



On the Narrative of “Things” in Tobacco Road

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Abstract: American writer E., Erskine Caldwell’s novel *Tobacco Road* depicts the ignorant, backward and miserable lives of poor whites in the American South, revealing the ills of the southern society during that era. In the novel, the boundaries between people and objects are blurred, and people are objectified as victims of land and social oppression. Furthermore, things have an active power in the novel, driving the plot and carrying historical and spatial significance at the same time. The dilapidated houses and deserted farmland symbolise the end of an era and foreshadow social change. By analysing the “things” in the work, we can gain a deeper understanding of the tensions between peasants and natural resources, as well as the injustices in the social structure. The perspective of the object narrative also provides us with profound social and cultural insights into the economic exploitation and cultural oppression suffered by the poor sharecroppers in the South under the imperial rule.

Keywords: narrative of things; E., Erskine Caldwell; *Tobacco Road*; the South

Introduction

E., Erskine Caldwell is regarded as one of the most widely read, prolific, and critically acclaimed authors in American literature, with more than sixty literary works to his credit. During his lifetime, Caldwell won many prestigious awards and was one of the most widely read American writers of the twentieth century. He grew up following his father through the southern states east of the Mississippi River, exposed to a wide variety of people and events, before settling in Raines, Georgia in 1918. In the countryside outside the city, he saw how black people lived and discovered the circumstances of sharecroppers on the sandy roads. These observations left a profound impact on him, influencing the development of his acute social consciousness, which was subtly embedded within the narrative style of his ostensibly comedic novels. The majority of his novels adopt a naturalistic style, which focus on the ignorant, backward, and miserable lives of poor whites in the American South and explore the racial persecution suffered by blacks. The celebrated Southern novelist William Faulkner considered him one of the five most outstanding contemporary American writers. As a Southern writer, his novels reflected the series of adverse social phenomena in the impoverished American South at that time and promoted an understanding of authentic life of the American South at that time. His renowned work *Tobacco Road* (1932) is a profound interpretation of his ideas, reflecting the social reality of the South and the impact of imperial rule on the fate of individuals.

Set in the depleted farmland around Augusta, Georgia, during the Great Depression, *Tobacco Road*, first published in 1932, narrates the experiences of Jeeter Lester, a Georgia sharecropper, and his family, who are trapped by the austere economic conditions of the Depression as well as by their own limited cognitive abilities and destructive sexual conduct. The tragic ending is almost doomed by the characters’ inability to change their lives. *Tobacco Road* (1932) was an instant success, highly controversial in its day, and was adapted into a successful play in 1933. Most of the current academic studies of the novel interpret the image of poor white Southerners in *Tobacco Road* from a eugenic perspective. Zhang Lunning, Wang Tingting, and Karen Keeley have all explored the tragedy of the Jeeter family from the perspective of the textual eugenic discourse under the imperial eugenic movement of the twentieth century, and then reflected on the exploitation and oppression of poor southern farmers by the empire[4][8][11]. And the physical bestiality of the Jeeter’s family is mentioned in Yi Xiaoxuan’s article, which explores the spiritual crisis of the poor southern peasants under social change[10].

Throughout the above relevant studies, it can be found that it is very innovative to study and analyse the characters and narrative ideas in *Tobacco Road* from the perspective of “things” narrative. In *Tobacco Road*, things are not only the background of literature, but also the active elements that constitute the core of the story. Through the perspective of things, we are able to gain insight into the deeper meanings of the characters, social background and thematic ideas. Mr. Tang mentions the term “things turn”[6] in his book on the study of things narratives, which allows us to go back to the thing itself and explore the “thing” outside of human beings. Through the narrative of things, *Tobacco Road* shows us a literary world full of complexity and depth, in which the relationship between things and human beings is no longer a simple one of owning and being owned, but a complex interaction of mutual shaping and influence. In the novel, the symbolic things reflect the deep-rooted problems of the social structure and the background of the times, the power shown by the things in action becomes the projection of the characters’ emotions and desires, and the retired things represent the precipitation of history and memory. Analysing from the angle of thing narrative not only enriches the artistic level of the novel and profoundly exposes the deep-rooted problems of the American southern society, but also refracts the theme that



people under the background of the Great Depression era gradually lose themselves under the influence of things, which ultimately causes tragedy. E. , Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* is not only a literary work depicting the life of poor white people in the American South, but also a profound social criticism. By analysing the "things" in the novel, we are able to gain insight into the deeper meanings of the characters, the social background and the thematic ideas, and we also recognize the important role of the thing narrative in literary works, as well as its value in social criticism and cultural reflection, which provides readers with a brand new perspective to understand and appreciate this work.

