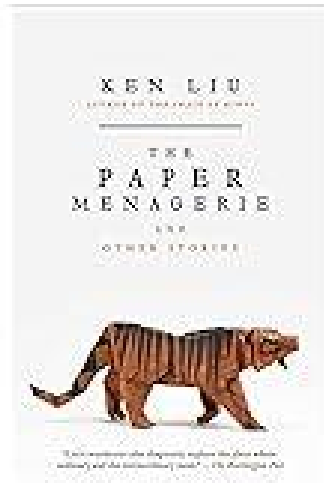


Retrieving Memory through Sensory Cues in Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie: A Supposition of Recalling Memory*

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Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Abstract

Memory is the picturisation of past events and the process of storing events and incidents with priority in the long-term memory (LTM) or the short-term memory (STM). It is accordingly a microscopic chemical change in the brain between the neurons at the connecting point. Bringing memory into literature serves as a compendium of different cultures, cultural and collective memories, identities and social disputes besides the fact that it also serves for imaginaries, aesthetics and philosophy. This paper aims to explore the retrieval of memory through the secondary cues as represented in the postmodern short story “The Paper Menagerie”

by Ken Liu, an American science fiction and fantasy writer who follows an unconventional and non-sequential narration. The secondary cues are identified by the application of the Level of Processing theory by Fergus I. M. Craik and Robert S. Lockhart to specify the processing of how memory is treated with stimuli which are the auditory and visual cues.

Keywords: Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie*, Level of Processing, auditory memory, visual memory, memory cues, stimuli.

In his work "Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals," William James defines memory as the recollection of past events, distinguished by its ability to store these events in long-term or short-term memory through microscopic chemical changes in the brain. (James, 117) Memories do not possess physical properties; rather, they are abstract generalisations in the process of recollection. The faculty of memory is constructed through actions stemming from various circumstances.

Auditory and visual memory are specific types of memory processing, crucial to learning, re-learning, and memory retrieval, with sensory cues playing a key role in the processes of encoding, remembering, forgetting, and retrieval. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, auditory memory is "the memory for information obtained through hearing," and can be retained in linguistic or non-linguistic forms, such as words and music. Similarly, visual memory is defined as "the capacity to remember previously seen visual images." (James 117)

From classic literature till now, the understanding of memory and the accumulation of its knowledge has taken various trends in literature. Glenn W. Most in his "Memory and Forgetting in the Aeneid" deliberately writes how memory has been a component of thought from the classical age until now. He writes, "But no other Roman poet seems to have been so obsessed with memory as Virgil was, no other one seems to have located the phenomenon of memory so conspicuously at the very center of his poetry". (Most 155)

Literature serves as a compendium of different cultures, cultural and collective memories, identities, and societal disputes. Readers of literature associate, connect and indulge themselves with past events that have relatively happened, identifying personalities, imagination etc.

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Memory being incorporated with the literature files a diverse knowledge of history, sociology, psychology, theology, literature, media and neuroscience inculcating ideas and interpretations. Narration concerns and influences the delivery of meanings and interpretations. This paper aims to explore the retrieval of memory through the sensory cues as represented in the postmodern short story which follows an unconventional and non-sequential narration.



Portrait of Ken Liu by Lisa Tang Liu.

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Liu

Ken Liu, an American science fiction and fantasy writer, who descants on various subjects such as cryptocurrency, futurism, implications of new technologies, science fiction, virtual reality and sustainable storytelling, is the author of the selected short story. “The Paper Menagerie” by Ken Liu is a fantasy and magical realism short story that was first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. His other short stories also explore the ideas of tradition and progress, the susceptibility of memory and the aspect of what it means to be a human.

According to Fergus I. M. Craik and Robert S. Lockhart, well-known psychologists who excel in the field of perception, cognition and cognitive neuroscience with a focus on the basic process of memory and embodied cognition, cognitive psychology, transfer-appropriate processing, cued recall respectively, professes that the memory is tied to levels of perceptual processing. They include, “. . .levels may be grouped into stages (sensory analyses, pattern recognition, and stimulus elaboration, for example) processing levels may be more usefully

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envisaged as a continuum of analysis.” (Craik and Lockhart 676) They describe that memory does not have a fixed space store, rather, the beholder has several different ways to encode and retain it. The Levels-of-Processing theory answers the questions of, how a person receives the information, what the beholder of the memory does with the received information, and how that it affects the retention, that is, the continued possession of that information as memory. Craik and Lockhart call the retention as a “continuum of analysis.” (Craik and Lockhart 676) So, the individual needs to understand the significance of the information processing in the basic memory system in which certain aspects of the stimuli can be recirculated for retentions to keep the segments conscious by holding them in a continuous rehearsal buffer for the memory to get stored in the designed locus.

This processing theory goes with Structural, Semantic and Phonetic levels to transfer the information to LTM or STM in consensus associated with the familiarity of the information. Specificity of processing is another aspect of memory that gives increased value to recall when inputted through any stimuli. Stimuli can be auditory or visual.

