

Exploring the Narrative Functions of Props in Animated Films

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ABSTRACT

Props, an indispensable element in animated films, can enhance the expressive power of the films, enabling the audience to better understand their essence. Using theoretical and textual analysis, this research paper analyzes and compares the narrative functions of props in two famed animated films (“Up” and “Coco”) via Paul Wells’ narrative strategy theory. Regarding the major text “Up”, four narrative functions of props are generalized: to externalize the inner activities of characters, to strengthen the relations between characters, to reduce superfluous plots and to resonate with the audience. The paper then takes “Coco” as a sub-text and selects one of its key props for narrative analysis, proving that the four functions deduced from “Up” are transferable therein.

Keywords: Props, Narrative functions, Animated films, “Up”, “Coco”.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MAJOR TEXT “UP”

“Up” is a 3D animated blockbuster produced by Pixar in 2009. It was not only the first animation presented as the ceremony opening film over the 60-year-long history of the Cannes Film Festival, but also won the Best Full-length Animation and Best Score Award at the 82nd Academy Awards. The film tells the story of a stubborn and quirky old man named Carl and an adventurous little boy named Russel driving a flying house in search of the Paradise Falls. Carl spent a happy time with his wife Ellie when he was young, but he regretted not being able to help his wife fulfill their wish to go to the Paradise Falls. The demolition of the downtown area was approaching his house day by day, where there were memories belonging to them. Unwilling to compromise, Carl decided to leave the place in search for the Paradise Falls, fulfill his promise to his wife, and make up for his shortcomings in personality traits. He then blew up tens of thousands of balloons to carry the old house and flew towards the legendary lost world. The little boy Russel, who aspired to become an explorer, accidentally boarded this flying house and embarked on a journey with Grandpa Carl amid the mayhem.

2. WELLS’ NARRATIVE STRATEGY THEORY AND PROPS

Paul Wells proposed an influential and explanatory theory of animation narrative strategies in his academic monograph *Understanding Animation*. The theory starts from the characteristics of animated films and proposes various narrative strategies commonly used. Specifically, they include metamorphosis, condensation, synecdoche, symbolism and metaphor, fabrication, associative relations, sound, acting and performance, and choreography (Wells, 1998: 69-111). Usually, multiple strategies are used in one animated film.

Props are one of the most common building blocks in animated films. When props are associated with the fate of characters in the film, entangled with events, and play a role in driving the plot, they have the function of participating in narrative. In the eyes of ordinary viewers, “props are a part of the situation, which help to depict characters’ personalities, promote the development of the plot, and can be used to express covert emotions” (Gao, 2010: 75).

The essay is innovative in that it uses Wells’ theory to analyze and interpret several key props in

“Up”, thus integrating animation, narrative, and props from an academic perspective and sorting out their correlations. It also applies the claims drawn from the main text analysis to another Pixar film “Coco” to see if they are transferable.

3. THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF PROPS IN “UP”

There are a host of props in “Up”, but due to word limit, this essay mainly analyzes two key props from the perspective of the narrative device of symbolism: Ellie’s badge and her Adventure Book. In addition to those two, some other props with intriguing connotations will also be analyzed though they may appear just for a short while in the film. The figures henceforth quoted are all screenshots from this film accessed via bilibili.

3.1 Key Props

- Prop 1: Ellie’s badge (“Figure 1”)

At the first glance, it is nothing but an ordinary grape-flavored soda bottle lid with an added pin. Yet in the film, it is endowed with profound connotations. When they met for the first time, Ellie bestowed the badge to Carl, which witnessed the beginning of their childhood friendship. And for most of the time in the film, Carl treasures and wears it. From Wells’ symbolic narrative strategy (1998: 83), this ordinary soda bottle cap symbolizes friendship, love, Carl’s longing for Ellie, and above all, a spur for Carl’s adventure. At the end of the film, Carl awarded the badge to Russel, who had fought through adversities with him. Interpreted via the theory, firstly, this final gifting conveys that the adventurous spirit has been passed onto the younger generation and secondly it shows Carl’s appreciation for Russel and the importance he attaches to the gadget. As quoted from Carl, it is “the highest honor I [he] can bestow” (bilibili, 2009). Last but not least, this behaviour also indicates that Carl was relieved from his innermost because he finally helped Ellie fulfill her long-standing wish. Therefore, from its symbolic narrative function, the badge matters in making the inner activities of the characters explicit, strengthening the relationships between characters (friendship, love, respect interpreted from the three screenshots), and resonating with the audience.



