

# Postmodernist Rewriting of Classics: A Study of Phillip Roth's Metafiction *The Ghost Writer*

Zhan Simin

**Abstract**—Phillip Roth is one of the most outstanding American postmodernist writers, his work *The Ghost Writer* has typical metafiction features, and it was acknowledged as the turning point of his creation from imitating modernism to postmodernism experimental writing [1]. The "Reflexivity" in the novel reflects his profound insight into the relationship between various fictional systems and the real world as well as self-construction. This paper takes Roth's novella, *The Ghost writer*, as an example, and points out the author's endeavor to subvert the narrative models in classic literary works *Anne's Diary* from postmodernism angle, as well as his efforts and thoughts to smash the old Jewish literature residue and create better fiction. It also points out that *The Ghost Writer* not only simply subvert the classics in order to write stories, but also reveal the difficult life of Jewish immigrants between Jewish tradition and American culture and the embarrassing dilemma of young Jewish writers in the cultural gap. Through "intertextuality", *The Ghost Writer* embedded in other texts to enlarge the text background and by way of parody, it combined satire and criticism into literature to impel readers to contemplate literary works, life and reality.

**Index Terms**—Postmodernism, metafiction, parody, reflexivity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Philip Roth is known as "The Living Legend of American Literature", and he is one of the most prominent contemporary writers in the United States. Roth's works are rich in themes and profound in meaning, and often related to the most sensitive and acute issues of contemporary American society, especially Jewish immigrants, such as: the assimilation and special status of Jews in American society, individual struggles and successes, the contradictions between Jewish father and his son, the question of persecution and discrimination against Jews, etc. [2]. The either sharp or negative descriptions of the Jewish people involved in Roth's novel often lead to a lot of controversy, which may also trouble Roth's creation. In Roth's novella, *The Ghost Writer*, the hero Nathan Zuckerman is a promising young writer who spends a night in the home of E.I. Lonoff, an established author whom Zuckerman idolizes. With this story, Roth try to express his bewilderment to the relation of art and life. In *The Ghost Writers*, Roth not only talks about the theory of the novel, but also uses "intertextuality" to enlarge the text world of the novel, and through the parody of *Anne's Diary*, Roth shows the remnants of anti-Semitic persecution to the Jews and the writing dilemma of the young

Jewish writer, which has typical characteristics of metafiction.

The name "metafiction" is recognized in 1970 by the American critic and writer William Gass in his work fiction and the figures of life first, and defines it as "fiction about fiction" [3]. Metafiction is the reflection of novel creation and narrative form. In early 1984, this concept was clearly defined in Patricia Waugh's book as "a self-conscious, capable of directing attention systematically to its man-made state in order to question the relationship between fiction and reality" [4]. She stressed that the metafiction is not only studies the literary fiction itself, but also explores the fictional nature of the world beyond the fictional text. Mark Currie believes that the metafiction is "a kind of boundary discourse, a writing that locates itself in the boundaries of literary fiction and criticism, with a boundary as its theme" [5]. The definition of Currie emphasizes both the literary nature of metafiction and the critical function of metafiction.

A typical feature of postmodernism novels is the secularizing of the classical works, which is to make bold rewriting, remove the sacred appearance, add some popular content, and get the pleasure of the text by canceling the line between the classical text and the popular novel [6]. One of the manifestations of the author's understanding of the uncertainty of the subjective world and the real life and the incomplete of art works in the postmodern novel is that the narrative discourse always puts the limitation of narration (or narrator) into the form of the novel, implying that readers cannot and should not trust authoritative narration. The narration in the novel (Framed narrative structure) strengthens the relationship between consciousness and reality, which seems to be convincing [7]. In *The Ghost Writer*, Roth draw on first person narration, flashback, recollection, fantasy and inner monologue and the subversion of the classic *Anne's Diary*, deeply reflected the interwoven of the virtual world and the real world in the postmodern context of the novel.

## II. SUBVERSION OF THE CLASSIC *DIARY OF ANNE*

Parody is one typical features of metafiction texts. writers subvert the structure or narrative rules of classic works in order to form a special artistic effect. By mocking and distorting the plot and themes of the original text, writers tend to present his own opinion through the newly-formed metafiction works.

