



## SEPARATENESS AND CONNECTEDNESS: A STUDY OF WAR NARRATIVE IN VAN BOOY'S *THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS*

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### Abstract

Simon Van Booy, an emerging British novelist, continues to write about war but narrows it down to the separateness and connectedness of war in his novel *The Illusion of Separateness*. Van Booy takes advantage of a series of narrative strategies to create the illusion of separateness at the surface level, but at the deep level of the novel, he reveals that war makes people closely connected with each other, which can be seen in the interlaced, elliptical character relationship diagram of three generations. Therefore, this study, drawing on narrative theory, endeavors to investigate Van Booy's war writing in *The Illusion of Separateness* and explore how the writer uses narrative devices to emphasize the natural elements of war, namely separateness and connectedness. By expounding on these elements and the war narrative in this novel, we can see Van Booy's unique thinking on war and also have a deeper understanding of war.

Keywords: connectedness, separateness, Simon Van Booy, *The Illusion of Separateness*, war narrative

### Introduction

Simon Van Booy (1975) is an emerging British novelist in recent years. His collection of short stories, *Love Begins in Winter*, won the Frank O'Connor Award in 2009. In 2013, he published his second novel, *The Illusion of Separateness*. It presents the devastation and soldiers' psychological trauma due to World War II and emphasizes the separateness and connectedness of war.

Van Booy gets his inspiration from the true story of his wife's grandparents Bert and Annett Knapp (Hustvedt & Van Booy, 2011, p. 24). After Bert gets married, he joins the US Air Force and suddenly disappears on the battlefield. A few months later, his wife receives a telegram from him saying that he will be back soon. In *The Illusion of Separateness*, the couple are John and Harriet Bray. Van Booy also arranges for John to go to the battlefield and send a message of peace to his wife.

After a period of suffering, he finally reunites with his wife. Another protagonist in the novel is named A (Mr. Hugo after the war, hereinafter referred to as Mr. Hugo). He joins the Hitler camp. The two major characters' encounter on the field. After John threatens Mr. Hugo with a gun, the two turn to share food and leave with their backs to each other. Through the two main lines of John and Mr. Hugo, Van Booy connects scattered characters, creating an intertwined elliptical character relationship diagram, so as to maximize the separateness and connectedness of the war.

At present, there are only some book reviews and an article on the novel. From the perspective of eco-criticism, Colăcel (2014, p. 39) maintains that Van Booy's *The Illusion of Separateness* "revisits Ian McEwan's 2001 *Atonement*" and these two novels "share a common language of social and moral responsibility which has something to do with the nature-writing frame of reference". In a book review, Leber (2013, p. 32) says that "[t]his short and deceptively simple novel, which affords the pleasure of discovering its well-wrought patterns, is likely to grow in stature as it lingers in memory". Although scholars have noticed that it is "a fractured but fine-tuned narrative revealed through the sum of its pierced-together parts" (Kania, 2013, p. 34), critics have ignored that Van Booy used this ingenious narrative technique to highlight the separateness and connectedness of war. Therefore, based on the theory of narrative time and narrative space, this paper intends to explore Van Booy's war writing in *The Illusion of Separateness* and investigate how the writer uses narrative devices to strengthen the separateness and connectedness of war.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The method applied in this essay is close reading, which is helpful for us to discover the narrative devices utilized by Van Booy to stand out the separateness and connectedness of war. And the theory that will be used in this paper is narrative time and narrative space, the two "components of the basic conceptual framework for the construction of the narrative world" (Bridgeman, 2010, p. 54).

In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette (1980, p. 33) discusses narrative time. He mentions that story time is "the time of thing told", "the time of the signified" and narrative time is "the time of the narrative", "the time of the signifier". When the temporal order of succession of the events in the story differs from the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative, there appear anachronies or nonlinear narrative time phenomena, which can be subdivided into analepses and prolepses. Analepsis refers to "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Genette, 1980, p. 40). Prolepsis means "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (ibid.).

