The Covert Comments of the Omniscient Narrator in Ulysses

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Many ways have been employed by writers to elucidate their themes, such as characterization, style, narrator's comments etc. Narrator's comment as an effective approach of making judgments and exploring the theme is universally applied by novelists. Narrators reveal their comments generally through two modes: omniscient narration and focalized narration. The omniscient narrator himself does not participate in the story, but he can evaluate the fictional world from his point of view, generally the omniscient narrator may employ two ways to make comments: the overt comments and the covert one. The former commonly appears frequently in traditional novels, for example, the opening sentence in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, the narrator gives his clear and definite comment on Victorian society: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife". In the latter case, the omniscient narrator may express his judgments imperceptibly filtered in the narration. His comments are implemented covertly through symbols and allusions.
or through parodic narrative modes. Consequently the narrator's comments are constructed into the texture of the text. In the case of *Ulysses*, the omniscient narrator discloses his unique comments on modern society mainly through implicit devices, which produce a comprehensive and multi-levelled revelation of the chaotic nature of modern society.

The narrative modes engaged in *Ulysses* are the omniscient narration and character-focalized narration, through which the narration fulfills the theme. Joyce integrates the omniscient narration and the focalised narration to comment the very nature of the "paralysed Dublin", and how modern men react in the spiritual wasteland. These two narrative methods are interwoven masterly in the text to illustrate the theme, and probe into the core of the spiritual chaos through the narrator's comments. This thesis explores how the omniscient narrator articulates his attitudes and judgments on modern society, and how these contribute to the theme of the novel. An omniscient narrator communicates authorial narration thus the readers would assume him as the writer's agent, and willingly accept and approve what he informs. Many authors allow their authorial narrators to speak directly to their addressees and to comment on action and characters overtly. James Joyce seldom applies such a device in *Ulysses*. The omniscient narrator in *Ulysses* frequently makes covert comments on the alienated and futile spiritual wasteland. His comments are carried out mainly through two ways: 1) the use of symbols and allusions, 2) parodic narrative modes.

1) Allusions and Symbols

Although the omniscient narrator occupies less part in *Ulysses* than the character narrator does, he takes every effort to elucidate the theme through covert comments. One of his covert comments is the use of symbol and allusions. "The covert comments are generally filtered in the narration, and reveal the narrator's attitudes and ideology towards the society through narrative structures and techniques, however the narrator himself never makes
open comments. "^ The narrator never directly expresses his attitudes toward the "paralyzed Dublin", but through his implementation of symbols and allusions, the cultural and historical meaning of which denote imperceptibly his negative and bleak attitudes towards modern society. The symbols and allusions at the very beginning of the novel reveal quietly the narrators' ironic attitudes towards the society:

Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crosses. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned.

—Introibo ad altare Dei. ³

The omniscient narrator at the very beginning describes Buck Mulligan ironically as a slovenly priest in a Mass. The bowl of lather, symbolizing the chalice, which in the ceremony of the Mass becomes the blood of Christ, and his yellow gown, indicates the dressing of a priest celebrating a Mass. However, the "ungirdled" suggests an ironic violation of the priestly vow of chastity, because when a priest celebrates Mass, the alb, the long white linen robe with tapered sleeves that he wears, is secured by a girdle. The portrait of Mulligan at the very beginning offers the readers a mockery of the religion. The solemnity is broken violently. Furthermore the appropriate vestments for the Mass are white with gold optional. The yellow gown indicates liturgically negative connotations: "Yellow is sometimes used to suggest infernal light, degradation, jealousy, treason, and deceit. Thus the traitor Judas is frequently painted in a garment of dingy yellow. In the Middle Ages heretics were obliged to wear yellow."³ The Latin words, which means "I will go up to God's altar", is what a priest used to say in opening phase of the Mass, and denotes that people pray to be rescued from the oppression and to be restored to the temple and alter of God. The ironic presentation of Mulligan, the anti-hero as a priest is the narrator's unique
and artistic comments on the alienated and futile society through allusion and symbols. The future of mankind is randomly relied on a clown, and thus a bleak tone is cast at the very beginning of the novel.

