

FORUM



“Covert Progression” and Dual Narrative Dynamics

Dan Shen

BEIJING [PEKING] UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: In many fictional narratives, the plot development exists in tension with a “covert progression” in the shape of a powerful hidden dynamic, which is essentially different from previously investigated deeper-level meanings and which complicates readers’ response in a distinct way. The overt and covert progressions parallel each other throughout the text. The plot development in itself may be interpreted from various angles, and the parallel covert progression further complicates the picture in conveying contrastive or even opposing thematic significance, character images, and aesthetic values, thus arousing or having the potential to arouse more complicated response from readers. The ways the two kinds of dynamics interact with each other are diversified, ranging from harmonious complementation to drastic subversion. In those narratives containing such dual dynamics, readers paying attention only to the plot development—no matter how many angles critics try to approach it—will result in a partial or false picture of the thematic import, character images, and aesthetic values. Since Aristotle, investigations of narrative fiction have focused on the plot development. In order to uncover and to account for the “covert progression” and dual dynamics, we need to break free of the bondage of the long critical tradition and to extend or transform the relevant theoretical concepts and models not only in narratology, but also in stylistics and translation studies.

KEYWORDS: covert progression, dual dynamics, various interaction, causes of neglecting, theoretical extension

Ever since Aristotle, the critical field has taken for granted that narrative dynamics of mimetic fiction reside in the plot development, which may have different branches or layers and which may be interpreted from diversified

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DOI: 10.5325/style.55.1.0001

perspectives. Since the 1980s, there has been increasing studies of narrative dynamics as a reaction to the more or less static models of plot structure as offered by classical narratologists. The pioneering book of this line of inquiry is Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* (1984), which puts emphasis on the forward movement of plot/plotting and of reading (see also Sternberg, *Expositional*). Another scholar who has continued and further developed some of Brooks's ideas is James Phelan, who, for the past few decades, has been playing the leading role in investigating narrative progression. Phelan has published six influential single-authored books on narrative progression, the first being *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (see also Richardson, *Narrative*; Baroni; Dannenberg; Toolan; Marsh, *Submerged*; Oubella; Currie; Baroni and Revaz). Numerous essays have also appeared to explore narrative progression, temporality, and sequencing (see, e.g., Sternberg; Nash; Sandberg; Richardson, *Silence*). They join hands in shedding significant light on the nature and functioning of narrative dynamics and on the complicated relations among the author, narrator, character, and readers.

The primary aim of this essay is to help develop the thriving investigation on narrative progression by extending attention from single progression to dual progression. In many fictional narratives, behind the plot development, there exists what I have designated as "covert progression," a hidden dynamic *paralleling*, at a deeper level, the former overt dynamic *throughout* the text. The two textual dynamics invite dual response from readers. More specifically, the covert progression and the plot development convey contrastive or even opposite thematic significance, character images, and aesthetic values, which complicates or has the potential to complicate readers' response in various ways (Shen, "Covert," *Style and Rhetoric*, "Dual Textual," and "Progression").

The previously neglected *covert* progression and *dual* dynamics existing in many fictional narratives give rise to a series of questions: How is "covert progression" different from other kinds of deeper-level meanings? What kinds of relations exist between the covert progression and the overt plot development? Why have covert progression and dual dynamics eluded attention in the long narrative critical tradition? How can the reader identify the various kinds of authorial camouflage for the undercurrent created for various purposes or due to different reasons? How do dual dynamics call for the extension and transformation of theoretical concepts and critical models in narratology, stylistics, translation studies, and cognitive studies?

“COVERT PROGRESSION” VERSUS OTHER KINDS OF
DEEPER MEANING

In investigating narrative fiction, generations of researchers have tried to probe into the deeper meanings of the texts. The past half century has witnessed the emergence of various new concepts and models of deeper-level meanings, which have made significant contributions to our understanding of narrative dynamics from diversified perspectives, but which invariably operate within the plot development itself, thus essentially different from “covert progression.”

a. “Covert progression” versus “covert plot”

“Covert plot,” a concept relevant to much modern fiction, was put forward by Cedric Watts, who defines covert plots as “smaller or larger plot-sequences which are so subtly and obliquely presented, with elisions or hiatuses, that they may be overlooked at the first or even second reading” (“Conrad’s Covert Plots” 53). This is a case in point: In *Heart of Darkness*, the Company’s manager secretly endangers the life of Mr. Kurtz (his main rival for promotion) by delaying Kurtz’s relief through damaging the boat and preventing its repair. Not only Kurtz is kept in the dark, but the observer–narrator Marlow is not aware of the intrigue until years after Kurtz’s death, let alone the reader (Watts, *Deceptive* 119–21). As Watts made clear, a “covert plot,” typically in the form of “an intrigue or deception,” is a device of “delayed decoding” involving “presenting the effect while withholding or delaying knowledge of the cause” in the plot development itself (“Conrad’s Covert Plots” 53). When Watts pays attention to covert “larger plot-sequences,” he is still concerned with how to offer a more accurate understanding of the plot development itself (see, for instance, *Deceptive* 47–52).

