

Original Paper

On the Narrative Art of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Abstract

The Metamorphosis is one of the most famous novels written by Franz Kafka. Through depicting such a bizarre and absurd story as the transformation of the main character Gregor into a beetle, the work reveals the reality that people are eventually alienated under the environment of capitalist society and the great pressure of social life. *The Metamorphosis* is quite distinctive in its narrative technique, and scholars have done a lot of research on it. This paper tries to analyze the novel from the perspective of narratology and reveal the irreplaceable role of the integration of different narrative techniques in the expression of the characters' hearts and the dystopian theme of the novel.

Keywords

The Metamorphosis, Narrative Structure, Narrative Perspective, Narrative Time, Narrative Discourse

1. Introduction

The Metamorphosis tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, who finds himself transformed into a beetle after waking up one morning. After the metamorphosis, he loses his job, his way of life and habits change, and his family's attitudes make him experience the coldness and harshness of the world, so he ends up dying a miserable death of loneliness and despair amidst starvation. The novel subverts the traditional narrative mode and has its characteristics in the narrative structure, narrative perspective and narrator, narrative time, and narrative discourse, thus well expressing the theme of alienation in the novel.

2. Narrative Structure

The Metamorphosis adopts the narrative form of a composite structure interlaced with vertical and horizontal structures. The vertical structure is reflected in the novel's chronological order and the development of events as clues, which shows us the tragic life of the main character Gregor and reveals the cruel nature of the capitalist society that turns human beings into the accessories of material life and eventually abandoned. A straight narrative is the overall characteristic of the vertical structure, and the

author always keeps a calm and objective attitude. The structure of the novel is like a straight line, with no sudden and unexpected plots in the middle. However, if looking at it from the perspective of the spirit and reality, the value of individual life and society, we will find that there are extreme oppositions within such a structure, and these oppositions counteract each other, eventually leading to the novel's apparent straightforwardness (Yan, 1992). Before he turns into a beetle, Gregor lives a miserable life, but he works hard, so he is socially valuable; after the metamorphosis, he loses his ability to work and becomes a burden to his family, but he does not have to suffer from work anymore. Although his social value is declining, his spiritual realm is constantly being improved. This opposing contradiction cancels each other out, forming a tension that better reflects the tragedy of the main character Gregor.

The horizontal structure is mainly reflected in Gregor's three actions in the novel. The first time is Gregor makes great efforts to open the door of his room after turning into a beetle, but he is mercilessly pushed into the room by his father and falls into a coma; the second time is when his mother and sister intend to move away the furniture in Gregor's room, he scares them to guard his own paintings, finally he is heavily beaten by his father with an apple; the third time is that Gregor is attracted by the music of his sister playing the violin and crawls out of the room, wanting his sister to play for him alone, and as a result, he is abandoned by the whole family and eventually dies of despair. Sorting these three activities horizontally, it can be seen that the consequences of the three actions are more and more serious each time, and Gregor is hit more and more severely, and finally dies helplessly. The combination of vertical and horizontal structure shows Gregor's sadness and futile struggle to find himself as he is unable to get rid of the pain of alienation and thus loses himself, and at the same time, this is also the picture of the alienation of the majority of people in the capitalist society.

3. Narrative Perspective and Narrator

This novel uses a combination of externally and internally focused types of perspectives. In his book *Narrative Discourse*, structuralist narrator Genette classifies perspective into three types of focusing according to the degree of restriction placed on it: non-focalization, internal focalization and external focalization. The unfocused type refers to the traditional, omniscient type of perspective, in which the narrator can observe the story being narrated from all angles; internal focalization means that everything is presented strictly according to the feelings and consciousness of one or a few characters. It relies completely on the senses of these characters to see and hear, only relaying the information received from the outside and the possible inner activities of this character, while for other characters, just like bystanders, they guess and speculate their thoughts and feelings by contact; the external focalization is that the narrator presents each event strictly from the outside, providing only the character's actions, appearance, and objective environment without telling the character's motives, purposes, thoughts, and feelings (Wang, 2008). In short, external focus refers to the narrator being outside the story while internal focus refers to the narrator being inside the story. *The Metamorphosis* uses a mix of these two perspective types, which makes it difficult for the reader to tell whose

