

Study of the Fragmented Structure in *Oracle Night* as a Metafiction

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Abstract—Paul Auster is one of America's most inventive and original postmodernist writers, whose novels have received worldwide popularity. His new piece *Oracle Night* was written in 2003 when the literary postmodernism has become a prominent literary tendency and when metafiction has been a typically postmodernist writing model. This thesis aims to study metafictional structural features of Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*, which has not been given due critical attention to both in China and in foreign countries. Based on detailed textual analysis, the study contends that *Oracle Night* holds the structural feature as a metafiction by attempting to explore the representative one, namely, the Fragmented Structure exploited in this novel. The author of the thesis illustrates fragmented structure in the following aspects, that is, Fragmentation of Plots, Fragmentation of time and space, Fragmentation of characters, etc. Lastly, she analyzes the function of Fragmented structure.

Index Terms— Paul Auster, Metafiction, fragmentation, functions

I. INTRODUCTION

The author of the thesis has found that *Oracle Night* should be a better work to reveal Auster's talent as an experimental writer for his application of the metafictional technique. After researching intensively into *Oracle Night*, the author of the thesis sides with the conclusion that *Oracle Night* is a metafiction, needing more profound, academic and detailed study and analysis. The present thesis aims to illustrate the novel from the aspect of narrative pattern of metafiction.

First of all, *Oracle Night* moulds a protagonist as a writer who creates stories. The writer is Sidney Orr, 34 years old, semi-recovered from a never-quite-specified, nearly-fatal illness, whose will to write has gone watery until he buys an exotic notebook in a stationery store in his Brooklyn neighborhood. The instant this notebook is purchased, stories begin to proliferate, many of which in the footnotes crop up from the bottom of the pages with still more stories, an entire luxuriant jungle of narratives. Orr starts writing a novel in the notebook about an editor with a resemblance to Orr himself who discovers a long-lost novel. Orr's own story unfurls in various complicated ways. There is a screenplay about time travel. There is another older writer, a mentor of Orr's, with stories of his own. Orr is endlessly dissolving into other characters and other stories, not sure whether he is writing a book already written.

In the second place, other stories happening at different levels are within the basic story. As the novel indicates, it consists of several stories. In a novel of just over 200 pages, we read such a great pile of stories, detailedly, stories about Sidney Orr, Nick, Flagg, Eva, Grace, John Trause, Jacob, Edward, and the time machine. *Oracle Night* is multi-layered, with story wrapped within story, each story somehow interlinked with the next so that the multitude of fictions chime together in unexpected ways, investing the whole with an almost choral quality, even if that quality can be cacophonous and disturbing. All the stories actually happen at the same time. Voice competes with voice, character with character, and all is so tightly controlled and so technically accomplished that the reader, taken deeply within the fiction, cannot discern which part of the novel is fictional and which part is of reality. Finally, the reader loses the sense that it is indeed just a fiction.

From the perspective of structure, *Oracle Night* consists of many stories, and the relationship between the seven stories is not necessarily connected with each other. Though they only work as fragments, they help to integrate the whole story with certain techniques. And from the perspective of structure, it is called Fragmented Structure of metafiction.

Metafiction is a mode of writing within a broader cultural movement often referred to as postmodernism. As Patricia Waugh puts it,

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also

explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.

If a metafiction contains commentary discourses, fragmented collage and random sequences of time and place, the overall structure must be broken, so fragmented structure comes into being. Metafictional writers, quite concerned with the discontinuity of the process of narration, often break the convention of narrative continuity, linearity, or the traditional ordering of discourses by writing their novels in short sections, by suspending tradition, and by using short paragraphs, capitalized headings, diagrams, numerals, mathematical signs and peculiar drawings, epigraphs, and footnotes.

In metafiction, the concept of story, plot and character becomes vaguer and vaguer, and the form seems to become the most important thing. Thus, content is made inferior to its form. As a result, what the reader can anticipate from metafictional writing is nothing but the lack of a unifying theme, structural collapse, scattered segments, and fragmented characters.