Things as signs: Interchange of identities between people and things

Things as signs refer to those items that carry symbolic meaning or metaphors in a text. They may not be directly involved in the development of the plot, but through their symbolism they influence the reader's understanding and feelings. "This path of examination of things narratives regards the thing in the narrative as a cultural symbol, and tries to reveal the social and cultural connotations and subject-object relations to which the thing points." [6] Things as signs have an important symbolic meaning and metaphorical function in literary narratives; they are not only physical existences, but also reflections of cultural and social phenomena.

In *Tobacco Road*, Duke's relationship with the car exemplifies the interchange of identity between man and thing, in which the man is objectified and becomes one of the things. Throughout the novel, Duke's identity is so closely tied to the car that he is almost objectified into it. This identity interchange reveals that in Bessie's eyes, Duke's value and identity can be defined through material exchange. Duke is no longer a separate individual, but becomes a thing that can be equated with the car. In Bessie's eyes, a car can be exchanged for Duke, suggesting that in a sense, the car is equal to Duke. "If she was going to buy a brand-new car, he did not care how she looked." [1] Duke and Bessie's marital relationship is essentially an exchange. Duke gives himself as a thing to Bessie through marriage, and Bessie buys a car in exchange. This exchange relationship reinforces Duke's identity as a thing, and his existence and value are reduced to a material transaction. Mr Tang believes that things as signs have the function of "exploring how things express human identity and fulfil emotional needs". [6] In the text, the car as things as sign is a symbolic symbol of Duke's self-objectification, which becomes a sign of Duke's identity, and he also obtains social recognition and self-satisfaction through owning the car, which eventually becomes a thing, realising the interchangeable identities of human and thing. "When they reached it, Dude got out reluctantly and followed Bessie inside. He wanted to stay in the car and blow the horn, but Bessie said he had to go with her to get the license." [1] Duke also seems to accept his state of being objectified. He sees himself as a thing that can be equated with the car, and this self-objectification reflects his problematic identification with his own identity. Instead of rebelling against this objectification, he accepts his role as a thing.

The relationship between the car and Duke also reflects the importance of material values in the society at that time. In this social context, man's value and identity can be measured by material wealth and this value leads to the objectification of man. His identity and value are reduced to a part of material exchange, a reduction that ignores his emotions and needs as a human being. In *Tobacco Road*, the car is not only an actual thing in this relationship, but also serves as a symbol of Duke's identity, status, and self-worth. The relationship between Duke and the car is also not just a simple one of ownership, but a complex symbolic one. In it the identities of people and things are interchanged. This relationship reveals the character's self-identity problem, the distortion of social values and the tragedy of the individual in material pursuit. The car, as things as sign, not only reflects Duke's personal experience of interchangeable identities with things and his psychological state of self-objectification, but also reveals that under the wave of industrialisation and the prevalence of the commodity economy, the oppression of the underclasses by imperialism has caused a gradual loss of dignity in life and further promoted the objectification of human beings.

The tree is also regarded as a symbolic symbol in the text. It is not just a part of nature but along with May it is a bystander and witness to the family's story, fulfilling the narrative function of a thing. "Ellie May had come out of the house and was standing behind a chinaberry tree in order to hear and see what was taking place beside the well stand." [1] In many episodes in the text, Ellie May is always standing behind a tree, observing what is happening in the yard. Instead of standing alone somewhere in the yard like Jeeter or Duke, she herself hides herself behind the tree, not wanting anyone to notice her. She looks at the yard through the tree. At this point in time, tree is then a symbol of May, who becomes a spectator as the tree watches what is going on in the yard, while May assumes the tree's original function of standing there quietly. "She moved her head from one side of the tree to the other, trying to attract Lov's attention." [1] May relies on the tree to make her actions, and the tree plays an important function in helping May to perform her actions. In this narrative, the tree transcends its natural properties and becomes part of the family. It is not only a presence in the physical space, but also a witness to the emotions and experiences of the family members. The tree acts as a bystander and witnesses everything that happens in the family. It stands quietly on the sidelines, observing the joys and sorrows of the family members, and becomes a silent witness to the family story.

