

Analysis of Transformative Effects of Language Used in Therapeutic Writing

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis of a special category of writing--therapeutic writing and use novel *The Sorrow of War* as an example for deeper study. Comparing with traditional writing, this essay gave the definition of therapeutic writing. Combined with the 4 elements of literary mentioned by M. H. Abrams (1954), main elements of therapeutic writing are given in. These elements are: the therapy (the work), the therapist (the artist), the pathogenesis (the universe), the patient (the audience = the artist). With the adoption of discourse analysis, specific language features of therapeutic writing are induced. In this part, a certain book *The Sorrow of War* is taken as an example and its general features are shown: stream of consciousness style, fragmented and none-liner narrative, repetition, diary-like. Then through more detailed language observation, the essay illustrates how application and performance of the language people use are related to their mental well-being. It is suggested that these findings could be a start of the study in a new kind of writing different from traditional writing like fiction or biography, which may expand the study area from neuroscience and psychology to linguistic aspect. Besides, this paper provides a method for people to alleviate their pain and trauma which is of the practical value nowadays.

1. Introduction

Writing has the power to provoke people to change. Many people who have mental problems may adopt writing therapy to heal and feel soother. There is a new kind of writing related to writing therapy in psychology, known as therapeutic writing. From the end of last century, studies by researchers from different areas tries to reveal the relationships between writing and people's mental health.

Noam Chomsky's book *Language and Mind* argue that the study of language may bring to light inherent properties of human mind.[1] Closely related to writing therapy in psychology, the study of therapeutic writing from a linguistic way has the potential to shed light on people's cognitive capacity and provide some practical value for people and society.

The Sorrow of War is a novel that presents the whole healing process of a soldier who have experienced the Vietnam war. Based on the author's own experience, the novel is real and typical to show various details about therapeutic writing.

For this paper, both general and specific analysis centred on therapeutic writing are covered.

Hopefully, this kind of study may contribute to increasing researches that focus on trauma and language, which is likely to spark the use of therapeutic writing in people's daily life to improve their mental well-being.

2. Literature review

People writes for various reasons. With the development of psychology, neuroscience, researchers became more interested in the therapeutic role that writing plays.

In the domain of psychology, the therapeutic action of writing is a form of expressive therapy, known as writing therapy. The research interest toward the therapeutic function of writing began with the study of American psychologist James W. Pennebaker in 1986^[2]. Many experiments have been done by his team and demonstrated the potential of expressive writing to actually 'boost' people's immune system as well as help people recover from trauma. His book, *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval* was published in 2004 in which he provided people practical tips and encouraged them to write to heal.^[3]

Narrative psychology is another growing field in the late 1980s when researchers turned to focus on self, trauma and the construction of meaning. This refers to a viewpoint or a stance within psychology that is interested in the "storied nature of human conduct"^[4] how human beings deal with experience by constructing stories and listening to the stories of others.

While Pennebaker and narrative psychologist focus on proving the positive influence of writing on people's health and the science of stories, psychologist like Robert Ornstein starts to connected this with neuroscience. By comparing the difference between talking and writing based on the bicameral structure of the brain, he notes that writing might use or even stimulate parts of the brain that are not stimulated by talking^[5]deeper than Robert Ornstein, researchers in the area of neuroscience attempt to find out confusions like how human's brain operates during the process of writing, what kind of change is generated after this therapeutic action, where the traumatic memories go and so on. Neuroscientist Daniel J. Siegel and parenting expert Tina Payne Bryson explain the mechanism of this in their book *The Whole-Brain Child*.^[6] Though this book is not very academic and focus on parenting, the new science used by authors can be considered as a good explanation of how human's brain work when writing their stress or painful experience in a narrative way. In this book, they suggest the core of getting rid of frustration is integration based on the fact that everything people experienced affects the way the brain develops (known as neuroplasticity). Among different kinds of integration that are mention in the book, the horizontal integration and memory integration can well explain the science of writing therapy. Horizontal integration proves that by telling the story, the right brain which is associated with emotion can be linked to the left one which tends toward ideas and rationality. Memory integration explains that story-writing helps people making the implicit memory explicit so people who need to heal can know what actually happens.

As for literary researchers, they focus on literacy trauma theory, analysis of trauma that characters suffer in famous literature works or how the authors of these works gain peace by writing stories. For example, in thesis *The Trauma of Loss as a Turning Point in Elizabeth Gaskell's Works*, the author attempts to take the perspective of Mrs. Gaskell's trauma through the method of textual analysis.^[7] The essay explains Mrs. Gaskell's way of reconstructing her traumatic memory and getting healed through scriptotherapy. Another book *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* collected many typical articles around this topic.^[8]

Different domains explore wiring therapy from specific perspective: the psychology focus on effect, the neuroscience focus on the mechanism and the literary part do research on the content and background of literary works.

