

Theoretical Innovation, Critical Practice, and Interdisciplinary Approach: SHEN Dan's Contribution to Narrative Studies

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Abstract: SHEN Dan is a pioneering and leading figure in the field of narrative studies over the past few decades. This article provides an overview of Shen's outstanding contributions to narrative theory and criticism both in China and in the West, including how she clarifies and develops theoretical concepts, issues, and models in classical narrative poetics and postclassical narratologies, how she reveals various kinds of significant relations both within narratology and between narratology and stylistics. In particular, the article will explicate how Shen's profound interest in the underlying meanings of literary texts has driven her to offer innovative interpretations through an interdisciplinary approach, culminating in the establishment of her new theory and criticism of covert progression and dual narrative dynamics, which goes beyond the Aristotelian tradition focusing on plot development and which has extended and transformed not only narratology but also fictional stylistics and fictional translation studies.

Keywords: SHEN Dan; narrative studies; theoretical development; critical innovation; interdisciplinary approach

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标题: 理论创新、批评实践和跨学科方法：申丹对叙事研究的贡献

内容摘要: 近几十年以来，申丹教授一直是叙事研究领域的领军人物。本文梳理了申丹在国内外对叙事理论和文本阐释做出的杰出贡献，包括她如何澄清并发展了经典叙事诗学和后经典叙事学中的理论概念、议题和模型，以及她如何揭示了叙事学内部以及叙事学与文体学之间的各种重要关系。本文重点阐述了申丹对文学文本隐含意义的深切关注如何推动她采用跨学科方法提出创新的阐释，并最终创建了隐性进程和双重叙事动力的新理论。这超越了亚里士多德研究传统对情节发展的关注，不仅拓展和革新了叙事学，而且也

拓展和革新了文学文体学和小说翻译研究。

关键词：申丹；叙事研究；理论发展；批评创新；跨学科方法

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SHEN Dan conducts research in the fields of narratology, fictional stylistics, and fictional translation studies. These three areas are interconnected rather than discrete in her research. She got her Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh, where she completed a doctoral dissertation titled “Literary Stylistics and Fictional Translation,” which formed the basis of her first book in English with the same title published by Peking University Press in 1995. During this period, she gradually discovered that fictional stylistics, which focuses on linguistic techniques, forms a strong complementary relation with narratology, which centers on structural techniques. Since completing her Ph.D. studies and returning to China, Shen has increasingly devoted her attention to narrative studies often with her characteristic interdisciplinary approach. The present article will focus on Shen’s contributions to narrative studies both in China and in the West.

1. Shen’s Innovative Discussion of Classical Narrative Poetics in Relation to Stylistics

Shen’s first book in Chinese, *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction* (1998)¹, is a landmark in classical narrative poetics and fictional stylistics, characterized by her pioneering interdisciplinary approach. Shen argues in this book that narratology (primarily classical narrative poetics at that time) and fictional stylistics are complementary to each other, and that both are necessary for a fuller understanding of literary narratives. Narratology focuses on classifying and analyzing various structural techniques, whereas fictional stylistics focuses on analyzing language choices in literary texts. They have different methodological approaches to the study of literature, yet both are concerned with presentational techniques in narrative texts. Shen contends that the two disciplines are interconnected and that a comprehensive analysis of narrative presentation requires taking an interdisciplinary approach. She suggests that narrative poetics can provide structural frameworks with which stylisticians can better analyze verbal strategies used in a narrative, while stylistics can provide a more detailed understanding of the effects and implications of language use in a narrative. To facilitate readers’ comprehension of the mutual benefits of

1 Winner of First Prize of the 4th National Excellent Foreign Literature Books Award.

narratology and stylistics, the first part of the book, on the one hand, addresses three significant topics in narrative poetics—the distinction between story and discourse, the concept of the plot, and the study of character and characterization, and, on the other, it discusses the principles and properties of different branches of stylistics, with a focus on literary stylistics. The second half of the book explores the overlapping areas of narratology (narrative poetics) and fictional stylistics, encompassing the relationship between narratology's discourse and stylistics' style, various categories of narrative focalization, and modes of speech presentation. Part of the discussion fed into a chapter Shen was invited to write for *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005), "What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do for Each Other." Shen argues that, although "discourse" and "style" may superficially resemble each other, they conceal an essential difference that, once acknowledged, "underscores the necessity and value of combining narratological and stylistic approaches to the presentation of narrative" (136). The boundary between the two stems from the fact that narratology's notion of discourse is mainly structural, an aspect that is often taken for granted by stylisticians when investigating choices of language. In contrast, narratologists often focus their attention on structural relations and techniques, very much neglecting different ways of using language. This boundary is partly due to the contrastive approaches of narratology and stylistics to literary analysis, as well as their different connections to linguistics. Shen's discussion aims at showing that "narratological features and stylistic features interact and reinforce each other, and it is necessary to see their interaction" (146) in order to gain a fuller understanding of a literary work. Shen has also systematically investigated interdisciplinary attempts in the stylistic field and published "How Stylisticians Draw on Narratology: Approaches, Advantages, and Disadvantages" in *Style* (2005).

Shen's first book in Chinese was published in a period when the field of foreign literary studies in China was eager to absorb Western academic achievements in aesthetic and other kinds of literary studies. Significantly, Shen's book differs from many other books published at that time aimed at introducing Western theory and methodology since it is marked by Shen's keen critical insight and innovative thinking. Apart from its pioneering attempt at systematically revealing the complementary relation between narratology and stylistics, the book displays Shen's superb abilities: (1) to draw distinctions about various aspects of narrative through lucid discussion of examples; (2) to reveal the essence of various key theoretical concepts and important relations; (3) to clear up theoretical confusion and point out relevant partiality and limitations in Western theory; (4) to make up for the deficiencies in existing studies with ample exemplification from both Western

and Chinese fiction; (5) to bring to light the peculiarities of speech presentation in Chinese prose fiction and offering her own classification of Chinese blend modes.

