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Modernist Implications in Katherine Anne Porter's
Works

凯瑟琳·安·波特小说的现代主义特征

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Abstract

Modernism is considered to be one of the most influential trends in the modern West. Modernist literature began late in the nineteenth century and can be traced back even to avant-gardes in the late eighteenth century. It is normally seen as a response to the tremendous social upheaval and is characterized by a rejection of the conventional subject matter and technical method. Although different modernist writers have expounded modernism in their works differently, they show similar characteristics in their emphasis on the need to present a pessimistic picture of the modern life and the cultural dislocation. Among them, Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980) is one of the most significant figures in American literature in the twentieth century. Though it is mostly for her realistic and stylistic writing that she takes up an important place in American literature, her works bear the distinct stamp of modernism in both the subject matter and the writing technique, which is rarely noticed and yet to be analyzed by critics. This thesis is an attempt to probe into the modernist implication in Porter's short stories, short novels, and long novel, consisting of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion.

Porter was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century and was cultivated intellectually and culturally in the twentieth century. Modernist tints have manifested both in her literary reviews and writings. As a critic, she comments favorably on the modernist masters like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and applies both modernist themes and strategies in her writings. In the 27 short stories, 6 short novels and one long novel, Porter discusses many of the modern concerns, in which the theme of alienation, of paradox, and of death particularly reveals Porter's modern consciousness. In the course of her literary creation, she applies the strategies of symbolism, of stream-of-consciousness narrative and innovatively tries the non-plots writing skill. This thesis examines all these and thus illuminates the modernist implications of Porter's works and her modernity as a writer.

Key words: Modernism; Theme; Technique

摘 要

现代主义被认为是二十世纪西方最具有影响力的思潮之一。现代主义文学始于十九世纪晚期，其源头可追溯到十八世纪晚期的先锋派创作。通常，现代主义被认为是对巨大的社会变革所产生的一种反应，以抛弃传统主题和技巧为特征。尽管不同的现代主义作家对这一思潮的表达不同，但在表现现代生活的悲剧性画面和文化断裂方面，他们是相似的。凯瑟琳·安·波特（1890-1980），二十世纪一位杰出的美国女作家，就是其中的一位。尽管她一直以其作品的现实主义特色和独特的文体风格而享誉美国文坛，但无论从写作主题还是写作技巧来看，其作品都蕴含鲜明的现代主义色彩。但是，对其作品这一方面表示关注且进行分析的评论家却很少。本文尝试对波特短篇小说、中篇小说和长篇小说的现代主义特色进行较全面的探讨。

波特出生于十九世纪最后十年间，她接受文学熏陶则是在二十世纪。她的文学评论和写作中都显示出现代主义倾向。作为一个文学评论家，她对一些现代主义大师如弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫，詹姆斯·乔伊斯等赞赏有加，并在她自己的创作中运用现代主义手法表现了现代主义主题。她共著有短篇小说二十七篇，中篇小说六篇和长篇小说一部。这些作品探讨了许多现代人关心的问题。其中，对异化、悖论、死亡等主题的探讨尤其体现了波特的现代主义意识。在创作过程中，她采取了意识流、象征和淡化情节写作等现代手法。本文就这些主题和手法展开分析，阐明波特作品的现代主义特征和她的现代小说家身份。

关键词：现代主义；主题；手法

Contents

Abstract	i
Introduction	1
Chapter One Katherine Anne Porter and Literary Reviews on Her Works	4
1.1 Katherine Anne Porter’s Life and Works	4
1.2 Literary Reviews on Porter’s Works	5
Chapter Two Modernism and Porter’s Relationship with Modernism	9
2.1 Historical and Social Background of Modernist Literature	9
2.2 Characteristics of Modernist Literature	12
2.3. Porter’s Modernist Ideology	15
Chapter Three Modernist Themes in Katherine Anne Porter’s Works	20
3.1 The Theme of Alienation	20
3.1.1 Alienation Embodied in the Deserted	21
3.1.2 Alienation Embodied in the Grotesque	27
3.2 The Theme of Paradox	31
3.2.1 Paradox of Love and Hatred.....	32
3.2.2 Paradox of Life and Death.....	35
3.2.3 Paradox of Good and Evil	35
3.3 The Theme of Death	37
3.3.1 Discovery of Death	38
3.3.2 Perception of Death	39
3.3.3 Facing up to Death.....	42

