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Fetal Narrative and Ethical Taboo: On the Unreliable Narration of Ian McEwan's *Nutshell*

Xucheng Ding*
College of Chinese Language and Literature, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China
*Corresponding author, e-mail: 15769391798@163.com

Abstract: *Nutshell is a model of unreliable narration. It is first-person narration based on fetal narration, and the narrator "I" 's ability to imitate adults and surpass adults breaks the cognition of real readers. The unreliability of the narrator's reporting, judgment and interpretation of the facts is reflected in the transformation from "I" in the first-person singular to "We" in the first-person plural. The ethical themes of fratricide and incest in Nut Shell are deeply explained by the marks of unreliable narration.*

Keywords: *Narrator; Unreliable narration; "I"; Ethical taboo; Nutshell*

Introduction

Unreliable narration is not only the core concept of narratology, but also an important narrative strategy. The rhetoric method was put forward by Wayne Booth (1961), "when the norms of the work (the norms of the implied author) are consistent with the narrator, it is called a reliable narrator, otherwise it is called an unreliable narrator". James Phelan (2005) expands the two types into three types or three axes: "fact/event axis", "value/judgment axis" and "knowledge/perception axis", and distinguishes six sub-types of unreliable narration successively: "false report" and "insufficient report"; "misjudgment" and "inadequate judgment"; "misreading" and "underreading". Based on the practice of criticism, Zhao (1998) believes that the situation of "excessive" should be taken into consideration, namely, "excessive reporting", "excessive judgment" and "excessive interpretation". The cognitive approach uses the norms of the actual reader as a measure of unreliable narrative. Ansgar Nünning (2005) focuses on the framework of reader's interpretation and believes that "unreliable narration is not so much the character of the narrator as the interpretation strategy of the reader". The reader's strategy in reading the work determines whether the narrative text is reliable or not. Nowhere is this more evident than in McEwan's Nutshell. First of all, it is a first-person narration based on "fetus" narration. The narrator "I" cannot speak directly, relying on "imitating adults" and "transcending adults"; Secondly, the novel has undergone a change from "I" in the first-person narration singular to "We" in the plural. "We" has a vague meaning, reflecting the fetus' dissatisfaction with its lack of identity. Finally, this series of "marks of unreliability" hints at the ethical theme of Nut Shells: parricide and incest.

"Imitation Adult" and "Super Adult": Unreliable Narration of the Fetus

The unreliable narration in Nut Shell can be divided into two aspects: "imitation adult" and "super adult".

The "imitation adult" of fetus means that it can have exquisite language expression ability, strict logical reasoning ability, excellent hearing ability and profound and complicated knowledge reserve.

In terms of narrative discourse, "I"'s exquisite verbal expression is inconsistent with the fetus. The unborn narrator of *Nutshell* makes extensive use of complex sentence structures, brilliant rhetoric, and beautiful language that is difficult for the average adult to manage. "I'll bind her with this slimy rope, press-gang her on my birthday with one groggy, newborn stare, one lonesome seagull wail to harpoon her heart" (McEwan, 2016). In this sentence, he uses figurative rhetoric and slang (press-gang) expressions. "It was a silent rebuke, a categorical repulsion, a cold retreat, but a gesture of friendship" (McEwan, 2016). This parallel sentence uses a series of parallel phrases with a strong sense of rhythm and rhythm.

"My eyes close nostalgically when I remember how I once drifted in my translucent body bag, floated dreamily in the bubble of my thoughts through my private ocean in slow-motion somersaults, colliding gently against the transparent bounds of my confinement, the confiding membrane that vibrated with, even as it muffled, the voices of conspirators in a vile enterprise" (McEwan, 2016). This sentence, the change of the tenses of the past (drifted), the present tense (remember) and the present continuous tense (colliding) crisscross, and the conspirators, membrane, translucent and other advanced vocabulary, continuous use of long and difficult sentences is far beyond the baby's own ability. In addition to English, the fetus has an amazing command of French, Latin, German and other words.