This term is used in a different sense by David H. Richter when discussing Isak Dinesen’s “Sorrow-Acre” set in Denmark in the 1770s. The overt plot of the novella centers on a widow’s effort to save her only son (accused of setting fire to a barn of the old lord) by trying to mow in one day a rye-field (the work for three men), which is the lord’s condition for letting her son go. She succeeds, but only to die from exhaustion. What Richter calls “covert plot” is another storyline with a different central character, the old lord’s young nephew, Adam, who has just returned from England on the day set for the widow’s mowing. This storyline depicts the contrast

between the liberal-minded nephew and the feudal aristocratic uncle and portrays the tragic fate of the nephew, a storyline either totally overlooked or partly noticed and misread by previous critics. While Richter's "covert plot" is a *branch* of the plot development *itself*, "covert progression" is an undercurrent *paralleling* the plot development, with the *same* central character(s) and the *same* events but implicitly conveying contrastive or opposite thematic significance.

b. "Covert progression" versus "second story"

"Second story," as defined by Armine Kotin Mortimer in "Second Stories," shares some essential features with "covert plot" in Watts's formulation. It is in the shape of an untold "secret"—a hidden adulterous affair, a murder and so on, which the reader has to infer in order to have a complete plot line. That is to say, "second story" is a constituent of the plot, while "covert progression" is another textual movement. In "Fortifications of Desire," Mortimer directs attention to another kind of "second story," a kind that, rather than kept untold, is revealed later in the narrative, such as the husband's infidelity in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss," which comes to light toward the ending. Like the former kind, this kind of "second story" is an indispensable constituent of the plot development itself.

c. "Covert progression" versus "submerged plot"

"Covert progression" is also dissimilar to what Kelly A. Marsh designates "submerged plot" in a courtship novel with the female protagonist as motherless daughter (*Submerged*; "Mother's"). The term refers to the daughter's search for the absent mother's unnarratable sexual pleasure under patriarchy, which implicitly influences the daughter's own love affair. As Marsh convincingly shows, the unearthing of the connection between the daughter's overt plot and the submerged plot of her search (as additional hidden motivations for her action) enables us to gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of the former. Marsh's aim is to "posit an alternative view of the workings of plot in novels of motherless daughters, and challenge our view of plot more generally" (*Submerged* 6).

d. "Covert progression" versus "submerged narrative"

"Covert progression" is also distinct from "submerged narrative," a concept used in two different senses, respectively, by Deborah Guth and C. J. Allen. Intratextually, it is associated with the gap between what the character

narrator claims/believes to be or fails to perceive and what the fictional reality really is. Guth considers the former as “ostensible narrative” and the latter as “submerged narrative”—inferred by the reader through “realigning apparently insignificant or unexplained details” that “generate quite different meanings, clearly at odds with [the narrator]’s own narrative agenda” (126). The gaps between the submerged and ostensible narratives are essentially a matter of unreliable narration (Shen, “Unreliability” 896–901), involving secret communication among the author and the reader behind the narrator’s back, giving rise to tension, complexity, irony, or subversion (Guth 126–37).

Intertextually, “submerged narrative” refers to the implicit thematic connection among different narratives (Allen). Focusing on John Hawkes’s trilogy published in the 1970s, Allen argues that “what makes the three [novels] a trilogy is a submerged narrative in which the power of the conscious mind to create idyllic visions is gradually undermined by unconscious needs and fears” (579).

Whether intratextually or inter-textually, “submerged narrative” remains operating within the realm of the plot development(s).

e. “Covert progression” versus Rohrberger’s “short story”

Mary Rohrberger draws a distinction between a “simple narrative” and a “short story.” The former is a tale whose “total interest lies on the surface level” with “no depths to be plumbed” and the latter, by contrast, has a deeper level of meaning (106). Rohrberger treats Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” as “a simple narrative” because there is “no suggestion given within the framework of the story to direct the reader to meaningful implications” (120–21). I appreciate, however, the narrative highly because behind its plot development, there exists two parallel covert progressions with dual macrostructural dramatic irony (see below). Interestingly, both Rohrberger and I find Mansfield’s “The Fly” valuable but for different reasons. Rohrberger regards it as a typical “short story” because its plot is marked by rich *symbolic* meaning, while I attach importance to the narrative particularly because, behind the plot development, there exists a *paralleling nonsymbolic* covert progression (see below).

In contrast to many previous critics who have tried from various angles to get at submerged elements of the plot development, my interest in a covert progression “takes a step beyond the heritage of Aristotelian poetics

in that it diverges from the traditional emphasis on plot to explore textual undercurrents running parallel to and sometimes counter to the plot development” (Pier 123).

DIFFERENT RELATIONS BETWEEN COVERT PROGRESSION AND PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The covert progression and the plot development contrast and interact with each other in diversified ways, which generally fall into two broad categories: the complementary and the subversive. In each category, we can further distinguish different subcategories. Just as there are multiple subcategories, there are multiple factors underlying the construction of a covert progression. This undercurrent often has to do with the author’s purposeful camouflage, attributable sometimes to the author’s desire to hide some attitude or belief in a certain historical context, sometimes to the author’s cognitive complexity or ingenious artistry, sometimes to the author’s purpose of conveying at once incompatible themes or contrastive conflicts or different kinds of irony (see below).

Category A: Covert and Overt Progressions Complement Each Other

a. Complementarity between two kinds of irony against different entities

In some narratives, the target of irony in the plot development becomes a means of conveying irony against another entity in the covert progression. A case in point is Katherine Mansfield’s “Revelations” (1945), which is regarded as a case of “uncharitable studies of neurotic women” (Berkman 121), where Mansfield “reveals her determination to write with greater honesty and integrity by ruthlessly exposing the weaknesses of the central, female figure, whose faults are very similar to her own” (Woods 84). This is the beginning of the narrative:

From eight o’clock in the morning until about half past eleven Monica Tyrell suffered from her nerves, and suffered so terribly that these hours were—agonizing, simply. It was not as though she could control them. “Perhaps if I were ten years younger . . .” she would say. For now that she was thirty-three she had a queer little way of referring to her age on all occasions, of looking at her friends with grave,

childish eyes and saying: “Yes, I remember how twenty years ago. . .” or of drawing Ralph’s attention to the girls—real girls—with lovely youthful arms and throats and swift hesitating movements who sat near them in restaurants. “Perhaps if I were ten years younger. . .” (Mansfield, “Revelations” 190)

From this opening, we can already see how the plot development portrays with irony the central character Monica as a “selfish female of neurotic temperament” (Nathan 104), who “really seems to have so little trouble accepting her own selfishness that she is not worth paying attention to” (Kobler 88).

