The Analysis of the Writer-Reader Relationship During the Postmodernism Period Based on Foucault's Panopticism Theory

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Abstract: In the postmodern era, the relationship between readers and authors has undergone significant changes. Specifically, the status of readers has risen relative to that of authors. To explore this issue, this paper will introduce Foucault's panopticism theory and analyze the changing power relationship between readers and authors based on this theory. In the analysis, this paper will explore the similar conditions between panopticism and the reader-writer relationship in the postmodernism era to follow a core logic of that those conditions based on the change of reader-writer relationship at that time, finally lead to some phenomena in terms of literature and its market, especially showing the authors' self-descipline. Besides, this paper will mention some literary works and the literary phenomenon of Meta-narrative from the postmodern era to help enrich the core logic. In conclusion, this paper will systematically analyze the factors leading to the changes in the reading and writing relationship during the postmodern period, how panopticism emerges within this relationship, the resultant self-discipline of authors, and the subsequent impacts of these dynamics.

Keywords: postmodernism, literature, reader-writer power, panopticism, meta-narrative

1. Introduction

Postmodernism, which took place in the 1960s, is an anti-traditional and anti-authority literary and artistic movement. In the postmodernism period, many new artistic concepts and literary and artistic phenomena were born. Because of its proximity in time, postmodernism has had an extremely significant impact on contemporary literature and art, and even to this day, the literary and artistic concepts and works associated with it are continuing to develop. It is, therefore, quite necessary to pay attention to the series of literary phenomena that emerged during the postmodernist period and analyze their impact. Among these, the change in the relationship between the author and the reader is an important literary phenomenon during the postmodernist period. Coinciding with the rapid development of the social economy in the 20th century, the expansion of the capital market, and the improvement of cultural literacy rates, the relationship between readers and authors could not help but change. It is obvious that the status of readers has increased while the author's creation has been affected. This change in power relations has continued to the present day, and the subsequent results are becoming increasingly apparent, such as the author's creation being subject to the constraints of readers or the market. It is very necessary for us to reflect on the trend of literary and artistic

commodification and consider the future direction of literature and art. At present, there is much research on the commodification of literature and art and the current situation in which authors are subject to the capital market, but it is now clear that returning directly to the point at which the relationship between readers and authors changed significantly during the postmodernist period is somewhat lacking. This paper argues that analyzing the specific situation of the relationship between readers and authors from the postmodernist era would be a good starting point. When studying the power issues of some subjects in the postmodernist era, one figure must be mentioned: Michel Foucault. His panoptic gaze theory, which analyzes the changes in power in the modern context, is insightful. Moreover, the paper finds that a considerable part of this theory corresponds to the power relationship between authors and readers in the postmodernist era, where the author is in a subordinate position in the panoptic gaze. Based on this theory, we can intuitively see how the power relationship between readers and authors operates in the postmodernist era and speculate on its causes. In summary, this paper will first introduce Foucault's panoptic gaze theory and cite some postmodernist literary texts to observe the specific ways in which readers and authors exercise power based on this theory. In the analysis process, the paper will also emphasize the meta-narrative, a literary phenomenon of the postmodernist era, to better argue the hierarchical relationship between readers and authors. Finally, the paper will analyze the impact of the changing relationship between readers and authors and make comments.

2. What is Panopticism

2.1. Content

Panopticism is a theory proposed by Michel Foucault to describe a model of disciplinary mechanism, a method by which a subject of power controls those being watched. In this theory, the means of control through power is concretized into a prison or similar structure where the controlled individuals are placed in separate small rooms. The windows of these rooms are one-way, meaning that the regulated can always be observed but cannot confirm whether they are being watched. This ultimately leads the controlled individuals to begin self-disciplining, as they constantly worry about being under surveillance. In short, panopticism describes such a control apparatus.

From a characteristic perspective, it features centripetal visibility, lateral invisibility, non-physicality, constant surveillance, and the differentiation of individuality [1]. These elements form the basis of the power relationship mechanism within panopticism. The key point is that due to these characteristics, this mechanism ultimately leads to self-discipline rather than absolute power suppression. Because as Foucault says, the panoptic surveillance brought about by panopticism can intervene in places where power cannot intervene [1]. It makes people become vigilant because it has persistent, all-seeing, ubiquitous monitoring means [1], and people have to spontaneously pay attention to their own behavior. At the same time, it also weakens the power of those being regulated and prevents them from coordinating collective activities. This leads those being regulated to accept self-regulation, and there is no way to resist.

The biggest connection point between the panoptic surveillance and the reader-writer relationship in the postmodernist era is that, under the influence of various factors, the reader-writer relationship also has the characteristics of panoptic surveillance in the panopticism, making the author subject to supervision and weakening the author's power. A certain mechanism between readers and authors leads to the authors being influenced by a form of disciplinary control in their creative processes. In the relationship between readers and authors, there is no direct control apparatus akin to a prison in physical space, nor is there nominal surveillance and being-watched dynamic, while the relationship between readers and authors in the postmodern period actually exhibits some influences of

panopticism. This helps to explain how the relationship between readers and authors operates in the postmodern period and aids in analyzing how authors develop self-discipline in their creations.

