

Narrative Strategies and Aesthetic Effects of "Child Perspective" in Xiao Hong's Novels from the Perspective of Narratology — Centered on The Story of Hulan River

Yutong Lu

*School of Humanities, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China
1732988733@qq.com*

Abstract. The Story of Hulan River is one of the representative works with unique artistic achievements in the history of modern Chinese literature. Its literary value and artistic effects have been highly recognized by famous writers. "A narrative poem, a colorful local custom painting, and a string of sad and gentle ballads". Mr. Mao Dun highly summarized the aesthetic characteristics of The Story of Hulan River with these words. The reason why it can achieve such unique artistic effects is not only because of its rich and profound content, but also because of the author's innovative use of child perspective in writing. Through the naive and ignorant observation and narration of the little girl protagonist, it shows the human feelings and social conditions of the small town of Hulan River. This perspective not only gives ordinary life a defamiliarized and poetic filtering effect, but also reflects the numbness and cruelty of the adult world with children's innocence, forming an implicit and profound social criticism. In the tension between lightness and heaviness, vitality and decay, Xiao Hong completed the recollection and reflection of the cultural genes of her hometown, and also made the work transcend personal memories and become a cultural fable of the national living conditions.

Keywords: The Story of Hulan River, "Child Perspective", Narratology

1. Introduction

As one of the "Four Talented Women of the Republic of China" in the history of modern Chinese literature, Xiao Hong's work The Story of Hulan River occupies an important position in modern Chinese literature with its unique narrative techniques and language style, and is regarded as a classic work with unique artistic value. In particular, the skilled use of child perspective in this work further makes it show remarkable narrative innovation and aesthetic uniqueness in literary creation of the same period. The academic circle has conducted quite rich discussions on the child perspective in The Story of Hulan River. Existing studies generally recognize the important role of this perspective in restoring childhood experience and strengthening the "autobiographical" color of the text, and point out that it realizes the "defamiliarized" inspection and criticism of social bad habits and the adult world through the innocent eyes of children. Further studies attempt to combine child perspective with female consciousness and local reflection, or highlight its cold and desolate

characteristics different from other authors in comparison, revealing the function of this perspective in conveying the author's complex local emotions and unique language use. However, most existing achievements take child perspective as a way to analyze the ideological connotation of the text, and fail to systematically start from narratology theory to deeply explain its operating mechanism as a core narrative strategy—that is, how the limitation of perspective, the interweaving mode with other perspectives, the stylization of children's language, and the style presentation different from other authors jointly structure the text and generate its unique aesthetic effects. This paper intends to analyze the child perspective in *The Story of Hulan River* from the perspective of narratology, aiming to reveal how it transcends the simple text interpretation function and becomes an active and formal aesthetic creation, so as to provide a new dimension for understanding Xiao Hong's narrative art.

In narratology theory, the essence of "child perspective" is an extreme and pure form of "internal focalization" defined by Gérard Genette. Its power is rooted in the fact that the narrator's perception, cognition and emotional ability are strictly limited to the level of children, thus creating a unique "limited" narration. This characteristic is closely connected with Wayne C. Booth's theory of "unreliable narration": due to the immaturity of children's comprehension, their narration often deviates from the norms set by the implied author on the "axis of fact" and "axis of value", but this "unreliability" is not a defect, but a core mechanism for generating narrative irony and rich interpretation space. *The Story of Hulan River* is exactly a model of this narrative strategy. In the novel, the perspective of the child "I" forms strict internal focalization. Its innocent perception filters the complexity and cruelty of the adult world, making trivial daily life glow with poetry. However, it is this cognitive "unreliability", such as confusion and incomprehension about feudal customs and human tragedies, that creates a huge aesthetic distance between readers and the story. When readers interpret the tragic truth not stated by the child narrator through adult experience, the text produces a strong ironic effect, which deeply exposes the irrational and absurd nature of local social order. Therefore, based on relevant narratology theories, this study will deeply analyze how the "child perspective" in *The Story of Hulan River* acts as a precise narrative mechanism, and finally achieves its huge artistic tension and enduring ideological charm between innocence and coldness, poetry and sadness by constructing "limited" narration and "unreliable" appearance.