Mentally, "I" can make certain logical reasoning. Under questioning by Inspector Allison, Trudy and Claude gave themselves away. The murder of both of them will soon be revealed. It was I, in Trudy's belly, who was advising them. "I" first pointed out the mistakes they made in the inspector's cross-examination: answers were too fast and inconsistent; Then point out the consequences of such a mistake: waiting for the DNA on the hat to come back and getting caught; Finally, the solution strategy is pointed out: first strike, run away immediately to have a chance of survival. My interpretation, reasoning ability to some extent not inferior to adults.

My hearing ability is excellent. I can hear the details of my surroundings. "When I hear the friendly drone of passing cars and a slight breeze stirs what I believe are horse chestnut leaves…I know that the ornate cast-iron railing of oak leaf and acorn design is held together by historical layers of black paint and should not be leaned on" (McEwan, 2016). Any change is within my perception, and the reliability of such a narrator's narrative must be greatly reduced.

In terms of knowledge reserve, "I" is an encyclopedic scholar. Whether it's culture, politics, economy, environment, or diet, I know what I'm doing. In literature, "I" was not only familiar with trochee and tetrapod, but also familiar with the poems of Peter Potter, James Fenton, Seamus Heaney, Keats, Wilfred Owen, Eliot and others. I had a profound understanding of Kafka's Metamorphosis and Joyce's Ulysses. In music, "I" often listen to Schubert, Schoenberg, Stravinsky and other composers, their music style characteristics and shortcomings can say a thing or two; Politically, I am fully aware of the Middle East war, jihadi organizations, Israeli-Palestinian issue, American hegemony, nationalism, European integration and refugee flows, which have brought crises to the world. On the economic front, "I" predicted that the gap between rich and poor and the financial crisis would bring the world to the brink of collapse. In terms of the environment, I think global

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warming, resource depletion and environmental pollution must be taken seriously.

In addition, fetuses defy the physical logic of the real world and have insight into the minds of others. “I” could feel my mother’s anxiety when my father lingered in front of the house, and knew that she was going to “pretend to be sleepy” and that “This she will soon relate to Claude in humorous terms” (McEwan, 2016). Even before that happens, the fetus can read the mother’s mind and predict what she will do next. Sometimes the fetus acquiesces that its mother thinks as it does, and agrees on whether Claude is stupid or not. “Her silence rewarded him. She was thinking, and So was I. Same old question: How stupid is Claude” (McEwan, 2016).

Finally, the fetus is both narrator and narratee, and the boundary between the two is not clear. He sometimes answers to his own questions. At first, he questions his mother’s involvement in his husband’s murder. “something like—this? Too precious. So, getting closer, my idea was to be” (McEwan, 2016). The narrator does not ask the narratee to answer the question, he asks the question when he already has the answer, he is merely expressing his anger. If this is to be understood as “human nature”, the frequent use of long passages of self-questioning is abnormal. According to the reading experience and acceptance ability of real readers, “multiple personalities” can only show one personality at a time. As a questioner, the intense, urgent and emotional character of the fetus appears at the same time as the calm, calm and rational character of the answer, which obviously goes beyond the reader’s cognition.

“I” and “We”: Unreliable Narration under the Change of Person

Nutshell is narrated in the first-person, and the narrator is omniscient and omnipotent. “I” can always predict the direction of things and the actions of characters in advance. Unlike traditional novels, My narrative is not persuasive. It seems to control the whole situation, but a closer look reveals that the My narrative is not reliable. This is mainly the limitation of the first-person narrative itself. “Because human limitations in perception, memory, and judgment may make it easy to miss, forget, or misperceive certain events, words, or motives, first-person narrative is always at least potentially unreliable” (Riggan,1981). The unreliable narrative in *Nutshell* is not only a first-person narrative, but also a shift from “I” in the first-person singular to “We” in the plural.

The first-person narrator “I” is the homodiegetic narrator. In Nutshell, there is a distance between the “I” who assume the narrative function and the “I” who assume the character function. When “I” appears as a narrative function, it has a strong emotional tendency. This leads “I” to misjudge and misinterpret characters and events.