2.2. The Rationale for Using Panopticism to Analyze the Reader-Writer Relationship

Firstly, this paper will elucidate the rationale for using panopticism to analyze the reader-writer relationship in postmodern literature. There are three rationales: temporal alignment, the universality of panopticism, and similar conditions.

2.2.1. Temporal Alignment

Panopticism and postmodern literature coincide in time. The postmodern period flourished in the 1960s, and Foucault was a representative figure at that time. Generally speaking, due to the same economic and social background, postmodern literature shares similarities or connections in essence with other contemporaneous phenomena. Various issues of the time prompted Foucault's reflections, leading to the proposal of panopticism. Thus, the literature of the time is likely to have subtle connections with panopticism. Moreover, in *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault mentions that disciplinary mechanisms began to gradually spread throughout the social body as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, forming a so-called "disciplinary society." The disciplinary network that panopticism refers to increasingly covered the social surface [1]. After two or three centuries of development, literature could hardly remain uninfluenced. Therefore, using panopticism to interpret phenomena in postmodern literature is temporally reasonable.

2.2.2. Universality of Panopticism

Panopticism itself is inherently universal. In Foucault's view, both the model of panopticism and the phenomenon of discipline have the ability to explain various phenomena in society. For the former, he wrote that panopticism, without losing any essential features, is destined to spread throughout the social body, its mission being to become a common function. Regarding the latter, he said that discipline is not synonymous with an institution or an apparatus; it is merely a mechanism of power that can be utilized by various institutions or apparatuses [1]. In other words, after the development of modern and postmodern periods, panopticism and the phenomenon of discipline have become ubiquitous. Thus, using it to explain literary phenomena in the postmodern period is feasible.

Even if the initially assumed locus of panopticism is spatial disciplinary institutions like schools, prisons, and hospitals, it also operates in an abstract sense. For instance, Foucault wrote that public schools should not only cultivate obedient children but also be able to supervise parents, obtaining information about their lifestyles, economic sources, religious attitudes, and moral conditions [1]. Here, the relationship between schools and parents is abstract rather than spatial, as parents are not required to stay in schools. Similarly, the relationship between readers and authors is abstract; there is no real structure that confines authors physically and forces them to write for readers. However, as mentioned earlier, one characteristic of panopticism is "non-physicality," and in the abstract relationship involving reading, writing, thoughts, and spirits, it still functions. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to use it to interpret literature.

2.2.3. Similar Conditions

The reader-writer relationship in the postmodern period shares certain conditions with panopticism. The preconditions that lead to discipline in panopticism, such as centripetal visibility, lateral invisibility, non-physicality, constant surveillance, and the differentiation of individuality, are echoed in the postmodern reader-writer relationship. Authors can see their readers, but readers cannot directly

choose their authors, making authors passive. Readers can constantly surveil authors due to their large numbers and increased knowledge levels, making authors cautious, akin to prisoners fearing inspection. Authors are invisible to each other laterally due to the nature of literature—its uniqueness and the discouragement of excessive borrowing. This isolation fosters competition among authors, weakening their collective strength. Finally, the increase in the number of authors, who are categorized and controlled like commodities, symbolizes the differentiation of individuality, making them controllable. Among these factors, centripetal visibility and constant surveillance prompt authors to self-discipline, lateral invisibility weakens their collective power, and individuality differentiation allows readers to dominate the selection. These conditions place authors in a subordinate position of control.

3. What Leads to Authorial Discipline

Before applying panopticism to observe literature of the postmodern period, it is essential to understand how the relationship between readers and authors has evolved. The central change is that the situation has shifted from "author-centric" to one where the reader is in a more advantageous position, demystifying authorial authority and elevating the public's status. There was a period emphasizing authorial centrism in Western literature and the publishing industry, where readers were merely an economic consideration, existing to acknowledge, purchase, and endorse publications. This perception lasted until the late 19th century [2]. During this time, authors, being scarce figures, had the liberty to express their thoughts freely. In the later modern and postmodern periods, the reader demographic underwent significant changes, including an objective rise in knowledge levels, an increase in numbers, a subjective shift towards individual thinking and a decrease in blind reverence, following the disillusionment of postmodern values. Readers began to prioritize choice. Besides, in the context of capitalist development, they got the power of consume. They were no longer just users of books but also customers of the literary market [3], able to decide whether to pay for literary works and should receive the desired experience after payment. This gave them a higher status within the context of capitalist development, gained consumption power, and gradually seizing discourse power. Conversely, the collective rise in knowledge posed a threat to authors as more individuals capable of writing emerged, increasing competition and diminishing the prominence of individual authors.

