



An Analysis of the Employment of Wolfgang Iser’s Blank Theory in *Young Goodman Brown*

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Abstract

Wolfgang Iser is one of the most important theorists of aesthetics of reception. His reader-response theory is mainly concerned with the reading process, in which the text could ultimately find its meaning through the interaction between the reader and the text. Because literature is not only a kind of imitation of real life, but also a product of the author’s imagination, thus there will be gaps or uncertain points between the real world and the world portrayed in the text. Those gaps and uncertain points are called “blank” and by this phenomenon, Iser proposed his “calling structure of texts”, aiming to demonstrate that the blank itself is the texts’ structural mechanism calling readers who are promoted by curiosity to read them. During the reading process, the readers’ reading expectation is prompted to fulfill those blanks because of the contrast between the experiences written in the text and the experiences they confront in the real world, thus materializing the complete meaning of the text. In this paper, the author tries to explain the blanks used in Hawthorne’s masterpiece *Young Goodman Brown*, explore the types of blanks appearing in the text, Hawthorne’s real intention to arrange these blanks, and what reading experience these gaps bring to readers.

Keywords

Wolfgang Iser, Blank, *Young Goodman Brown*

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1. Iser’s Blank Theory

“The blank in literary works includes the absence of language, the interruption of narration, incoherence and the missing of important elements of a narration and so on” (Wang Rui, 2013). The blank symbolizes literature’s requirement for open and diverse interpretation, rather than being restricted in the author’s arrangement. This could stimulate readers’ reading potential and interest, lead them to construct the meaning of the texts, and encourage them to read reflectively and critically.

1.1 The Background of Blank Theory

In the late 60s and early 70s, the 20th century, there was an aesthetic enlightenment in Germany. Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser proposed that aesthetic research should focus on the readers’ reception, and response towards literary works, the reading process, and the effect of such acceptance on literature’s social function. They explored the dynamic interaction between readers and literary texts by asking and answering a series of questions.

Jauss pointed out that aesthetic practice should include three aspects: production of literature, circulation of literature, and reception of literature.

Reception is the process of readers' creation of works on the basis of their own aesthetic experiences, which excavates various meanings of literary works. Works of art are not permanent, but historical, for they are continuously accepted by readers in different societies and different historical periods. Classics exist only for as long as they are accepted. Readers' acceptance activities are limited by their own historical conditions and by the scope of the work, so they cannot receive works as much as they please. The author establishes a dialogue relationship with the reader through his work. When a literary work appears, there is a level of expectation, the expectation of what to read from the work. The readers' expectations create a frame of reference by which the readers' experience relates to the writer's experience.

The level of expectation is determined both by the genre and by the readers' previous experience with the genre. The value of a work lies in its inconsistency with the readers' expectation level, producing aesthetic distance.

The reception of art is not a passive consumption, but an active aesthetic activity showing approval and rejection. Aesthetic experience plays its function in this activity, which is the intermediary of aesthetic practice.

According to Iser, the salient feature of literary works is that there is no exact correlation between the phenomena depicted in the works and the objects in reality. All literary works have some degree of uncertainty. It is this quality that the readers discover through personal experience. In this situation, Iser proposed the "calling structure" and blank theory.

1.2 Definition and Effect of Blank

According to Iser's theory, it is not the author who gives meaning to the texts. The meaning of a text is founded through the interaction between the readers and itself. What's more, literary works are both imitative and virtual. On the one hand, it mimics the reality of life; on the other hand, the authors employ their imagination and create their own world in literary works. Because the process of creation is both objective and subjective, there is a contrast between the world that readers could feel in real life and the one depicted in literary works (Zhang Zhongzai, 2002). This contrast is blank. In literary works, demonstrates itself as the absence of language, interruption of narration, incoherence, and missing of important elements in narration, and so on.

Because of the blank, the author successfully stimulates the readers' reading interest and curiosity. This is called the "calling structure of text". Readers have two ways to standardize this blank: they can measure the work by their own standards, or they can revise their stereotypes (Zhang Zhongzai, 2002). The works have no exact equivalent in real life. This open nature of literary works allows readers to fill in the blank on the basis of their own social and aesthetic experiences, thus forming a variety of meanings for the text in the reading process.

The blank offers readers a ground space for imagining, nevertheless, it does not simply mean that the readers could interpret the text optionally. The blank is also a tool of the author to regulate the reading process, leading readers to follow the route that he or she has set during the process of writing, in order to avoid the distortion or misunderstanding of the text.

