

A New Historicist Interpretation of Forrest Gump

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Abstract: This paper, taking Forrest Gump as analysis corpus, aims to explore the main themes that are reflected in the novel. From the perspective of new historicism, this paper analyzes the main plots in relation to social, political and cultural context of the United States, through which major themes of anti-racism, anti-war ideas and the realization of American dream get reflected. Combined the theory application of new historicism and the textual analysis of Forrest Gump, this paper attempts to provide a more panoramic research for the further study.

Keywords: textual analysis, new historicism, Forrest Gump

1. Introduction

The paper chooses the full-length novel *Forrest Gump* as corpus. Written by American author Winston Groom in 1986, the novel satirizes the social problems in America through the life of Forrest Gump who is retarded but persistent. It was then adapted into the movie with the same name ten years later, witnessing the rise of anti-intellectual culture in American society, which the American media dubbed "anti-intellectual cinema" in 1990s. Obviously, *Forrest Gump*, as a masterpiece of that period, reflects important events in American socio-history over the decades by depicting the tough life experienced by Forest Gump. To put it another way, as a classic novel in America, *Forrest Gump* is partly the epitome of American history and reconnects the society and Americans.

New historicism, also called "cultural poetic", is now widely used in text analysis. In literary criticism, it sees texts as the product of history and emphasizes full interpretation of texts in terms of political, ideological and cultural factors. As a genre of cultural studies, it relates text with history, mainly focusing on the relationship between literature and life, literature and history, literature and the discourse of power. Moreover, both the textuality of history and the historicity of texts are emphasized in new historicism, which can be seen as a cross-interaction between literature and history.

What's worth noticing is that previous scholars have achieved great success on the research in relation to the theory application and the analysis of *Forrest Gump*. On the one hand, topics like "Translating Gender in the 1980s: A New Historicist Perspective to Translations of Gladys Yang's *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*", "Considering Judith : Explorations in New Historicism--the Afterlife of a Femme Fatale on the Borderline Between Religion and Culture, Theory and Method", "A New Historicist Perspective of Thomas Preston's *Cambyses: A Lamentable Tragedy Mixed Full of Pleasant Mirth*", "A New Historicist Perspective of Thomas Preston's *Cambyses: A Lamentable Tragedy Mixed Full of Pleasant Mirth*", to name just a few, are the reflection of the application of new historicism. On the other hand, themes about *Forrest Gump* are mainly interpreted from such perspectives as linguistics, translation and film studies. Topics may be shown like "A Study on the Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology—A Case Study of English-Chinese Translation of *Forrest Gump*", "A Comparison Between *Forrest Gump* and *Ah Q*", "Verbal Humor Analysis of *Forrest Gump* from the Perspective of Presupposition Theory", "Analysis of Euphemism in Film Language and Lines from a Cognitive Perspective".

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Nevertheless, there is a field that few scholars research into, which is the textual analysis of *Forrest Gump* from the level of new historicism. Based on previous studies and attempting to fill the research gap, this paper combines the theory of new historicism and textual analysis of the novel *Forrest Gump*. It firstly gives a relatively comprehensive introduction to the novel and the theory, and then discusses the main plots in relation to social, political and cultural context of the United States at the time, through which major themes of anti-racism, anti-war ideas and the realization of American dream are reflected. Lastly, it provides a succinct conclusion.

2. Main themes reflected in *Forrest Gump*

As is mentioned above, *Forrest Gump* is a great work in 1990s and even till today, reflecting the history and society of America at that time. With humorous language, it vividly depicts Gump's life story. Despite born with disability, he is a self-made man who eventually finds favor with God and works miracles in many fields. Through those events that are related to American society and history, main themes can be seen and analyzed from the following aspects.

2.1 Anti-racism

Racial discrimination has long been a sensitive and complex issue in American history and the government has always been committed to eliminating it for hundred years. Unfortunately, it remained a serious problem even up to 1980s, the time when the author wrote the novel. At that time, there appeared an increasing rise in racism and one main reason can be used to account for that, which is the policy changes of black men. More specifically, when President Reagan took office in 1981, he made a series of major changes to black policy, of which, the most noticeable and significant one was the budget cuts in black policy spending. In the various forms of welfare spending budgets, the budget enjoyed by blacks was largely reduced. Even the worse, Reagan cut the welfare budgets for black children. To large extent, this has greatly showed the government's tendency of "black genocide" and intensified the conflict of racial discrimination.