In *The Ghost writer*, Nathan Zuckerman recalled the time when he came to visit a prestigious writer E.I. Lonoff. At that time, Zuckerman is not only fascinated by Lonoff's idea

Manuscript received May 10, 2018; revised September 11, 2018.  
Zhan Simin is with Hang Zhou Normal University, China (e-mail: 15990109849@163.com).

toward art and life, but also attracted by a young Jewish woman Amy Bellette and later noticed the abnormal relationships between Lonoff and her.

*The Ghost Writer* is divided into four parts to illustrate Zuckerman's observation on the triangle relationships of Lonoff's family. Through first point of view, Nathan is both the observer and narrator of the story. In the first chapter "Maestro", Zuckerman gets to see the real maestro Lonoff and realizes the contradiction between art and life. In the second chapter "Nathan Dedalus", Zuckerman strayed from home for his writing a novel about the negative image of the Jewish people is unacceptable to his father. The refusal of biological father let Zuckerman long to get the support of his "spiritual father", Lonoff. In the third chapter "Femme Fatale", the author changes the narrative perspective to use the third person point of view to tell the story of Amy. Amy Confided to Lonoff a year ago that she was actually Anne Frank who had left the classic writing, Anne's Diary but not dead in Holocaust, instead, she kept exiling after she was found in attic. In the last chapter "Married to Tolstoy", Lonoff's wife, Hope, who again lost control of her emotions at breakfast the next day, and begged her husband to stop living a silent and moral life, she hoped Lonoff to live with his true love Amy to set this triangle relationship free. But Lonoff insisted on such an abnormal but decent life, and finally Hoop ran away from home in indignation.

In the third chapter of the story, because of Amy's vague past, Zuckerman comes to suspect her as being Anne Frank, living in the United States anonymously and having survived the Holocaust. In the continuation of Anne's story, the original text content was retained but the development of the result was changed, it is a collision between real history and the fictitious novel.

In the continuation, after Anne was brought to the concentration camp by the Nazis and rescued by the British Army and then recovered from a few weeks of coma in a field hospital, she changed her name to Amy Bellette to forget the past. Amy thought she was the only survivor of her family, after living depressively in British foster families for three years, she wrote to Lonoff for help and flew to America. When living in United States, Amy found out in the theater that her diary has been brought to screen and she noticed that her father Otto Frank is still alive from the article in *The New York Times*. However, watching the tears of the Christians, in order to have their pity "in the most pitiless way" (134), Amy chose to not let the world know her living in order to keep Anne's Jewish saint's image. To revenge and hurt the Christians, Amy hid her identity even without informing his father, who had not seen him for years, that he had a daughter alive. It is contradictory to the little Anne who loves her father more than anything else and her father "had taken the place of everything she could no longer have" (115). What's more, suppressing the impulse to contact father, Amy began to treat Lonoff as "father of the spirit" and later grew abnormal feelings toward him. Amy wants to tempt Lonoff and persuades him to abandon his legal wife Hope, thus she is a third party in Lonoff's marriage, this image is again contradictory to pure Anne.

Anne Frank is a classic Jewish saint's image, when reading

novels, readers tend to introduce the existing cultural background knowledge, and naturally double-check the traditional Anne's image to the new Amy's. From the huge difference between the two images, it revealed the persistent influence of the Jewish people's sufferings in anti-Semitism and the limitation of the Jewish Literature in the mainstream American society, and thus we can perceive the plight and efforts of the young Jewish writers. From the perspective of genre, Roth rewrote Anne's Diary as third-person narrated novel; from the perspective of content, Roth add the plots that Anne was caught in the concentration camp and the experience after she was rescued; from the perspective of character development, Roth pull the pure Anne down the altar to human nature stain. Through the subversion of old literary form to content, Roth succeeds in breaking readers' reading expectations, forcing readers to face up to the remnants of classical literary construction and realizing the intertwined relationship between virtual world and real world.

### III. THE FLOW OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Metafiction tends to blur the boundary of the virtual world and the real one, however, we can see the conscious of writer is constantly reminds the readers to notice the transitions. In *The Ghost Writer*, the heroine Nathan Zuckerman is acknowledged as the alter-ego of Phillip Roth. They are both generations of Jewish immigrants, and they are both desperate young Jewish writers that try to figure out a way to develop their writing careers. The struggle that Zuckerman suffers is a mapping of Phillip Roth's, and Zuckerman's consciousness can also be seen as Roth's consideration. In the first-person-narrative story, we can clearly see the protagonist Zuckerman's awareness. The input of the narrator's self-consciousness not only add authenticity to the story, but also led the readers into considerations.

