



An image analysis of “Rocking-horse” in the rocking-horse winner from the perspective of Lotman’s semiosphere theory

Huang Yuchan

School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Nanjing Normal University, Jiangsu, China

Abstract

The Rocking-Horse Winner is a short story written by the English writer D.H. Lawrence in his later years. It deeply reveals that in the industrialized capitalist society, people are dying for money. Family affection and love no longer exist. Only the greed and endless desire for money are left. The rocking-horse is a symbol of complex and various meanings in the text. From the perspective of semiotic theory, text is a relatively independent sign system, which has the function of generating meaning. Its heterogeneity makes multiple interpretations possible, and the topics involved are also issues of universal humanistic concern, which will trigger readers from different sign systems to interpret it, and will increase the possibility of multiple interpretations. This paper analyzes the diversified symbol interpretation of rocking-horse and how the dynamic changes of the symbol meaning promote the development of the plot from two aspects--external text and internal text by using Lotman's Semiosphere Theory.

Keywords: the rocking-horse winner; semiosphere; text; heterogeneity

Introduction

The Rocking-Horse Winner was written by The British writer D.H. Lawrence in his later years. The hero of the story, a boy named Paul, longs for mother's love, but “at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could feel love, no, not for anybody.” In order to get his mother's love, Paul rode his rocking-horse crazily to predict the name of the winner in horse-races. He won a lot of money, but the mother was not satisfied and she only wanted to get more money. Gradually, Paul's predictions became less accurate. After making one last correct prediction, he fell off the horse and died soon after. In this story, Lawrence criticized the distortions of interpersonal relationships caused by money in the western middle and upper class after the First World War. Some critics believed that the novel criticized the greed of human nature, the drawbacks of the matriarchy and the Oedipus complex.

Studies at home and abroad mostly comments on the theme of the novel or writing skills from macro aspects. Few analyze the image of rocking-horse in detail, let alone those based on Lotman's symbol circle theory.

Lotman's Semiosphere Theory is developed from sign to text, from text to culture and from culture to semiosphere, in which sign is the most basic component. However, Lotman's research does not stop at the sign itself. What he emphasizes is the interrelationship and operation law between different individuals in the whole, that is, the interrelationship between text and text and between culture and culture in the semiosphere (Kang 2006:30) [3]. Any sign can be effective only when it enters the semiosphere. Independent symbols have limited meanings. Only when they interact with other symbols can they have definite meanings. In the semiosphere, all codes acquire relatively rich meanings (Wang & Guo 2020: 141) [6]. Text builds a bridge in this process.

Text and culture also have isomorphism. Lotman defines the

essence of culture as information, while text can transmit, save and produce information (Kang Cheng 2006: 31) [3]. Lotman believes that the study of text can be divided into discussion of the elements inside the text and the elements outside the text. Using these two text structures to analyze literary works can further and comprehensively explore the author's intention. Lotman's theory of external text points out that the characteristics of the structure of external text (outside the text) are composed of the same socio-historical, ethnic, anthropological and psychological factors that constitute the artistic patterns of the world (Lotman 2003: 253) [4]. The combination of internal and external text interactive research is conducive to promote readers to receive the complete information of the text, which is also the theoretical core of this paper.

Factors Outside the Text: from Culture to Semiosphere

Each nation or even each region has a relatively independent sign system. If the sign system changes during communication, the meaning of sign will change accordingly. Signs which enter different semiotic systems will have different meanings. Effected by the specific background, the result of decoding of the symbol will differ. Therefore, The Rocking-Horse Winner was set in western industrial society at the beginning of the 20th century. After the publication of this work, if the semiotic system it enters changes, its interpretation will inevitably have the trend of diversification.

Social background

Lawrence lived in the transitional period from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Major Countries in Europe and America entered the stage of monopoly capitalism one after another, and the contradictions among these capitalist countries intensified, and finally the First World War broke out. Lawrence felt the

deepening spiritual crisis and social crisis in the Western society after the First World War, and what made him especially worried was the serious destruction of human by modern industrial civilization (Zheng 2006: 26) ^[7]. Before the world economic crisis of the late 1920s and mid-1930s, the economic situation in Europe and the United States was so good that some speculators became the new money overnight in the gambling industry. Wealth has become the standard to judge a person's success. People began to make money blindly, to get rich and richer... At the same time, hedonism was popular. "Diligence and thrift" advocated by traditional religious beliefs were gradually replaced by the pursuit of personal wealth and material enjoyment.

