

Realistic yet Illusive: Features of the Writing Techniques in *The Stone Diaries*

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Abstract Carol Shields, as one of the most eminent authors in Canadian literature, is famous for *The Stone Diaries*, which won her both the Governor General's Award and the Pulitzer Prize. This paper aims to study the novel's structure, content, theme, genre, narrative skills and so on as to present its writing features and to present the artistic effects achieved by the author's implementation of the techniques. *The Stone Diaries* is a combination of determinate and indeterminate features, including indeterminate genre, narrator, and self erasure, which increases the tension in the interpretation of this work.

Keywords *The Stone Diaries*; postmodernism; realism

Being currently the only novel winning both the Governor General's Award and the Pulitzer Prize, *The Stone Diaries*, while receiving accolade, also causes some disagreements among readers, critics, and scholars as to whether it is a realistic novel or a postmodern one. Some argue that *The Stone Diaries* is a realistic novel. For instance, Xinmin Liu maintains that *The Stone Diaries* has strong characteristics of realism and is far from being a postmodern novel (Liu 95).

Other critics such as Ling Wang and Mingli Qin argue that *The Stone Diaries* is a postmodern work. Based on the anti-plot feature of *The Stone Diaries*, they argue categorically that this novel should be categorized into postmodernism. Both arguments, as a matter of fact, are reasonable and hold water to some extent; however, it is detrimental in casting *The Stone Diaries* into either of the two categories. Instead, this article will analyze the writing techniques by studying the novel's genre, narrative skills, contents and plot, from which it can be seen that Shields's sophisticated skills not only contribute to the novel's success, but also promote the revolution of contemporary novels.

Certainties in *The Stone Diaries*

Realism is a literary movement in the 19th century, which intends to represent life as it really is. From the perspective of reader-response, it is concerned with the intended effects on readers, that is “realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen” (Abrams, et al 303). Realists believe that their novels can fulfill the mission of documenting real life. Besides, they believe each story should have a clear and complete plot which is about specific characters and a specific ending since everything is determined. In other words, realistic novels should at least be characterized by the following traits: a clear structure, a coherent content and a distinct theme. Luckily, many parts of *The Stone Diaries* meet these requirements.

First of all, the structure of *The Stone Diaries* belongs to the category of realistic novels with each of the 10 parts coherent with one another and is arranged in a chronological order. The ten chapters of *The Stone Diaries* are Birth, Childhood, Marriage, Love, Motherhood, Work, Sorrow, Ease, Illness and Decline, and Death respectively. From the titles of each chapter, it is obvious that the ten parts are not put together in a collage way. Instead, they are arranged in a linear and chronological way with one part following another, and altogether they tell the life story of the protagonist Daisy from her birth to death. In fact, this arrangement is an epitome of a realistic writing, and resembles very much the structure of the famous realistic novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* written by Thomas Hardy. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* consists of seven parts: Phase the First: The Maiden, Phase the Second: Maiden No More, Phase the Third, The Rally, Phase the Fourth: The Consequence, Phase the Fifth: The Woman Pays, Phase the Sixth: The Convert, and Phase the Seventh: Fulfilment. By the arrangement of these seven parts, the tragic life story of the protagonist Tess is told in a chronological way with coherent contents, and this arrangement is readable and acceptable. With respect to the structure of postmodern novel, Gass, the eminent postmodernist, says that our world lacks meaning and coherence (Hu 52). Federman says that he prefers incoherence and he thinks that his whole life is to live for it which is a path into chaos (Hu 52). Its plot is anti-plot as held by Ling Wang and Mingli Qin, and novels of anti-plot are those whose “time relation and cause and effect relation are featured by distinctive incoherency and fragmentation” (Wang and Qin 67). For example, the former ten parts of the famous postmodern works *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* include chapters such as A Place, Weather, My House, etc. with each chapter having no connection from the one preceding it and the one following it or the other ones. In this sense, *The Stone Diaries* does have traits of realism.

