

Challenges Placed by Hypertext Cyber Literature on Traditional Literature Theories

Ahong Zhou

College of Literature and Journalism, Central South University, ChangSha 410083, China;

zahcwp2016@163.com

Abstract

As an emerging literature type, hypertext cyber literature, which depends on hypertext technology and is created and exists only on the Internet, can be deemed as the true cyber literature. From the western countries to China, from creation to theory, hypertext cyber literature has gone through a process of birth and development. It presents different characteristics from traditional literature in terms of text, creation and appreciation. Different from traditional linear texts, the texts in the cyber hypertext literature have a three-dimensional net structure in the cyberspace. It shows various voices of the multimedia. It can be deemed as the technological “playing” of signifier. Distinct from the traditional saying like “Poetry Tells Ambitions” and “Poetry Origins in Emotion”, the motivation of the creation of hypertext cyber literature could be understood as game-playing and psychological compensation. In terms of appreciation, hypertext cyber literature has gone through the transition from “silence” to “response-inviting”, from “pushing” to “pulling”, and from the antagonistic ends of “writer-reader” to “wreader”.

Keywords

hypertext cyber literature, net-structured texts, the “playing” of “signifier”, Response-inviting Structure, “wreader”.

1. Introduction

Hypertext cyber literature is an emerging form of literature. It depends on hypertext technologies (mainly the hyperlink technology), and it can only be created and exists on the Internet, therefore, many scholars deem that hypertext cyber literature is the true cyber literature. As a hybrid of scientific technology and literature, hypertext cyber literature shows different characteristics from those of the traditional literature in terms of texts, creation and appreciation, and is swaying the literal norms that have been existing for thousands of years.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1 The history of the development of Hypertext Cyber Literature

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the maturity of the technology of hypertext and hyperlink, some western writers began to create hypertext cyber literature on the Internet. Michael Joyce is the universally acknowledged as “father of the hypertext novels”. *Afternoon: A Story*, published by Michael Joyce at the First ACM (Association for Computing Machinery) Conference on Hypertext, was considered as the earliest work of hypertext literature. There is a hyperlink at the bottom of each page of the novel. There are all together 951 hyperlinks in the whole story, providing multiple ways of reading for the readers. From then on, more western writers started to create hypertext cyber literature. American writer Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* has hyperlinks in the middle of the sentences, and his *Reagan Library* has timing and random hyperlinks. Mathew Miller’s *Trip* is a hypertext story about two kids trying to find their mother. The text is set as a map of the United States, with links on different locations, which readers can click to choose and read the content. At the same time, many websites which study hypertext, such as Hyperizons, Electronic Literature and Hypertext, and The Electronic Labyrinth emerged. In addition, with the spring up of hypertext writing, many scholars

began their theoretical studies on this new form of literature. For example, J Conklin wrote *Hypertext: An Introduction and Survey* (1978). Hypertext literature and studies are also discussed in university lectures. In the 1990s, American novelist Robert Coover set up a Hypertext Fiction Workshop in Brown University, and Professor Janet Murray gave lectures on “Interactive and Non-linear Fiction” in Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The theoretical works that have attracted wide-range attention include M Joyce’s *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* (1995), I Snyder’s *Hypertext: The Electronic Labyrinth* (1996), S Holtzman’s *Digital Mosaics: The Aesthetics of Cyberspace* (1997), and GP Landow’s *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (2006) and so on.

In Chinese network, Taiwan writers took the first step in the 1990s exploring hypertext cyber literature. For example, Dai Ju (Elea) wrote *Love Letter*, and Xu Wen Wei wrote *Crying in front of Zi Xu Mountain*. Cao Zhilian established a website called “Bitter Persimmon’s World”. And Li Shunxing started a series of studies on hypertext literature. In China Mainland, hypertext cyber literature has a relatively late start, but it is attracting more and more attention. Some literary websites have special columns for interactive novels and some experimenting works of the hypertext literature. Huang Mingfen from Xiamen University carried a systematic study on hypertext cyber literature in his *Hypertext Poetry* (2002). Ouyang Youquan from Central South University carried an in-depth theoretical study on hypertext cyber literature under the cyberspace literature background.

Hypertext cyber literature, with its brand-new form and vitality, is swaying the literary norms that have been existing for more than a thousand years, and deconstructing a series of the “original point” problem traditional literary theories have. If cyber literature has brought a “change to the theoretical field, an overturn to the theoretical concept, and reform to the theoretical system”, then hypertext cyber literature, which is generally acknowledged as the true cyber literature, with no doubt plays the most outstanding role in this literary theoretical reform.

