

Original Paper

Interpretation of the *Silence of the Lambs* from the Perspective of Horizon of Expectation

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Abstract

The silence of the lambs is one of the most influential crime novels of its time. The author Thomas Harris vividly depicts the characters and their psychological activities. He created the atmosphere of tension and horror through unique methods, breaking through people's horizon of expectation, and generating unprecedented experience to readers in the creation process of the novel. At the same time, he created characters that broke people's prescribed interpretation of the protagonist of crime novels and exceeded readers' expectations. The aim of this paper is to gain more insight into this great work from the perspective of Horizon of Expectation.

Key words

silence of the lamb, horizon of expectation, character, uncertainty

1. Introduction

As a well-known novelist and screenwriter, Thomas Harris is famous for the suspense and thriller elements in his novels. He has completed *Black Sunday*, *Red Dragon* and other works. However, the *Silence of the Lambs* is truly his masterpiece. Published in 1988, the book is considered to be one of the classic crime-exposing works since the 1990s. The novel was adapted into a film of the same name in 1992. After its release, it became a household name and attracted the attention of readers and critics in a wider sphere. Then, it is worthwhile to explore the inner cosmos of this masterpiece from a different angle, the expectation from the readers. This paper serves to touch on the expectation solicited by the characters, plots and outcomes.

2. The Outline of the Story

This novel mainly tells the story of a series of shocking killings in the city where FBI agent trainee Starling lives, the murderer is a abnormal killer named Buffalo Bill aiming for obese women, Starling's task is to visit man-eating psychiatrists Hannibal in a federal prison hospital and get Buffalo Bill by his psychological behavior data to assist in the investigation. Hannibal asks Starling for a penetrating analysis and asks her to share her childhood experiences in return for his help. Finally, Starling successfully rescued the trapped Catherine and killed Buffalo Bill through the clue of insect cocoon found in the throat of the victims, and completed the task excellently. Using Dr. Chilton's neglected pen, Hannibal finally managed to escape, leaving a mystery.

3. Theoretical Basis

Before the 20th century, critics believed that the existence of literary works was only related to the creation of the author, and the readers only passively accepted it, which had nothing to do with the existence of the works. This traditional method of criticism focuses only on the relationship between the work and the author. In the 1920s, with the emergence of new criticism, critics set off a trend of thought focusing only on the "ontology of works". New critics, such as Eliot, Ricciarz believed that the ontology of literature was only the work itself, an the analysis of the text should not relate to the author's life and other social factors. Until 1960s, Wolfgang, Hans Robert Jauss and other critics put forward a kind of distinctive reading theory, they thought the research of literature starts from the reader who understand and accept the literature, the attention should be transferred from the text to the reader's response. Readers need to actively participate in creating the meaning of the text, as the text of "the reader". So far, western literary theory has truly realized the transformation from "author-centered" and "text-centered" to "reader-centered".

Jauss put forward the concept of "perspective of expectation" in his masterpiece "Towards the Aesthetics of Acceptance". Before entering into art appreciation, readers form an aesthetic expectation formed by the combination of art experience and life experience, while artistic works overlap through the "horizon of expectation" of the author and the recipient. The meaning of a work as an aesthetic object is realized through the "adaptation of vision" in the reception of the recipient. As the recipient of the aesthetic subject, only through the completion of the "unification of vision" can the aesthetic connotation of the work be further understood. Each novel reader has his or her own unique "horizon of expectation", which generally consists of three aspects: first, the reader's attitude towards the form of novel; second, the cognition of specific works; third, the individual's world view, outlook on life, cultural attainment, etc., which is determined as a psychological experience of existence. Positivism pays attention to the external study of literature, focusing on the relationship between the characters and events in the works and the author and history. Structuralism pays attention to the internal study of literature, focusing on the literary language and the structure itself. In contrast, reception aesthetics takes the recipient as the subject and target, pays attention to the study and influence on the recipient of

the work, and emphasizes the role of the recipient in artistic activities. “On the basis of hermeneutics and phenomenology, this school constructs a reader-centered theoretical system with core words such as text, perspective of expectation, and integration of vision. From the perspective of the “horizon of expectations” theory, it is inevitable that this novel is a great success and is well received. At the same time, throughout the whole novel, in terms of characterization, plot arrangement and ending setting, they all fit and exceed readers’ expectations to varying degrees.

4. Expectation for the Characters

“Cannibal” Hannibal is a very complex and intriguing image, in him the good and evil mixed, human nature and beast overlap. He is both a savior and a slayer, with extremely serious schizophrenia symptoms. He has his own peculiar criterion for judging the world around him, and anyone breaking the rules will be punished in his own way. Like he said, he eats rude people. At the same time he was calm, restrained, rational and polite. The contradictory qualities of human nature were swelling in him. He seemed to know everything, but he was puzzled that he could not control everything. Under this dual image, Hannibal’s gentle and gentle manner and the essence of demon in his heart subvert people’s interpretation of such image, thus forming a contrast, which makes this work highlight the elements of suspense and horror. At the beginning of the novel, there is a tense and suffocating environment, which adds to the atmosphere of Dr. Hannibal’s appearance. In particular, Dr. Chilton, the director of the state psychiatric criminal hospital in Baltimore, gave clear rules: *don’t put your hand over the fence, don’t touch the fence. Don’t hand him anything but soft paper. Items can only be passed to him through a sliding feeder that holds food.* Before Hannibal comes along, the reader has already imagined him as an odious, sinister, devil-eating figure. And when he really appeared, he subverts everyone’s horizon of expectations. The reader is presented with a courtly, calm, resourceful and brave man. However, it is such a brilliant man who always displays a gentlemanly manner that hides extremely abnormal psychology in his heart. The sharp contrast between his appearance and his heart makes this character extremely suspenseful, which makes him more frightening than those ferocious murderers.

