

## Narrative Time of *The Grass Is Singing*

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**Abstract:** *The Grass Is Singing*, published in 1950, is the first novel written by British Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing. It tells a story of Mary, the heroine, being killed by her black houseboy. The novel which sets in the southern African colony, describes the racial tensions in colonial region and the miserable life of black people.

Many scholars have studied this novel extensively from different angles; however, researches from narrative perspective are quite limited. This thesis intends, by virtue of narrative theories proposed by Genette and Rimmon-Kenan, to study the narrative techniques of *The Grass Is Singing*, focusing on the analysis of the novel's narrative time.

In *Narrative Discourse* (1980), more than half of the space discusses narrative time by Genette, which is the hot topic from classical narrative to the structuralism narrative, and even postclassical narratology. So far, among the discussions about the relationship of story time and text time, the study by Genette is the most comprehensive. Later in the similar field of research, theorists such as Seymour Chatman, Rimmon-Kenan, and Mieke Bal have said that their studies are based on the narrative time theory of Genette.

Genette put forward concepts of "order", "duration", and "frequency" to analyze the differences between story time and discourse time in *Narrative Discourse* (1980). Order means the handling of the chronology of the story which is concerned with the question "when?", duration refers to the ratio of story time and discourse time which answers the question "how long?", and frequency indicates probable ways of demonstrating single or repetitive action units which is concerned with the question "how often?". [1]

This thesis intends to analyze the relationship between story time and discourse time in terms of order and duration in *The Grass Is Singing*, and discusses how the narrative techniques make the plot of the novel distinctively charming by author's arrangement of time.

### 1. Order

"We have already seen (pp. 16–17) that story-time, conceived of as a linear succession of events, is no more than a conventional, pragmatically convenient construct. Text-time is equally problematic." "What discussions of text-time actually refer to is the linear (spatial) disposition of linguistic segments in the continuum of the text. Thus both story-time and text-time may in fact be no more than pseudotemporal." [2] The question discussed here is whether the presentation of the story follows a natural sequence of the events.

"The main types of discrepancy between story-order and text-order ('anachronies' in Genette's terms) are traditionally known as 'flashback' or 'retrospection' on the one hand and 'foreshadowing' or 'anticipation' on the other. However, in order to avoid the psychological as well as the cinematic-visual connotations of these terms, this thesis shall follow Genette in rebaptizing them 'analepsis' and 'prolepsis' respectively." [3]. So this thesis will also follow Rimmon-Kenan's appellation of time order as analepsis and prolepsis when discussing the novel *The Grass Is Singing*.

#### 1.1 Analepsis.

According to Rimmon-Kenan, "An *analepsis* is a narration of a story-event at a point in the text

after later events have been told. The narration returns, as it were, to a past point in the story.” [4] The phenomenon of analepsis is common in traditional writing skills in the western literary. The novel writers apply this writing skill to meet the needs of expression by putting the ending of the story or the most important part in front of the novel, and then narrate the story successively according to the development of the events. In *The Grass Is Singing* we can also find many examples of it.

There are eleven chapters of *The Grass Is Singing*. The first chapter introduced a news report. The second chapter mentioned Mary’s childhood. When she graduated from school, she got a job as typist and lived happily in town. In the third chapter, Mary found the life on the farm was not like what she thought. The fourth chapter described the beginning of Mary’s life on the farm and her hatred towards the houseboy. The fifth chapter narrated Mary’s ill-treatment to the black houseboy. The sixth chapter talked about Dick tried to make money in various ways but always failed. The seventh and eighth chapter illustrated that Mary had to take over the farm because Dick was ill. The ninth chapter described that Moses helped Mary when Dick was ill again. The tenth chapter was about Tony found the secret between Mary and Moses. The last chapter talked about Mary’s illusions and her tragic ending.

