

Aesthetic Implication in Shen Congwen's 'Border Town'

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Abstract: Shen Congwen's novel '*Border Town*' creates a beautiful "Xiangxi World" with strong pastoral sentiment. In addition to narrating natural beauty, human feeling, and human nature beauty, the novel also reveals sadness in beauty, and the interweaving of the ideal world and reality, showing Shen Congwen's aesthetic concept of truth, goodness, and beauty. From the beautiful "Xiangxi World" and the sad in the novel, this paper explores the aesthetic implication of '*Border Town*'. First, the author creates a beautiful "Xiangxi World" by describing the beauty of nature, human feeling, and human nature. The other is a unique aesthetic style through a touch of sadness and introverted creative techniques combined with the beauty of human nature. Through the aesthetic analysis and discussion of Shen Congwen's '*Border Town*', this paper sums up some previous ideas. Also, it puts forward some personal ideas to have a more profound understanding of the aesthetic implication of Border Town.

Keywords: '*Border Town*', "Xiangxi World", beauty of human nature, sorrow of object, sadness

1. Introduction

'*Border Town*' is a novella created by Shen Congwen. This novel has had an important influence on the author himself and even on the whole history of modern Chinese literature. The novel takes "Tea Cave", a small mountain town on the border of western Hunan, as the background. Through beautiful brushwork, it shows readers a quiet and distant mountain town with simple folk customs and creates a "Xiangxi World" with an idyllic sentiment.

As a representative work of Shen Congwen, '*Border Town*' has been concerned and studied by domestic scholars since its publication. Since 2019, there have been more than 450 studies on Border Town, which can be seen that the academic circle pays much attention to Border Town. The main research perspectives include the beauty of human nature, the tragedy of love, the Xiangxi world, aesthetic implications, life consciousness, and more. In addition, there is also the analysis of the novel's characters and the comparative study with other works. Among them, scholars mainly study the aesthetic implication of '*Border Town*' from the aspects of ecological aesthetics, translation aesthetics, and aesthetic comparison. Starting from the perspective of aesthetic implication, this paper is divided into two parts on the basis of previous studies. The two parts demonstrate the two perspectives of "beauty" and "sadness", respectively. The first part is to analyze the content of '*Border Town*' reflecting the beauty of human nature so as to explore the beautiful "Xiangxi world"

created in *'Border Town'*. The second part analyzes the “sad” plot and ending of *'Border Town'*, and analyzes the unique aesthetic style reflected in *'Border Town'*.

2. The Beautiful “Xiangxi World” Created in *'Border Town'*

In Shen Congwen's works, there are different characters with different characteristics. The small mountain town has raised a group of kind and simple people, and they appear one by one in the novel. From their life and communication, we can see a peaceful and harmonious picture of the beautiful Xiangxi. *'Border Town'* is a modern version of *'The Notes of the Peach Garden'*. In *'The Notes of the Peach Garden'*, Tao Yuanming portrays an enchanting paradise away from the hustle and bustle of the city, a combination of the beautiful and the plain. The same is true of *'Border Town'*, which does not have ups and downs in its plot but creates a secluded and quiet “Xiangxi world” through plain narration and slow narrative rhythm. It vividly demonstrates Shen Congwen's aesthetic thoughts of the supreme truth, the supreme goodness, and the supreme beauty and fully demonstrates the beauty of human nature to readers. It is a place where people are honest, true and passionate, where they love and hate, and where there is no impurity in their emotions [1].

Shen Congwen said, “I just want to build Greek temples” [1]. The small temple he built worshipped “humanity”. He created Border Town to express a “beautiful, healthy, and natural life form that is not against humanity” [1]. The beauty of human nature depicted in *'Border Town'* fully reflects the brilliance of human nature. The best embodiment of beauty in *'Border Town'* is the portrayal of the character Cuicui. When Cuicui appears, her appearance and personality characteristics are described. Cuicui has always been in contact with nature. Her skin is tanned, and her eyes reflect the green mountains and rivers. Nature has nurtured and educated her. Cuicui is lively and naive. She is very well-behaved and never does anything cruel. She does not worry or sigh or get angry [2]. The author did not describe the physical features of Cuicui alone but combined them with nature. The beauty of the characters and the beauty of nature set off each other, which can better show the characteristics of beauty.

