

Article

A Comparison of Faulkner and Shen Congwen' Novels from the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract: New historicism emphasizes the interaction and mutual influence between texts and their contexts, viewing literary creation as both a product of culture and an active participant in shaping it. The relationship between literature and history is interdependent-what is known as "the historicity of texts" and "the textual nature of history." The novels of Faulkner and Shen Congwen appropriately address the relationships among literature and history, reality and fiction, fact and narrative. Moving fluidly between history and reality, they actively engage in cultural formation, exerting an agency in historical construction and thus achieving an interactive dialogue between literature and history.

Keywords: New Historicism; historicity of texts; textual historicity; the Yoknapatawpha lineage; the world of Western Hunan

1. Introduction

In 1982, American scholar Stephen Greenblatt proposed "New Historicism" in the magazine *Genre*. It gradually became a literary criticism school [1]. Most of the traditional Western literary theories adhered to the claims of text-centeredism and literary ontology, believing that the text is a self-referential, self-contained, and independent system. There emerged an increasingly serious non-historical tendency. Traditional historicalism or old historicalism held that history is progressive, narration is neutral, and the text is passive. These viewpoints were questioned and abandoned. The demand to re-discuss the relationship between literature and history and to reinterpret the meaning of literary works from the historical environment and context has gradually become stronger. New historicalism emphasizes the interaction and influence between the text and the context, believing that literary creation itself is both a cultural product and participates in the shaping of culture [1]. It regards literature as a part of the cultural symbol system and emphasizes the mutual shaping between literature and its context. It holds that predictive literary texts can participate in the development and construction of history. In the perspective of New Historicalism, literature is always a cultural force that shapes human nature in the historical context. New historicalist critic Louis Montoloo called the relationship between literature and history "interwoven and interdependent", namely "the historicity of the text" and "the textuality of history" [1]. "The historicity of the text" endows the text with specific social and historical attributes, so the text has a specific historical perspective, and the interpretation of the text is inevitably endowed with social historicism. The text is fixed, extended, and changes in the time coordinate, constantly enriching and changing with the passage of time, presenting a dynamic and open situation. "The textuality of history" refers to that the author who writes history only conducts discourse interpretation and conceptual construction based on historical materials, and builds a bridge of understanding between the past and the present [1]. Through the text, people can enter history, understand history, and comprehend history. However, the text does not passively and randomly reflect history; it is inevitably constrained by historical culture and ideology. The process of using the text to construct

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history is also the process of using the text to interpret history, and the relationship between the interpreter and the text is a two-way dialogue interaction relationship. New historicalism liberates a work from the isolated analysis of the text and places it in the social conventions and discourse practices of the same era, providing a new research paradigm for literary studies.

2. Comparative Analysis of Works of Faulkner and Shen Congwen from the Perspective of New Historicism

Faulkner and Shen Congwen are both outstanding representatives of the rural literature of the 20th century in the world. Each of them created the "Yoknapatawpha Dynasty" based on their hometowns and the "Xiangxi World" based on their hometowns, both looking back with deep affection at the beautiful past of their hometowns, deeply analyzing the social conditions of the American South and Xiangxi in China, and predicting the development trends of their respective worlds. It can be said that they participated in the construction of history. This article interprets the works of Shen Congwen and Faulkner based on the relevant viewpoints of new historicism, and analyzes how the two writers appropriately handle the relationships between literature and history, reality and fiction, facts and stories in their works, traveling between history and reality, actively participating in cultural shaping, and exerting an active role in the construction of history.

2.1. The Historicity of the Text

"The historicity of the text" refers to the fact that the literary experiences of the writer take place within a certain historical context [1]. The literary expression of personal experiences always has a special historicity, and at the same time, the subjectivity of the individual is inevitably influenced by the social background and cultural traditions at that time. All texts have cultural and social characteristics and are the product of the interaction of specific historical, cultural and other factors. The text itself is simultaneously a historical and cultural event, participating in the construction of history and having an active role in shaping history. The historical, social and material scenarios in the writing mode constitute what is called the historic atmosphere of literature. Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha County" and Shen Zongwen's "Xiangxi World" both use their own hometowns as the narrative space in their novels. The renowned female writer Widdie once said: "The life of a novel comes from the region." [1]. They were all witnesses to the changes of the times, faithfully recording the situation of farmers going bankrupt and rural areas becoming dilapidated under the impact of industrial civilization, and detesting the infiltration and destruction of modern civilization on the simple rural life and beautiful human nature.

