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DO THEY COMMIT PERJURY?: A STUDY OF REPEATING NARRATIVE OF A CRIME SCENE IN PETER DEXTER'S *PARIS TROUT*

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Abstract
In *Paris Trout*, a novel based on actual cases, American writer Pete Dexter arranges a crime scene to be told eight times from different perspectives. A close look at repeating narratives leads to discovering certain discrepancies between the narrator's account and the characters, especially the criminals'. Dexter renders the criminals' statements questionable by giving the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator authority and letting his account exert the primary effect. Based on the related laws, this essay finds out that the criminals commit perjury in their statements to exonerate themselves. Moreover, Dexter reveals that their illicit doings are under the defense lawyer's instructions. By doing so, Dexter puts lawyers' professional ethics at the center of the story. Showing the truth or winning the lawsuit for the customer? This question is an ethical issue that every lawyer ponders. In order to vigorously promote this kind of thinking, the novelist purposely forms a huge difference in characterization. The defense lawyer is modeled on a lawyer of integrity and honesty who is committed to revealing the truth. Through the ironic change in characterization, Dexter criticizes defense lawyers who don't have professional ethics, a situation rampant in American society in the 1980s.

Keywords: *Paris Trout*, perjury, Pete Dexter, professional ethics, repeating narratives

Introduction
Paris Trout, the 1988 National Book Award winner, is a riveting story of the eponymous character who brutally murders a 14-year-old black girl in a small Georgia town in the 1950s. This novel was adapted into a film with the same name in 1991. Apart from some reviews of the movie (see Pitman, 1991; Young, 1991; Drucker, 1991), Robert Batey (1994) analyzes various contracts in the novel, such as criminal contracts, marriage contracts, and social contracts, and discusses how these contracts contribute to alienation among characters. From the literature review, we can discover that there is insufficient attention paid to the narration of the crime scene, which the author has repeated eight times from different perspectives. More importantly, different from repeating narratives in other novels, such as that in *Rashômon* where three characters recall the crime scene, repeating narratives in *Paris Trout* is unique since, apart from the characters' accounts, it includes an

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authoritative version of the scene. Considering the authority of the omniscient narrative, why does the author Pete Dexter still arrange other characters to describe and recall the scene? This question is the starting point for this essay. Put more precisely, this essay endeavors to investigate the following questions: Is there any discrepancy between the characters' versions of the scene and the authorial one? If there is, why do the witnesses commit perjury? What is the author's purpose in revealing their lies? Through answering these questions, this essay hopes to lay bare Dexter's criticism of American legal society.

Theoretical Framework

The method this essay adopts is close reading and the theory this essay draws on is repeating narrative put forward by Gérard Genette. In chapter three of *Narrative Discourse*, Genette (1980, p. 113) discusses narrative frequency which is "the relations of frequency (or, more simply, of repetition) between the narrative and the diegesis". He further points out three types of narrative frequency. They are singulative narrative which means "*[n]arrating once what happened once*", repeating narrative, which refers to "*[n]arrating n times what happened once*", and iterative narrative, which denotes "*[n]arrating n times what happened n times*" (Genette, 1980, p. 114-115, italics original). This essay mainly focuses on repeating narratives. According to Genette (1980, p. 115), "the same event can be told several times not only with stylistic variations, as is generally the case in Robbe-Grillet, but also with variations in 'point of view,' as in *Rashomon* or *The Sound and the Fury*". Dexter's *Paris Trout* belongs to the second group. Apart from the omniscient narrative about the crime scene, six characters recall it from their points of view.

In discussing the function of repeating narratives, Ruth Hamilton (1986, p. 185) argues that it can "reinforce the theme" of the literary work. For instance, it is applied to the repeating narratives in Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*. In order to reinforce the feeling of guilt, Winterson arranges for Shep to repeat his wife's death seven times because he kills her to end her suffering (see Cheng & Wu, 2020). However, as for the repeating narratives in Dexter's *Paris Trout*, it goes beyond the function of reinforcement since witnesses and defendants must recall the crime scene from their perspectives in the courtroom. Nevertheless, the sequence of the eight repetitions is crucial because it reveals some versions' falsity and condemns the perjurers in court. Therefore, this essay aims to analyze the repeating narratives of a crime scene in Dexter's *Paris Trout* and further figure out the reasons for the defendants' perjuries and the author's criticism.

