
THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF DORIS LESSING'S *TO ROOM NINETEEN* AND ITS EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

The short story, *To Room Nineteen*, created by British writer, Doris Lessing, mainly tells the story concerning the difficulties encountered by the protagonist, Susan, in her life, and she tries her best to solve the difficulties, but, at last, she has no choice but to end the pain through suicide. The theme reflected in the story is thought-provoking to its readers and is worth analyzing. In the field of narratology, narrative perspective reflects how a story is constructed, which also, to some extent, reflects the writing techniques of a writer. Therefore, the author of this paper believes that the analysis of the narrative perspective and its effects are of great significance in the interpretation of the story, *To Room Nineteen*.

Key Words: *To Room Nineteen*; Narrative Perspective; Susan

1. INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing, born in 1919, is a British writer and the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2007, whose masterpiece is *The Golden Notebook*. The story studied in this paper, *To Room Nineteen*, is included in her *A Man and Two Women* (1963). The story tells a story about a failure in intelligence. In this story, it is widely believed that Susan and Matthew are well-matched, and their marriage will be happy forever. Many years later, one day, Matthew admits having had an affair with a woman, but Susan forgives him. Every day after their wedding, Susan is busy with housework, which causes serious tiredness to her. Considering the difficulties she met, Susan tries to relax, and the family also gives her room for relaxation. They hope to give her some freedom and appease her soul, but it does not work. What scares her, even more, is that the room is more like a cage. Later, she finds a little tranquil hotel in Victoria. She stays alone in the room of the hotel to seek solace, but she is disturbed by the manager, which forces her to find another place. This time, she chooses FRED'S HOTEL, and this time, she changes her name. She stays in Room Nineteen for around a year, of course, only when she needs it, but unfortunately, her husband finds the place and mistakenly believes that she has an affair. Susan does "admit" it. But the reality is that the person who has an affair is her husband. Not only that, but he also proposes that they four should have lunch together, which makes Susan anxious. Before the appointed time, Susan comes to Room Nineteen, which is the same as before. At the end of the story, she closes the door and windows and turned on the gas, at which point she feels satisfied (Lessing 267-304). At first, people thought that Susan and Matthew's marriage was perfect, and they tried to avoid the detours that others had taken. However, at the end of the story, Susan can only get real relief by committing suicide, which must be thought-provoking. In terms of narrative, the story is dominated by third-

person narration, and the first-person narration also appears. To some extent, different narrative styles reflect different narrative perspectives. It is generally believed that the narrative perspective plays an important role in the development of the storyline and character. In addition, the narrative perspective also reflects the relationship between the narrator and the text (Ziguo 119). The narrative perspective is the perspective from which the narrator or character observes the world, narrates the story, and by which the author and the readers are connected (Yiwen 71-74). Given these aspects, this article intends to interpret the narrative perspective of the story, *To Room Nineteen*.

2. THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF *TO ROOM NINETEEN*

The story has been studied from different perspectives. Yakiv Bystrov and Diana Sabadash studied the story from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, through which they believe that the integrity of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics within the framework of cognitive pragmatics can be the readers' means of analyzing a story (52). Rula Quawas analyzed this story from Susan's point of view. In her article, *Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen': Susan's Voyage into the Inner Space of 'Elsewhere'*, Rula concluded that Susan's self-willed death is not a defeat, but a way of resisting the crushing, culturally enforced image of woman, and of positing a new politics of identity (107-122). Given the previous studies, this paper decides to explore the story from its narrative perspective. In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eight classifications of narrative perspective are mentioned. (1) editorial omniscience (third-person narration with an intrusive omniscient narrator: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*); (2) neutral omniscience (third-person narration with an impersonal, non-intrusive omniscient narrator: Aldous Huxley's *Point Counterpoint*); (3) "I" as witness (the action is viewed from the periphery by a narrator who is also a secondary character: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*); (4) "I" as protagonist (the action is viewed from the center, by a narrator who is also the main character: Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*); (5) multiple selective omniscience (third-person narration with several characters as focalizers: *The Golden Bowl*); (6) selective omniscience (third-person narration with one character as focalizer: *The Ambassadors*); (7) the dramatic mode (third-person narration and vision from without: "*Hills Like White Elephants*"); (8) the camera (the action "just happens" before a neutral recorder and is transmitted by it seemingly without organization or selection) (David Herman 442-443). The narrative perspective of the story, *To Room Nineteen*, is dominated by the omniscient narrative perspective, and there is also the phenomenon of narrative perspective conversion in the story:

[1] This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlingses' marriage was grounded in intelligence (Lessing 267).

[2] They were older when they married than most of their married friends: in their well-seasoned late twenties. Both had had a number of affairs, sweet rather than bitter; (...), and likely to make desperate or romantic marriages (Lessing 267).