In terms of narrative space, it is defined in *Dictionary of Narratology* as the "place or places within which the situations and events represented [...] and the

narrating instance(s) occur” (Prince, 1987, p. 88). Gabriel Zoran is believed to construct a relatively systematic and complete structure of space in “Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative” (1984). In accordance with this Israeli scholar’s opinion, space in narrative in the vertical dimension can be categorized into three levels of spatial structure, namely topographical level, chronotopic level, and textual level. Topographical space refers to “space as a static entity” (Zoran, 1984, p. 315). It is the equivalent of physical space which is put forward by Lefebvre. Both of them mean the natural space in which people live. The chronotopic space refers to “the structure imposed on space by events and movements, i.e., by spacetime” (ibid.). And the textual space means “the structure imposed on space by the fact that it is signified within the verbal text” (ibid.).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Separateness of War***

In *The Illusion of Separateness*, Van Booy makes the characters scatter in the cities of the United States, Britain, and France – Los Angeles, New York, Long Island, Manchester, and St. Peter’s Island. John goes to war-torn France and his wife lives alone in the United States. Similarly, Mr. Hugo joins the army and goes to France, parting with his father. The war not only leads to the separation of husband and wife and that of father and son but also causes the disintegration of families. It is worth noting that in order to strengthen the separateness of war, Van Booy constructs the separation of stories and that of characters in the aspects of time and space.

On the one hand, Van Booy uses the device of analepsis to write the separateness of war in *The Illusion of Separateness*. In the novel, Van Booy extends the story timeline from 1939 to 2010, covering characters’ lives during World War II and more than 50 years after the war. But Van Booy does not use linear chronological order to write the story in his novel. Instead, he divides the novel into 15 chapters, and the time point of each chapter falls in a specific year. The time point of the first chapter is 2010, and the last chapter is 1944. In between, there are 1981, 1968, 1942, 2005, 1939, and 2009. It can be seen that the work is in flashback from the big framework. In addition, Van Booy’s favor of analepsis can also be seen in the characters’ narratives. Taking John’s narrative as an example, six chapters center on John:

Chapter 4: John will go to the battlefield in 1942;

Chapter 6: John parachutes from a fighter in 1944;

Chapter 7: a flashback of John’s encounter with his wife in 1939 and his hard military training before joining the war;

The following three chapters follow the 1944 incident in Chapter 6. In Chapter 8, John sees some strangers and flees immediately;

Chapter 10: John confronts Mr. Hugo;

Chapter 13: a flashback of John's sense of guilt after killing a bird when he was 7 years old. Then the author follows the end of Chapter 10, telling that after John inserts a gun into Mr. Hugo's mouth, the two choose to live in peace.

For one thing, it can be seen that these six chapters about John do not appear in succession. Van Booy inserts other characters' stories in between. As a result, the writer strengthens the fragmentation and separation of the story. For another, the only continuous three chapters (Chapters 6, 7, and 8) are also fragmented in terms of content. We can infer that chapter 8 is connected with Chapter 6, but the author chooses to use the device of flashback in Chapter 7 to separate John's landing with a parachute from his escape, which further exaggerates the separateness of war. In addition, at the beginning of Chapter 13, Van Booy first mentions John's deep sense of guilt after killing birds during childhood. Then, the author makes the narrator continue telling the confrontation between John and Mr. Hugo. On the one hand, the story in flashback or "punctual anachrony" (Bal, 2017, p. 80) provides the reason why John gives up killing the enemy. On the other hand, Van Booy interrupts the climax of the novel by inserting the episode of killing birds, dividing the confrontation of the enemy on the battlefield into two halves. For readers, this technique of interruption makes them more deeply aware of the separateness of war.

Mr. Hugo, another soldier in the novel, is the protagonist in three chapters, namely chapters 2, 9, and 15, which are respectively located at the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Compared with those chapters named John, these three chapters about Mr. Hugo are far apart and look fragmented and highly separated. It is noteworthy that Van Booy also uses the technique of analepsis in these three chapters.