"Fragmented" narration is a kind of narrative mode, which indicates that this kind of narration is made up by several minor narrative fragments. It can be traced back to John Dos Passos' fiction in the 1930s. The term "fragment" is borrowed from the work of Jacob Korg's *Language in Modern Literature*. The nature of "fragmented" narration is incoherent and eccentric, which breaks the structure of continuity, linearity, or the traditional ordering of discourses. To put it more concretely, "fragments" here refer to several irrelevant short plots belonging to different literary genres. And within one novel, these plots are patched together just like a hodgepodge. Metafictionalists often break the convention of narrative by writing their novels in short sections and by using short paragraphs, capitalized headings, diagrams, numerals, mathematical signs and peculiar drawings, epigraphs and footnotes. Such seemingly disconnected fragments as everyday scene, newspaper articles and characters are combined together, constructing an interconnected unity aesthetically impressive to the reader. "No story is related in them. The content of a fragmented text may be anything: assertions about things in general, discussions between actors, descriptions, etc." (Bal, 1986, p60) So, fragmented narratives usually produce an unstable and disintegrated image in the reader's mind, which indicates that the postmodern world is also in disorder.

In order to highlight the metafictional features of a novel, the creator deliberately applies Fragmented Structure to disclose the fragmentation of the contents and the story structure and characters of the novel. Paul Auster exploits fragmented narrative to deconstruct the traditional meaning and to overthrow the traditional literary mode. This chapter emphasizes such aspects as the text expression of fragments, and the internal relations behind these fragments to uncover the special charm of the art in *Oracle Night*. With no principle of central organization or authorial voice to give meaning to events, the narrative's logical sequence is disrupted. In the disjointed world of Paul Auster, each fragment exists as a separate unit. With no causal order to link them together, the fragments are ruled by laws of random nature and unpredictable chance.

II. EMBODIMENT OF FRAGMENTED STRUCTURE

Metafiction differs from traditional novels in that the latter is usually delivered in a logical and orderly way. The narrator often offers comments on character and events, and reflects upon the significance of the story.¹ So readers can easily follow what the narrator is narrating. However, in metafiction, whether the narrator is omniscient or not, readers cannot be sure whether the narrator is reliable or unreliable. Sometimes, he allows some brief digressive essays interrupting the narrative, and produces fragments of several kinds. Therefore, the plotting process of the novel could be disturbed intentionally to distract readers' attention and judgment; characters within can be blurred deliberately and finally turn out to be totally abstract and flat; the temporal distortion and spatial form would be applied to associated their unique experiences of their own world in that time and space in worldly reality is smashed to pieces. Main features of metafictionality in this respect are exploited to express the dissociated reality of the world.

A. Fragmentation of Plots

Plot has been defined as the sequence of incidents or events, of which a story is composed, and some of which can be described as being key moments in the narrative as an array of events. Clearly, plot is not merely a stringing of events, but these events must be of some significance. Also, the events must have a connection to each other, and as a whole, should be relatively coherent.

To Leitch, there can be stories without plots. A story may be there even if there is no causal or successive sequence of events. The claim that a story can exist without plot depends, of course, on one's definition of plot. Leitch (1986) has a problem-solving definition: plot is the series of actions which lead to an end, or more elegantly, it is the "image of human experience as a series of rational actions with a necessitous end" (p. 130). Leitch's definition thus regards plots as not existing in stories with irrational actions, or those which contain little or no action. Thus, plots do not exist in some modern or post-modern narratives for him. *Oracle Night*, as a metafiction that belongs to postmodern narratives, contains a series of irrational, incompact and irrelevant plots. We can hardly feel its integrity and continuity, and sometimes the plots may be absent in the whole story. The so-called "story" is just a very general skeleton of the simple

¹ Zhang Yuanyuan mentions three main narrative features of metafictionality, that is, narrative uncertainty in characters, narrative uncertainty in plot, and narrative uncertainty in theme (Zhang Yuanyuan, "Analysis of the Metafictionality in *Lolita*", 2008).

figures or the combination of several unattached scenes. The whole narration is just free-flowing and discretionarily pasting of some slices of life. In this respect, we can say that there is no integrated story in a novel, and the development of the plots is becoming blurred. The manifestation of the novel comprises only some detailed information and some narrative segments.