2.2 Different Characteristics of Hypertext Cyber Literature from Those of Traditional Literature

Compared to the traditional literature, hypertext cyber literature has the following three characteristics:

2.2.1 A Three-dimensional Network Structure in the “Saibo” Space

In English, “Cyber” means things that related to computers. With the development and popularization of the Internet in China, the word “saibo” was created in Chinese according to the pronunciation of “cyber”, meaning the same thing. The world of network (cyberspace) is often fashionably called by Chinese scholars as the “saibo space”. The hypertext cyber literature is changing the process of literature creating and the way texts are saved by gradually abandoning writing and printing words on paper and adopting hitting keyboards and “bit jump”, and the way people save literature is changing from using the physical two-dimension hardware to the virtual “saibo space”.

The biggest challenge hypertext cyber literature placed on the traditional literature does not only show by its changing the process of creating the way texts are saved, but also by its creative text structure. Hypertext cyber literature can only be created and exist in the “saibo space”. Different from the common cyber literature, hypertext cyber literature has a three-dimensional network structure. The traditional literature, which is written on the desk, printed by machines, and saved in the paper, shows a one-directional, linear structure. This kind of text once printed, can be put page numbers on every page, from cover to cover. Readers read from the first page to the last. The general cyber literary works also exist in a linear structure; therefore they can be printed out, and can be put on page numbers. However, in creating a hypertext work, writers might put many hyperlinks in some turning point in the story, or in some morphemes in a poem. Readers can choose which to click. Clicking different hyperlinks brings readers to different windows. The hyperlinks are often highlighted with attractive effect. They might be highlighted, be in different colors, fonts and sizes, be flickering, underlined, arrow-added or other special marks, in order to hint and lead the readers to choose different hyperlinks. Hyperlinks can be outside the text or in it. The websites that they are linked

might be an explanation to the text itself, or the hyperlinks might lead the story to a different direction, creating a multi-directed text. The content that a hypertext contains might be many times more than the traditional linear texts or even has an exponential growth. The large amount of “text within the text”, “text in the middle of the text”, and “window of the window” have all together build up a text-linking network. Hypertext cyber literature depends on the Internet, and the hyperlink technology. Hypertexts are bound by its network structure, not having a “close relationship” with printing. They can only exist on the Internet with the hyperlink technology. Without the Internet, hypertext cyber literature immediately loses its technological ground. It is impossible for it to find another fine soil that is suitable for its survival.

2.2.2 Different Voice of Multimedia

According to the traditional art theory, different kinds of art should use different ways and materials to shape an image. For example, dance depends on the body movement, sculpture use various kinds of material and architecture are built with stone. Similarly, literature is defined as the art of language. The fundamental difference from other forms of art is that literature uses words and symbols as its way to shape an image. Maksim Gorky said “the first element of literature is language”. Roland Barthes summarized that “language is the life of literature and the world literature exists. Everything in literature is included in writing.” It is widely acknowledged that literature is an art of language. The indirect way language art creates an image, the wide range and the flexibility literature reflex life, the clearness and depth of expressing one’s mind, are what give the unique charisma to literature and what make literature differ from other art forms [1].

Nowadays, digital media covers every aspect of people’s life, including their literary behavior. In the paper literature, the words and symbols are still playing solo. But in the modern media such as the Internet, movie and television shows, literature is gradually turning into a comprehensive art of pictures, words, and sounds. In cyber literature, videos (pictures, images, photos, animation, etc.) and sounds (music, acoustics, vocal accompaniment and off-screen voice, etc.) incorporate with words ingeniously, and they create art images together. The process of literature combing with multimedia suits the mass’s pursuit of aesthetic freshness, and therefore it is gradually being accepted and acknowledged. Since literature is less dependent on language medium now, it is no longer the art of language. Combining with multimedia and becoming a comprehensive art are already the trend for hypertext cyber literature. In hypertext cyber literature, a link can lead to not only a written text, but also pictures, animations, sounds and etc. Different links form a hypertext system. In the same website, sounds, pictures, animations and so on bring out the best of the words, providing an all-side aesthetic enjoyment to the readers. Being added a series of pictures and acoustic effects, a written text can have a three-dimensional result of idea expression. Combing with multimedia is where the hypertext literature is heading.

