



Review Article

An Actantial and Functional Structure Analysis on Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*

Heri Dwi Santoso 

Faculty of Foreign Language and Culture, Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang, Jl. Kedungmundu Raya No. 18, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, 50273.

Article history: Received 1 September 2017; Accepted 2 October 2017; Published 10 October 2017

ABSTRACT

To a certain extent, a structural study is good enough to comprehend the very substance of a literary work. Given the above thesis, the researcher attempted to conduct a structural research on *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* (ROTHMC), an African-American novel, using actantial and functional structure analysis. This study aimed at comprehending the basic framework of the story that leads to the revelation of the plot and relations between characters, which indicated the African-American protagonist's struggle to challenge white supremacy. Method used in the research was descriptive qualitative. Results found that the protagonist was David Logan, an African-American independent farmer that had an ambition to free African-American community from white people's repressions. It was also found that the ambition and dream of David Logan about African-American freedom and independence and his awareness on the repression toward African-American people (Sender) has made him struggled to make African-American or African-American become a free race with dignity in the United States, where land and other things at the time was dominated by White people. Meanwhile, the functional analysis showed the plot structure of ROTHMC, which was centered on the struggles of David Logan and the family to challenge white supremacy.

Keywords: actantial; functional; Greimas; plot; white supremacist challenge.

HOW TO CITE: Santoso, H. (2017). An Actantial and Functional Structure Analysis on Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, 2(2). 135-144. doi:<http://doi.org.10.21070/jees.v2vi2.985>

1. Introduction

Firstly published in 1976, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (ROTHMC) has attracted huge attentions of the U.S. public and its value today is still very high (Hayes in Burnett, 2016). The fame of the novel has ever been filmed, broadcasted in a TV movie in 1978. ROTHMC is the second book, among several other books about the Logan family such as *Song of the Trees* (1975), *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), *The Road to Memphis* (1990) and *The Land* (2001). Logan Family is a family of African-American Southerners, who

E-mail address: heridwi.santoso@unimus.ac.id

Peer reviewed under responsibility of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo.

© 2017 Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo, All right reserved,

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

challenge white supremacy in the Great Depression era (early 1930s). Some parts of the novel indeed show stories that are terrific for children, e.g. burning, shooting as well as verbal and physical abuses. The narrator is Cassie Logan, an 8-year-old African-American girl, describing how she admires his father as well as the ways he leads the family to cope with the life in a racist society.

Uniquely, Taylor wrote the novel specifically for children. In the 1997, Alan Award acceptance speech, Taylor stated that in the Northern state (of the U.S), "...a black church questioned a book like *Roll of Thunder* being presented in the schools to its children" (Taylor, 1979), though insisting that it was for telling them their history.

As a parent I understand not wanting a child to hear painful words, but as a parent I do not understand not wanting a child to learn about a history that is part of America, a history about a family representing millions of families that are strong and loving and who remain united and strong, despite the obstacles they face. (ibid.)

In addition to such 'painful words', the way the story develops (plot) and relations between the characters are also crucial aspects. The researcher's claim in this article is that the most parts of the story are constructed by conflicts between the characters, which are racial-based.

In the research, a structural analysis on ROTHMC using actantial and functional structure analysis was conducted. The purposes were to make conclusions related to the novel's main plot and characters' relations between those (characters) involved in the plot. An actantial analysis breaks down the whole structure of a narrative "...into smaller parts and to find connections between them..." (Tyson in Quach, 2017, p. 209). Meanwhile, a functional analysis becomes a way to comprehend the story's (plot) formula (Zaimar, 2002, p. 23). The basis of an actantial analysis is action. An action can deal with either a whole story's primary conflict or the main conflict in a part of a story, called episode. In this model of analysis, an action has 6 components, called as actants (Hébert, 2011, p. 71). These components are subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent (Abrams, 1999, p. 9). Meanwhile, the functional structure is a plot formulation that consists of initial situation, qualifying test of transformation, main test of transformation, glorifying test of transformation, and the final situation (Zaimar, 2002, p. 23).

