

The Narrative Significance of Landscape in Shen Congwen's Novels



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Abstract: Shen Congwen's works are famous for his unique depiction of landscapes, in which the delicate descriptions of natural and humanistic landscapes not only beautify the background of the story but also profoundly express the emotional and psychological state of the characters, as well as reflect the rich social and cultural background. This paper discusses the characteristics of landscape narration in Shen Congwen's novels and its significance in modern literature. These creative techniques of Shen Congwen not only have an important influence on the landscape description in modern literature but also provide a deep insight into the cultural perception of society.

Keywords: Shen Congwen; landscape narrative; natural scenery; humanistic scenery

Introduction

As one of the outstanding representatives of Chinese literature in the 20th century, Shen Congwen is famous for his unique literary style and profound humanistic care. His works are mostly based on the natural scenery and folk life in Xiangxi. *The Border Town* and other works depict the landscape vividly, making it an indispensable narrative element. In Shen Congwen's works, landscape is not only the background description but also the carrier of emotion, thought, and culture, which plays a key role in character shaping and plot development. Therefore, it is helpful to explore the narrative significance of landscape in Shen Congwen's novels, analyze how to deepen the understanding of characters and events through landscape depiction, and the influence of this unique narrative mode on readers, to deeply interpret Shen Congwen's representative works, and then feel the artistic charm and deep significance of landscape narration in his works.

1. Analysis of the Landscape in Shen Congwen's Novels

1.1. The depiction of natural scenery

The natural scenery under Shen Congwen's pen

is characterized by its vivid memory, and the delicate emotional veins and subtle changes of human emotions are sketched out in a light touch. In Shen Congwen's novel world, the natural scenery is not only the background of the accompaniment but also the resonance of emotions and stories. Xia Zhiqing once evaluated Shen Congwen as the greatest impressionist in modern Chinese literature, whose depiction of natural scenery is delicate and full of vitality (Jiang, 2022). In works such as *Ghosts of the Mountain*, Shen Congwen skillfully anthropomorphizes the natural scenery, using warm strokes to give the rooster and the plow ox a human touch and a three-dimensional image. This depiction shows Shen Congwen's literary skill and reflects the simplicity and childlike innocence of the fictional characters. Shen's natural scenery, full of bright colors and soft light, is like a slow movement, leading readers into a vivid picture. In *The Border Town*, the streams surrounding the rocky mountains are clear and transparent, the White Pagoda stands leisurely, the ancient ferries hover on both sides of the river, the peach and apricot blossoms bloom royally in spring, and the purple flowers dazzle in the sunlight in summer. These depictions are not only the depiction of scenery but also the projection of emotions and the expression of the heart. Through

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these natural landscapes, Shen Congwen delicately outlines the inner world of the characters and builds a literary space that is both real and dreamy. Shen Congwen's description of natural scenery is often presented in the artistic technique of straightforward style of writing, his brushstrokes jump lightly on the paper, capturing the soul of the scenery with concise and precise language. In *Snow*, snowflakes flutter like butterflies and moths, appearing vivid and lively. In *Night Fishing*, the purple mist at dusk fills the foothills of distant mountains, and the sound of insects at night is like a musical ensemble. These depictions are not only the praise of the beauty of nature but also a profound understanding of life and emotions. Shen Congwen's depiction of these natural landscapes is not only a nostalgia for the beauty of his hometown but also a source of inspiration for his literary creation. His novels reveal far-reaching moods in these vivid landscapes, and the characters come to life in this tranquil nature, their behaviors and words not only represent the style of an era but also the indispensable humanistic landscapes in Shen Congwen's novels. The interaction between these landscapes and the story not only enriches the layers of the novel but also provides readers with a unique aesthetic experience.

1.2. Outline of social landscape

In addition to the beautiful natural scenery, Shen Congwen's novels are also fascinating for the profound outline of exotic humanities and customs. His works vividly depict the unique customs of the border areas in western Hunan, such as footstools, waterwheels, mills, oil mills, river streets, and so on, forming a distinctive humanistic landscape. Under Shen Congwen's writing, these customs are not only the background of life but also the carrier of the story's emotion, reflecting the lifestyle and state of mind of a generation (Miao, 2018). Shen Congwen's characters, their love, life, faith, joys, and pains are presented in these customs. They either run for love, struggle under the weight of life, or find solace in their faith. The emotions and destinies of these characters are closely linked to the surrounding humanistic landscapes, forming a vibrant and deeply

meaningful picture. In *The Long River*, the casual picking of oranges by passers-by demonstrates the locals' closeness to nature and their simple philosophy of life. The mountain songs and fishing scenes in *Fishing* convey the local sentiment of people living in harmony with nature. In another work, the devotion to God and respect for Taoist masters profoundly depict the beliefs and spiritual world of the local people. Shen Congwen's depiction of humanistic landscapes is not only a record of material life but also a profound exploration of human nature, emotions, and social culture. His writing is full of understanding and respect for traditional customs, and at the same time, there is no lack of realistic depiction of the barbaric side. The depiction of these customs shows Shen Congwen's deep insight into traditional culture and also expresses his tolerance and understanding of the diversity of human nature (Zhu, 2018). In Shen Congwen's novels, the humanistic landscapes are not only depicted in the background, but they, like the natural landscapes, become an important element in the storyline and characterization of the characters. The interaction between these landscapes and characters not only enhances the novel's infectiousness and poetic effect but also makes the work have deeper cultural connotations and artistic value. Through these meticulous depictions of customs, Shen demonstrated a literary world full of vitality and profound thinking, making his works a unique and distinctive landscape in modern Chinese literature.

