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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A Study on Narrative Time in *Sunday in August* under Genette's Narrative Theory

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| ABSTRACT

The short story *Sunday in August*, written by French writer Patrick Modiano, recounts a story that John recalled from a Sunday in August. Although the length is small, there are many suspensions, which makes people feel confused and lonely. This effect is mainly caused by the author's unique narrative strategy: narrating from the first-person perspective makes readers feel more engaged and better understand the author's true feelings. At the same time, a kind of anachronistic narrative time technique is used to skillfully arrange the sequence of events, creating many unknowns, which makes readers focus on what happened in the past in the reading process, producing a sense of confusion. This paper aims to lay bare its subtle and elaborate narrative design of time by scrutinizing the way in which the protagonist, John, narrates the story beyond the limits of time, laying an emphasis on Modiano's ingenious arrangement in discourse time by examining its time, order, duration, and frequency, through which Modiano's unique philosophy of time and his deep understanding of the characters' inner world are fully revealed.

| KEYWORDS

Patrick Modiano, Narrative time, Narrative strategy, Duration.

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### 1. Introduction

Patrick Modiano, a very strange name to the public, has full weight in the literary world. Patrick Modiano is a famous French writer known as the representative writer of the "New Fable School." He focuses on exploring and studying the existence of contemporary people and their relationship with the surrounding environment and reality, which is reflected in many of his works. The themes of his novels are searching, investigating, recalling, and exploring, as well as the lack of identity cognition. He is good at using the stream of consciousness and the transformation of time and space, as well as multiple narrative perspectives, to create an atmosphere of suspense. Most of his works have the characteristics of detective stories. He did not have a big perspective and pattern but curled up in the corner of the times and quietly watched the flow of people. He was a writer of fragmented writing. His works were all spliced by fragments of life or memories but did not affect the overall independent aesthetic feeling. Moreover, his language is very beautiful and poetic, and his novels are poetic novels with meaningful artistic conception and unique conception. The Nobel Prize for Literature won in 2014 brought Modiano into everyone's eyes. Before that, most domestic readers were unfamiliar with the French writer. Modiano's novels were not good at storytelling, and there were a lot of metaphors and imagination. The theme was serious and profound, which was somewhat alienated from Chinese readers who were not accustomed to this style. However, the translation and introduction of Modiano began in the last century. His works were introduced in China later, starting in the 1980s. At present, the introduced Modiano works in the Chinese Mainland include *Star Plaza*, *Accident Nocturne*, etc. As early as the end of the last century, Mr. Wang Xiaobo, a writer who died early in China, gave him a high appraisal and thought that he was one of the highest achievers of modern novels. Until 2014, Modiano had proved his strength by winning the Nobel Prize for Literature with *Dark Street* and *Sunday in August*. Nobel Prize awarding officials believe that Modiano's



The time node is located here, bringing out the theme *Sunday in August*. At the same time, many mysteries were left to the audience. Where did Sylvia and Neil go? Who are the two people who fell off the cliff? Did the "Southern Cross" diamond return to Villecourt? Who is Paul (Neil)? Through the timeline service story, we can see that the final story is completely told, and the mood reaches a climax, but it also ends abruptly, with a full aftertaste.

In flashback, in the first person retrospective narration, there are two perspectives, usually to show the huge difference in cognitive ability between the "experiential I" and "narrative I." "She wanted people to think we were married. It was a matter of pride for her. And I acted like a real coward ...I should have married her." (Modiano, 2017: 5). This paragraph is the first person retrospective narration of Villecourt, which aims to show the huge difference in his cognitive ability between now and seven years ago. Seven years ago, he didn't want to marry Sylvia, but now, he thinks he is a coward in retrospect, and he regrets it. This statement obviously tells the reader from the present perspective when recalling the past events, which belong to a flashback, and its function is to provide the reader with some past information related to the main events.

In addition to flexibly using flashbacks, Modiano also upsets the inherent narrative order by using the narrative method of pre narration, juxtaposing "future" and "present," or even "past," so that the readers are confused by numerous and complicated time clues. Pre narration is also a kind of narrative method. Genette defined pre narration as all narrative activities of narrating or mentioning future events in advance. On *Sunday in August*, "I" met the beautiful married woman Sylvia at work. The latter chose to elope with "me" and stole the "Southern Cross" diamond that her husband intended to resell to others. Sylvia is used to hanging this exquisite big diamond around her neck. It will be their source of life in the future. It should have been a symbol of hope and beauty, but "I" always feel that it will bring bad luck. The argument that diamonds will bring bad luck has appeared several times in the article as such:

