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Research on Michael Morpurgo's novel writing

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Abstract

Michael Morpurgo is an outstanding writer in the field of British children's literature. Morpurgo's childhood experiences and his love for nature are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for his literary creation. The vivid characters and animal images in Morpurgo's works convey his anti-war attitude.

Keywords: Michael morpurgo, war, animals, children

Introduction

Morpurgo, who graduated from King's College London, discovered his talent for storytelling after working as a teacher. "I had never thought or even imagined I could be a writer. My ambition as a boy was not to become the next Robert Louis Stevenson, but to play rugby for England. 'Snug' was one of the very first stories I ever wrote, and it was the first story of my own I told, in the last half-hour of the school day, to my Year 6 class at Wickhambreaux Primary. It was the most wonderful half-hour"^[1]. He believes that creating stories is an art^[2]. Stories can connect and inspire people.

Michael Morpurgo was awarded the British children's book laureate between 2003 and 2005. Besides, he was awarded three Royal Prizes and a knighthood for his outstanding contributions in children literature. He is also a teacher who enjoys telling stories in class and a philanthropist who advocates natural education. What has made him renowned worldwide is his war novels that are compatible with elementary school students, such as *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful*. As the laureate writer of British children's literature, Morpurgo not only draws inspiration from his childhood memories, but also from other places and events.

Michael Morpurgo is good at switching narrative strategies in war novels. *War Horse* (1982) adopts animal narrative. *Private Peaceful* (2003) and *Shadow* (2010) adopt non-linear narrative. *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips* (2005) and *Waiting for Anya* (1990) adopt diary form. *Out of the Ashes* (2001) and *Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea* (2006) adopt first person narrative. The plump character images, friendly animal images, and exquisite narrative strategies not only demonstrate his literary skills, but also constitute the internal tension of the text, deepening the aesthetics of his novels.

Utilizing Childhood Experiences

Michael Morpurgo's parents had a great influence on his early life. The father is often absent and the relationship between father and son is not harmonious in his works. Compared to the absence of father, the female characters in Morpurgo's works are more gentle and friendly. The relationship between mother and son is relatively harmonious.

Morpurgo's mother loves to tell him stories, and he became interested in literature from the bottom of his heart. He attended the independent prep school Mount House in Devon until he was 13. He then went to The King's School, an independent school in Canterbury. He was later trained for the British Army at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst which is the most famous Military Institution in Britain, but his military career had to be closed because of his accidental injury. After that, he graduated with a 3rd class degree in English and French from King's College, London, followed by a step into the teaching profession and a job in a primary school in Kent as a teacher. While he was teaching, he discovered his talent for storytelling and he liked to tell children stories. It was in Kent Michael Morpurgo discovered he wanted to write for children.

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Storytelling stimulated Morpurgo's enthusiasm to write. His writing career was inspired by Ted Hughes' Poetry in the Making, Paul Gallico's The Snow Goose and Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. In 1974, Morpurgo published his first novel *It Never Rained: Five Stories* at the age of 31, and then he began his writing career. Michael once said to a journalist three people are very influential in my life. Francis Cammaerts, Morpurgo's uncle, who objected to the Nazis during World War II, rescued by his comrades-in-arms from the execution ground. Morpurgo regarded his uncle as a hero because of his legend experience. Ted Hughes was the second influential person for Morpurgo. Both Hughes and Morpurgo lived in Devon, and Hughes was not only his neighbor, but also his friend and mentor in life. In 1982, *War Horse*, Morpurgo's favorite book, was shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize, but at last he failed in getting the prize, so he felt quite frustrated. Next day, Hughes invited Morpurgo to go fishing and enlightened Morpurgo. It was Hughes who inspired Morpurgo to start his writing career. Clare Morpurgo, Morpurgo's wife and the eldest daughter of Sir Allen Lane who was the founder of Penguin Books, helped Morpurgo a lot. When Morpurgo was writing, Clare would talk about the plot with him. After finishing each chapter, Clare always made her comments upon the work.