As a novel reflecting the cruel reality of American society, *Forrest Gump* distributes this theme indirectly by laying down clues about racism throughout the whole text. Through questions set at the beginning and answers showed in the characters' interactions as the plot develops, the theme of anti-racism gets reflected.

Above all, Gump's mother, as a white woman, names him Forest Gump after Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Southern general during American Civil War, because she views the man as a hero. After the defeat of American Civil War, this so-called hero founded the Three K's Party, a typical racist organization which believed in white supremacy and guarded Anglo-Saxon blood through violence and terror. It can therefore be reckoned that Forrest Gump's mother is a racist at heart, and that Forrest Gump carries the label of racism in his name.

Secondly, the person to whom Forrest Gump first tells his life story is a black woman. It would be rather ridiculous and unimaginable to see such a scenario under the background of racial discrimination and segregation. However, the novel is designed so at the beginning. In its plots, a black woman listens absorbedly to Gump's story about the origin of his name, fostering a strong contrast to the actual reality requirement.

What's followed next is that though Forrest Gump carries the label of racism, many of his later actions are against racism. For instance, he goes to church to pray with black men; he has his finance managed by black men after becoming rich and he makes friends with a black man named Bubba. Bubba's family is virtually a typical representation of the black community. His grandmother and earlier generations all serve as white people's servants. But roles are switched when they are enriched by Forrest Gump: white servants begin to serve Bubba's mother in meals. This is definitely not a simple black-and-white color swap, but a closer look that reveals the gradual change of opposite roles and backgrounds. When Bubba's grandmother serves the white man, the scene mostly happens in a manor house, with a wide lawn and tall oak trees outside the window, indicating the slave life of black men during the plantation period. The latter takes place in a high-tech apartment, with modern high-rise buildings in the distance, which subtly portrays the changing times.

In short, the novel provides a witty and real description of the origin and current situation of racial discrimination in America. Comparing the situation in *Forrest Gump*'s time with that in the old time, it reflects the author's and even the society's desire to gradually eliminate racial discrimination. Incorporating answers into the developing plots, the novel is of great power to give a heavy hit on racial discrimination and make readers re-experience the history of American society at that time.

2.2 Anti-war ideas

Wars always impress people with swords, guns, blood and death. In *Forrest Gump*, wars also shows the brutality

through Gump's experience in Vietnam War. For example, the loss of Lieutenant Dan's legs and the death of Bubba are the manifestations. Under such circumstances, the anti-war organizations show up and rally together, indicating the US government's participation in the Vietnam War and the opposition to cruel wars. The theme of anti-war thought arises in the following details.

First of all, in pre-war period, Gump is an ordinary person who lives the similar life like other ordinary people, being a football team member, graduating from college and so on. What makes him different is the decision to join the army. One day after the graduation ceremony, Gump accidentally meets a man in army uniform and gets a propaganda card which says "EXCELLENT CAREERS FOR EXCELLENT YOUNG MEN." It is right due to the thing that Gump makes his mind to join the army. Surprisingly, Gump is an excellent soldier in the army despite the intellectual disability. Quite contrarily, due to his intellectual factors, Gump is an outstanding soldier because he behaves submissively without any resistance. Even when the instructor questions him loudly at a high volume that could easily provoke resistance from normal people, he simply answers the instructor in a straightforward manner. It is rather detrimental in normal life, but when it comes to the army, it simply turns a winning point. This shows great irony of wars, because wars leave human numb, merely knowing nothing but mechanically fighting for the live-or-dead results.

Then, it comes to war period. In the novel, the first episode about the Vietnam War begins with a dialogue that happens between Jenny and Gump before they rush out to the war. Jenny says "Just if you're ever in trouble, don't be brave, just run, OK? Just run away", which is totally different from what Gump has learned in the army, because what he has learned tells him to bravely kill the enemy. Lucky enough, Gump survives from the crossfires. However, his friend Bubba unfortunately sacrifices even when Gump risks getting shots to save him. What results can these things lead to? One must be their beloved's sadness, desperation and great hate to wars. Therefore, the theme of anti-war thought gets exemplified in the novel.