2.2.3 “Playing” of Signifier by Technology

Traditional linear text is the elaborate product of author’s conception. From the beginning to the end, traditional linear text has a consistent storyline, whereas hypertext has an intercrossed and extensive network structure. In order to keep the coherence between each link and the text and to make the multi-linear hypertext possible, writers have to do a lot of thinking to build multiple conception and themes. From the text point of view, multiple conceptions mean no conception at all, and multiple themes mean no theme at all. When multiple choices and the elaborated arrangement of multiple reading take a big part of the author’s consideration, the meaning of the text itself is accordingly ignored in a sense. The multiple choices and the frequency of link inserting might lead to a breakage of the meaning, a loose inner structure, a not-corresponding reason and result, and therefore hypertext cannot be extracted out a theme like the traditional literatures. As a result, hypertext literature is difficult to be “signified”. Instead, it has an expansion and the playing of the “signifier”. The multiple linear structure and the multiple choices of hypertext make the “signified” walk off, and the “floating signifier” formed.

The “signified” walked off in the hypertext literature. Reflecting the real world and expressing the emotions of the authors have also faded out from the hypertext cyber literature. Theme, protagonist, clue, beginning, development, climax and ending are all faded out or even faded away. Hypertext cyber literature attaches more importance to the text itself. The network structure of hypertext literature determines that a hypertext does not convey a beforehand designed purpose, because it does not have any purpose at all. If there is a purpose, then the hypertext itself is its purpose. It satisfies with its own text, and will not pay any attention to anything else. The text is its ultimate pursuit and its highest meaning. The text is the thing-in-itself. Outside the text is nothing. Deeply depending on the Internet technology, hypertext cyber literature has the implication of being a purely technological text. In some hypertext creation, the authors might spend more time on considering the technology that applied to the hypertext than on the literature itself.

2.3 The Motive of Creation of Hypertext Literature

Since the ancient time in China, there have been two types of motives of creation of literature works, i.e., “Poetry Tells Ambitions” and “Poetry Origins in Emotion”. “Ambition” and “emotions” are not completely on the contrary, because “ambition” contains “emotion” and “emotion” includes “ambition”. But generally, “telling ambition” is more of a social functional expression for the literary works. For example, *The Prefaces of the Poems of the Maos* says that the function of literature should be “to help coordinate couple relations; to teach filial piety; to help maintain good personal relationships; to educate people; and to change custom”. Cao Pi deemed that articles are “great undertaking for running a country and a big event for eternity”. Bai Juyi encouraged himself “to sing the common people’s problem and hope the emperor would know”. On the other hand, “originating in emotion” attaches more importance to the expression of authors’ inner feelings. For example, in *Wen Xin Diao Long*, Liu Xie said “compose for the emotion’s sake”. Tang Xianzu thought that the creation of drama is due to “a profound emotion coming from somewhere we don’t know”. Wang Fuzhi said “poetry is to express feelings”. For many years, the works of literature have been created for these two purposes.

Now is the digital media age when all kinds of new form of literature emerge. The cyber literature has a theme of itself, a standpoint of various voices, a culture of influencing beliefs, an unloading of the main body. These, in some sense, can be deemed as a more prominent feeling expression of the authors. But it overturns the traditional writing motive of “revealing the ambition”, especially the hypertext cyber literature. Hypertext cyber literature has no consideration for its social functions, or expressing any kind of emotions. A multiple-directed text gives the best example of how hypertext literature destructs the traditional writing motives. Based on the current works of hypertext cyber literature, its writing motives can be categorized into the following two types:

2.3.1 The Saying of Game

The setting of the hyperlinks in the hypertext cyber literature are like those in some online games, in which when the plot turns, different directions are provided for the players to choose and then into a different game and a different end. In this way, players are become more involved in the game and therefore are more attracted to it. Applying this kind of setting into literatures can also get more of readers’ involvement, and can meet the mass’s expectation of aesthetic appreciation. Online games can be saved, and when finding yourself make a wrong choice, you can go back and choose again. Similarly in the reading process of a hypertext cyber literature, if readers find themselves start to lose interest in the text they are reading, they can go back and click another hyperlink. Thus, the hypertext cyber literature is a little bit like a game.

This analysis is based on the similarity of the hyperlink setting and the direction picking in online games. Meanwhile, hypertext cyber literature deconstructs the social responsibility that the traditional literature bear, providing more of an aesthetic freshness for people on a technological sense. The creation of the hypertext cyber literature is not for reflecting real life or bearing social functions, or expressing feelings or emotions. It’s only an online product of the author’s interest and hypertext technology. Many hypertext cyber literature pay more attention to the hyperlink technology

than the value of the story itself, so in a great sense hypertext cyber literature has the meaning of being a game.

