

Parallel and Deviance, Integration and Reconstruction—— Comment on *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression* by Professor Shen Dan

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Abstract: In *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression*, Shen Dan, combining theory construction with case analysis, makes a systemic clarification of her “covert progression” and “dual narrative progression”, and thus provides a new framework of interpretation to various textual mysteries hitherto, a new direction of the reconstruction and integration between stylistics and narratology, as well as a new orientation to related disciplines, such as translation. In this paper, the main content and key points of each chapter of this book are summarized, and the opportunities and challenges of this new paradigm are explored.

Keywords: Shen Dan; Narratology; Dual Narrative Progression; Covert Progression

Introduction

Confined to the Aristotelian plot-centered pattern, the previous literary theories and criticism models are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted, but the readers are fixed on a single track, and the accessibility of textual meaning still needs to be expanded. When reading a text containing multiple narrative progressions, because they cannot understand the scattered text elements between plots, readers, bound to the research framework of a single narrative progression, often come up with a one-sided understanding of the text. Sometimes they even impose causality on the narration, leading to far-fetched misunderstandings and even academic disputes.

Following closely the research trend of “narrative progression” in the western narrative circle in the past 40 years, Professor Shen has keenly observed that so far no one has paid attention to the progressions behind the plot. Therefore, in the winter of 2013, she published *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots*, which pioneered the concept of “dual progression” and “covert progression”. As soon as the book was launched, there were a large number of respondents. Pioneer scholars at home and abroad have put the research paradigm into the text research of various genres and multiple media, which also confirmed its strong explanatory power and wide application value.

Professor Shen in *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression* ^[1] systematically expounds on the theoretical framework of “dual narrative progression” and “covert progression” for the first time. On the basis of clarifying the covert progression and many other similar concepts (on the surface), this volume holds that we should go beyond the plot, and investigate another “narrative undercurrent” that is parallel to the plot from a larger perspective. From the interactive relationship of parallel multiple narrative progressions, the book re-read several classics in terms of their theme significance, characterization, aesthetic value and so forth. Meanwhile, relevant disciplines should also revise, expand, and reconstruct relevant research models and norms, in order to build a new text interpretation framework. It can be said that the interdisciplinary requirements of this new research paradigm have injected new vitality into many disciplines and guided a new path of their development. The book consists of 15 chapters and is divided into two parts. The first part is a theoretical discussion and the second part is classics analyses. The following two sections provide a brief introduction to the content of this book.

1. Theoretical Discussion

Part one of this volume makes a comprehensive theoretical discussion and constructs a research model of “double progression” and “covert progression” from multiple perspectives.

The first chapter focuses on the distinction of similar concepts. First of all, Professor Shen defines “covert progression” as another track parallel to plot development, which is neither the deep meaning of the plot, nor a part of the plot, but another track which has been ignored by the critics and developed in parallel with the plot from beginning to end. So when readers fail to capture its meaning, it does not affect the understanding of plot development. This clarification, from the conceptual point of view, distinguishes between “covert progression” and other similar concepts including “second story”, “covert plot”, “submerged plot”, “submerged narrative” and “subtext”. On this basis, the complex interaction between dual progressions will affect the expression effect of the text, coloring the text with different degrees of irony. As an “ironic undercurrent”, this ironic effect only occurs in the interaction of covert progression but does not appear in the local text, which makes it different from other local ironies such as “verbal irony”, “plot irony”, “contextual irony” and so on. There are two kinds of irony here. One is that there is no irony in the plot, and the stain of irony can only be re peeped out from the covert progression. The other is that the plot and the undercurrent bear different irony.

Chapter 2 mainly discusses the interaction between plot development and covert progression. Firstly, the relationship between the two types of progressions is divided into two categories: complement each other and subvert each other, and thus the extension from intra-text interaction to the intra-text one between author, narrator, character and reader is achieved. Due to the inconsistency and disharmony of the narrator at the conflict level, the setting of ideal readers and the position of perspective points in different narrative tracks and different narrative dynamics can be formed, shuttling and intertwined in the same text, and thus compare, supplement and contradict each other in different ways, constructing the rich and diverse thematic meaning, and multiple character images, and let the readers take the initiative to distinguish, select and analyze the meaning.