2. The world in "children's eyes": text presentation of child perspective in *The Story of Hulan River*

2.1. Interweaving and co-construction of adult perspective and child perspective

In the narrative texture of *The Story of Hulan River*, the most striking feature is not a simple limited child perspective, but a more complex narrative strategy: the subtle interweaving of the experiencing self (namely the child perspective) and the narrating self (namely the adult perspective), as well as the polyphonic narrative voice formed thereby. For readers, the "I" first becomes the "I" of adult Xiao Hong, then the child "I". The deep communication between the two makes us devote ourselves more thoroughly to the situation of the child "I", sharing the same thoughts, feelings and language with her [1]. According to Gérard Genette's narrative stratification theory, the narrating act and the narrated story exist at different levels. In *The Story of Hulan River*, the focalizer of the story is mainly the limited-cognition child "I" playing in the back garden, but the narrator of the story is the adult "I" who has experienced the vicissitudes of life and looks back at her hometown. On the surface, the narrator exercises great restraint, letting children's perception dominate the text and creating an innocent surface atmosphere. However, a mature adult consciousness with compassion

and reflection always acts as an implicit narrative driving force, penetrating through delicate textual arrangements, forming a relationship of dialogue, supplement and even irony with the child perspective, and jointly constructing a meaningful world full of poetry and profound sadness.

2.1.1. Duality of language: integration of children's perception and adult discourse

Although the narrator simulates children's vision to observe the world, the language used is beyond children's ability. It is highly artistically refined poetic language permeated with adult vicissitudes, which results in the separation of "narrative perspective" and "narrative language". For example, the description of the severe cold in the north at the beginning of the novel:

"When the severe winter locks the earth, the ground is full of cracks. From south to north, from east to west, some are several feet long, some are ten feet long, and some are dozens of feet long. They are directionless. Whenever the severe winter comes, the earth cracks." [2]

These scenes can be captured through children's senses, but expressions with generality and vicissitudes such as "from south to north, from east to west... the ground is full of cracks" obviously come from an adult narrator with an overall cognition of his hometown. The child perspective provides fresh and vivid perceptual materials, while the adult consciousness is responsible for literary weaving and sublimation, making trivial childhood memories gain a universal poetic glory. This duality of language is the key to the co-construction of the poetic tone of the text by the two perspectives.

2.1.2. Structural correspondence: intertextuality of personal memory and collective fate

The structural arrangement of the novel clearly reflects the co-construction of dual perspectives. The first three chapters outline the local customs of Hulan River and the free childhood of "I" in the back garden through the flowing sight of the child "I", which is a concentrated presentation of the child perspective. From the fourth chapter, the narrative focus gradually turns to the tragedies of others such as the Young Daughter-in-Law, Uncle You and Feng Waizui. The child perspective acts as an "eyewitness" here. She records these events with puzzled eyes and retains the original cruelty of the events. However, the selection, arrangement of these events and the seemingly plain yet sharp connections are completed by the adult perspective behind. The adult perspective connects personal childhood memories with the collective unconsciousness of the whole Hulan River and the grand theme of the destruction of people by feudal customs, forming the intertextuality of personal history and ethnography. The child perspective presents "what it is", while the adult perspective reveals "why it is". The two jointly complete a profound criticism of the inertia and tragedy roots of local society.

2.2. "Symbolic effects" shown by addresses centered on child perspective

In the narrative network of *The Story of Hulan River*, character addresses are not simple symbolic references, but core carriers for the child perspective to filter and reorganize world experience, containing profound symbolic meanings. Children "name" characters with their simple emotional logic and limited cognitive ability. This way of naming strips away the complex social identities and moral judgments of the adult world, and instead constructs a symbolic system based on intuitive feelings and emotional closeness. This system not only vividly reflects the unique psychological world of children, but also symbolically reveals the essential fate and situation of characters in a

specific cultural context through innocent "misreading" and simplification, producing strong narrative tension. Examples are given below.