The symbols and allusions related to the religious ceremony serve as a profound mockery of the West society and its people, for the rational and stable society of tradition was hammered into smithereens by Nietzsche's "the death of God". People lived in an agitating world, in which they felt the collapse of spiritual props, and lost in faith. They had a strong sense of alienation and incurable feeling of homelessness, and felt a futile future of the whole mankind. In order to depict this phenomenon, James Joyce masterly employs the narrator's covert comments, he seldom permit his omniscient narrator express his attitudes overtly, but reveals them stealthily. These words and descriptions through symbolic allusions impact the readers shockingly, because the readers would easily make a sharp contrast between the stable and rational world sustained by an omnipotent God and the chaotic modern society represented in the mockery delineation of religious ceremony. Another example can be shown in Chapter Twelve. A man called "Citizen" symbolizing the Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant monster, has a one-eyed view, a rabid Irish nationalist and anti-Semitic quarrels with Bloom. Bloom in this chapter is depicted as a humble but charitable person and hails for universal love. However in the contest with the fanatical Citizen, he is always suppressed by his counterpart, the illusion cuts evidently that in the chaotic world love and reason is defeated by injustice. The symbol and allusion in the ending of the chapter profoundly strengthens this theme. The raged Citizen throws a biscuit box onto Bloom, but he swiftly gets in a carriage and escapes. The narrator then describes Bloom and the carriage as a messiah and his chariot: "He stood ascend to heaven. And they held Him in the chariot, clothed upon in the glory of the brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they
durst not look upon him. And there came a voice out of heaven, calling: Elijah! Elijah!" (Ulysses, p. 345) The masterly comment of the narrator lies in his allusive symbol of biblical character paralleled with a trivial person, the Elijah with an underdog. The comment is made manifest but also tragic. A vulgar and coward anti-hero, who is despised in the whole chapter has been scared to exile, is suddenly clad as the Jewish prophet. The profound significance shocks the readers with the illusion that the future of the whole mankind has been relied on such humble and despicable person. Thus the gloomy and futile future of modern society gets clearly drawn. The narrator's comments are tactically achieved implicitly through his symbolic depiction.

Compared with an overt comment of the narrator, this device interweaves the narrator's attitudes into the texture of the text imperceptibly and makes his comments convincing and profound. These symbols and allusions are constructed in nearly every page of the text, and most of them serve as an ironic delineation of modern men in contrast with their counterparts in ancient religion, epics and mythologies, therefore strengthens the theme of the novel.

2) Parodic Narrative Techniques

The omniscient narrator may imitate other forms or styles as devices to reveal his negative attitudes towards modern society. This way of narrative aims at the ironic tone of the theme. In Ulysses, the narrator parodies other artistic forms like newspaper, music and drama etc. so as to attribute meaning and significance to the narrative form as an approach to reveal his ideology and attitudes. In the conception of the eighteen chapters, Joyce makes a detailed outline and works it "from eighteen different points of view and in as many styles". These variations in the narrative enables the narrator parody other artistic forms as approaches to convey his mockery of the paralyzed Dublin and its people, for "the narrative structure imparts
meanings”. Under such circumstances the narrator should narrate the story in the omniscient level on one hand, on the other hand, he serves as a stage manager to regulate the narrative and stylistic form in every passage or a whole chapter, so that not only the content, but also the narrative form produces meaning. Many these narrative forms are ironic display of other artistic forms, and reveal imperceptibly the narrator’s negative attitudes towards modern society.

The parodic narrative can be discerned in Chapter Fifteen “Circe”, the dramatic form of which serves as a mockery of Western civilization. On the narrative level, the narrator innovatively moulds the whole chapter into a Shakespearean play. His parodic accounts of the antiheroes in the form of drama provide the readers with a sharp contrast between the “paragon of all animals” in Shakespeare’s dramas and the sordid Dubliners, between the Elizabethan battlegrounds and the Dublin’s brothel area, and between the Renaissance civilization and the spiritual wasteland. On the other hand, the evils in Shakespeare’s plays are reproduced ingeniously on the Dublin streets by Joyce’s narrator. “It is significant that Shakespeare, in what is considered to be his profoundest study of evil and his most sensitive poetic investigation of the human status, should have recourse to just such devices as Joyce uses here.” In Chapter “Circe”, engaged as a stage manager, the narrator imparts the role of a performer to each of his characters, and guides them to act as Elizabethan players.

The narrator’s dramatic construction of the whole chapter intensifies the ideological significance of the narrative form, and magnifies the opposition between the chaotic modern society and the Renaissance civilization. The mockery of modern men is filtered through his ironic imitation of drama. The omniscient narrator manages to transform the narrative as ways of making meaning, which reveals his attitudes, for his “projects can go beyond narrating, describing, or identifying will resonate with overtones of
propria persona. Such pronouncements are best labeled comments. "Shakespearean paragons are replaced by groups of anti-heroes: Bloom's inner workings in this chapter are described as immediately succumbed to hallucinations, in which he is "transformed" into a feminized beast. Stephen's nostalgic and religious obsessions are as "enchanting" and harmful as bloom's sexual preoccupations with masculinity and virility. The parody of Hamlet's soliloquy enables the readers to contrast swiftly history with reality, and profoundly understand the shocking degradation of the spiritual wasteland. And the ironic effect of a squalid clown clad as a heroic prince draws the readers close to the theme. The mockery of modern men is filtered through his ironic imitation of drama. Bloom and Stephen are harassed by prostitutes and sordidness of the brothel, and are completely vulnerable in Nighttown, as if they are hypnotized or under a spell and both must reassert themselves, and should be led out of "the paralyzed Dublin". Their distorted sexual fears and repressed desires demonstrate the chaotic and alienated society and its people. Modern men are urgently required to be reoriented out of the wasteland. The chaos and futility of modern society are highly foregrounded and the theme is strengthened by the narrator's innovative parody of dramatic narration.