The relationship between the tree and May can be seen as a symbiotic one. The tree takes on more significance because of May while May also relies on the tree for protection. This symbiotic relationship emphasises the interdependence and influence between the two. "Brown believed that by having the same thing doing the same thing, the same thing in the same place, perhaps a sense of continuity and unity could be created that could be used to help overcome the disorder of life's structure and the complexity of reality's changes." [2] The unchanging nature of the tree is contrasted with the constant change of family members and family situations. The tree is consistently present, while the family members experience birth, death, and various changes. This contrast emphasises the tree's role as a witness to the family's history. The silence of the tree and May's behaviour of hiding behind the tree reflect a sense of secrecy. The tree does not speak

and May does not show herself to speak, "Each time he glanced in that direction, she jerked her head back so he could not see her." [1] Both are silent in their own ways, this silence may represent unspoken secrets or unresolved issues in the family. In the novel, the tree is both a material being and a cultural symbol. It has both actual physical properties and deep symbolic meanings. The tree acts as a bystander witnessing the main plot of the novel and also provides shelter for May, who the tree turns into a substitute for witnessing everything that happens here. This duality gives the tree the status of a third viewer in the narrative. It becomes a participant in the story as well as a bystander to it.

Actionable Things: The Power of Things

Things in novels are not only part of the setting; they also have an active power to influence the fate of the characters and the development of the story. Things play the role of driving the plot forward in the novel, and the actionable things has life and "the power to influence the activities of the characters and drive the narrative forward in motion" [9]. The turnip in the novel can then be seen as a thing with action and influence. In the life of Jeeter's family, the turnip represents a basic survival need. It is not only food, but a key element in the family's struggle for survival. The turnip interacts directly with the Jeeter family's hunger. "The Lesters watched Lov closely while he stood in the middle of the road." [1] When Lov walks up to Jeeter's house from a distance with a large bag of turnips, they all stare straight at the turnips in his hands. The family members' desire for turnips mirrors their desperate need for food. The turnips become a medium for alleviating hunger and satisfying basic physical needs.

Jeeter begins to ask Lov what is in the sack when she sees him, which is the turnip implicitly tantalising Jeeter's mind. When Lov begins to eat the turnip in front of them, the sweet juice emanating from the turnip attracts Jeeter's family and tugs at their hearts and minds, for they are already very hungry. "Since everything is an actor, any phenomenon is more than the result of human action, but the result of the co-operation of multiple actors, including humans." [6] Things can act as mediators of character relationships, influencing the interactions and relationships between characters. The turnip serves as the thing that everyone fights over. It prompts the introverted May to come out from behind the tree, allows Jeeter, who prides himself on his dignity, to steal his son-in-law's food, and makes Duke, who is not very interested in the outside world, to join in the fight for the turnip. "In naturalistic fiction, non-life plays often harmful roles." [6] The turnip at this point acts like a demon, seducing the Jeeter family, including Ada, Granny, and May, whose patience fades with the passage of time, and finally loses its reason and dignity, fighting over the bag of turnips, "Dude dashed across the yard towards his father; Ada ran down the porch steps, and the old grandmother was only a few feet behind her." [1] And May uses herself to catch Lov's eye so that Jeeter can grab the turnip so that she can eat it. These actions demonstrate the driving force of the turnip. As an actionable thing, the turnip interacts with Jeeter family's very hungry stomachs in the text, inspiring the characters to take action.

The turnip also reflects social reality. "In a material society, since things serve as important representations of social institutions, their effects affect people through the socialisation of their psychology about things." [5] In an environment of poverty and resource scarcity, the turnip becomes a scarce resource, and the distribution of the turnip at the end demonstrates the unequal relationships and positions of power among the family members. The two men, Jeeter and Duke, get the most turnips, while the two women, Ada and May get the rest of the turnips, and the three smallest turnips are thrown to the grandmother, who has no use for them. The indifference of human nature is manifested in Jeeter's family. Jeeter desperately holds the turnips in his arms, the juice splashing everywhere through the sack, "The juice squirted into his eyes, almost blinding him; but it was as pleasant to Jeeter as summer rain-water, and far more welcome." [1] The turnip, as a plant that grows in the earth, is life-giving. Its juice symbolises hope and regeneration. The bag of turnips greatly relieved the hunger of Jeeter's family and extended life for Jeeter's family. The turnip as a thing influences the actions and psychology of the people, thus continuing the following and advancing the plot. The turnip is more than a simple thing in the text; it is imbued with action and influence and becomes a key factor in driving the plot of the family members' struggle for survival.