Chapter 2: Mr. Hugo meets Danny in 1981;

Chapter 9: Mr. Hugo is treated, recovers in the hospital, and returns to the hospital as a janitor in 1948;

Chapter 15: Mr. Hugo confronts John on the battlefield in 1944, picks up Martin, and is mistakenly shot by soldiers, resulting in the loss of half of his face.

It can be seen that Van Booy divides Mr. Hugo's story into three parts. According to the natural sequence of the story, it should be the sequence of chapter 15, chapter 9, and chapter 2. However, Van Booy goes the opposite way and takes advantage of the device of analepsis to place Mr. Hugo's war experience in the final chapter of the novel, which greatly endows it with significance. At the same time, the author also reveals that everything results from one war.

Against the real historical background of World War II, Van Booy not only highlights the separateness of the story by skillfully dealing with the relationship between story time and narrative time but also constructs a complex and separated

spatial structure to stand out the separateness of war.

As mentioned above, Gabriel Zoran constructs a relatively systematic theory about space form in narrative in his article. According to Zoran's view, topographical space can be a series of opposing spatial concepts (such as inside and outside, village and city). It can be divided up in accordance with the modes of existence of its units (such as divine world and human world, reality and dream). In *The Illusion of Separateness*, Van Booy creates the opposing modes of existence, such as reality and dream. The novelist tends to blur the boundary between reality and dreams. Taking Mr. Hugo's dream as an example, after describing that Mr. Hugo sees Danny home, the author leads the readers into Mr. Hugo's dream but does not tell the readers that it was a dream. Readers will be confused at first reading, but then they will realize that this is only Mr. Hugo's dream. In his dream, Mr. Hugo witnesses Danny and his mother being forcibly separated by the police, and Danny's mother is killed. In this episode, Van Booy secretly arranges a coincidence: in reality, Mr. Hugo is a Nazi party, adhering to separating Jews from other races. In his dream, Mr. Hugo witnesses the heart-piercing separation of the black mother and son. With the help of this dual separation, the author has greatly strengthened the separateness of war.

The second level of the vertical dimension of Zoran's narrative space is the chronotopic space, which refers to the spatial structure formed by the events and movements in the narrative, including synchronic relations and diachronic relations. The former refers to the interrelationship of the objects at any narrative point, in motion or in rest in the text, while the latter refers to the movement of the plot in a certain direction. The synchronic relationship provides a good perspective for interpreting the contrast between the motion and the rest constructed by Van Booy. In *The Illusion of Separateness*, Mr. Hugo and John are in motion during the war, especially in the period of self-protecting. Their running state is in sharp contrast to the static state of the native French. Taking Mr. Hugo's escape as an example, since he separates from John, he receives help at a peasant woman's house and gains food from an enthusiastic woman in a restaurant, but he has to separate from them in the end. As for John's escape, he is treated at peasant Paul's house and escapes the interrogation of the enemy in a barbershop, but he is also forced to separate from them in the end. Therefore, it's fair to contend that Van Booy spends a lot of time describing their escape journey in order to highlight the separateness of the war.

The cause of World War II was Hitler's propaganda that he wanted to establish the great Germanic empire. He claimed that all Slavic peoples - Russians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians - should be excluded and exterminated first and labeled them as "subhuman" (Bourke, 2001, p. 120). In addition, anti-Semitism is an integral part of fascism, and Holocaust is "an integral part of World War II" (Lassner, 2009, p. 179). When the European war broke out, Hitler warned that the consequences of the war would be the extinction of the Jewish nation in Europe. The result of war is also multi-dimensional separation. In

order to maximize the separateness of the war, Van Booy uses a series of narrative techniques in *The Illusion of Separateness* and coincidentally constructs the separation of the story, the sense of separation of space, and the forced separation of characters at the aspects of time and space.