2. Methods

It is a structural research that focuses on analyzing the plot and relations between characters in the novel. The method of this research is descriptive qualitative, focusing on viewing meaning within the novel (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011, p. 3). Using the method, the data is analysed and described systematically and factually. There are two kinds of data in this research, such as primary data, this novel, and secondary data, consisting of references taken from books and internet supporting the research. The technique of data collection is library research, covering activities of reading, note-taking the novel, as well as searching for references. Meanwhile, the technique of data analysis is by applying A.J. Greimas' actantial and functional structure analysis.

3. Findings and Discussion

By applying the actantial and functional structure analysis, the very first thing to do to reveal the plot and relations between characters is to determine who the protagonist is. It was found in this study that the protagonist is David Logan, regarding to his dominant role and involvement in most of the important events in the story.

Based on the above finding, 3 (three) actantial schemas and the functional structures are made, representing 3 (three) episodes of story and their primary conflicts, where David Logan becomes the subject of each of the actants. Episode 1 is about David Logan's effort to retain the family's land ownership. Episode 2 is about David Logan's response to the Burning of the Berries. And, the episode 3 is about David Logan's response towards white mob's violence against T.J. Avery.

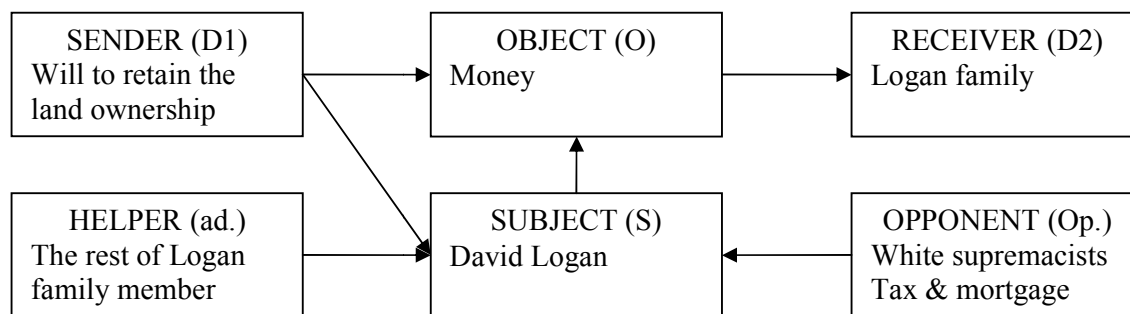
a. Episode 1: Retaining Land Ownership

1) Actantial Schema

In Episode 1, David Logan as the story's protagonist becomes the episode's main action's Subject (S) who does nothing big but only focuses on pursuing money for the family (Object/O). He works in the railroad construction in Louisiana, which is far away from his home in southern Mississippi. He has no choice but to do so because he has to retain the possession of his family's land (Sender/D1) for the sake of his family (Receiver/D2) following white supremacists' attempts to takeover it (Opponent/Op.). David Logan gets supports from the rest of the family members, including his mother (Big Ma) who grows cotton, and his wife (Mary Logan) who teaches at the Great Faith, a primary and elementary

school for African-American children while helping Big Ma in the field (Helper/Adj.). With tax and mortgage, however, the situation is not good because of not only the Great Depression but also simultaneous threats that he and his family have been receiving from White supremacists led by Harlan Filmore Granger.

Table 1: Actantial Schema 1



2) Functional Structure

i) Initial Situation

Logan family is the only African-American family in Spokane County that owns land. But, there is also mortgage and loan for the land, on the other side. Moreover, for 3 (years) since 1930, the U.S. is entering the Great Depression. The price of cotton slumps to that it is impossible to pay the mortgage.

ii) Qualifying Test of Transformation

David Logan attempts to get a new job in many areas in the U.S., since 1930. In the spring 1931, David Logan is still looking for a job to "...going as far north as Memphis and as far south as the Delta country. He had gone west too, into Louisiana (Taylor, 1976, p. 9) until he gets a job in Louisiana in the railway construction project. Since then, he returns home only when winter comes. His desire to get money is fully supported by the family.

iii) Main Test of Transformation

In two years since his first day laying tracks, David Logan is able to get enough money so that he can pay the annual mortgage and tax. Real supports of given by the whole family, including his mother (Caroline Logan) and wife (Mary Logan) helping him by planting cotton. Mary Logan also works as teacher at a school specifically designed for African-American children in Spokane County.