Actionable things has the initiative and a strong ability to give action and plays an active role in the narrative process. [6] Cotton is not just a static thing in the text, but a presence of power and influence that shapes the fate and lives of the characters in an active way. Cotton symbolises the close connection of the Jeeter family to the land. It is not only the source of their livelihood, but also a bondage from which they cannot escape. The obsession with growing cotton restricts Jeeter's freedom of movement and prevents him from leaving the land to work in the factory. Cotton embodies Jeeter's identity. As a farmer, his life and self-worth are tied to the land and cotton. Cotton becomes part of his identity and influences his self-perception. All he thinks about is growing cotton, and this perception is passed down from generation to generation. Jeeter's father did the same, and Duke also looks at the barren land after Jeeter's death and says "I reckon I'll get me a mule somewhere and some seed-cotton and guano, and grow me a crop of cotton this year." [1] The impact of cotton on Jeeter's family is continuous and they have become physically and mentally bound to it.

Jeeter's inability to leave the land to work in a factory reflects the shock that the average farmer receives during the transition from a traditional agrarian society to an industrial one. Jeeter always thought of getting some seeds and fertiliser so that he could grow cotton, but he had no money and no one was willing to lend him money, "I can't even raise me a crop of my own, because I ain't got no mule in the first place, and besides that, won't nobody let me have seed-cotton and guano on credit." [1] because the land is already low on nutrients and can't grow good cotton, and on the wave of industrialisation the profits from growing cotton had become almost non-existent, so no one would lend Jeeter any more money to let him grow cotton, but he would not go to the factory himself. The dramatic changes brought about by industrialisation did not make life better for the poor, but rather made them poorer. Jeeter says, "I can't make no money, because there ain't nobody wanting work done. Nobody is taking on share-croppers, neither. Ain't no kind of work I can

find to do for hire." [1]which exemplifies the exploitation and oppression of the poor in the development of imperialism. Cotton is both a symbol of hope and a source of despair. It represents the hope of the Jeeter family for the future, but at the same time it is also the embodiment of their plight, because the land here can no longer grow cotton, and no one is willing to invest in cotton, so that the farmers are even more without a means of survival, the social status of the farmers has also been repeatedly lowered. And the blacks, whom they used to look down on, can ridicule them with abandon, so that they do not want to work and dig mines for a living like blacks do, and they want to continue to live a good life by planting land. To sum up, cotton is not only a thing in the text, but it has an active power to influence the life, economic condition, social status and psychological state of the Jeeter family. Cotton deeply shapes the fate of the characters here, reflecting the social transformation and the social reality of invisible capitalist oppression, and making people reflect on the impact of the industrialised era on the traditional way of life.

Withdrawn things: Intersections of history and space

"Things have a real nature, but the real nature of things is infinitely receding, unable to be fully grasped and spoken of by humans and other things." [6]The land and the house in *Tobacco Road* serve as receding things, which carry the weight of history and space and are an important part of the background of the story and the fate of the characters. By alluding to them, indirectly referring to things [3], the land, as an inextricable thing in the text, has been planted with tobacco and cotton successively. The driving force behind it is profit. The people on the land have prospered with the prosperity of tobacco and cotton at that time, and have declined with its decline. "The entire section of land around him had originally been owned by Jeeter's grandfather." [1]The land that was once in the hands of Jeeter's grandfather was the best land for growing tobacco, but when it came into his father's hands it was only half, and grew only cotton. All that finally came into Jeeter's hands was a heap of debt. From boom to bust, the different crops grown on this land are not only the history of the Jeeter family from wealth to poverty, but also the history of the state's exploitation and oppression of them.

