

## **Cognitive Narratological Study of *A Village Life***

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**Abstract:** *Until now, cognitive literary criticism has achieved the “cognitive turn”. Cognitive narratology, as one of the branches of cognitive literary studies, further studies the mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices. Taking Louise Gluck’s A Village Life as an example, this paper aims to first analyze the narrative patterns of this collection and then to show readers’ cognitive process of changing old cognitive frames and building new ones based on the theories of cognitive literary studies in order to help readers better understand literary works like A Village Life.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive Narratology; Narrative Pattern; Cognitive Frame; Louise Gluck; A Village Life*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1. Cognitive Narratology**

Cognitive science is the interdisciplinary, scientific study of mind and its processes with input from multiple disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience and computer science. The cognitive sciences began as an intellectual movement in the 1950s, called the cognitive revolution. This revolution caused “cognitive turn” in many disciplines, which means each discipline combines its own researches with cognitive sciences in order to find inspiration, new methods and paradigms (Muqing, 2015). Around 1970s, the “cognitive turn” began to have impact on literary studies. Up until now, new research paradigms such as cognitive poetics and cognitive rhetoric are initially formed. Like cognitive sciences, cognitive literary studies can also be divided into many branches, including cognitive poetics, cognitive rhetoric, cognitive stylistics, cognitive narratology and cognitive cultural research.

Cognitive narratology can be defined as the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever---and by whatever means---those practices occur (Herman, 2009). Although one of the reasons why cognitive narratology developed prosperously when classical narratology was at a low ebb is related to its novelty as an interdisciplinary science, its emphasis on context goes with the tide of contextualization in the West. Cognitive narratology generally criticizes that classical narratology ignores context and only focuses on text, and emphasizes more on the cognitive frames than on the uniqueness of individuals. Shen Dan distinguishes four kinds of cognitive studies of literature: discussions about the commonality between readers’ cognitive process and tactic about narrative structure of a genre, regardless of their sex, race, class, experience, time and space; discussions about different cognitive processes of different readers, needing to take the impact of readers’ sex, race, class and experience on the interpretation into consideration; discussions about the people’s cognitive process of real events and discussions about different characters’ different cognitive processes of the same cognitive structure, needing to pay attention to the impact of characters’ specific identities, time and space on cognition (Dan, Shen, 2004). Although the above four kinds can all be categorized into cognitive literary studies, the first kind is studied most by scholars in this field because they aim to find the readers’ common

cognitive frames.

## **1.2. Narratological Study of Poetry**

The narrative text is no doubt the focus of narratological studies which emerged from the Europe between the 1960s and 1970s, implying that poetry, especially the lyrical poems are almost ignored by scholars in this field. However, with the further development of narratology, especially with the transition from classical narratology to post-classical narratology, new branches of narratology gradually emerge and extend to cross-generic studies so that the lyrical poems which weren't included in the narratological studies are now paid attention to. In 2004, the Germany scholar Peter Huhn proposed three concepts related to the basic category of narratology, i.e. sequentiality, mediacy and articulation (Junqiang and Lichun, 2017). His main purpose is to highlight the common features of different genres so as to demonstrate that the narratological studies can be used as a tool to have an in-depth analysis of the forms and functions of poetry.

