

“Other” Anxiety behind Anti-hero Theme: Dual Narrative Dynamics in *No Country for Old Men*

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Abstract

No Country for Old Men is a western novel, written by American writer Cormac McCarthy. The story begins with a hunting game among Bell, Moss and Chigurh at the US-Mexico border. Starting from the perspective of the scholar Shen Dan’s “dual narrative dynamics”, this thesis compares the relationship between “overt progression” and “covert progression” from the aspects of character images, thematic significance and aesthetic values, and finally draws the following conclusion: The fact that Bell disguises American citizens as victims of absurd violence in the overt plot and Bell’s alienated and fearful attitude towards the border “other” in the covert progression, which have completely opposite thematic significance, thus guiding “authorial audiences” to make different ethical judgments and aesthetic choices to the text.

Keywords

No Country for Old Men
Dual Narrative Dynamics
Ethical Judgment

Introduction

No Country for Old Men (2005), the fifth of McCarthy’s Western works, was published in 2005. Since its publication, scholars at home and abroad have debated the ambiguous moral orientation expressed in his novels. And it is not difficult to find that scholars have exerted their extreme differences on the ethical position because they only analyze characters or plots from the overt plot of novel. Therefore, this thesis will make full use of the dual narrative dynamics to find the covert plot behind *No Country*, and attempt to give an answer to the academic controversy over the ethical position

of the novel, thereby helping readers to have a more comprehensive understanding of McCarthy’s creative intentions.

2. Exchange of Identities: Victim and Perpetrator

The novel opens with the inner monologue of old Sheriff Bell, interspersed with the omniscient narrator’s objective reporting of the “cat and mouse game” between the three characters. On the surface, Bell’s failure to maintain male authority in the overt plot leads to the escape of the external evil forces represented by

Chigurh, and bring the "randomness of violence" to American citizens as the main driving force (Woodward 28). However, it can be found that McCarthy's design is by no means a compromise to the evil forces by the method of close reading of the text. The plot of the villain defeating the hero not only deconstructs the white patriarchy, but also leads readers to pay attention to exchange of identities in the hidden process. Bell's excessive anxiety about the border "other" prevents him from becoming a powerful patriarchal figure. Thus in order to preserve the image of a powerful ruler, Bell forces Chigurh to become a victim of male hegemonic power.

At the beginning of the novel, Bell points the violent behavior that occurred in the small town towards "prophet of destruction" Chigurh (McCarthy 4), laying the groundwork for the opposition of moral positions in the overt plot, while McCarthy secretly reminds readers of Bell's prejudice of Chigurh. In the overt plot, Bell emphasizes that Chigurh's "ability of destruction" made the citizens of the Sanderson County as victims of his violence. Then in order to prove his idea, Bell uses "out there" to emphasize the opposition of the two identities (4), thus further demonstrating the destructiveness of Chigurh as "other" and innocence of the self. But in covert plot implies Bell's demonization of Chigurh and exaggerated behavior of his "ability of prophet", which emphasizes the difference between community citizens and outsiders, strengthens the ideological opposition between this two-party, so makes Chigurh as a victim of Bell's external anxiety.

In Bell's inner monologue, he tried to imply that Chigurh was the source of crime in the Sanderson County. He first recalled the harmonious relationship between the sheriff and the citizens of the community through the first-person retrospective perspective, and then shifted his focalization to the present and then suggested the incomprehensible nature of violence in the community. By comparing the present and past, Bell attributed these 11 dead incidents in a week to the sudden appearance of Chigurh and Mexicans. In the overt

plot, Bell guides readers into the trap of Chigurh's by all kinds of language skills, which aims to provide sufficient evidence for his victim image, while McCarthy uses scattered plots to dispel Bell's language control over Chigurh's image, implying the covert narrative undercurrent behind the reader's novel plot. That is, Bell deliberately uses a variety of narrative devices to strengthen the ideological antagonism between citizens and outsiders in the community by attributing the violence of Sanderson's community to the "other" Chigurh's invasion, thus making excuses for his frail heroic image. Therefore, to some extent, Chigurh has become a victim of Bell who tries to transfer internal conflicts within the country.

3. The Mutual subversion of Overt and Covert Progression: Identity Anxiety and "Other" Anxiety

As mentioned above, the conflict between the old Sheriff Bell and the killer Chigurh provides the main narrative dynamics for the plot (303). As the subsequent episodes continue, Bell's resignation seems like a kind of compromise to the violent word. Thus, the ending in which evil triumphs over justice in the overt plot and the hero Bell is forced to quit seems to be the deconstruction of the invincible male hero in the myth of the American West, thereby indirectly expressing McCarthy's doubts about the male hegemony in the west myth. But readers will see a hidden undercurrent that goes against the development of the plot by carefully exploring the details in the novel. In the overt plot, the failure of Sheriff Bell and the death of Moss not only represents the failure of male authority, but also reflects the anxiety of the United States towards the invasion of the border "other" in the context of 9/11.