I was furious with Claude. “I” said, “How wrong he is. This is Claude as in property developer who composes nothing, invents nothing” (McEwan, 2016). I used “nothing” to describe Claude. This is a misjudgment. Claude, who is currently an unsuccessful man, once bought a building on his own. have nothing is to be deliberately devalued by the fetus. It is then revealed that Claude still has savings, that he gives John five thousand pounds in order to get Trudy to get rid of him, and that Claude has a house in the country and is not deprived of it. “Maggot” and “dog” later to describe him, is completely my biased remarks.

The wrong interpretation is reflected in the dialogue of the characters. “The exchange is relaxed, the tone inconsequential. Small talk or a trade in threat and insult—I lack the social experience to know” (McEwan, 2016). This is a misreading. “I” know what threatening words are, and although I am in the womb, I have as much social experience as any adult. If I know more and speak less, the reliability of my story is questionable.

In the second half of the novel, the first-person plural “We” is frequently used to tell the story. Unlike “I”, “We” is sometimes clearly referred to, but sometimes it is difficult to determine what it refers to. Semantic fuzziness enhances the unreliability of the narrative. When the category of “We” is two people, the meaning is mostly clear: “We’ll be rich toget her” (McEwan, 2016). Where “We” refers to mother and Claude; “We gave and received and permitted everything” (McEwan, 2016) and by “We” mean father and mother; There is also ambiguity, such as “At last the moment is on us” (McEwan, 2016). The “We” in this sentence may refer to mother and Claude, or mother, Claude, and “I”. In my opinion, when the intrigue was exposed, all three of us would be punished. If the mother is going to jail, the fetus will also be in prison. As a result, it is reasonable for “I” to be punished. In terms of process, in the formulation and implementation of the murder plan, “I” have been a bystander, did not participate in it, as the fetus did not have the ability to expose or stop, So I should not have been punished. The “we” should only have been mother and Claude. “When the language used by the narrator contains internal contradictions, ambiguous images and similar phenomena, this phenomenon produces a reaction that undermines the reliability of the users of the language” (Kenan, 1989). The contradiction between the process and the result makes it difficult for us to make a judgment.

The change from “I” to “we” essentially reflects the lack of identity of “I”. “I” repeatedly stressed the importance of my presence, such as imagining a tragic fate in a slightly jocose tone: “If she commanded it, I too would go to Shoreditch, and nurse myself in exile. No need for an umbilical cord” (McEwan, 2016); Or intense resentment at being ignored: “What was I in my father’s peroration? Dead. Head-first in a burial mound within his hated ex-wife’s gut. Not even a mention, not in an aside, not even dismissed as an irrelevance” (McEwan, 2016). There’s a reason for that. Whether as a character or as a narrator, “I” does not exist in the eyes of parents. “I” think that by changing the plural of “we,” I can position myself as a person just like them. My emphasis on freedom and my passionate pursuit of rights are all related to my desire to be an independent “person” rather than a “thing” to be disposed of at will. Based on this “I” misreported: “But I’m old enough to take responsibility for myself and try to be the master of my fate” (McEwan, 2016). Unfortunately, psychologically, I am no different from “human”. Physically, however, it has not yet fully evolved into a “human” form. The separation of psychology and physiology makes the existence of “I” as “human” vanish into nothing, and also increases the unreliability of the narrator.

Parricide and Incest: Ethical Taboos in *Nutshell*

The ethical issues in *Nutshell* are common “parricide” and “incest”, the former being the premise of the latter’s success. “My mother has preferred my father’s brother, cheated her husband, ruined her son. My uncle has stolen his brother’s wife, deceived his nephew’s father, grossly insulted his sister-in-law’s son.” Mother and uncle conspired to poison father in order to maintain their relationship and fight over the family fortune. Brotherly love, sister-in-law love, the normal ethical relationship between husband and wife has been broken.

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In order to better express the influence of ethical dislocation, McEwan uses rhetorical techniques such as metaphor and irony.

