

Original Paper

Analysis of the Dual Narrative Structure in *To Live*

Zhang Chenjing^{1*}

¹ College of Chinese Language and Literature, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

* Zhang Chenjing, College of Chinese Language and Literature, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

Received: February 5, 2025

Accepted: February 15, 2025

Online Published: March 4, 2025

doi:10.22158/sll.v9n1p108

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v9n1p108>

Abstract

Yu Hua's novel To Live adopts a dual narrative structure, featuring an external focalization narrated by "I", the storyteller, and an internal focalization centered on the protagonist, Fugui. With Fugui's narrative serving as the primary thread and "I"'s narrative as the secondary, the narrative intersperses "I"'s perspectives and reflections as an observer and listener during Fugui's recount. The interplay between external and internal focalizations not only heightens the novel's authenticity but also propels the plot forward, extending readers' engagement with the narrative. This enables readers to empathize with Fugui's enduring hardships and his resilient, optimistic attitude towards life. It urges readers to adopt Fugui's positive and upward spirit in the face of adversity.

Keywords

to live, internal focalization, external focalization

1. Introduction

In the preface to his work, Yu Hua reveals, "My relationship with reality is strained; indeed, I have historically regarded it with hostility. Over time, my inner fury subsided, leading me to comprehend a genuine writer seeks truth, a truth which excludes moral judgments. The responsibility of a writer is not to vent, accuse, or expose yet to illuminate nobility. The nobility I speak of is not mere virtue but a transcendence realized by understanding all things, namely an impartial stance towards good and evil, as well as a compassionate perspective on the world. It was amidst this mindset that I encountered the American folk song 'Old Black Joe'. The song narrates the life of an old black slave who, despite enduring numerous hardships and losing his entire family, still greets the world with kindness, without complaints. I was deeply moved and then decided to write a novel, namely *To Live*, with the purpose of depicting humanity's resilience and optimistic outlook on life in adversity. The writing process enlightened me: people live for the essence of living itself, not for anything extraneous". Yu Hua's *To*

Live was conceived from this song's inspiration. Although the novel describes heart-wrenching tales of demise, it conveys the unyielding spirit as well as steadfastness of life, urging individuals to persevere and live optimistically.

The majority of novels mainly use an omniscient narrative perspective, in which the narrator has a detailed understanding of the whole story. When Yu Hua first began writing *To Live*, he used the third person, narrating from the perspective of an observer. However, after writing more than ten thousand words, he found himself unable to continue. He then tried a different perspective and ultimately adopted a dual narrative structure in *To Live*. The structure refers to the arrangement of two narrative perspectives by the author during the narration process. The story that includes the entire textual plot is called the external story, while the story consistently narrated within the text is termed the internal story. The person who narrates the external story is the external narrator, such as the "I" in the text. The person who narrate the internal story is the internal narrator, such as "Fugui" in the novel. Typically, the external narrator bears the responsibility of explaining the internal narrator, while the internal narrator only needs to tell the story and immerse the reader in it. Together, they promote the development of the storyline of novel.

2. External Narrative Perspective

As the external narrator of a novel, the role of "I" is not to narrate the story. The storytelling of "I" is intended to introduce the true narrator of the story. The narration of "I" is mostly interspersed between stories, in order to naturally transition from one story to another.

For instance, the text reads, "At this juncture, Fugui's narration came to a halt, and I noticed that we were both immersed in the sunlight. The shifting rays caused the tree shade to subtly drift away from us, towards the adjacent side... I then resumed my seat in the shade, placing my backpack behind my waist and leaning against the tree trunk, while fanning myself with my straw hat... I remained seated in the shade throughout the day until the sun dipped below the horizon. My reluctance to leave came from the fact that Fugui's narration was still ongoing".

Whenever Fugui narrates a key plot of his story, "I" emerges as an observer, and offers my own reflections. This technique makes readers navigate between reality and memory, thus enabling a smooth shift of plot as well as propelling the storyline forward. After facilitating this natural transition, I revert to my role as a listener. I only reappear when the story reaches another critical juncture, making the novel gracefully descend from one climax to the next, thus moderating the pace of the plot's evolution. Besides promoting smooth transitions between story segments, the "I", plays a key part in giving a rigorous as well as coherent structure to the novel. The narrative begins from the perspective of the external narrator, "I", as shown in the passage: "After rising to my feet, I observed an elderly man in the nearby field consoling an old ox. Perhaps feeling deeply fatigued, the ox that was plowing the field stood still with its head lowered. Behind it, the old man, who was supporting the plow with his bare

back, seemed dissatisfied with the ox's passive attitude. I heard his loud voice addressing the ox: 'Oxen plow the fields, dogs guard the house, monks beg for alms, cocks crow at dawn, women weave cloth—which ox doesn't plow fields? This has been the way since ancient times. Come on, come on!'"

From the above passage, it can be seen that "I" determine the narrative direction of the novel. Prior to this segment, the "I" had encountered various villagers, among whom Fugui figured prominently. Through this narrative segment, Fugui is seamlessly introduced to the readers, thereby setting the stage for his story. As the narrative ends, the "I" revisits the scene of the old man as well as the ox, recounting, "The old man and the ox receded gradually into the horizon, and I caught the echo of the old man's hoarse, heartfelt voice in the distance. His song fluttered like the wind in the expansive evening sky, as he sang, 'In youth, I wandered, and in middle age, I wanted to seek treasures, and in old age, I became a monk'". With the old man as well as the ox fading from sight, smoke spiraled from chimneys, and the glow of sunset waned, signaling the end of the tale.