Shen Congwen successfully created the image of Cuicui, a naive, romantic, sweet and kind girl, which also conforms to his aesthetic thought. Cuicui and nature are harmonious, with nature as one becoming part of it. The name Cuicui comes from the green bamboo in the mountain, which also shows the harmony and unity between man and nature. In addition, when describing Cuicui in the novel, she focuses on the changes in her expression, such as “smiling with pursed lips”, “chuckling”, and “frowning with a wry smile”, which vividly presents the image of an innocent and lively young girl in front of readers. Cuicui reveals the characteristics of beauty both physically and mentally.

The main plot of Border Town is about the love story between Cuicui, Tianbao and Nuosong. This story records the growth process of Cuicui, which reflects the yearning and persistence of a girl who is just in love. Cuicui is not passionately pursuing her crush but with a little shyness and reserve. Days Tianbao and Nuosong, in order to fight for sweetheart, choose the local most traditional way to propose to the song to fight for Cuicui's love. Day Tianbao knows Cuicui's sweetheart is sent after Nuosong, takes the initiative to quit, and helps them. Nuosong sent in the day after an accident and also chose to leave, and Cuicui has been waiting. At the end of the story, it said: “This man may never come back, may come back tomorrow.” The author describes this beautiful love story with delicate descriptions, full of innocence and nature, and the open ending makes this love story a hazier aesthetic feeling.

In addition to the main characters, the author also writes about the frontier prostitutes, showing the beauty of human nature through the prostitutes' own thoughts and the local attitudes towards them: Because of the simple customs of the people in the border areas, even prostitutes are good-natured people. They do not care much about money, and they never feel that doing such things is obscene and shameful. The villagers do not despise or arrange prostitutes because of their identity [2].

The prostitutes in '*Border Town*' are very affectionate, not greedy for money, but also trustworthy and full of sincere emotions, which is more trustworthy than those in the city. In the novel, "Xiangxi World" is a rural area in opposition to the city. The people here are not as complex as the city and are not polluted by the commercialization of the city. There was no conspiracy, no calculation, no equality, and no rank based on occupation or property; they are close to nature and embody the most authentic human condition. What the author emphasizes in the novel is the comfortable state of the "Xiangxi world" without the social organization form of "civilized society" [3].

The "border town" society is an idealized society built on the ideological basis of "all human beings are good", and it is also an idealized society invented by the author by combining reality with "dream", which always embodies the author's aesthetic ideal and social ideal [4]. This beautiful "Xiangxi world" is the author's emotional sustenance, but also the author's beautiful, emotional world; this is a country full of freedom, kindness, and simplicity.

3. The Sadness Contained in the Text of '*Border Town*'

In traditional Chinese literature works, there are few contents and emotions of great sadness and joy, but most of them are introverted aesthetic style, which is related to Confucianism which has been circulating for thousands of years. Confucianism advocates the idea of the mean. Confucius once put forward the idea of "joy but not adultery, sorrow but not hurt", which means happiness without indulgence and sadness without hurting oneself. Therefore, under the influence of this thought, Chinese literature advocates the aesthetic style of beauty in it but simplicity in it, plain but realistic, simple but colourful, mild and orderly, implicit and freehand, advocating restrained catharsis of emotions in literary works [5]. Shen Congwen's '*Border Town*' is also exactly in line with this feature. When expressing sadness in the article, it does not reflect the extreme pain emotion but the subtle sadness.

Here we can mention the concept of "sorrow of object". "Sorrow of object" is an aesthetic style, which is a kind of beautiful taste produced by the agreement between objective objects and subjective feelings, mixed with various emotions such as sorrow, pity and sympathy. Kawabata Yasunari, a Japanese writer, is very good at writing about depression. To be precise, Kawabata Yasunari's depression is a typical Oriental depression -- a beautiful sadness [6]. Moreover, Shen Congwen's '*Border Town*' has a lot in common with it. He not only creates a beautiful "Xiangxi world" but also reveals a touch of sadness and worry about the small mountain town. Shen Congwen's student Wang Zengqi once commented on his works, "Xiangxi is always so quiet in Shen Congwen's works. He is good at describing this quiet poetry with some sounds and colours. In Shen Congwen's books, loneliness has become an aesthetic realm [7]." Therefore, the subtle sadness in '*Border Town*' also belongs to the category of aesthetics.

