

Happiness is the balance between freedom and legitimacy——Narrative analysis of Alice Munro's "Free Radicals"

Jurong Bai^{1*}

¹Nanjing Normal University, China

*Corresponding author: 2826893326@qq.com

Abstract

Alice Munro's short stories are intriguing due to their ingenious plots. To interpret her works, one often needs to piece together numerous details from the convoluted narrative to grasp the core of the story. Her short story "Free Radicals" attempts to uncover the complexity of human nature within a meticulously constructed textual narrative. Through the inner growth of the protagonist Nita after a robbery, it reveals a philosophical reflection on life: happiness is the balance between freedom and legitimacy. By focusing on the role reversal between Nita and Bette, the nested narrative method, and the dual metaphor of the title "Free Radicals", this discussion from a narratological perspective enables a more incisive understanding of the story.

Keywords : Alice Munro; short story; Free Radicals; narratology

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Introduction

Alice Munro is the 13th female winner in the history of Nobel Prize for Literature. She has been focusing on the creation of short stories. Although her space is limited compared with novels, she can make short stories rich in the content of novels and transcendent life thinking with her exquisite structure skills and excellent language art. In the face of short story creation in the hands of Maupassant, O. Henry, Chekhov, Hemingway and other masters, has made great achievements, how to climb the peak to bring innovative breakthroughs, has become the Munro short story writing needs to face and explore. There is no doubt that Munro has expanded her writing territory by exploring new growth points of short stories. She uncovers the undercurrent hidden in the mediocre life with a calm and objective tone, and tries to uncover the complex human nature in the careful construction of the text narrative, thus creating a novel world where darkness and warmth coexist, and where gloom and brightness coexist. With the unique psychological and life experience of women, she repeatedly refined and polished excellent short story works, shaping the unique style charm of the novel.

"Too Much Happiness" is a collection of short stories published when Munro was suffering from cancer in her later years. It consists of ten stories, which deal with the evil themes of violence, murder, crime and so on. It presents a darker tone than her previous works, which means that Munro's exploration of the human spiritual world has entered a more subtle and deep place. Living in the shadow of death, Munro wrote an image of an elderly woman suffering from cancer who had the same experience as herself in her novel "Free Radicals" which was included in "Too Much Happiness". There is a lot of room for interpretation of this story, and the author thinks that from the perspective of "happiness" reflected in the novel, this novel can be seen as Munro's response to the title of the novel "Too much happiness". In his book *The Happiness Paradox*, Ziyad Marar elaborates a point of view: "Happiness depends on the balance between freedom and legitimacy——the pursuit of freedom is almost always about 'me', self-expression, and escape from others; Legitimacy, on the other hand, depends almost entirely on the other, on our need to approach and gain approval from the other ". The idea that happiness is a balance between freedom and legitimacy is implicit in the main idea of Free Base. Based on narratology theories, this paper intends to analyze and discuss the novel Free Base from three aspects: story, narration and text.

Narrative Layer: Nested Narrative Method

The narrative mode of Munro's short stories is flexible and diverse, she breaks through the pattern of traditional novel creation, and forms a unique "Munro narrative" strategy. She is good at grasping the real life with fragmented techniques and the rhythm of time and space transformation, promoting the intersection of memory and present with non-linear narration, completing the blooming of the moment in a short space, leaving rich imagination space and pointing out the philosophy behind it. Domestic scholar Zhou Yi commented on Munro's narrative art: "With her unique keen perspective, Munro tells the

story in a way similar to paper cutting. The reader seems to be ramping on and on, but at the end of the story, he can always find some kind of fear like an abyss and a clear mirror like a water." Munro pays attention to the management of story form, which becomes the existence of her short stories difficult to reproduce. As a reader, sometimes it is necessary to repeatedly review the text, carefully read, follow the various details scattered in the novel by the author, carefully consider the relationship between characters and events, and splicing out the logical lines to see the cause and effect of the story. From this, we can reasonably draw our own conclusions on the blank parts of the novel.