The American Civil War destroyed the slavery system in the South. With the collapse of the old system, traditional lifestyles and values were also shattered under the impact of historical changes. As a son of the South, Faulkner had an emotional dependence and value recognition on the old traditions and social order of the South. However, he also deeply realized that the industrial civilization of the North had influenced every corner of the South, changing the traditional spiritual outlook of the Southerners. He saw the corrupt essence and inevitable fate of the old traditions and social order. What he truly focused on was how human beings would move towards the future with the burden of history. Faulkner admired the heroic, martial, and loyal chivalric spirit displayed by the outstanding Southern landowners, and revered the sense of self-esteem and honor they demonstrated, and even more so, the traditional spiritual qualities such as "bravery, honor, pride, compassion, love for justice, and love for freedom" embodied in them [1]. In "The Yoknapatawpha Dynasty", he created a series of images of Southern landowners based on his great-grandfather "Old Colonel", such as Colonel John Shadoreth in Shadoreth, Stepan in Pollyanna, Pollyanna, Macaslin in Go, Moses, and General Compsin in The Rumble and the Commotion, all of whom were independent, enterprising, ambitious, courageous, and with strong will, representing the old Southern aristocracy [1]. An

important reason for this was that he saw a traditional spiritual quality lacking in the modern Southern society. The newly emerging bourgeoisie in the South was profit-driven, morally corrupt, and lacked faith. "The Goldfish Eye" in *The Sanctuary*, "Jenson" in *The Rumble and the Commotion*, "Flem" in *The Town and The Mansion*, etc., were representatives of such people. Faulkner's literary creation was influenced by the social background at that time. He attempted to think and explain social issues through artistic means, and then explore effective methods to solve problems. He tried to discover some vital spiritual resources from Southern traditional culture to provide a spiritual reference for modern society, guiding Southern compatriots to leave their fictional "Eden", bravely face their own problems, rise up for change, and encourage Southern people to move out of the past and face the future, establishing a positive and upward new South.

Since the 20th century, China's traditional feudal order has undergone profound changes under the impact of modern industrial civilization. In Shen Congwen's works, the most obvious phenomenon is that the simple, honest, and kind nature of the people in Xiangxi, which was in a primitive divine state, is gradually disappearing in the tide of money and materialism. "The trend of degeneration in the midst of change", "that bit of upright and simple human beauty that rural society still retains, is almost completely disappearing. What replaces it is a vulgar outlook on life that emphasizes practicality and profit, which has been cultivated in the past two decades." [2]. The traditional virtues in human nature, the noble and selfless moral sentiments, and the spirit of striving and advancement have all perished in the rampant desire for wealth. "The soldiers are as kind as common people, showing no arrogance or disturbance towards others. Farmers are brave and obedient, and all respect gods and abide by the law." "Everything maintains a simple habit and follows ancient rituals" - this era is gone forever [3]. Especially, the traditional marriage and family pattern of the people in Xiangxi, which originally did not value money but only cared about human relationships and moral values, has also been shaken under the shadow of goods and commodities and is on the verge of collapse. Shen Congwen said with concern: "The good habits of the place have been eliminated, the enthusiasm of the nation has declined, and women are gradually becoming like Chinese women, moving their love to gold, livestock, false fame and false affairs." [3]. Just as in *Border Town*, as the alien force of modern civilization intruded into the lives of the people in Xiangxi, the windmill, as a symbol of modern civilization, was changing the original interpersonal relationships and survival patterns in the Xiangxi world, and the life choices of the protagonist were showing the inner potential of life to resist alienation. However, the modern situation of the Xiangxi world made Shen Congwen fall into serious life worries: Due to the invasion and expansion of "modern civilization", the disintegration of primitive culture, the Xiangxi world is experiencing a historical evolution process where life is gradually being alienated. From the "Rich Life" in which Jin Feng, who was tempted by money, willingly became a concubine, to the "Husband" where the rural woman who sold herself went from being shy at the beginning to becoming the "generous and free" of the city woman, it sketches out the mutated trajectory of the "modern civilization" that erodes human nature centered around money. In Shen Congwen's works depicting the Xiangxi society, he expressed his sadness for the gradual disappearance of the ancient style. Shen Congwen created true local literature, enabling future generations to remember the traditional society of Xiangxi. "Regardless of the future, the scenes and sounds, fear and hope of the old society in Xiangxi, have been preserved in literature." [4]. Shen Congwen, in his life experiences, had come into contact with people from all levels of society. In that tumultuous era, he saw that the upper class frequently launched wars for power and profit, while the vast working people still "spent their days in the same circumstances with blood and tears." He deeply sympathized with the painful life of the lower class. As he himself said: "For farmers, soldiers and artisans, there is an inexpressible tenderness." [5]. Therefore, in his works, he focused on expressing their joys, sorrows, anger and happiness, such as *The Ox*, which expressed the pain brought to farmers by the heavy taxes and levies; *The Husband* depicted through the description of the rural woman who sold herself due to the pressure of life, on the one hand, showed his