We may note here that although in real life, events may follow one another in a haphazard or incoherent sequence; writers of traditional writing demand some kind of probable sequence when it comes to stories. The metafictionalists hold that the coherent plots that are found in traditional novels are not the true features of the “reality.” As Patricia Waugh (1984) states, “In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly written.” (p. 18) The worldly reality is not an orderly whole but fragments of mess; in other words, the fictional world in a novel is just as fragmented as the reality and the author should not bother to apply logical construction and art layouts to it. Therefore, we cannot find integrated storyline in a metafiction, with several parts of the novel present arbitrarily with intermittent contents and stories of different literary styles at different length.

In *Oracle Night*, fragments pervade the whole novel, to name a few, Sidney’s falling ill and becoming handicapped, his going into a paper palace whose manager is a Chinese named M. R. Chang, whose behavior is irrelevant to the development of the story; the story of Bowen’s elopement and silent death without notice; the story of 3-D viewer with Richard; the story of John’s son; the story about Sara and her grandma’s novel—*Oracle Night*, the story of the Time Machine, and so on. Among these narratives, only a few of them are connected together by the writer in the novel. Most of these stories are just like unmindful talks and the author piles the irrelevant things together without telling the intrinsic relationships between and among. All these accomplish the fragmented structure in general. Among them, the story of the 3-D viewer in Chapter 3 just makes the point and the 3-D pictures within are so vivid that when Richard appreciates the pictures, he feels that “thirty years of his life were erased.” When he sees the figures that have passed away, he feels as if they were still alive. The 3-D viewer may be that kind of holographic imaging that we once learnt from physics. No matter how fragmentary the photographic plates may become, we can obtain an overall panorama, which is among Auster’s features of fragmented notion.

Story line, or story structure, is the skeleton of a novel, which, as an important factor, plays a decisive role in the outcome of a novel. Different structures may determine different story patterns. In traditional writing, the structure often applies linear time sequence and strong causality relations to organize an integrated plot. On the basis of plots, the creator decides the structure of the novel. Along with the change of conception of novel creation, the structure of novels changes dramatically, especially metafiction.

Fragmented narrative causes the deformity of structure, which makes the novel lack integrated plots and a constant character. What’s more, readers cannot find an integrated structure often seen in traditional writing. Metafictionalists hold that reality needs to be recreated out of fragments, and readers are asked to resist authoritarian power of the work and to participate in reconstructing a complete story actively from fragmented texts in presence of them. In *Oracle Night*, some of the important plots are omitted, so readers are compelled to compose the process of the novel themselves to build a coherent world.

Auster often puts some irrelevant plots together, which makes the reader’s thought blocked up. That is to say, when the reader falls deep into the narration, the narration suddenly breaks off. Another plot which intrudes in is often irrelevant to the previous one, without any links between the plots, so the reader’s thought chain of the former reading is interrupted suddenly.

In regard to the integral structure designation, Auster removes the title of each chapter. There is no sequence number or heading, and each chapter is divided only with one line separated from the other. All these make the novel an integration of piled fragments together.

In terms of literary style, we may say that Auster has blurred the boundary of different literary styles and made *Oracle Night* an art of multi-style, or we can say it is “genre hybridization.” In *Oracle Night*, Auster constantly inserts some historical facts, reports, fictions, footnotes, letter, and the like, into the process of narration. Such reports, stories from a contemporary writer or a poet, or citations from historical documents and newspapers at that time provide first-hand information about science, literature, philosophy or social conditions of that period. They offer a commentary on the age from within its own perspective. In *Oracle Night*, the author inserts into the novel a science fiction about Time Machine, a picture of telephone number list of 1937/38, a news report “BORN IN A TOILET, BABY DISCARDED”, and a letter to Sidney from John Trause.