2. Classification of Blank

The development of blank is simultaneous with that of literature. At the early stage of literary history, authors employed humble rhetoric to represent blank. As time went by, the contexts and the form of literary works became more and more complicated, therefore, blank also acquired diverse features. In the following section, the author will introduce the category of blank used in traditional literature and modern literature separately.

2.1 Blank in Traditional Literature

In this section, traditional literature refers to literature written before the 20th century. Although numerous literary works show great influence and beauty of the authors' imagination, such as poems during the Romantic period, their techniques of writing are comparatively simple when compared with the literature in the 20th century, or modern literature. The traditional literature mainly follows the settled rules for each genre, classical but lacks innovation. The authors of modern literature favor new techniques of writing, such as stream of consciousness, black humor, and so on, so modern literature is definitely colorful and vigorous. Therefore, with innovation in the way of writing, more forms of blank appear.

2.1.1 Omission of Language

This kind of blank refers to the absence of information that the author does not tell readers on purpose (Wang Rui, 2013). Readers could only reason the hidden information by the contexts or their own knowledge. This kind of blank makes the author use the shortest sentences to express the most profound meaning on the one hand and offers readers the opportunity to give their own interpretations on the other hand.

For example, in *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne does not tell the readers where Goodman Brown went to, and who the old man was exactly. As the plot goes deeper, the readers would know that the so-called meeting was probably

about witchcraft and that the old man might be a wizard, according to the dialogue between the old man and one of the villagers. What's more, at first, Goodman Brown seemed to hear the voice of his wife, but he was not sure, and later he found a pink ribbon hanging on the branch. The readers know that at the beginning of the story when the couple said goodbye to each other, there was a pink ribbon on her hat. Therefore, readers can be sure that Faith was also in the dark forest.

2.1.2 Deemphasizing the Background

It means that the author does not depict the background of the story on purpose or in detail, thus every reader could feel the similarity of his or her life experience in the reading process so that they could set themselves in the place of heroes in the story and give the interpretation of the text according to their own experiences (Wang Rui, 2013).

For example, Hawthorne does not tell readers too many details about Salem town, neither the natural environment nor the social environment, such as what the scenery of this town looks like or what kind of people live in this town. This town was just like any common town in our real life at that time, thus readers could easily set themselves in the place of Goodman Brown. Both readers and Goodman Brown cannot accept the cruel reality that almost everyone in the town betrayed their faith, including the most respectable people and even their fathers, and there was evil in everyone's heart. This kind of arrangement could evoke readers' resonance to the greatest extent.

2.1.3 The Foil

A foil's function is to draw readers' attention and stimulate their imagination towards certain things by portraying other things (Wang Rui, 2013).

In *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne uses a great deal of words to depict the natural environment of the dark forest. The horrifying and somber environment foreboded the doom and misfortune that would come soon. What's more, the foil is also employed in the description of characters. After the old man appeared, Hawthorne mentioned that the old man took a staff with him, there being a vividly engraved snake on it. The snake was an image of cruelty and wickedness in Western culture. The appearance of the snake staff made the old man more mysterious and horrific.

2.2 Blank in Modern Literature

Though the contexts and connotative meaning of *Young Goodman Brown* are refreshing and complicated at its time, it still belongs to traditional literature concerning its form and writing techniques. Nevertheless, in modern times, literary innovation made literary forms become more and more varied, and writing techniques more and more abstract, thus evoking the evolution of the blank. During the literary revolution since the 20th century, blank acquired new forms.

In the 20th century, writers felt interested in linguistics. They gradually realized the function of language to express and construct meaning, so that language became the most important part of literary creation in some aspects. However, writers recognized that there still were things language could not explain precisely, and sometimes, they preferred readers did not perceive their purpose directly, so they used silence, interruption, and the absence of narrative elements to express meaning which surpassed the limitation of language, so that readers could analyze the text's underlying meaning through limited language. Influenced by social reality, literature in the 20th century regarded emptiness and incompleteness as the essence of human beings. Writers exerted themselves to unfold the alienated and empty situation of a man with a fragmentary way of writing. Their works were full of images, turbulent chaotic times, events, omissions, incoherence, and interruption. Those elements became new forms of the blank.

2.2.1 Blank and Signs

It refers to that there are no words, but blank or signs on the page (Wang Rui, 2013). The form of the signs is diverse: they could be geometric designs, paintings, or even words created by the author himself. Those signs are usually meaningful and connotative, symbolizing the author's opinion towards this world, certain people, or social events. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan Wake*, the texts are full of words that were created by Joyce himself and blank left on purpose.

