

Sensory Narration in Oates's Four Summers

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Abstract: The four parts of Oates's novel *Four Summers* are stories, which correspond to Sissie's four key stages from infancy, childhood, adolescence, to youth respectively, and describe Sissie's growing experience. This paper attempts to explore how the novel superbly displays the cognitive process of girls at the bottom and the narrative skills of their spiritual predicament from the sensitive, lonely and fearful sensory feelings of Sissie, the heroine in the text.

Oates is a famous contemporary American female novelist, whose works are quite prolific. It was commented that, her characters have limited imagination or become poor due to the environment. They rarely experience epiphany, and rarely have visions beyond those induced by American advertisements [1]. With their imagination stunted or impoverished by circumstances, they have little insight, and few visions other than those caused by American advertising. Unaware of the reason for their feelings and behavior, they live in a state of confusion, a waking dream that is punctuated by periods of restlessness, helplessness, or violence. *Four summers* is one of the excellent short stories written by Oates in 1967. It first appeared in the *Yale Review* in the spring of 1967 and was later included in Oates' novel collection *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970). After the launch of *Roulette of Love*, it has received a lot of praise from the critics. Barbara Bannon said it was “probably the best collection of short stories by Joyce Carol Oates so far”[2]. Crichton once commented on the ideological characteristics of this novel. The characters of the collection offer a dismal view of the human being's ability to enjoy a healthy and beneficial emotional life[3]. Richard Gilman considers *Four Summer* to be one of the best stories in the series, and notes that it creates a kind of verbal exception, a sense of language that is not used to express previously established ideas or ideas, but to create a new imagination.[4].

Each part of *Four Summers* describes the events of summer, so as to record the changes from childhood to adulthood, try to deeply understand the thoughts and motivations of an adolescent, and then explore the pain and confusion that young girls bring when they enter the adult world. In the process of the author's narration, the characteristics of sensory narration are very obvious. The

author uses accurate language based on hearing, taste and vision, which is consistent with the characteristics of age, to describe his cognition of growth. The cruel fact that gradually becomes clear with the enrichment of experience is that no matter how strongly Sissie escapes, she must repeat the life and experience of her parents at the bottom. The pressure brought by her sensitivity, fear and loneliness, and the conflict with the real situation may lead to her collapse next summer. This is a story about a girl at the bottom who tries to escape from reality and fails. The lack of community communication makes her fall into spiritual isolation, the lack of educational conditions makes her fall into class difficulties, and the lack of economic foundation makes her fall into lack of opportunities. *Four Summers* does not have the obvious violence in Oates' novels, but this story is full of nightmares that are blindly repeated generation after generation.

Four Summers is one of the excellent short stories written by Oates in 1967. It first appeared in the "Yale Review" in the spring of 1967, and later included in Oates' novel collection *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970)[5]. Each part of *Four Summers* describes the events of summer, so as to record the changes from childhood to adulthood, try to deeply understand the thoughts and motivations of a girl, and then explore the pain and confusion that young girls bring when they enter the adult world. This paper will focus on the sensory narrative features highlighted by the author in the process of narration.

Sissie is the narrator of the story. She tells about four summer outings in the same lakeside tavern in her life, without a complete plot. In four summers, Sissie used age appropriate language to express her cognitive development through her behavioral sensory observation of family and peers. In the first part of the novel, that is, when she was young, her sentence structure and description were similar to those of children. "The boys run out back by the rowboats, and I run after them. I have a bag of potato chips." "Frank throws his side, ways, twisting his body. He is ten and very big." Showing the hazy feeling of the world, "I can feel how happy they are all together, drawing together by the round table."

In the second part, Sissie, about 12 years old, can better summarize the world around her. She has already judged that "Jerry is like Dad, the way his eyes look". He has the ability to describe, "his appearance makes me surprised. He squints his eyes, as if he were a stranger rather than his father." He also has the ability to generalize, linking the past with the present, "All these men are acquaintances. We have been seeing them for years." "Dad can row fast [sic] doing everything fast like he always does." As shown in Table 1-3.