Take the picture of telephone number list of 1937/38 for an example, the insertion of which is to help with the accomplishment of fragmented narration. By applying the telephone number list of 1937/38, the continuity of the novel is broken up. Its sudden appearance in the novel receives nicer visual effect. Additionally, the telephone number list of 1937/38 makes the fiction a “real” one. The reader may reckon where these numbers come from. Therefore, the intuitionistic fragmentation of picture helps to polish the narration in a vivid way; meanwhile, it breaks up the narration thoroughly.

What’s more, several unnecessarily related stories are often pasted in the same novel, and there are no necessary logical connections within. In *Oracle Night*, there are altogether seven stories pasted together, some of which are real, while others are fictional. All the stories just happen in relatively different time and space, which, however, are

connected and related to each other by characters' behaviors. Fragments in narrative are carried out on the basis of different purpose and utility, though they seem disorganized and unsystematic. Actually, they are not so elusory as they seem to be. At the superficial level, they seem to be scattered pell-mell over the whole novel, but in fact, they are serialized with a storyline to work as a whole.

B. Fragmentation of Time and Space

Indisputably, the postmodernist city life is an aimless, disorderly one in which people are besieged by a great sense of confusion, despair, losing control of everything, both physically and spiritually. In order to reify the social reality, Auster creatively takes advantage of metafictional techniques by breaking sequential order of time and space to achieve unusual aesthetic effects.

"To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story." (Genette, 1980, p. 35) Temporal order can be divided into two kinds, that is, anachrony order and achrony order.

In traditional narrative, the stories are developed in time sequence, which is called anachrony order. Stories of the same level happening at different time and space are placed in the narrating process linearly. As a result, the flexibility of narration is limited to a large extent. Though such narrative strokes as flashback, interposed narration, and supplementary narration are often adopted in traditional narrative to demonstrate its multi-colored text, the linear narrative chain remains unchanged as a whole, for readers can find out the development of the story through the time clues.

In *Oracle Night*, the main temporal order is the achrony order, which means "A sequence of temporally unordered events" (Genette, 1980, p. 84). The novelist combines stories happening at different time and in different places into the same novel, creating a temporal fragmented structure. The traditional temporal connection between chapters is broken up, so is the temporal order within a chapter. Not only within the major narrative loop, but also the minor narrative loop as well, past and present have been melted together. The narrative whole intends not to depict how the attempted bombing attack is prepared and executed. Instead, it manages to elaborate on revealing latent relations between those characters involved and how these relations activate the story. Metafictional writing reframes the narrative strategy, subverting the linear narrative chain and leading the narrative to a domain where narrative elements assemble and are pasted arbitrarily.

Auster's *Oracle Night* employs the distorted time concept to break the linear development of time and build a narrative figure based on the fragmentation of temporal order. Auster wants to lay out the background information of the writing, but he deliberately reverses the time order. If we read the novel in a leaping way, we can still grasp the plot of the novel, for the novel provides no real beginning or ending. And any stories of mental involvement can happen either beforehand or afterwards. *Oracle Night* begins with buying a blue Portuguese notebook on the "morning of September 18, 1982". (p. 2) But in Footnote 1, Auster states that "twenty years have elapsed since that morning, and a fair amount of what we said to each other (M. R. Chang) has been lost". (p. 8) When creating a protagonist according to his wife Grace within the first-degree narrative, he points out in Footnote 3 that "I happened to meet Grace in a publisher's office as well, which might explain why I choose to give Bowen the job I did. It was January 1979, not long after I had finished my second novel [...]" (p. 15) Then the author turns back to the night of "September 18, 1982". Still other clues are as follows: "on the following Monday, seven days after Bowen's disappearance". (p. 71) More examples following up,