In the absence of the father, the protagonists in the stories have no other way but to grow up on their own, which constitutes a major feature of Morpurgo's novels. For example, in *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips*, Lily Tregenze mentioned in her diary that her father joined the army and lost his life. In *Private Peaceful*, the death of Thomas's father caused him to face the psychological burden alone; In *A Medal for Leroy* (2012), Mike's father Leroy was a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force, and his father died before he was born. In *Mr. Nobody's eyes*, Harry's father was a soldier and died in the plane crash. In *Running Wild*, Will's father died in the Iraq War. In *My Father Is a Polar Bear*, Andrew and Terry did not know their biological father until they met their biological father through TV. In contrast to the absent father, resourceful and kind female characters abound in Morpurgo's work, such as the Old lady in *The Butterfly Lion* (1996), Mike's mother in *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999), Thomas's mother Mrs. Peaceful in *Private Peaceful* (2003), Auntie Snowdrop in *A Medal For Leroy* (2012), and Mrs Pettigrew in *Homecoming* (2012). These female characters are good listeners in Morpurgo's stories. Although they are not central characters, these female characters help unfold the narrative and plot.

Children are the father of adults. Adults should not forget their childhood, but they should understand children by returning to their childhood so as to create a suitable environment for children's physical and mental development. The writing of youth novels often leads Morpurgo back to his childhood. Morpurgo's works are deeply influenced by his childhood experiences, and the lack of fathers' image is of great significance for the trauma narrative in Morpurgo's novels. Father is a reliable image, while mother is a weak person in the historical context of war. Therefore, as a young protagonist, there is no dependence, no way out, and they can only rely on themselves to grow. Growth is the inevitable thing and the only way out for the protagonist^[3]. The lack of father's image has become one of the characteristics of Morpurgo's youth novel series.

Representing the Trauma Caused by War

Morpurgo's writing was influenced by World War II. Presenting the universal suffering of war was the most important driving force for his writing. Born in 1943, Morpurgo experienced the evacuation during World War II when he was young. He felt the immense trauma brought by the war in his unstable childhood: the breakdown of his family, his biological father's departure and his mother's remarriage. The fragmentation of his entire family was caused by war, so he placed the family separation within the grand historical context of war. Morpurgo was very sensitive and obsessed with fantasy, blending the reality with fantasies in his stories.

Morpurgo often explores the separation of human and animals in wartime contexts, such as *The Butterfly Lion*, *War Horse*, and *Private Peaceful*, set in World War I, while *The Mozart Question* and *Half a Man* are set in World War II. In dark times that threaten to destroy faith in humanity, Morpurgo shows the power of love and compassion in his novels. These painful novels reveal an important proposition in children's literature - the proper way of dimension.^[4] In *Private Peaceful*, the horrors of war and the cruelty of Charlie's execution are opposed to the love between Thomas and Charlie. Thomas and Charlie oppose the inhumane demands made by the army. Charlie, who refuses to leave his wounded brother, thus defies the orders of his superiors and is ultimately shot and executed. Soldiers on both sides are disgusted by killing each other. The themes of disillusionment and aversion to killing are also the theme of *War Horse*^[5]. In *Private Peaceful*, Charlie's crime is to refuse the orders of the bullying sergeant. In fact, Charlie possesses heroic courage, poise, and leadership, which suggests that while the attitude to war in contemporary books is completely different from that of the past, the characteristics of the ideal soldier remain the same.^[6] Whether a person is a hero should not be judged by whether he is willing to risk his life, but by whether he can maintain his composure when others are panicking or even making wrong decisions.

Morpurgo presents a more difficult subject

The Holocaust. Most of novels are modeled on others' traumatic experiences in World War II. The "safety" to be established in the creation involves not only the reaction of the child reader, but also the psychological reaction of the creator himself. *The Mozart Question* presents the horrors of the Holocaust in a way suitable for children. The fledgling journalist Lesley is sent to Venice to interview the world-famous violinist, Mr. Paulo Levi, who is now an old man and tells a young reporter the story of his life in World War II. Morpurgo does not shy away from the pain experienced by the victims of the Holocaust, and the narrative of recollection can create a psychological distance from the reader. The shock of surviving the Holocaust affirms the power of humanity.