Findings and Discussion

Repeating narratives of the crime scene

In the novel, the crime scene is described eight times, respectively, from the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator's points of view and six characters. The six characters present at the crime scene fall into two groups: the black people, including the two victims, and the white people, the accused. The testimonies from the first group accord with the authorial narrative by and large. In contrast, the defendants' statements differ significantly. So, this essay mainly analyzes the defendants' description of the crime scene and the narrators.

Dexter first gives readers an omniscient narrative about the crime scene. The fact that the narrator's account comes first is vital because "information and

attitudes presented at an early stage of the text tend to encourage the reader to interpret everything in their light" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, p. 124). Abbott (2002, p. 81) also points out that we readers tend to "privilege, in our memory of a narrative, the first impression we developed early in the reading or witnessing of it". So, readers will interpret the scene based on the information given by the narrator. They know Paris shoots two unarmed women after he hears the girl screaming at the sight of his brass knuckles.

With the first impression, readers will hold suspicion about later versions. For example, when Paris recalls the crime scene to his lawyer Harry Seagraves before the trial, he says that "[t]he girl got in the midst of it — she put herself in the midst — and then the woman. The ruckus moved into the house, where the girl and the woman were [sic] shot" (Dexter, 1988, p. 67-68). Paris repeats twice that the girl voluntarily and actively gets involved in men's struggles. In other words, he emphasizes that the girl's death is self-inflicted. Nevertheless, readers' first impression warns them that Paris's account is incorrect. He lies because he wants to evade his responsibilities. His evasion can be further demonstrated in the aforementioned passive sentence. Paris doesn't say the girl and the woman are shot. By omitting the doer of the action, he refuses to claim the crime. Nevertheless, his trick is useless since the bullets taken from the dead can prove his crime.

As a defense lawyer, Harry knows how to win the case. He continuously gives hints to Paris that he may claim the victim has a pistol. In other words, Harry covertly instructs Paris to claim that he murdered the girl in self-defense. It should be noted that in his statement at the end of the trial, Paris makes the very claim.

However, such a claim should be supported first by others. So, Buster Devonne, who is also present at the crime scene, comes to play his part. When he recalls the scene to the judge and jury in court, he says that "[t]he girl had a pistol" (Dexter, 1988, p. 191). However, he lies because readers have already learned from the omniscient narrative that the girl is unarmed. He lies because the defense lawyer bribes him. Harry confesses later, "'During the course of the trial, ... Buster Devonne asked for a payment for his testimony. We gave him a thousand dollars — I gave him a thousand dollars — for what he said'" (Dexter, 1988, p. 222). There are two things worthy of our attention. First, Harry should bribe the witness, which means he who knows the law very well violates the law. Second, Buster commits perjury even though he has sworn on the *Bible* in the courtroom. Swearing on *Bible* is a solemn event and Peter Leeson says that "[t]he country's religious history may be part of the reason for this [swearing on *Bible* in courtroom]" (47). But Buster should forsake his faith and religion just for economic benefits. Through these ironies, Dexter reflects moral decline and the loss of religious belief.