iv) Glorifying Test of Transformation

David Logan successfully keeps his family's own land protected. Thus, the Logan family still becomes the only family that owns land. This is what makes white supremacist jealous and keen to takeover the land.

v) Final Situation

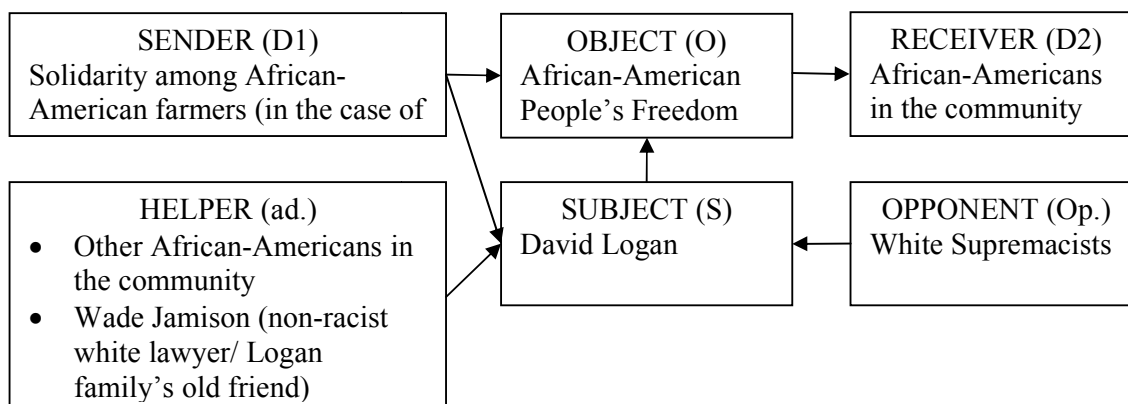
Under the negative dominance of white supremacists, worsened by some oppressive actions done to African-American farmers, some people are worried about David Logan's brave actions that can make white supremacists angry. However, advices from his mother dealing with David Logan's actions can keep him safe, at least for 2 (two years).

b. Episode 2: Response to Berries Burning

1) Actantial Schema

The same as in episode 2, the subject is David Logan (Subject/S), but with a different object. In this episode, David Logan attempt to persuade fellow African-American tenant farmers in the community to boycott Wallaces' store (an agricultural store owned by white supremacists) because of his solidarity to fellow African-American farmers after the burning of Berry brothers (Sender/D1). His objective is to make fellow African-American farmers in the community (Recipient/D2) free from the dominance of the Whites (Object/O). In doing so, he is helped by fellow African-Americans, including L.T. Morisson, and Wade Jamison, a non-racist white lawyer who has been an old friend of the Logan family (Helper/Adj.). In case of Wade Jamison's support, he offers him to back up credits that all tenant farmers have at the Wallace store so that this idea will not risk the poor farmers' lives. However, he's got opposed by local white supremacists, led by Harlan Filmore Granger, simultaneously threaten him, the family, and the African-American community in general, either psychologically or physically (Opponent/Op.).

Table 2: Actantial Schema 2



2) Functional Structure

i) Initial Situation

The burning of 3 (three) members of Berry Family, i.e. John Henry Berry, Beacon Berry, and Samuel Berry, by night men (terrorizing white supremacists) makes David Logan persuades his fellow African-American tenant farmers, to boycott Wallace farm shop. He believes that Wallace brothers are the ones behind this incident. In succeeding this action, David Logan gets helped by his wife as well as mother.

ii) Qualifying Test of Transformation

In the process, David Logan with an active assistance of Mary Logan, uses a persuasive method to persuade African-American tenant farmers in the community not to do business with Wallace store anymore. He sends Mary Logan to persuade them, telling that the presence a dancing room in the Wallace store and the fact that the store sells liquors have given bad influences to teenagers. The idea is effective for a majority of the farmers support it.