In Chapter 7, "Backing up to the previous Wednesday, to the afternoon when Bowen climbed the steps of Ed's boardinghouse [...]" (p. 78). Evidently, the disturbed time order gives the reader a sense of chrono-displacement. The reader may find it hard to distinguish events happened at different times, and thus reckon the authenticity of the narration, in the meantime, the continuity and the discrepancy of different narrative degrees are destroyed. In Chapter 8, and in the same chapter, the author mentions the life of Edward in April, 1945:

April 1945. My unit was in Germany, and we were the ones who liberated Dachau [...] Two months in the camp. I was a cook, so I worked kitchen detail. On the second day, a woman came up to me with a baby in her arms. (p. 82)

And then Auster tells the reader about Ed's wives of 1953 and 1969. Next, Auster leads his narrator in the novel back to the narrative time in Chapter 9, that is, "the morning of September 20, two days after the day in question [...]" (p. 96) And in the footnote of Chapter 9, Auster goes into the novel to narrate something happening "four years earlier", 1978. The narrator Sidney Orr again in Chapter 10 leads us back to a time in the 1960s. The writer, in Footnote 11 tells the reader what Chang narrates the story about China's Cultural Revolution, which takes the reader back to the period beforehand. So, from the above lay-outs of events occurring in an achrony order, it can be concluded that the temporal order of *Oracle Night* is fragmented.

Different time arrangements in *Oracle Night* create a trans-placement of time between reality and fictionality, which is another important factor to accomplish the fragmentation of the contents. Besides, Auster often converts the narrative space to make the novel fragmented.

When it comes to space fragments, the random and fragmented combination of time and space in *Oracle Night* should be given due attention to since it is reflected between lines.

The relationship between time and space is of importance for the rhythm. When a space is presented extensively, an interruption of the time sequence is unavoidable, unless the perception of the space takes place gradually and can

therefore be regarded as an event. Moreover, information concerning space is often repeated, to stress the stability of the frame, as opposed to the rensitory nature of the events that occur within it.

Compared with space, time enjoys higher flexibility and variety in the text. Time can move in different ways, “[...] either linear, cyclical, or circular fashion, as being inherently dynamic, static, or recurrent [...]” (Danow 1997, p.18). So when composing the novel, Auster, as well as Sidney Orr, frequently juxtaposes his past experiences with his imaginary world, hence leading readers to the blurred boundary of fact and fiction.

C. Fragmentation of Characters

Characterization is one of the indispensable and vital ingredients in traditional literary works. While not every character has a prototype reality and most characters have a certain degree of discrepancy to reality, but at least the traditional writers model characters on certain types of characters in the real world and keep the similar identity of the real characters. In this way, writers manage to create lifelike characters that are close to readers and make the character images easily touch the heart of readers and easier for readers to accept and generate a wide range of resonance.

If we apply the traditional theory concerning characterization to *Oracle Night*, the conclusion would be that there is no central character in this novel. In Auster’s fiction, language is unstable and nothing is definite except chance, his characters are not the central point around which the text revolves. The emergence of characters appears to be random, and thus fragmented, and there is no rule of coming on the scene. In this way, characters in the novel can be blurred deliberately by the writer and finally turn out to be totally unbelievable. Characters’ personalities become incomplete, confusing, vague, and pale. Here, characters become wholly imaginary and man-made things, and the relationship between characters in the novel and figures of the reality has been broken up. Therefore, we can say that rather than creating a series of characters, Auster is just describing characters as symbols or ciphers scattered in the work which do not help with the accomplishment of the continuity of the work. To metafictionalists, characters are decentralized subjects, never depicted as full-dimensional or round ones. Regardless of characters’ gender, age and professions, they would lose their individuality to some extent. However, this “flat” nature is not of the simple kind. The character is a figure that is made up with several “flat” sides. Each side reflects its own meaning and their meanings generally contradict with each other, thus forming the multiple facets of a person and providing the multiple possibilities of the quality one person may possess.

