

The Fog of Narration in the Bamboo Grove and the Non-existent "Truth"

-- A brief review of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Bamboo Grove"

Xinwen Zhang^{1,*}, Yuke Zhu²

¹ College of Chinese Languages, Zhejiang Normal University, Zhejiang, China

² College of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Normal University, Zhejiang, China

* Corresponding author: Xinwen Zhang (Email: zhangxinwen1202@163.com)

Abstract: Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "In a Bamboo Grove" is a typical text for the study of "unreliable narration", with a novel and unique narrative structure composed entirely of the testimonies of four people and the confessions of three suspects. However, the overlapping of these seven layers of "first-person" narratives ultimately leads to the loss of "truth". Through "rhetorical method", "cognitive method" and the perspectives of "grammatical person", we can try to study the unreliability of the text, and then, through the heavy narrative mist in the bamboo grove, discover the "truth" that Ryunosuke Akutagawa intends to share with his readers through this complex narrative structure, namely his skepticism about human nature. This "skepticism" tendency of his stems from both personal trauma and the social factors of the time; it creates contradictions in his thoughts and also feeds his literary motifs.

Keywords: "In a Bamboo Grove", Multiple narratives, unreliable narration, Skepticism.

1. The Multiplicity of Narrative Voices Among Seven Individuals

The narrative realm of "In a Bamboo Grove" is reminiscent of an intricately woven contrapuntal composition, where seven interrelated characters unfurl their own narrative in the first-person voice, ultimately constructing an interlacing and contradictory mosaic of 'truths'. [1] This implies that a singular event may be perceived through seven distinct lenses.

1.1. The Unreliability of Four Individuals

The text begins with recounting the 'testimonies' provided by four individuals—a woodcutter, a wandering monk, a constable, and an elderly woman—under the scrutiny of a magistrate, which collectively sketch the primary contours of the event.

Among these four people, the woodcutter contributes insights regarding 'the morning' after the incident—a corpse located in a secluded thicket on a mountain inaccessible to horses, adorned in a light blue robe and a Kyoto-style black gauze cap, bearing a deep stab wound, yet no knife in the vicinity, only a rope and a comb beside cedar roots. Interjecting his own judgment within his testimony, the woodcutter surmises a violent struggle preceding the man's demise. While the wandering monk retrospects on the scene he encountered 'yesterday at noon'—a woman on horseback veiled, dressed in red with a blue lining; a horse with cropped mane, measuring approximately four feet four inches in height; a man armed with a sword, bow and quiver filled with over twenty war arrows. Moved by a Buddhist sense of compassion, the monk laments on the transience of human life. The constable supplements with details from last night's witness, when Tajōmaru was apprehended—clad in dark blue, similarly equipped with a sword and arrows, appearing to have sustained injuries from falling off a short-maned horse. His prior encounters with Tajōmaru taint his testimony with

subjective preconceptions— branding the bandit a 'notorious thief', asserting that Tajōmaru was undoubtedly the murderer, and attributing his fall from the horse to karmic retribution. The elderly woman, as the victim's mother-in-law, provides specific identities for both the deceased and her daughter, her narrative equally laced with evident biases—portraying the victim as gentle and unlikely to have enemies; the daughter as assertive yet not romantically involved with others; and harboring particular animosity towards the bandit, Tajōmaru. [2]

As none of these four were direct participants to the event, their narratives, though not comprehensive, are presumed to be roughly truthful. By piecing together and integrating their accounts, we can extract certain details and clues from the incident. Firstly, the rope discovered by the woodcutter resonates with Tajōmaru's own reference to the tool he used during the crime; the monk's account of the woman and horse echoes the motive Tajōmaru confessed to, and the description of the horse aligns with the constable's discovery of the horse with a cropped mane; the constable's disparaging remarks about Tajōmaru find echoes in the narratives of the three suspects; the elderly woman's background information on the couple sheds light on their attire and the woman's initial fierce resistance as mentioned in the suspects' confessions.