In the novel, the narrative method is very unique, in which the narrator tells the story about the protagonist Nita in the third person tone, but it is in the subjective perspective of Nita to organize the picture and present the scene, "although this is a third person narrative, but as with the first person narration of the original text, we are not through the narrator, We see things through the protagonist's perspective of experience. Because the omniscient narrator's eyes have been replaced by the eyes of the characters in the story, we cannot see beyond the characters' vision, we can only experience what is happening with them." Therefore, although the novel is narrated through the third person, it starts from the position of the character Nita, tracks Nita's concerns and focuses on Nita's mental activities. Richie's death, Nita's living alone, and the concerns of her friends Virgie and Carol are all based on Nita's subjective experiences. The most obvious is that Nita's fabricated murder story at the end can tell the details of Bette and Richie's time together, indicating that Nita knows the earlier parts of Richie and Bette's lives. Throughout the text are representations of Nita's inner thoughts, such as "How did I know he was going to beat me to it?" "Every morning, when she sits in her place and Ricky isn't in his, she wonders why." "She knew he wanted her to ask him what he had really done. She was also clear that the less she knew, the better." Behind the seemingly simple narrative, the author uses unique narrative techniques to make use of the ambiguity of the narration of the characters and the narrator to create an illusion for the readers, so that the sudden turn effect of the following Settings can be maximized, and the theme becomes obscure from transparency. The novel constructs several story layers in the whole text frame. The outer frame narrative is the story of Nita, an aged woman suffering from cancer, who lives alone after her husband passes away and is accidentally confronted by a mugger; the secondary story layer is the murder experience of a young man and the poisoning incident fabricated by Nita. These two stories are embedded in the same discourse space with the themes of parent-child tragedy and marriage breakdown respectively. Adding a layer of fatalism to the plot development, and forming a huge tension between the embedded story layer and the main story layer, revealing the complex predicament of human existence. The novel can be roughly divided into three parts by the blank lines before the sections and the ellipses of three dots. The first part is dominated by the narrative voice, which explains the background of the story and the introduction of the characters through the narrator's narration, intersperses the relationship between Ritchie, Bette and Nita. At this time, the non-story narrator consciously plays the function of constructing the text. In the second part, as the narrative progresses, the tasks of the narrator are fully undertaken by the characters' words, and the narrator gradually withdraws behind the characters and presents the events directly through the eyes and consciousness of the characters. This processing method enhances the reliability of the information conveyed by the characters' words, and the readers have to rely on the characters' words to obtain the dynamics of the story development. Therefore, this opportunity is taken to embed the murder experience of the young man and the poisoning incident fabricated by Nita, both true and false refer to the theme of the novel. The narrator reappears at the end of the second part, which also marks the end of the two sub-stories. In the third part, the narrator returns to his original position and reveals Nita's lie, completing the narrative that ends with the young man's death in a car accident. The two embedded stories in the novel play an important role in expressing the theme. According to Israeli critic Remon Kennan, "The sub-story layer provides an explanation for the story layer, answering questions such as, 'What events led to the present situation?' and so on." The story structure embedded in "Free Radicals" reinforces the intersection of the fates of two unrelated people, and by complementing each other's stories, the novel shows two people with the same family problems going in different directions. The man was abused by his disabled and mentally deformed sister when he was young, but his parents did not control him, and demanded that if he wanted to inherit the house, he must promise to take care of his sister in the future. The domestic violence and unfair treatment made him feel strong resentment in his heart, so he went on the road of destruction. Although he took the initiative to talk to Nita, it showed that he was suffering from unbearable suffering in his heart, but he did not show remorse. On the contrary, he robbed Nita's house, and his final outcome also revealed the author's ethical orientation. Nita also has immoral behavior, and this experience also triggers her subconscious guilt and guilt for her involvement in other people's marriages for a long time, and thus generates a new understanding of life and happiness. Munro's clever use of nested narratives keeps the plot full of twists and turns, and the pace of the narrative loose. The artistic tension formed between the external frame story and the embedded story in the sub-story layer reveals the darkness and trauma of the human heart, and the predicament of life and the test of humanity faced by mankind are excited to examine on the calm lake.

A variety of quotation forms are used in the novel, mainly in four forms: indirect quotation, free indirect quotation, direct quotation and free direct quotation. The use of various quotations changes with the transformation of the relationship between the narrator's voice and the character's voice. According to the above three parts of the text, the discourse forms of the first part are mainly indirect quotations, such as "she said she didn't need any daily necessities", and free indirect quotations, such as "she ate well and slept all right". The second part is based on direct speech, which is carried out through a conversation between the man and Nita. The third part is based on free direct speech, with Nita's words expressed as character confessions without quotation marks, such as "Dear Bette, Richie died, and I became you to save my life." The comprehensive cross-use of various quotes makes the distance between the characters and the reader alternately close and slightly distant, and the reader can both understand the inner thoughts of the characters and jump out to form his own judgment.

Text Layer: The Metaphor of "Free Radicals"

The title of a novel is a key to enter the world of the text and to interpret the meaning of the story. The author's intention is often revealed through the title, which is the entrance to prompt readers to understand the text. Readers can usually grasp the thematic meaning of the work through the title. Most of Munro's short stories are named with deep meaning, and "Free Radicals" is no exception. In Munro's writing, "there is always an undercurrent of change, the plot often becomes less important, and the story itself, the people and objects in the story, even the space and scene actually become the medium, a symbol or metaphor, to convey the meaning of the novel". The novel's relatively obscure title remains puzzling after reading, and it seems difficult to associate the word with the text, as it is used only once in the story. After the young man breaks into Nita's house, the story takes a bizarre turn when two strangers start talking. The man demands a drink from Nita, who brings it in and inexplicably says "free radicals" before adding, "Wine something. It seems to kill the bad bacteria and form the good ones, I forget." Although the original text gives no further explanation of free radicals, the title of the novel is an ingenious arrangement and a rich metaphor.