The diamond twinkled on her neck in the light of the moon. How hard and cold it was compared to her soft skin, how indestructible against her slender, touchingly fragile body . . . More than the room's smell, more than Villecourt prowling around us, that diamond glittering in the half light suddenly became in my eyes the blazing sign of the evil fate hanging over us. I wanted to take it off her, but I couldn't find the clasp on the chain at the back of her neck. (Modiano, 2017: 54)

Another example: At that time, the only thing we could see and touch, the only entity that never disappeared, was the diamond. Did it bring us bad luck? (Modiano, 2017: 88)

In the eyes of "I" (the narrator), the priceless diamond is just like an ominous thing, which makes people uneasy and afraid. Later, it did attract a pair of Neil and his wife, who claimed to be rich businessmen in the United States. They claimed to buy diamonds. After dinner, Neil and his wife proposed to take them to Cannes for a visit. "I," and Sylvia reluctantly agreed. On the way, Nilto "I" got off to buy cigarettes. When "I" returned, I found that Neil's car had carried Sylvia nowhere... Later, "I" learned that Neil's real name was Paul, and that he was immoral and had a deep connection with Sylvia's husband's diamond business. Diamonds did bring bad luck. Moreover, this misfortune happened to Sylvia, and her life and death were unknown from then on. This coincides with the plot that "I" cannot take the diamond off Sylvia's neck.

According to the degree of prominence of the pre-narrative events, the academia divides the pre narrative into implicit and explicit. The so-called implicit narration is to indirectly tell the readers what will happen in the future by means of hints. It generally does not explicitly and directly describe what will happen in the future, but only outlines the general trend and possibility." On *Sunday in August*, the narrator repeatedly stressed that diamonds will bring bad luck and predicted that the bad luck is related to Sylvia, but the specific bad luck was not explained at this time. Therefore, it should belong to implicit pre narration.

If the above example is an implicit one, the following example is an explicit one. From this passage, readers can clearly know that the future is not as beautiful as what they expected that night.

I thought that my life was taking a new course, that all I needed to do was stay in Nice for a while to erase everything that had come before. We would end up no longer feeling the weight that was pressing down on us. (Modiano, 2017: 27). I was not yet a ghost myself like I am tonight. I told myself that we would forget everything, that everything would start over in this unknown city. Start over. That's the phrase I kept repeating as I walked down Rue Gounod, with more and more of a skip in my step. (27)

### 3. Narrative rhythm caused by Duration change

The whole book can be divided into three parts. The first part consists of one chapter, the second part consists of eleven chapters, and the third part consists of three chapters. The speed of a narrative will be defined by the relationship between duration (that

of the story, measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years) and length (that of the text, measured in lines and in pages). The isochronous narrative, our hypothetical reference zero, would thus be here a narrative with unchanging speed, without accelerations or slowdowns, where the relationship duration-of-story! length-of-narrative would always remain steady. (Genette, 1980: 88). Therefore, Genette proposed that the relationship between narrative time and story length can be measured according to the ratio.

### **3.1 summary:**

Summary can be described as  $NT < ST$ . (Genette, 1980: 95). The narrative time is shorter than the story time to form a summary. The following is when John comes to the police station and wanted to ask the police for help to find the missing Silvia and Neil together. He chose to summarize the story of the disappearance of the three. Because John was afraid that the police would not really help him after transplantation, he might just listen to them as a joke, so he didn't think it was necessary to tell them in such detail; he summarized the story of three people missing here.

Everything was about to be turned on its head. I only had to give a few more details, and a phase of my life would be over right there in the police prefecture. The moment had come—I was sure of it—when he would take off the black slipcover and move the typewriter onto his desk. He would slip a sheet of paper into it and turn the squeaking roller. Then he would look up at me and say, in a gentle voice: "I'm listening." But he didn't move, didn't say a thing, his chin still in the palm of his hand. (Modiano, 2017: 117)

### **3.2 scene:**

The scene can be described as  $NT = ST$ . (Genette, 1980: 95). Scene means that the narrative time is basically equal to the story time. According to Genette, the most common is the dialogue of characters in the text. In the first chapter of the text, when John and Villecourt met, they used scene narration, and the conversation between John and Sylvia and Neil and his wife was completely displayed in front of the readers almost without any modification. The scene where John goes to the villa to talk with the blond real estate agent when he is looking for the Neils is also listed. The narrator did not add any comments, and even the adjuncts, such as "he said," were omitted. The following is a description of the situation when I met Villecourt again seven years later. The narrator shows all the characters' dialogues and expressions and reproduces the scene at that time.