In the third part of the novel, it shows the behavior and attitude of adolescent girls. She became obsessed with her body. "My legs are too thin and my figure is flat and not nice like Marian's". She has publicly scorned her family, "Somehow, I really want to run away. I don't like them. There's something in me that wants to escape, and it's got them. They're so loud, my parents! My mom spilled some stuff on the front of her clothes, but did she notice?" They began to pay sensitive attention to the inharmonious and cruel reality in life and fantasized about leaving her parents to escape embarrassment, which is a common feeling among teenagers, "Where would I rather go? To watch a movie with Marina and Betty, or to lie on the bed in my own room and stare at the pictures of movie stars posted on the four walls? As I watched the beautiful women in my room, my mother waited until her father had returned to the kitchen, where she continued to wrestle endlessly in bed and stare at pictures of movie stars on the wall - the pretty ones who never said a word - while my mom waited in the kitchen for her dad to return so they could continue their argument."

In the fourth part of the novel, Sissie, a young man, has established a complete self-consciousness. She has been able to see the ugliness of her world very clearly. "The lakeside bar [sic] everything the same. But different too small, dirtier." But they should not struggle to accept the inevitable cycle of destiny, "I put my hand on my chest to remind myself that I am in love: with this baby, with Jesse, with everything. I am in love with our house and our life and the

future.” Oates records the narrator’s process from childhood to adulthood through four parts, showing the changing ideas and motivations of a girl in the process of growth.

Table 1. Sissie’s expression characteristics at different ages

Time	Age	Expression
The First Summer	Around 5-6 years old	He's 10 years old, and he's very tall.(1.24)
The Second Summer	Around 12 years old	Jerry had a problem last month. The headmaster slapped him.(2.11)
The Third Summer	Around 14 years old	As I walk through a crowded pub, I am aware that people are watching me. (3.25)
The Forth Summer	Around 19 years old	Yes, all the same. But different too — smaller, dirtier.(4.1)

Table 2. Sissie’s description characteristics at different ages

Time	Age	Description
The First Summer	Around 5-6 years old	Short-haired woman looks at me.(1.46)
The Second Summer	Around 12 years old	Jerry's just like my father, in the way he looks.(2.6)
The Third Summer	Around 14 years old	My legs are too skinny, and I have a flat body, not as pretty as Marian. (3.25)
The Forth Summer	Around 19 years old	Why is this place so ugly to me? I feel as if a hand were pressing against my chest, shutting off my breath.(4.6)

Table 3. Sissie’s generalization and judgment characteristics at different ages

Time	Age	Generalization and Judgment
The First Summer	Around 5-6 years old	Dad suddenly looks at me and smiles.(1.61)
The Second Summer	Around 12 years old	All these men are familiar with each other. We have been seeing them for several years.(2.8)
The Third Summer	Around 14 years old	I am wondering what he is doing. Do they all do this? Do I have to have it done to me too?(3.56)
The Forth Summer	Around 19 years old	I dropped my hand on my belly to remember I was in love: with the child, with Jesse, with all of it.(4.18)

Although Sissie has great differences in her cognition of details in the past four summers, her sensitivity, fear and loneliness have maintained a high degree of unity. Sissie is an extremely sensitive girl, who has an extraordinary ability to observe people around her. When she was young, she could capture the demeanor, taste and movement of people around her in detail. For example, when an adult wanted to tease Sissie to drink beer, “I could smell the scent of beer, the smell of hot and faded perfume, and the glass was stained with pink lipstick.” All the ships are dark green, but some of them look like small bits of paint. Because Sissie is very sensitive to details, when her brother and other children killed the crow, she unexpectedly felt “If the bird dies, then everything can die”. The sensitivity of children just reflects the insensitivity of parents to children, who focus too much on their own happiness and neglect children.

In addition to sensitivity, Sissie also has strong fear and anxiety. Each part of the whole novel mentions the feeling of fear. Sissie is about 5 years old in the first part. Although children are

clamoring to take a boat tour, adults are playing cards around. For their own entertainment, Sissie’s mother and her mother’s friends gave the frightened girl a beer. The scene of an unthinking adult letting her drink beer vividly captures the horror of forced adulthood. When she was young, she was “afraid of indecency”; when she was a teenager, her father’s boat was so bumpy that she was “I am afraid”; when she was 14 years old, she rebelled but was afraid of rebellion. The strange man asked about my age, which made “my heart pounding violently”. When he began to harass her, “he felt a little scared”; in the fourth part, Sissie, who is married and pregnant, tries to persuade herself to accept life frankly, but she still “feels scared at being left with them”. Fear is everywhere, making her not an independent outsider but a paralyzed person with no ability to act. We can hardly see Sissie’s confrontation with fear.