In *Half a Man* (2014), the protagonist Mike grew up feeling a mixture of fear and curiosity towards his grandfather, whose face was burned. Mike's grandfather was always silent every time he appeared at Mike's house. Due to spend the summer vacation at his grandfather's house, Mike was able to learn the story behind his grandfather's burned face. His grandfather was a severely burned veteran in World War II. Not only did he suffer for the rest of his life, but his family also endured emotional tests because of this

experience. The survivors' leisurely narrative, which unfolds in detail, can be seen as a kind of resistance and digestion to the traumatic experience that weighs on them like a rock in their memory. While recollecting the bitter memory, they still strive to depict the looming "sweetness" in it. After his grandfather revealed the truth, Mike helped his grandfather heal the pain in his heart, and then reunited the long-broken family.

Representing war in children's literature not only expands the scope of the subject, but also deepens its ideological matrix^[7]. Morpurgo adopts the survivor as witness to narrate the story which contains traumatic memory, and he strives to review and examine the traumatic memory in a relatively safe way for both the author and children. War leaves people with not only pain and suffering, but also enormous psychological trauma that are difficult to heal. The criticism of war and the questioning of human nature are the important reasons why Morpurgo continued to write and reflect on the war.

Revealing Love for Nature

Many of Morpurgo's books are set in rural areas. His stories extol perseverance, courage, and mutual understanding, which contain ethical wisdom that transcends everyday trivialities. The common themes in many of Morpurgo's novels include the natural environmental problems faced by rural people in small towns, the interdependence between humans and animals, and the relationship between the elderly and children. The values conveyed by Morpurgo's works are relevant to contemporary social problems.

Ted Hughes was a friend and mentor of Morpurgo's writing career, both of whom lived in Devonshire. Ted understood something more profound: that being close to nature was part of our elemental being, and that it should be a part of every child's heritage. Like his late friend and mentor Ted Hughes, Morpurgo has a deep emotional attachment to nature. For this reason, Morpurgo and his wife Clare began setting up a charity farm for urban children in 1967. The couple personally operated and served as teachers in the farm. They invited the school in the city to organize children to live on their farm for a week, experience farming, raise livestock, exercise in the fields, and have close contact with nature. At present, City Children's Farms have been established, which are located in Devonshire, England, in Iddesleigh. This is also the setting of *War Horse* and *Peaceful*. Nowadays, not far from the City Children's Farm, there is also a *War Horse Farm* open to ordinary tourists. The couple loved rural field, and Morpurgo even said, "If I could paint the scenery of heaven, it would definitely not be far from the surroundings of Iddesleigh." It can be said that in both literary and non-literary practice, Morpurgo helps children transcend the boundaries of daily experience. Through their contact with nature, children not only understand the world, but also understand their own role in the world.

In *Homecoming* (2012), people chose the wetland to build a nuclear power plant where Mrs. Pettigrew lived. Afterwards, the abandoned nuclear power plant destroyed the tranquility of the village and the beautiful childhood memories. In the process of continuous evolution and transformation of nature, human have received more and more dividends, felt the strength of human power, and mistakenly believed that human power can be obtained from nature without restraint, and the ecological imbalance it brings can cause fatal harm

to us. The big whale stranded in River Thames in *This Morning I Met A Whale* sends a message to Mike: humans must make up for the damage they have caused to the earth, otherwise it will be too late. Mike chose to spend his whole life fulfilling the promise he made to the whale. Respect and gratitude are the moral foundation for us to understand ecological relationships and establish ecological ethics. Respect is based on equality. An equal mindset will bring about genuine understanding, which in turn will lead to achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Animals play an important role in Morpurgo's novels. Morpurgo always focuses on the children and animals in the war so as to represent the experiences of children and animals in wars, such as the British peasant boy Albert and the pony Joey, the Peaceful brothers and the little dog, the black soldier Leroy and the little dog Jasper; and the French shepherd Joe and sheep who helped Jewish people transit through Spain; The British boy Will and the elephant Oona in *Running Wild* (2009) and the Afghan boy Aman and his little dog, who were forced to flee to England after losing his home in the Afghan War. While his novels represent complex and crude war from children's perspective, he cleverly incorporates animals into his writing to invoke a sense of warmth.

