A Study of the Unreliable Narration in *William Wilson*

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**Abstract**

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is an excellent writer with a great diversity of works including poems, short fictions, and literary theories in the 19th century. His stories are usually connected with the supernatural events shrouded in a weird and bleak atmosphere, which also provide penetrating insight into the mental state, especially psychological problem of the unreliable first-person narrators. One of his short story, *William Wilson*, is a mixture of surrealism and Gothic sentiment, in which the narrator tells the story of a schizophrenic who commits suicide from the first-person narrative situation. The author adopted the unreliability of the narrator as a rhetorical strategy. Based on the leading figure of Narratology, James Phelan’s theories about unreliable narration, this paper interpreted the unreliable narration in *William Wilson* from three axes including the facts, the ethics and the perception, which purports to grasp the connotation of the narrator and the complex plurality of the narrator's identity construction at the textual level as a whole.

**Keywords**

Unreliable narration, *William Wilson*, Edgar Allan Poe
1. James Phelan's Unreliable Narration

In contemporary narratology, the rhetorical school of unreliable narration was proposed by Wayne Booth and developed by James Phelan. Phelan's theoretical research and application are more optimistic in terms of the still-improved nature of the study of unreliable narratives (Shen, 2006). The implied author is redefined as the actual or conceived composite of the real author's abilities, character, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other attributes that play an active role in the construction of a specific text. When the narrator's words and actions are consistent with the implied authorship paradigm, the narrator is reliable. Otherwise, the narrator is unreliable. Phelan (2002) argues that unreliable narrator usually perform three corresponding acts during the narrative process, which may occur either simultaneously or sequentially. The unreliable narrator's deviation from the implied author can be expressed in three judgment axes including the fact/event axis, the value/judgment axis, and the knowledge/perception axis, and six subtypes are distinguished including "misreporting" versus "inadequate reporting", "misevaluation" versus "inadequate evaluation" and "misinterpretation" versus "inadequate interpretation". At the same time, based on the effect of distance between the narrator and the reader, Phelan divides unreliable narration into two main types including the distant unreliable narration and the contract unreliable narration. In the distant unreliable narration, the reader realizes adopting the narrator's perspective means distancing from the implied author's perspective, which symbolize the absence of a relationship between the author and the reader. In the contract unreliable narration, the discrepancy among the narrator's report, interpretation and the reader's judgment of these factors has a paradoxical effect in that it reduces the distance between the narrator and the reader (Shang, 2008).

2. The Unreliable Narrative in William Wilson

The story of William Wilson is about the narrator who, unable to bear the admonition of a man with the same name as himself, eventually goes insane and falls into schizophrenia, killing the other person who has the same name as well as himself. The seemingly simple story contains numerous unreliable narrations, such as a strong defense of his own murderous behavior, the narrator's self-judgment when preparing for the murder and the illusion of perception of a man with the same name. The overall absurd plot, combined with Phelan's unreliable narration axis, is manifested mainly in three ways as follows.

2.1 The Questioned Facts: the Appearance of Two William Wilson

The narrator begins by calling himself William Wilson, hiding his real name and claiming that he was born into an imaginative and irascible family, and that he fully adheres to his family's temperament, which is unpredictable and irritable. The implied author opens the story in this way, directly making the implied readers feel the unreliability of the narrator's unreliability on the discursive level and be wary of the subsequent development of the story.

The narrator then claims that there is a student at school who resembles him in appearance and name, and that this "William Wilson" is trying to perfect his physical and psychological imitations, arguing with him in public and admonishing him. The narrator sees these acts as an unreasonable revenge, however, they can only be perceived by him: "Wilson's rebellion was to me a source of the greatest embarrassment; the more so as, in spite of the bravado with which in public I made a point of treating him and his pretensions, I secretly felt that I feared him … He appeared to be destitute alike of the ambition which urged, and of the passionate energy of mind which enabled me to excel" (Poe, 1998, p. 240). The narrator "I" claims that William Wilson tried to exemplify and mock him. Here the narrator presents his feelings as a character in direct quotation, but as a narrator himself, he does not use any authoritative narrative discourses to record what really happened, but only to emphasize his own feelings and to impose his own hallucinations on his classmates. The existence of "William Wilson" makes the reader feel the unreliability of the narrator as a schizophrenic, presenting the anomaly and absurdity of the discourse.