The feeling of fear is accompanied by loneliness. In the first summer, Sissie had a keen sense of loneliness. Her brothers “They do not care with me”, “I can see they do not like me”; Sissie wants to stay with her mother, but her mother asks her brothers “Go and play by yourself, stop bonding us”. This sense of loneliness has continued in Sissie’s growth. In her childhood, she could catch her mother’s roar at her little sister, “Nobody wanted you, it was a goddamn accident!” After getting married, Sissie still felt lonely from time to time. “Jesse forgot himself and walked ahead of me, I have to walk fast to catch up with him”, “I am scared at being left with them”. Sensitivity, to some extent, leads to loneliness and fear, which in turn promote sensitivity. The Four Summers well discusses the pain and confusion that young people bring when they gradually enter the adult world.

Four summers takes place in the same season (summer) at the same place (shabby lakeside tavern). The limitation of time and space indicates that the bottom people are unable to get rid of the core and theme of “change”. Sissie is extremely sensitive to the ubiquitous ugliness around her at all stages. Even as a child, she can ruthlessly notice the characteristics of people and environment, “She is smiling at me and I can see that her teeth are yellow” ; Summer comes every year, and parents and children also spend one ugly and reincarnated summer after another. No matter how long and how many summers have passed, the lakeside taverns are still so shabby.

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Table 4. Living environment and habits of the lower class

Environment (deplorable)	I	I can see that her teeth are darkish when she is smiling at me and .(1.57)
	II	Some napkins and beer cans are nearby. There is part of a hot-dog bun, with flies buzzing around it.”(2.37)
	III	So we're in the pub. It's a lot of smoke. I don't like smoke. (3.1)
	IV	The big old house with the dirty siding, the big pink neon sign outside, and the dirt road that was so bumpy.(4.17)
Habit (excessive Drinking)	I	The woman grins and holds the glass down to me, and it clicks against my teeth. They laugh.(1.62)
	II	“All he does is just drink,” Jerry says. “I really hate him.”(2.10)
	III	His breath smells like beer, maybe, it is like my father's breath.(3.53)
	IV	Why do they looks so old, sitting at kitchen tables with several bottles of beer?”(4.15)

Table 5. Behavior and entertainment of the lower class

Behavior (Clamor)	I	The man helps the woman out of the boat. They laugh together.(1.20)
	II	They are laughing together, though. Nobody is angry.(2.8)
	III	Sometimes they laugh, kid around, they kiss. Then the quarrel starts up again in a few minutes. (3.20)
	IV	The explosions of laughter, the slap of someone's hand on the damp table in anger, the clink of bottles accidentally touching.(4.16)
Entertainment (jukebox)	I	Inside the tavern there is music from the jukebox.(1.133)
	II	A car over in the parking lot has its radio on loud.(2.6)
	III	I don't like the noise and these people. Even music is ugly, for it belongs to them.(3.25)
	IV	[...]some drawling remark of my father's—lifting for a moment above the music.(4.16)

Sissie used stereotypical terms to describe the characteristics of the life of the lower class. The man helps the woman out of the boat. They laugh, quarrel and hate each other; All men have “big stomachs” and drink too much. “Sitting at kitchen tables with several bottles of beer?” (4.15) Not only did the children drink too much, Father Reilly became mad because “He said some kids went to the church cemetery to drink and left many beer bottles”, but they also forced young Sissi to drink beer. “Beer plays a central role in every scene described by Sissie”[6]. The alcoholism of the lower class is often related to their powerlessness and vicious circle in life. After all, the more they drink, the more they fall into a situation of powerlessness. The lives of young people have been the same for generations. Girls, like Sissie, “Girls your age are all alike.”