In the second chapter of the book, Zuckerman eavesdropped on Lonoff and Amy's talk and speculated on what has happened. By concentrating on the voices upstairs, Zuckerman made several explanations of the sound and proved his thoughts one by one. Here we can see the flow of Zuckerman's consciousness. Zuckerman enjoyed to fantasize the voice he overhears that represents the actions of Lonoff and Amy, though his imagination was later shattered by reality and he was disappointed by his lack of imagination. When Zuckerman was trying to recognize what has happened upstairs, he enjoyed his made-up stories according to "the originality and excitement of what actually goes on" (169). Zuckerman found interest on the life-based creation but frustrated by the fact that he is unable to "invent as presumptuously as real life" (167), this also reflects Roth's pity.

The continuation of Anne's diary was admitted to be a fiction in the last chapter, Amy told Zuckerman directly that she has not been through the war and she is unfamiliar with Anne's story. Thus the continuation is more like Zuckerman's imagination, he is actually the playwright of the

parody.

In this play, Zuckerman made a good explanation for Anne's survival from the Holocaust and her changing name for Amy Bellette--she wants to be far enough away from what she needs to forget. The name Amy Bellette is quoted from the book *Little Woman*. Amy in the book is a strong woman who "wants to be a great artist and make great efforts for the goal, besides, she will not abandon her artistic pursuit when she is facing setbacks, ridicules or family forces" [8]. This quoted Amy's image is similar to Zuckerman who is pursuing Jewish literature under the pressure and objection from his family. Nevertheless, Amy Bellette, the heroine of the continuation of *Anne's Diary*, breaks the old image of meek Anne Frank, become rebellious and ambitious, and her life journey is just like Nathan Zuckerman. She hides her name and identity only to accomplish her revenge, she involves in her teacher Lonoff's family and attempts to make up for her lack of love. Amy Bellette exiled herself from her birthplace, and she hides her identity because of her ambition of keeping the artistic effect of the act that narrates old Anne Frank's story, in which the character Anne's death let the others feel guilt for the persecution of Jewish community. To keep the secret, Amy cannot reunite with her father. The same as Amy Bellette, Zuckerman cannot win his father's support as long as he insist on his choice of creation, they both suffered from physically and spiritually exile and looking for comfort from Lonoff. As Amy Bellette mirrors Zuckerman, the action of subverting the traditional image of Anne in the fantasy may also reflect Zuckerman's desire to break the traditional shackles. Zuckerman's consciousness in the fantasy revealed the lose of faith in his continuation and repeatedly challenged the authenticity of this fictional illusion.

When Amy announced to Lonoff that she was Anne, Zuckerman pointed out the less convincing part of Amy's story. The first one is how did Amy survived Holocaust alone. Later Zuckerman explained that the man who has seen Anne's die of typhoid may have confused her with her sister. Then Zuckerman again questioned Amy's not connected her family, and again defended that "Would a weak sixteen-year-old girl undertake a journey requiring money, visas—requiring hope—only to learn at the other end that she was as lost and alone as she feared? (114). After that, Zuckerman revealed the contradictions of the story without proper solution, such as why didn't Amy through contact father the magazine to deepen the story fictional narrative. Finally Zuckerman even openly admit that the story of beauty is fictitious.

In *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan Zuckerman is both the narrator and the observer. Therefore, Zuckerman present his imagination and knowledge to form the fictional world consciously. By picturing the conversation between Lonoff and Amy, Zuckerman points out the importance of originality in work creations. Besides, Zuckerman project his pursuit on Amy in the fantasy to let the imagined one break traditional rules. The rebel new Amy's intransigence also shows Roth's rejection of compromise. In the narration, Zuckerman also points out the less convincing part of his fantasy on purpose, and this adds more flavour to the connections of virtual and

real worlds.

#### IV. CONFLICTS BETWEEN ART AND LIFE

Among the generations of Jewish immigrants, Young Jewish writers are facing even harder dilemma. Trapped by traditional Jewish ethics and on the contrary inspired by modern American education, the young Jewish writers find their literary creations are unacceptable to the Jewish media. As a result, art and life seems so impossible to co-exist that the writers have to make a choice between their art evaluation and life harmony. However, Phillip Roth is clearly not a supporter of this idea, and to make a good explanation, beside of the burlesque of the classic *Anne's Diary* in *The Ghost Writer*, Phillip Roth also try to discuss the notion of writing in the text.