In the covert plot, the residents of small towns on the US-Mexico border generally have deep-rooted fears of Chigurh and Mexicans, that is, the fear of the community territory being occupied and the ideology being controlled by outsiders. It manifests as a fear of Chigurh's non-white identity. There are some

descriptions of Chigurh's appearance in the novel, all of which are described by the residents. On the way to escape, when Moss and Chigurh met the Eagle Hotel, McCarthy takes advantage of Moss's hearing and smell to emphasize Chigurh's unique identity, "Blue eyes. Serene. Dark hair. Something about him faintly **exotic**. Beyond Moss's experience." (McCarthy 113) This sentence is actually a text message by McCarthy informing the reader of Moss' subconscious prejudice against "other". As the plot progressed, McCarthy makes a conversation between Bell and the little boy to reveal Chigurh's non-white identity to the public. The specific dialogue is as follows: "What does he look like? Was he **Mexican**?" "I don't think so, He [Chigurh] looked like **anybody**." (McCarthy 291-292) This sentence seems to negate the Mexican identity, but in reality it reinforces the identity of the "other". Chigurh is no longer just from Mexicans, but has become a tangible "other" threat that envelops the hearts of community citizens.

In the overt plot, the American's complaint against Chigurh and the Mexican seems reasonable and justified. But in the covert plot, this accusation tends to shirk responsibility and conceal the manifestation of anxiety. When citizens and even law enforcement officials are unable to explain the violent behavior that occurs within this community, pointing out the problem of "other" is even more a protection of collective advantages. Therefore, the anxiety of the "other" in the implicit process is actually a manifestation of the "hegemony" and exclusion of dissent in the small town ideology.

4. The Dual Ethical Position of the Authorial Readers

The overt plot focuses on deconstructing the legitimacy of the existence of American male hegemonic ideology, while covert plot focuses on reminding readers to discover the replication of hegemonic ideology in the face of the "other". The implied author subtly expresses his

complex moral stance towards the protagonists in the novel. In the process of "decoding" the novel, two different types of authorial audiences will have completely opposite reading ethics towards the novel due to the creative intention of the implied author. The authorial audiences' perception of the tension in the narrative distance, that is, the estrangement and sympathy of the authorial audiences to McCarthy's ethical position, is reflected in *No Country*.

In the overt plot, the narrator Bell utilizes the absolute advantage of his narrative voice to manipulate the authorial audience's initial impression of Chigurh, while portraying himself as a sheriff who is "going to commence dedicatin myself twice daily" (169), so as to guide the authorial audience into the reading position of a good sheriff preset by the plot progression, and to view Chigurh as the source of violence in the United States. But in the covert plot, if the authorial audiences can receive the information hidden in McCarthy's text, they will get rid of Bell's language control, discover the novel's intention to defend American male images and consolidate hegemonic rules, and make new ethical judgments on the novel based on McCarthy's true creative intentions. Through close reading of the text, the authorial audience will follow McCarthy's footsteps and discover a completely different character image behind the hidden text, that is, despite Bell's efforts to disguise himself as a victim of Chigurh's absurd violence, he still exposes the essence of his perpetrator under McCarthy's "choice of words and sentences". The authorial audience who entered this reading position will regard Bell's behavior as a form of self-defense anxiety. On the surface, Bell presents Chigurh as "an irrational, unbeatable evil and racializing Chigurh" as a threat of "other" to the United States and its citizens (Hwang 362). In fact, what is hidden behind Bell's behavior is the maintenance of hegemonic ideas.

5. Summary

The discovery of dual narrative dynamics has strongly

responded to the controversy about the moral orientation of *No Country* in the academic circle, and provided a reasonable reason for the interpretation of the novel. The interplay of overt and covert plots blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, between deconstructing hegemonic ideology and constructing hegemonic ideology, thus leading the authorial audience to produce a distinct ethical position. The two narrative dynamics of this novel, explicitly or implicitly, reflect

McCarthy's ambiguous hegemonic attitude. As a representative of anti-Western novels, McCarthy has been committed to deconstructing the racial and gender antagonism in Western mythology. But as border anxiety deepened in the context of 9/11, McCarthy seems to have been terrified by the emergence of the "other" and unwittingly becomes an accomplice to the idea of American hegemony.

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