just when his fate was about to be changed, he died, suddenly. Second, overall speaking, after two failed choices, David gave up on the main road and returned home. According to the Christian creeds, he introspected and confessed, thus should be forgiven, but the end is completely opposite, just like Soapy's fate in *The Cop and the Anthem*. That is the fate of fates, which cannot win or be escaped.

Whenever an emergency, M. Papineau was the first person to come, but even so, David died three times under the gun engraved with the Marquis's name. Why did M. Papineau appear every time? Why did he know David's fate well? Was he God? Why did David die every time under a gun engraved with the Marquis's name? Was he the devil? The surprising endings set a series of suspense and contain profound meanings, which trigger the reader's unlimited thinking and highlight the theme of the story. His experience suggests that in this world, there may be more danger behind the opportunity. And in this complex society, turning back is not always the shore, there may be an unfathomable abyss.

From the above two levels of analysis, the unique narrative strategies of O. Henry can be fully embodied. "With his unique application of fables and comics, and based on the imitation of medieval literary style, O. Henry highlights his art of humor, exaggeration, irony and absurdity in creation, and opens up a new realm for novel" (Ruan, 1994).

2. THE NOVEL “POLYPHONIC NARRATIVE”

The “novelty” of polyphonic narrative is based on the publication time of *Roads of Destiny*. The polyphonic theory was first proposed by Bakhtin in 1929 in *Dostoevsky’s Creation Problem* and *Roads of Destiny* was published in 1903. Comparatively speaking, when *Roads of Destiny* was published, the theory of polyphony had not yet taken shape thus was very novel.

The term “polyphony” is a musical term that refers to a musical genre that was widely used in Europe before the 18th century. In *Dostoevsky’s Poetic Problem* (1929), Bakhtin pioneered the concept of polyphony. He pointed out: “The basic characteristics of Dostoevsky’s poetics, in Grossman’s view, lies in the breakthrough of the organic unity of the material required by general novels, the combination of different and incompatible elements in the overall structure of a novel, and the breakthrough of the unified and complete narrative style” (Bakhtin, 1998, p. 16). In *Roads of Destiny*, O. Henry adopted the new style of “narrative polyphony, time-space polyphony and emotional polyphony” (Hu, 2016) rather than the traditional narrative style. The establishment of this three-dimensional structure, “whether for the objective narrative or the subjective expression of the character’s inner heart, has provided the possibility for deeper exploration and has triggered the reader’s dialectical thinking on destiny” (Li & Lin, 2008).

As far as the perspective of narrative polyphony is concerned, in *Roads of Destiny*, the author sets up two perspectives: omniscient and limited. From the omniscient perspective, M. Papineau is a mysterious figure who seems to be clear about the development of the whole story. At the beginning, he seemed to have predicted that David would not become a poet. “The song was over. The words were David’s; the air, one of the countryside. The company about the inn table applauded heartily, for the young poet paid for the wine. Only the notary, M. Papineau, shook his head a little at the lines, for he was a man of books, and he had not drunk with the rest” (p. 503). It is obvious that people applaud just because they are greedy for wine, but M. Papineau is not. He doesn’t applaud because he is knowledgeable and has a good judgment, and he knows that David can’t succeed. After David returned to the village from the main road and lived a happy life, spring had come again and touched his heart, and he tried to write poetry again. However, David’s stock of poem grew larger but his flock smaller. He was strongly opposed by his wife. At this moment, M. Papineau reappeared: “M. Papineau, the kind, wise, meddling old notary, saw this, as he saw everything at which his nose pointed” (p. 519). In the end of the story, when David committed suicide, “M. Papineau, whose nose had brought him there among the first” (p. 522). Whenever David succeeded or failed, M. Papineau

was always the first one to appear, just like a God. His appearance is for the salvation of David’s destiny. As for the limited perspective, David himself is the best example. This perspective mainly focuses on David’s own choices of destiny. Two levels are included among his choices. The first level is to choose the left branch, the right branch, the main road forward or return home. The second level is to fight or not, to send a letter or not, and for family or for dream. Through David’s limited perspective, his choice in each road leads to opportunity or danger, he does not know. In this way, the ambiguity of the choices of destiny has been added, the suspense has been set up, the plot has been enriched and the development of the story has been paved.

Time-space polyphony is the most obvious polyphonic structure in *Roads of Destiny*. Like computer games, David returns to the place where he starts and resets his destiny after each death. At the same time, the characters associated with him in the story also appear in new identities. Firstly, the time-space polyphony experienced by the main character David. On the left branch: David had just married Mademoiselle Lucie by chance, but died of justice under the Marquis’s gun. On the right branch: David, who obsessed with the charm of the Countess Quebedaux, fell into a conspiracy and was caught up in an armed rebellion, and finally slain by a ball from the pistol of the Marquis. On the main road back to the village: David harvested love but was not resigned to be plain, thus resuming writing poetry, but was not appreciated, and finally shot himself. Secondly, the time-space polyphony experienced by the minor characters. In all the three roads of destiny, David was shot under the gun engraved with the Marquis’s name. M. Papineau, who existed like God, was a mysterious man who seemed to have a clear understanding of the outcome of David’s choice, but still could not save him three times. Yvonne, Mademoiselle Lucie and Countess Quebedaux, though in different identities, were more or less the causes of David’s tragic fate. “Anywhere you go, you die in one way: this is the fate of small potatoes under the exploiting class. This road of destiny conceals the story’s profound connotation” (Chen, 2008).