Secondly, *The Stone Diaries* distinguishes itself by its coherent contents. When looking upon *The Stone Diaries*, readers are firstly impressed by its autobiographical title, and then by its vivid characters and logical plots. These three factors altogether contribute to the novel's realistic content. First of all, its autobiographical title makes readers believe that *The Stone Diaries* documents the life experience of a person whose name is Stone. After reading its first chapter, readers' impressions are strengthened by its realist features of detailed and lifelike descriptions. Besides, realistic novels aim to depict reality. In realistic novels, subjects depicted are what can be found in daily life. Therefore, since what *The Stone Diaries* depicts is daily life or common life of human beings—from cradle (birth) to dust (death), the content of *The Stone Diaries* in this sense is of realistic feature, and appeals to more readers.

Thirdly, the feminist theme of the novel makes *The Stone Diaries* possess realistic features. For example, it deals with unequal gender relations on page 121 and deals with Daisy's happiness when she is working and her sorrow when she is fired. Realism deals with various themes, such as war, gender relation, and so on. Thus, in this sense *The Stone Diaries* is featured with realism and does not frustrate readers as does postmodern writing.

Indeterminacy in *The Stone Diaries*

Despite the above-mentioned certainties, features of indeterminacy also abound in *The Stone Diaries* and help the novel achieve the effects which cannot be realized by realism. Some postmodern writers do not believe novels can be representations of real life, and they think there can never be an ultimate truth in the world because nothing is destined, so they deem that there is no specific plot or specific ending. Besides, in their point of view, language is unreliable, so subject, history, reality, truth, and etc., all constructed by language, are also unreliable. Thus being completely different from realists, postmodernists "greatly weaken or even cancel the fundamental function of literature, i.e. the function of reflection and depiction of real life" (Li 60). In addition to that, postmodernists also hold that the world is in chaos and disorder, and that there is no center in this world. Therefore, under postmodernists' pen, it can be found that their texts are "full of fragment structure and multi-dimensional narrative perspectives", and readers can hardly conclude the themes of their works. They want to "subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying 'abyss,' or 'nothingness' on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended" by the technique of indeterminacy, word play, and so on (Abrams, et al 203). In other words, postmodern works are characterized by the indeterminacy of plot, theme, genre, narrative skills, unreliable description, and so on. Features of indeterminacy are

manifest in *The Stone Diaries*: its genre, its narrative skills, and also its content.

Firstly, indeterminacy exists in the genre of *The Stone Diaries*. Professor Liu Xinmin believes that *The Stone Diaries* is an autobiography, and he holds that it is “written in the form of autobiography telling the story of a common woman Daisy Goodwill’s experience from birth to death” (Liu 91). Though it is also mentioned in the former part of this paper that *The Stone Diaries* has an autobiographical title, it is not of certainty that it is of an autobiographical genre because the novel itself violates the definition of autobiography in the latter part of the novel. Generally speaking, autobiography is a genre in which “the narrative subject and the writing subject, i.e., the narrator and the author is the same person. ‘I’ narrates ‘my’ life story, and what is imitated is a real image of ‘myself’”, and here “‘I’ refers to the author alive in a real life (Shang 64). Based on this concept, it can be concluded that *The Stone Diaries* is not totally qualified as an autobiography because if *The Stone Diaries* were an autobiography of the protagonist Daisy, then she should have been alive when she writes it and she can never depicts scenes after her death, but there is a depiction of Daisy’s death. Therefore, the author and the protagonist of this novel are not the same person. However, what if the last chapter of death were imagined by Daisy when she had been writing her autobiography and she just wanted to add it into the whole? With such questions unresolved, the genre of this novel becomes indeterminate. Readers in this way become more active in reading this work: they have to be alert as to what is true and what is fictional in the work, or in other words, can they trust the narrator?

Secondly, indeterminacy exists in the narrators, which again reinforces the indeterminacy of the novel’s genre and makes readers think more. As indicated by Xiaojin Shang, “the narrator, the author, and the protagonist in the autobiography are the same one, and there is no division between them”. However, numerous examples in the novel show the existence of more than one narrator. For example, the following is a description of how Daisy feels when she suffers from measles:

Well, you might say, it was doubtless the fever that disoriented me, and it is true that I suffered strange delusions in that dark place, and that my sullen eyes in the twilight room invited frightening visions.