suffering, and at the same time revealed their numb state; The Vegetable Garden took a humanitarian approach and expressed dissatisfaction with the ruling class's massacre of revolutionaries.

Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha County" series and Shen Congwen's "Xiangxi World" both depict the history of rural changes reflected in both the economy and people's concepts. Faulkner truthfully presented the rise of Snopesism, the destruction of traditional values, and the confusion and bewilderment of Southern aristocratic sons through his family history. At the same time, he also revealed the historical fate of the South and unified it with a strong sense of the times and profound historical feelings. Shen Congwen's "Xiangxi World" is a story of the fates of ordinary people in the village, containing an allegory of the impact on mass culture and society. It projects the classical beauty of the border town to reflect the political and social changes in China in the early 20th century. These two writers from different countries traveled between history and reality from different perspectives, jointly focusing on the various contradictions of modern society. Due to their attention to history, which is manifested in their exploration of the spiritual structure of historical figures, the sorting out of ideological changes, and the portrayal of the trajectory of the soul, they can shape the historicity of characters in special historical contexts and complete the task of writing history.

2.2. The Textuality of History

According to New Historicalism, "the textuality of history" means that the process of historical writing is merely an interpretative process, a descriptive construction of historical events [6]. There is no such thing as "reproduction of historical facts" as claimed. The history we perceive is merely an artificial product of language, a result of cutting, piecing together, and processing of the disordered events of the past, and is the outcome of "people's distinction, combination, search for rationality, establishment of connections, and formation of a whole" [6]. Different choices and arrangements of the same historical event can create literary texts with completely opposite meanings. As New Historicalism critic White puts it: a narrative statement may reproduce a set of events in an epic or tragic form and meaning, while another statement may reproduce the same set of events - with the same rationality and without contradicting any factual records - as a farce [7].

Faulkner employed complex narrative techniques in "The Yoknapatawpha Chronicles", making the storyline complex and ambiguous, with a strong subjective flavor. He "novelized" and "dramatized" the history of the American South. As Carr said, "The presentation of significant themes such as race in the text is constrained by Faulkner's historical perspective, but it is also a descriptive construction of certain narrative strategies [8]. Correspondingly, what we read is an edited narrative, especially the result of different narrators processing, regulating language, and facilitating the flow of the story." In the narratives of the four major families of Shadorelis, Compson, Stepan, and McCaslin, Faulkner adopted a multi-angle narrative strategy and the resulting conflicts provided readers with a large amount of confusing and subjective information, outlining the course of events and vividly indicating that history is merely the result of people's conscious or unconscious interpretation and conceptualization of past events through retention, deletion, or processing, a cultural text accomplished through literary fiction, and a kind of "historical narration" or "historical compilation." [8]. The "mini-histories" of each family, like fragments of a mirror, when pieced together, reveal the "big history" of the decline of the entire American South. It reflects the homogeneity of literature and history as discourse practices. Readers can roughly piece together the legends of the South based on this information, but they will never know the exact historical truth. This is in line with the viewpoint advocated by New Historicism that "history is textual." [8].