He came down from his platform and walked over to me. What a nice surprise. I've got an eagle eye; I spotted you right away. He seemed self-conscious, almost shy. I, on the other hand, felt calm and relaxed. It's funny seeing each other again here, isn't it? I said, Yes, He smiled. He had regained his confidence. A van stopped at the curb in front of us, and a man in a red jacket got out. You can take it all down," he said, then he looked at me straight in the eye." come have a drink? If you want. I'm going to have a drink with him at the Forum," he said."Come get me in half an hour. (Modiano, 2017: 9)

### **3.3 ellipsis:**

Ellipsis can be described as  $NT = 0, ST = n$ . Thus:  $NT < \infty ST$ . (Genette, 1980: 95). Ellipsis occurs when the story time or some events of the story are not reflected in the narrative. This way of describing the passage of time by emphasizing the different perceptions of the characters of time also appears in this text, such as:

He hadn't changed much in seven years—his face seemed more flushed, that was all..... His voice still had its metallic tone, a metal that had rusted a little over the years..... I had to face facts: this man was nothing like the man I knew seven years ago. There was none of the arrogant rudeness that had made me hate him then. On the contrary, he was resigned now, quiet. His hands had changed. He no longer wore that thick chain bracelet. (Modiano, 2017: 1)

The narrator thinks that the seven years they have not met are not important. The readers want to know about the changes in the past seven years. What they have experienced does not need to be revealed, so the seven years are covered in a sentence.

### **3.4 pause:**

Pause can be described as  $NT = n, ST = 0$ . Thus:  $NT > ST$ . (Genette, 1980: 95). Pause usually appears in narrative works as a description of an object of observation. The following description of a large blue envelope given to me by Consul Conde Jones occupies a page of the text, but the narrator's description does not occupy the story time, only the discourse time. Inside the envelope were two sheets of paper, the same blue color, with the letterhead of the American embassy. The information gathered and typed in orange characters was as follows: Château Azur, Boulevard de Cimiez, had belonged in the 1930s to one E. Virgil Neal, American citizen, owner of Tokalon perfume and beauty products, with offices in Paris (7 Rue Auber and 138 Rue de la Pompe) and New York (27 W. 20th Street).....(Modiano, 2017:161)

#### 4. Single and repeated narrative frequency

What I call narrative frequency is the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis. (Genette, 1980:113). Genette distinguishes between singlative narration, repeated narration, and general narration. A singlative narrative is narrating once what happened once (or if we want to abbreviate with a pseudo-mathematical formula: 1N/1S) or narrating n times what happened n times. The singlative narration is, therefore, defined not by the number of occurrences on both sides but by the equality of this number. (Genette, 1980:115) This is the most common narrative. It is used in all narrative texts, so it has no special significance, and it is also true on *Sunday in August*.

##### 4.1 Repetitive narration

Repetitive narration refers to narrating n times what happened once (nN/1S). (Genette, 1980:117). On *Sunday in August*, the article describes the "Southern Cross" diamond many times, a gem with a long history and a lifetime of blood, which points out its important role. Diamonds are actually a clue to escape. At first, they wanted to sell the diamonds at a good price and live a peaceful life. Later, they do not expect that the diamond will indirectly lead to Sylvia and Neil's disappearance. The last time he narrated the "Southern Cross," John could not help saying to himself: It would bring us bad luck. But I was wrong. Others before us had fought for it; others to come would wear it around their neck for a time or on their finger, and it would traverse the centuries, hard and indifferent to the passing of time and the deaths of those it would leave behind. No, our anxiety didn't come from our contact with that cold stone with glints of blue—it doubtless came from life itself. (Modiano, 2017:156)

The musty smell in the room is also mentioned many times in the text. It is intended to emphasize that it is something that will never go away. When we got back to the room it had the same musty smell. Usually when we came back at the end of another empty day, we felt such loneliness that the moisture and moldy smell went right through us. (Modiano, 2017: 47). This quotation shows that the musty taste willing to spoof may symbolize a sense of loneliness. And later the narrator also conveyed that "The first time I'd been in that room, the smell of mold had almost suffocated me. I had opened both windows to air out the room, but it hadn't helped. The odor had seeped into the walls, the leather chair, the wool bedspread." (Modiano, 2017: 33). The existence of musty smell has been pointed out many times to emphasize that a sense of loneliness runs through them all the time.