Firstly, the sequence of the whole story will be discussed here. It was very clear that the narrator began the story with the news of a murder case which had already happened. Therefore the reader had already known the fact that Mary Turner was killed by her houseboy. Then Lessing traced back from chapter two to chapter eleven talking about Mary’s miserable childhood, happy school life, satisfactory working conditions, marriage life and her tragic ending.

As mentioned above, Lessing applied the method of anaplesis to write this novel. Lessing showed murder case at the beginning of the novel, and then looked back from Mary’s childhood to her death. The novel retrospects to the whole story of the murder from chapter two to the end of the novel. All those events happened in her life led to her death in the end.

In the first chapter, there were a lot of descriptions of retrospection. Lessing used the anaplesis method to indicate people’s attitude to the Turners. For example: “Long before the murder marked them out, people spoke of the Turners in the hard, careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and self-exiled.” (Lessing, 2) The narration above showed that people’s impression of the couple before the murder case. Then Lessing told us the reason in the following narration. The Turners were simply unsociable and they never appeared at district dance or any other social occasions. Neighbors thought they secluded themselves because of something to be ashamed of. We can know that the neighbors disliked the Turners.

It can be judged that the method of anaplesis is a very important writing technique Lessing used in this novel. Anaplesis attracts people’s attention easily and makes the structure of text more flexible. What’s more, it also makes the plot more fascinating and creates suspense.

## 1.2 Prolepsis.

Besides analepsese, there are many prolepses in *The Grass Is Singing*, which foretell the tragic fate of the characters that they can’t escape. “a *prolepsis* is a narration of a story-event at a point before earlier events have been mentioned.” [5] It means the presentation of a future event in advance. It is a kind of narrative technique of the novel and it belongs to the category of narrative time which reflects the relation that narrative time is earlier than story time.

In the novel, Lessing mentioned that “and that sjambok did not do the Turners any good, as we shall see.” (Lessing, 7) Charlie suggested Dick to buy a sjambok to supervise the black people and make them surrender. Later in the story, Mary took over the farm when Dick was ill and she found that the sjambok was useful and could give her courage to get along with the black people. She used her whip and lashed Moses on the face in a swinging blow. Then she stood still, frightened. After Moses became the houseboy of Marry, she recognized the scar on his face that made her too afraid to accept him. The discrimination to the black led to Mary’s tragic life.

When talked about Tony, Lessing also applied prolepsis to predict the future life of him. He was a young man with advanced equal ideology at least he thought that he was. After he discussed the

murder with the Sergeant, he realized that the things they talked about had nothing to do with the murder. "He would understand it all a good deal better in a few months, when he had 'become used to the country.'" (Lessing: 21) Tony would forget the advanced ideas that he learnt from the civilized society because if he wanted to survive in a society of discrimination he must close his mind to many things.

## 2. Duration

In *The Grass Is Singing*, narrative order is not the only factor that is helpful for the description of plot and characters. Duration is also important to form a unique style of narrative and is crucial to highlight the theme and the plot of the story. It mainly discusses the relations between the story time and the text time. Duration is the distance between two points of time in the story. In the development of the plot, it is because of the existence of duration that makes the plot slowly flowing forward and makes the novel have a strong artistic quality. The only real time that can be found is reading time which varies from reader to reader. Therefore, compared with finding such a point of reference for order, it is harder to set a "norm" to describe changes of duration. "Genette therefore proposes to use constancy of pace, rather than adequation of story and text, as the 'norm' against which to examine degrees of duration." [6]

### 2.1 Ellipsis.

Ellipsis belongs to the category of narrative time, and it is about the relation between the length of story time and narrative time. The parts that are omitted are not unimportant and dispensable. Ellipsis is an effective way that can produce unique and unexpected effect. It is an effective writing skill to make a narrative work concise and brief. "The maximum speed is ellipsis (omission), where zero textual space corresponds to some story duration." [7]