For this essay, from a linguistics aspect, the analysis will discuss therapeutic writing based on discourse analysis. Through the specific language observation (words, style, emotional color, etc.) of the novel *The Sorrow of War*, this essay will study the application and performance of the use of language and the psychological transformation of the author during the process of therapeutic writing.

3. Methodology

Discourse refers to all types of texts and talk. Another definition of discourse is language above the sentence or above the clauses.^[9] Discourse analysis (DA; conversation analysis CA), or discourse studies, is an approach to the analysis of written, vocal, or sign language use, or any significant semiotic event. The objects of discourse analysis (discourse, writing, conversation, communicative event) are variously defined in terms of coherent sequences of sentences, propositions, speech, or turns-at-talk. It is a qualitative analysis technique and a study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, and so on.

Rosalind Gill has mentioned that the growth interests of this methodology are consequence and manifestation of the 'turn to language'^[10]. This linguistic turn is impacted by various factors such as the structuralist idea. She also says that there are at least 57 varieties and 4 main themes of discourse analysis, which show the complexity as well as the potential possibility of this field. An important fact about discourse analysis is that discourse analysts view the discourse as a social practice and they consider overall meanings conveyed by language in context (social, historical, political background). Instead of considering language as a mere epiphenomenon, they regarded it as a practice in its own right. That's why the discourse analysis is adopted in this essay.

4. Definition of Therapeutic Writing

Therapeutic writing is a kind of writing that people write to solve their emotional problems when they feel pain because of some traumatic experiences.

Although all kinds of writing can promote people to speak out their inner voice, Therapeutic writing explicit this feature of writing to the most. Before a writer shows something he has written to others, the audience is himself. Different from traditional writing, therapeutic writing focuses more on the writer himself. By writing, the writer can hear himself. Rather than the subtle conception and construction of the framework in the traditional writing works, the motivation of therapeutic writing is human instinct at the beginning. Besides, the language style of healing writing is diary-like and focus more on the writers' inner thought. Both inspiration and the language style are more personal.

When people use language to record things and events, they narrate their memory to present their pains. This is because it is difficult to describe pain. Some literature also prove this: pain cannot be described; it 'shatters language'^[11]; or 'pain is beyond language, it is a sinkhole'.^[12] Therefore, telling stores related to trauma is likely to be more efficient than directly complaining that we are painful. When writing, people become more rational and cautious.

5. Elements of Therapeutic Writing

People who infect virus may have physical illnesses. They need various therapies like medicine or surgeries to recover. This is similar to those who are mentally painful. There should be the patient, the therapy, the therapist and the pathogenesis of therapeutic writing.

To better explain this, 4 elements of literature were put forward by M. H. Abrams's book *The*

Mirror and the Lamp. These 4 elements are works, artists, the universe (or the world) and audiences(or readers). Therefore, as shown in Table 1 we can match each element of literature with therapeutic writing in order to understand the role each element plays during the process of writing.

Table 1: Four Elements of Therapeutic Writing

the therapy	the work	the objects written by the artist
the therapist	the artist	the artist or writer who attempts to write in order to feel more comfortable and be cured
the pathogenesis	the universe	the universe, the world, the environment that leads to people’s trauma
the patient	the audience=the artist	the artist or writer who has suffered from trauma and need to be cured

In the situation of therapeutic writing, the pathogenesis is the universe, the world, the environment that leads to people’s trauma. The therapist is artists, writers who attempts to write in order to feel more comfortable and be cured. The therapy refers to works, the same as novels, or even the piece of arts itself. And the last element, patients, is the audiences who become better after reading the works. But in therapeutic writing, it is obvious that the therapist and the patient are the same person, namely the writer himself. In other word, the people who used to recover by writing perhaps can treat himself by his own works, so the man who does therapeutic writing, is a doctor and a patient at the same time. This is what make the therapeutic writing so special and different.

In book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H Abrams^[13] offers evidence that until the Romantics, literature was typically understood as a mirror reflecting the real world while for Romantics, writing was more like a lamp, which spread the light of the writer’s inner soul to illuminate the world. Not only is the therapeutic writing a mirror to reflect the writer’s painful experience and thoughts, but also a lamp that clarify writer’s disorder and light up his life. Through this process, the writer gets over of his miserable memories and goes into a positive mood.