2.2.1. "Young Daughter-in-Law" and "Old Hu Family": symbol of individual disappearance and collective devouring

In the whole tragic event of the Young Daughter-in-Law, the 12-year-old girl never has her own name. The narrator "I" follows the name used by people around — "Young Daughter-in-Law". This address itself is a powerful symbolic code: "Daughter-in-Law" defines her subordinate function in the patriarchal system and implies the stale custom of buying child brides as "Daughter-in-Law" in feudal society. The child perspective uses this address without criticism, which exactly symbolically reveals the complete disappearance and instrumentalization of individual value in the powerful feudal ethical order. She is not a "person" with a name, but a "thing" consumed to realize the family ideal of "reunion". In contrast, "Old Hu Family", a collective title centered on family name, symbolizes the indifferent and solid patriarchal power that devours individuals. Through the pair of addresses "Young Daughter-in-Law" and "Old Hu Family", the child perspective unconsciously completes a tragic symbolic narrative about individuals being ruthlessly devoured by the collective.

2.2.2. "Uncle You" and "Feng Waizui": symbolic existence of marginal groups

The narrator "I" calls the old servant in the family "Uncle You". This address based on seniority rather than name is a typical way of addressing marginal people in traditional Chinese local society, implying the ambiguity and substitutability of the character's identity. Children naturally accept and use this address, symbolizing Uncle You's fixed position in the social structure — a being attached to a big family and lacking independent identity. The nickname "Feng Waizui" with obvious appearance characteristics is a product of children's intuitive perception. It filters out the character's social attributes and inner world, simplifying him into a most prominent physical feature. This address itself symbolizes the "labeled" living state of underclass people like Feng Waizui in the eyes of others, especially innocent and cruel children. Their joys and sorrows are just stories of a "mill worker" or a "crooked-mouthed man" in the eyes of the world. Therefore, the addresses from the child perspective become a mirror, symbolically reflecting the cruel reality that these marginal people are symbolized and dehumanized under social gaze.

3. Aesthetic generation under childhood innocence: multiple effects of child perspective in The Story of Hulan River

3.1. Childlike and playful language style

The narrative power of child perspective is most directly reflected in its unique language style. In The Story of Hulan River, Xiao Hong does not simply imitate children's tone, but subtly refines and artistically creates a set of "childlike" language based on children's cognitive logic and emotional rhythm. This language takes the concreteness and colorfulness of vocabulary, as well as the repetition and jumping of sentence patterns as its core features, vividly simulating the thinking world of children and enabling readers to "see" and "feel" a world illuminated by poetry and wonder once again.

3.1.1. Vocabulary selection: concrete colors and direct sensory expression

Children perceive the world in a concrete rather than abstract way, directly through senses rather than concepts. Therefore, the language of the narrator "I" is full of tangible and concrete words. For example, the growth of pumpkins is described as "climbing the shelf if it wants to, climbing the house if it wants to"; the state of cucumbers is described as "blossoming a false flower if it wants to, bearing a cucumber if it wants to" [2]. The verbs "climb", "blossom" and "bear" here are full of dynamism and sense of picture, while "shelf", "house" and "false flower" are the most concrete things in children's vision. At the same time, children are extremely sensitive to colors, and the text is full of bright color words: "dragonflies are golden, grasshoppers are green", "the garden is bright, red is red, green is green, fresh and beautiful" [2]. This vocabulary selection strategy bypasses adult rational generalization, directly projects sensory impressions into the text, and constructs a bright, vivid and dynamic poetic space full of life.

3.1.2. Sentence structure: repetition and stream of consciousness

Another major feature of children's language is the simplicity and repetition of sentence patterns and the jumping of thinking, which forms a narrative effect similar to "stream of consciousness". A large number of repetitive and parallel sentence patterns are used in the text, such as "Grandfather stays in the back garden all day, and I stay in the back garden all day too", "Pat it, even the big tree will make a sound; shout, even the earth wall opposite seems to respond" [2]. On the one hand, this kind of repetition conforms to children's psychological habit of confirming the world through repetition; on the other hand, it also forms a poetic rhythm and aria-like lyrical atmosphere. In addition, the connection between sentences often does not rely on logical conjunctions, but follows children's flowing sight and wandering thoughts, jumping quickly from one point to another: "Flowers bloom, as if they wake up. Birds fly, as if they go to the sky. Bugs cry, as if they are talking" [2]. This seemingly loose and illogical syntax accurately reproduces the inner picture of children's scattered attention and rich association, making the narrative process present an innocent, natural and unrestrained poetic form.