In *The Grass Is Singing*, there are some examples of ellipsis which can be found in chapter two. In this chapter, Mary recalled her childhood life. She was born in a poor family. Her father brought home money but that was not enough to support the family. And because his father abused to alcohol and could not afford to pay his bills to the store, her mother would always beg for paying back the money next month. So the store to her was a place where her father was drunk and her mother's complaint also made her sad. Life was changed when she was sent to boarding school, she didn't want to go back home to see her drunken father and bitter mother. She spent a very happy life there. Mary graduated from school and found a job in town. She liked her office job. Then Lessing narrated here "By the time she was twenty she had a good job, her own friend, a niche in the life of the town." (Lessing, 32) It could be found that Lessing omitted the years that she spent between her sixteen and twenty, but we did not feel it was very sudden. We could infer from the previous narration that she must be spent very happy life those years and the life was unchangeable that made her satisfy about the living condition. The ellipsis used here was very natural.

When Lessing talked about Mary's lovesickness with Dick, she wrote "Weeks after she had given up hope, and had gone to the doctor for a prescription because 'she was feeling tired' and had been told she must take a holiday at once". (Lessing, 49) Lessing here omitted the description from the time point of two months after the appointment with Dick to the time point of seeing the doctor. The length of the time points was several weeks. Readers didn't know exactly what happened those weeks which made her sick. The ellipsis here left room for the readers to imagine the plot.

### 2.2 Scene.

As for Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, story-duration and text-duration are considered to be identical in scene and dialogue is the most common scene. It achieves the same pace of time between story and text. This kind of writing skill achieves an effect of immediacy and vividness, and the reader will have a strong feeling of participating in the development of plot.

There were a lot of dialogues in *The Grass Is Singing*, from which readers seemed to witness the real scene that happened in the story. When Mary was thirty years old, she became the personal secretary of her employer and had a good salary. She could rent an apartment if she would like to.

She lived in a girls' club because it could remind her of her school life that she loved so much. Young girls in the club always came to her to tell her their troubles. She liked to live in the club. She also became an important figure in the office as she had worked there for many years. After work, there was often a man who took her out to play hockey, tennis, or swam, treating her like a sister. She had many friends but no particular one. Her friends got married and their children were growing up but she still unmarried. She still treated herself as a little girl and wore her hair as little girl fashion. She enjoyed her life until one day she suddenly heard the words that friends said behind her back.

"She's not fifteen any longer: it is ridiculous! Someone should tell her about her clothes."

"How old is she?"

"Must be well over thirty. She has been going strong for years. She was working long before I began working, and that was a good twelve years ago."

"Why doesn't she marry? She must have had plenty of chances." (Lessing, 38)

This was a typical scene we could find in chapter two. It was an episode of the dialogue between Mary's friends. Readers could interpret from the conversation that the friends' real attitude towards Mary. Of course, anyone who had heard those gossip about oneself would not be happy, so was Mary. Undoubtedly, she hadn't expected that her friends would discuss her behind her back like that. It was such an emotional blow to her that she changed her hair style, her clothes and began to look for a husband. Readers could realize that direct description of dialogue was so important to advance the plot.

### 3. Summary

This thesis is a discussion of the narrative time in *The Grass Is Singing*. It focuses on the relationship of story time and text time.

The thesis follows the appellation of time order as analepsis and prolepsis by Rimmon-Kenan when discussing the novel *The Grass Is Singing*. By analyzing analepsis in this novel, readers can know other people's attitudes toward the Turners; by analyzing from the perspective of prolepsis we find that Lessing applies this technique to indicate the tragic life of the protagonists. The Ellipsis appeared in the novel leaves much room for readers to imagine. As for scene, the analysis is based on friends' gossip towards Mary. The reader seems to vividly watch the scene of the dialogue between Mary's friends. These narrative techniques Lessing applied in *The Grass Is Singing* make readers to realize the theme of the novel and her writing objective more naturally and easily.

### References

- [1] Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (Second Edition)*. [M] London and New York: Methuen. 2005:48.
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