Jack in this short story encounters these stimuli where it kindles the memory that he had somewhere lost consciously in his childhood. Here, the auditory and the visual stimuli take place through the ‘letter’ written by his mother in her native language- Chinese, which irritates Jack, for not being much American and the ‘Origamis’ that she created by folding papers for him when he was a child, breathing into the paperwork, so that it moves, though it was not a living being respectively.

Ken Liu starts “The Paper Menagerie” as a memory of Jack sobbing, as Jack is the narrator of the short story. Jack presents the unconventional breaks in the narration. Narrative incoherences are seen as there are fluctuations in Jack's memory whenever he ponders over to retrieve the particular memory which he wanted to share, about his ‘Mom’. Jack recollects the memories that he had lived with his mother who was associated with Chinese culture. Being a Chinese woman living in Connecticut, with her husband and her son, she has difficulty talking and being more like an American which makes Jack move away from her and her love. Jack starts hating her Chinese culture, food and features when he starts experiencing mocks from his

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American friends. He stopped playing with the Origami toys which his mom gave him with all her love. The narration swings back and forth, stating reasons, how and why Jack's love was turning to hatred until the story of his mom's death is revealed.

The letter written by his mom serves as an auditory predictive model to retrieve the memories. The letter reading and the retrieval of memory is a structural and phonetic level of processing. But here, as the letter is in Chinese and it is read by a Chinese woman, the level of processing turns to a specificity of process and becomes an auditory memory. Jack says, "We sat down on a bench together, and she read the letter to me aloud. The language that I had tried to forget for years came back, and I felt the words sinking into me, through my skin, through my bones, until they squeezed tight around my heart." (Liu, 38) The auditory predictive model, the letter, gives stimuli to the beholder to retrieve and recollect the memories that have faded. The letter talks about the good and bad memories that she cherished every moment, and it shows the intensity of a mother's unshared love.

This auditory memory transpires when there is a direct correlated neutral action or stimuli by hearing or listening. Here, words are recalled effectively and are present for explicit memory rather than implicit memory. Characters and words in Chinese in the story which were used by his mother are *ai*, *Kan*, *Laohu*, *Rawrr-sa*, *Zhe jio zhezhi*, *Xuexiao hao ma*, *Sha jiao chunk*, *Bu haochi*, *Fashao la*, *Haizi*, and *mama ai ni*. The character *ai* increases the recall value in Jack and makes a lasting, more elaborate and stronger memory trace. The stimuli gave a stronger trace in which, ". . . The saliency of the given stimulus arises from the sensory event in combination with the frequency memory trace of recent stimulation in the frequency-specific channel." (Zimmermann, Jacqueline & Moscovitch, Morris & Alain, Claude, 7)

The phonetic and structural process of recalling the memory by writing the character *ai*, again and again, stimulates and traces the frequent channel of the memory in Jack and retrieves it.

The visual predictive models are the Origamis crafted by his mother. The visual input is the strongest input and stimuli in the process of specification of a memory. In his childhood, he liked and played with origami where they were holding the breath of his mom. Later, in

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adulthood, these origamis were not lively, since his mother died, and they were just pieces of folded paper.

Visual memory requires the observer to remember not only the features like colour, shape, size, and structure but also the space those items were displayed. So, the memory does not depend only on the objects or structures but also on the spatial orientations. The spatial-context dependence is applied to all visual working memory where the objects and the structures work as stimuli. The darkness of the attic shows the longevity of the paper menagerie staying there in the attic, also symbolises the memories of Jack, associated with the Origami toys that have faded in due course of time. Jack's mom's origami is so special because it carried her breath and moved. "This was her magic." (Liu, 27) After the death of his mom, the paper menagerie induced him to retrieve all the memories, once intentionally Jack hoarded them.

Firstly, the visual memory does not consist of independent or individual items. Instead, they are represented in more structural, objectified and abstract ways, both in spatial and feature dimensions. Secondly, the levels of the visual memory are also not independent since they are integrated with the symbolic, structural and representation of other objects. The origamis are not only the folded craft papers, but these also include her breath blown into the folded paper-like balloons that symbolise the longevity of his mom's life and the individuality of toy representation. Jack did not have any toys other than the paper menagerie; other boys had Star Wars plastic toys. (Liu, 30)

The visual representations and the differences between the toys bring a subjugation in the memory, from childhood to when Jack started the aversion towards the paper menagerie when Mark, the neighbour of Jack, mocks his paper menagerie. The recollection of the memory that he used to play with the origami toys marks a behavioural change in his adulthood and the memory systems get altered and refined by the content fed by the object. The objectification of the environment and the visual representations of the origamis retrieve and extend the durable trace of the memory.

The process of memory consists of auditory and visual memories working as stimuli in response to the objects and words that Jack encounters after his mom's death. The properties present in the story are the conscious requirements to induce these memories of the beholder.

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Having the non-sequential narration where his memories are scattered at first and then in the flow of an organisation, shows that the consciousness, the time and the memory of the beholder form the characteristics of memory cues.

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