Characterization of Tess from the Perspective of Focalization

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Abstract. This article makes a tentative analysis of the characterization of Tess in Tess d’Urbervilles from the narrative perspective of focalization. Thomas Hardy combines the three types of focalization in Tess d’Urbervilles to vividly present a tragic heroine with multi-facets traits: a pure virtuous country girl who is conservative morally as well as rebelling. As the dominant perspective in Tess d’Urbervilles, the zero-focalization offers readers a panoramic view and higher vision of Tess’s character with all-round information, which makes the personality multi-facet and clear. And internal focalization brings readers closer to the Tess by seeing her inner and observes her from perspective of other characters so that Tess’s image becomes more vivid and profound. External focalization is used to describe Tess’s external attractive appearance and at times suggests some of her personality traits. A special sense of suspense has thus been made to arouse readers’ curiosity to read on to know more about Tess.

Introduction to Focalization and Tess D’Urbervilles

Focalization, a term given by Genette, refers to the mediation of some ‘prism,’ ‘perspective,’ ‘angle of vision’ or ‘point of view’ through which the story is presented in the text, verbalized by the narrator though not necessarily his. It’s not free of optical-photographic connotations, and –like ‘point of view’ – it’s purely visual sense has to be broadened to include cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 73). Focalization stands an indispensable position among all the narrative elements to convey the theme and present vivid images.

Tess d’Urbervilles, a masterpiece by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), a famous modernist novelist, has always had a remarkably strong appeal for general readers since its publication over 100 years ago and also attracted increasing attention from scholars both at home and abroad. Backward social morality is exposed and the tragic heroine Tess stands independently as an exceptional piece in the history of English literature.

This essay will make a tentative analysis of the characterization of Tess from the perspective of focalization.

Types of Focalization

Various opinions are given by narratologists on the classification of focalization. Genette, the world-renowned French narratologist, gives a more complete and accurate one which is based on Friedman’s eight types and other narratologists. Using a rigorous typology, Genetette distinguishes three types of focalization. The first type is zero focalization or non-focalization, i.e. the traditional “omniscient narrator” without fixed perspective. The narrator knows everything, even what everyone thinks in the story. He obviously knows much more than the character. The second type is internal focalization, i.e. the perspective of a particular character in the story. Thus, the narrator knows as much as the focal character and cannot report the thoughts of other characters. The third type is external focalization, the point of view of an outsider, not involved in the story but acts a bit like a camera lens, following the character’s actions and gestures from the outside. Therefore, the narrator know less than the character.

Thomas Hardy combines the three types in Tess d’Urbervilles to present a vivid image of Tess with multi-facet traits.
Characterization of Tess under Zero Focalization

Zero-focalization is a common narrative method used in traditional fictions. The narrator is omniscient, who can not only see the actions of the characters, give descriptions of all kinds of scenes, but also have the power to expose the characters’ inner worlds to the readers as well as produce comment on each other, which happens in the story. Therefore, information about character can be provided as much as possible by the god-like narrator in order to make character concrete and complete.

As the dominant perspective in Tess d’Urbervilles, the zero-focalization enlarges the image of Tess with all-round information. She is an innocent country girl with many virtues. However, she is a moral conservative and a rebel at the same time.

On the one hand, direct definitions are given by the authoritative narrator for characterization, especially at the beginning. For example, Tess Durbeyfield at that time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion by experience. The dialect tongue to some extent, despite the village school: the characteristic intonation of that dialect for this district being the voicing approximately rendered by the syllable UR, probably as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech (Hardy, 1985: 52).

Here, Tess’s name, identity, age, education background and accents are told by the narrator directly. An innocent country girl comes into our view. Moreover, many virtues pertaining to labor people can be found in her. Zero focalization provides the narrator the authority to name some prominent traits of Tess, such as “freshness” and “prettiness” (Hardy, 1985:52).

On the other hand, examples are elaborated to show Tess’s image indirectly in various ways such as speech and action. As a result, we can elicit Tess’s multi-facet character from the plots or incidents presented under zero focalization.