The conflict images of Amy Bellette and Anne Frank in the third chapter also reflect the confrontation between life and art. Anne Frank was the perfect saintly saints, her image had a wonderful artistic effect, countless people in the theater shed tears for her story, while Amy Bellette is just a fragile girl who is suffering from the trauma of holocaust and thus shows the dark side of her character. Considering the image of the "solitary girl" who survived the war but lost the connection of her family, Amy's wandering and struggling match the reality more. The conversion of old Anne and new Amy's images show Roth's considerations of art and life.

As we have mentioned above, we can held that the Amy in the fantasy mirrors Zuckerman the heroine's doings. New Amy abandoned her normal life to accomplish her art purchase and she succeed. Zuckerman shared different opinion toward literary creation with his family. When Zuckerman chooses to carry on his idea of artistic creation, his life pattern is about to be disrupted. Zuckerman makes a first step in his writing career and get to meet his psychological supervisor Lonoff on the expense of his original life, and this is just the beginning of his choice.

However, Roth did not arrange a happy ending to the rebel new Amy. After hiding identity and exiling, Amy only managed to interrupt into her teacher Lonoff's marriage, which is also unacknowledged by the other side. Amy is actually living an unsatisfying life after her choice, and this is maybe the same to Zuckerman. Zuckerman admits the cost of losing his family's support to make better writing creations, but he is also attracted by Amy's made-up identity Anne and considers that marrying the saint Anne can erase his guilt of writing wrong text in his family's eyes. That's to say, life is eventually inseparable even when it is contradict to art choices.

In *The Ghost Writer*, by presenting the different images of two renowned writers that Zuckerman met in his path of scholarship, Roth describes the thoughts of his alter ego--Nathan Zuckerman. In the book, Zuckerman has studied from two renowned writers — Emanuel Isidore Lonoff and Felix Abravanel, and this two writers have different attitudes toward art and life in the novel.

Lonoff was a famous writer of great artistic attainments, but Zuckerman's first impression toward him was "E. I. Lonoff looked more like the local superintendent of schools than the region's most original storyteller since Melville and Hawthorne" (4). For Lonoff, life is isolated from art, he even refuse to expose his photos to the public to not let the reader connect him with his work. Lonoff's writing daily was dull, but it seemed to be the whole of his life, he said: "I turn sentences around. That's my life." (16) In Lonoff's view, he writes only from his own imagination and has nothing to do with life. Lonoff immersed himself in his writing career, even when going out for a walk with his wife Hope, he would feel anxiety and pay attention to his watch or his wrist frequently. In the fourth chapter, Hope said to Amy before he left home: "There is his religion of art, my young successor: rejecting life! Not living is what he makes his beautiful fiction out of" (152). Lonoff devoted himself for writing all day and thus disconnected with the nature around him. For three decades, Lonoff deliberately blurred the boundary between literary creation and life, which led to his contradictory views on the relationship between the two. In face of Zuckerman's worship, Lonoff thought that to be a great writer, he had to abandon the fun of ordinary life, and on the other hand, he admonished Zuckerman to be careful to life choices instead of acting like him or "all the works of thirty years are only illusions" (27).

Felix Abravanel, the other renowned writer that Nathan met three years ago in his last year college, is on the other hand different than Lonoff. He enjoys being the centre of attention. In the lectures at the University of Chicago, Felix's photos show an arrogant look, he wore expensively and he is high-profile with his girlfriend in the crowd shuttle. Instead of sitting around typewriter all day like Lonoff, Felix skillfully participated in various social activities. To Zuckerman, Felix is an observer, he engaged life materials to his work—"the ardor of those books, composed in the sunny stillness of his California canyon and seething with unbuttoned and aggressive innocence, seemed to have little to do with the author himself when he came coolly out into the fallen world he'd been so ardent about down in the canyon" (52).