These are the first two paragraphs of the story. The phrase, I suppose, in paragraph [1] reflects that the narrator of the story tells the story to the readers in the first-person narrative from "my point of view", believing that this is a story in which reason or intelligence cannot work. The phrase also shows "my" opinion or comment on this story as the narrator of the story. In paragraph [2], the narrator shifts his/her narrative perspective from the first person to the third person, shifts the

narrative voice outside of the story, and shifts the narrative vision from the inside to the outside. The narrative of this part is mainly expressed with “they” as the subject. At this point, it is clear that the sentences in paragraph [1] are rather subjective, and the first sentence, this is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence, belongs to free direct thought, which makes the subjectivity of the narrative in paragraph [1] more intense. In contrast, although the phrase in paragraph [2], but not too long, makes the readers feel that the content in parentheses is like a first-person narrative. However, it is undeniable that the overall narrative angle of paragraph [2] has obviously turned to the objective narrative angle. The content of this part is about Susan and Matthew's marriage, and the narrator gives a third-person narrative from an objective perspective, in which the readers should be able to see very clearly how ideal the couple's marriage is. From the following description of their friends' marriages that “a good many of their friends had married young, and now (they felt) probably regretted lost opportunities; while others, still unmarried, seemed to them arid, self-doubting, and likely to make desperate or romantic marriages”, we can see that their marriage is in sharp contrast to that of their friends. As the information about Susan and Matthew's marriage passes unreservedly to the readers, the couple's marital status is clearly understood by its readers. The above omniscient narrative is prevalent in the story as the excerpts listed below:

[3] Both, before they married, had had pleasant flats, but they felt it unwise to base a marriage on either flat, because it might seem like a submission of personality on the part of the one whose flat it was not. (...) this balanced and sensible family was no more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense for choosing right (Lessing 268).

[4] On the contrary, they used their intelligence to preserve what they had created from a painful and explosive world: they looked around them, and took lessons. (...) They must not make the same mistakes, they must not (Lessing 269).

[5] What it amounted to was that Mother's Room, and her need for privacy, had become a valuable lesson in respect for other people's rights. (...) it had become another family room (Lessing 282).

[6] She tried to shrink herself back into the shelter of the room, (...) she was as ill as a suddenly deprived addict (Lessing 297).

[7] She had about four hours. (...) that smelled of sweat and sex (Lessing 303-304).

[8] She lay on her back on the green satin cover, but her legs were chilly. (...) as she drifted off into the dark river (Lessing 304).

In excerpt [3], the narrator describes the couple's efforts to maintain their marriage from a third-person perspective. The readers of it may be able to form the above view while reading, but they cannot penetrate the narrator's view on the matter directly from narrator's narration. The readers are as if they were passively accepting the knowledge. The phenomena are similar to those in excerpts [5] [6] [7] [8]. These paragraphs only show the readers what the characters do or think. In other words, we can realize what happened (the whole matter or to the character), but we cannot know the narrator's point of view. This god perspective pulls the narrator out of the story itself, and performing as a third-person narrator, merely describes the events from an objective

perspective. Compared with excerpts [3] [5][6][7][8], excerpt [4] is more similar to excerpt [2]. Both excerpts [2] and [4] have clearly been inserted with narrative in in parentheses:

Excerpt [2] That they had waited so long (but not too long) for this real thing was to them a proof of their sensible discrimination (Lessing 267).

Excerpt [4] All around them, marriages collapsing, or breaking, or rubbing along (even worse, they felt) (Lessing 269).

The two inserted phrases seem to be in a third-person narrative: from the narrator's perspective, the narrator seems to tell the readers that the couple waited not too long. The narrator seems to tell the readers that the couple feels that the friction-filled life is even worse. But because of this narrative voice, the readers can also feel as if the narrator also said in the narrator's own perspective: "I", the narrator, think that they waited not too long and "I", the narrator, think that the couple believes that the friction-filled life is even worse. Therefore, the excerpts [2] and [4] are more flexible in expression than the other parts in the respective paragraphs. In other words, the narration in parentheses in [2] and [4] are freer and more subjective than the narration outside the brackets. Therefore, when reading the excerpts [2] and [4], readers may feel that the contents in parentheses are greatly different from the contents outside the parentheses, thus creating an effect of narrative perspective transformation.

Not only that, but there are also a small number of first-person protagonist narration, "I" as protagonist, in the story. As the following excerpts:

[9] Except, thought Susan, unaccountably bad-tempered, she was (is?) the first. (...) and who is Myra Jenkins? Why, no one at all (Lessing 271-272).

[10] There was only one thing to do, and of course these sensible people did it: (...) giving thanks for past good fortune as they did so (Lessing 272).