perspective is actually being viewed from. The dual perspectives appear simultaneously from the very beginning, alternating at times, throughout the novel. In the opening passage, “Gregor Samsa awoke from a restless sleep to find himself lying in bed transformed into a giant beetle. He lay on his back, his hard, armor-like back pressed against the bed, and when he lifted his head a little, he saw that he had taken the dome-like brown alone and divided it into several curved, hard pieces, and that the quilt barely covered the tip of his stomach, which was slipping down. His many legs were pitifully thin compared to his large frame, and all danced hopelessly before his eyes.” It is easy to see that this is Gregor’s point of view, but who observes him waking up from his sleep to make a discovery? In fact, there is also an external point of view here. Another example is another place in the novel, “He looked at his father sideways, always uneasily, and began to turn round, trying to be as quick as possible, but being very slow”, from which the reader, on the one hand, can feel Gregor’s inner turmoil and fear from the inner perspective, and on the other hand, they can observe the clumsiness and slowness of his movements from the outer-focused perspective. This composite dual perspective allows the reader to read and experience at the same time, obtaining the double feelings of the narrator and the protagonist. In the novel, the outward-focused perspective is fixed on Gregor, while the inward-focused perspective is from Gregor’s point of view to observe the people around him, and both of them are narrated in the third person. The author does not use the first person but the third person to describe the story, giving people a sense of distance and obscurity. The novel is mainly narrated from Gregor’s point of view and the narrator is not a traditional omniscient perspective. Although Gregor’s perspective has great limitations, it is under such limitations that the reader is able to go through the process of metamorphosis together with Gregor and experience the psychological journey of anxiety, confusion, helplessness, and despair together with him. At the same time, such a perspective also creates a strong sense of anticipation in the reader, making him or her always keep a high tension to continue reading. In the third-person limited point of view of the novel, the narrative voice and the narrative vision are no longer united in the narrator but exist in two different entities, the narrator outside the story and the focused character inside the story. Genette has delineated two major levels of narration, the first being the external narrative which refers to the narration that encompasses the entire work, and the second being the internal narrative referring to the narration of the story within the story, including stories, memories, and dreams told by the characters in the story (Wang, 2008). The extra-story narrator and the intra-story narrator mentioned above correspond to these two major levels of narration, which also facilitates the shift of narrative perspectives. The depiction of Gregor’s family after his death at the end of the novel is a clear manifestation of the external focus, as the author shifts to an external narrative in which Gregor’s family does not have any psychological ups and downs after his death and decides to go on an excursion, an ending which intensifies the tragic color of the novel. Without the shift in narrative perspective, there would be no story after Gregor’s death, and we would not be able to experience the loneliness, indifference, and sadness caused by the inability to communicate between people in modern western society.

4. Narrative Time

The Metamorphosis adopts the parallel development of story time sequence and narrative time sequence in the treatment of narrative time, the narrative order is extended from the beginning to the end, and the rhythm is almost the same, starting from Gregor waking up early in the morning and discovering that he has turned into a beetle to his last breath of despair, and the whole family decides to take a trip to the countryside. The whole narrative is in a kind of straight-line development. The narrator takes Gregor's metamorphosis as the main line of narration, and there is no intervention of other stories in the middle, and there is no "time reversal" caused by flashbacks, flashforwards, flashes and other confusions, but it does not mean that the narrative time of the novel is a simple linear arrangement.

From the point of view of the whole novel, there is a causal relationship between Gregor's deformation and his family's abandonment and eventual death. But why did Gregor deform? From the novel's narrative, we do not know what happened the night before Gregor turned into a beetle, which leads to a break in the narrative timeline. Thus, the reader is unable to find an explanation for the cause, which further strengthens the non-causality of the plot and shows that Gregor's metamorphosis is an unmitigated disaster (Chen, 2013). This dissolution of the story's time can stimulate readers' curiosity and make them continue reading with puzzlement. And the deformation accordingly becomes the background of the whole novel and an existential situation that Gregor cannot get rid of. What he thinks and feels are all narrated against this background. The author does not tell the reader the reason for Gregor's metamorphosis until the end of the novel, and this is exactly what we need to think about.