6. Process of Writing

Therapeutic Writing contains three important elements: Trauma, the act of writing and its outcome. People who infect virus may have physically illness. They need various therapies like medicine or surgeries to recover. This is similar to those who are mentally painful.

Trauma is the virus easily explained as a painful experience. Because of traumatic events, patients may suffer a serious disorder.

The act of writing can be regarded as medicine or surgeries. First, the process may be painful in the short run but beneficial in the long term. Secondly, the writing is more personal. Besides, the writing can often be done in a narrative way. Finally, unexpected description are created when people think more rationally and carefully in order to precisely show their experiences. During writing, the unspoken is spoken.

The outcome is that the virus are eliminated or cannot pose a threat on people’s healthy; the patient is recovered. Therapeutic Writing helps the writer become more positive and calm after writing. In fact, when the writer thinks there is no need to write more about the experience, he is healed and put down his pain.

7. Discourse Analysis

7.1 Introduction of *The Sorrow of the War*

Published in 1990, *The Sorrow of the War* was written by Bao Ninh^[14]. Born in Hanoi in 1952,

Bao Ninh served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade during the Vietnam War and survived. He has said that it was his love of reading literature and writing his own writing helped him gradually get through the trauma of the post-war period^[15]. Based on his own experience, Bao Ninh finished this book.

The book is about a writer named Kien who struggles to overcome his traumatic experience in the Vietnam War ended in 1975. As a former soldier for the North Vietnamese Army, Kien has trouble finding happiness in postwar Vietnam. Tormented by the violence of his past, he starts writing about his experiences, creating a nonlinear, fragmented narrative.

The Sorrow of War could be a typical example of Therapeutic Writing. This essay presents 4 elements of Therapeutic Writing Table 2 based on the novel and explores what the protagonist Kien has written as well as his feeling when writing, which helps to study the language variation under traumatic experience.

Table 2: Four Elements of Therapeutic Writing in *The Sorrow of War*

the therapy	the work	The Sorrow of War
the therapist	the artist	Kien
the pathogenesis	the universe	horrible experience about the Vietnam War
the patient	the audience	Kien

7.2 General Features of *The Sorrow of War*

7.2.1 Stream of Consciousness Style, Fragmented and Non-linear narrative

The novel features in the stream of consciousness style and a non-linear narrative. This kind of style embraces the chaotic nature of human thought. In a non-linear narrative writing, the order of one thing follows from another indirectly and there is no coherent structure or cohesion but Kien's flow of memories.

Kien mentioned this in Process of writing part.

The lines become intermixed and sequences lose their order. (48)

It is a dangerous spin he is in, flying off at a tangent, away from the traditional descriptive writing styles, where everything is orderly. (50)

Another way to explain this feature is through the plot. According to the storyline of the novel, the text can be classified into 5 kinds of part. They are flashback, reality, feelings, thoughts, processing of writing, and changes.

Flashbacks are Kien's memory recollections, which recurs events in Kien's mind when he sees related objects or scene in reality and his nightmares. Kien's flashbacks includes the Jungle of screaming souls, his girlfriend, Phuong and other people he met during the war. Feelings and thoughts are generated after Kien's flashbacks. Process of writing is a specific part which centered on Kien's action of writing. Reality narrative things that are not memory but Kien's observation on real life. Change is the difference of Kien's behavior and thoughts. There are not certain boundaries of this units and they may mix up in some parts.

7.2.2 Repetition

Repetition is another feature of this novel. Same parts of the plot appear repeatedly in the novel. For example, Kien narratives his flashback related to the Jungle of screaming souls 4 times and his girlfriend, Phuong 5 times. He is trapped in his past and tries to get out of it. It is the process of repetitive writing that helps Kien recover.

7.2.3 Diary-like

A diary is a written record of one's experiences, observations, and feelings. For example, the subjects of the following sentences are almost I and we.

We were only able to meet for a moment in my dream... In the thick mist of the dream I could only see Hoa vaguely, far away. But I felt a passionate love and a grieving intimacy I'd not felt for her at the time of our traumatic. I'd only felt shameful impotence, a feeling of defeat and desperate exhaustion.(50)

7.3 The Change of Kien's Language Style

7.3.1 From negative to positive

Kien is immersed in his painful experience and his negative attitude shown by interrogative sentences, negation as well as negative adjectives. By writing, Kien uses them less and less and expressions with positive polarity appears. This change can illustrate that Kien gradually becomes more positive, which can be considered as one of signs that Kien is recovered.

Negation: Negation is a way in which grammar encodes negative polarity into verb phrases, clauses or other utterances. There are varieties of negative structures to express the negative polarity. Kien uses lots of them to describe his thoughts and feelings.