2. The Connection and Significance of Landscape and Narrative

2.1. The relationship and significance between landscape and characters

In Shen Congwen's novel world, landscape is not only a kind of background but also a kind of narrative means that is deeply connected with characters. Shen was influenced by Turgenev's works, and he believed that the intricate combination of character and landscape was a necessary skill for modern writers. In his novels, the relationship

between landscape and characters is inseparable, and together they form a rich and multidimensional narrative space. Shen Congwen's landscapes are both depictions of physical space and projections of characters' emotions and psychological states. Each piece of landscape is closely connected with the character's personality, emotion, and destiny, and they not only reflect the character's inner world but also influence the character's behavior and the direction of destiny (Boat, 2023). In *The Border Town*, the clear and transparent streams and the hazy mountains in the distance not only constitute a beautiful picture but also map the pure and hazy emotions of the characters. Landscape here is not only a presentation of visual beauty but also an externalization of the characters' spiritual world. Shen Congwen's description of the landscape is full of poetry and philosophy. Through his delicate strokes, he closely connects the landscape with the life and emotions of the characters, making the landscape no longer a simple depiction of nature, but an emotional and psychological language. This interaction between the landscape and the characters not only enriches the level of the narrative but also enhances the novel's expressive and infectious power, enabling readers to feel the joys and sorrows of the characters in the landscape and to experience the changes of the times and the true meaning of life. In short, in Shen Congwen's novels, the landscape is not only a reflection of nature, but also a carrier of characters' emotions, and a meeting point of time, space, and characters' stories. Under Shen Congwen's writing, the relationship between landscape and characters becomes a unique narrative art, which makes his works full of romantic beauty and deep humanistic concern.

2.2. Landscape as a tool for plot advancement

In Shen Congwen's novels, landscape is not only a kind of background depiction but also a key tool for plot advancement. As Ge Fei pointed out in *A Study of Novel Narrative*, the core of a novel often begins with an image or picture, and this initial picture forms the writer's impulse to write. Shen Congwen's works are the vivid embodiment of such

artistic expression. The landscapes in Shen's novels carry his rich experience from the borderland of western Hunan to urban life. His brushstrokes travel through urban and rural areas, interweaving multiple perspectives of marginalized society and urban culture, forming a unique narrative style. In these landscapes, readers not only see the beauty and grandeur of nature but also feel the fluctuation of characters' emotions and the pulse of the times (Cao, 2023). Landscape in Shen Congwen's novels is not only a static background but also a dynamic narrative element, which participates in and promotes the development of the plot. Shen Congwen's landscape descriptions are often closely connected with the plot of the novel. For example, a clear stream is not only a depiction of natural scenery but also a witness to the emotional development of the characters. Clusters of imagery in these landscapes, such as streams, mountain marshes, and ancient streets, keep recurring in his works, and they not only construct an atmosphere but also foreshadow the plot's twists and developments. In Shen Congwen's fictional world, the landscape becomes a way to narrate the story, which not only adds to the beauty of the work but also deepens the understanding of the characters' psychology and emotions. Through the description of the landscape, Shen ingeniously introduces the reader to the depth of the story, making the plot unfold in the landscape, and the relationship between the landscape, the plot, and the characters is interwoven into a poetic picture scroll under the delicate strokes.

3. The Inspiration Brought by the Scenery in Shen Congwen's Novels

3.1. Drawing on natural scenery in emotional expression

In Shen Congwen's *Unforgettable People*, the natural scenery is skillfully integrated with the main character's emotional expression, which becomes a unique narrative technique. When Otsu, the main character, crosses the Seto Inland Sea from Osaka and looks out at the scenery to his left and right, his dreary mood the loneliness of the external environment, and the mist-covered coast form a

profound internal and external dialog. This is not only a depiction of a landscape, but also a profound reflection of the inner state of the protagonist. Through such a description, Shen Congwen makes the landscape no longer a simple background, but a carrier of emotions. Here, the landscape is not simply a part of the external world but is closely connected with the inner world of the protagonist. It reflects the protagonist's loneliness, confusion, and uneasiness about the unknown future. This "subjectivization of the landscape" makes the landscape an effective means of expressing and strengthening the psychology, emotions, and concepts of the novel's characters. Shen Congwen's creative approach provides a valuable inspiration for modern literature. Landscapes can transcend their physical properties and become a powerful tool for emotional expression. It is not only a display of beauty, but also an externalization and mirror image of the inner world of the characters. Through the depiction of landscape, the author can reveal the inner world of the characters more deeply and express more complex and delicate emotions. This technique makes the emotional expression of literary works more rich and three-dimensional, giving readers a deeper reading experience.