Figure 1 Ellie’s Badge (a screenshot from “Up” accessed via bilibili).

- Prop 2: Ellie’s *Adventure Book* (“Figure 2”)

Like the badge, another legacy from Ellie to Carl is her *Adventure Book*. Ellie, then a young child, mysteriously introduced it to her new pal Carl, through which, the film portrays the destination of the adventure, Paradise Falls, and the main villain Charles Muntz (initially mistaken as a hero though) of the story. After their marriage, the book was kept by the couple until Ellie was found to be infertile, and then Carl used it to encourage her to pick herself up. However, throughout her life, Ellie was never able to fulfill her childhood travel dream, and finally on her deathbed, the frail wife pushed the book to her husband. Perhaps she hadn’t expected her husband to set out on an incredible expedition later. Agonized by the devastating loss of his sweetheart and annoyed by the impending demolition of their house, a place brimming with pleasant memory, Carl helplessly flipped through this legacy, eyes blurred. And it was probably this overwhelming regret and sadness that inspired him to break through his cowardly nature and dare to embark on an adventure the next day. Later in the film when difficulties arose again during the adventure, it is the part of the book Carl had overlooked before (where Ellie had pasted their photos over the lifetime and left a message encouraging him to take risks) that inspired Carl to strive in adversity, moistening the eyes of many movie-goers. From Wells’ symbolic narrative strategy, just like Ellie’s badge, her *Adventure Book* reflected her love and encouragement for her husband, as well as her love for adventure. This spiritual crutch, when turned to, could stimulate Carl to persevere through difficulties. “Props are not only a simple accompaniment, but they often externalize a character’s personality beyond other aspects.” (Wan, 2011: 77). There are also some props in the film that appear infrequently (or are concentrated in a short period of time). Using Wells’ other narrative strategies, their narrative functions can also be analyzed.



Figure 2 Ellie's *Adventure Book* (a screenshot from "Up" accessed via bilibili).

3.2 Other Props in "Up"

In the film, there are some other thought-provoking props, three of which are analyzed here via Wells' theory. The first is the piggy bank. ("Figure 3") At first glance, it's just a jar with a label of *Paradise Falls*. But judging from the reasons for smashing it several times, including fixing the car, staying in hospital and fixing the house, the piggy bank is actually a synecdoche: compared to the financial strength of the couple. From Wells' theory (1998: 80), synecdoche is a narrative device: referring to something big and complex (the whole) with something small and simple (a part). In fact, Wells himself exemplified by "likening a bottle to the act of drinking" (ibid.). So here the jar alludes to the fact that the economy of the couple is average, so their travel dream could not be realized. Also, children like to use piggy banks. So from this perspective, the piggy bank also plays a role in resonating with the audience, both children and adults.

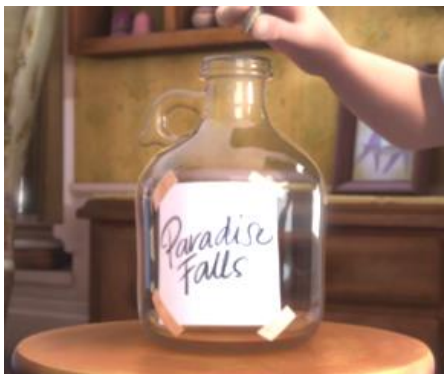


Figure 3 The couple's piggy bank (a screenshot from "Up" accessed via bilibili).