In the covert progression, however, the central character becomes a means of directing irony against patriarchal discrimination and subjugation. Monica is in a sense a representative of English upper middle class women, who cannot go out to work and who traditionally have social activities in the afternoon and evening, and the morning is a time when life is most idle, meaningless, and lonely, which partly accounts for why she suffers from her nerves at this time of the day. As a 33-year-old woman whose relationship with Ralph started just months ago, she is getting dangerously close to the age after which no one will marry her. Significantly, Victorian society believed that a woman who failed to get married was unattractive, unintelligent, and useless, often making them outcasts (Auerbach 111). Consequently, Monica is obsessed with the age and appearance of herself. What appears to be Monica’s own shallow and trivial obsession, in effect, is the deplorable result of the gender discrimination and oppression in the patriarchal society, which reduces upper middle class women to “dolls” of men and values only their youth and beauty. This is a fundamental reason underlying Monica’s neurosis.

However, we need to bear in mind that the covert progression should parallel the plot development throughout. The beginning in itself cannot accommodate such a continuous undercurrent. But some passages in the middle of the text alert us to its possible existence:

How incredible men were! . . . What had she been doing ever since that dinner party months ago, when [Ralph] had seen her home and asked if he might come and “see again that slow Arabian smile?” Oh, what nonsense—what utter nonsense. . . Oh, to be free of Princes’ at one-thirty, of being the tiny kitten in the swansdown basket, of

being the Arabian, and the grave, delighted child and the little wild creature. . . . "Never again," she cried aloud, clenching her small fist. (Mansfield, "Revelations" 192, italics added)

Ralph is an embodiment of patriarchy, treating Monica as a plaything and being interested merely in her "slow Arabian smile." The following free indirect discourse and Monica's loud cry "Never again" show Monica's awakening to her being oppressed by patriarchy. The series of prepositional phrases following "to be free" indicates that the only model for Monica in Ralph's thinking is as a doll. Moreover, her neurosis may be ascribable to a great extent to this humiliating and meaningless relationship. Monica's cry for freedom here echoes her earlier cry for freedom: "I'm free. I'm free. I'm free as the wind.' And now all this vibrating, trembling, exciting, flying world was hers. It was her kingdom. No, no, she belonged to nobody but Life" (Mansfield, "Revelations" 192).

Such passages conveying social protest and Monica's desire for freedom constitute what James Phelan calls "recalcitrant materials" ("Debating" 161), which deviate from the path of the plot centering on Monica's weaknesses. Given the Aristotelian tradition, when encountering such recalcitrance, critics tend to overlook it or try to reconfigure the progression of the plot in light of it, or endeavor to pull it onto the track of the plot development. Thus, one critic observes, "When [Monica] gets her first revelation, her first glimpse of freedom, the narrator says that she owns the world, but then, perhaps by way of correction adds, 'no, no, she belonged to no one but Life' . . . This illustrates a teaching older than Mansfield which says to *'be on guard against every form of greed* for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions' (from the New Testament)" (Morrow 68, italics added). Mansfield's positive presentation in free indirect discourse of Monica's desire for *freedom from patriarchal oppression* is mistaken as the narrator's negative comment on Monica's *greed for wealth*, which fits in the plot development.

When I encounter such recalcitrant materials, I would consciously search for the possible existence of another narrative movement. My attempts sometimes fail because the recalcitrant elements turn out to be merely local deviations in the plot, but sometimes my efforts are rewarded since the recalcitrant elements do interact with other textual choices to constitute a continuous undercurrent progressing in another thematic direction. With such

conscious effort, it is not very difficult to find that in “Revelations,” from the beginning to the ending, there exists an ironic covert progression protesting against patriarchal oppression (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 95–110). Because of the coexistence of this undercurrent and the overt plot, textual choices often simultaneously generate two contrastive kinds of meaning, as we have seen in the opening. The ending of the narrative is a conservative one in the overt plot, with Monica arriving at Prince’s to meet Ralph for lunch. But in the undercurrent, by transforming Monica into a meek doll and merging it with the dead body of a little girl, Mansfield subtly conveys, at the same time, a tragic ending, implicitly indicting patriarchal subjugation of woman (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 106–8).

One may wonder why Mansfield did not make the plot development itself one of social protest. Mansfield wrote the narrative at the beginning of the twentieth century, when, despite the influence of the New Women’s movement, England was still very conservative so that a socially rebellious story would surely have met with resistance from many conventional readers. Significantly, Mansfield was writing to make a living (Murry 64) and she had to consider readers’ reception in that conservative context. Not surprisingly, she created an overt plot to portray a “selfish female of neurotic temperament” but, at the same time, a covert progression to ironize the social forces reducing her to such a state. In the latter, the female protagonist invites readers’ understanding and sympathy, calling for drastic changes in the “interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments” in the reading process (Phelan, *Experiencing*). The distances among the author, narrator, character, and reader are notably shortened.

The limitation of space does not permit me to go into such details in discussing other narratives, but I would like to offer here some theses which are applicable to other cases:

Thesis One, in order to discover the covert progression, it is a prerequisite that we break free of the bondage of the narrative critical tradition since Aristotle, which very much confines attention to the plot development and only tries to unearth its own deeper, sometimes ambiguous or contradictory meanings. Even deconstructive critics are only concerned with the incompatible readings of the plot (Miller). In commenting on the covert progression, H. Porter Abbott observes that it is a type of meaning “that readers miss not because it’s hidden but largely because their interpretive equipment won’t allow them to see what is right there in plain sight” (560).