"House" appears many times in the novel, which is quite metaphorical. Its dilapidated doors and Windows, balconies, the absence of damaged floor tiles, uncollected garbage and the foul smell saluted our nostrils. It's dangerous, messy, and teetering. The physical structure of the house meant that the father was in a difficult situation and his life was in danger, and that Trudy and Claude were in danger of being found guilty and imprisoned. The crumbling house symbolizes the irremediable end of marriage and love between mother and father. The mess of the house is a metaphor for the confusion of ethical relations.

Nutshell is a satirical attempt at parricide. "How wearying, on top of all else (a hangover, a murder, enervating sex, advanced pregnancy), for my mother to be obliged to exert her will and extend fulsome hatred to a guest." It is highly ironic to attribute the mother's fatigue to hangovers, sex and murder, both of which she acted autonomously Shang (2018) says "an unborn child knows ethical rules, goodness and justice, while Two adults, Trudy and Claude, lose their sense of ethics." This is not the case. It is true that the fetus has the qualities of kindness and justice, but it has also inadvertently violated the rules of ethics. This is embodied in my love for my mother.

My love for my mother goes beyond the ethical norm. I have an "Oedipus complex". The incest in *Nutshell* refers not only to the inappropriate feelings between uncle and sister-in-law, but also to the immoral feelings between "I" and mother. "I think there is a core of suppressed power in the family—Oedipus, incestuous power—that is also an important driver of family integration. If you take away those controls, you will see an absolute anarchy, in which Oedipus's incestuous power is at the root of everything" (Hamilton, 1978). McEwan believes that "Oedipus complex" plays an important role in maintaining the relationship between family members. "I won't survive without her, without the enveloping green gaze to smile into, the loving voice pouring sweets in my ear, the cool hands tending my private parts" (McEwan, 2016). I imagined my mother caressing my private parts, implying that "love" had turned into "sex". The latter often occurs between lovers or couples, but not between mother and child. Although it's my fantasy, but subconsciously, Trudy has both mother and lover. "I've got her to myself, here in the ordered kitchen, in sunshine and peace, while Claude sleeps away the morning. We should be close, she and I, closer than lovers" (McEwan, 2016). This one is even more explicit: "I have her completely" is used in the present perfect, as if it had become a given and would remain so. "Closer than the lover" is a further indication of my unusual relationship with my mother. The formation of this relationship makes it possible to rebuild the small family of father, mother and "I". "I" instead of father became mother's partner, firmly defend the dignity of this small family, never allow uncle to intervene. "A narrator's character may be functional, even acting as a stand-in for the implied author, through which the implied author expresses his view of the world" (Phelan, 2002). The implied author expresses the identification of "Oedipus complex" through the substitute of "I". As we can be seen from the above, "Oedipus complex" is related to sex. What he wants to explore in *Nutshell* is not the question of good and evil of human nature, but the question of human animality, especially the role of animality in maintaining family relations.

That "I" and the implied author in value or theme expression level is consistent, is reliable, can real readers, or the author of the readers, all think that "I" report, interpretation and judgment is not reliable, the unreliable

is of implied author recognition, which is " Contractual Unreliable Narration " James Phelan said. It is these "unreliable narration by contract" that obscure the ethical issues in Nutshell, leaving readers with space to think and imagine.

Conclusion

According to the interpretation standards of real readers, the unreliability of "I" is the imitation and transcendence of "adults" in the process of narration. As far as the novel itself is concerned, both "I" and "We" appear unreliable in the narration of the three axes of "fact/event axis", "value/judgment axis" and "knowledge/perception axis". In terms of the ethical theme of Nutshell, it deeply illustrates the "Oedipus complex" through the unreliable narration of "contract type". From the short story collection First Love, Last Rites to the medium-length novels The Cement Garden, The Comfort of Strangers and Atonement, to today's Nutshell, McEwan's novels have always had an unreliable narrator. It is precisely these unreliable narratives that enable readers to explore the truth of the narrative, give readers more motivation to read, and make it possible to interpret the novel in a variety of ways.

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