The second impressive prop is Carl's tie ("Figure 4"). In a segment of few seconds, viewers can see that every time Carl goes out, Ellie helps him with the tie, and as the tie changes, their age also changes from young to old. The condensation device in Wells' theory (1998: 76) is to downsize repetition, so as to save time. So the replacement of

ties not only looks funny, but also tells the audience that the couple enjoyed their life.



Figure 4 Carl's tie (a screenshot from "Up" accessed via bilibili).

The third and a most touching prop is the hillside scenery involving a slope, a big tree and the sky, which subtly reflect the nuanced changes at different stages over the couple's life ("Figure 5" and "Figure 6"). The former with its azure sky, patched clouds, verdant meadow and bright sunshine, symbolizes a robust life while the latter, with everything bleakly dimmed in the setting sun, implies their life has slipped into a forlorn dusk, partly attributed to Ellie's prolonged illness and frailty. Wells' narrative device of associative relations (1998: 93) can be used to interpret such intricacy. When they were young, it was Ellie who cheered up Carl on the hilltop; while in their senior age, Carl waited for Ellie. This scene reflects the love and companionship between the couple. Although they have gone through ups and downs (the buildings in the distance have also evolved from ancient to modern ones), the true love between them is that of an eternal constancy, which would inevitably elicit audience's empathy. "A vehement emotional identification aroused by the sentimentality of a film constitutes the spiritual healing power and empathy field beyond the image itself" (Gao, 2019: 116). The props discussed above all successfully evoke viewers' empathy by tugging their heartstrings.



Figure 5 The slope when the couple are youthful (a screenshot from "Up" accessed via bilibili).

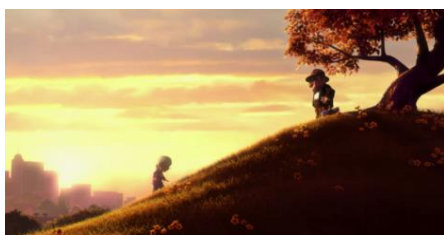


Figure 6 The slope when the couple are in their senior age (a screenshot from “Up” accessed via bilibili).

4. THE NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF PROPS

Guided by the strategies / devices of Wells’ narrative theory: symbolism, synecdoche, associative relations and so on, the previous section has analyzed and interpreted some props in “Up”. The essay thus argues that props have four functions in the narrative of animated films: to externalize the inner activities of characters, to strengthen the relations between characters, to reduce superfluous plots and to resonate with the audience.

“Narrative is the process of conveying the essential meaning of events, people encountered, and life experiences to others through storytelling.” (Wang, 2018: 91). No matter whether Ellie’s badge or her Adventure Book narrates the relationship between the couple, especially Carl’s longing and cherish for his deceased spouse. In fact, Carl’s every important decision is inspired by these symbolic key props. Additionally, props also push the plot by strengthening the connection between Ellie, Carl, and Russel. When Carl and Ellie encountered the harsh blow that Ellie was infertile, Carl took out the Adventure Book to encourage her. When Carl suffered setbacks on his adventure, the words left by Ellie in the Adventure Book encouraged him. At the end of the film, Carl awarded the badge to Russel, symbolizing the further inheritance of love and courage. Such meaningful props have also inspired and moved the audience time and again, stimulating their interest in boldly predicting the upcoming plot.

Some other props in the film, explained by Wells’ narrative theory, also play a role in twigging off film redundancy and expediting the plot (such as Carl’s tie), in evoking a childlike mentality among adult audiences (such as the piggy bank) and in inspiring the viewers to marvel at the passage of time (such as on the same slope with nuanced scenery). “Films focus on movement, with

a particular emphasis on rhythm... Appropriate narrative rhythm can excite the audience and relieve their watching fatigue” (Yang and Wang, 2010: 64).

To briefly sum up, within the framework of Wells’ narrative strategy theory, the props in “Up” serve the following four narrative functions:

- to externalize the inner activities of characters,
- to strengthen the relations between characters,
- to reduce superfluous plots,
- to resonate with the audience.

Next, the four claimed functions will be substantiated through the props in another animated film (the minor text) “Coco”.