3.2. "Defamiliarization" subversion of inertial cognition in the adult world

Within the framework of narratology, one of the most profound narrative functions of child perspective is that it serves as a powerful strategy to achieve systematic "defamiliarization" of the inertial cognition of the adult world. Viktor Shklovsky's "defamiliarization" theory of Russian formalism points out that the skill of art is to make objects unfamiliar, make forms difficult, increase the difficulty and duration of perception, so as to break the automation of daily perception. In *The Story of Hulan River*, the perspective of the child narrator "I" is exactly such a perfect "defamiliarization device". Because her cognitive ability has not been completely assimilated by social customs and inherent concepts, she filters and reconstructs the world familiar to adults with her innocent, puzzled or even "wrong" vision, forcing readers to follow her perspective to re-examine the social norms and tragedies regarded as "natural", thus stripping off their reasonable shell and exposing their absurd and cruel nature. This process is closely related to the cognitive gaps brought by limited focalization and the ironic tension produced by unreliable narration.

3.2.1. Purification of perception: "restoration" of the true nature of things

According to the phenomenological idea of "return to things themselves", art should abandon preconceived ideas and directly present the essence of experience. Child perspective is naturally close to this state because it has not been completely eroded by concepts. Objects functional in adult eyes restore their true form and vitality in the perception of the child "I". For example, as can be seen from the above description of the "back garden", cucumbers and corns are no longer simple crops here, but living beings endowed with independent will. This narration strips away the practical value and utilitarian judgment given to things by the adult world, and restores them to a pure, free and dynamic poetic existence through children's spiritual perception, realizing the "defamiliarized" representation of the original appearance of the world.

3.2.2. Suspension of judgment: "neutral" presentation of cruel reality

Adult narration often has clear moral judgment and social position, while child perspective naturally suspends value judgment due to the limitation of comprehension. This "non-judgmental" nature produces a calm or even cold narrative effect, which is more impactful instead. The narrator and characters in the novel never become the mouthpieces of the author or the implied author. The emotional intention structure of childlike innocence and poetic heart leads to the withdrawal of the writer's adult experience as much as possible [3]. When describing the tragedy of the Young Daughter-in-Law, the narrator "I" only acts as a curious onlooker, recording what she sees and hears: "People watching the fun come in an endless stream"; "It is not a waste of time to watch the fun, after all, they have broadened their horizons and seen the world" [2]. Children regard a cruel collective atrocity as "fun" and "a show", and cannot understand the cruelty of feudal ethics behind it. It is the "absence" and "silence" of this value judgment that form a huge contrast with the cruelty of the event itself, forcing readers to take the initiative in ethical thinking and value re-evaluation. Stimulated by this "neutral" narration, adult readers experience a piercing sadness and anger more deeply, thus completing a profound insight into the essence of the event. This strong criticism realized through "non-judgment" is a unique embodiment of the defamiliarization power of child perspective.

3.2.3. Juxtaposition of events: "deconstruction" of linear logic

Adult narration often follows causal and linear time logic to find reasonable explanations for events. However, children's memories are often fragmented and situational, following the logic of emotions and impressions. Due to the weakening of rational thinking, children often view things in scattered perspective. With involuntary attention in a dominant position, they scan the world with block thinking, which often makes the viewed events have no close causal connection and phenomena have no tight logical relationship [4]. In *The Story of Hulan River*, the narrator "I" narrates events such as sorcery dances, river lantern releases, Goddess Temple Fair and the tragedy of the Young Daughter-in-Law in juxtaposition like a collage. There is no strong causal connection between them, and they are only presented as part of the "life" in Hulan River. This non-linear and parallel narrative structure deconstructs the linear logic in which adults try to find a single cause for tragedies (such as the evil of a certain person), and places individual sufferings in an overall, circular and numb cultural atmosphere. Sorcery dance is both a religious ritual and an entertainment activity, and more likely an accomplice to death. This juxtaposition blurs the simple boundary between good and evil, revealing that the root of tragedy is not the malice of individuals, but the entire closed and inert

cultural system itself. With its impressive narrative process, child perspective successfully "defamiliarizes" our cognition of the causes of social tragedies and guides us to deeper cultural reflection.