First, the excerpt [9] tells of Susan's psychological activities after Matthew admitted his affair. Excerpt [10] closely follows the excerpt [9] in the story. In the excerpt [9], the following features can be found: the paragraph begins with an omniscient narrative, and the second half of the paragraph turns to the first-person protagonist narrative perspective, "I" as witness, where the narrator narrates from the "my", the narrator's, perspective of instantly experiencing events. And there are also interspersed with narratives in parentheses. In addition, from the perspective of discourse expression, it is obvious that the second half of the excerpt [9] is free direct thought. In this case, the characters' thoughts are reflected through the contents and texts. There is also an effect in which as if Susan were speaking to herself. The psychological rendering of the character is even more intense. In this way, when readers read this part, they can directly feel Susan's inner thoughts and feel that she has been greatly affected by her husband's disloyalty. In terms of excerpt [10], the way of narration used in this paragraph is an omniscient narrative mode, where the narrator evaluates or judges the matter from a condescending perspective, which makes the readers feel that both sides of the couple are responsible for the rift in their marriage, and to solve the crisis is to require the efforts of both sides. As we can see, the story in the excerpt [9] begins with an omniscient narrative perspective, then turns to the first-person protagonist narrative, "I" as

protagonist, in the middle, and turns to an omniscient narrative perspective again in excerpt [10]. There is a clear change of perspective.

[11] “He said: ‘But the children are at school and off your hands.’” (Lessing 280)

[12] She said to herself: I’ve got to force myself to say: Yes, but do you realize that I never feel free? There’s never a moment I can say to myself: There’s nothing I have to remind myself about, nothing I have to do in half an hour, or an hour, or two hours... (Lessing 280)

[13] But she said: ‘I don’t feel well.’ (Lessing 280)

Excerpts [11] [12] [13] are taken from the conversations between Susan and Matthew. Susan felt too tired, and she was always busy doing her housework. But what she told Matthew during their conversations was that she felt uncomfortable. Apparently, What Susan said is not what Susan thought. From these three excerpts, the transformation of the narrative perspective is also obvious. First, the excerpt [11] is the narrator’s description of Matthew’s words, telling the reader what Matthew has said to Susan and the direct speech is not in relation to the narrator’s point of view. The excerpt [13] is the narrator’s description of Susan’s words. This part also simply tells the readers what Susan said. Excerpts [11] and [13] are narrated from an omniscient perspective, while the excerpt [12] is obviously a description of Susan’s mental process. In excerpt [12], there is no reporting clause, like she said, which makes the readers directly touch the hearts of the character, Susan, feeling that what Susan really wants to say is not what she said, or that she didn’t say it because she didn’t want to, or that she didn’t know how to say. Free direct thought in this part shows that Susan’s inner world currently is very complicated. From a narrative perspective, this part clearly uses “I” as the subject, and the story is told from the perspective that I am the one who is experiencing the event, “I” as protagonist.

The first-person protagonist narrative perspective of the excerpts [9] and [12] introduces the readers directly into the inner world of “mine”, in which “I am” experiencing the event. The first-person protagonist narrative perspective makes the readers directly and vividly feel the heart of the characters and strengthens the subjectivity of the inner expression in a free and direct way, which is easy for the readers to look at the problems from the perspective of the character, “I” as protagonist. Compared with the excerpts [10] [12] [13], it is obvious that the narrative perspective of the first-person protagonist can better express the inner thoughts of a character.

The 12 excerpts, from excerpt [1] to excerpt [12], are selected from different parts of the story. We can clearly see that the story is dominated by an omniscient narrative perspective, and the story is also interspersed with the first-person protagonist narrative perspective. This constant change of narrative perspective also allows readers’ thinking to shift from the external environment to the inner world of a character. This continuous perspective change, on the one hand, forces the readers to consider the external factors when analyzing the characters. On the other hand, the change can also enable the readers to think about the real thoughts of the characters. The combination of the two aspects makes the interpretation of the characters more thorough, and more comprehensive. As mentioned in the previous content, the narrative perspective includes narrative sound, narrative vision, and narrative focus. The following content will follow this step in the analysis of the story.

Narrative sound, narrative vision, and narrative focus are the three elements contained in the narrative perspective. The narrative sound refers to the source of discourse, from the character or the narrator. The narrative vision refers to the visionary source, the character's or the narrator's. The narrative focus means what or who is the object on which the narrative discourse is focused. Please see the excerpt [14]:

[14] There she sat on a bench, and tried to calm herself, looking at trees, at a brown glimpse of the river. (...) She spoke to herself severely, thus: All this is quite natural. First, I spent twelve years of my adult life working, *living my own life*. (...) So now I have to learn to be myself again. That's all (Lessing 275).