The long days of resolution, of silence, the torment of boredom—all these pressed on me, on young Daisy Goodwill and emptied her out. (Shields 75)

From the above example, it can be seen that in the first sentence it is Daisy the protagonist who narrates how herself feels about measles but the second sentence is narrated by someone in a third person’s point of view in which the narrator and the protagonist Daisy become two distinct individuals and violates autobiographical

writing's requirement. Besides, more examples show different narrators exist. For example, after Mr. Flett's death, there is a sentence describing how Daisy feels about her husband's death:

But does she actually pine for this dead partner of hers? For the calmness offered up by the simple weariness of their love? How much of her available time bends backward into the knot of their jointed lives, those twenty connubial years? To be honest, very little. There, I've said it. (Shields 230)

From the above example, it can be seen that it is narrated in a first person point of view, and the narrator is not Daisy herself. By the two examples mentioned above, it can be concluded that *The Stone Diaries* has at least three narrators: Daisy, a first-person narrator that is not Daisy, and a third-person narrator. No matter who these narrators are, they make the identity of the narrator become indeterminate, deconstruct the novel's autobiographical genre, and attribute the characteristics of indeterminacy to *The Stone Diaries*. Thanks to the indeterminacy of narrators, readers can construct their own interpretation of the text rather than accept what is told by the author.

Thirdly, the content of *The Stone Diaries* also manifests features of self-erasure and metafictionality. In this way, the readers' participation is invited. First of all, many examples in *The Stone Diaries* show the feature of self-erasure. For instance, in order to leave a lifelike impression on readers, the author includes many photographs with names of the characters written below them. However, after a close examination, it can be found that those pictures are contrary to what is described in the novel. For example, in the novel, Daisy's mother is described as an obese woman and taller than Daisy's father. However, in the photos, it can be found that Daisy's mother is not as obese as described and is shorter than Daisy's father. Thus, in this sense, the photos of Mr. and Mrs. Goodwill serve as a tool of self-erasure and deconstruct what is said about them. Another example of self-erasure: in the novel there is a scene depicting the year 1936 when Daisy is to come to visit Mr. Flett. It tells that Mr. Flett writes "six letters a year for twenty two year" to Daisy from the time Daisy leaves his house (Shields 141). However, this functions as a self-erasure because Daisy leaves Mr. Flett in 1916 when she is 11 years old and comes back in 1936 with twenty years past, which contradicts the "twenty two years" of correspondence.

Besides self-erasure, another prominent feature, metafictional writing, also appears in *The Stone Diaries*. Metafictional writing, as is utilized by John Barth in his short story "Lost in the Funhouse", means to explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction. In *The Stone Diaries*, metafictional writing can be seen:

What is the story of a life? A chronicle of fact or a skillfully wrought impression? The bringing together of what she fears? Or the adding up of what has been off-handedly revealed, those tiny allotted increments of knowledge? She needs a quiet place to think about this immensity. (Shields 340)

From this example it can be seen that within the novel the question of how to write a story is discussed, and the meta-fictional feature which is manifested so obvious cannot be nullified by the realistic writing permeated here and there in the novel.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be seen that both determinate features and indeterminate features exist in *The Stone Dairies*. By the implementation of both techniques, Shields makes the text become more appealing and involves readers' participation: on one hand, certainties in works are more readable and more acceptable to readers but fail to involve readers' interaction in novel writing because realistic writings pursue the truth of details, and construct a lifelike surface; on the other hand, indeterminacy invites readers' participation in reconstructing the story through inference and imagination.

Besides, Shields's combination of certainties and uncertainties adds something new to realism, and promotes and advances the development of contemporary novels. Realists' works are still welcomed by readers due to the vivid and lifelike descriptions while "postmodernists who make works become a word play and emphasize the fictional nature of the novel make their works lack the targeting of reality and the depth of thought, and it is likely they will become boring" (Zhou 103). Thus, Shields's combination of the techniques of certainties and uncertainties can be viewed as a breakthrough in the skills of novel writing. Just as Carol Shields herself says:

Some postmodernists think there is no point beyond the language game, but I think there can be—and I don't know why we have to talk about these two forms of fiction [naturalism and postmodernism]. Why we can't have something in the middle—which is, I suppose, what I'm trying to do. Because postmodernist ideas do allow you to do things that you can't do as a naturalist. (Wachtel 44)

All in all, realism, which is less extreme than naturalism (in Carol Shields' own words afore-mentioned) for its works depict more real pictures than do naturalistic works, is more acceptable to readers, and its combination with indeterminacy not only contributes to the conveyance and construction of novels themselves but also guides a possible direction as to how the contemporary novels can evolve.

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