2.3.2 The Saying of Psychological Compensation

The traditional text has a self-sufficient linear structure with a consistent and coherent storyline through the whole book. Readers can read from the first page to the last. However, this unidirectional linear text provides no choices and cannot be reversed, so it might give the readers a sense of loss in some cases. In the traditional literatures, readers feel sad for the tragic ending of *A Dream in Red Mansion*, and shed tears for Romeo and Juliet when they both are dead, but they cannot do anything. But in the hypertext cyber literature, this feeling can be made up. If all the classic works are extended into hypertext works, then the readers can decide how the story develops and what should be the ending.

Take the Chinese classic work of literature *A Dream in Red Mansion* as an example. The promise made in their previous life of Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu makes the readers agitated. Baoyu and Daiyu had already fallen in love with each other, but still they tested each other's love, making each other miserable and the readers too. In the novel, the two have never spoken out their true feelings. Their feelings became deeper and deeper as the time went by, but so did their misunderstanding. The only time when Baoyu boldly revealed his feelings is in the thirty-second chapter:

“My good cousin, I was never brave enough to tell you my feeling. Now I dare say it, so that even if I die, I can die with no regret! I am sick because of you. I cannot say anything to anyone. I just hide it. I will never get better, not until when you do, I am afraid. I cannot get you off my head, even in my sleep and in my dreams!” [2]

However, those who read *A Dream in Red Mansion* know that this bold confession was not heard by Lin Daiyu, because when Baoyu said it, she had already walked away. So this love confession was only heard by Xiren whom Baoyu thought was Daiyu in his half-asleep state. This kind of plot leaves an ever-lasting charm to the readers. One would read it for a hundred times without getting bored of it. Most readers, while they admire the genius art skill applied by Cao Xueqin, would think: It would be great if Daiyu hadn't gone away and did hear Baoyu's love confession! What reaction would she give if she heard him? What would happen between the two at that moment there?

Plots like these containing contingency are very frequent in the traditional linear texts. Contingent plot gives the work an ever-lasting charm, but also leaves pity to the readers. Perhaps the impossibility and the irreversibility are the charisma of the linear texts. Classic story makes the readers obsessive. They cannot stop thinking another possibility for the development of the story. However, the immortal works are not that easy to understand, but it is because it is not that easy to understand that people keep thinking about them. This is a kind of happiness of reading, and a kind of pain at the meantime, or even torture. Hypertext cyber literature has hyperlinks which provide the possibility of choosing where the story goes. This undoubtedly is a kind of compensation for the readers. Generally, after reading the one link they choose, most readers would go back to read other links also. Without further discussion whether this multi-directed choices and multiple possibilities of reading would affect the lingering charm of the work, it cannot be denied that it does satisfy the need of multiple reading, and it is a psychological compensation.

In our real life, everyone faces countless of choices in his or her whole life. The life itself has too many accidents and coincidences. An eye contact or a word between two lovers might determine where their relationship would go. A slight difference might lead to a series of dramatic life-changing events. Sometimes a turn-back might determine a whole life. When looking back afterwards, people often feel regretful. However the choices in life cannot be re-chosen. Yet in reading hypertext cyber literature, readers can have the knowledge of different possibilities of how the story goes and how it ends in each hyperlink, and therefore readers can analyze, compare, complain and summarize. In this sense, the hyperlinks in the hypertext cyber literature are not only a psychological compensation, but also an art care for the humanity.

2.4 Appreciation of Hypertext Literature

In terms of appreciation, hypertext cyber literature also shows many differences from the traditional ones. The major differences are as follows:

2.4.1 From “Silence” to “Response-Inviting”

Wolfgang Iser, the representative personage of the Aesthetics of Reception put forward a term called “the response-inviting structure”. It means the “blankness” and the “unambiguous/undefined factors” in the literature invites the readers to apply their imagination and comprehension of art to fill the blanks. This “response-inviting structure” has its ubiquity in all the literary works. The “blankness” and the “unambiguous/undefined factors” in the traditional linear texts also invite the readers to give response. But this kind of response-inviting is based on the meaning of the text. It asks the reader to have his or her own understanding of the meaning of the text. The linear texts have a static and closed structure in the form. The text stays in a silent status while the readers read it. But the “response-inviting structure” of hypertext cyber literature can be found not only in terms of the meaning of the text, but more directly showed in the form of the text itself. If we can say that the traditional literature is the reappearing appreciation of the past time, and the conventional cyber writing is the present appreciation of the current time, then, the response-inviting structure of hypertext cyber literature forms a live appreciation of the disassembled time. For the network structured multi-directional texts, the texts themselves are an ideal “response-inviting structure”. The multi-directional structure of the texts presents an aliveness of appreciation, response-inviting the readers to initiatively get involved and make choices on the direction of the narration.