After Buster's testimony, there comes Paris's statement. He gives a more detailed but imagery scene:

> When I caught up, she'd put her hands under the pillow where the *gun* was. I knew that's what was there. ... I didn't <u>hit</u> her hard enough. She staggered and dropped the *pistol* on the floor, ... And then she took a breath, like it was just starting, and reached to pick *it* up. I <u>shot</u> her in the shoulder right there. ... the girl had got to the *pistol*, and *it* was in her hand again. ... and I began to <u>shoot</u>. I don't know how many times. Three, four, five shots, I honestly don't know. (Dexter, 1988, p. 197, underlines and italics added)

It should be noted that in Paris's version, the girl also has a pistol and intends to fire it before Paris does, and sensing the danger, Paris fires at her. In short, Paris distorts the truth and endeavors to express such a message: he shoots the girl in self-defense, and he is guiltless. "Narratives describe our past ..., providing tellers and listeners with a positive affirmation of the reality of the past and the constancy of selfhood" (Schiff et al., 2006, p. 375). And in Paris's narrative, he tries to convince the judge and jury of his innocence.

Why do They Commit Perjury?

Then, why do Buster and Paris commit perjury or why do they try to convince the judge and the jury that the dead has a pistol? The answer can be found in related laws. According to Article 28 of the Law of Georgia, "A person shall not be considered to have acted unlawfully if he/she commits an act provided for by this Code in self-defense, i.e. injures the wrongdoer during the unlawful infringement to protect his/her person's legally protected interests." As for Paris's case, if he can make the judge and the jury believe that he murders the girl to protect himself, he "shall not be considered to have acted unlawfully". It's his strategy, or more correctly, it's the defense attorney Harry's tactic. From his discussions with Paris's wife Hanna, we can see Harry knows that witnesses and defendants can tell what happened, but the jury decides what happened (Dexter, 1988, p. 145, p. 178). Therefore, he bribes Buster and "subtly instructs Paris in perjury" (Batey, 1994, p. 300) to provide a different version of the crime scene, in an attempt to exonerate his client.

However, Harry's conduct is against professional ethics and the law. According to the 15th Canon of Professional Ethics in American Bar Association (1953, p. 322), "[t]he office of attorney does not permit, much less does it demand of him for any client, violation of law or any manner of fraud or chicane. He must obey his own conscience and not that of his client". Moreover, it should be noted that Harry suffers greatly due to his violation of law and professional ethics. Furthermore, Monroe H. Freedman (1966, p. 1475-1476), a specialist on lawyer's professional ethics, points out that if the attorney knows that his client is going to commit perjury, "the most common method for avoiding the ethical problem just posed is for the lawyer to withdraw from the case". So, Harry who senses Paris's lies at the very beginning (Dexter, 1988, pp. 68-69) and knows that he will commit perjury should withdraw from the case. But he doesn't, and what's worse, he commits more illegal doings which have been analyzed above. Such being the case, it's fair to claim that Dexter in his novel talks extensively about lawyer's "principles and values; and the norms of professionalism" which are "influential in the literature on legal ethics" (Baron & Corbin, 2017, p. 155).

On the other hand, Freedman (1966, p. 1469) raises three questions concerning criminal defense lawyers' professional ethics in his article "Professional Responsibility of the Criminal Defense Lawyer: The Three Hardest Questions", and the third question is "Is it proper to give your client legal advice when you have reason to believe that the knowledge you give him will tempt him to commit perjury?" This question leads us to doubt the propriety of Harry's instructions to Paris. When Paris first comes to discuss the case with Harry, Harry instructs him to tell that the dead girl has a gun:

> "And there were guns in the house," Seagraves said.
> Trout did not answer, did not seem to understand what Seagraves meant.
> "Did you see guns? You said they had guns too."
> "I might," he said.
> "Did anybody touch them?"
> It went slow, with Trout taking his time to consider the answers.
> "I would say so, yes, sir."
> "This girl might of touched a gun?"
> "Might of." (Dexter, 1988, p. 69, underlines added)

In their conversation, there are two things deserving our attention. First, Harry Seagraves gives implicit instructions to Paris Trout. He starts with a positive recognition that "there were guns" and asks Paris if he sees guns. Despite Paris's vague answer, Harry further questions if the victim has touched the gun, which presupposes there are guns. In other words, Harry instructs Paris to claim that there are guns and that the dead girl has touched the gun. Professionally speaking, Harry reminds Paris that he can resort to the excuse of self-defense. Second, Paris, who has received a law education, successfully gets the hidden instructions from Harry, which is indicated by Paris's changed reaction — from not understanding to deep pondering and to a positive answer. From then on, he insists that the girl has a gun.