3.3. Irony and critical core from the child perspective

The critical power contained in the child perspective in *The Story of Hulan River* is not realized through direct accusation or judgment, but generated and released through narrative irony. The core of this process lies in the deliberate "distance" between the narrator "I"'s perception, understanding and evaluation, and the position of the implied author. According to Wayne C. Booth's narrative theory, when the narrator's report, interpretation or evaluation deviates from the norms of the implied author, it constitutes "unreliable narration". The child perspective precisely uses this natural "unreliability" caused by limited cognition to create tension between surface narration and deep meaning, thus wrapping the sharp edge of criticism in the coat of innocence and ignorance, forming a unique ironic feature and profound critical core.

3.3.1. Cognitive dislocation and unreliable narration on the "axis of fact"

The unreliability of the child perspective is first reflected on the "axis of fact", that is, the narrator's misreading or ignorance of the truth of events. Facing the complex events of the adult world, especially the customs full of cruel nature, the "report" of the child "I" is often one-sided or even "wrong" due to the limitation of comprehension. The most typical example is the scene of watching the Young Daughter-in-Law being "treated": "Everyone went to see the wandering immortal, and I ran too... The wandering immortal drew talismans very quickly, muttering incantations while drawing." In my eyes, it was more like a novel and lively "performance", focusing on how interesting the immortal's movements were, rather than what torture the Young Daughter-in-Law was suffering. How can a child who knows nothing about the world understand the great significance and difference of life and death? This narration creates a spiritual distance from adults. What readers feel is more like a hairy primitive social appearance, producing a strong aesthetic tension [2].

However, it is this cognitive dislocation of regarding tragedy as "fun" that forms a strong foundation for irony. A huge gap is formed between the tragic truth known by the implied author (and readers) and the appearance perceived by the child narrator. This gap forces readers to go beyond the naive interpretation of the narrator and take the initiative to construct the cruel truth of the event. The generation of criticism no longer depends on the narrator's direct words, but on the shock and reflection caused by readers in the process of filling cognitive gaps. The tension between the narrator's "incomprehension" and the reader's "comprehension" is the driving source of narrative irony, which makes the criticism more internal and powerful.

3.3.2. Deviation of values and unreliable narration on the "axis of value"

A deeper level of irony comes from unreliable narration on the "axis of value", that is, the value judgment held by the child narrator obviously deviates from the norms of the implied author. For example, for some words and deeds of Uncle You, "I" may simply think they are fun or strange, and make simple judgments of "good" and "bad" based on this. But when Uncle You is really sad because "I" call him "bad", the childlike value standard of "whether it brings fun to oneself" is separated from the implied author's deep compassion and sympathy for the character's fate.

At this time, the direction of irony is more complicated. It does not simply laugh at children's naive judgments, but suspends the snobbish and indifferent value system of the adult world by showing the inconsistency between this naive judgment and the character's tragic situation. Children's value standards seem cruel because of their purity, but this cruelty precisely reflects the absurdity of adult social rules. The critical attitude of the implied author is implicitly expressed by revealing the "unreliability" of the narrator's value judgment and its causes (that is, the indifference of the social environment reflected by children's innocence). Here, the "deviation" between the narrator's attitude and the author's attitude becomes a sharp tool for social criticism.

3.3.3. Innocent conspiracy: "coincidence" of narrator and author's attitudes and its irony

What is particularly profound is that at certain moments, the attitude of the narrator "I" and the attitude of the implied author will show a kind of "coincidence", but this "coincidence" itself contains a deeper level of irony. When "I" feel all things in nature with a pure heart, that pure love and resonance with life are highly consistent with the poetry and human ideals pursued by the implied author. However, when this innocent and kind perspective observes the ignorant and cruel behaviors of the people in Hulan River, the "coincidence" produces a paradoxical effect.