Emotional polyphony is a concept put forward by Milan Kundera, not by Bakhtin. In *Roads of Destiny*, the emotional polyphony is mainly embodied between David and Yvonne, David and Lucie, and David and Quebedaux. David and Yvonne were lovers. Yvonne was the reason why David left home to pursue his dream as a poet, and also the reason he returned home when failed. David married Lucy because of sympathy, and then chose to fight with the Marquis because of the so-called justice. David was so obsessed with the beauty of Quebedaux that he was willing to do anything for her, but ended up with paying for his life. David’s three roads of destiny are greatly involved in women; each of them has revealed his weaknesses: impulsion and precipitance, which eventually lead to David’s disorientation and death.

It is not difficult to see that *Roads of Destiny* mainly describes the fate of small potatoes under the oppression of the exploiting class in the medieval France. It looks like a collection of medieval literary works, which includes the “chivalric literature” with love, adventure and courage, the “city farce” which directly satirizes the real life with irony, as well as the “country pastoral” with idyllic scenery and country love. They are three independent stories at first, but with polyphonic narrative, O. Henry combines them into a relevant one, which successfully reflect O. Henry’s multidimensional exploration and thinking on fate.

3. THE ARTISTIC CHARM OF ROADS OF DESTINY

Generally speaking, O. Henry is gifted with a clear style and a keen observation of details. He mainly writes about people in the poorer walks of life. His works abound in good-natured humor. Nearly every story he writes grips the attention and interest from the beginning, and all are wholesome reading. Many of his stories contain a great deal of slang and colloquial expressions that make them hard to be understood by people outside of America. Such forms of speech are used to give what is called local color, or to make the stories fit in with the characters and scenes described. O. Henry’s own speech, both spoken and written, is always chaste and clear. Likewise, all the features mentioned above are embodied in *Roads of Destiny*. However, its charm is much more than that.

3.1 The Charm of Narrative Structure

The artistic charm of “polyphonic novel” lies in the conflict, dialogue, openness and unfinalizability of “polyphonic thought”. In *Roads of Destiny*, the four features run through the whole story, making the novel dialectical and open. Furthermore, on account of the application of “O. Henry Ending”, the tension and charm of the four features are pushed to the extreme. They act like two arteries, connecting the three independent stories into a whole, and giving them life.

3.1.1 Conflict

The most attractive part of a story must be its climax, and conflict is the main pusher to bring the plot to the climax. The more intense the conflicts, the more ups and downs of the plot, and the more charm of a story, thus triggering the reader’s thinking and arousing resonance. In *Roads of Destiny*, the unexpected but reasonable “O. Henry Ending” has brought the conflicts to the extreme. In the story, the conflict of emotion, the conflict of character, the conflict of fate and the conflict of the theme are perfectly reflected: if it is not because of the quarrel with Yvonne, David may not leave home; if it is not because of pity and obsession, David may not die under the gun of the Marquis; if it is not because of the cure of the gun engraved with the name of the Marquis, David may

not die; if it is not because of the choices of fate in the crossroads, David may lead directly to the paradise of success. However, these are all hypotheses. It is precisely because of the existence of the above conflicts, the reader will consciously get involved in the prediction of the coming ending. However, when the ending is about to come, the plot has been suddenly reversed, and an opposite ending is presented. At this point, the plot and the theme of the story is more clear, and the image of the protagonist is more deeply engraved into the reader’s mind. Without the existence of these conflicts, *Roads of Destiny* will not have such important existing value. That is the true meaning of the existence of “O. Henry Ending”.

3.1.2 Dialogue

Dialogue reveals the world of the human mind. In *Roads of Destiny*, “dialogue” is reflected not only in the dialogues between the characters, but also between the stories. The dialogues of the characters have revealed the speakers’ psychology and emotion while the dialogues between the stories have embodied a deeper connotation of the text, highlighted the character’s qualities and revealed the story’s theme. When in reading *Roads of Destiny*, the reader mainly focuses on David’s tragic life, and even laughs at his stupidity while ignoring the good qualities he originally possesses: justice, simplicity, kindness and dedication to dream.

The direct reason for this impression is because the reader may only pay attention to the plot while ignore the “dialogue” in the story. More specifically, the reversal of the plot brought about by “O. Henry Ending” is full of the reader’s brain, occupying the original impression of the character’s qualities. Fortunately, through the application of polyphonic narrative, the story has been repeated. In this way, “dialogue” can be produced between the former and the later story, and the images of the same characters also can be recreated. At this point, the contrasts between the characters in different stories attract the reader’s attention, thus paying more attention to their words and deeds. At this time, the role of “dialogue” in portraying characters will be timely, effectively and fully played.