The Rocking-Horse Winner was also written on the eve of the economic crisis, when people were caught up in the crazy pursuit of money. Based on this, the image of the rocking-horse can be interpreted as a symbol of vanity, since the family was not rich. All the wealth was an illusion made by the parents to maintain their social status. The rocking-horse was also a tool to obtain money and "good luck". Paul used it to predict the name of the winning horse in order to obtain a large amount of money to satisfy his mother's desire, which finally led to Paul's death. In the society where money distorted people's minds, the meaning of rocking-horse was no longer a toy, but a symbol of desire, a tool to distort people's hearts, and a reflection of character alienation.

Lawrence's family background

Lawrence's father was a miner who did not receive much education. Because of heavy labor all the year round he had a bad temper. Lawrence's mother was well educated and dissatisfied with her marriage. The couple were often at odds. Due to the disharmony in family, Lawrence's mother devoted all her love to her children, especially to little Lawrence. This kind of love affected Lawrence's psychology for a long time. Lawrence was totally biased towards his mother and in his deep consciousness there is a kind of inexplicable resentment towards his father (Zheng 2006: 23) ^[7]. This is also reflected in his works, such as "Sons and Lovers" and "The Lovely Lady", which embody the Oedipus complex. Lawrence hated this complex very much, but he couldn't get rid of it, because he loved his mother. The love-hate mixed feelings really make him suffer a lot.

"The Roking-Horse Winner" also has a similar embodiment. The father almost didn't appear in the whole story, and through the mother's narration we know their relationship was not harmonious. The mother complained that the husband had no luck. In order to show his ability to take the place of his father, and to meet mother's requirements, he firmly declared he was lucky. In order to prove himself he began to ride rocking-horse crazily, and got lots of money as a birthday present for mother. The rocking-horse here was a tool of Paul to prove that he could take the place of his father. It was a symbol of Oedipus. With the expansion of the mother's desire, the weird voice in the house became louder and louder. The mother's love threatened Paul. Paul was very painful but he had to work harder for his mother. The rocking-horse here was a symbol of the mother's desire to squeeze Paul, and also a symbol of destruction. Therefore, when placing the rocking-horse in the semiosphere of Oedipus complex, its meaning is not only a symbol of money desire, but also a symbol of the son's love

for his mother and the mother's desire which crushes and destroys Paul.

Therefore, the external text plays an important role in decoding signs. In different semiospheres, the meanings of texts are also different. To survive and develop culture, it is necessary to enter the cultural space, which is the semiosphere described by Lotman (Kang 2006: 100) ^[3]. Because of the heterogeneity of the semiosphere and with the change of the times and the rise of feminism and ecologism, people begin to analyze the patriarchal discourse in *The Rocking-Horse Winner* from the perspective of feminism, or analyze the unreasonable consumption view in the novel from the perspective of ecological protection... Different times have different perspectives. The heterogeneity of the semiosphere makes the text meaning differ when the text enters different semiosphere, which provides impetus for the regeneration of the text meaning and also promotes the diversification of the text interpretation.

Factors within the Text: the Carrier of Culture

Text plays an important role in Lotman's Semiosphere Theory. Text is the carrier of complete meaning and complete function (if cultural researchers and cultural carriers are distinguished, then text is the carrier of complete function for the former, while for the latter, it's the carrier of complete meaning). In this sense, text can be regarded as the first element (or basic unit) of culture (Wang & Guo 2020: 143) ^[6]. First, it combines codes systematically which provides the possibility for codes to generating meanings. Secondly, because of its role as a "carrier", it is also a necessary way to grasp the relative information of specific space. Although the meaning of independent code is relatively fixed, they interact with each other secretly. Lotman believes that culture has the function of storage and propagation information, and text is the important carrier of culture. Text embodies culture as a series of abstract symbols or symbol systems that can be decoded by people living in a particular symbolic space. The premise of understanding culture is to decode the codes arranged according to the symbol system. In this sense, text influences the decoding process, for example, because the author tends to express his ideas in a direct or indirect way subjectively, which leads to different interpretations of the same sign.

Heterogeneity of the rocking-horse image

Lotman points out that the semiosphere are heterogenetic, and the language properties within vary from completely translatable to completely untranslatable. The heterogeneity is determined by the multiphase and multifunctional nature of language (Kang 2006: 102) ^[3]. The text of *The Rocking-Horse Winner* is a meaning generator. The heterogeneity of its structure is determined by the multiphase and multifunction of the language. Lotman's view of text also holds that text has the functions of information transmission, information generation and information memorization. The function of information transmission is the process in which the text creator communicates the message in various forms of symbols to the receiver. In short, it is the relationship between encoding and decoding. In most cases, due to the influence of various factors, the decoder can't be completely consistent with the idea of the coder, which will cause understanding bias. Thus, the information generation

function of text will come into being. The decoder will get different information from the image of rocking-horse in different ways of understanding, which lays the foundation for the multiphase of text.