The narrative voice of this part, starting with "there she sat on a bench" to "she spoke to herself severely, thus", is the narrator's voice and it lies outside of the story. The narrator, while describing Susan's anxious state of mind, tells the readers from a rather objective perspective that Susan has already been anxious for a period of time. But from "all this is quite natural" to the end of this paragraph, "that's all", the narrative voice is from the character, inside the story. This is very different. The paragraph reflects a phenomenon, in which the narrative voice has changed. Not only that, in excerpt [14], the narrative vision has also changed simultaneously. The beginning of the paragraph is mainly narrated from the narrative vision of the narrator, and the narrative discourse is consistent with the narrative vision of the narrator. But obviously, after "she spoke to herself severely, thus", the narrative vision changed, then the narrator no longer stayed outside the story, but became the character itself, and because of this change, the narrative discourse began to align with the character's vision. In other words, the narrative discourse no longer belongs to the narrator, but to Susan. This change in narrative vision makes it easier for readers to see problems with the inner thoughts of the character. And it's more subjective when considering problems. The first-person narrative is usually an internal-focus perspective, in which the narrator only describes what he sees, hears, or thinks. However, it should be noted that the narrative focus of the paragraph did not change. That is to say, the narrative object of the paragraph did not change from the beginning to the end of the story. The narrative focus is Susan all along. The passage [15] also reflects the above narrative phenomenon.

[15] No. 19 was the same. She saw everything with an acute, narrow, checking glance: the cheap shine of the satin spread, which had been replaced carelessly after the two bodies had finished their convulsions under it; (...) But she had to be careful, because she did not want, today, to be surprised by Fred's knock at five o'clock (Lessing 303).

Excerpt [15] is taken from the end of the story. When her husband confesses his affair FOR THE SECOND TIME, Susan has to "admit" her affair, too. Certainly, her affair is not real, which requires her to "create" a man with whom she had an affair. Now, she is aware of the hypocrisy between her and her husband, and she extremely disgusts and resents herself and her husband. But how will she face the "foursome" lunch that her husband proposed a few days later? After borrowing money, Susan came to Room Nineteen again, a place she hadn't planned to come back to. What follows in the story is what is described in excerpt [15]. Obviously, the narrative discourse is uttered by the narrator from "No. 19 was the same." to "narrow, checking glance", which is to say that the narration voice is derived from the narrator who stays outside the story. This allows the readers to look at Room Nineteen, to observe Susan, from an objective perspective. At this

moment, the narrative vision also belongs to the narrator. But the narrative vision shifts from the narrator's to the vision of the character's from "the cheap shine of the satin spread," to "an intense green shade in a fold of the curtain."

This obvious shift allows readers to instantly use Susan's eyes to observe Room Nineteen, and it gives the readers a more real feeling of the current appearance of Room Nineteen. So far, the narrative voice belongs to the narrator, and, compared with excerpt [14], the excerpt [15] is more objective and more like stating a fact. Later, the narrative voice shifts from the character to the narrator, from "She stood at the window, looking down" to the end of the paragraph. In this part, the narrator tells the readers what Susan is doing and thinking, which extends the distance between the reader and the character, and it also makes the readers calmly see what she does and thinks as Susan stands in the room. It should be noted that the narrative focus changed from the beginning to the end of the paragraph: from "No. 19 was the same." to "narrow, checking glance", the narrative focus shifted from "Room Nineteen" to Susan. The following narrative, which begins with "the cheap shine of the satin spread," to "an intense green shade in a fold of the curtain.", indicates that the narrative focus turns from Susan back to "Room Nineteen" again. Immediately after that, from "She stood at the window, looking down" to the end of the paragraph, the focused object again turns back to Susan.

It can be seen from the excerpts [14] and [15] that although the narrative sound, narrative vision and narrative focus are the three important elements of the narrative perspective, the phenomenon that one element changes when another element changes did not appear. This further proves the freedom of narrative voice, narrative vision, and narrative focus. The constant changes of these three elements in the narrative context make the readers have to think deeply when reading the story, which further draws the readers into the story. Obviously, narrative voice, narrative vision and narrative focus play an important role in literary creation and appreciation.

3. CONCLUSION

In the second part, this paper analyzed the relevant excerpts of the story, *To Room Nineteen*, from the classification of narrative perspective. It concluded that the story is mainly omniscient, interspersed with the first-person protagonist narration. In the relevant paragraphs, the continuous change of narrative perspective also enables readers to judge the plot and characters of the story from different perspectives, and it also enables readers to constantly change their way of thinking along with the change of narrative perspective. From the perspective of the work itself, the continuous change of the narrative perspective makes the plot and characters of the story more vivid. With the detailed analysis of the narrative perspective, from the three perspectives of narrative voice, narrative vision and narrative focus, it can be found that the interpretation of the narrative perspective is of great significance to the interpretation of the story. Obviously, the story, *To Room Nineteen*, can be interpreted differently if interpreted from narrative perspective.

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