Shen Congwen regarded novels as "words that appropriately record people and events" [9]. In Shen Congwen's novels from Xiangxi, whether in the works depicting the mysterious and beautiful love in ancient Xiangxi such as *The Love of the Shaman*, *Long Zhu*, *Moonlit Scene*, *Fengzi*, or in the novels reflecting the real rural life in Xiangxi such as *Border Town*, *Long River*, *Bosu*, *After the Rain*, *A Black Story*, *Hotel*, the wooden

houses with eaves on the banks of the Xiangxi River, the grinding machines, the white pagodas, the boats for crossing the river, as well as the dragon dancing, lion dancing, firework displays, and dragon boat races during festivals, all bear the characteristics of folk culture with local customs and traditions. In Long River, Shen Congwen wrote extensively about the taboos and customs of the local farmers' daily lives. In Long Zhu, the Miao people "combine men and women, singing and celebrating the New Year, on the Dragon Boat Festival, in August, on the Mid-Autumn Festival, and during the big sacrifice to the bull when dancing, men and women sing in groups, dance in groups, focusing on their hearts and placing them in their lovers' presence. The method is not money, not appearance, not the family hierarchy, nor any pretense. Only the genuine and passionate songs." [9]. His descriptions of the folk customs in Xiangxi, with a blend of reality and fiction, are extremely wonderful. Shen Congwen's accounts of the weddings, funerals, and marriages in Xiangxi, as well as the village rules and bad habits, are all included in his writings. Shen Congwen never concealed the poverty and decline of his hometown. In A Lesson from the Xinhai Revolution, he detailed the cruel killings carried out by officials abusing their power, while the local people remained oblivious and mindlessly killed [9]. In Chenzhou, he described the women and children who died due to the exchange of banknotes [9]. In Huaihua, he even saw "many stupid things done by humans" and the officers' staff who took pleasure in "appreciating murder" [9]. The social conditions and human nature in these small towns, the inferior roots of the ethnic and human beings, and the painful scenes were all recorded in Shen Congwen's works. In Shen Congwen's novels, when explaining the trajectory of historical development, he adopted this non-mainstream interpretation method. In his personalized speaking style, he reconstructed the rural history of Xiangxi, allowing us to see the three-dimensional picture of the survival state of Xiangxi's countryside.

Faulkner's novels about the rise and fall of Southern families and Shen Congwen's reconstruction of the history of the Xiangxi countryside adopt a special historical writing style of family history and village history. Literature and history, reality and fiction, facts and stories are intertwined and mixed together. In their works, history has become a picture composed of anecdotes, folk customs, and other historical debris, creating a continuous "dialogue between text and history" [10]. These works are different from traditional historical novels with grand scenes. Instead, they focus on the rise and fall, prosperity and decline of families and villages, as well as the joys and sorrows of common people, achieving a transformation from "national allegory to family allegory, from macro to micro, from explicit politics to potential ontology" [10].

3. Conclusion

Faulkner and Shen Congwen were faithful recorders of their own era and geographical region. "The Yoknapatawpha Dynasty" and "The World of Xiangxi" are fictional epics that tell history through fictional events and are products of a certain cultural historical context. By historicizing reality and making the past real, the past shapes the present, and the present reinterprets the past, eliminating the binary opposition of "foreground" and "background" in the traditional sense of literature and history. Through their works, Faulkner and Shen Congwen vividly presented the decline process of the American South and Xiangxi in terms of economy, society, and cultural mentality; profoundly analyzed the essence of the real world, explored the reasons for its decline, and with profound moral thinking and unremitting artistic exploration, participated in the construction of social and historical processes and achieved the active role of the text in shaping history. Through the interaction of literature and history to explain and guide the real world, exploring the exploration and reflection on history and reality in the human civilization predicament, conducting profound reflections and criticism on history and reality, exploring the excellent culture of the nation, singing the eternal value deep in the human heart from ancient times to the present, Faulkner's "Man is immortal", and Shen Congwen repeatedly expressed his "hope to recreate the national morality", reflecting their confidence in human destiny. Continuously traveling between

history and reality, their anticipation and gaze towards the human future are on the same path but with different routes.

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