In summary, in the postmodern period, the reader's status gradually surpassed that of the author. Concurrently, some subjective and objective factors began to form an environment conducive to panopticism. Key conditions for the formation of panopticism include one-way visibility, constant surveillance, lateral invisibility, and differentiation of individuality. The relationship between authors and readers exhibits one-way visibility: authors cannot accurately select their readers, whereas readers can extensively and precisely choose their authors, making authors passive. Readers possess a constant surveillance function due to their large numbers and heightened awareness of literary errors, leading authors to remain cautious, similar to prisoners fearing inspection. Authors are laterally invisible to each other, a characteristic not driven by the era or readers but by the inherent nature of literature: the uniqueness of art discourages excessive collaboration, promoting solitary efforts and competition, thereby weakening collective authorial strength. Lastly, the differentiation of individuality among authors, categorized like commodities by readers, facilitates control and selection. These factors—centripetal visibility and constant surveillance fostering self-discipline, lateral invisibility diminishing collective authorial power, and individuality differentiation enabling reader control—collectively place authors in a subordinate role of control.

4.   Specific Outcomes Formed

This shift in power relations has led to several phenomena in both the literary and market domains. From the author's perspective, self-discipline arises, leading to increased caution in their creative processes. For instance, the frequent use of meta-narrative in postmodern literature, where the writing process is self-referential within the work, exemplifies this. *In Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator, as the author of the Dresden story, reflects on his aspirations for the book, acknowledges his lack of content, and considers the climax design. He also describes the mundane aspects of an author's work: selling climaxes, thrilling plots, characters, and dialogues to earn a living and using lines to represent storylines and character relationships during drafting [4]. Similarly, in *How to Tell a True War Story*, the author reveals the emotional experiences of writing fiction, where distinguishing between actual events and true stories becomes challenging, often leading to inevitable fabrication. Authors' use of meta-narratives can be seen as a preemptive measure, acknowledging their human fallibility and potential for error, thus breaking the mystique [5]. This technique, unnecessary when few readers understand the writing process, becomes necessary as widespread awareness increases authorial pressure. It appears approachable, respectable, and humorous, avoiding criticism and increasing popularity, thus prevalent in the postmodern period. Essentially, this self-disciplining behavior under panopticism is at play.

From the reader's perspective, panopticism in the literary market stimulates authors' utilitarianism, as avoiding criticism is difficult, but gaining recognition or praise is simple. Merely relying on talent and ideas becomes challenging, making market alignment essential for survival. Consequently, authors produce content favored by readers. This aligns with the disciplinary function mentioned in panopticism, where control aims not to suppress but to harness individuals' value. Observing such goals and authors' compliance in creating desired value for readers indicates the full realization of panopticism in the literary field during the postmodern period.

5.   Impact on Literature

The relationship between reading and writing under panopticism intensifies the utilitarian nature of literature, reinforcing the divide between popular and traditional works gradually shaping the contemporary literary market structure. For the market, utilitarian discipline may lead to commercial prosperity and the flourishing of popular literature, generating substantial revenue. It encourages authors to consciously choose well-defined themes and genres, making the entire literary market inherently orderly. Authors write in ways that are more easily accepted and less prone to criticism, facilitating book selection for readers and evaluation for editors. However, this can also result in the displacement of high-quality works by inferior ones, potentially undermining true artistic value. As Rudyard Kipling noted, bestsellers sometimes do not even deserve to be called books [6]. The aesthetic attribute of literature gives way to commercial attributes [7], potentially leading to a dominant presence of commercially successful yet superficial works, causing severe homogenization of literary content and the neglect of innovative works. Furthermore, traditional media, such as literary journals, have been affected [8]; their circulation began to decline in the late 20th century. Although they retain a certain level of authority and are less scrutinized by readers, leading to a diminished capacity for reader discipline, a lack of satisfaction may reduce their consumption.

For readers, short-term happiness increases as they more frequently read content tailored to their preferences due to their influence on authors. However, the availability of nutritious content may decrease, and the aesthetic tendencies of readers, like those of literature, may become increasingly shallow and fixed. The critical, literariness and substantive qualities of literature significantly diminish [9]. During the postmodern literary period, people enjoyed the various meta-narrative elements in Margaret Atwood's Happy Endings [10], which are undoubtedly classic and interesting.

However, if people focus solely on the entertaining aspects and later authors imitate meta-narrative techniques, leading to their repeated appearance in the continued development of postmodern literature today, other spiritual and substantive elements of literature will be overlooked.

As for the authors, their situation is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, they face increased scrutiny, which may inhibit innovation or render bold innovations less likely to succeed. For many authors, achieving success may conflict with producing high-quality content, prompting them to cater to the literary market by writing purely for commercial purposes. On the other hand, stringent audience expectations may enhance the overall quality and entertainment value of works, as well as their accessibility. Utilizing recognized creative paradigms can also improve the efficiency of literary production. Authors might need to discover new, more advanced writing techniques in the new environment.

6. Conclusion

This paper finds that in the postmodern period, the relationship between readers and authors gradually forms the conditions for panopticism, ultimately leading to self-discipline among authors and market-influenced creative tendencies. This guidance alerts readers, authors, and the market to environmental changes. By establishing the connection between panopticism and the power dynamics in reading and writing, this study facilitates further research into this direction and addresses the resulting issues in the literary field. However, it does not further discuss the future of the literary market under this relationship. Future research can build on this foundation to provide guidance on the current situation.

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