Excluding the subjective conjectures of these four, the information that corresponds and resonates with the direct participants' statements appears credible, aiding readers in discerning some truths from the three suspects' narratives and inferring the ultimate 'truth'. Nonetheless, the woodcutter's claim that the body was killed by a knife, without specifying whether it was Tajōmaru's large sword or the woman's small dagger, and his delayed arrival at the scene, render his account 'unreliable' due to its insufficiency; the monk, as the sole witness from the day before (given the secluded nature of the bamboo grove, it's nearly impossible to find a second witness), offers evidence that is likewise 'unreliable' due to lack of corroboration; the constable's strong bias against Tajōmaru

makes his words 'unreliable' due to his subjectivity; and the elderly woman's familial relationship casts doubt on her impartiality, thus her account is also 'unreliable'. Representing the laborer (woodcutter), the religious figure (monk), the enforcer of justice (constable), and the family member (elderly woman), these four individuals, each from their own vantage point of innocence, morality, legality, and emotion, offer their own 'truths'[3], albeit each imbued with a degree of 'unreliability'.

While 'unreliability' is inescapable, the synthesis of these four accounts with Tajōmaru's own 'confession' still allows for a tentative verdict that Tajōmaru is the assailant. Yet, the samurai's wife's 'confession' at Kiyomizu Temple and the deceased's spirit's 'confession' through a medium both admit to being the true culprits, shattering the deductions made thus far and prompting the reader to doubt under the text's guidance.

1.2. The Unreliability of the Three Suspects

Compared to the four observers, the conspicuous 'unreliability' of the three suspects manifests in two aspects. First, due to differing positional choices and value orientations, the suspects' narrations of the ultimate truth contradict one another, each proclaiming themselves the actual murderer[4]: Tajōmaru, contemptuous of the hypocritical authorities who morally restrain murderer yet often kill populace peo invisibly, brazenly admits to slaying the samurai, driven by avarice towards a tragic end, thereby 'casting himself as an unshackled hero of the wilds'[1]; Masago's narrative is persistently entangled with the issue of shame, with the samurai's gaze depicted repeatedly in the narrative leading to the woman's choice of action, murder as a means to eradicate shame and uphold her dignity; the samurai's narrative is fraught with anguish, defeated by the bandit and then tormented by jealousy and shock, with shame over his own impotence and disappointment in his wife leading him to choose suicide as a 'glorious release' in the samurai spirit. Second, these contradictory accounts are unverifiable by the reader[4]: Tajōmaru's narrative stems from his courtroom confession, Masago's from her temple repentance, and Kanazawa Takehiro is already deceased, with the so-called spirit possession by the medium beyond empirical scrutiny. Each of the three's narratives forms a self-contained whole, and the different contexts of their emergence prevent any possibility of mutual confrontation and questioning.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "In a Bamboo Grove" allows each character to voice their own perspective. Within this field, each narrative voice adds details to the event, yet ultimately, they reflect the narrators' personal stances and viewpoints rather than pointing to the singular 'truth'. The outcome of reading does not involve the possibility of restoring a factual 'truth,' as each of the seven characters' narratives is inherently unreliable.

2. The Unreliable Narratives from Different Storytellers of the Same Event

As a narrative phenomenon, 'unreliable narration' first emerged in Western literature during the 14th and 15th centuries; as a narrative technique, it is present across a variety of narrative texts; and as a core topic of narratological research, it has sparked heated debate and discussion among

Western scholars.[5]

Within Western academia, there is a consensus that the "rhetorical method" and "cognitive (constructivist) method" are the mainstream approaches for studying "unreliable narration".