iii) Main Test of Transformation

Following the agreements between the farmers about the boycott plan, David Logan gets a massive challenge during his effort to succeed the plan. A lot of farmers unsurprisingly change their mind after threatened by white supremacists, including Harlan Filmore Granger and Wallace brothers. It is too dangerous for the farmers to have a conflict with those powerful people. Given this situation, however, David Logan doesn't change his mind, even when his wife has already lost heart. He bravely departs to Vicksburg to find a store replacing Wallace store and then buy some supplies needed by them, written in the shopping lists. He succeeds it.

iv) Glorifying Test of Transformation

After getting some financial aid from Wade Jamison (he promises to back up the farmers' credits at Wallace store), David Logan goes again to Vicksburg for shopping, bringing another shopping list given by the fellow African-American farmers. He is accompanied by his son (Stacey Logan), brother (Hammer Logan) and L.T. Morrison (his friend, a fellow African-American that he firstly met in the railway construction). However, this second trip makes white supremacists' anger peaks. They do anything to stop David Logan and the company. They even try to ruin the Logan family as the 'punishment'. The supremacists also use the method of nightmen to attack them, and finally are successful to stop them.

v) Final Situation

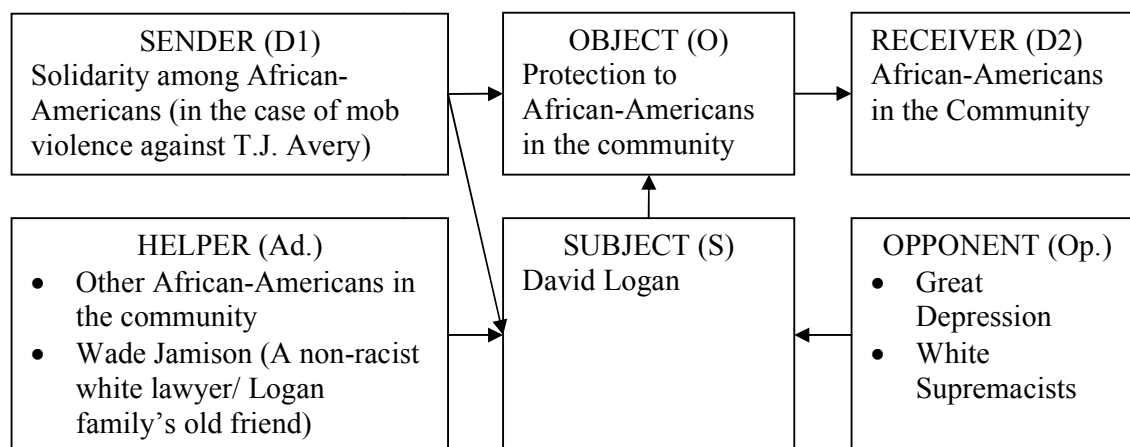
The nightmen (white supremacists) attack on the Logans doesn't only temporarily paralyze David Logan's leg but also the economy of the family. But, it is not the last violence done by white supremacists towards the Logan family. Another act of violence is done by Harlan Filmore Granger, the most influential figure among white supremacists in the area, who interferes the bank to expedite the due date of the mortgage, which is supposed to be still 4 (four) years remaining. Shortly after that, David Logan who previously went back to the North returns bringing some money from selling his car. It is to help the family pay the mortgage and tax. At this point, David Logan is incapable of fulfilling fight back against white supremacists, including taking revenge on the violence on the Berry family. In fact, the family's suffering gets worse, especially economically.

c. Episode 3: Response to Mob Violence against T.J. Avery**1. Actantial Schema**

The third and final episode of ROTHMC tells about T.J. Avery's robbery and the white mob's reaction to it. In this episode, David Logan is again the subject (Subject/S), who tries to secure T.J. Avery and also the rest of the Avery family members as a manifestation of his objective to keep his fellow African-American farmers protected (Object/O) (Recipient/R). What motivates him is his solidarity to T.J. Avery who's struggling to escape from white mob violence in form of lynching against the boy, following an accusation of robbery addressed to him (Sender/D1). This deed is supported by all other Logan family members. He also is helped by L.T. Morisson and Wade Jamison by persuading the mob to cancel the execution (Helper/Adj.) However, David Logan has to deal with the 'ruling' white supremacists, especially Harlan Filmore Granger and Wallace brothers. Besides, R.W. Simms

and Mervin Simms, despite their involvement in the robbery also join in the violent mob (Opponent/Op.). That is why David Logan has no choice but to negotiate with Granger, who is the most powerful among white people in the area. The consequence is that he must burn his own plantation under the command of Granger.