2.2.2 The Absence of Narrative Elements

Writers do not tell readers certain information about the events written in the text so readers have to guess according to the following plots or social reality (Wang Rui, 2013). For example, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the author does not demonstrate the identity of Estragon and Vladimir and their purpose for waiting. In the hopeless waiting, readers realize that Estragon and Vladimir are representatives of whole human beings and feel despair and emptiness of human life.

2.2.3 Incoherent Narration

It means writers do not follow normal chronological order. Their narration becomes chaotic and fragmentary (Wang Rui, 2013). For instance, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, Morrison employed multiple points of view, and every speaker observed Picola's experiences from different aspects so that readers can only cobble that fragmentary narration together to know the whole event. What's more, Morrison favors the technique of flashback, interweaving other people's stories with those of Picola's. From different points of view, readers can feel the suffering and despair of a black girl living in a loveless society full of discrimination.

3. Blank in *Young Goodman Brown*

The blank in *Young Goodman Brown* mostly belongs to that in traditional literature: through omission, deemphasizing, foil, and other forms of blank, Hawthorne demonstrates to readers the struggle of good and evil in man's heart. By blank, Hawthorne succeeded in evoking readers' imagination and controlling their reading direction at the same time.

3.1 The Use of Omission

By using omission, Hawthorne did not tell readers all the information about the story, instead, he hoped readers to weave and organize all the information together through the hints he offered and the readers' imagination.

From the beginning of the story, Hawthorne demonstrates to readers a farewell scene: young Goodman Brown is saying goodbye to his newly married wife, Faith. Faith exerted herself to hold Goodman Brown back and stay with her, while Goodman Brown refused her and insisted on his leaving. Hawthorne does not tell readers the reason why Goodman Brown had to leave his beautiful and tender wife alone and where exactly Goodman Brown must go. Although Faith was worried and seemed to "have trouble in her face" (Guerin Wilfred, 2012), Goodman Brown comforted himself that "after this one night, he will cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven" (Guerin Wilfred, 2012). The importance of this "one night" easily drew readers' attention, while the author held the suspense on purpose.

When Goodman Brown came to the forest, an old man was waiting for him. The man was "in grave and decent attire (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)", which hinted that they might go for an important meeting, maybe for a party or for church. The old man condemned Goodman Brown for his being late, and Goodman Brown responded with a tremor. Readers could not help thinking who the old man exactly was and how he could be so powerful. The old man carried a black staff with him, there being a snake fixing upon it. The snake was the symbol of sin and evil. Readers might speculate that this old man was an antagonist.

After they entered the forest for a while, Goodman Brown became hesitated. He had scruples touching the matter that the old man would take him to. What was Goodman hesitating for? Was that because "the matter" was horrifying or immoral? Until the old man told Goodman Brown that his father and grandfather, who were considered pious and respectable, had done "that matter", Goodman Brown continued to proceed. Here, readers know that the old man made acquaintance with Goodman Brown's ancestors.

In the next paragraph, Goodman Brown is still haunted by a sense of immorality. He said: "Were I go on with thee, how should I meet the eye of that good old man, our minister at Salem village? His voice would make me tremble both Sabbath Day and lecture day (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)." Here, readers ensured that "that matter" was immoral and would confront the condemnation from both other people and Goodman Brown's heart.

Later, they met a pious lady, Goody Cloyse, in the forest. Through her conversation with the old man, readers know that she betrayed her religion and was anointed by paganism or witchcraft. At the same time, she mentioned that the old man should know the recipe for the sorcery. Later, the old man gave Goody Cloyse his staff, and she disappeared in seconds, so readers accepted certain information from the author that the old man was a wizard. The lady also said that there would be a nice young man to be taken to the meeting and join them that night, and readers had a proper reason to suspect that Goodman Brown was that "nice young man" and the old man intended to make Goodman Brown betray Protestantism and become a pagan. That was "the matter" that Goodman Brown was afraid of.

As he goes deeper into the forest, he realizes the existence of the minister Deacon Gookin, and other people of Salem Village, who also went for the pagan meeting. They talked about "a goodly young woman" to be taken into their communion. Readers here were offered another suspense: who was the young woman? Suddenly, Goodman Brown heard a similar voice with sorrow, and he recognized that the voice belonged to his wife, Faith. Though Goodman Brown did not see Faith with his own eyes, he found the pink ribbon that should be on the hat of Faith in the forest. Readers could speculate that Faith was also there, going to the meeting. At the pagan meeting, it turned out that Goodman Brown and Faith were indeed the new members of the evil community and they accepted the baptism of paganism.