2.4.2 From “Pushing” to “Pulling”

Nicholas Negroponte said, being digital will change the nature of mass media from a process of pushing bits at people to one of allowing people (or their computers) to pull at them. This is a radical change, because our entire concept of media is one of successive layers of filtering, which reduce information and entertainment to a collection of “top stories” or “best-sellers” to be thrown at different “audiences.” [3] Although he was talking about the relationship of media and communication, the same principle applies to the appreciation of literatures. In the traditional linear texts, the relation between the author and the reader is a “pushing” relation, where the author “gives”, and the reader “takes”. Once the reader begins his or her reading, he or she is in a passive position because he or she can only have the linear storyline that the author gives. However, in the hypertext cyber literature, the multi-directional hyperlinks make it possible for the readers to decide where the story goes based on their interests, personalities, and education. This is an initiative “pulling” process. Changing from “pushing” to “pulling” destructs traditional center position own by the “pusher”, and gives humane care to the readers. It has also changed the way literature diffuses.

2.4.3 From the “Writer-Reader” Binary Antagonism to “wreader”

Hypertext cyber literature makes it possible for the writers and readers to do an actual communication. In some sense, it even makes the boundary between reading and writing disappear. It makes a revolutionary breakthrough not only on the relationship between the creator and the appreciator of the traditional literature, but also on that of the writers and readers of the common cyber literature in a general sense as shown in the following aspects:

First, writer and reader begin some attempts on exchanging each other’s role. After the reader read the hypertext, he or she can totally add some explanatory hyperlinks, or write another plot-choice according to his or her own understanding of the story to the already-existed hyperlinks. In this way, the text of a hypertext becomes bigger and bigger like snowballing. By this mean, the writer and the reader do something more than exchanging and sharing. They have interchanged roles. The reader becomes a writer of some part of the hypertext, while the writer becomes a reader. What’s more, in some interacting hypertexts, every person is a writer of his or her text, but he or she is a reader of the other texts that wrote by other people. Martin E. Rosenberg created a word “wreader” combining “writer” and “reader” to describe this kind of role. “Wreader” in fact erases the traditional binary antagonism of writer and reader.

Second, readers can take part in the writing process in hypertext literature. There are many hyperlinks in hypertext cyber literature. Readers have the option of deciding how the story develops according to his or her personality, preference, tastes, and instant mood by these hyperlinks set in the turns or the key paragraphs. Readers are dragged into the creation of the story. There is no authorship because the story changes according to the reader's choice. Even a same hypertext story presents a different structure and features for different readers. A same reader would create a new story every time he or she reads and makes different choices. Although the reader never get involved in an actual writing with only a click on the mouse, he does integrate his own interests and preferences based on his educational level and cultural attainment. Thus, this kind of reading can be counted as a kind of creating.

From what have been discussed above, hypertext cyber literature has partly blurred the boundary between writing and reading, author and reader. This is no doubt a challenge to the traditional "writer-reader" dichotomy. This active participation of the readers keeps the hypertext story in a "yet-to-be-finished" status forever. As long as the netizens are still wandering in a maze of the non-linear or multi-linear text, the text will forever be "alive" and "active". A hypertext works in incessant interaction can live or grow for dozens of years or for longer time."

3. Conclusion

Hypertext cyber literature, as a new form of literature, has posed many challenges to the traditional literary theories with its new appearance and vigor. It destructs norms in text, writing, appreciating and other aspects of the traditional theories. Currently in the Chinese literature network, hypertext cyber literature is getting more and more attention, and is representing an important direction where the Chinese cyber literature will develop.

Hypertext cyber literature is a brand-new form of literature. However, its creativeness brings much confusion. For example, although a network text is a structural revolution to the linear text, will the multidirectional texts affect the whole text's being meaningful? Does the multimedia damage the unique charm of language? Does the dependence on the technology have an opposite effect on its literary nature? Although hypertext cyber literature changes the traditional passive "pushing" to the active "pulling", "to pull what" is at the end depends on "what the readers can pull", i.e., the choices provided by the hypertext works. Therefore, "pulling" is conditional, and its activeness is limited. So the theory of hypertext cyber literature still faces many problems which wait upon more studies.

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