(1) negative indefinite pronouns like nobody, nothing, nowhere

Kien nestled in his jute raincoat, hugging his knees, staring blankly into the rolling stream, thinking of nothing, wanting nothing.(16)

(2) no +none.

There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. (47)

He had no idea of how he would earn his daily living.(72)

(3) neither and nor

Time and his work had taken over his life. He had sought neither opportunities nor responsibilities. (56)

There is no new life, no new era, nor is it hope for a beautiful future that now drives me on, but rather the opposite. (47)

(4) negative adjective which contains a negative prefix or suffix

He became increasingly restless, unable to concentrate, or even to turn up at the university. He sat uncomfortably, unable to relax or plan his days properly. (85)

Interrogative sentences: Interrogative sentences are generally divided between yes-no questions which ask whether or not something is the case and wh-questions, which specify the information being asked about using a word like which, who, how, when, etc.

Kien uses this kind of sentences to show his inner activities. They are the questions that Kien ask himself or ask the world, most of which have no answer. He asks why to find the reasons, asks how to look for method. He attempts to know what is right or wrong.

Yes-no questions:

Was it the empty, blank stare he now saw in the mirror? Was that what they turned from, avoiding his glances? (70)

Is the final scene, the unfinished, bloody dream of this morning, about to intrude itself in his mind? Will the pictures unfold against his wishes as he sits staring at the road? (43)

Words with negative meanings

Kien uses many words and phrases that tends to negative meanings. In the following sentences, “deserted”, “desperate”, “surrender” shows his hopelessness; “lonely”, “utter isolation”, “cold”

shows his loneliness and solitude; “deeply sad”, “suffering” shows his pain; “dark”, “emptiness”, shows Kien is confused and in void.

Like now, when the whole town seems deserted, wet, lonely, cold, and deeply sad. (68)

It was a time of utter isolation, of spiritual emptiness, of surrender. (72)

From now on life may be always dark, full of suffering, with brief moments of happiness. Living somewhere between a dream world and reality, on the knife-edge between the two. (44)

After Kien’ writing and thinking, he starts changing. More words with positive meanings are used. “Peace” shows that Kien’s pain has eased; “powerful”, “urgent”, “pumped” show he became more energetic; “wonderful”, “beautiful” are common words that shows optimistic attitude; “love”, “spring”, “sunshine” are things that are full of hope and warmth.

Something moved within Kien's heart, taking him from turmoil to peace. Something inside him, powerful and urgent, pumped life back into his collapsed spirit and snapped life back into him. It felt like love. Perhaps it was recognition of some wonderful truth deep inside him. (76)

The next morning, rays from the first day of spring shone through to the darkest corner of his room... a lonely-looking soul wandering in the beautiful sunshine. (87)

7.3.2 From obscure to detailed

Flashback part about Phuong can be a good instance to explain this change. Kien recall his girlfriend, Phuong 6 times. At first, there is only 2 paragraphs in page 69 that tells Phuong’s departure. This is the event that stimulates Kien directly. From page 83 to 85, Kien thinks back to Phuong’s departure again. Besides that, he also recalls the new life with Phuong after war. After this, Kien thinks about this childhood and happy time spent with Phuong where they are young between page 117 to 120. Then, Kien misses his girlfriend and tells her departure at the fourth time from page 128 to 146. Dialogues are added to this part. Next flashback part tells what happened to this couple at the beginning of the world during the air raid. At last he recalled the air raid again, more description about the scene and more complete about the story. More details are shown, like the name of train station, the people they met on the train, the type of the train as well as what happened after the air raid.

The length of these 6 parts is gradually increasing, which illustrate that more details are recalled by the author during the repeated process of writing and Kien’s memory of the past is clearer and clearer. Kien does not just focus on one point (Phuong’s departure) and he extends to many other things related to Phuong. At last he faced with the most sorrowful things he experienced with Phuong which he always subconsciously escaped from.

8. Conclusion

The book well presents the whole healing process when people try to ease their pain by writing. People always follow their thought when they are doing therapeutic writing so that the language they used is in a stream of consciousness style. The narrative is fragmented, non-liner and repetitive. Therefore, when people have disorders there is also disorder in their words. They only focus on themselves and don not care about the outside world. So their words are self-centered, personal and subjective. The sign they are recovered from the trauma can be found in the change of language. The narrative becomes more in order and more about the objective world.

The analysis is meaningful because it provides a new angle for people who try to forget their trauma. It would be a good idea for people to try to use more liner and positive language and write things outside rather than their inner world.

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