2.2 The Value Fallacies Caused By the Moral Defects: The Murder of William Wilson

The unreliable narratives here are mainly the unreliable judgments both on the value axis and the perception axis according to Phelan's narrative axis. When confronted with William Wilson's admonition and shelter based on the narrator's evil deeds, the narrator admits that William Wilson is a moral man and accepts his advice with ambivalence. On the other hand, the narrator regards this admonition as a disgusting supervision and an intolerable arrogance, and sees him as an eccentric who interferes with him relentlessly and disturbs him with his inflected advice. In fact, the narrator's repeated emphasis on the embarrassment and shadow cast by William Wilson's behavior is a
creditable report, and the problem arises in his value judgment, as he keeps resisting William Wilson's admonition to justify his crimes, which can be seen as a moral flaw.

Finally, the narrator could not bear the pressure brought by William Wilson and made preparations to murder him: "I began to murmur,-to hesitate,-to resist, with the increase of my own firmness, I now began to feel the inspiration of a burning hope, and at length nurtured in my secret thoughts a stern and desperate resolution that I would submit no longer to be enslaved” (1998: 242). Thus, before preparing to murder William Wilson, the narrator describes his murder plan as being inspired by fervent hope, an unwaveringly determination and no longer willing to be enslaved. These descriptions themselves indicate a kind of strong pretended modification by the narrator, and a non-objectivity in the language. At the same time, the narrator is even making such exclamations after a lot of alcoholism, presenting a misreading appreciation that creates a perception of himself, and it is these modifications that expose the narrator's pathological values.

At the time of Wilson's assassination, the narrator claims to have seen a large mirror, and when he walks toward it, he finds: "Thus it appeared, it was my antagonist-it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. Not a thread in all his raiment-not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, mine own” (1998: 246). Here in the murder of William Wilson, the narrator directly shows his own fear and causes insanity with the image in the mirror, so that it dawns on the reader that the narrator is not stabbing another person, but his own schizophrenic self. The perceptually unreliable reading here shifts the reader and the implied author from a distant unreliability to a contractual unreliable narrative, thus triggers a sympathy for William Wilson's misguided moral defects.

2.3 The Lack of Self-awareness: Justifying the Crime

The narrator repeatedly tries to convince the implied readers that the crimes he commits are not due to his own madness, but only to his family's irascible nature and the temptation he bears, which is mainly an unreliable judgment of value and unreliable interpretation of perception as seen in the unfolding of Phelan's narrative axis.

The narrator begins by hiding his true name, claiming to have humiliated the family, and recording the crimes he has committed. It is clear from the text that the narratee is the judge, listening to the narrator's account of his crimes and various excuses. The narrator begins his confession by claiming: "I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy-I had nearly said for the pity -of my fellow men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control" (1998: 224). It is thus clear that such a confession is only superficial, and that the narrator is merely excusing his crimes and trying to gain the expression of sympathy from the recipient, attributing his insane crimes to his own nervous disorder and environmental temptations, which is clearly a perceptually unreliable reading. The narrator does not directly respond to why his actions appear to be insane to others, and distorts his motive for killing as his unwillingness to be enslaved and to submit to the arbitrary will of William Wilson, trying to justify everything, thus creating a false perception of ethics.

3. Conclusion

The unreliable narration in William Wilson has a strong dramatic tension. The superficial irony of the text is deciphered through the unreliability of the narrator's recounting of facts, of values, and of perceptions. By seeing the deeper connotation behind the narrative, it helps to fully grasp the connotation of the narrator and the identity construction of multiple personality expressions, and to appreciate the mechanism of oppression in the real context, with a view to making appropriate value judgments on this literary work.

References