Chapter 3 firstly explores the reasons why critics turn a blind eye to covert progression from three perspectives, namely, critical tradition, author (as subject and object respectively), and intertextuality. These reasons include: (1) the most fundamental reason being the bondage of criticism tradition, including the requirements for the unity in interpreting conflict and character image; (2) the opinion that the author’s writing style is stable and the writing content should meet the moral standard; (3) the author’s reservations in his letters and interviews; (4) the author’s applying of elusive skills; (5) the backgrounded irony produced in the interaction of covert progression; (6) intertextuality. Accordingly, if we want to explore the dual progression, the shackles of the critical tradition and the stereotypes of the author should be broken. Also, we should focus on the text, pay attention to the echo of the text components, and the trivial and irrelevant details of the plot. In addition, we need to go beyond the text, and combine the text analysis of stylistics with the structural analysis of narratology, and combine in-text analysis with out-of-text investigation and intertextuality.

The first half of Chapter 4 points out that covert progression, together with plot development, constitute different tracks. Therefore, in different progressions, the same words have different importance and can express different literal, implicit and symbolic meanings at the same time. The multiple meanings of the same expressions in multiple tracks are called “the meaning in the narrative progression” by Professor Shen. They contrast, supplement and conflict in the text interaction, allowing the text to show more conflicted tension and semantic density, diversifying the motivation of characters’ behavior and enriching the theme’s meaning. At the end of this chapter, the definition of “stylistic meaning” in the field of stylistics is expanded, calling for exploring the thematic meaning generated in the dual progression.

Chapter 5, starting with the limitations of narrative theories, focuses on the significance and effect of dual progression in building meaning in text structure, as well as the challenges it imposed, including theoretical concepts, interpretation of the framework, as well as the research model. Then, it appeals to (1) reconstruction of event structure and character model, (2)

reconstruction of unreliable narrative and narrative distance, (3) reconstruction of narrative perspective, (4) reconstruction of narrative tone, (5) reconstruction of narrative skill model, and (6) reconstruction of the relationship between story and discourse.

Chapter 6, points out that the exclusion of contemporary American rhetorical narrative theory from the stylistic analysis is biased. So, the structural analysis should be combined with text analysis, text investigation should be combined with context investigation, and text research should be combined with text comparison. Through the analysis of the two core concepts in rhetorical narratology: “implied reader” and “authorial audience”, this chapter reveals that the contemporary rhetorical narrative theory implicitly considers the requirements of historical context, which is where the second and third generations of Chicago School surpass the first generation in poetics. Then, considering the existence of dual progression, the single implied author model and authorial audience model should also be reconstructed into the “dual (or even triple) author model” and “dual authorial audience model”.

Chapter 7, by instance analysis, exhibits that covert progression is often neutralized in domestication and concretization, and thus suffers damage in translation practice. Thus, in translation study, the translation accuracy of covert progress should be added to the translation standard of “expressiveness”, and the existing translation standards and norms should be expanded to include the dual progression. Moreover, this requirement will bring about many changes in the field of literary translation: we need to reconsider strategies, research, and teaching in the field of translation, and strive to convey two kinds of narrative progressions that move forward side by side and run through the original text simultaneously.

2. Works Analysis

Based on the theoretical guidance of the previous part, in the next part, Professor Shen Dan cited classic short stories to analyze specific examples throughout the full text from the title to the end, and to support and reflect on the previous part. The second part can also be continued in two parts, with the first four chapters (chapters 8 to 11) exploring the works of Czech and American authors:

Chapter 8 discusses the thematical conflict in Franz Kafka’s *Das Urteil*. In the eyes of past critics, the conflict of the novel lies in the father and the son. However, after an in-depth investigation, there is a greater conflict between individuals and society under the conflict between father and son. Thus, the two different levels of conflict here contradict, constrain and complement each other, and the covert progression here can help readers understand the social meaning behind the work. Chapter 9 analyzes the two parallel and different narrative processes in Ambrose Bierce’s *A Horseman in the Sky*, and compares the text with his other novels. This chapter not only helps the reader to grasp the rhetorical purpose of the work more accurately but also reveals the essential difference between *A Horseman in the Sky* and the other two texts. Also, Professor Shen believes this chapter also breaks our preconceptions about the consistency of the author’s style and provides a new method of text classification. Chapter 10 analyzes the parallelism of three kinds of narrative progressions under three literary/social trends of thought in the historical context. In the novel, *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, feminism and consumer culture are overt to us readers, and the two are pulling at each other without reconciling, in the eyes of the previous critics. But what our predecessors fail to notice is the covert naturalism paralleling the former two progressions. In this chapter, the author holds that feminism and consumerism are unified with naturalism in this text through the effect of the external environment on individuals. It can be said that through the covert progression, the plot is transited and reconciled, and the integrity of the text is further explored. Chapter 11, after successively exploring the differences between Edgar Allan Poe’s view of novel and poetry, and also the embodiment of “unity of effect” in the three parallel and identical tracks in the novel, explains the source of critics’ misreading of the novel, *The Tell-Tale Heart* as (1) the generalization of Poe’s aestheticism, (2) the ignoring of his “unity of effect”, and (3) the neglect of the covert progression. By analyzing the two situations of the dual progression, namely, the same-directional progressions and the different-directional progressions, as well as the different dramatic irony bred by the two covert tracks, this chapter discusses the synergy of the complementarity between multiple narrative processes in improving the theme, ethics and value of the text.

The second part of Part Two focuses on four works written by the same author Katherine Mansfield, aiming to reveal how the same writer constructs the dual narrative process in different ways and from different perspectives.

Chapter 12 compares the difference between the plot and the covert progression in *Psychology*: the former has a wavering perspective, while the latter is consistent; the former is a demonstrative event structure, while the latter has an ending event structure; the protagonists love each other in the plot, while the woman casts a one-way projection towards the man in the covert progression, etc. Such differences can shape the same story of mutual subversion, and at the same time, finely describe the emotional complexity of the heroine. Chapter 13 reveals that perspective-occupied sympathy is the main reason why readers sympathize with the woman in *A Dill Pickle*. In the covert progression, we can see that not only the hero but also the heroine is self-centered and selfish. Even the hero sees the sharing between people beyond class boundaries and has a clear understanding of his selfishness. Therefore, some words of the male protagonist can play a contrasting role to the female protagonist who is self-centered without realizing it, making the work change from single-track irony to double-track irony, and the images of the two characters change from flat ones to round and multifaceted ones, the work changes from simple and clear to full of tension, and the object of irony expands from the weakness of a single character to the weakness of both the male and female protagonists and the to the weakness of human nature in the society. Chapter 14 holds that the interaction between the plot and the covert progression in the novel is complementary to *The Fly*. So, if the story is interpreted only from a narrative process, the understanding is merely one-sided. Through the sympathy of symbolic characters at the plot level, and the continuous satire of the boss in the covert progression, the complexity and contradiction of the characters are aggravated, and the character image becomes plumper. Chapter 15 involves another type of covert progression: the leaping covert progression behind the plot, which is illustrated by *Life of Ma Parker*. In this chapter, the author makes an important clarification, that is, although in this novel, the covert progression does not operate consistently at the textual level, in fact, the character's behavior and personality involved in it demonstrate persistence. Using the traditional gender stereotypes under the framework of patriarchy, the invisible process of the novel subverts the binary opposition of gender to a certain extent, which is forward-looking and progressive.

3. A Brief Comment

Professor Shen insists on commenting on the strengths and shortcomings of various schools in a fair and objective manner, without being moved by authoritative views. She takes rhetorical narratology as her stand, breaks the interpretation framework since Aristotle, and provides Chinese theories and methods for the study of foreign literature. In *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression* and a series of related literature published in authoritative journals at home and abroad, she focuses on the two tracks, the two creative positions of the author, and the two kinds of ideal readers, not only providing a new framework for readers to understand the text more comprehensively, but also introducing a new research approach for the expansion of narratology and related disciplines and the integration of narratology and stylistics.

Overall, the volume distinguishes itself with several noteworthy features. First of all, as symbolized by her terms and definitions of “covert”, “undercurrent” and “deep”, this new interpretation system invites us to come out of the shackles of the plot, and to use the method of close reading, going from the interpretation-end to the rhetoric-end, and seeing another undercurrent encoded into the text by the author and hidden at the edge of the plot. It is the most distinctive and rare achievement of this monograph to make such a major theoretical breakthrough in the complete discipline of rhetorical narrative research. In the theoretical framework, the dual progression not only finds the existence of the covert progression, but also scientifically classifies the different interactive relations between the undercurrent and the plot, and deeply explores the reasons why the dual narrative process has been ignored for a long time, which is really a great breakthrough. Nowadays, many famous scholars in the world have highly praised the theory, which proves its newness in theoretical creation and its profundity in theoretical achievements. The author believes that under the interpretation dominated by the plot, the integrity of the text containing multiple narrative dynamics still needs to be excavated. In order to truly understand the thematic meaning and aesthetic function of the text as a whole, we must take into account the interaction of different text details and multiple progressions. Only in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction, mapping and complementarity, we can