As Joyce manages to write his novel through various styles, the narrator avails himself of opportunities to reveal his comments through parodic narrative modes. In "Aeolous" the narrator imitates the style of newspaper and divides the whole chapter into sixty-three sections, each of which is capped with a headline. The narrator becomes a experienced editor or journalist and assembles those sections drastically varied in content, rhetoric and perspectives, so that the heterogeneous and mosaic narrative form renders the whole chapter as a collage of different aspects of modern society, and "leave an overtly large and irreducibly heterogeneous category called Miscellany". The narrator thus becomes a cubic artist like Picasso, with

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his brush paints the whole chapter as a cubic picture, in which the drastic heterogeneity in content and form serves as an insightful comment on the spiritual isolation and social chaos of modern society. And all the activities "of one day are juxtaposed to one another like the great newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world's life)." The fragmented and chaotic nature of modern society is masterly foregrounded through the parodic narrative. The narrator's ironic imitation of other forms employed in narration covertly and ingeniously reveals his negative attitudes towards modern society, such constructions of narrative form exist nearly in every chapter and every page. The narration through gigantic imitation of exaggerations in Chapter Twelve, "Cyclops", weaves the narrator's comments on the fanatical Citizen and charitable but humble Bloom through the contrast of paradoxical and ridiculous parallel between styles. One interpolation is the ironic narration of Bloom's universal love, in which the narrator ironically imitates a comic scribble on the wall and then lists a series of love relationships crowded with animal's oestrum, sexual love and random images and associations of love: "Love loves to love love. Nurse loves the new chemist. Constable 14A loves Mary Kelly. Gerty MacDowell loves the boy that has the bicycle. M. B. loves a fair gentleman. Li Chi Han lovey up kissy Cha Pu Chow. Jumbo, the elephant, loves Alice, the elephant." (Ulysses, p. 333) Even the Ancient Chinese book in the Han Dynasty Li Chi, Books of Rites, loves Chinese tea (Cha is Chinese word for tea), thus Bloom's universal love is derided in the narrative form, and the narrator's ironic comments is immediately achieved. More examples are shown in Chapter Eleven, "Oxen of the Sun", in which the omniscient narrator reveals his comments on the society through the parody of those heroic styles in history from Geoffrey Chaucer to Charles Dickens. The narrator's comments are enhanced through his narrative contrast between the ancient heroic styles and modern chaotic society. Through out the novel the narrator's comments
through narrative forms vary in different chapters and within chapters. Therefore the narrator in order to covertly articulate his comments “dons a stylistic mask of innocence to parody the very enterprise of telling a story. Parody is cut loose from the concerns of character and becomes an aspect of narrative”, and through these narrative devices the omniscient narrator weaves his implicit comments on the chaotic and futile society into the text, which reveals a profound manifestation of the spiritual wasteland.

The highlight of James Joyce’s technique lies not only in his characterization but also in his innovation of narrative techniques. He effectively employs different narrative forms to reveal the narrator’s comments on the paralysed Dublin society. Joyce’s omniscient narrator ingeniously retreats from overt comments, coats his comments a layer of allusion and symbols, or through parodic narrative forms. James Joyce’s innovative employment of omniscient narrator’s comments achieves a high mastery of the omniscient narrator’s comments in theme-probing through the integration of the narrator’s narration and its’ comments, both of which function efficiently in the other’s collaboration, and profoundly elucidate the theme. Therefore James Joyce’s artistic achievements in Ulysses, is highlighted in his innovation of the theme probe through narrative techniques. He endows the narrator with the comments through different narrative techniques, and through such devices James Joyce not only qualifies Ulysses a masterpiece on the modern spiritual wasteland but also innovates narrative techniques for theme probe, which have influenced modern and postmodern writers.

Notes:

1. Yamin, Hu. Narratology. [M] Wuhan: Central China Normal University Press, 1998, p. 111.
2. Joyce, James. Ulysses. [M] Vintage Books, New York, 1961, p. 3.
3. Gifford, Don and Robert J. Seidman. Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce’s
Ulysses. [M] Berkley Los Angeles London: University of California Press. 1989, p. 13.

4 Tymoczko, Maria. The Irish Ulysses. [M] Berkeley; University of California Press, 1994. p. 68.

5 Chatman, Seymour. Story and Discourse. [M] Ithaca and London; Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 25.

6 Blamires, Harry. The New Bloomsday Book. [M] London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 153.

7 Chatman, Seymour. Story and Discourse. [M] Ithaca and London; Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 228.

8 Gifford, Don and Robert J. Seidman. Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses. [M] Berkeley Los Angeles and London: University of California Press. 1989, p. 635 - 6.

9 Butler, Christopher. "Joyce' Modernism and Postmodernism". [A] Attridge, Derk. Ed. The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce. [C] Shanghai; Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 269.

10 Lawrence, Karen. "The Narrative Form" [A] Bernard Benstock. Ed. Critical Essays on James Joyce's Ulysses. [C] Buston; G. K. Hall & Co., 1989, p. 297.

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