5. ANALYSIS OF PROP NARRATIVE IN “COCO”

As another well-known animated film released by Pixar in 2017, “Coco” was hailed as the most outstanding animation of the year, winning the Best Animated Feature Award at the 90th Academy Awards in March 2018. It inherits the narrative tradition of American animation, with a hero’s trajectory as the basic structure, telling the story of young Miguel’s pursuit of his musical dream in the world of the dead. Next, the film will be taken as a minor text to testify the transferability of the four narrative functions of the props proposed in the previous section.

One of the most significant props in the film is a group photo of Mama Imelda, Hector, and the young “Coco”, who are respectively the great grandparents and great grandma of Miguel. (“Figure 7” and “Figure 8”) The photo was initially placed in a frame, which rested at the top of the ancestral altar, as these three people are the first-generation ancestors of Miguel’s extended family. At the beginning of the film, Hector’s head was missing in the photo, and no one knew who he really was. It wasn’t until Miguel accidentally smashed the frame that he discovered the part folded behind the photo, which was a guitar by Hector’s left hand. The boy soon recognized the instrument as the same one enshrined in the central memorial hall of the town, the iconic guitar of the late God of Songs Ernesto de la Cruz. Delirious, Miguel believed at one point that he was a descendant of “the most beloved singer in Mexican history” (a film line of “Coco”). Thanks to this prop

evolution, the storyline is advanced, with the relations between characters established and strengthened.



Figure 7 The family photo of Miguel's great great grandparents and their kid "Coco" (a screenshot from "Coco" accessed via bilibili).



Figure 8 Miguel discovered the secret of the photo (a screenshot from "Coco" accessed via bilibili).

Afterwards, as Ernesto de la Cruz's crimes were debunked, Hector and Miguel were thrown into a cave prison where Miguel showed Hector the photo. Hector's reaction, as well as his disclosure of the truth, makes Miguel and the audience realize that the headless musician in the photo is actually Hector, Miguel's true great great grandpa. The relationship between the two characters is further clarified and extended through this prop. Teary-eyed, Hector held the photo, which externalizes the character's inner activities. The viewers who see this can't help but be moved and relieved, because despite facing adversity, Miguel and Hector have finally discovered their kinship. ("Figure 9")



Figure 9 Hector was moved to tears when seeing the photo (a screenshot from "Coco" accessed via bilibili).

At the climax of the film, "Coco", who was already about to lose her memory due to dementia, miraculously regained part of her memory and communicative ability when she heard the familiar song Hector used to play for her when she was only a little child, as well as seeing the photo of her parents with herself. She took out the missing part

of the photo, the one with Hector's head on, which she had been treasuring in a dairy all her life. For the first time this prop was presented intact in front of the audience, which was particularly touching and resonating. From the above analysis, it can be seen that the four narrative functions derived from the analysis of the props in "Up" are also vividly displayed through the main prop in "Coco". ("Figure 10")



Figure 10 The photo became complete again with its long-missing top right piece (a screenshot from "Coco" accessed via bilibili).

6. CONCLUSION

Just as in traditional movies, props also play an important narrative role in animated films. This essay has analyzed and compared the narrative functions of props in two prestigious animated films using Paul Wells' seminal narrative theory involving such devices as symbolism, synecdoche, condensation, and associative relation. Regarding "Up", props including Ellie's badge and Adventure Book, the couple's piggy bank, Carl's tie, and hillside scenery are analyzed, with four narrative functions of props in animated films deduced: to externalize the inner activities of characters, to strengthen the relations between characters, to reduce superfluous plots and to resonate with the audience. Afterwards, the essay takes "Coco" as a sub-text and selects one of its key props – a group photo – for narrative analysis, finding that the four functions generalized from "Up" are representative and transferable in "Coco".

Concerning limitations, more props in the minor text should have been analyzed and compared. In addition, the research methods adopted in this study are slightly monotonous. In future studies, more data will be collected and analyzed through ethnographic methods such as questionnaires and interviews. In this way, the narrative functions of props will be surveyed among film-viewers, with the findings triangulated with those of theoretical and textual analysis, which may enhance the objectivity and comprehensiveness of research.

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