In Morpurgo's works, the lives of the elderly are very simple, who live in harmony with nature. The old people give back more love to nature than they receive from it. The most relevant example may be *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999), which tells the story of a little boy named Mike who accidentally falls into the Pacific Ocean from a sailboat. The next morning, he found himself on a deserted island, rescued by Japanese World War II veteran Kensuke who lived alone on the island. The old man gave Mike a lot of help, and they developed a deep friendship through limited language communication. The relationship between them are like grandparents and grandchildren, as well as friends who forget their age. As their relationship developed, Mike experienced the integration with nature. He brings the stranded little turtle back to the sea and save chimpanzees from hunters. In the end, Mike had to go home, but Kensuke was happy to stay on the deserted island. He has long regarded animals as his relatives. Once he leaves, the animals in the island cannot resist the slaughter of hunters. He must stay in his territory to protect animals. In addition, Marty built an animal "ark" to take care of some animals killed by hunters in *Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea* (2006). Will and Oona in *Running Wild* (2009) were chased by hunters. Fortunately, they were saved by Dr. Gerding. Will decided to rescue animals in the orangutan orphanage established by Dr. Gerding. These characters show gratitude towards nature.

Morpurgo employs the meeting of the elderly and children in his novels repeatedly and creatively, which allows people from different cultures, ages, and nationalities to communicate with each other. His stories aim to cross national and species boundaries. Many of Morpurgo's novels depict heartfelt emotions between the elderly and young. *Kensuke's Kingdom* (1999) and *Running Wild* (2009) are not only stories about adventures on deserted islands or jungles, but also cleverly arrange the encounter and acquaintance between an old man and a young child. These older characters usually give children more care and sympathy because the relationship between the elderly and

children is usually not affected by conflicts between parents and children.

For a long time, Morpurgo has spoken for the rights of neglected people and animals. Every story since has had a true event, a historical happening, a memory, at its heart and I have told it my way. *A Medal For Leroy* (2012) and *Private Peaceful* (2003) speak for the rights of soldiers who suffered injustice in World War I. *Alone on a Wide, Wide Sea* (2006) and *Shadow* (2010) speak for the rights of orphans and refugees. *War Horse* (1982) and *Running Wild* (2009) speak for animal rights. Morpurgo consistently regards animals as companions for children to face difficulties and teach children to respect the space of other creatures.

Moral models is particularly important for children who are developing their minds, especially in the cultivation of morality. Morpurgo's works represent many humans and animals who are friendly to each other. The relationship between humans and nature in small towns and rural areas reflects ecological care, encourages children to think from different perspectives and find a balance between outside world and themselves.

Conclusion

Throughout Morpurgo's literary creations, his childhood life, the trauma of war, and his love for nature are the fundamental foundations of his literary creation. Morpurgo always rooted his literary creation in his childhood experiences, drew inspiration from nature and past memories, and combined them to express his understanding of life and society through the characters and animals in his works. Morpurgo actively inherits the tradition of British literature, and he attaches great importance to visiting schools and interacting with children's readers. As you age, it's easy to start feeling that you've lost contact with the world and feel like you're being cut off from the world and the people who matter the most to you. Morpurgo keeps in touch with his own roots. It is his connection with people and places that makes Morpurgo feel alive. Therefore, the stories are told by old generation in Morpurgo's novels, and the storytellers provide emotional and cultural connections for younger generation, through which past values, beliefs, and experiences are transmitted.

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