

On the Perfect Unification of the Setting and the Characters’ Psychological States in *Early Autumn*

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ABSTRACT : *This paper illustrates the unification of the setting and the characters’ psychological states from time, place, facial expressions and foreshadowing after introducing the author and the theme of Early Autumn. Through setting, the story reveals the characters’ complicated inner world, emotional conflicts and emotional undercurrents beneath the calm surface. What’s more, the story reflects sense of men and sensibility of women.*

KEYWORDS - *Early Autumn, setting, psychological state, unification*

I. INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes, a black novelist, poet, writer and playwright who is recognized as the greatest lyric poet in black American poets, wrote film scripts, opera lyrics and documentaries about black musicians. He wrote his autobiography and he translated Spanish and French poetry. He mastered all kinds of literary forms, and encouraged other black writers to create works reflecting black people’s life. In 1960, he was awarded a medal as America’s foremost black writer. He died at the age of 65, who had written over 40 books including 7 novels, 6 plays, 2 collections of short stories, 7 books for children, 2 volumes of autobiography and 10 volumes of poetry. Langston Hughes was the leading writer of the Harlem Renaissance, and the most original and versatile black writers in the last century. He successfully wrote in all literary forms. His literary works helped shape American literature and politics. Some representative works of Langston Hughes are: *Weary Blues* (1926) and *The Dream Keeper* (1932), collections of poems which express the despair of Negro with sharp humor and self-control(YU,1999:323-325)[1]. *The Ways of White Folk* (1934) was his first collection of short stories. *The Panther and the Lash* was a last book of poetry published after his death (1967) referring to the radical Black Panther movement for black liberation. In this paper, I take *Early Autumn* as an example to illustrate Langston Hughes’ writing style: the unification of setting and characters’ psychological state(Luo,2007) [2].

Early autumn is one of the manifestations of his craftsmanship in the writing of short stories. Within not more than 500 words, Hughes tells a story of a very common incident—a casual meeting of Mary and Bill, two lovers who separated years ago. On the surface, this is a very simple story; however, upon close examination, one may find detailed analysis and appreciation could never be redundant. It is in this story that Hughes highlights the unification of setting and characters’ psychological state with his exquisite writing techniques.

In *Early autumn*, Hughes explores the eternal theme of love through the description of a common incident in common life of common people. With his special deployment of setting, Langston Hughes leads the reader himself to feel, experience and think the hero and heroine’s psychological states, instead of directly telling them.

Early autumn dusk, the leaves falling slowly from the trees, in Washington Square the lights twinkling and blurring as chains of misty brilliance, a great many people went passing hurriedly. On her way to the bus stop, mid-aged Mary was walking across Washington Square. Just then, she ran into Bill, the person whom she loved when they were young. This scene is described in *Early Autumn*, the very short story of Langston Hughes. This short story, with a simple plot, or even without a plot (Bai,2007)[3], is nothing remarkable at the very first sight; however, its complex flavor could be appreciated through careful analysis. Mary’s rushes of surging emotions and trains of thought, which are beyond description hiding underneath her peaceful appearance, have been revealed.

In the beginning of this story, Langston Hughes narrated Mary and Bill’s short-lived love history by brief and concise words. During that time, they spent many sweet nights together, walking and talking. But later, they broke up due to “something not very important”. This part of bitter romance has engraved some indelible mark in both of their hearts. The rippling sound stirred up by a pebble thrown into the current of the times will keep spreading forever. Time goes on and things change. What has been taken away and what has been brought up by the torrent of time. What is this unexpected meeting going to be like? The author applied contrast technique to answer it.

- (1) Mary and Bill's widely different appearances;
- (2) Their different social position;
- (3) Their different degrees of satisfaction with their families and marital states;
- (4) Their different attitude towards each other(Luo,2007)[2].

Early Autumn is novelette and places its plot with a dialogue. However, the characters' relationship and emotions are reflected not only in the dialogue, but in the setting or situational context of the short story. Mary's speech is full of excitement, concerns, and even expectations of continuing their former relationship, making a striking contrast with Bill's speech which shows indifference for the changes of Mary's situation. This pretty much tells the readers that their relationship has to come to an end. In the following, I will examine the unification of the setting and the characters' psychological states of *Early Autumn*.

II. THE UNIFICATION OF SETTING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE

Setting refers to the situational context of literary works, usually including time, place, facial expression and default. Time, place and facial expressions are usually explicit, while default is implicit, and the last plays an important role in prediction of a character's words, behaviors, attitudes and mental activities.

Time:

In *Early Autumn*, Hughes sets up the narrative time in the title of the story: Early Autumn. As the extension of summer and the beginning of autumn, the early autumn is the transitional period between a hot season and a cold one. Hughes applies the symbolic meaning of this period and implies the change of Mary's emotions from ecstasy to disappointment for autumn is the season when trees are withered and bare. On the other hand, autumn is the season when flowers are withering and fruits are ripe; therefore, it could bring the reader either the sense of loss and bleakness or the sense of harvest and hope. Making best use of the ambiguity of the possible interpretations, Hughes gets the reader involved even before the story starts. If being used late instead of early in the title, the story does not realize this effect because late autumn has no suspense, that is, winter is approaching and love must end. In Hughes' arrangement of the specific period of time of the story—from "late afternoon" or "nearly sunset" to "autumn dusk", this technique could be further demonstrated. Being the period when the sky is becoming less bright, it could signify both something infinitely beautiful and something with diminishing beauty. Through the setting of time, Hughes leads his readers to have rich imaginations by providing the readers with an ambiguous context of the story.