2.1. Rhetorical Method

In 1961, Booth introduced the concept of "unreliable narration" in "The Rhetoric of Fiction", positing that the criterion for "unreliability" lies in the "narrative distance" between the "narrator" and the "implied author" (Wayne C. Booth,1961). Building on this, Phelan expanded the concept to include the "narrative distance" between the "narrator" and the "author's reader" within the scope of unreliable narration research(James Phelan,2005).[5]

In classic texts such as Henry James's "The Aspern Papers"(1994) and Lu Xun's "A Small Incident(1919)", "unreliable narration" primarily arises from the distance between the "narrator" within the text and the "implied author" outside of it. However, "In a Bamboo Grove" is different; its unreliable narration stems from the distance between different "narrators" within the text. This internal textual distance serves to reveal the disparity between the "narrator" and the "implied author". In other words, Ryunosuke Akutagawa amplifies the distance between "narrators" to hint at the text's unreliability, thereby narrowing the narrative distance between the "implied author" and the "reader", enabling the reader to better grasp the author's true subjective inclination and philosophical thought—through this treatment, readers can experience the profound skepticism underlying "In a Bamboo Grove".

At a time when the study of "unreliable narration" in the West was still nascent and even undefined, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's creation of "In a Bamboo Grove" in 1921 was particularly wise.

2.2. Cognitive Method

After the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of cognitive (constructivist) narratology disrupted the rhetorical method's dominance over the study of "unreliable narration" and challenged and integrated it.

Unlike Booth's perspective, Nünning shifted the judgment of unreliable narration from the "implied author" to the "actual reader", elevating the reader's role(Ansgar Nünning,1999). Yacobi also supported this idea, introducing the role of the "reader" in the judgment and processing of unreliable narration, considering "unreliability" not as a personality trait of the "narrator" but as a "speculative method" or "reading hypothesis" by the reader within the context paradigm(Tamar Yacobi,2005). Building on a critical integration of rhetorical and cognitive methods, Hansen pointed out that attributing "unreliability" solely to a single factor such as the implied author (Booth), the implied reader (Chatman), or the actual reader (Nünning) is insufficient. Instead, "unreliability" should be divided into four types—narrative-internal unreliability, narrative-external unreliability, text-internal unreliability, and text-external unreliability—all of which can operate simultaneously within a single text(Per Krogh Hansen,2008).[5][6]

Although Hansen's integrated viewpoint continues to be questioned by some scholars, in fact, the distinction between these four types can already cover the various "unreliabilities" involved in "In a Bamboo Grove" quite accurately.

"Narrative-internal unreliability" is revealed by linguistic

markers, which can be seen in the words "probably" and "seems" in the testimonies of the woodcutter, wandering monk, constable, and elderly woman; "Narrative-external unreliability" refers to the conflicting versions of the event narrated by different storytellers, mainly existing among the three suspects—Tajōmaru, Masago, and Kanazawa Takehiro; "Text-internal unreliability" refers to the reader's doubt about the reliability of a character due to their personality type, with readers more inclined to believe the woodcutter and the wandering monk, who are less biased, than the constable and the elderly woman, who have familial relations, and more inclined to believe the confessions of the samurai and his wife than those of the notorious thief; "Text-external unreliability" means that the reader brings their own values into the judgment of events or characters, with readers who admire heroism likely to believe Tajōmaru, those who value women's chastity likely to believe Masago, and those who uphold the samurai spirit possibly inclined to acknowledge Kanazawa Takehiro.

2.3. Perspective of "Grammatical Person"

Beyond the two dominant paradigms of rhetoric and cognition, an increasing number of scholars have begun to explore "unreliable narration" from novel perspectives. For instance, Stanzel approaches from the viewpoint of "grammatical person", positing that "by definition, a first-person narrator is an unreliable narrator"(F. K. Stanzel,1984).[5] Afterwards,many scholars adopt this research perspective.

In "In a Bamboo Grove", Ryunosuke Akutagawa divides the text into seven independent "first-person" narratives, leveraging the inherent unreliability of the "first-person" to lay the groundwork for his dual skepticism[7].

Firstly, each individual possesses a motive to distort "facts", and such motives are often self-serving. In "In a Bamboo Grove", the thief, the woman, and the samurai each prefer to bear the stigma of murder to ensure their accounts conform to the societal and ethical expectations of their respective roles, thereby crafting their personal images for individual gain.