From the point of view of the narrative rhythm proposed by Genette, the novel adopts the narrative methods of equivalent narration, overview and expanded narration (1990). Equivalent narration refers to the fact that the time of narration basically coincides with the time of the story, which is also the main narrative rhythm of the novel. Overview refers to the fact that the narrative time is shorter than the story time, which is specifically manifested in the use of a few sentences or a paragraph to encompass a relatively long story time, with the function of accelerating the rhythm and broadening the breadth. Expanded narration, on the other hand, is the opposite, in which the narrative time is longer than the story time, and the narrator slowly describes the process of time development and the characters' actions and psychology, just like the slow-motion scene in a film (Wang, p. 157). *The Metamorphosis* begins on a rainy morning, goes through Christmas in the middle, and ends also on a rainy March. The whole story time is about one year, and the author has different treatments of the story time of this year. He puts a lot of ink on what happens in the two hours after Gregor's transformation, i.e. from the time Gregor wakes up at six thirty to the time he is kicked back to his room by his father at seven thirty, but this hour or so takes up a large part of the text. In this section, the author's narrative pace is relatively slow, and a great deal of space is focused on describing Gregor's actions and his psychology after he transforms into a beetle. In this part of the narrative, Gregor's metamorphosis into a beetle needs a gradual adaptation process, so the narrative time is stretched out,

and at the same time, it is also to let the readers have a process of adaptation, and most importantly, it still highlights the ambivalence of Gregor's psychology after his metamorphosis. In the subsequent narrative, the author obviously made adjustments to the narrative speed, the narrative speed is accelerated, from which can also be seen that Gregor has gradually adapted to the beetle's way of behavior.

5. Narrative Discourse

The author uses a kind of metamorphosis discourse in the creation of *The Metamorphosis*. It is a very unfortunate thing in itself that a man turns into a beetle, and there is no specific reason for the emergence of this strange event in the novel. The author also uses a calm and indifferent tone to describe the metamorphosis lightly and even has a little bit of humor and comical, which makes the readers feel deeply confused. And an unbelievable event becomes the premise and background for the author's whole narrative, completely deviating from traditional novels. This event which should be the ending or climax of the story becomes the beginning of the novel, showing the absurd theme (Hu, 2001). Owing to such a beginning, the whole discourse of the novel undergoes some deformations.

Kafka uses a lot of virtual speech and speculative vocabulary in the novel, which creates an aesthetic uncertainty characteristic. In *The Metamorphosis*, the descriptions of the chaotic scenes at home caused by Gregor's metamorphosis, his life and physical and psychological feelings can be said to be very specific and detailed. However, these descriptions are always accompanied by speculative words such as "as if", "apparently", "perhaps" and "it seems", or narrated in a virtual tone, so these descriptions, though vivid, give people a sense of uncertainty. The use of these words makes the readers experience Gregor's confusion and anxiety after his metamorphosis. His uncertainty about the meaning of his existence and his social value triggers the readers' deeper understanding and thinking.

6. Summary

Kafka's unique narrative technique gives the work an absurd and unbelievable tone. The plot of *The Metamorphosis* is absurd, bizarre and abrupt, but after thinking, we find that it is logical and a reflection of reality. It shows the readers the life tragedy of Gregor who is struggling for survival in a calm narration. "Why is it deformed" is the question we have been thinking about. Under the heavy pressure of social life, Gregor has lost the normal human self-worth and sense of individuality. He worked so hard, without freedom, pleasure and emotion, thus gradually losing himself and being alienated into a beetle. Alienation seems to be destructive to the reader, but in fact, it may be a kind of liberation and freedom to Gregor. In addition to the theme of alienation, the novel also reveals the indifference between people and families in a capitalist society, which is a true reflection of the living environment faced by modern people and worthy of our deep thoughts.

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