Disillusionment of Bliss in Authorial Voice

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Through close text reading of Bliss written by Katherine Mansfield, this thesis analyzes authorial features of extra representational acts, like direct judgments and addresses, and indirection techniques, such as free indirect discourse and irony, and explores Mansfield’s narrative voice of authority from the perspective of Lanser’s critical concept of “authorial voice” in order to show Bertha’s disillusionment of her superficially happy life and to inspire women to raise the consciousness of facing reality, finding true self and living unfettered life.

Keywords: Mansfield, Bliss, authorial voice, disillusionment

Introduction

Since the 1990s, “feminist narratology” has become a prominent study in the field of American narrative research, and Lanser’s Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice also has a lasting impact on feminist literary criticism and narratology in China with the publication of its Chinese translation (Shen, 2004, p. 137). Lanser (2018) drew upon the term “authorial voice” in feminist reading of narrative structures to identify “narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential” (p. 15). She chooses the term “authorial” to suggest that such a voice (re)produces the structural and functional situation of authorship. Moreover, she suggests making a distinction between narrators who simply predicate the words and actions of fictional characters and those who undertake “extra representational” acts: reflections, judgments, generalizations about the world “beyond” the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writes and texts (p. 16). Also, she selects five novels to analyze the main techniques used by authors to express their authorial authority: self-silencing, indirections, maxims, absence, and unspeakable voice (Lanser, 2018), among which she sums up Austen’s various forms of “indirection” that includes free indirect discourse, irony, ambiguity, and so on (p. 62). In Bliss, Mansfield shows her extra representational acts and indirection technique, and with the disillusionment and awakening of the heroine in her work, she explicitly makes readers aware of her own voice.

The controversial heroine Bertha, who is recognized by some critics as a female stereotype: “timid, sentimental, childish, frigid, naive, self-deluding” (Marilyn, 2002, p. 141), finally confronts the cruel disillusionment of her bliss and expresses her yearning for freedom and autonomy implicitly, although she realizes her desires and expresses dissatisfactions toward her life at a low speed. We can catch on to the gradual process of Bertha’s awakening through Mansfield’s elaborate authorial discourses. Hu Jian (2011), whose research topic is modern feminist literary image, also takes Bliss as an example to analyze the consciousness of
female subject cognition, highlighting the disillusionment (pp. 222-223). This thesis involves the study of the author’s both characterization and narrative voice, illustrating Mansfield’s distinct authorial narrative voice that embodies her struggles and efforts to speak out despite social constraints. There are few researches from this aspect, and this thesis may provide a new perspective for the study of Bliss.

**Bertha’s Dissatisfactions and Desires in Extra Representational Acts**

Mansfield actually forms her own authority by infusing her own discourses into text lines, and seeing all those “extra representational” acts, such as “judgments” and “direct addresses to the narrate”, it can be figured out that she expresses dissatisfaction with Bertha’s daily life and that of women like her (Lanser, 2018, p. 16).

**Mansfield’s Judgments and Bertha’s Dissatisfactions**

Mansfield makes use of many seemingly objective direct thoughts without narrative marks to guide readers. It can be exemplified through two examples. Firstly, we cannot differentiate between the author’s judgments and Bertha’s interior monologue in that paragraph of description of Bertha’s seemingly blissful life. “Really-really-she had everything” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 226). Mansfield writes that Bertha has a good husband, an adorable baby, a rich family, and many thrilling friends. But the reader is left with the impression that the more the “happy marriage” is described, the more Bertha’s unhappiness is revealed. So, Mansfield is inclined to illustrate that women should not pursue a seemingly happy life only. Bertha believes that their spiritual life lags behind the material life, and she is not willing to immerse herself in the ordinary daily chores. Secondly, Bertha’s mentioning of Chekhov makes it more obvious that the author puts her literary preference into the story’s development. As we all know, deeply inspired by Chekhov in art, Mansfield pays attention to explore the changes of characters’ emotions from seemingly ordinary places. Chekhov is good at ridiculing the ugly reality and vulgar hypocrisy, and writing about the depressing life. Here both Mansfield and Bertha’s preference for him indicates that the ending of the story will take on a sudden turn, and that things are much more complicated than what they seem to be, and the superficial happy life will be broken sooner or later. Also, most of her friends are artsy-craftsy, with no real literary taste at her level.