*A Village Life* is a poetry collection written by Louise Gluck, the winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature and is also the research object of this paper. Louise Gluck is an autobiographical poet and she created a new form of poetry composition, poem books. Gluck was recognized by the Swedish Academy for her "her unmistakable poetic voice, that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal". Dana Goodyear (2009) praised Gluck as a master that "finely calibrates the shocks and their intervals" and "camouflages herself in language so plain it's almost banal". However, if readers learn more about the meaning behind these seemingly "banal" words, they will find that this collection is "frightening the way a living statue would be frightening if it were to smile at you". Like her former works such as *Ararat* and *The Wild Iris*, *A Village Life* is still written in the form of poem book and explores some eternal themes such as love, marriage and death. Compared with her previous poems, although every poem in this collection seems independent from each other as they all narrate different stories and explore different aspects of life, they are, in effect, all connected tightly together in an organic structure built by Gluck. This brand new form of poetry composition is a breakthrough not only because Gluck breaks readers' traditional cognitive frames of poems that always regard poems as single and independent of each other, but more importantly, provides readers with new narrative contexts and guides them to build new cognitive frames to understand the real meaning behind the poems. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that to have a thorough understanding of *A Village Life* isn't easy because readers need some time to explore new cognitive frames that conform to the textual features of this collection so that the author's real intentions can be revealed. Therefore, this paper aims to first analyze the narrative patterns of this collection and then to show readers' cognitive process of changing old cognitive frames and building new ones based on the theories of cognitive literary studies.

## **II. NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF A VILLAGE LIFE**

In order to build a cognitive frame that can help readers understand the true meaning of *A Village Life*, readers should first understand the unique narrative patterns of this collection.

### **2.1. Collection as an Organic Whole**

As Gluck is an autobiographical poet, she narrated what she saw and heard and also her reflections on her life experiences in this volume. However, what makes her poetry so impressive is the narrative context she builds. Gluck first constructs a common context that functions as a static background for all the poems of this volume. She sets this volume in an unnamed Mediterranean village where a fountain sits at the center of the village with avenues leading to different directions. The static background, including a mountain, a fountain, a meadow and a plaza, seems unaffected by time and will always be there forever. Every poem narrated in this collection happens under this background. Moreover, the order of the poems is also very interesting. Only by

seeing the titles, readers can feel the flow of time and the change of space. For instance, there are many titles that show the transition from winter to summer such as “First Snow”, “March”, “Midsummer” and different times of a day such as “Twilight”, “Noon”, “Sunset”, “Dawn” and “Sunrise”. Meanwhile, other titles like “In the Cafe”, “In the Plaza” and “At the River” demonstrate that the author moved from one place to another. Although there are some titles like “Marriage”, “Figs” and “Solitude” which seem unrelated to each other, they, in fact, all belong to the same system and are under the same context. Thus, in general, Gluck combines the static background with dynamic narrative and build an organic whole for the volume, which is a very refreshing way of narration in poetry.

## **2.2. Prose-Poem**

Prose poetry is poetry written in prose form instead of verse form, while preserving poetic qualities such as heightened imagery, parataxis, and emotional effects. As a poet who likes to try new things and to create her own writing style, Gluck’s interests are only limited to poetry composition and she also did some researches on other genres of literature such as prose and fiction. “I was torn between a structure of oppositions/ and a narrative structure”, Glück writes in the poem “The Story of a Day”. It’s a moment that sets you thinking about the differences and similarities between poetic and fictional storytelling (Rumens, 2014). Based on her explorations, Gluck made a cross-generic attempt in her poetry. Compared with her newly published poetry collection, *Faithful and Virtuous Night, A Village Life* is also written in the form of prose-poem. For instance, in “A Village Life”, Gluck depicts her experience of walking dog in a prose style:

“On Sundays I walk my neighbor’s dog  
so she can go to church to pray for her sick mother.  
The dog waits for me in the doorway. Summer and winter  
we walk the same road, early morning, at the base of the escarpment.”

Although these lines are written in the verse form, they have the characteristics of prose, including storytelling, characters and plot. The poems in this collection also have various characters and plots, and narrate different stories. The prose-poem is a fascinating hybrid, combining the rhythmic stretch and low-stress accenting of the prose sentence with the close focus associated with poetry. It can seem a relaxed form, or a relaxation of form ((Rumens, 2014). Gluck absorbs the advantages of the two forms and makes a good mixture which makes her poems distinctive and powerful.