Lonoff is a negative writer and refuse to connect life with art, while Felix actively enter the society and link the other's life with art creation, although he serves himself more like an observer rather than a participator. The two of the writers have taken a different attitude towards life, but they both haven't truly participated in life, their fiction arts has a common characteristic--they only give the reader what they want to give rather than reflect the true feelings of their own life. As for how readers will look at the content of the novel, Zuckerman's father firmly believes that "what people read is not the art--they read the person" (82). In fact, life always provide material for artistic creation, even Lonoff who refuse to connect life to art, wrote life is embarrassing according to his life experience.

However, as a still young and naive writer, Zuckerman choose to live exactly like Lonoff regardless of thinking Lonoff's life dilemma. For him, Art is an organic choice of real life rather than mere imitation and misappropriation. The content, plot and characterization of the novel are determined

by the writer's rational and meticulous thinking. That is why Zuckerman refused his family's idea of letting him write more about the positive side of Jewish community instead of the negative side, and thought "that's not the reason for this novel" (78). Zuckerman's devoting to writing career and ignoring his gradual alienation with his Jewish family showed that Zuckerman is pursuing for art's presentation but abandoning his life. Roth actually presented his idea of life and art by the words of Zuckerman's father that writing is the creation of art, but life is the fertile soil of art and people read life on art. Thus, it can be predict that Zuckerman may also have to face the struggle between life and art in his later writing career years.

## V. CONCLUSION

While pursuing realism, novel subverts the creation principle of realism literature, constructs the illusion and finally collapses it in order to make the reader realize that the novel is not a facsimile of reality, but merely a story written by the writer [9]. *The Ghost Writer* is the first book of Zuckerman series, and it also narrates the harsh reality that young Jewish writers begin to notice. The heroine Nathan Zuckerman shares a lot of similarities with the writer Phillip Roth, they are both ambitious Jewish writers and they are both suffering disagreements. However, we will not treat the novel as Roth's autobiography but rather take Zuckerman as one of Roth's speaker.

That's the effect of metafiction. Considering Anne is a classic character in literature and Amy is a living man in life, Amy's hard choice of whether to expose her identity in the fantasy is also Zuckerman's struggle toward life and art. The parody of classic novel shows Zuckerman's rebel spirit and his determination in carrying out his dream. The permanent debate of choice between art and life was exemplified through Lonoff and Abravanel's life and again being questioned in Zuckerman's fantasy. And the influx of the author's self-consciousness in *The Ghost Writers* makes the entanglement of the virtual world and the real world more clearly displayed in front of the readers. Through parody, intertextuality and the discussion of novel theory in the book, Roth reveals the dilemma of young Jewish writers and the enduring trauma of the post-war Jewish people.

## REFERENCES

- [1] "A tentative study on the changing of the creative technique of Philip Roth-Huang Tiechi," *the Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2009.
- [2] F. Lu, "Criticism on Phillip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*," *Literature, History, Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 33-37, 1980.
- [3] G. William, *Fiction and the Figures of Life [M]*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 24-25, 1970.
- [4] P. Waugh, *Metafiction [M]*, London and New York: Rout- ledge, vol. 2, 2013.
- [5] M. Currie, *Metafiction [M]*, London and New York: Longman, vol. 2, 1995.
- [6] Liu W. S., "The postmodern rewriting of *Anne's Diary* in *The Ghost Writer*," *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, vol. 4, pp. 56-60, 2005.
- [7] M. H. Liu, "On the epistemological root of self-consciousness in post-modern novels," *Journal of Yangzhou University: Humanities and Social Sciences Edition*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 72-75, 2009.

- [8] Y. Lin, *Commentary on the Writing Features of Little woman: Times*, 2011.
- [9] B. Huang, "A self-portrait of a Jewish writer [J]," *AnHui Literature: The Second Half of the Month*, vol. 9, pp. 109-110, 2008.



**Zhan Simin** was born in August 11, 1995, in HangZhou ZheJiang Province, People's Republic of China. Post-graduate student in HangZhou Normal University, master's degree of English literature will be earned in 2019.

Miss Zhan is also a supply teacher working for the art and oversea department of HangZhou Normal University.

She has already published some works, such as, Zhan Simin. Ghost, Silence and Doubleness: Reading into the "Uncanny" in *The Woman Warrior* [J]. *Overseas English*, vol. 09, pp. 188-190, 2018.

Zhan Simin. Gracefulness and Nobleness--Comparisons Between Chinese and Western Tragic Aesthetics [J]. *Business Stories*, vol. 3, p. 176, 2017.