further understand the integrity and discreteness of the text and make a breakthrough in the face of the text mystery we can't explain. Therefore, the dual progression is a milestone in broadening the scope of text research.

Secondly, according to Pianzola, the bridging role of dual progression between narratology and other disciplines cannot be ignored^[2]. Different from the isolated rhetorical narratology tradition that excluded context and stylistics in the past, the foundation of dual progression is not a monologue, but an interdisciplinary one. On the basis of clarifying some vague conceptual issues so far, Professor Shen sees the potential of narratology to expand on the one hand, and the combination of narratology and stylistics in progression-centered alignment on the other hand^[3]. Therefore, in this book, she writes about the overlap and dialectical relationship between narratology and stylistics and calls for the expansion of narratology and related disciplines in many aspects. The covert process is characterized by strong concealment. So, careful and in-depth stylistic analysis is conducive to finding these progressions hidden in language details. If stylistic research can draw nutrients from the dual progressions, it may glow its unique value more clearly. Therefore, the system focuses on the close relationship within the text and among various disciplines and provides us with a panoramic text investigation mode, which is also a milestone.

In addition, in terms of writing, as far as the internal connections between each chapter, there is a great continuity. And, it is important to note that the author is to make good use of the technique of analogy. Often when she is in an illustration of one issue, she makes comparisons consciously by presenting their similarities and differences, which serves as a good way to contact the various topics in this book. As a well-structured and close-knit monograph, on the one hand, it is fluent in writing, and on the other hand, it allows readers to have a clearer understanding of the interaction of progressions at the macro level, and to better distinguish the minute differences at the micro-level. Also, as for research topics and data selected, the pluralism of topics in each chapter of the book illustrates the complex perspectives in analyzing progressions. Moreover, the book draws on instances from a wide range of novels, and, these instances represent a variety of phenomena. Such broadness in exemplification contributes to the demonstration of the universal efficacy of the dual progression as a robust method of interpretation

However, as a newly emerging textual research paradigm, the universality and explanatory power of its theory still need to be verified and improved in the research of multimodal text. In addition, the author holds that the analysis of dual progression needs to be expanded. For example, can multiple narrative progression be related to polyphony? What are the voices of the same narrator and different narrators in different progressions, and what is the interaction of multiple voices? What is the status and authenticity of the covert narrator in different narrative progressions? Moreover, in order to distinguish from the subtext, in the dual progression system, the plot and undercurrent progression is defined as two independent, parallel and separate progressions, but this treatment will inevitably lead to the complexity of narrative reliability. In short, when there are multiple tracks in the text, although different tracks can assist each other at some point, when the values in different tracks conflict, the narrative reliability will be overturned, and this problem needs to be further discussed.

Finally, the value of *A Study of Dual Narrative Progression* lies not only in its comprehensive, systematic and in-depth theoretical discussion and text interpretation, which fills some gaps in narrative theory research at home and abroad but also in the opportunities and challenges it brings to narratology and other related disciplines, inasmuch as it opens up a board territory for future theoretical and textual research. When sorting out the theory, the volume puts forward a series of thought-provoking problems to be solved urgently. How to expand and reconstruct the existing frameworks? As a young theory, dual progression finds a new breakthrough and injects new vitality into us. Therefore, the study of dual progression is an academic masterpiece worthy of an in-depth study by all literary workers.

In conclusion, and to summarize the above merits and shortcomings, despite a few limitations stated above, this informative and stimulating book, with its well-organized structure, thought-provoking and reader-friendly explanations, and together with its expansive coverage of research topics, can provide a reference guide for researchers, and also newcomers to know the broad coverage and great explanatory power of it, and can make a substantial contribution to our appreciation of texts. In the future application, the dual progression can also be combined with other theories to further expand its development space, which is of great benefit to the development of this theory as well as the progress of text analysis

methods.

References

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