When responding to my revelation of the dual dynamics in Kate Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde" (Shen, "Dual Narrative Progression as Dual Authorial Communication"), James Phelan suggests testing respectively the plot development and the covert progression (Phelan, "Debating" 161–62). But unless we break free of the shackle of the narrative critical tradition, we will not get a chance to test the covert progression because existing "interpretive equipment won't allow" us to see it. In order to discover it, when encountering recalcitrant materials in the plot development, instead of skipping over them or trying to fit them in the interpretation of the plot, we need find out whether *textual choices in different parts of the text interact to constitute another narrative movement*, which progresses in a contrastive or opposite thematic direction.

Thesis Two, we must free ourselves of the bondage of a fixed authorial image.

There is a critical consensus that Mansfield is not concerned with social problems, and existing criticism on Mansfield's fiction has focused on her sensitive and perceptive characterization and atmosphere-building. This view also hinders our perception of the dual dynamics in "Revelations" where, behind an ironic overt plot concerned with individual characterization, there is an ironic covert progression protesting against social injustice.

Thesis Three, a consideration of the historical context may shed light on the covert progression.

If the relevant historical information helps with the discovery of the feminist undercurrent in Mansfield's "Revelations," in reading Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby," the knowledge of her as a racist in daily life may facilitate the discovery of the racist covert progression behind the anti-racist plot development (see below). In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," the covert progression centering on the murderer's self-conviction rests with the interaction between the text and the historical context. Ignoring history will make the discovery of this undercurrent impossible (see below).

Thesis Four, intertextual comparison may also be conducive to the uncovering of the covert progression.

If we compare "Revelations" with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*, a narrative with a feminist overt plot that exerted strong influence on Mansfield (Murry, *Journal* 37), we may come to see more clearly that Mansfield is trying to convey in the undercurrent the "distorting" function of patriarchy (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 100–105).

b. Complementarity between two different kinds of conflict

In some narratives, the plot development is concerned with family or personal conflict, but the covert progression centers, instead, on the conflict between individual and society. Franz Kafka's "The Judgment" (1913) is a typical case in point. Although the narrative has aroused heated controversy, critics have reached the consensus that it focuses on "the conflict between father and son" (Binder 14; Flores; Berman; Brod 129–30). Indeed, Kafka himself unequivocally describes the narrative as "a journey around father and son, and the friend's changing shape may be a change in perspective in the relationship between father and son" (Kafka, *Letters* 267; *Diaries* 278).

My exploring of the covert progression was triggered by a recalcitrance in the plot. The narrative devotes one-third of the textual space to the son's reflection on his friend in Russia, who has failed in business and is in poor health. In the son's view, what prevents his friend from returning home is the foreseeable damage of social pressure on the individual: The friend would "be gaped at on all sides as a prodigal who has returned for good, that only his friends understood things and that he himself was a great baby who must simply do as he was told by these friends of his who had stayed put and been successful . . . wouldn't it be far better for him, in that case, to stay abroad as he was?" (Kafka 1–2). Even from this short elliptical quotation, we can infer a prominent characteristic of the son's mentality—being very much concerned with social pressure.

Existing criticisms of the son's reflection on his friend invariably try to fit it in the interpretation of the plot, *without touching on social pressure*. By contrast, I searched carefully for another narrative movement and found a covert progression throughout the text concerned with the individual–society conflict (Shen, "Covert Progression, Language" 17–24). Both the father and the son, as well as the son's friend in Russia and the son's fiancée, are in the same boat as victims of the modern society.

Intertextually, there is another critical consensus that "The Judgment" is "Kafka's seminal story," containing "in miniature the essence of his themes and techniques in his later work" (Flores, "Foreword"). Apparently, family conflict is not a major thematic concern of Kafka's later work. But with the discovery of the covert progression in "The Judgment," we will come to the realization that the "themes" shared by this text and Kafka's later texts, such

as “The Metamorphosis” (1915) and *The Trial* (1925), center on the conflict between individual and society or the predicament of people in modern society.

The dual dynamics of this narrative leads to two more theses:

***Thesis Five*, given the long narrative critical tradition merely paying attention to the plot development, the author in his letters, journal, and so on may only describe this overt progression without touching on the covert one**, which he or she has created as an undercurrent for readers to discover by themselves.

***Thesis Six*, the discovery of the covert progression may help resolve some ambiguities in the plot development.** “The Judgment” has aroused heated debates, with some critics regarding the father as a tyrant who oppresses the son (Brod 129–30) but other critics deeming the father as a victim of the self-centered son (Berman). With the covert progression coming to light, we can see clearly how the affectionate relationship between father and son is destroyed by social pressure, and we’ll no longer perceiving the son as being self-centered (Shen, “Covert Progression, Language” 19–24).

c. Complementarity between symbolic and nonsymbolic

The plot development of Mansfield’s “The Fly” (1922), concerned with war, death, victimization, existence, memory, and helplessness and so on, is marked by rich symbolic meaning. There are many textual details appearing peripheral or digressive to the plot development, such as “‘I’ve had it [the office] done up lately,’ he [the boss, the central character] explained, as he had explained for the past—how many? —weeks. ‘New carpet,’ and he pointed to the bright red carpet with a pattern of large white rings. ‘New furniture’...” (Mansfield 423). Prompted by such digressive details, I found a nonsymbolic covert progression throughout the text where the boss’s enfeebled friend, the boss’s newly decorated office, the boss’s son, the old clerk Macey, and, significantly, the fly all implicitly function as a vehicle to convey a sense of irony concerning the boss’s vanity and self-importance (Shen, “Covert Progression behind”). On one hand, this undercurrent subtly unifies various digressive details, endowing them with thematic significance and making them artful behind their trivial appearance in the plot development. On the other, the undercurrent also implicitly adds another contrastive layer of meaning to many

textual choices that play an important role in the overt plot, giving rise to a different image of the boss. The investigation of the dual dynamics here point to another thesis:

Thesis Seven, a covert progression may reside to a significant extent in textual choices which appear peripheral or digressive to the plot development. When encountering such elements, we should not skip over them but should try to find out whether there is another narrative movement that unifies these elements, enabling them to play a significant thematic function and to newly take on aesthetic value.

d. Complementarity between attacking and commending

Ambrose Bierce's "A Horseman in the Sky" is a tale that "alone would put [Bierce] into the front rank of all commentators on the futility of war" (Bates 50). Previous criticisms have put this tale on a par with Bierce's "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" published in the same collection. An early review sees in both narratives "nothing but the minutest details of bodily and mental pain" ("Novels of the Week" 241), and a contemporary critic observes that "'The Affair at Coulter's Notch' is very close in conception to 'A Horseman in the Sky'" (Joshi 44). Another critic uses the two tales as examples of how Bierce's works "particularly ironize" "the sort of unthinking submission to duty" (Yost 249–50).

When our mind is confined to the plot development, we tend to become "numb" to an essential difference between the two narratives. In "The Affair at Coulter's Notch," Coulter has no choice but to obey the vicious "imperative" order of a cruel and jealous general, who had an affair with Coulter's wife and was complained against and who now wants to take revenge by making Coulter get killed in that "fatal" notch (Bierce, "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" 71) and, moreover, compelling him to slaughter unwittingly his own wife and baby by firing at the twelve enemy guns surrounding his own house.

By contrast, in "A Horseman in the Sky," the sentry, Carter Druse, makes a conscious choice to kill his father as an enemy scout in order to save five regiments of his comrades:

In his memory, as if they were a *divine mandate*, rang the words of *his father* at their parting: "*Whatever may occur, do what you conceive to be your duty.*" He was calm now. His teeth were firmly but not rigidly closed; his nerves were as tranquil as a

sleeping babe's—not a tremor affected any muscle of his body; his breathing, until suspended in the act of taking aim, was regular and slow. Duty had conquered; *the spirit had said to the body*: “Peace, be still.” He fired. (Bierce, “Horseman” 30, italics added)

In the overt plot, the son's having to kill his father is a tragic event, forming a means of bitterly criticizing war. More specifically, the reference to “babe” reminds the reader of the father's bringing up the son from babyhood, but the son is so calm and peaceful in the patricide. The emphatic “not a tremor affected any muscle of his body” and the fact that his breathing is not only “regular” but also “slow” emphatically convey how the war makes the son inhumane in patricide, which is very shocking.

However, in a parallel covert progression, a drastically different picture emerges: What underlies the son's carrying out his duty is his father's advice upon his going soldiering that “whatever” the circumstances, he must do his duty, an advice that is compared to “a divine mandate.” The entity that wakes the son up and enables him to do his duty is an “angel” (Bierce, “Horseman” 29), and the order his body receives is “Peace, be still,” the same order Jesus Christ gives to the stormy sea, which immediately calms the sea down (*Holy Bible*, Mark 4: 39). Significantly, “the spirit” (compare “his spirit”) that has given the order seems associable with “the Holy Spirit.” The religious associations not only lend to justifying the son's carrying out his duty, but also function to turn the covert progression somewhat into an allegory of Duty. The calmness and peacefulness of the son (“firmly but not rigidly”) in carrying out his duty make his action more admirable.

Throughout the narrative, behind the plot attacking the cruelty and inhumanity of war, there is a covert progression positively conveying the paramount importance of carrying out one's duty, with words almost always simultaneously generating two contrastive kinds of thematic meaning, which contradict each other but need each other in conveying the total significance of the text, and which invite complicated response from readers (Shen, “Joint”). The discussion here gives rise to two new theses:

***Thesis Eight*, if we confine our attention to the plot, we may sometimes only see the similarity between two actually very different narratives: for example, when a narrative contains a covert progression behind the overt plot such as “A Horseman in the Sky” contrasted to another narrative only containing a similar overt plot such as “The Affair at Coulter's Notch.” Only by opening our eyes to dual**

narrative dynamics can we perceive at the same time the essential difference between the two narratives.

Thesis Nine, the same person in creating different narratives may adopt drastically different stances even in depicting a similar event, such as a soldier's performing his duty.

e. Complementation among three kinds of irony against the same person

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" contains three parallel ironic progressions. In the plot development, a neurotic protagonist narrator, who insists on his sanity, tells the story of his conceiving the idea of killing an old man with a "vulture eye," and his careful execution of the murder, hiding the dismembered corpse under the floor. He cannot stand what he thinks he is hearing: the increasingly loud beating of the old man's heart in front of three policemen, and, in his agitation, confesses to his crime.

Behind the overt plot, one covert progression subtly rests with the murderer's shriek at the ending, "Villains! [. . .] Dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! Here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!" (Poe 559). The former part of the shriek, accusing the policemen to be dissembling villains, appears odd, peripheral, and digressive to the plot. But it is crucial to the first covert progression: The murderer is the only person who dissembles in the narrative and who constantly takes unethical delight in dissembling. This part of his shriek is in effect a matter of his unconsciously projecting his own dissemblance unto the policemen, which constitutes unwitting self-condemnation and brings into being an overall dramatic irony (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 32–44).

Another covert progression rests on the interaction between the somewhat insane narrator's persistent claim of his being sane and the insanity debate in that historical context, where a murderer's insistence on his sanity amounts to unwitting self-conviction, thus generating another overall dramatic irony.

The plot development and the two covert progressions work together in directing irony from different angles against the ruthless and hypocritical murderer, inviting readers to engage in multiple secret communication with the author behind the narrator's back (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 29–49). From this analysis, we can derive two more theses:

Thesis Ten, in some narratives, there are two covert progressions behind the plot development.