##### 4.2 summary narration

A summary narration is narrating one time (or rather, at one time) what happened n times (1N/nS). (Genette, 1980:116). For example, when John asked for help from the police, he only told about his experience of asking for help from the police once. The police made a priest like gesture of helplessness but only said, "I'm sorry. There's really nothing we can do for you." (Modiano, 2017:119). When the police closed the door, John stood for a moment, paralyzed, stupefied, under the globe of light in the hall, staring at the blue letters: "Family Tracing Services. (Modiano, 2017:119). The author's intention is very obvious: intended to attack the incompetence of the police system at that time with a summary description. We can roughly infer how the police station acted at that time by describing in detail the experience of asking for help from the police station.

#### 5. The aesthetic function of narrative time strategy

*Sunday in August* broke away from the conventional time sequence. In the beginning, "I" met Villecourt in Nice City, and our two strange behaviors undoubtedly caused a kind of suspense and reading impulse to the readers.

The second part tells the past in a novel way. In the process of telling, a mystery is thrown out first, and then these mysteries are revealed step by step. First of all, we continued the first part of our encounter with Villecourt. This time, we failed to talk with Villecourt and ended up with Villecourt disappearing. Then they met Sylvia and planned to sell the "Southern Cross" diamonds together. Then, they met Neil and his wife. The mysterious Neil and his wife also lured the readers step by step. The readers were always guided forward in the reading process, never knowing what would happen next, thus maintaining a strong interest in reading. At the end of this part, the author gives the reader a further blow, and the story gradually reveals its original appearance. When John looked through the old photos, he found that the man who claimed to be Neil was actually Paul Alexandri. In the photo, the man was sitting by the Mana River with Villecourt, which did not prevent people from thinking about it!

In the third part, the narrator tells the story back to the beginning of his acquaintance with Sylvia, and he is frank: Yes, that was where I met Sylvia Heuraux, Villecourt's wife, one summer morning: in La Varenne, at Le Beach. I had come to the banks of the Marne to take photographs a few days earlier. A small press had accepted my proposal for a book called Riverside Beaches. (Modiano, 2017 : 124)

When the story comes to this, the reader further understands the full picture of the story. Throughout the book, the author has made great efforts in the design of the narrative. He abandoned the traditional sequence of story telling, used the timing and narrative framework based on time reversal, and described the story as if it was very messy, but in fact, it was clear and logical. It gives the story a unique charm, thus attracting readers' interest in reading. The author uses techniques such as summary, scene, ellipsis, and pause to grasp the narrative rhythm, achieve appropriate details, and highlight key points. The singlative and repetitive narrative frequency can arouse the readers' attention to specific events in aesthetic function and deepen the impression of the story in the readers' minds. Repetition means emphasis, which means that the narrator wants to let the reader slowly realize the significance and importance of these events through repeated emphasis so that the reader can understand the implications of the novel more comprehensively and thoroughly. The reader can also experience the value meaning of different orientations in the text according to the changing narrative frequency designed by the author in the narrative text. The author does not need to publicly publish comments and opinions on certain events in the text, just let the reader summarize from these repeated narrations, which not only hides the identity of the author but also achieves the narrative effect of establishing the author's authority.

## **6. Conclusion**

Genette's exposition of the relationship between "story time" and "discourse time" provides a new research perspective for the interpretation of Modiano's *Sunday in August*. Through time sequence, duration, and frequency, to analyze the use of narrative time in the novel and to explore its effects in characterization, plot construction, and theme expression. Modiano used the first person narrative perspective combined with the third person limited omniscient perspective to show the story in a novel way in front of the readers, leaving many mysteries and leaving people with endless aftertaste. He combines the fragmented narration of the first person with the supplementary narration of the third person. He artistically uses the form of flashback and pre narration to shuttle the context of the characters inside and outside the flashback. At the same time, the time sequence should be controlled to create a thought-provoking storyline. In terms of duration, the novel focuses on the scene and explains the plot and character in the dialogue. At the same time, it complements the scene by summarizing, omitting, and pausing. The alternation of narrative techniques involving time sequence and duration, such as summary, scene, ellipsis, and pause, makes the narrative of the novel appropriate, focused, and clear. At the same time, the author makes good use of the narrative frequency, follows the traditional narrative techniques, focuses on singlative narration, and intersperses repetitive narration. The use of general narration to express specific strong emotions and the use of repetitive narration to highlight the emotional color and tone of the novel. Therefore, Modiano's *Sunday in August* has unique narrative skills in terms of narrative time. This study enriches the exploration of theories related to narrative time, inspires the appreciation and arrangement of narrative time in future literary works, and also enriches the interpretation of Nobel laureate Modiano's works. Analyzing the narrative time of their novels allows readers to have a clearer understanding of the storyline. However, it lacks a specific analysis of the characters' inner thoughts and personalities, as well as an exploration of the significance of location transitions. In the future, other literary theories can be applied to study this text, such as spatial theory.

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