In *Roads of Destiny*, it is precisely because of the promise that “I will live only to make you happy, and myself worthy of you” (p. 508), there is the justice that “perhaps you will condescend to fight me” (p.509); precisely because of the sincerity and kindness that “your hopes shall be my wings” (p. 513), there is the sacrifice that “Upon the cushions lay the dead body of the poor mock king and poet, slain by a ball from the pistol of Monseigneur, the Marquis de Beaupertuys” (p. 517); and precisely because of the persistent pursuit of dream that “spring had come again and touched his heart” (p. 519), there is the optimism that “David’s stock of poems grew larger and his flock smaller” (p. 519). These “dialogues” are common, but they have revealed a glorious side of David’s humanity.

“Dialogue” also plays an important role in revealing the qualities of minor characters. The Marquis’s ruthlessness and inhumanity are incisively and vividly revealed in “You put much labour upon me, madame. It seems I must find you a husband and make you a widow in the same night” (p.509). The countess’s selfishness and ugliness are fully reflected in ““He is gone, ‘ she said, ‘as fleet and stupid as one of his sheep, to deliver it”” (p. 514). The repetition of the story provides the reader with multiple perspectives to explore the characters, while “O. Henry Ending” highlights the goodness and badness of the characters, making the contrasts more obvious. The combination of the two makes the character more real and leave a more deeper impression to the reader.

3.1.3 Openness

As far as “openness” is concerned, there are ten possibilities for David’s fate. Based on the text, David has three known destinies: 1) Fight---was shot; 2) Send the letter---was shot; 3) Unappreciated - committed suicide. The end of all the three fates is death. However, there are seven possibilities for David’s unknown fate: 1) not leave home---unknown; 2) not fight---unknown; 3) not send the letter---unknown; 4) not commit suicide---unknown; 5) not write poetry---unknown; 6) not return home---unknown; 7) was appreciated---unknown. It is obvious that the seven possible results are unknown, behind the unknown, there will be countless possibilities. In this way, the novel is undoubtedly an unclosed circle, and is a “hyper text” with higher interaction with the readers. “Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient” (Iser, 2001, p. 1673). The open ending of the novel brings with multitude of significance and marks the unfinalizability of its contents and ideas, which provides the readers an open space to participate and a large number of blanks to fill.

3.1.4 Unfinalizability

According to the “unfinalizability” of polyphonic theory, *Roads of Destiny* is actually unfinished. Although David was shot by the gun engraved with the name of the Marquis at the end of the three roads, that doesn’t mean it is the narrative end of the whole story. The connotation of “finalizability” and “unfinalizability” in Bakhtin’s thoughts is much richer than that in people’s common comprehension. The novel is structurally similar to a computer game, in which the author becomes a player, and the crossroads symbolize four chances to be reborn. Therefore, David’s fate can be reseted four times after death. At the crossroads, David had walked the left branch, the right branch and back at the main road, and died three times, but he still had a chance to be reborn: goes straight on the main road. Only when he finishes the exploration on the main road, it can be viewed as the narrative end of the story. As to whether David ends up with death or changing his fate, that is a question of “openness”.

3.2 The Charm of O. Henry’s Thoughts

Literally, *Roads of Destiny* is only a matter of a tragic story about a young man who involved in risks three times when pursuing dream and finally ended in death. However, rich content of life situation is hidden in such a common story. It is a high generalization of human existence state and survival attitude. In the Chinese scholar Jin Jianren’s view, “literature must refer to certain objects that evoke emotions, must refer to people’s life experiences involved in the world, and must be inextricably linked to the real world” (Jin, 2018, p. 168). In this sense, David can be viewed as a signifier and the society behind him can be viewed as what is signified. Although O. Henry spends tremendous amount of ink depicting David’s tragic life, he aims at uncovering the social background behind him.

However, how is the connotation hidden and disclosed? The application of two artistic methods of “O. Henry Ending” and “polyphonic narrative” must be the best answer. “Each clue of a polyphonic novel is indispensable. They clarify each other, explain each other, examine and explore the same theme” (Kundera, 2004, p. 95). Lucky beginning, tragic end, this is the shepherd David’s fate. David is only an epitome of society. His predicament in choosing roads of destiny expounds his helplessness in love and the inevitability of fate. It is universally acknowledged that the real fate is not a game which can be reset after death. Such a fate arrangement in *Roads of Destiny* not only provides a multiple perspectives for examining the fate of the hero David, but also contains the author’s dialectical and multidimensional philosophical thinking on life.

CONCLUSION

The application of the two artistic methods of “O. Henry Ending” and “polyphonic narrative” not only reflects O. Henry’s thinking on life and love, but also brings infinite enlightenment to the reader. Who controls human fate? Can the weakness of human nature be avoided? Can fate really be reset? These are eternal philosophical propositions that can not be answered since ancient times. The combination of the two provides a unique dual artistic perspective in analyzing the present human survival and mental state, and shows O. Henry’s broad vision and dialectical thinking as a cultural philosopher, which achieved sublimation from structural aesthetics to philosophy.

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