In the end of the story, Brown finds himself sleeping on the vast ground in the forest and it seems nothing happened. The author did not tell readers whether Goodman Brown's journey was a dream or not. However, for the readers, it did

not influence their interpretation of the story: there was evil in every man's heart, and no matter how perfectly hidden in daily life, man would unfold their dark side someday. Readers could find that though Hawthorne did not offer complete information for them to analyze the passage, they could employ their imagination to speculate the plots by themselves on the basis of the hints left by Hawthorne. Therefore, by leaving blank, on the one hand, Hawthorne promoted readers' reading interest and the ability of imagination; on the other hand, he led the readers' reading direction by hints, so that readers would not diverge from the storyline he arranged when writing.

3.2 The Use of Deemphasizing

At the beginning of the story, Hawthorne mentions that the background was set in Salem Village. Hawthorne did not introduce this small town on purpose. It seemed that it was just a common village. However, in reality, in American history, the notorious Salem Trial happened here. Hundreds of innocent people were persecuted cruelly for being sentenced as pagans or witches. Hawthorne's ancestors also took part in that crime, therefore, in Hawthorne's point of view, Salem was a place that was cursed and full of misfortune and people's crimes and sin. From the beginning, the story was covered in a dark and unfortunate atmosphere. Nevertheless, because the author did not point it out directly, readers could only know that by their own experience and knowledge. It was astonishing that such horrible persecution happened in that peaceful village.

Later, the old man told Goodman Brown that he knew his father and grandfather and he even helped him "when he lashed the Quaker woman through the streets of Salem" and "set fire to an Indian village (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)". According to Hawthorne's family history, his ancestors persecuted Quakers and Indians cruelly, which brought Hawthorne a strong sense of guilt for his whole life. In the story, though Goodman Brown insisted that his father and grandfather were pious and respectable, they committed grave crimes against innocent people, which consolidated the main idea of the story: there was evil in everyone's heart. What's more, Hawthorne also implicitly criticized Protestantism for its cruelty and hypocrisy.

What's more, the author did not particularly emphasize the timeline of the story. All readers knew was that Goodman Brown departed at dusk. Dusk was the boundary of day and night. In the Salem village, people acted friendly, pious, and faithful in the day, while in the night, they became wild pagans and witches. Goodman Brown's departure in the dusk symbolized that he entered the world of evil, which foreshadowed the following plots.

3.3 The Use of Foil

In the contents, the author favored foils to set a certain atmosphere for the events.

When Goodman Brown first entered the forest, "he had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)". The forest was dark and gloomy, and the road was narrow. The whole forest was covered in a lonely and peculiar solitude. Those images predicted that that mysterious matter was definitely not something good. The description of the features and the horrible staff of the old man strengthened that prediction.

When Goodman Brown felt despair for Faith's betrayal and began to pray, "a cloud, though no wind stirring, hurried across the zenith and hid the brightening stars. The Blue sky was still visible, except directly overhead (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)". This narration predicted that praying had no use in saving Goodman Brown, and the doom would fall on him. "The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds—the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians; while sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveler, as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)". This description symbolized that the faith in Goodman Brown had crumbled completely, and he felt ridiculous for his youthful innocence.

He went to the meeting with agony and fury. In the vast open space of the forest, there was an altar surrounded by blazing pines, "their tops aflame, their stems untouched... The mass of foliage... was all on fire, blazing high into the night and fitfully illuminating the whole field. Each pendent twig and leafy festoon was in a blaze... (Guerin Wilfred, 2012)" In such a hell-like environment, Goodman Brown and his wife Faith accepted pagan baptism. The portrayal of the baptism scene mimicked the scene of hell written in the Bible. On the one hand, readers feel horrified about the scene; on the other hand, it symbolizes Goodman Brown and Faith betraying their religion and falling into hell and suffering for their whole lives.

The author did not merely employ foil in the description of the environment, but also in the depiction of characters. After leaving Faith, Goodman Brown murmured "She talks of dreams, too. Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done tonight" (Guerin Wilfred, 2012). In the first beginning, Faith's action had already predicted the misfortune that would happen that night. When he came across Goody Cloyse in the forest, "she was making the best of her way, with singular speed for so aged a woman, and mumbling some indistinct words—a prayer, doubtless—as she went" (Guerin Wilfred, 2012). From Cloyse's action, readers could realize the

importance of “that matter” and acquire more information about the hidden plots to cobble the whole story.

3.4 The Use of Other Forms of Blank

In *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne employed a great deal of symbols helping to connect the plots and establish the main idea of the passage. The symbol itself was a kind of blank, for symbols in literary works were not merely a common object, but had connotative meaning that reflected the author’s thoughts. The gap between a symbol’s superficial meaning and its underlying meaning together became a blank. Only through careful reading and interpretation of the texts, could readers understand the true meaning of those symbols and the main idea the author intends to express.