## **2.3. Coexistence of the First, Second and Third Person Narration**

Different from lyrical poems that narrate in the first person or second person or from narrative and epic poems that narrate in the third person, Gluck uses all the three persons in this collection. For instance, in the poem “Pastoral”, from the first to the sixth stanza, Gluck expressed the disappointment of young people who fled away from their hometown and went to the big cities, only to find that things got even worse from the perspectives of the second and the third person:

“So people flee---and for a while, away from here,

....

But no signal from earth

Will ever reach the sun. Thrash

against that fact, you are lost.

When they come back, they’re worse. (Gluck, 2014: 5)”

As Gluck didn’t use the first person in the six stanzas, her presence can hardly be felt by readers so she seemed like an onlooker who just observed the lives of a group of young men who struggled so hard but

only tasted failure and desperation. However, the second person largely shortens the distance between readers and the characters because it puts readers in the shoes of the characters in order to let readers have deeper resonance with the young people's frustration and letdown. Then from the seventh stanza to the end, Gluck changed the perspective and wrote in the first and second person:

"To my mind, you're better off if you stay;  
that way, dreams don't damage you (Gluck, 2014: 5)."

By writing in the first person, Gluck's voice can be clearly heard and she can have direct communication with readers about the dilemma faced by young people nowadays. Thus, the use of the first person narration creates an interactive environment for the reader and the author.

There are also other poems such as "Noon" and "Sunset" in which Gluck only wrote in the third person to depict the scenes of a young couple having picnic and a farmer worker burning dead leaves. In these poems, Gluck tends to hide herself and to reveal the common problems that modern people are faced with from an objective point of view. Thus, although Gluck doesn't write in the first person, there are always some lines which are really thought-provoking. For example, in "Noon", Gluck wrote:

"It seems a strange position, being very young.  
They have this thing everyone wants and they don't want—  
but they want to keep it anyway; it's all they can trade on. (Gluck, 2014: 9)"

In three lines, Gluck points out the dilemma that young people face, that is, although they are young, they aren't always happy because there are so much worries in their lives and being young can't help them solve those practical problems.

Gluck broke the generic conventions of lyrical and narrative poems and created her own way of poetry composition. In *A Village Life*, the three persons are combined together to make a unique voice that not only belongs to Gluck, but also to all humans because just as the Swedish Academy praised Gluck for her "her unmistakable poetic voice, that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal", her real intention of writing poems is not to express her personal feelings, but to voice out the universal feelings of humankind.

### **III. HOW TO BREAK OLD COGNITIVE FRAMES AND BUILD NEW ONES**

The common problem faced by all readers is that they often misunderstand or even can't understand the real meaning behind literary texts. As for poetry, the situation gets worse. Compared with prose or fiction, poems are written in limited words and provide little or even no background information. Moreover, many poets create their unique writing style and make innovation in narrative patterns, rhetoric, etc., so these poems are more like riddles to them and the process of understanding these poem will be very painful. Cognitive narratology, according to Shen Dan (2004), reveals the interactions among "text prompt", "generic conventions" and "conventional cognitive frames", and they are interdependent and closely related to each other. "Text prompt" is the product made by an author in terms of generic conventions and cognitive frames; "generic conventions" are the result from the interactions between the textual features and cognitive frames of genres; and "cognitive frames of genres" rely on the functions of textual features and generic conventions. Thus, in order to build new cognitive frames, readers should learn the textual features and generic conventions of a text.