***Thesis Eleven*, the same short fragment of the text may be crucial to both dynamics but with a division of labor: one part being pivotal to the overt plot and the other to the covert progression.** In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the murderer’s last shriek plays a key role in both dynamics, with its latter part echoing the title and forming the dénouement of the overt plot and its former part constituting the fulcrum of the covert progression.

Category B: Covert and Overt Progressions Subvert Each Other

In some narratives, the covert progression and plot development more or less overturn each other. Overlooking the covert progression may result in a drastic misunderstanding of the thematic import and characterization of the narrative.

a. Ethically objectionable covert progression versus ethically acceptable plot development

In Kate Chopin’s “*Désirée’s Baby*” (1893), the female protagonist Désirée, a foundling adopted by the white planter Valmondé and his wife, is wooed and wed by Armand Aubigny, a neighboring planter and bearer of one of the finest names in Louisiana. She gives birth to a son who looks to be of mixed race. Armand spurns both mother and child for the black blood, and Désirée, carrying her baby, commits suicide. At the ending, Armand learns that the son’s African features come from himself instead of from Désirée. This overt textual progression primarily forms an indictment of the Southern racist system.

Behind the overt plot, the covert progression implicitly builds up a fictional world where all (really) white characters never perpetrate racial discrimination and oppression, purportedly making life gay for enslaved blacks and happy for free blacks. By intended contrast, black characters are guilty of racial discrimination and the only person who cruelly oppresses black people is a black planter. Implicitly created is a dual vision of slavery: positive slavery under white masters and negative slavery under a black master. This dual vision unobtrusively mythologizes and endorses the white-dominated Southern racist system (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 70–88, “Dual Narrative Progression as Dual Ethics”).

If we extend attention to historical materials, it is not difficult to discover that Chopin was a racist in daily life (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 84–85). When

she wrote “*Désirée’s Baby*,” slavery was already abolished. Not surprisingly, she only created a racist undercurrent implicitly attributing the evils of slavery to the inferior black blood. However, it should be noted that some Chopin narratives such as “*A Dresden Lady in Dixie*” present a positive picture of the black blood, forming a stark contrast with “*Désirée’s Baby*” (Shen, *Style and Rhetoric* 88–90). That is to say, although the historical Chopin was a racist, the “implied authors” of some Chopin narratives display divergent racial stances (Booth; Shen, “What”).

b. Opposed character relationships

The plot development and covert progression in Katherine Mansfield’s “*Psychology*” (1920) convey drastically different character relationships. Critics have reached the consensus that the plot development of this narrative “records a meeting between two lovers. . . . The story deals in the gap between the couple’s tranquil Platonist ideal and their disturbingly passionate and complex feelings for each other” (Dunbar 100–101). By contrast, in the covert progression, the woman cherishes unrequited love for the man and constantly projects her feelings onto him (Shen, “Dual Textual”).

This undercurrent rests with very subtle textual choices. The free indirect discourse used to convey the woman’s thought “What devil made him say that instead of the other” (Mansfield, “*Psychology*” 153) unobtrusively changes the nature of the man’s thought. The expression “the other” refers back to “he wanted to murmur to her: ‘Do you feel this too? Do you understand it at all?’” (152). Because a person cannot penetrate into another person’s mind, it is impossible for the woman to know what the man wants to say. The phrase “instead of the other” subtly yet unequivocally signifies that the sweet words the man “wants” to utter are actually imagined by the woman. With this fantasy alerting us, a careful examination of various delicate textual details leads to the discovery of a covert progression where the woman cherishes unrequited love for the man, behind the overt plot where the man and the woman are passionately in love with each other. Such subtle expressions, which are peripheral to the plot but are crucial to the undercurrent, tend to elude critical attention.

***Thesis Twelve*, in some narratives, such as in Mansfield’s “*Psychology*” and Poe’s “*The Tell-Tale Heart*,” the fulcrum of the covert progression is constituted by one or a few very subtle stylistic choices, and we need therefore be very careful in**

examining the author's stylistic choices, otherwise the covert progression can easily elude attention.

Thesis Thirteen, because the fulcrum of the covert progression may appear in the middle or the end of the text, to discover the undercurrent, we need to read the text over and over again, to see whether stylistic and structural choices in different parts of the text implicitly interact with each other to form an undercurrent throughout the narrative.

c. Opposed progressions in a graphic novel and foregrounding of different elements from the same complex

Covert progression not only occurs in the written medium, it can also be found in a graphic novel (or comic), a medium in which language and images crucially interact. In Miller's *300*, for instance, the overt plot presents a clash between the Persians, a wild army on the rampage, and a professional corps of 300 Spartan freedom-fighters commanded by its King, Leonidas. The Spartans are not devoid of complexity, as their desire for freedom is compromised by their excessive collectivist zeal as soldiers. A careful examination of the visual, visual-verbal, and sequential possibilities of the graphic novel leads to the discovery of a covert progression that differs from the overt plot in the foregrounding of the Spartans' contradictory pair freedom/collectivism. Thus, for instance, the purely visual representation of the killing of a wild wolf by a young Leonidas early in the graphic novel, which prefigures the coming of the equally wild Persians, accommodates a covert reading: While the overt reading of the killing anticipates the battle with the Persians as an act of liberation, omitting the collectivist elements, the covert reading, by contrast, suggests that Leonidas, his 300, and everything they stand for are the real beast, thus foregrounding the more negative elements of their identity. The use of such destabilizing visual, textual, and sequential strategies in *300* suggests that graphic novels may provide a fertile field for the research of covert progression. In the wake of a decade-long condemnation of Miller's work, among it *300*, on ethical grounds, uncovering a covert progression that criticizes the Spartan position should reinstate this graphic novel as a rich and complex work in the canon (Candel).

Thesis Fourteen, covert progression and dual dynamics may occur in other media, where we also need to search consciously for the possible existence of an undercurrent behind the plot development.