As the clue of the whole novel, the symbol of rocking-horse has diversified meaning. First of all, the rocking-horse in the text is highly ironic. It should be a toy that brings children joy in childhood, but Paul's rocking-horse only brought him heavy burden. It once enabled Paul to win large amount of money, while his mother's insatiable greed led him to his death. At the end of the story, uncle Oscar said Paul "has best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner". However it was pathetic for a nine-year-old child to gamble crazily in order to "buy" his mother's love. He finally died in the carefree childhood which he should have, died on the rocking-horse which represents happiness. The same goes for the "winner" in the title. Paul won a lot money but lost his life. The rocking-horse, as a prop carefully arranged in the story, strongly satirizes Paul's "good luck" that he mentions repeatedly.

Secondly, no matter how crazily the rocking-horse surged, it couldn't move forward, which implies the pursuit of money is in vain. In order to make more money, Mrs Hester has tried various jobs, but she had no success even in drawing furs and sketches for clothing advertisements, which she was best at. Paul. On the other hand, Paul said more than once that the horse has taken him to "a lucky place", and when he knew the name of the winning horse, he said: "I got there." Paul thought the horse took him to the lucky place, but in fact the horse was fixed and never moved. Such a plot setting implies the madness of pursuing money is in vain and expresses author's strong criticism of money worship.

The relationship between Paul and the horse is like the relationship between desire and Paul. Paul whipped the horse, because "he knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it", and the nurse persuaded him, "you will break your horse", but Paul ignored. The reason why Paul rode so crazy was that the way the desire for money "rode" on him was just like the way he rode on the rocking-horse. The more the desire was, the more crazily he will ride. From this perspective, the rocking-horse was also a reflection of Paul. The pressure turned Paul into a rocking-horse. "Its red mouth was slightly open. Its big eye was wide and glassy-bright". The description of the horse was actually what Paul looked like at the beginning. Then "the horse, rather shabby, stood in an arrested prance in the boy's bedroom." This was Paul's tired image of pursuing luck, and he was still in a "prance" for money. Finally, when Paul fell ill and "was tossing ceaselessly on the pillow. He neither slept nor regained consciousness". He finally became a rocking-horse, a poor money machine.

In addition, the plot that Paul rode on the rocking-horse for seeking money and "luck" for his family can be seen as a parody of the Knights of Round Table in King Arthur's time. In Paul's eyes, his rocking-horse was like a knight's horse, and he was an invincible warrior. He sat on it and "wildly the horse careered the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them", as if he were a knight. He sought luck and money for his country and his people-his family and his mother. In addition, other places in the text also parody the Knight's legend. First in terms of structure, the beginning of the article is allegoric, "There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck....." A few words outline

the fairy tale background from a third-person perspective. Meanwhile, among the racehorses, there's a horse named Lancelot, named after King Arthur's first knight. Lancelot was one of the greatest knights of the Round Table in King Arthur's time and was well known throughout the kingdom. However, his inappropriate love with the queen eventually led to the collapse of the Round Table and the country. The author puts the magnificent feat of ancient knight on an innocent child, which adds to the tragedy of the novel. It also implies Paul's Oedipus complex. It was the "love" for his mother that forced him to destruction.

The dynamic changes of rocking-horse image

Many writers use dual narrative mode when creating literary works and present the deep meaning of works through "covert progression". Many narrative works have dual narrative. One is the overt plot. The other is hidden behind the plot development, showing a different or even opposite direction from the overt plot and forming a complementary or subversive relationship with the plot development in the theme. The author calls this covert narrative the "covert progression" of narrative (Shen 2013: 48) [5]. In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, the overt plot develops from the rocking-horse to the racetrack and back to the rocking-horse. Paul accumulates money by predicting the name of the winner horse by riding the rocking-horse. The covert progression hides in the inflation of desire and the change of the symbolic meaning of the rocking-horse.

The rocking-horse, which came to the Hester as a Christmas present, stood out among all the "expensive and splendid" toys. In sharp contrast, the author clearly pointed out that the family is not rich, and all the prominence are just an illusion created to maintain social status, so the rocking-horse was just a tool to satisfy their vanity. The appearance of the rocking-horse was accompanied by the desire for money. The obsession with money turned into the voice that echoes around the house, "and even the horse, bending his wooden, champing head, heard it." It was only a secret whisper, but it made Paul care.