### ***Connectedness of War***

As the title “The Illusion of Separateness” suggests, the separateness of war written by Van Booy on the surface of the novel is an illusion. In fact, in the depth of the work, the author skillfully reveals the connectedness of war. In his works, Van Booy often uses weaving techniques to connect the characters. For example, in his first novel, *Everything Beautiful Began After* (2011), Van Booy connects three young people who are trapped in the past through a series of coincidences. While in *The Illusion of Separateness*, Van Booy connects characters with the grand historical background of World War II, highlighting the connectedness of the war.

In 1929, the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy proposed the “small world theory”. He “suggested that any two persons are distanced by at most six friendship links” (Backstrom, Boldi, Rosa, Ugander, & Vigna, 2012, p. 33). Stanley Milgram also conducts an experiment which demonstrates that “taken randomly two people in the United States, these are separated by a chain of relationships involving six acquaintance links” (Roveri, Carcaterra, Molinari, & Pepe, 2020, p. 2-3). Coincidentally, in *The Illusion of Separateness*, there are six characters in chapter titles. Van Booy arranged the six characters to connect with each other, forming an intertwined elliptical character relationship diagram. As the Kirkus review (2013, p. 224) says: “Unlike the author’s previous works, this novel doesn’t emphasize romance, but the author retains an abiding interest in interconnectedness”.

But Van Booy does not explicitly point out the relationship among the characters. On the contrary, he uses some narrative skills to invite the readers to infer the relationship network of the characters. The most important technique is to change the narrative perspective. Professor Dan Shen (2019, p. 224-225) mentions in *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction* that the shift of point of view can create suspense. In *The Illusion of Separateness*, Van Booy creates suspense and a sense of mystery squarely by changing the perspective. When the narrator introduces John’s opponent in the penultimate chapter, the author does not arrange for the omniscient narrator to play the privilege of knowing everything but uses John’s limited perspective to call Mr. Hugo the enemy. Similarly, in the last chapter of the work, when introducing Mr. Hugo’s opponent, the author also gives up the omniscient perspective and adopts Mr. Hugo’s limited perspective, without directly stating that the enemy is John. Only after reading through the novel can we readers suddenly realize it turns out that Mr. Hugo and John are enemies. At this time, we admire the author’s ingenious layout and exquisite narrative techniques. This also echoes the title of the novel: everything is just an “illusion of separateness” since the two people who seem to have no connection have already been secretly

connected through the war.

In addition to shifting the narrative perspective to delay the disclosure of the relationship between characters, Van Booy also takes into consideration the choice of words and sentences and the layout of the text. In the first chapter of the novel, when talking about the relationship between Martin and Mr. Hugo, the author mentions that “a disfigured person gave it to others in Paris a long time ago” (Van Booy, 2013, p. 14). The personal pronoun “it” prevents the reader from directly understanding the truth. If Van Booy uses the personal pronoun “he” here, the reader will know the relationship between Martin and Mr. Hugo at the beginning. However, the author uses the technique of defamiliarization to make readers ignore this key information in his “hypnotism”. In the second repetition, the author points out that Martin “was given to his mother by a man he can’t even imagine” (Van Booy, 2013, p. 19). Using the vague phrase, “a man”, Van Booy once again conceals the relationship between Mr. Hugo and Martin from the readers. In addition, in the first chapter, the author describes that when Mr. Hugo hears the song hummed by Martin on the verge of death, he is familiar with it. But the author does not further explain the familiarity here. It is not until the last chapter of the novel that the author expounds that Mr. Hugo sings this song to appease Martin who is crying in his infancy. Although Van Booy secretly uses the acoustic image to connect the two characters who have not been seen in decades, the span between the first chapter and the last chapter prevents readers from easily discovering the connection between the characters through the image of the song.