3.2. Integration of humanistic landscape and social background

In Shen Congwen's novels, the integration of humanistic landscape and social background reveals a profound literary truth for readers. Shen Congwen creates a series of vivid literary images and plots by skillfully combining humanistic landscape and social background. In *The Brief Biography of A Hei*, Wu Ming's godfather is invited to exorcise A Hei's illness, which is not only a process of healing, but also an exploration of the relationship between man and God. In *Little Halt*, the custom of applying chicken blood to the lintel of a door and agricultural tools is both a ritual to ward off evil spirits and a reflection of people's belief in and expectation of the gods. The humanistic landscapes in these stories are not only descriptions of customs and habits but also in-depth excavations of the social and cultural backgrounds.

Through the depiction of elements such as gods and witches, rituals, and theater, Shen Congwen shows a diverse and complex cultural world. People in this cultural world, their lives, beliefs, and emotions are closely connected with the surrounding social environment. For example, the people's obsession with theater in *The Butcher* is not only a pursuit of entertainment but also an escape and solace from the reality of life. This creative approach of Shen Congwen reveals to us that combining the humanistic landscape with the social background can not only increase the depth and realism of the work but also better reflect the complexity and diversity of the characters (Li, 2022). In this way, readers can understand the characters' behaviors and emotions more deeply and feel the social landscape and cultural characteristics of that era. In Shen Congwen's writing, the humanistic landscape is not only the background of literature but also a mirror of human emotion and social history.

3.3. Exploration of landscape as a narrative strategy

Shen Congwen skillfully uses the narrative strategy of "landscape" in his novels, and through the change of perspective, the landscape becomes an indispensable part of the narrative. In Shen Congwen's novels, readers often see unfocused landscape narratives. In this kind of narrative, the narrator depicts the landscape from an omniscient perspective, like the detailed description of the small mountain town of Chadong at the beginning of *The Border Town*, in which the narrator's perspective wanders freely from the official road to the stream, the white pagoda, the ferry, etc., to outline the natural environment in which the characters are situated in an all-round way. Similarly, in *The Long River*, the narrator also spends a lot of ink depicting orange trees, orange groves, and the human customs of the Chen River basin, showing the natural landscape and customs of a place. Through this all-encompassing, free-wandering perspective, Shen Congwen not only objectively shows the real appearance of the landscape, but also incorporates rich cultural and social elements into the landscape. This narrative

strategy makes the landscape not only a description of the natural landscape, but also a reflection of the cultural, historical, and social background. This narrative technique of Shen Congwen provides valuable inspiration for modern novel writing, which enriches the background of the story and deepens the understanding of characters and plot by utilizing the landscape as a narrative strategy (Guo, 2020). This narrative approach, which uses landscape as a link, gives the novel a deeper literary meaning and aesthetic value.

3.4. Mining deep cultural meaning from landscape

In Shen Congwen's novels, the landscape is not only a display of natural beauty but also carries rich cultural significance more profoundly. From Shen Congwen's works, we can learn how to excavate and show the deep cultural significance of the landscape, which is an important revelation for modern literary creation. In Shen Congwen's writing, every landscape is the beginning of a story, a deep reflection of the culture of an era and a region. The quiet town, clear streams, and smoky mountains in *The Border Town* not only constitute a beautiful picture but also a reflection of people's way of life in that era, reflecting the profound social and cultural background. Through the depiction of these landscapes, Shen Congwen not only presents the beauty of nature but also deeply reveals the relationship between man and nature, man and society, as well as the lifestyle and cultural characteristics of that era (Fang, 2020). In addition, Shen Congwen often incorporates rich emotions and philosophical thoughts into his depictions of landscapes, making the landscapes a carrier for conveying emotions and thoughts. This approach not only enhances the artistic charm of the novel but also enables readers to feel the emotional changes of the characters and the atmosphere of the times through the landscape. From Shen Congwen's works, we can learn that the landscape can not only be used as the background to increase the realism and attraction of the story but also as an important literary element to show deep cultural and historical significance. Through the in-depth excavation and artistic

expression of the landscape, the novel can convey the author's thoughts and feelings more vividly and reflect the characteristics of society and culture more deeply.

Summarize

Shen Congwen's landscape narratives are not unique in art but also occupy an important position in literary history. His works show profound emotional expression and rich cultural connotation through delicate landscape depictions, becoming a unique stroke in modern literature. These landscape narratives not only deepen the readers' understanding of the plot and characters of the works, but also enrich the expression methods of modern literature, and provide valuable insights for contemporary writers in landscape depiction and emotional expression. Shen Congwen's landscape narratives also have a profound influence on modern society. The social culture of that era reflected in his works provides today's readers with a window to understand the past and reflect on the present and enhances the connection between literature and society. Future research can pay more attention to the connection between landscape and socio-historical context, and explore the multiple functions of landscape in narratives, as well as its changes in different cultures and eras, to understand and evaluate Shen Congwen's literary contributions more comprehensively.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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