Metafiction never gives a fixed definition of anything. In a metafiction, readers cannot see normal human desires or sensitive passions of characters created in traditional realistic works where characters have an integrating and consistent quality. The individuals under the pen of metafictionalists are no longer those who are the undertakers of social behaviors or some certain historic missions. They are those who are put on the edge of the social life, not bearing any moral responsibilities or political duties. None of Auster’s characters is a big shot, without vivid appearance or explicit family background, and even without names.

In metafiction, the feature of characterization can be generalized as “fragmented.” According to Frederic Jameson, the disappearance of personality in postmodern society, as well as the changes along with it, evokes the prevalence of the fragmented characters all over the world in many areas. The disappearance of personality here refers to the fact that the behavior of the individuals is hard to apprehend.

Paul Auster applies the artifice to the creation of his works. His characters by and large reveal multiple identities and characters in *Oracle Night* who have lost their personal traits as an individual and are almost all patched up under various situations. Characters are displayed and exemplified in various ways, leaving to the reader the task of inferring the quality they imply.

A single person can not possess two extreme personalities at the same time. So when the character just has one-dimensional property, the novelist has to give several possibilities of this one-dimensional property which the character may have. So the fragmentation of characters is applied in *Oracle Night*, corresponding to the increasing fragmented modern personality. Otherwise, the writing would remain at an excessively simple level. In the process of characterization, Auster does not focus his attention on the character depiction. All characters in the novel can be analyzed via several ways, and they are hard to ascertain.

In modeling characters, Paul Auster makes each character a “figure” or a “cipher”, because in postmodernist writing, characters are said to be modeled and merely fictional. So there is no direct connection between characters in the novel and people in the real world. Characters are “being-there,” but not “being-in-the-world.” Auster plays this out in a number of ways as several characters in Sidney’s novel mirror those in his real life and Auster drops hints connecting Sidney’s reality and his fiction throughout *Oracle Night*. For example, when Sidney describes the relationship between Bowen and Sylvia Maxwell, it simultaneously describes the author’s own connection with his characters:

Little by little, by force of the attention Bowen brings to Sylvia Maxwell’s words, he begins to see a connection between himself and the story in the novel, as if in some oblique, highly metaphorical way, the book were speaking intimately to him about his own present circumstances.

But with all of this fraternization going on between the author and his characters, and between inner characters and other characters, the line starts to be blurred about who it is that is actually doing the talk. Trause, whom Sidney consults throughout the novel, offers this advice:

Everything human is real, and sometimes we know things before they happen even if we aren’t aware of it. We live in the present, but the future is inside us at every moment. Maybe that’s what writing is all about, Sidney. Not recording

events from the past, but making things happen in the future. (p. 12)

While this is true in parts, the relationship Sidney has with his writing seems more malleable. While he may have predicted the future (in his wife), he has also played out the past by rehashing an already-created character in Flitcraft/Bowen, and placing characters familiar to people he knows in his life within the story.

The inexplicability of characters is another point in Paul Auster's *Oracle Night*. In traditional novel, we can get a portrait of characters after reading the novel. However, after reading *Oracle Night*, the reader still cannot figure out the appearance and behavior of the characters. The narrator Sidney Orr tells the reader about his wife Grace and John Trause in massive depth, but nothing about the characteristics of the figure himself. And most of the introductory words about characters are in the footnotes.