Thesis Fifteen, as distinct from the complementary relations where the overt plot always has a more or less substantial role to play, when the overt and covert dynamics subvert each other, the function of the overt varies drastically: It is sometimes only a deceptive cloak (“*Désirée’s Baby*”), sometimes a functional foil to set off the covert (“*Psychology*”), and sometimes as important as the covert (300).

THEORETICAL EXTENSION AND TRANSFORMATION

Up to now, theoretical concepts and critical models of narrative fiction have not taken into account the covert progression and dual dynamics as such. These have two disadvantages: first, they cannot account for the covert progression(s) and dual (or even triple) dynamics, and second, they tend to hinder the search for them. There is an urgent need to extend and transform theoretical concepts and analytical models in various fields, including narratology, stylistics, and translation studies. As space is limited, I’ll focus on narratology and only touch on the other two fields.

COMPLICATING AND EXTENDING NARRATOLOGY

Dual Conflict/Tension and Dual Event Structure Model

The plot development and the covert progression often center on different kinds of conflict and generate different kinds of tension. Moreover, in some narratives like “*Psychology*,” even the basic type of the overall event structure in the two dynamics differ from each other. In terms of the distinction between “plot of resolution” and “plot of revelation” (Chatman 47–48), the plot development in “*Psychology*” is a revelatory one, where the relationship between the man and the woman stays pretty much the same. But in the undercurrent, there is a zigzag movement toward a resolution: The woman finally gives up her unrequited love and accepts pure friendship as cherished by the man. In order to account for and encourage the search for such contrasts, we need to have a dual model.

A MODEL OF DUAL EVENT STRUCTURE

- i. **The event structure of the overt plot:** What constitutes the conflict and tension of the events in the plot? Are the events revelatory or moving toward a resolution?

- ii. **The event structure of the covert progression:** What constitutes the conflict and tension of the events in the covert progression? Are the events revelatory or moving toward a resolution?
- iii. **The relationship between the two:** Whether they are subversive or complementary to each other?

Even if the two dynamics are both resolved or merely revealing, their specific event structures would differ from each other. We need therefore always describe them separately and consider their interaction.

Dual Characterization and Dual Character Image Model

The overt and covert dynamics foreground different character traits and portray different character images. For instance, in “A Horseman in the Sky,” the father in the plot is merely a deplorable victim of war, but in the undercurrent, he is a respected embodiment of duty, even deified by various textual choices to a certain extent (Shen, “Joint” 131–36). In face of such complexity, we also need to have a dual model:

A MODEL OF DUAL CHARACTERIZATION AND CHARACTER IMAGE

- i. **Characterization and character image in the plot development:** What features of a character are (emphatically) depicted in the overt plot? What image of the character emerges in this narrative movement?
- ii. **Characterization and character image in the covert progression:** What traits of the character are (emphatically) conveyed in the covert progression? What image of the character comes out of this undercurrent?
- iii. **The relationship between the two:** Whether they are subversive or complementary to each other?

Dual Model of Unreliability

The widely accepted criterion for judging narratorial unreliability as proposed by Wayne Booth is the distance between the implied author and the narrator (Phelan, *Living*; Shen, “Unreliability”). But the double dynamics in

some narratives complicate the issue, especially in extradiegetic narration. In “Psychology,” for instance, the man and the woman being in love with each other in the plot development is a false picture reported by the narrator, yet it is not a “misreporting” due to the narrator’s shortcomings, but a matter of the implied author’s purposefully misleading the reader for cognitive and artistic richness; hence there is no essential distance between the narrator and the author. In Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby,” the extradiegetic narrator in the undercurrent assumes a racist stance in judging events, but the narrator’s “misevaluation” is to be attributed to the implied author’s own racist stance. In such cases, we need to shift to other criteria, such as the distance between what the fictional reality is and what picture of the reality is presented by the narrator/author in judging “misreporting” and the distance between socially acceptable ethics and the narrator/author’s ethics in measuring “misevaluation.”

Significantly, in “Psychology,” the narrator’s report of the relationship between the man and the woman is unreliable only in the overt plot and is reliable in the covert progression; and in the Chopin narrative, the narrator only misevaluates in the covert progression but (at least superficially) conforms to socially acceptable ethics in the overt plot. Thus, we need a model of dual unreliability.

A MODEL OF DUAL UNRELIABILITY

- i. **Whether the narrator is unreliable in the plot development?** What is the criterion for judging the narrator’s unreliability in this narrative movement?
- ii. **Whether the narrator is unreliable in the covert progression?** What is the criterion for judging the narrator’s unreliability in this narrative movement?
- iii. **The relationship between the two:** Whether they are subversive to each other or are complementary to each other?

Dual Model of Authorial Communication

In the new century, rhetorical critics as led by James Phelan are concerned with the relations among several beings: the historical person (the author in daily life), the implied author (the person in the process of writing a particular text, which implies his or her image for readers to infer), the narrator,

the character, the authorial audience (the ideal audience the implied author has in mind), and [real] individual readers—whose experiences and social positioning may give rise to diversified readings of the same text (Phelan, “Authors”).

As we have seen, in a narrative with dual dynamics, the implied author tends to adopt two contrastive or even opposed stances in creating the two parallel narrative movements. Consequently, instead of inviting readers to infer one image of the implied author (shortened as IA), the text invites readers to infer two contrastive or even opposed images (such as antiracist versus racist) from the two narrative movements.

Corresponding to the dual image of the IA, there are two contrastive or opposed positions of the “authorial audience.” In Mansfield’s “Revelations,” the authorial audience position for the overt plot is nonfeminist and that for the covert progression is feminist. In Kafka’s “The Judgment,” the authorial reading position for the plot is concerned with personal conflict, and that for the undercurrent is concerned with the conflict between individuals and society.