For instance, when Tess sees her mother so busy, Hardy writes “I’ll rock the cradle for ‘ee, mother, said the daughter gently” (Hardy, 1985: 58). Here his diligence, selflessness and good temper are displayed obviously. When Clare abandons her, she is still waiting for him and her free direct speech reveals her loyalty to love “I love him just the same, and hate all other men, and like to make ‘em think scornfully of me” (Hardy, 1985: 355)! When she sees Clare is unable to accept her loss of chastity, the narrator writes.

Her cheek was flaccid, and her mouth had almost the aspect of a round little hole. The horrible sense of his view of her so deadened her that she staggered; and she stepped forward, thinking she was going to fall (Hardy, 1985: 308).

Tess is so frightened and worried at Clare’s response. Her characteristic weakness has been shown that she has also badly influenced by the backward morality psychologically.

When Tess’s child died, the most impressed of them said: “Be you really going to christen him, Tess?” The girl-mother replied in a grave affirmative (Hardy, 1985:145). The determination to baptize her legitimate child shows her spirit of rebellion towards the backward religion.

Traditional zero focalization runs through the whole narrative text of Tess. It offers a panorama by settings, details on speech, action or even inner thought of characters, which makes the personality multi-facet and clear. Meanwhile, the narrator stands in a higher place and could direct readers to see higher as to the fundamental qualities of the character by commenting. Nevertheless, disadvantages exist. Too many opinions and consciousness from the narrator may make readers uncomfortable. And also character’s inner thoughts or feelings under zero focalization seem not deep enough for readers to be close to the character. To make up, Hardy adds certain internal focalization.

Characterization of Tess under Internal Focalization

According to Genette, internal focalization falls into three types: (1) fixed internal focalization which the focalization is located in only one character; (2) variable internal focalization, when focalization is located in different several characters and (3) multiple internal focalization, when there are different focalizes who focalize themselves on the same event in different perspectives.
In *Tess d’Urbervilles*, Hardy inverts variable and a little multiple internal focalization into the dominating classic zero focalization for the sake of better characterization of Tess. The changes between focalize and focalized present multi-dimensional image of Tess and make this character more vivid and exceptional.

What is focalized in Tess’s eyes is a reflection of her own image. For focalization, “it’s purely visual sense has to be broadened to include cognitive, emotive and ideological orientation” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 73). Therefore, the focalization inevitably reflects the emotion, attitudes, values and the personality as a whole. As the heroine, Tess focalized in the story most of the time. Thus, the focalized from her perspective reflect the image herself. The inner description from her own perspective is predominant in this type. For example, when her mother advises her to marry Alec, who seduced her,

Get Alec d’Urberville in the mind to marry her [1]! He marries her! On matrimony he had never once said a word, And what if he had? How a convulsive snatching at social salvation might have impelled her to answer him she could not say [2]. But her poor foolish mother little knew her present feeling towards his man. Perhaps it was unusual in the circumstances, unlucky, unaccountable; but there it was; and this, as she had said, was what made her detest herself [3]. She had never wholly cared for him, she did not at all care for him now [4]. She had dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender a while: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run.

The first sentence puts focus on the Tess. Two exclamation marks are used to show Tess’s strong disgust for Alec and her doubt about Alec marrying her. According to the backward morality, a women’s chastity, as her biggest virtue, is her husband’s exclusive possession. Thus, it’s Tess’s only choice to marry Alec after she is seduced by Alec. Her obvious attitudes exhibit her spirit of rebellion. The second sentence becomes narrator-focalizer, expressing the narrator’s attitude. Immediately, Tess takes the perspective, revealing her mixed feeling towards Alec. The fourth sentence turns back to Tess’s point of view and provides an objective description of what Tess thinks about Alec. Tess’s spirit of rebellion is sufficiently displayed.

Furthermore, in some plots, Hardy selects one other character as the focalizer to see what happens to Tess, which enriches the image of Tess. The entire Chapter LVI is a typical example, for the whole process of Tess killing Alec is described from the perspective of Mr. Brooks, the landlady.