But as long as the land remains, history remains, and the land bears witness to all these historical changes. We cannot grasp the land as a whole, but we can perceive him through everything that happens on the land. The history that the land denotes is a metaphor for the history of the lives of poor white men in the South, which represents an irreversible decline and a heavy burden of history. "But everybody had always burned over the land each spring, and they continued if only for the reason that their fathers had done it." [1] The farmers on this land would burn over the land with fire every year before they started planting, and nobody knew why they did it, just because it was the experience of their fathers. This is the historicity that the land carries, no one can grasp the land, but the land deeply affects the people here. Through the stories that take place on the land, the reader can perceive the end of an era and the passing of a life. The fact that the land can no longer grow enough cotton to feed a family reflects the characters' plight and their sense of powerlessness for the future, and everything that happens on the land is closely linked to the characters' destinies. The characters' lives, struggles and dreams unfold on the land, which is an insignificant but important part of their lives and a reality they cannot escape.

The house provides a concrete place for the development of the storyline, a space where the characters live and interact. It is in this house that the story of the Jeeter's family takes place, and the crumbling house at the beginning suggests that the Jeeter's family is coming to an end. People are unable to devote much attention to the crumbling house because they cannot grasp it, and there is a "gulf between the real thing and the sensuous feature" [7]between them, resulting in the final tragedy of the house's destruction and Jeeter's death in the fire.

The house is closely integrated with the protagonist's identity and life. It is not only a place to live, but also a part of the protagonist's life, reflecting his lifestyle and values. The house is in a state of disrepair, but Jeeter never repairs it, either because he doesn't want to or because he can't. "Doesn't want to" reflects Jeeter's persistence in growing cotton and his refusal to go elsewhere to make a living, and his unwillingness to go into the factory even though he is now struggling to make ends meet. "When the roof leaked, the Lesters moved from one corner of the room to another, their movements finally outlasting the duration of the rain. The house had never been painted." [1]If it is "can't" to repair the house, it also reflects that Jeeter is actually unable to grow cotton because no one is willing to lend him money to buy seeds and rent tools. The result of this unwillingness to make changes is that the house is destroyed in a fire at the end of the novel, along with Jeeter. "Half an hour after the roof had first caught, the house was in black smoking ashes." [1] The destruction of the house also reflects the social changes and the times. It implies that the old way of life and values are undesirable, and that in the era of rapid industrial development and consumerism, if one still sticks to the land, one will only end up with nothing. It reveals the oppression from imperialism that the poor whites in the southern part of the United States are subjected to from a macroscopic background, and hints at their tragic end. The land and the house work together in the novel, they complement each other and together they build a narrative world full of history and a sense of space. The land and the house, as withdrawn things, cannot be perceived explicitly, but carry a rich historical and spatial meaning.

Conclusion

The power of *Tobacco Road* as a profound work of social criticism lies in the skilful use of the thing narrative. Through the lens of things, Caldwell presents the complexities of southern American society and reveals the plight of the individual in both social and natural environments. The things in the novel are both the driving force of plot development and witnesses to history and space. Their symbolism and active power provide us with new ways to understand social ills and individual destinies. In the first part of the things as signs, this paper analyses the interchange of identity between people and things through two typical things, namely, the car and the tree, and explores the symbolic role of things in the identity and expression of people; in the second part of the actionable things, it studies the initiative of the things and their

influence on the characters' behaviour through the turnip and the cotton, which are things with active power; and in the third part of the withdrawn things, it finds out the land and the house, which are two things of unique significance, have the function in expressing history and space. The thing narrative of *Tobacco Road* is a challenge to the traditional narrative style and a profound reflection on social reality.

The thing-narrative perspective allows us to recognise that things are no longer static backdrops, but active forces that drive the plot and carry the weight of history and spatial change. The symbolic significance of these things transcends the material itself and become microcosms of social ills, reflecting the tensions between peasants and natural resources, as well as the economic exploitation and cultural oppression of imperial rule, and demonstrating the tragic plight of the poor sharecroppers of the South under imperial rule. Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* is thus not only a record of the past, but also a revelation of the future. It tells us that only through a deeper understanding of the structure of society and the situation of individuals can we find the power to move society forward. The perspective of thing narrative also enables us to be more profound and comprehensive when facing social problems, emphasizing the important role of literary works in social criticism and cultural reflection, and providing us with a new perspective for understanding and improving society.

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