A MODEL OF DUAL IA AND DUAL AUTHORIAL AUDIENCE

- i. What is the IA’s stance in the plot development? What is the authorial reading position for this narrative movement?
- ii. What is the IA’s stance in the covert progression? What is the authorial reading position for this undercurrent?
- iii. The relationship between the two: Are they subversive or complementary to each other?

This model can also account for the essential similarity and difference in authorial position between the two narratives by Bierce as mentioned above.

Needless to say, all of us can only try to infer the IA’s and the authorial audience’s position—in the same way as generations of critics have been trying to infer the themes and character images of literary works from textual choices. No one can claim that his or her inference is completely accurate, but we should not give up the effort, and we often find an analysis convincing and shareable. Also needless to say, the rhetorical concern with authorial communication is complementary to the cognitive concern with how readers’ different social positioning and experiences give rise to diversified readings. If we are only engaged in the latter approach, we’ll be hard put to discover the dual dynamics as such, at least at the present stage with readers

still fettered by the long-term interpretive framework concentrating on the plot development.

Apart from the abovementioned dual models, we also need to have **a dual model of narrative distance, a dual model of focalization** (in “Psychology,” focalization keeps shifting between the man and the woman in the overt plot, but in the undercurrent, the woman consistently functions as the focalizer), **a dual modal of narrative tone**, among others, and on a more general scale, **a dual model of story and discourse**.

COMPLICATING AND EXTENDING STYLISTICS

The plot development and covert progression(s) constitute two (or three) parallel trajectories of signification, along which the same words may take on different degrees of importance and generate contrastive or opposite meanings. In order to account for the dual dynamics, we need to transform and extend both stylistic theory and analysis. No matter what linguistic model is adopted, the stylistic theory should direct attention to such double dynamics in some narratives and offer a dual model to account for them. In stylistic analysis, the analyst needs to explore whether linguistic choices simultaneously play a different thematic function in another hidden narrative movement. When finding some linguistic choices pointing at a different thematic direction from that of the plot development, one need examine carefully whether they interact with other linguistic choices in different parts of the text to convey implicitly a contrastive or even opposite kind of thematic meaning and to portray different character images. If the result of the exploration is more or less validating, the analyst not only needs to carry out the stylistic analysis along the two different trajectories of signification (frequently adjusting the direction in the process of the analysis), but also needs to pay attention to the interaction between them.

COMPLICATING AND EXTENDING TRANSLATION STUDIES

As regards a narrative with dual (or even triple) narrative dynamics, a translation choice that is perfect in terms of the plot development may turn out to be a total failure as regards the covert progression(s). For instance, in translating Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the famous Chinese translator Minglun Cao renders “Villains! Dissemble no more!” into “你们这些恶棍!别再装聋作哑!” (back-translation: “You these villains! Don’t pretend to be deaf and

mute any more!”). In the original, the murderer, who dissembles in various ways but has never pretended to be deaf and mute, accuses the policemen to be dissembling. Because he is the only person who dissembles in the narrative and because the unqualified “Villains! Dissemble no more!” can refer to his own continuous dissembling, his words unwittingly constitute self-condemnation and bring into being an undercurrent of overall dramatic irony. The translator, by adding “you” and “these” to qualify “villains” and by restricting “dissembling” to “pretending to be deaf and mute,” makes the words only accuse the policemen, thus unwittingly undermining the covert progression. But as regards the plot, this rendering is right and proper. That is to say, the dual dynamics calls for extending and transforming the criteria of translation in order to account for the success or failure in translating both narrative movements. And we should explore the strategies and methods for rendering successfully both dynamics.

CONCLUSION

It should have become clear that in some narratives, behind the plot development, there can be found covert progression(s). Because of the coexistence of the overt and covert narrative movements, textual choices are at once pulled toward two (or three) contrastive thematic orientations and made to play different thematic functions. This leads us to see that intratextually, sometimes what determines meaning production is not co-text in the usual sense, but a particular narrative movement as a trajectory of signification, a trajectory that may be complemented or contradicted by another contrastive trajectory in the same text. The double dynamics convey different or even opposite thematic significance, character images, and distinct aesthetic values, inviting complicated response from readers. In a narrative with such dual dynamics, only paying attention to the plot development—no matter how many angles critics try to approach it—will result in a partial or false picture. When the covert progression comes to light, many textual details that appear odd, puzzling, trivial, or digressive in the plot may fall into place in the undercurrent, newly taking on thematic and aesthetic relevance and significance. The process of uncovering the coexisting narrative progressions is a process of gaining a fuller and a more balanced understanding of the text.

In order to uncover and to account for the “covert progression(s)” and its (their) relation with the plot development, we need to extend and transform

the relevant theoretical concepts and models. Significantly, the previously neglected covert progression and dual dynamics not only present a great challenge to the previous and present narrative studies, but also offer a golden opportunity to enliven, enrich, and develop narrative theory and criticism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is grateful to John V. Knapp, the editor of *Style*, for his helpful suggestions and comments during the process of preparing this target essay. The author would also like to thank James Phelan for his generous and helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

DAN SHEN is Boya Chair Professor of English language and literature at Beijing [Peking] University. She is on the advisory boards of the American journals *Style* and *Narrative*, the British journal *Language and Literature*, and the European *JLS: Journal of Literary Semantics*. In addition to six books and more than one hundred essays in China, she has published *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction* with Routledge, and numerous essays in North America and Europe in narrative studies, stylistics, and translation studies. (shendan@pku.edu.cn)

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Dan Shen’s Rhetorical Narratology and Umberto Eco’s Semiotic Theory of Interpretation

John Pier

UNIVERSITY OF TOURS

Every reader, listener, or viewer of stories, from the most casual to the most critically attuned, intuits that between the lines or under the surface of the narrated incidents there lies unspoken information and meanings of various kinds, scopes, pertinence, and accessibility that cannot be ignored.

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DOI: 10.5325/style.55.1.0028