Shen Congwen is good at finding beauty in all living things, and he believes that beauty is everywhere, which is also reflected in *Border Town*. What the novel wants to express is not only the beautiful "Xiangxi world" but also the beautiful "Xiangxi World" with sadness. The novel is full of beautiful and sad stories. '*Border Town*' begins with the tragic love story of Cuicui's parents, and Cuicui is abandoned by them and picked up by an old boatman. She has been living with her grandfather since childhood, which sets the sad tone of the novel.

A large part of '*Border Town*' is about love, and the love story also forms the narrative clues and structural framework of the novel. From the perspective of the deep meaning of the text, the love of Cuicui and Nuosong is more a symbol of beauty and a symbol of life form [8]. The main part of the whole novel is to describe Cuicui's love story. This love story is very pure, without any impurities, but it reveals a kind of ethereal feeling. In this love story, accompanied by constant departure and death, Grandpa, Tianbao and Nuosong send three people finally leave Cuicui, leaving only Cuicui

waiting; she also grew up overnight, which hides the aesthetic implication of “beautiful sorrow” that is, “sorrow of object”.

The martyrdom of Cuicui’s parents shows that it is the irreconcilable result of the desire for love and the moral conflict, and it also completes the shaping of the beautiful human nature of the character in this irreconcilable conflict. Moreover, Cuicui and Nuosong send their love is also full of frustrations; their life is also full of sad chants [9]. In the novel, the reason for the two love tragedies is actually because of the “kindness of human nature”. A variety of responsibilities have a violent conflict, which leads to the sad ending of the story. Cuicui’s parents, due to a variety of factors such as loyal and kind character, military duty, responsibility to the family, ambiguous feelings, and more, have a conflict and eventually commit suicide. The love story of Cuicui is even more so. The most important cause of this love tragedy is not the social environment, the cultural factor, or the evil of human nature, but the kindness of human nature. The innocent kindness of Cuicui and the deep brotherly love sent by Nuosong are the main causes of the tragedy.

At the end of the novel, the author writes that the collapsed white tower has been restored, but the Nuosong that sings under the moon and haunts Cuicui has yet to return. He may never return, perhaps “tomorrow”. Since modern China, the end of the spread of a long-time “reunion interest” has been hit. Lu Xun said that Chinese people like reunion very much in their hearts, so even if they know that there are defects in life, they are not willing to say it out because after saying it, they will feel bored and even try to make up for this defect [10]. The ending of Shen Congwen’s *‘Border Town’* is also different from the traditional happy ending. It is an open ending and an abrupt ending. The words are grief and sadness, and the persistence and loneliness of Cuicui silently staying in the small mountain town, which makes readers have infinite imagination of Cuicui and this beautiful love story.

Lingering, unexplainable sorrow and wistfulness are always the emotional tone of *‘Border Town’* and also constitute the melancholy emotional atmosphere of the work [8]. The author uses prose culture to incorporate subtle sadness into the novel. In the novel, the death of Grandpa, the estrangement between the two brothers Nuosong and Tianbao, the death of Tianbao and the departure of Nuo reveal the feeling of sadness and reflect the fragility of beauty.

4. Conclusions

The beauty in *‘Border Town’* is the combination of natural beauty and human beauty, as well as the combination of human beauty and sadness. This beautiful “Xiangxi world” is a beautiful ideal world constructed by Shen Congwen, which embodies the author’s good expectations for reality. However, the reality is cruel, unlike the true beauty reflected in the small mountain city; for example, people can no longer find *The Notes of the Peach Garden* at the end of Peach Blossom Land. The beautiful world of “Border Town” can hardly exist in real life. *‘Border Town’* created by Shen Congwen does not simply describe beauty. While showing the beauty of human nature, it does not escape from the narration of reality and sadness. It highlights the aesthetic concept of the ultimate truth, the ultimate goodness and the ultimate beauty, which makes the novel more intense in aesthetic expression.

The aesthetic implication of Shen Congwen’s *‘Border Town’* is mainly reflected in the following two aspects: first, the author creates a beautiful “Xiangxi world” by depicting the beauty of nature, human feeling and human nature; The other is to reflect the unique aesthetic style through a touch of sadness and a more restrained creation technique while combining with beauty.

This paper makes an aesthetic analysis and discussion of Shen Congwen’s *‘Border Town’*, summarizes some previous ideas, and puts forward my own ideas, so as to have a more profound understanding of the aesthetic implications of Border Town. Of course, these are just personal views, which have certain limitations and subjectivity and need to be further improved. Expect more possibilities in the follow-up research, and hope that more people can conduct in-depth research in this field.

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