Chapter Four Modernist Techniques in Porter's Works	44
4.1 Symbolism in Porter's Works	44
4.1.1 Dream Symbols.....	45
4.1.2 Character Symbols.....	48
4.1.3 Image Symbols.....	50
4.2 Stream-of-consciousness Narrative in Porter's Works	53
4.3 Non-events writing strategy	56
Conclusion	60
Works Cited	61
Acknowledgements	65

目 录

摘要.....	i
绪论.....	1
第一章 凯瑟琳·安·波特及其作品回顾.....	4
1.1 波特生平及作品.....	4
1.2 波特作品评论.....	5
第二章 现代主义及波特与现代主义的关系.....	9
2.1 现代主义文学的社会历史背景.....	9
2.2 现代主义文学的特征.....	12
2.3 波特的现代主义思想.....	15
第三章 波特作品的现代主义主题.....	20
3.1 异化主题.....	20
3.1.1 异化在被遗弃者身上的表现.....	21
3.1.2 异化在怪诞人身上的表现.....	27
3.2 矛盾主题.....	31
3.2.1 爱与恨的矛盾.....	32
3.2.2 生与死的矛盾.....	35
3.2.3 好与恶的矛盾.....	35
3.3 死亡主题.....	37
3.3.1 发现死亡.....	38
3.3.2 察觉死亡.....	39
3.3.3 面对死亡.....	42

第四章 波特小说中的现代主义手法.....	44
4.1 波特小说中的象征主义手法.....	44
4.1.1 梦的象征.....	45
4.1.2 人物象征.....	48
4.1.3 意象象征.....	50
4.2 波特小说中的意识流手法.....	53
4.3 波特小说中的淡化情节.....	56
结论.....	60
参考书目.....	61
致谢.....	65

Introduction

Katherine Anne Porter is a prestigious American writer in the twentieth century. Self-educated as she is, she enjoys a degree of fame that comes to few serious writers in America. She has been titled “a writer’s writer”, which means other writers could learn from her writings. Her fame rests mainly on her short stories, in which she has developed a style of precision, concision and economy in language but rich in meaning, and for which she has often been acclaimed as a “stylist”. Since the materials of her works derive from real life, Porter has long been catalogued into realistic writers. Critics believe that she even hates modernist writing in that she used to renounce modernist ideas in literature and had even expressed her disgusted feeling about certain modernist writers. For example, she had debunked D.H. Laurence, mainly for his writing of sex, which she thought to be “low” literature. However, as much attention goes to the style and realistic material of her writing, the modernity of her works has been overlooked, though it is in actuality manifested in many of her works. This thesis sees the modernist implications as worth studying in Porter’s “realistic” works, consisting of four chapters and trying to explore them in terms of both the theme and the techniques of her writings.

Just as Woolf believes in “the insider’s experience in workings” (DiBattista, 2000:128), a writer’s idea is closely related to his early experience. The first chapter gives a brief review of Katherine Anne Porter’s life and her works, summarizing the critical review of her works, and suggests an analysis of her works on modernist implication, which is rare and worthwhile, compared with the general criticism on Porter’s stylistic writing. The chapter also expounds Porter’s interaction with some important modernist writers like Gertrude Stein, and the influence of Woolf, Stern, and Henry James on her. In the light of the contemporary literary trend in Porter’s time and her involvement in modern literature, it is natural that her works are centered on the subject matters of the modernist kind, such as alienation and paradox.

To examine the modernist implication of any literary works, it is necessary to make clear the characteristics of the modernist literature. Chapter Two is a brief survey of modernism in English and American literature, relating to the historical and social

background of modernist literature, the characteristic feature of modernist literature and Katherine Anne Porter's ideology of modernism. As a result of and also a part of modernist movements in the West, modernist literature echoes all the new ideas of modernist movements. In literature, there was a rejection of traditional realism in favor of experiments in writing. Writers tend to describe and penetrate into the individual world, expressing the theme of fragmentation, uncertainty, paradox, etc. As modernist literature goes towards introversion and technical display, there have been tremendous changes in literary expression techniques. Distinctive features appeared in techniques of modern writing. Symbolism and stream-of-consciousness writing play their important roles in expressing modernist ideas.