In the process of reading the novel, the author could not help but have doubts: Starling lost her father when she was young, and the lonely growing environment caused her great psychological trauma. Why does the novelist choose a poor, wandering orphan of humble origin as the hero of the novel? Starling came to Baltimore on an important mission. In Dr. Chilton’s eyes, Starling’s status as a “beautiful woman” was more attractive than that of a “detective”. Starling walked in the tunnel of the underground prison, causing a disruption among the prisoners. Max openly profanes Starling, and put her as the object of desire. Men tend to project their sexual fantasies onto woman’s bodies, so woman’s appearance is endowed with strong visual and sexual attraction. This is also the expectation of the general readers for female images, especially among the majority of male readers. To become a qualified federal investigator, however, one must be able to endure pain, hurt, suffering, to be able to

use strong, tolerance, perseverance to melt them. In the traditional male perspectives, a weak, timid, isolated and indecisive women disappeared, Starling presents us with a image of the brave, strong, brave woman. This arrangement exceeds the expectations of the reader, making the reader no longer see Starling in the traditional way, and making the work more engaging.

5. Expectation for the Plots

In such novels, readers often expect battle-hardened agents to bring the bad guys to justice and bring the case to light. It is not so much a detective novel as a history of character transformation, born out of the struggle between good and evil.

Starling, the hero of the novel, is the most fleshing out. There are two aspects of her transformation: first, as a savior of good and evil, she is eager to save the daughter of the senate to make up for the regret in the childhood when facing lamb helplessly slaughtered; One is that as a child without a father's love, she hopes to inherit his career and become a good federal agent. During her FBI apprenticeship, Starling trained hard to be a top student; In visiting Hannibal's to assist in the investigation of Buffalo Bill after serial killing, Starling has shown more beyond the fortitude, courage and wisdom of ordinary women, she found special butterflies in the first victim at the autopsy, which becomes the important clues to solve crimes, and eventually found Buffalo Bill through Hannibal's hints, a fierce fight before the successful retrieving of Catherine, shaped the heroine image of the savior.

Similarly, in the image of Buffalo Bill, he underwent a transformation. On the surface, he is a sick killer, but in fact, he is also eager for change. In her conversation with Hannibal, starling learns that buffalo bill, the serial killer, is not really a transsexual. Buffalo bill, who had often been abused by his stepmother as a child, developed a violent streak that made him hate his identity and want to be a woman so he wouldn't be afraid after becoming his stepmother. As an adult, Buffalo Bill sought for permission from the hospital to be transsexual several times but was rejected, and when this "transition" path was blocked, he began looking for other ways to "transform" into a woman in a dress made of woman's skin. In the novel, Buffalo Bill appears as a traditional human monster, and obese women in size 14 become his victims and skinned. According to the previous arrangement, the author not only provides the readers with the pleasure and outcome of revenge, but also leads the readers to think about other deeper connotations on this unconventional monster image, that is, the unsatisfied desire in human nature for "transformation". It is the stepmother's abuse that leads to the lack of male identity. Although he chose the path of "transformation", he did not complete the transformation from cocoon to butterfly. Buffalo bill's fear is more real and his human predicament more realistic.

6. Expectation for Outcome

Among the characters in the novel, Hannibal is undoubtedly one of the most successful ones. His extensive reading and careful thinking gave him an extremely deep understanding of human nature. He

is so perceptive that no matter who he is nothing he says or does will escape his notice. What is striking about the novel is that the reader is repeatedly amazed by Hannibal's intelligence and wisdom, and at the same time is repeatedly shattered by the unexpected ending. Hannibal uses the ballpoint pen left inadvertently by Dr. Chilton to unlock the handcuffs, kill the guard and flee. After a successful escape, he changed his identity. At Starling's party, she receives a letter from Hannibal, who has changed his identity, and the reader cannot guess what he really thinks. Buffalo Bill is eventually shot by Starling, but Hannibal, the bigger threat, is at large again. Starling was finally able to "sleep soundly and sweetly, for the lamb was quiet." However, since there is still a monster like Hannibal lurking in the vast sea of people, there is no guarantee that the "silent lamb" will not cry out again. As the novel draws to a close, but the fear lingers, the reader asks, can Starling really sleep? Just when the reader is anticipating the ending, it all came to a screeching halt. All is still unsolved mystery. In the process of actively participating in reading, they constantly fill in the "uncertainty" of the text, leaving huge space for imagination.

7. Conclusion

The "blank space" and "uncertainty" shown by Thomas Harris in *The Silence of the Lambs* indicates that any reader can actively participate in thinking and imagination in the process of reading the text according to his own reading experience and value orientation. Under the interpretation of the text, the reader keeps speculating and reasoning rationally, thus endowing the text with more meaning. Through a series of complex consciousness activities, such as analysis, reasoning and imagination, readers take the initiative to establish and obtain the constructed meaning of the text. The novel is full of binary opposition between good and evil, the absence of the heroine's father image renders the tension of the text, and the open ending strengthens the uncertainty of the text. Readers actively participate in the construction of the meaning of the text, and then through these "gaps" and stimulate the readers to "fill" the creative and imaginative connection of the "re-creation" role. Through repeated rereading, the reader gradually becomes an active creator of the second text in the process of constantly refuting, confirming and reconstructing their own vision of expectation. This process, perhaps, is why this novel, unlike the detective stories that usually end in a happy ending, has been able to attract generations of readers and interpreters.

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Note

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