Taking *A Village Life* as an example, readers should first know the generic conventions of poetry and then understand the narrative patterns of *A Village Life* or Gluck's poems that are very different from other poems or poets. The process of building new cognitive frames can be illustrated as below:

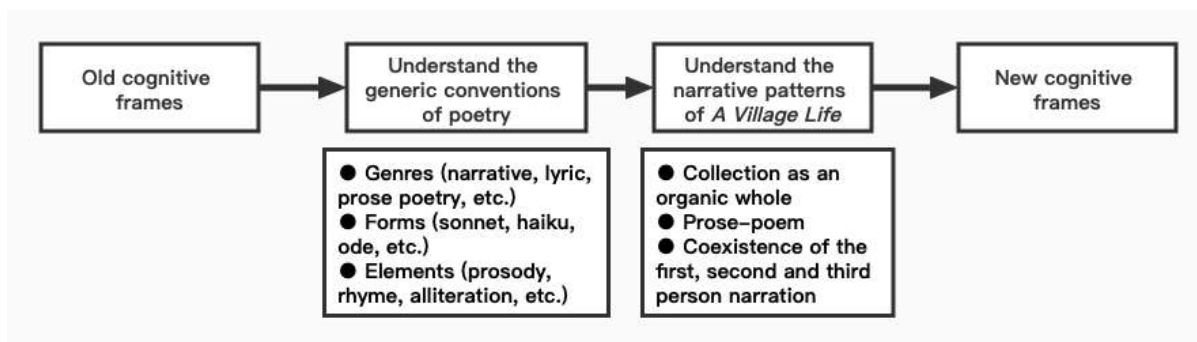


Figure 1

If readers want to have a better understanding of this collection, they should first ensure that they learn the generic conventions of poetry so that they can have a general understanding of this form of literature. Readers should know genres of poetry, including narrative poetry, lyric poetry, epic poetry, elegy, prose poetry, etc., forms of poetry which include sonnet, villanelle, limerick, ode, haiku, etc. and elements that constitute a poem, i.e. prosody, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, form in poetry and diction. However, only having the basic knowledge or a general understanding of poetry isn't enough because every poem or every poet has their own characteristics. If readers can't recognize the unique features of a poem they are reading, every poem will be the same for them and the real meaning or intentions of an author will be distorted or completely hidden. In terms of the narrative patterns of *A Village Life*, readers should first know the form of this collection, prose-poem, which is a hybrid that combines the typical features of prose such as characters and plots with the poetic features of poetry, so that they can understand why the structures of these poems are loose and the language is simple and plain. Moreover, they should also know the distinctive organization of the poems in this collection as Gluck builds a static background which can be reflected in the title of this volume, "A Village Life", and connects every poem according to the change of time and space, and this collection shows harmony and balance between dynamic and static. Last but not least, Gluck uses all the three persons in her narration to produce a universal perspective which is very different from lyric poets or narrative poets.

In fact, the process of learning the narrative patterns of literary works is also the process of breaking readers' old cognitive frames and building new ones because the essential information, that is, the generic conventions and narrative patterns of a text, can correct the misunderstandings or ambiguous concepts of readers' old cognitive frames and reconstruct them. Based on new cognitive frames, readers' understanding of a text will be greatly improved.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Cognitive literary criticism, after the stages of generation and development, has achieved the "cognitive turn" and a broad future is ahead of cognitive literary studies (Muqing, 2015). As one of the branches of cognitive literary studies, cognitive narratology further studies the mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices and enlightens many scholars to break the traditional theories and methods of classical narratology and create new ways to understand the narratives.

This paper, based on the theories of cognitive narratology, aims to explore the cognitive process of breaking the old cognitive frames and building new ones by taking Louise Gluck's poetry collection, *A Village Life*, as an example. This collection is a good example for presenting the process of building new cognitive frames because it is more difficult to be understood by readers than traditional lyric or narrative poems. In *A Village Life*, as Gluck made huge efforts on innovating the form and exploring new perspectives, readers may feel very confused when reading these poems. Thus, in order to solve this problem, this paper demonstrates that

if readers want to have a better understanding of literary works, they should first learn the generic conventions to have some basic information about this genre of literature, then understand the narrative patterns that differentiate this literary works from others. During this process, those misconceptions can be removed and new knowledge can be dug out to help build new cognitive frames so that the real intentions and meaning hidden in literary work can be revealed.

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