The novel begins with external narration and ends with external narration, creating a frame that echoes at both ends, with a well-structured and cohesive narrative.

3. Internal Narrative Perspective

Within the dual narrative framework of the novel, alongside the external narrator "I", exists the internal narrator Fugui, who assumes the role of protagonist and recounts the narrative from his internal perspective.

Under the guidance of "I", Fugui unfolds his own life story: Born into a landed gentry family, Fugui was once a wayward youth who fell prey to deceit and squandered his family's entire fortune, plunging them into poverty overnight. His father passed away in sorrow, while his mother fell ill. During a trip to the city to seek medical assistance for his mother, Fugui was forcibly conscripted as a laborer. Upon his return, he found his mother deceased and his daughter Fengxia rendered deaf and mute. He further weathered the tumultuous eras of Land Reform, the People's Communes, the Great Steel Campaign, the Three-Year Famine, and the Cultural Revolution. Throughout these trying times, Fugui was compelled to give his daughter away for the sake of his son, who ultimately perished from excessive blood donation. His daughter Fengxia succumbed to postpartum hemorrhage, and following the demise of his son and daughter, his wife also passed away. His son-in-law Erxi met a tragic end in an accident, and his grandson met his fate in an unforeseen mishap, leaving Fugui solely with his ox as a companion.

Despite the multitude of hardships Fugui has endured, his narration remains calm and composed, even when discussing the passing of his loved ones, which cannot obscure the depth of his inner sorrow. Despite the loss of his entire family and the perpetual presence of suffering, Fugui refrains from self-destruction. Instead, having withstood these trials, he emerges more steadfast and optimistic in his resolve to continue living.

In the preface, Yu Hua posits, “people live for the essence of living itself, not for anything extraneous”. Throughout the novel, the phrase “to live” is frequently echoed: “In those days, my mother often said to me, ‘As long as one lives happily, poverty is of no consequence’, ‘I said to myself, ‘Now I must live well’”, “When we reached the doorway, Jiazhen, lying in bed, exclaimed, ‘Chunsheng, you must live on’”, “She said to me, ‘You must carry on living well. There’s still Kugen and Erxi to consider’”. These repetitions of “to live” serve not merely as characters’ cries for survival, but as unwavering affirmations of their belief that “nothing is more crucial than living”. Life, though fraught with sufferings, holds hope only through the act of living. It is this unyielding belief that empowers Fugui to face life with optimism.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of the novel, the narrative is presented through the external narrative perspective of “I”, which is a retrospective perspective of the first person protagonist, describing events during my journey to gather folk ballads in the countryside. This narrative method remarkably boosts the authenticity of the novel, thus making readers perceive it as a genuine account. Upon encountering Fugui, the perspective transitions to a first-person narrative witness’s bystander perspective, where “I” listens to Fugui’s recount of his life’s journey. As Fugui narrates, “I” seamlessly shifts the temporal and spatial context of the text into that of the story, positioning Fugui directly before the readers, thus using an internal narrative perspective. The transformation deepens the story’s realism and may even evoke a vivid sense of immersion, with “I” functioning merely as an observer who occasionally interjects with personal reflections during Fugui’s narration, primarily to lead Fugui to continue sharing his tale. The novel weaves the story from Fugui’s internal narrative perspective, while “I” inserts my own exclamations and engages in a dialogue with the narrator Fugui from an external narrative perspective. The outer narration of the external narrative as well as the inner narration of the internal narrative intertwine, thus destroying the natural flow of the story’s timeline and further enhancing its authenticity. The narrative structure makes the storyline transition smoothly and slows down the pace of the narration, thus providing readers with sufficient space for reflection.

In *To Live*, Yu Hua does not directly narrates the tragic and bumpy life of Fugui. Conversely, he adopts a dual perspective of internal and external narrative to allow readers to experience Fugui’s life from two angles, viewing the hardships encountered in life. This narrative method allows readers to appreciate Fugui’s optimistic and positive attitude towards life and learn from him, urging them to confront adversity with optimism and perseverance and never succumbing to despair.

References

- Chen, J., & Dong, X. (2019). Analysis of the Double-layer Narrative Structure and Tragic Artistic Characteristics of Yu Hua's To Live. *Masterpieces Review*, (30), 135-136.
- Li, T. T. (2021). On the Narrative Strategies of Yu Hua's To Live. *Journal of Hubei Open Vocational College*, 34(16), 195-196.
- Liu, Y. (2021). The Narrative Evolution of Yu Hua's To Live and Its Significance in the History of Literature. *Journal of Yangzhou University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 25(03), 25-38.
- Wang, D. D. (2016). *Research on Gérard Genette's Narrative Discourse Theory*. Shandong University.
- Wang, T. Y. (2022). Exploring the Narrative Art of A Dream of Red Mansions from G éard Genette's Narrative Perspective. *Youth Literati*, (29), 123-125.
- Wang, X. S. (2024). *Research on the Narrative Perspective of the Rural-themed Documentary Song of the Earth from the Perspective of Gérard Genette's Theory*. Changchun University of Technology.
- Zhang, Y. (2019). A Narratological Interpretation of Yu Hua's To Live. *Masterpieces Review*, (09), 135-136.
- Zhang, Y. H., & Qian, H. (2024). On the Narrative Art of Yu Hua's Novel To Live. *Jin Gu Wen Chuang*, (45), 8-11.