**Direct Addresses to Public Narratees and Bertha’s Desires**

“What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 219)? In many paragraphs, like this, there are many Mansfield’s direct dialogues with readers. The word “you” has a very obvious directivity, that is, talking directly to the narratees and asking them what kind of reaction he or she would make if he or she were in such a happy preset scene, so as to increase the reader’s sense of immersion. Such vagueness or confusion is the author’s way of establishing her authority in the reader’s response. Another example, Oh, is there no way you can express it without being ‘drunk and disorderly’” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 220)? Except direct address “you”, “being drunk and disorderly” also easily draws the readers into the same state, where they have great empathy with heroine’s restlessness, blankness and hysteria—she has no idea about how to express it and what to do with it.

These questions function like the author using her own voice to express an attitude, or asking the reader’s opinion, or presenting the heroine Bertha’s inner monologue. The author has three purposes in writing this way: First, to paint a lively, energetic and simple heroine character. Second, to form a sharp contrast and inspire readers to think: How strong the happiness is at the moment, how cold the disillusionment will be later. It also
shows that the heroine’s self-liberation is very necessary and urgent. Thirdly, to show the heroine’s strong desire and pursuit of lovely life and that she does not want to be bounded, and what she is eager for is to live a free life.

**Mansfield’s Indirection to Show Bertha’s Disillusionment**

Zhuang Rong (2014) had also presented a nuanced version of Sarah’s writing experience and complicated her “modest muse” image, in which the “feminine sentiment” corresponds to Lanser’s indirection (p. 46). Mansfield’s indirection like free indirect discourse and irony contributes to the spiritual disillusionment and the organic awakening process of Bertha’s sense of independence and freedom.

**Free Indirect Discourse to Present the Constraint of Self-value**

First, the phrase “idiotic civilization” appears when Bertha sighs “How idiotic civilization is! Why be given…like a rare, rare fiddle” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 220)? Bertha expresses her wish not to be an ignorant or idiotic bird in her husband’s cage that is aware only of showing beautiful feathers. The word “fiddle” here has double meanings simultaneously: One is apparently the “violin”; another is the “fraud” or the “secret” her husband and friend conceal from her. Moreover, “idiotic civilization” comes up again when Bertha hangs up reluctantly and feels helpless about her husband’s incomprehension, “how much more than idiotic civilization was”, and she can only “absurdly cry” something unimportant and irrelevant to her real thoughts to keep the conversation going (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 223). Her strong passion contrasts sharply with her husband’s indifference. It is now explicit that she feels tied down about the family or social norms, and particularly her inability to have a deep connection in soul with her husband. The word “absurd” also arises when Bertha tries to be close to her daughter: “How absurd it was. Why have a baby if it has to be kept—not in a case like a rare, rare fiddle” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 222)? The “fiddle” this time symbolizes the constraint on mother-daughter relationship. Because of the invisible power from the despotic nanny over her, there is a loss of intimacy and affection between her and her daughter, which leads to her failure to assume the proper role as a good mother. Finally, the description that Bertha throws off her coat for “she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment” explains that she prefers to get rid of those suffocative pressure (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 220).

Bertha’s happiness begins to become disillusioned with the awareness of absurd bondage and suffocating repression. Above discourses Mansfield grants Bertha also show her voice that captive women needs to break their chains and seize the opportunity of happiness to live by their own free wills.

**Irony to Demonstrate the Disillusionment of Social Interactions**

Irony is mainly embodied in the following three aspects: “harmonious” friend circle, “prejudiced” husband, and “silver” Miss Fulton.