Then, in order to stop the voice in the house and to satisfy his mother, Paul rode on the horse crazily until see the name of the winner of the horse race. In this way, Paul earned five thousand pounds and gave it to his mother. In this sense, the horse was a symbol of luck and also a tool for catering to the mother. Paul wanted to give one thousand each year. However the greedy mother took all the money at once, then "the voices in the house suddenly went mad, like a chorus of frogs on a spring evening". Paul wanted to meet the desire of the mother, to eliminate the noise in the house, but the voice "simply trilled and screamed in a sort of ecstasy". Mother's lust for money grew stronger.

After that, Paul lost hundreds of pounds for two consecutive "wrong" times. He became a little impatient and rides the more crazily, and his health became worse and worse. He died when he finally knew he had won eighty thousand pounds. In the end, the broken rocking-horse became a symbol of Paul's self-destruction. Paul paid with his life for satisfying his mother's infinite desires, so the rocking-horse was a symbol of destruction. Lawrence also alluded to destruction through other symbols. Both Paul and his mother wore green pajamas, a symbol of luxury and death in the late 19th century. Because green was extremely difficult to obtain in nature, it had always been the color used by noble class. In 1775, Swedish chemist Carl Wilhelm

Scheele invented a bright green dye made from toxic arsenite. The dye, known as Scheele's Green, became very popular. By the end of the 19th century, it had replaced mineral and vegetable dyes and was used on wallpaper, fabrics, and even children's toys. Some 19th-century magazines reported that children get sick in bright green rooms and women in green clothes get sick from breathing toxic air. Historians believe the paint may have contributed to the death of French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1821, as the deadly dye was found on his bedroom wallpaper, and large amount of arsenic was detected in his hair. So before dying, Paul wore green pajamas, meaning mental and physical destruction. His mother also wore green pajamas, implying that she might be the next to die. With the toxic color, the horror image highlights the rocking-horse as a symbol of destruction.

Obviously, the plot also develops as the change of the symbol meaning of rocking-horse, from a symbol of vanity, to a tool for collecting money, and finally to a symbol of destruction. The dynamic change of the symbol of rocking-horse constitutes the covert progression of the novel, which is the process of Paul's destruction. In *The Rocking-Horse Winner*, the "center" and "edge" of the semiosphere are mutual transformation. In order to meet the desire of the mother, Paul kept accumulating wealth, seemingly more and more close to the "center". In fact, his body and mind were extremely hurt. The closer he walked to the "center" of desire, the farther he would be from the normal life. Wealth became "centralized" constantly, while the body and mind were constantly "marginalized". In the end the money reached its peak and Paul's life reached its end. The overt plot and covert progression proceed in opposite directions, which promote the development of the plot of the novel, and also satirize people's alienation and destruction by money.

Conclusion

Through the deep decoding of the external and internal structure of the text, this paper analyzes the various meaning of the rocking-horse. Along the clue of sign-text-culture-semiosphere, we walk into the inner world of Paul, and understand the process of Paul's alienation and the author's criticism of money worship. Lawrence's thoughts and ideas embodied in *The Rocking-Horse Winner* are particularly prominent under the perspective of Lotman's cultural semiotics. In the aspect of external text, the decoding of rocking-horse differs in different semiospheres and different social backgrounds. In terms of internal text, first of all, rocking-horse has different cultural meanings due to the heterogeneity of text. Secondly, there are two kinds of narrative in this story. The overt plot is Paul's wealth accumulation, while the covert progression is that Paul is gradually forced to destroy himself by desire. The dynamic change of rocking-horse's meaning promotes the covert progression. The overt plot and covert progression develop in opposite directions, which not only effectively promote the development of the plot, but also greatly deepen the theme of the novel by means of satire, parody and symbolism.

References

1. Lawrence DH. *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. Selected Readings in British Literature. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2005, 168-182.
2. Kang C. Culture and its Space for Survival and Development-a Study of Lotman's Cultural Semiotics

- Theory. Nanjing: Hohai University Express, 2006.
3. Kang C. Spatial Interpretation of Cultural Semiotics -- a Study of Juri Lotman's Symbolic Circle Theory. *Foreign Literature Review*,2006:(2):100-108.
4. Lotman J. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Guangzhou: Sun Yat-sen University Express, 2003.
5. Shen D. What is "Covert Progression" and How to Uncover it? *Foreign Literature Studies*,2013:(5):47-53.
6. Wang Y, Guo Y. Study on the Four Coordinates Affecting the Meaning Regeneration Mechanism of *Lolita*. *Russian Literature & Arts*,2020:(1):141-147.
7. Zheng K. *The History of Foreign Literature*. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2006, 23-26.