Secondly, even if the objective "facts" of the story could be accurately restored, we are still unable to confirm the so-called "truth", as what we consider "facts" are essentially individual interpretations of the world based on subjective perceptions. In the story, a mere glance from the woman after being dishonored receives multiple interpretations: in Tajōmaru's eyes, her gaze is "like a flame", inspiring the bandit to desire her as his wife and resolve to kill the samurai; in the samurai's eyes, her gaze is "vacant" and "beautiful", as if she completely believed the bandit, inciting in him a sense of betrayal; and in the woman's own perception, she receives her husband's cold contempt and returns a look of "shame, sorrow, and anger".

Given that insurmountable barriers exist at both the output and input ends of "truth", an "absolute truth" is doomed to be lost. In this sense, the philosophical nature of the unique narrative structure in "In a Bamboo Grove" seems more evident than its artistry.

3. The Truth Beyond Truth— Ryunosuke Akutagawa's Skepticism

"Life is but a line of poetry by Baudelaire." In 1927, Ryunosuke Akutagawa penned this desolate and pessimistic footnote to life in his posthumous work "A Fool's Life"(1927),

subsequently choosing suicide as a confrontation against all nihilism and suffering.

The academic community concurs that his suicide was undoubtedly influenced by his skeptical inclinations, as he himself professed in "Essentials of Fiction"(1926): "I am a skeptic about everything." Tracing the germination of this skepticism, we can discern that his own life experiences from childhood to adulthood marked the onset of his doubt in human nature, which also nourished the central motifs of his literary creation: whether it was his mother's madness, disputes over his custody between his biological and adoptive fathers, living under others' roofs, his aunt's indulgence before his adulthood, or the burdens of a large family, the torment of illness, the frustration of first love, the threats from a lover in his adulthood—all these placed him in a state of constant unease and sensitivity, allowing him to probe deeply into people's "egoism". Apart from personal traumas, the social environment of the time further deepened his pessimistic view of life and society: growing up during an era of rapid centralization under the Japanese imperial system, the awakened Ryunosuke Akutagawa saw little hope for the future of militarism and capitalism and found no solution, thus falling into profound struggle and doubt.

This skeptical tendency not only led to his ideological vacillation and ultimate demise but also manifested in his many historical-themed stories: in "Saigo Takamori"(1918), he expresses his attitude towards historical facts through the old scholar's assertion that "there is no absolutely correct historical material in the world". Therefore, in his actual writing, he often reinterpreted historical stories with modern consciousness and creative techniques, rather than simply aiming to "reproduce the past". "In a Bamboo Grove" is a prime example, its main plot synthesized from two independent stories in the "Konjaku Monogatari"—"A Wife's Journey to Tanba Province, Her Husband Bound and Abandoned on the Ōi River" and "A Woman Visits the Ubasuteyama Temple, Encountering a Bandit"[8]—and through creative techniques such as limited perspective, unreliable narration, and open-ended conclusion, it reveals the self-serving nature of discourse, expressing profound modern skepticism about human nature as well as reevaluating power, the concept of chastity, and the samurai spirit.

Through the lens of Akutagawa's skepticism, we can delve into the motives behind the actions of each narrator in "In a Bamboo Grove". They unscrupulously embellish their own narratives with various lies to cover up the truth, deconstruct others' narratives, and achieve the effect of constructing a positive self-image, fulfilling self-serving purposes. It is the selfish nature of humanity that creates the greatest unreliability in discourse, obscuring the truth behind the crime and forming the dense fog that envelops "In a Bamboo Grove".

However, when unreliable narration is compounded, we can paradoxically discern the "reliable" reality set behind this "unreliable" truth, namely the "unattainability of truth". This reality is not directly reflected on the surface of the narrative but hidden in its depths, gradually revealed through repeated interpretation and contemplation of the narrative.

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