The landlady looked through the keyhole. Only a small space of the room inside was visible, but within that space came a corner of the breakfast table, which was already spread for the meal, and also a chair beside. Over the seat of the chair Tess’s face was bowed, her posture being a kneeling one in front of it: her hands were clasped over her head, the skirts of her dressing-gown and the embroidery of her night-gown flowed upon the floor behind her, and her stocking less feet, from which the slippers had fallen, protruded upon the carpet (Hardy, 1985: 469). She did not answer, but went on, in a tone which was a soliloquy rather than an exclamation, and a dirge rather than a soliloquy. Mrs. Brooks could only catch a portion (Hardy, 1985:469). As she did so her eyes glanced casually over the ceiling still they were arrested by a spot in the middle of its while surface which she had never noticed there before. It was about the size of a wafer when she first observed it, but it speedily grew as large as the psalm of her and, and then she could perceive blot in the midst, had the appearance of a gigantic ace of hearts (Hardy, 1985: 471).

The internal focalization from perspective of Mrs. Black does not cover how Tess kills Alec. But what she sees and hears not only tells us the fact but also suggests Tess’s change from weakness to anger to rebellion. A brave and rebelling girl has been characterized vividly.

**Characterization of Tess under External Focalization**

“If what is presented is limited to the characters external behavior (words and action but not thoughts or feelings), their appearances, and the setting against which they come to force, external focalization is said to obtain” (Prince, 1987:32). In this kind of focalization, everything is given by
an outside observer. There is no personal comment given by the narrator, no detailed analysis of character’s inner thoughts and feelings, only objective narration. The narrator, like a faithful scrivener, gives us every single piece of information about what he sees outwardly. A considerable amount of external focalization is also used to characterize Tess. Not only are Tess’s external features displayed, but also some of her personality traits are often revealed.

Tess’s first appearance is described under external focalization. The narrator takes external focalization, giving no further information about who she is but a detailed description of her action and good looks. This external focalization happens after she turns her head at the exclamation.

She was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others, possibly but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to color and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment (Hardy, 1985: 51).

Tess’s external beauty unfolds in the description under external focalization here. Moreover, “mobile peony mouth” and “large innocent eyes” function as disguised definitions to Tess’s personality traits: liveliness and innocence.

Another example lies at the beginning of Chapter 14 when this morning the eye returns in voluntarily to the girl in the pink cotton jacket, she being the most flexuous and finely-drawn figure of them all. But her bonnet is pulled so far over her brow that none of her face is disclosed while she binds, though her complexion may be guessed from a stray twine or two of dark brown hair which extends below the curtain of her bonnet. At intervals she stands up to rest, and retie her disarranged apron, or to pull her bonnet straight. Then one can see the oval face of a handsome youth woman with deep dark eyes and long heavy clinging tresses, which seem to clasp in a beseeching way anything they fall against. The cheeks are paler, the teeth more regular, the red lips thinner than is usual in a country-bred girl (Hardy, 1985: 138).

Here the effect of suspense has also been made to attract readers to focus on this girl. This external focalization not only tells Tess’s extraordinarily attractive looks, but also indicates Tess’s inherently diligence and purity.

We can find it is more attractive to taking external focalization than the other types to introduce Tess in many plots, for the hidden information creates the curiosity in the readers. Readers will be attracted to read on to know more information such as which she is, what kind of part she plays in the story. Thus external focalization creates a kind of suspense and brings more attraction to the story as well as to the image of Tess. Detailed descriptions under external focalization tell the external looks of the character and also at times speak for itself about the character’s personality.

Conclusion

By adopting mainly the zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization as well as shifts here and there, Thomas Hardy does succeed with Tess d’Urbervilles in presenting a multi-facets tragic heroine: a pure virtuous country girl who is conservative morally as well as rebelling. Seemingly contradictory traits make Tess more concrete and move readers deeply. The overwhelming traditional zero focalization is used to provide more and more information about Tess, which makes the image of Tess multi-facet and profound. Readers could perceive a panoramic view and higher vision of Tess’s character. And internal focalization brings readers closer to the Tess by seeing her inner and observes her from perspective of other character. So that Tess’s image becomes more vivid and profound. External focalization is used to describe Tess’s external attractive appearance and at times suggest some of Tess’s personality traits. A special sense of suspense has been made to arouse readers’ curiosity to read on to know more about Tess. This successful characterization of Tess under a combination of different focalizations makes Tess an exceptional figure in literary history.
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