For example, out of curiosity and the nature of seeking playmates, "I" want to approach the Young Daughter-in-Law. This childlike kindness forms a sharp contrast with the indifference and cruelty of the surrounding adults. At this moment, the narrator's kindness (praised by the author) conflicts sharply with the environment's malice (criticized by the author). The "presence" and "persistence" of the innocent perspective itself constitute the silent and strongest accusation against the dark reality. This criticism is no longer realized through "deviation", but through "coincidence" with the true nature of good human nature, to contrast how serious the deviation of reality is. The more innocent the child is, the clearer the evil of the world reflected by them will be.

4. Coordinates in literary history: the uniqueness of child perspective in The Story of Hulan River

4.1. "Literary transformation" of Xiao Hong's life experience

When examining Xiao Hong's choice of narrative perspective in The Story of Hulan River in the coordinates of literary history, we must realize that it is not a mere technique, but a highly artistic narrative transformation of Xiao Hong's personal life experience. This process profoundly shows how the writer sublimates individual traumatic memories, emotional loss and wandering experience into a universally meaningful aesthetic form through the precise design of narrative stratification and implied author in narratology. The child perspective is not only a carrier of emotional projection, but also a narrative strategy to achieve aesthetic distance and artistic control.

4.1.1. Emotional compensation and perspective choice: the child narrator as "ideal self"

Xiao Hong wandered all her life and longed intensely for a warm family and a stable sense of belonging. The "roots" and "love" unavailable in reality are symbolically compensated in the literary world through the construction of the child perspective. The warm isolated island formed by "I" and grandfather in the back garden is exactly the artistic reconstruction of the writer's ideal childhood and family relationship. From a narratological perspective, this choice skillfully uses the limited cognition of the child's "experiencing self" to temporarily shield the complex external society and create a poetic space for emotional rest.

However, this compensation is not simple beautification. The happiness of the narrator "I" is real, but the narrow scope of her activities precisely implies the coldness of the external world. Great emotional tension is formed between the limited warmth focused by the child perspective and the vast sadness perceived by adult readers. Xiao Hong is not escaping from reality, but contrasting the huge and empty "nothing" by focusing on this small and strong "something", thus making her call for love and warmth more shocking. In her short and difficult life journey, the young Xiao Hong kept rising and falling in the process of pursuit—practice—disillusionment—re-pursuit—re-practice—re-disillusionment, and loneliness was her deepest life experience. This sense of loneliness fully shows the individuality of human beings as a life phenomenon, which drives her to yearn for the distance and keeps her in an endless search [5]. The child perspective here becomes the narrative projection of the writer's ideal self. It is not only an emotional compensation for the lack of real life, but also a profound expression of universal human needs.

4.1.2. Overlapping of dual time and space: dialogue between adult narrator and child focalizer

There is an unnoticeable but crucial stratification in the narrative voice of *The Story of Hulan River*: the recollective, adult "narrating self" and the recollected, child "experiencing self". Although the text is almost dominated by children's perception on the surface, the desolate and generalized tone at the beginning "When the severe winter locks the earth.. [6]." has already revealed the existence of a vicissitude adult voice. By hiding the adult "narrating self" behind the scenes and making the child "experiencing self" the front-stage focalizer, Xiao Hong realizes the overlapping of dual time and space. Children's eyes are responsible for presenting vivid details and instantaneous insights, while adult minds are responsible for selecting and organizing these memory fragments and endowing them with an overall emotional tone — the ubiquitous compassion and desolation in retrospect. This narrative strategy is exactly a metaphor for Xiao Hong's own exile situation: she is in a foreign land (Hong Kong), looking back at her hometown (Hulan). The separation of time and space endows the observation with necessary aesthetic distance. Therefore, under the innocence of the child perspective, there is always a painful undercurrent of adult wisdom. The dialogue and tension between the two form the basis of the novel's polyphonic narration, and also elevate personal nostalgia to a philosophical height of reflecting on a form of civilization.