In the fourth part of the novel, Sissie finds herself repeating the same life and suffering from the possibility of making a huge mistake by marrying Jesse. The newspaper published the news of Duane Dorsey’s imprisonment, “He broke the glass in his mother-in-law’s house and smashed the window. His mother-in-law or someone called the policy, he was breaking windows in her house.” Aunt Sissie also expected to be a TV host. Sissie stared at the pictures of movie stars in her bedroom. In this part, she has been unable to realize her free will. Facing the mysterious man who symbolizes “escape”, she wants to shout to him, “Wait, wait”, but I can’t shout it out. I can only sit there helplessly and watch him leave I want to cry out to him, “Wait, wait!” But I cannot. I sit helplessly and watch him leave. Sissie finally calmed down to comfort herself, “It was so easy for my mother... But it will be different with me because my life will be changed by it, [sic] and I will never be the same again.”

In fact, *Four Summers* does not have a specific plot, but links the articles through the links between places. In addition, there is something in common in the four summers, that is, her life is always boring. This can be seen from many details. Sissy used to adore some movie stars because she thought at least they were beautiful. She regards these romantic things as natural and inevitable. She thought that these, like all things, were boring, like formulas. [7]Therefore, she wanted to escape. And so when she met the man she met a few years ago, she couldn't help asking herself "Why did I marry Jesse?" and hoped that the man would take her away. In her heart of hearts, she is eager to change the status.

Sissie's misfortune can be attributed to many external factors, but I have to say that her own personality is actually one of the reasons. Sissie is too sensitive to her life, her family and even the people around her. The first summer, when she saw a man "leaning against the railing and laughing", she was "afraid that the railing would suddenly break and he would fall into the water." For other peers, they were more brave. When Sissie was four years old, she thought about many things that did not match her age. On the one hand, Sissie wanted to resist; On the other hand, she

was afraid. This is because of her weak character. In fact, if she can resist as soon as possible, parents may be able to find problems as soon as possible and pay attention to her heart.[8] After all, her parents love her, they are not cruel.

The whole article focuses on the inner world of the characters. In fact, the four summers depict different periods of life from the perspective of the same girl. With the passage of time, the girl's mood has never changed. When other people enjoy life happily, she wants to escape and want a different life, but she has no courage to escape, which more or less reveals some psychological activities of modern American young people. [9]If you really want to escape from the present life, you must seize the opportunity by yourself, and you must first overcome your inner fears. [10]Or, people can try to enjoy the existing life, try to learn to be satisfied, and maybe they will be happier.

Teenagers are a mirror of an era and a society, as well as inheritors and innovators of culture. Their living conditions and spiritual outlook reflect the cultural characteristics and social environment characteristics of an era. Their spiritual pursuit, values and lifestyle are all reflections of the spirit of the era.[11] "Four Summers" tells the confusion and hardship of growing up in the cultural atmosphere of drinking family, youth violence, love and sex. Appeal to the whole society: the growth of teenagers needs a good family and social environment. We should try to stay away from the problems of alcoholism, youth violence and other problems, and get timely attention and guidance from the family and society in the process of growth. [12]Only in this way can they grow up freely, healthily and happily in the harmonious and caring cultural atmosphere built by the family and society.[13]

Sissie's heart is contradictory, but she does not choose to escape freely. The newspaper published the news of Duane Dorsey's imprisonment, "He broke the glass at his mother-in-law's house and smashed the window. His mother-in-law or someone called the police, he was breaking windows in her house." Aunt Sissie also expected to be a TV host. Sissie stared at the pictures of movie stars in her bedroom. In this part, she has been unable to realize her free will. Facing the mysterious man who symbolizes "escape", "she wants to shout to him, 'Wait, wait', but I can't shout it out. I can only sit there helplessly and watch him leave I want to cry out to him," Wait, wait! "But I cannot. I sit helplessly and watch him leave." What she fears is the boring and cyclic future life. [14] However, the man did not remember her, which seemed to be a painful blow, and made Sissie realize it clearly. The man can't take her away from her existing life: "Their life is like hands dealt out to them in their innumerable card games. You pick up the sticky cards, and there it is: there it is can't change anything ..."Sissie Er understands that the dull life ("bad card") is determined by heaven and "can't be changed". We can only go around in the circle of life and can't escape fate. [15]Sissie finally calmed down to comfort herself.

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Conflict of Interest

The author states that this article has no conflict of interest.

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