Mrs. Norman Knight presents with “the most amusing orange coat with a procession of black monkeys”, and asks Mr. Warren what “happy socks” he meets in a mocking tone (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 228). They talk about dramas, theaters, and poetries with vulgar taste in art. There are indeed many “pretentious and inane conversation among these remarkable specimens of the superficial, self-satisfied bourgeoise” (Armine, 1994, p. 45). Later, Bertha sighs “What a pity someone does not play!” to hide her sense of foreboding and her embarrassment at being in an atmosphere of un congenial guests. Though Bertha does not recognize the dull and absurd topics they discuss, she has to acquiesce to them. She deludes herself into thinking that these people are
her dear friends, and convinces herself that she likes them, because they would enjoy the dinner she has prepared, the table she has decorated, and come to her parties anyway. It is Bertha’s self-deception as well as a mockery of her numbness from Mansfield. In addition, Mrs. Norman Knight believes the middle class is “stodgy”, Norman cries that it is a “sad, sad fall”, and Eddie Warren is in a state of “acute distress”, which demonstrate that those people are all in a low spirit (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 226). Their gloomy and unhappy mood and bluster are in contrast with Bertha’s brimming bliss and innocence, which shows the author’s irony toward the middle class of their boring whines and questions at her time. In this way, the author provides an ironic environment and mocks the hypocrisy and niminy-piminy behaviors of the middle class at that time. She articulates her personal views and establishes her authority as the narrator.

When Bertha treats their guests with hospitality, Harry is busy being niminy-piminy and arrogant on purpose. At first, Bertha thinks Harry is a good husband and appreciates that he has a zest for life. But slowly she notices that he actually is arrogant, aloof, aggressive, and rude. He does not care about his own daughter even. When she “brightly” echoes what their friends say, he always wants to show his sharp tongue (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 227). What is more unforgivable is that she has been deceived by him for he is good at performing. Although Harry is having an affair with Miss Fulton, he deliberately speaks ill of Miss Fulton in front of Bertha more than once, saying she is “cold like all blonde women” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 224). Bertha should naively believe that her husband has misunderstood her best friend and defends Miss Fulton: “You are quite wrong about her” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 234). Bertha does not realize how stupid and naive she is until she unexpectedly catches sight of their affair.

Bertha imagines Miss Fulton, “all in silver” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 229), as perfect as the pear blossom, “almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon” (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 233). Finally, after knowing the cheating, Bertha exclaims: “Your lovely pear tree-pear tree-pear tree!” to express her disappointment and astonishment (Huang & Sun, 2014, p. 237). These repetitions are deliberate attempts to emphasize the failure of Bertha’s lesbian complex and to disclose the illusory nature of her pursuits. This is the ultimate irony of her innocence and foolishness and of the title “Bliss”. Here Mansfield shows sideways Bertha finally begins to realize the cruelty of reality—betrayal from her best friend and her husband, the bondage of marriage and the illusory happiness she pursues.

The pretentiousness, hypocrisy and deceit of the people around her make Bertha again conscious of her innocence, the illusory life and the disillusionment of all the beautiful appearances.

**Conclusion**

This thesis seeks to pinpoint how an innocent and simple young woman awakens to take a serious look at her life after the ironic and harsh disillusionment and how the authorial voice or narrative stance come about and form authority in 20th century. When writing *Bliss*, Mansfield is suffering from her own predicament: “But what I felt so seriously as I wrote it was—oh! I am in a way grown up as a writer—a sort of an authority” (Katherine, 1922, p. 113). But she boldly expresses, in her own voice, in the narrator’s voice, or in Bertha’s voice, varieties of her views on the woman problems of that time. Bertha will continue to pursue her new blossom, and the disillusionment is also a new start of awakening feminism. Women today who have more rights and options may learn a lesson to figure out what is important to them, how to maintain and manage love and marriage, and why they should live independently and intelligently.
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