4.2. The position of Xiao Hong's "child perspective" narrative strategy in the genealogy of world narratology

Placing *The Story of Hulan River* in the grand coordinate system of world literature, it is not difficult to see that it is not a simple verification of Western narrative theory, but a creative transformation that dialogues with the trend of world literature but has unique oriental aesthetic charm in the specific context of Chinese modernity. Its uniqueness lies in that it elevates the "limited cognition" of child perspective from a simple technique to a comprehensive narrative paradigm integrating poetic philosophy, cultural criticism and lyrical tradition.

4.2.1. Deepening the theory of "limited perspective": from cognitive tool to ontological perspective

From Henry James, Percy Lubbock to Gérard Genette, Western narratology has mostly focused on the rhetorical function of "limited point of view" as controlling information, creating suspense and enhancing a sense of reality. Xiao Hong's practice has greatly enriched and deepened this theory. In

The Story of Hulan River, the "limited cognition" of child perspective is not only a screening mechanism for narrative information, but also an ontological way of viewing. It symbolizes an original life state not polluted by secular utilitarianism and rigid ethics, used to confront and reveal the "irrationality" and "desolation" of the adult world. This philosophical treatment of perspective itself has similarities with Mark Twain's use in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where Huck's innocent perspective also criticizes the hypocrisy of adult society. But Xiao Hong's uniqueness lies in her stronger lyricism and compassion. Her child perspective does not aim to promote adventure plots, but to submerge in retaining and mourning the true state of life. Its "limited cognition" focuses more on emotional and poetic filtering rather than plot suspension. This makes her child perspective sublimate from a narrative "tool" to an ontological "perspective" for observing the world and understanding life, providing a unique case of oriental aesthetics for world narrative theory.

4.2.2. Oriental practice of the "unreliable narration" theory: compassion integration beyond irony

Wayne C. Booth systematically expounded the theory of "unreliable narrator" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, whose core lies in the ironic effect produced by the differences between the narrator and the implied author in facts and value judgments. Xiao Hong's child narrator is undoubtedly "unreliable", and her attitude of "watching the fun" towards the tragedy of the Young Daughter-in-Law is the best example. However, Xiao Hong's uniqueness lies in that she transcends the relatively pure "irony-criticism" mode in Booth's theory and injects deep compassion and lyricism into irony. In Western modernist literature, unreliability mainly creates a sense of fragmentation of stream of consciousness and decline of families. However, the "I" in *The Story of Hulan River*, whose unreliable narration produces critical irony, is also wrapped in deep sympathy for the narrator herself and even the fate of all characters. The sharpness of criticism and the warmth of elegy are not separated, but integrated. This aesthetic characteristic of "sorrow without harm, complaint without anger" is the embodiment of traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit in modern narration. Xiao Hong shows that the "unreliability" of child perspective can not only be used for deconstruction and criticism, but also become the cornerstone of constructing a meaningful world coexisting with poetry and sadness, which is her rich and development of the "unreliable narration" theory with distinctive oriental characteristics.

4.2.3. Position in the tradition of world modern lyric novels: epic pursuit of fragmentary narration

In the 20th century, world literature saw a trend of "inward turn" driven by stream-of-consciousness novels, emphasizing subjective psychological reality, and narration tended to be fragmentary and internal. Xiao Hong's *The Story of Hulan River*, with its impressive and fragmentary narration driven by child perspective, undoubtedly echoes this worldwide trend. But it is quite different from Proust's tracing of the duration of personal subconsciousness, nor Joyce's subtle depiction of one day in Dublin. Xiao Hong's fragmentary narration captures the genre painting of a small town and the living conditions of a group of people through a child's eyes. Its purpose is not only to show the waves of the inner world, but to piece together a collective portrait of national spiritual life through personal and perceptual fragments. Those seemingly casual childhood memories, character sketches and custom records together construct a grand fable about "the silent national soul". In this sense, Xiao Hong uses the "smallness" of child perspective to write the "greatness" of national destiny. She combines the lyrical tradition of Chinese classical prose, the aesthetic concept of scattered perspective with the narrative skills of modern novels, creating a unique style with the character of

"modern lyric epic", and opening a modern road with unique Chinese style in the genealogy of world literature.