For example, Sidney Orr states in Footnote 2:

John was fifty-six. Not young, perhaps, but not old enough to think of himself as old, especially since he was aging and still looked like a man in his mid-to late forties. I had known him for three years by then, and our friendship was a direct result of my marriage to Grace. Her father had been at Princeton with John in the years immediately following the Second World War and [...] I therefore met him as a family friend, not as the well-known novelist I had been reading since high school--and whom I still consider to be one of the best writers we had. (p. 11)

This footnote informs the reader of something about John's career and his son. After that, the narrator states on Page 27 that "his hair was mussed, and the back strands had been flattened and stiffened and stiffened after lying on the sofa for so many hours in the past week" because of "phlebitis, an inflammation of the vein brought on by the presence of a blood clot", apart from which we know nothing in detail. The reader can only imagine his image. Also there is no description about Grace's appearance and characteristics. If we follow the usual pattern, a female character will be described detailedly about her appearance, and with large amount of adjectives. However, Auster simply tells the reader about Grace in a different way in the longest footnote on Page 15 to Page 18:

Grace was a good-looking woman, but even in those first tumultuous seconds of our first encounter, as I shook her hand and watched her settle into a chair by Betty's desk, I could see that she was not inordinately beautiful, not one of those movie star goddesses who overpower you with the dazzle of their perfection.

Judging from these sentences, it can be found that there is no direct description of her face, stature or any other factors which can intuitionally present one's appearance. However, the author leaves much space for her temperament and self-restraint, for instance, "why don't we get Grace in here and see what she thinks?", "Grace struck me as intelligent", "what I fell in love with: the sense of calm that enveloped her, the radiant silence burning within." Only these words cannot help mold a round person, and characters in the novel turn out to be fragmented.

In *Oracle Night*, a variety of characters that belong to different historical stages hop arbitrarily. Sometimes, the author even participates in the creation suddenly, and helps to shape behaviors of characters together. He often adds his own comment or exposes his composing process of characterization, which makes the characterization vaguer. The author then further studies the illegibility of postmodernist man's identity. Many people in the novel lead a kind of multi-existence and paradoxical life, which suggests the alternating and complicated personality of the people in modern society.

Their fragmented and miscellaneous identities give readers a big surprise and make them out of their wits in respect that they cannot generalize a stable figure image. Characters under Auster's pen lack the trust on themselves and others. And even at last they cannot apprehend themselves at all. So the protagonist, who is also a writer as is the case generally, does not know whether the book he has written is logical or not. So it is no wonder that the destiny of Nick Bowen in the underground room is left unsolved. Metafictionalists thus believe that the essence of human being is hard to know. So it is impossible to explain or convince its reliability to the readers. Man is a hypocrite under his noble moral appearance. Thus, the theme of the novel is to show Auster's particular feeling, view and literary intention. The protagonist "I" and the protagonist in the second-degree, Nick Bowen, all undergo the experiences of innumerable counterchanges of multi-identities: good husbands, sexual metamorphosis, writers, and so on.

III. FUNCTIONS OF FRAGMENTED STRUCTURE

Fragmented narration at least has the following functions in *Oracle Night*. In the first place, fragmented narration provides infinite space for the writer's imagination. As Tony Tanner (1971) remarks, "the fragment form caters to a kind of disordered and rescheduled imagination." (p. 221) And the narration is either real or false in which truth and falsity are difficult to tell. In this kind of writing, we would have difficulty assuring ourselves whether the writer is narrating a story of his real experience or he is just simply creating a fiction. Both the author and the reader play their roles in the coding and decoding process of the novel. As a result, both the continuity of narration and acceptance from the aspect of the reader appear to be fragmented.

Second, fragmented narration negates the affirmation of reality. The intersection of truth and falsity not only provides us an infinite imagination space, but also betrays and negates the affirmation of reality. After reading a section of "traditional realistic world" that is well-arranged in the former narration of *Oracle Night*, readers are suddenly pulled into the imaginary world of Sidney. It has no chain to connect the former and latter parts. So readers are left in the dark where this length narration comes from. Consequently, the "actual" world in the fiction is disrupted arbitrarily by the imaginary world in the novel. Thus the reader's understanding of the "actuality" is always incomplete and indeterminate.

Reading *Oracle Night* becomes another creation process. In this sense, *Oracle Night*, by means of its fragmented narration in which the truth is mixed with falsity, embodies the typical characteristic of metafiction.

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