Another manifestation of anti-war ideas is the depiction of Lieutenant Dan in the Vietnam War. Gump first meets him at the time he is drinking beer with other soldiers. With crates of beer piled up on the ground, one would think it was in a holiday celebration if it wasn't in Vietnam. However, the brutal reality is that they are just taking a short break during the war time and after that they have to devote themselves again to wars that they hate much. Lieutenant Dan knows that he may also die on the battlefield because death at wars is seemingly the fate of his families for generations. However, the words said by Lieutenant Dan reveal that he actually has a strong will to survive, for example, "Do not salute me. There are goddamn snipers all around this area who'd love to grease an officer." and "There is one item of G.I. gear that can be the difference between life and death." In times of peace, no one wants to die for war. Eventually, in the firefight where Bubba loses his life, Gump successfully saves him with the cost of losing a pair of legs. Over years, he has been a cynical man and even begun to beg on street till Gump shows up again and brings his life changes. Obviously, wars bring much torture and this has directly revealed the theme of anti-war ideas.

In summary, the novel, written at the time when the United States was deeply affected by the adverse effects of the Vietnam War, profoundly portrays the brutality of wars and the opposition to wars by depicting the hardship of people like Bubba and Lieutenant Dan who get destroyed by the war.

2.3 The realization of American dream

Besides the themes of anti-war thought and anti-racism, another key theme expressed in the novel is the realization of American dream. This novel, as praised, is a classic of American history, telling the myth of "grasping every moment of life and doing your best to create a miracle", which is exactly the realization of American dream. It also calls for the return of human values and expresses the preciousness of love in human nature. By the description of historical events, it reproduces the American dream and conveys its core value as well. That is to create a prosperous life through courage, perseverance, determination and diligence.

Main characters in the novel, such as Gump, Jenny, Lieutenant Dan and Bubba all experience the life from destruction to rebirth, which indirectly reflects the call for the realization of American Dream. More specifically, what Gump has experienced in his life can be regarded as the manifestation of American dream. The first one worth mentioning is the respect to his mother. He is deeply influenced by his mother since he was born with the name Forrest Gump. Besides, the friendship between he and his comrades is as well as the nature of American dream. In order to realize Bubba's dream of shrimping, he buys a fishing boat and goes to fish. After repeated failures, what makes him upset is not the hardship he has experienced but the worry that he may not fulfill his friend's dream. As for love, his persistence and courage finally win the return of his wife and son. All such aspects as respect to families, sincere friendship and true love reveal the connotation of American dream.

Moreover, it's not hard to find that the core values of American dream nurtured in *Forrest Gump* witness the harmonious development of American society. For one reason, the story of *Forrest Gump* represents the American myth which was broken in the 1960s. And then the hippies unleash a powerful counterculture movement that runs counter to mainstreams, and nearly bring the society to the brink of disintegration. Till the 1980s, the great novel sees the return of mainstream American culture and steady development of the society.

All in all, *Forrest Gump* is the perfect manifestation of American dream. Just as mentioned before, it can be seen as a epitome of American history. It encourages Americans to re-empower the values lost in their humanity and make the society prosper again by persistently pursuing their dreams.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the new historicists believe that the literary text is a peculiar way for writers to interpret human existence on the basis of reality, combined with their own imagination; it is not an endless play of words nor an autonomous sphere separated from history and politics. Therefore, the construction of human consciousness can be observed in the interaction between literature and history, indicating human's understanding towards the real world. In this sense, this work can be simply regarded as an artful combination of literature and history, as well as the integration of culture and society.

Through above analysis, it can be concluded that *Forrest Gump* has been praised as a classic novel, but there are still profound and implicit ideas that needs exploring. Combined the theory application of new historicism and the textual analysis of *Forrest Gump*, this paper provides a more panoramic research for the further study. It analyzes the plots related to social, political and cultural context and discusses main themes reflected in the work, namely anti-war ideas, anti-racism and the realization American dream. Firstly, through the depiction of characters' backgrounds and encounters, the novel repeatedly expresses anti-war attitudes, denounces the U.S. government, and complains about the wounds caused by the Vietnam War. Secondly, through the description of the origin of Gump's name and the later actions Gump behaves, the novel shows great irony to the racial discrimination in American society. Finally, the realization of the American dream is manifested throughout the novel as a warning against the collapse of cultural values in American society at that time.

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