5. Conclusion

Through the narratological analysis of the "child perspective" in *The Story of Hulan River*, we can clearly see that Xiao Hong did not simply look back at her hometown through a pair of innocent eyes, but elevated this perspective into a highly conscious and precisely structured narrative aesthetics. In Xiao Hong's writing, the child perspective is not only a way of perception, but also a mechanism of meaning generation; it is both a poetic filter and a critical prism. It creates cognitive tension through limited cognition, stimulates the depth of irony through unreliable narration, and constructs a polyphonic narrative structure through the implicit intervention of the adult perspective, thus building an artistic bridge between innocence and desolation, individual memory and national fable.

This paper systematically demonstrates the core role of the "child perspective" in *The Story of Hulan River* from three dimensions: text presentation, aesthetic effects and coordinates in literary history. At the text level, the interweaving of child perspective and adult perspective, the symbolism of character addresses and the childlike language style jointly shape a real and vivid Hulan River world with rich implications. At the aesthetic level, this perspective subverts the inertial cognition of the adult world through the "defamiliarization" strategy, and realizes a profound criticism of social inertia and cultural tragedy with the help of narrative irony. In the context of literary history, Xiao Hong's child perspective is not only a deepening and oriental transformation of Western limited perspective and unreliable narration theory, but also an outstanding practice of perfectly integrating Chinese lyrical tradition with modern novel form, making it occupy a unique and important position in the genealogy of world modern literature.

The artistic achievements of *The Story of Hulan River* show that great narrative strategies are never just a display of skills, but a high unity of form and content, emotion and thought. What the child perspective conveys is never a general feeling for the passing years of childhood, nor a condescending compassion for all living beings, but a depression permeated with the flavor of life. The eternal sorrow and regret for the people in her hometown contain the author's complex feelings of love and hate [7]. Through the narrative choice of "child perspective", Xiao Hong successfully integrated personal traumatic memories, wandering experiences and reflections on national culture into a universally meaningful aesthetic whole. With the light of children's eyes, she illuminated the living predicament of individuals in the shadow of history; with the voice of children's words, she questioned the silent national soul. It is this internal power based on narrative form that makes *The Story of Hulan River* transcend the limitations of time and space, become a bright pearl in the history of modern Chinese literature, and continuously provide readers with rich interpretation space and profound aesthetic moved.

Starting from narratology theory, this study tries to reveal the aesthetic value of "child perspective" as an active form construction, which may provide a new perspective for Xiao Hong research, and further confirm the effectiveness and vitality of narratology theory in interpreting classic texts.

References

- [1] Zhang, Y. (1997). On the child's perspective in Xiao Hong's *Tales of Hulan River*. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, (1), 181–195. <https://doi.org/10.16287/j.cnki.cn11-2589/i.1997.01.022>
- [2] Xiao, H. (2013). *Tales of Hulan River* (pp. 9, 53, 55, 112). Wuhan Publishing House.

- [3] Liu, Y. (2017). Limited perspective and restricted narration as a model of fiction: A reinterpretation of Xiao Hong's Tales of Hulan River. *Journal of Central China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 56(6), 81–92.
- [4] Chai, P. (1997). On the child's perspective in Tales of Hulan River. *Journal of Hulan Teachers College*, (3), 39–41.
- [5] Ruan, H. (2008). Dreaming back to Hulan River: On the quasi-child perspective in Xiao Hong's Tales of Hulan River. *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)*, (3), 81–85. <https://doi.org/10.16061/j.cnki.cn46-1076/c.2008.03.022>
- [6] Mao, D. (1991). Preface to Tales of Hulan River. In *Complete works of Xiao Hong* (Vol. 2, p. 704). Harbin Publishing House. (Original preface published 1940)
- [7] Shao, Y. (2003). Mature innocence: An analysis of the child's perspective in Tales of Hulan River. *Journal of Gannan Normal University*, (2), 64–66. <https://doi.org/10.13698/j.cnki.cn36-1037/c.2003.02.015>