Place:

Throughout the story, Hughes also employs the setting of place to imply the characters' psychological state. He skillfully deploys an unexpected meeting of Mary and Bill in Washington square, New York. The choice of such a real place where crowds of people flowed in steady stream not only adds a sense of authenticity and hence credibility, but also foregrounds the contingency of their meeting and the psyche of the characters. In addition to serve as the location of the meeting, the setting of place also plays an important role in the establishment of the mood of the characters and the tone of the story. The scene and crowds in Washington square were repeatedly described by Hughes to set off the characters and the incident and to coordinate the changing mood of Mary. In *Early Autumn*, the heroine's psychological state is externalized five times through the scene of place.

Firstly, the author writes: "A great many people went past them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset. Cold". In these five short sentences, the author tells the possible actual scene where the story takes place: park; to them, many people are strangers, who are only passing travelers on the stage of people's life. The last three sentences narrate the time and atmosphere in which the story takes place. The narration of specific time heightens the funereal atmosphere of autumn and implies Mary's sad mind.

Secondly, Hughes describes: "The leaves fell slowly from the trees in the Square. Fell without wind. Autumn dusk". From above, the readers can experience the change of Mary's psychological state. Bill's happy life with his wife and children gives Mary such a shock that "the leaves fell without wind." It indicates that the meeting did not come by easily and that Mary's enthusiasm wanes gradually and also foreshadows the disappointed departure in the end of the story. At this moment Mary's anxious and solicitous inquiries, and invitation met with only the plain and indifferent answers of Bill. Such a description vividly records the inexorable natural scene, and may also suggest that both the change of nature and the change of people are the reality that one should face and accept. Here the falling leaves and the coldness of autumn are the externalization of Mary's internal emotion.

Thirdly, Hughes describes: "Suddenly the lights came on up the whole length of Fifth Avenue, chains of misty brilliance in the blue air." Now Mary understands her situation clearly. Although she is reluctant, she has to accept it. "Chains of misty brilliance" indicates drops of tears in Mary's eyes are escaping and "the blue air" means the sad atmosphere. Fourthly, the author writes "The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred." Leaving, with regretful tears in her both eyes, Mary feels the lights flicker. Lastly, at the very end of the story, the author portrays the setting of place once again: "The bus started. People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people." Hughes carefully describes people to strengthen that it is their destiny that make them meet in such a crowd. However, fate brings the two lovers together, but the moment of life changes the relation between them, and now they are like strangers and part again.

Facial expression:

Besides the time and place, the author employs facial expression to indicate the character's inner thought. An obvious example is "-smiling politely, then a little frown came quickly between his eyes." Here "smiling politely" means to be embarrassed, and "a little frown came quickly between his eyes" seems to be incredulous. Another example of facial expression is "You ought to see my kids," he grinned. Here "grinned" shows Bill is proud of and satisfied with his family and marriage, and at the same time, it shows Bill is indifferent, conceited and hypocritical. Obviously, the facial expressions imply the hero's psychological state.

Foreshadowing:

The short story is very coherent. It is "foreshadowing" that makes it. Foreshadowing is the pre-condition and preparation of art works. It makes a story consistent. For example, "Many nights they had spent walking, talking together" is the foreshadowing of "Unconsciously, she lifted her face as though wanting a kiss..." That is, the former can be considered as cause, and the latter is the result. Another example of foreshadowing is "Bill went away, bitter about women" and "he held out his hand". Mary does not gain Bill's kiss because he hates her. A third foreshadowing is "Then something not very important had come between them, and they didn't speak. Impulsively, she had married a man she thought she loved". These statements predict that Mary's life, including marriage, might not be happy, and she might regret. Such is the fact. A woman, who leaves her lover for "something not very important", is hard to find real happiness because life is full of "something not very important".

All of this implies the change of Mary's sad, piteous and helpless psychological state. It also reveals Bill's indifferent and cold-hearted attitude to Mary. On the other hand, the story reflects sense of men and sensibility of women. Through the detailed setting, Hughes provides readers with not only the verisimilitude of the story, the opportunity to experience the change of the inner life of the hero and heroine, but also space for further imagining.

III. CONCLUSION

In *Early Autumn*, the author employs setting or situational context including time, place, facial expression and foreshadowing to heighten the characters' emotion or psychological state. Actually, the setting of the story reveals the externalization of the characters' psychological states and activities. In *Early Autumn* the author unfolds a memorable picture of the perfect unification of the setting and the characters' psychological state before readers' eyes, and reveals the characters' complicated inner world, emotional conflicts and emotional undercurrents beneath the calm surface.

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