Table 3: Actantial Schema 3



2. Functional Structure

i. Initial Situation

A while after the burning and nightmen attack on the Logans in Vicsburg, David Logan is recovering from the injury. However, his recovery is disturbed by T.J. Avery's case of robbery. The wimpy boy is accused of robbing a gun store in Strawberry and potentially lynched by the white mob.

ii. Qualifying Test of Transformation

David Logan, tough and loyal to fellow African-American, quickly reacts to what happening to T.J. Avery. Helped by L.T. Morrison, he brings with his rifle to where T.J. Avery is hiding. Knowing that, on the other side, white supremacists are planning to murder him as well as take over his family's properties. To justify it, they accuse David Logan and L.T. Morrison of taking part in the robbery.

iii. Main Test of Transformation

David Logan has neither much time nor good idea to secure T.J. Avery because as an African-American, he has neither authority nor influence to change the mob's street punishment.

iv. **Glorifying Test of Transformation**

David Logan has no choice finally to save T.J. Avery that has been caught the mob. He negotiates with Harlan Filmore Granger to handle the angry mob and releases the boy. Surprisingly, Granger agrees with the idea.

v. **Final Situation**

Behind Granger's agreement, there is a big consequence that David Logan has to take. He has to let his cotton plantation burned. Actually, he is the one who burns the plantation, at Granger's command. Given that condition, the Logan family has nothing to rely on at the end.

4. **Conclusion**

The actantial and functional analysis on ROTHMC is used to comprehend the plot and relations between characters. By applying the actantial model, the story is broken down into three episodes. Each episode has one major conflict that is important for the formulation of the whole story's plot. The episodes are 1) the episode where the protagonist's attempt to get money to retain the family's land, 2) the episode of the Berries burning, and 3) the episode of T.J. Avery's lynching threat. Meanwhile, the analysis of the functional structure of each episode shows how its plot is formulated, starting from the initial situation through the final situation.

Based on the actantial and functional analyses on the three episodes, it is concluded that the story's main action is the resistance against white supremacists. The Subject (S) is David Logan; meanwhile, the Objects (O) are money, freedom, and protection of the Logan family and fellow African-American farmers in the community. The Senders (D1) are solidarity among African-American and independence; meanwhile the Receivers (D2) are the Logan family and fellow African Americans. Lastly, the Helpers (Ad.) are the Logan family, fellow African-American people in the community (including L.T. Morrison), and Wade Jamison as a non-racist white lawyer; meanwhile, the Opponents (Op.) are white supremacists. In the analysis of the functional structure, it is concluded that David Logan and the helpers' resistance against the white supremacists is unsuccessful. They are unable to give themselves freedom from the dominance of the white supremacists.

References

- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Seventh Ed). Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle.
- Burnett, M. (2016). Celebrating 40 Years of “Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.” Retrieved September 1, 2017, from <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/69436-celebrating-40-years-of-roll-of-thunder-hear-my-cry.html>
- Hébert, L. (2011). Tools for Text and Image Analysis An Introduction to Applied Semiotics. Retrieved from <http://www.signosemio.com/documents/Louis-Hebert-Tools-for-Texts-and-Images.pdf>.
- Lapan, S. D., Quartaroli, M. T., & Riemer, F. J. (2011). *Qualitative Research : An Introduction to Methods and Designs*. San Fransisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Quach, M. (2017). The Complexity of Love and Friendship in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*: An Actantial Analysis. Retrieved from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1076785>
- Taylor, M. (1976). *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Toronto: Bantam Book.
- Taylor, M. (1979). *The ALAN review*. *The ALAN Review* (Vol. 25). Assembly on Literature for Adolescents, National Council of Teachers of English. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring98/taylor.html>
- Zaimar, O. (2002).“. *Srukturalisme*” *Makalah Pelatihan Teori dan Kritik Sastra*. Jakarta: Universitas Indonesia.