My decoding of Harry's and Paris's inner feelings and intention from external cues in the above-mentioned externalized narration is essential to infer the undercurrent information. Such active decoding is necessary when we read lightly tagged dialogues. Otherwise, we cannot discover that, to name a few, the heroine in Ernest Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" is pregnant and her lover persuades her to have an abortion, nor can we understand that Hemingway's "The Killers" is a story about Nick discovering evil. Similarly, as for the quoted dialogues in Dexter's *Paris Trout*, we cannot find Harry's hidden instructions if we fail to decode them actively. By "this dramatic technique of representing minds indirectly through pure scene composed entirely of lightly tagged dialogue" (Keen, 2017, p. 171), Dexter expresses his criticism about Harry who should instruct his client to commit perjury.

Dexter's criticism

Dexter's criticism of Harry becomes more salient if readers know that the actual attorney Harry is modeled on is a lawyer of integrity and honesty. *Paris Trout* is written based on actual cases (Dexter and Robillard, 2011, p. 80). Paris is modeled on Marion Wesley Stembridge, who shoots two black women and is sentenced to 1-3 years of prison (Stembridge, 1999). He appeals to the case three times and is exonerated. Marion Ennis, his defense lawyer, is uneasy about the case and drops out during the appeal (Jackson, 2008). Ennis is agitated about Stembridge not serving anytime in jail and commences to collect the evidence for Stembridge's perjury, which leads to Stembridge's revenge. Stembridge shoots Ennis and another lawyer to death and then commits suicide. From the real story, it can be seen that Ennis is a lawyer with a sense of justice. Whereas under Dexter's pen, Harry's conduct contradicts his professional ethics. By changing the image of the defense lawyer, Dexter expresses his criticism of defense lawyers who aim to win lawsuits by any means, regardless of their professional ethics.

Then why does Dexter in the 1980s represent an actual case that happened in the 1950s? In an interview, Dexter confesses that he likes to get inspiration for writing from past events: "I think you've got to live in some meaningful way and live long enough to look back and write about it. I still find inspiration in what's been done to me and for me. You look back on your life in a mature way" (Silva, 2006, p. 40). Apart from his retrospection, we should not ignore that Dexter has been a columnist for *Philadelphia Daily News* and *Sacramento Bee* before he starts writing novels (see Simon, 2007). Moreover, in *Philadelphia Daily News*, there is a column named "attorneys". Such being the case, it's reasonable to claim that Dexter has access to updated information about the American legal system. A close look at the American legal environment in the 1980s leads us to discover that during that time, the American judicial system is a beehive of illicit dealing. Not only do the judges take bribes and lawyers bribe witnesses (Gerhardt, 1989, p. 4; Marcotte, 1987, p. 28), but witnesses and defendants also commit perjury. Just as Douglas R. Richmond (2008, p. 130) points out, "[s]ince 1986, there have been at least forty-five publicly-reported settlements by, or verdicts against, law firms exceeding $20 million, thirty-four of which were attributable in whole or large part to the firm's representation of a dishonest client". Such an environment inevitably leads to "a 'constrained morality' and an 'erosion of ethos' among lawyers" (Loacker, 2022). Based on the actual situation in the 1980s, Dexter expresses his worry: the legal milieu has not improved since the same misdemeanors happen all the time.

Conclusion

Based on the actual cases which happened in the 1950s, Dexter makes some minor changes in characterization and takes advantage of repeating narratives in an attempt to shift the focus from guilt vs. innocence to whether the defense attorney and the defendant will outwit the prosecutor and convince the jury to believe their version of the crime scene. By revealing the cheap tricks, namely bribing and committing perjury, Dexter expresses his criticism of the American legal society and invites readers to contemplate the issue of professional ethics and justice, an eternal issue pondered in every era.

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