Chapter Three is a detailed analysis of modernist themes in Porter's works, expounding the themes of alienation and paradox in her short story "He", long stories *Holiday*, *Noon Wine* and her long novel *Ship of Fools*. In "He", the theme of alienation is revealed in the relationship between the disabled boy He and his mother; in *Holiday*, alienation is embodied in the Mullers' deserting their deformed daughter. Porter's only long novel *Ship of Fools* especially centers on the theme of alienation in modern western people. The analysis of this novel is focused on Mrs. Treadwell and Herr Graf, representatives of the modern western people living in an alienated atmosphere. The former lives by a cleft nature and the latter is enthusiastic about religion. The theme of paradox is one of the features in modernist mind as "the double meaning and the duplicity of existence, ... had never been experienced so intensively as now" (Hauser, 1951:224). Porter's literary works are teeming with the paradoxical themes: the paradox of love and hatred, of life and death, of evil and good, and of justice and crime. Love and hatred coexist in the American lovers in *Ship of Fools*. Mothers' love for their children is not pure but mingled with hatred in Mrs. Baumgartner and Mrs. Whipple. Life and death are not opposite but interchangeable, each converting to the other. In *Holiday*, the road to the funeral turns out to be the road to Otilie's revival from desertion. In *Noon Wine*, the paradox of good and evil is revealed in Mr. Thompson's killing Mr. Hatch, which turns the good man into an evil murderer and thus blurs the concept of good and evil, arousing the contemplation about the nature of good and evil.

Chapter Four examines the writing techniques manifesting modernist tendency in

Porter's narrative strategy. It is subdivided into two types of modern techniques -- symbolism and stream of consciousness, and one modernist writing strategy-- non-events writing which is a typical modernist writing strategy used in *Ship of Fools*. In this novel, the plot contains no climax and the story does not have a promising ending. Symbolist writing technique is analyzed in terms of three types of symbols set in her novels: symbols of characters, symbols of dreams and symbols of images. In the long fiction *Ship of Fools*, the twins Ric and Rac represent the evil spirit of human beings; symbols of dreams like the dream of Charles's in the short novel *The Leaning Tower* symbolize the protagonist Charles's view of the society in danger and crisis. The image of war and disease turns on as symbols of the illness of society at war. As to the quintessentially modernist writing technique of the stream of consciousness, it serves to express the theme of death and desperation in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

Beginning as a realistic writer yet showing great modernist implications in her works, Katherine Anne Porter has established herself as a significant modernist writer in American literature. Throughout her literary works, she involved the readers in many modernist themes such as paradox, alienation, death and desperation and applied modernist strategies like the stream-of-consciousness writing, symbolist writing and non-events writing, all the techniques appropriately used to serve to the themes of her works. Considering both the theme and techniques of Katherine Anne Porter's works, it can not be denied that Katherine Anne Porter is a typical modernist writer and thus in her literary works there manifests remarkable tint of modernist ideas.

Chapter One

Katherine Anne Porter and Literary Reviews on Her Works

1.1 Katherine Anne Porter's Life and Works

Katherine Anne Porter was born on May 15, 1890, in a small log house on a farm in a central Texas community. At the age of two her mother died, which depressed her father and left the children brought up by the grandmother, who was grim and strict. She was educated in convent schools in Louisiana and quitted her education at fourteen. The rigid life under the grandmother's superintendence and in convent schools cultivated her character of revolt. At sixteen she eloped with a railway clerk, married him, and got divorced nine years later, intermittently having four other marriages in her later life. Each marriage failed because she could not compromise her ideal to be a writer with the family life in which her role is expected to be only a wife. She had ever written to her friend, saying, "I think, that we, (Porter and her third husband, Pressly----author's note) might have had an idyllic marriage if I hadn't been a writer" (Stout, 1995: 103). In the early life she has been an actress, a singer, a journalist and an editor, and writer is her life-pursuing career.

A much-honored and esteemed author as she is, she actually published very little: just one novel (*Ship of Fools* in 1962), some 27 short stories, a brief memoir, and a few miscellaneous pieces. Yet she is known as a "writers' writer," a fabulously successful grant and honor-getter who had one of the country's longest and most celebrated writer's blocks.

Porter's major works, highly praised short stories and novellas, were written from the 1920s to the 1940s, and she became a major figure in the 1960s as a result of the reassessment of her early works: the stories edited in the volume published under the title *Flowering Judas, Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and *The Leaning Tower*. She edited them into *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (1965), which received the 1966 Pulitzer Prize and the 1966 National Book Award as well as the Gold Medal for Fiction of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1962, the novel that had been announced twenty years earlier came out under the title *Ship of Fools*, and it gave

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