First of all, Hawthorne did not elect Goodman Brown and Faith’s name arbitrarily. Their names were ironic. Brown’s first name was Goodman so readers naturally believed that he must be a young nice man, and Faith a pious woman. Nevertheless, as the plot goes deeper, readers realize that both Goodman and Faith betrayed their religion and went to the party of demons. The great contrast created a huge emotional impact on readers, making them think about the reason why they had to do such horrible things, and getting them closer to the theme of the story. Additionally, “Brown” was a mixture of black, white, and red, also symbolizing Goodman Brown’s struggle between good and evil.

Another obvious symbol was the figure of the old man. From reading, readers knew that the old man was a wizard. Nevertheless, he mentioned that he knew Goodman Brown’s father and grandfather, helped them to persecute innocent people, and led them to the meeting. He always existed throughout the history of Brown’s family. Hawthorne also told readers that the old man bore a resemblance to Goodman Brown, while he was not related to his family. Therefore, readers might speculate about the relationship between the old man and Goodman Brown. And one reliable answer was that the old man was evil. He existed throughout man’s history according to the story in the Bible. He played the role of a mirror, reflecting the dark side hidden in the human heart. Once getting the chance, he comes out, leading people to crime, just as the plot written in the story: no matter how respectable and nice a person is, there is darkness in their deep hearts, just like the minister, Goody Cloyse, and Goodman Brown himself. They would finally accept the invitation from the demon.

During the journey towards the forest, the old man carried a staff with him, there being a black snake on it. The snake was a conventional symbol in Western culture. In the Bible, it was the snake that tempted Eve and Adams to eat the forbidden fruit and then man was expelled from heaven. Readers knew that allusion might predict that it was a journey towards corruption and deprivation.

Another important symbol was Faith’s pink ribbon. When Goodman Brown did farewell towards Faith, the pink ribbon was on the hat of Faith. However, Goodman Brown found it hanging on the branch of a tree in the forest. Readers were ensured that Faith also intended to go to the meeting. And the color pink, like brown, was also a mixture of white and red. In Western culture, white symbolized innocence and purity, while red signified blood and guilt. This color again echoed the theme of the story.

In the story, the figures of Goodman Brown’s father and grandfather are frequently mentioned. The first time, Goodman Brown spoke to the old man that his father and grandfather were good people, respectable and pious. Ironically, when they were mentioned for the second time, the old man told Goodman Brown that they also did immoral things: they persecuted innocent women in Salem and harmless Indians, turning their back on their religion and going to the party of demons. Here, Hawthorne did not only criticize merely Goodman Brown’s father and grandfather, but Protestants as a whole. On the one hand, they proclaimed that they believed in a benevolent God and would do good things like him; on the other hand, they committed grave and vicious crimes against others.

What’s more, during the sacrifice at the end, Goodman Brown saw his father and grandfather’s images and they exerted themselves to push him towards the fire, forcing Goodman Brown to join them. At the same time, Goodman also saw a woman’s face. It seemed that was his mother. Compared with his father and grandfather, that woman was sorrowful and woeful for his baptism. Though knowing the baptism was evil and would lead to Goodman Brown’s deprivation, his father and grandfather still pushed him to it and intended to force Goodman Brown to join them. Here, Goodman’s father and grandfather became a symbol of a patriarchal society. Neglecting a young man’s own requirements and wishes, a patriarchal society forced him to do things he detested, while his mother had no right and power to save him, only watching her beloved child degenerate. Once again, readers could feel Hawthorne’s profound thoughts which surpassed his time.

4. Conclusion

With his reader-response theory, Iser proposes a new way of constructing the text’s meaning. He is concerned about readers’ position and creativity during the process of reading and meaning construction, providing researchers with a new way to analyze literary texts. Through the gap between the author’s intentions and readers’ knowledge, or the blank, the author successfully promotes readers’ reading interest and imagination, leading them to take part in the textual interpretation and meaning construction, highlighting the interaction between author and reader, rather than emphasizing one

single side. That's progress in the field of literary criticism.

Though blank theory was proposed until the second half of the 20th century, authors in the past time had already employed it in their writings. In *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne tactfully created various types of blanks to help readers digest the story's details and main idea. Compared with the texts that tell readers every detail directly and make readers lose their positions in the reading process, Hawthorne's writing skill seems more ingenious and artful and readers could also find a position during reading, helping offer diverse literary interpretation.

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