Moreover, the author also uses a cover-up to lead readers to draw a preliminary character diagram. In the first chapter, the author arranges the narrator to explain that Martin is kind-hearted and often brings food to the homeless, and the disfigured man (i.e. Mr. Hugo) is one of the homeless. Reading here, the reader will simply think that the relationship between Martin and Mr. Hugo is limited to this - the helper and the recipient. But in the last chapter, the author breaks the reader’s cognition and points out the truth: Mr. Hugo saves the baby Martin in the war. As a result, Van Booy creates a circular reciprocating structure: Mr. Hugo saves Martin in the war, Martin sends food to Mr. Hugo when he becomes a tramp, and Mr. Hugo finally dies in Martin’s arms. As the book review says: “At first glance, clues to what’s happening seem uncomfortably scattered; at second glance, the story snaps together beautifully” (Hoffert, 2013, p. 105).

What’s more complicated is that on the basis of interweaving the elliptical character relationship diagram, Van Booy arranges the characters to form three generations through the war: John, Mr. Hugo, and Anne-Lise are the first generation; Martin, the representative of the newborn in the war, is the second generation; Danny, Amelia, and Sébastien, as representatives after the war, are the third generation.

The first generation who participate in the war witness its cruelty, endure the psychological pressure beyond the limit and suffer from post-traumatic stress

disorder, which brings serious sequelae to the body and mind. “The Second World War, perhaps more than any war before it, raises the question of how war can be held in the mind when the mind itself is under siege” (Stonebridge, 2009, p. 194). As for John, his mind is under siege of the war. John thinks he is indirectly responsible for his granddaughter’s blindness because he wishes he could be blind so that he could avoid witnessing the devastation and destruction of the war. In addition, Van Booy arranges for John to scream in the middle of the night. John can open his heart and face life calmly only after talking with other veterans. Likewise, Mr. Hugo keeps reminding himself that he has committed heinous crimes and is hated by the world. Mr. Hugo repeats three times “I was one of those, remember – one of those: hated” (Van Booy, 2013, p. 73, 76, 79). This repetition highlights Mr. Hugo’s inner suffering and post-war regret. To make matters worse, Mr. Hugo often has nightmares. As mentioned earlier, he dreams that his neighbor Danny and his mother are forcibly separated by the police, and Danny’s mother is shot dead. The image of the gun reminds Mr. Hugo that he has also shot and killed people on the battlefield and committed the evil act of forcibly separating people. In addition, the author points out that Danny and his mother are from Nigeria, that is, they are black. In the novel, the author mentions many times that Danny and his mother have repeatedly suffered malicious abuse and racial discrimination. On the one hand, the author suggests that the incident of Mr. Hugo’s joining Hitler’s camp is similar to the white police’s separating the black mother and son: the span of 30 years has not extinguished the white people’s sense of racial superiority, and they still commit evil deeds on the battlefield or in daily life. This similarity conveys the author’s idea: be it war or racial discrimination, white people with a sense of superiority is committed to separating themselves from the inferior. But separation is only an illusion because all mankind is closely related and connected. The author constantly reminds readers that our sense of individuality is wrong. To some extent, we are all part of a larger whole.

As a representative of the newborn in the war, Martin is the link between the first generation. Martin connects Mr. Hugo to Anne-Lise. At the critical moment, Mr. Hugo hands Martin to the woman next to him. The woman is Anne-Lise. In addition, Martin who is born in the war is a brand-new life, who brings infinite hope to the war-wounded generation: Mr. Hugo hopes that he can stay away from the battlefield and live a simple life with Martin. It is worth noting that Martin is Jewish. Although the author does not specify Martin’s racial identity, he implies it through a series of images related to Jews. For instance, Martin has been circumcised and we know “[f]or Jews, circumcision is a religious requirement” (Rosen, 2010, p. 1124). Another piece of evidence is the yarmulke and “[t]he yarmulke is one of the most familiar external markers of Jewishness” (Milligan, 2013, p. 71). In the novel, many guests wearing yarmulkes attend Martin’s adult ceremony, which indicates that Martin is a Jew. Martin’s Jewish identity renders the story complicated. On the one hand, as a Jew, Martin is the target of the Nazi massacre, but he is saved by Mr.