"Free Radicals" itself is a chemical term, and in the novel, the author obviously extends its use to the level of human existence. Combined with the text and the definition of "Free Radicals", there are two kinds of interpretation of the metaphorical meaning of "Free Radicals". First of all, according to the "Chemical Dictionary" interpretation: free radicals, also known as free radicals, are compounds in the molecules of covalent bonds in the outside world (such as light, heat, etc.) under the influence of splitting into atoms or atomic groups containing unpaired valence electrons. The activity of free radicals is very large, generally under ordinary conditions can not be stable existence, easy to bind itself into stable molecules or react with other substances to form new free radicals. Let's start with the text, which states that the role of free radicals is to "kill harmful bacteria and form beneficial bacteria", which is an obvious reference to the murderous behavior of the young man and Nita, who killed his family with a gun, and the fictional story of Nita killing her husband's lover with vein toxin, namely her real life. In their eyes, in order to become "beneficial", they would even destroy these "harmful" threats to themselves, while the man actually killed his parents and sister who hurt him, and Nita completed her self-transformation and redemption in the fictional killing. Behind their behavior is the dull pain of trauma, is the dark entanglements, showing the complexity and change of human nature, although the man is vicious but also sympathizing, although Nita is hateful but also tolerant, the human heart is like the free radicals in chemistry has two sides, active and unknowable characteristics, from this perspective, the title "free radicals" has a double meaning referring to human nature. Secondly, "free radical" is a symbol of Nita's living state and a metaphor for her marriage relationship. Free radicals are produced because the original structure of a stable atom is broken by external forces, resulting in the lack of an electron in this atom, because there are unpaired electrons, free radicals and free atoms are very active, it is easy to chemically react with other substances, when it gains or loses an electron in the process of combining with other substances, it will restore balance and become a stable structure. After Richie's death, the original stable structure formed by Nita and Richie was broken, she kept a distance from the people around her, lost her interest in reading, her life became chaotic and disorderly, and returned to the free radical state when she was single. When she was young, she sought out Richie to pair with her into a stable molecular structure, and this was based on the fact that she had broken the stable structure that Richie and Bette had formed. Interestingly, after becoming a "free radical" again, the accidental experience made her reflect on her youthful behavior and understand her debt to Bette. Happiness depends on self to establish a stable life and a rich spiritual world, rather than the "free base" type of lonely wandering in the world of others, dependent on others to survive.

The intertextuality between this novel and other texts is also an aspect worthy of attention. At the end of the novel, Nita gets out of danger and sees a bookshelf near the telephone with a book called "The Tower of Pride" by the German architect Albert Speer, who in his other identity was Hitler's armament minister and the head of the imperial economy. Speer was later sentenced to 20 years in prison for crimes against humanity and war crimes at the Nuremberg trials. While serving his sentence, he reflects on why he chose the wrong path and realizes that any punishment is small compared to the suffering they have inflicted on the world. At this point, Nita, like Speer, feels that her actions have done Bette irreparable harm, and she sincerely feels guilty about Bette. In addition, the plot of Nita trying to escape from the persecution of the murderer by weaving fictional stories in Freiky is similar to the plot of Scheherazade attracting the king by telling stories and cleverly stalling time in One Thousand and One Nights, which forms intertextuality. Genet points out three kinds of relationships when he examines frame narrative and nested narrative. The third type of relationship is that "there is no explicit relationship between the two stories, and what plays a role in the story is the narrative behavior itself, such as distraction and obstruction, which is not constrained by the meta-story content. The most famous example is Scheherazade's postponement of his death by means of various narratives in The Arabian Nights." The intertextual nature of the two texts highlights the wit of Nita's character in the novel.

Conclusion

The ingenuity of Munro's novels contains a wealth of thinking, showing the complexity of human nature and various states of existence with delicate and thorough words, reflecting the writer's unique concern and thinking for life, digging into the depths of life with excellent narrative skills, and achieving a kind of human integrity observation. The plot of "Free Radicals" seems simple, but it actually contains the author's discussion on ethics, emotions and life forms in the human world. According to the words in the novel, "real life is escape", and what the novel confronts is what life escapes. The moral dilemmas faced by Nita and the family dilemmas faced by young men are often obscured by daily life. In the novel, Munro begins to write about human nature, allowing readers to feel and understand the true meaning of happiness in the balance between freedom and legitimacy.

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Conflict of Interest

All authors disclosed no relevant relationships.

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