Hugo who was a Nazi, and brings hope to Mr. Hugo. On the other hand, as the representative of newborn babies on the battlefield, Martin symbolizes the continuation of life and reveals the relevance of life.

As postwar representatives, the third generation, Danny, Amelia, and Sébarstien, have not personally experienced the cruel, ruthless World War II, but they are committed to showing the public about the war. Danny is a cutting-edge director and his third film titled *Ste. Anne's Night* is a great success. As can be seen from the title of the film, this is about the heroic deeds of Martin's adoptive mother Anne-Lise. Although Danny doesn't know Anne-Lise and hasn't witnessed her heroic killing of the enemy and defending the country in the name of Sainte Anne in the war, Danny still completes his mission and introduces the heroine to the public. Similarly, Amelia devotes herself to the exhibition of the photos lost by soldiers on the battlefield. As a blind person, she is mainly responsible for enabling other blind people to perceive the story in the photo, allowing them to touch and smell the objects with the same material as that in the photo, and telling them about the discoverer of the photo.

In addition, the author arranges for Sébarstien to donate a photo for Amelia's exhibition. He finds the picture in the wreckage of a plane behind the village. Coincidentally, the woman in the picture is Amelia's grandmother, John's wife. John forgets to take the picture away before parachuting. Miraculously, it is still intact after the plane crashes. This is the author's intention to specially arrange the transmission of war relics among the characters, so as to make the connection between the characters. When talking about the function of coincidence, David Lodge (2011, p. 150), a British novelist and literary theorist, says, "[c]oincidence, which surprises us in real life with symmetries we don't expect to find there, is all too obviously a structural device in fiction". Through this structural skill, Van Booy strengthens the connectedness of war. The meaning of life also lies in finding connections, just like John who is always "trying to make connections" (Van Booy, 2013, p. 109).

Significantly, Amelia names the exhibition "THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS". Here, Van Booy points out again that separateness is an illusion, because no matter where we are, we are closely connected and never separated. "Each and every man is at the same time separate from his fellows and related to them" (as cited in Lang-Takac & Osterweil, 1992, p. 277). As Van Booy quoted in his inscription the words of master Thich Nhat NaNH: "we are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness."

It can be seen that on the basis of the elliptical character diagram, the author sets up three generations to skillfully connect the soldiers, the newborn in the war, and the figures after the war. In both horizontal and vertical dimensions, the characters of the novel are interrelated with each other. The generation who participate in the war do not want to talk about the war. Most soldiers are unwilling to talk to their relatives and friends about what they saw, heard, and did in the war.

Anne-Lise refuses to admit that she is a heroine. John wouldn't tell anyone about his war experience. Similarly, Mr. Hugo refuses to mention whether his disfigurement is related to the war. While the third generation of characters in the novel tried to tell the war story. This weaving technique reflects the author's commitment to conveying his thinking: Although the war is cruel, it closely connects people and guides people to reflect on history, face the present and embrace the future.

### Conclusion

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf sets the story of Clarissa and Septimus as two parallel lines. They never know or meet each other. It was not until the last dinner that Woolf lets Clarissa know of the stranger's death. Thus, the two parallel lines are related: Septimus's suicide makes Clarissa reflect on life and death and face her own existence. In *The Illusion of Separateness*, Van Booy's arrangement is more complex. He arranges six characters to act as six independent points of the novel, which are distributed in each chapter of the work. In the narrative progression, the author connects the six characters through the two main lines of John and Mr. Hugo to form an intertwined elliptical character relationship diagram of three generations. Through the analysis of Van Booy's narrative technique, we find that the author specially writes the story as a fragment, and shows the separateness and connectedness of the war through the separation and reunion of the main characters. Van Booy does not personally experience the war and has no direct memory of World War II, but he shoulders the responsibility to write war with the conscience of the writer and continues the motif repeatedly presented in world literature.

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