Shen's distinctive way of investigating Western theory with her admirable intellect has enabled her to contribute to theoretical discussions in prestigious Western journals and volumes. I have already mentioned how her exploration of the relation between narratology and stylistics in this book fed into her chapter in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, actually with Shen as the only non-Western contributor. To take, for another example, Chapter 1 of Shen's first book in Chinese that discusses the distinction and relation between story and discourse. Shen first outlines the historical development of the story-discourse distinction, highlighting its validity while pointing out the limitations of Western tripartite classifications of narrative structure. Then, she extensively examines instances where the boundary between story and discourse becomes blurred and so there is no point distinguishing the two. This chapter paved the way for her further discussion in "Defense and Challenge: Reflections on the Relation Between Story and Discourse" published in *Narrative* (2002). In this article, Shen refutes existing subversive challenges to the distinction and offers her own non-deconstructive challenges in terms of "(1) narrated speech; (2) character's perception when used as the 'angle of vision' by the narrator; and (3) certain homodiegetic narration." She argues that, when a character's voice or consciousness becomes narrativized and temporarily elevated to the level of discourse, various distortions of fictional reality may occur. Likewise, when a character's perception/focalization takes on a dual nature, it blurs the distinction between story and discourse. Furthermore, in instances of homodiegetic narration when the I's narratorial function and character function converge, the distinction also dissolves. In her subsequent article "What Do Temporal Antinomies Do to the Story-Discourse Distinction?" Shen addresses the issue of "mimesis" and explores various situations that extend beyond the framework of classical narratology. As a result of her astute exploration of the issue, Shen was invited to contribute a one-thousand-word entry "Story-Discourse Distinction" to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (2005).

In her first book in Chinese, Shen has also devoted a chapter to the discussion of focalization, part of which has formed the basis of her two articles: "Breaking Conventional Barriers: Transgressions of Modes of Focalization" in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective* and "Difference Behind Similarity: Focalization in Third-Person Center of Consciousness and First-Person Retrospective Narration" in *Acts of Narrative*. The very titles of these articles indicate Shen's theoretical acumen and innovativeness. She points out that the boundaries among different modes

of focalization are not natural but conventional, and therefore authors can easily transgress relevant boundaries for various thematic and aesthetic purposes. While contemporary narrative theorists focus on the similarity in focalization between third-person center of consciousness and first-person retrospective narration, to the point of equating the two, Shen goes in the opposite direction and reveals various differences between the two modes of focalization in terms of rhetorical and aesthetic effects. These discussions shed fresh light on the relevant issues and enable us to gain a clearer and fuller picture. This book has also benefited from Shen's publications in the West. Chapter 6, for instance, has drawn on her "Stylistics, Objectivity, and Convention" published in *Poetics* in 1988. Whether it is a matter of her discussion in China feeding into her publication in the West, or vice versa, it is characterized by the gradual and systematic expansion and refinement of her theoretical inquiry.

Due to its profound academic insights and valuable guidance for researchers, the book received immediate recognition and acclaim from the academic community in China, establishing itself as the most influential monographs in the field of narrative studies over the past four decades. Since its publication, it has been cited by more than 2500 journal articles. Not surprisingly, the fourth edition of the book was selected in 2021 as one receiving "The Chinese Academic Translation Project of the National Social Science Fund," and, since then, Shen has been translating an abridged and updated version of this book, which is forthcoming from Routledge¹. Part of her updating of the discussion of focalization in the book, titled "Narratology, Stylistics, and Point of View: Partiality, Complementarity, and a New Definition," has appeared as a leading essay in the winter, 2023 issue of *Style*.

2. Shen's Contribution to Postclassical Narratological Theory

While Shen's first book in Chinese in 1998 focuses on the relation between narrative poetics, which was at that time still classical narratology², and stylistics, her second book in Chinese, *A Study of Anglo-American Narrative Theory* quickly follows the latest trend in postclassical narratologies and showcases her study in this area. Indeed, Shen has played a leading role in introducing postclassical narratologies into China, having published numerous articles explicating rhetorical narratology, feminist narratology, cognitive narratology, and the deconstructive "ananarratology," as well as having edited a seminal series of English-into-Chinese translation of

1 See Dan Shen, *Discourse and Style: What Narratology and Stylistics Can Do for Each Other*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

2 David Herman first proposed the notion of postclassical narratology in 1997.

books on postclassical narratologies¹. In her co-authored second book in Chinese², Shen is the sole author of the latter half on “Postclassical Narratologies.” Shen claims herself to be primarily a rhetorical narratologist and has paid more attention to this approach, which therefore calls for a separate article for discussion.³

As for feminist narratology, in this book Shen has analyzed systematically the differences between feminist narratology and feminist criticism, and revealed the hidden complementary relation between feminist narratology and classical narrative poetics, which fed into her articles “Why Contextual and Formal Narratologies Need Each Other” (2005) and “‘Contextualized Poetics’ and Contextualized Rhetoric” in *Emerging Vectors of Narratology* (2017). Shen is also a feminist narratologist herself, with a series of articles uncovering feminist undercurrents that protest against patriarchal oppression (see below). However, being open-minded and very perceptive, she has also brought to light the fact that Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” is in effect not a feminist text (“Non-Ironic”), in contradistinction to critical consensus both in China and in the West.

In terms of cognitive narratology, Shen’s discussion in this book has also fed into the two articles just mentioned respectively appearing in *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* and *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*. Shen has clarified the picture by distinguishing between generic cognitive context and sociohistorical context, as well as between generic readers and individual readers in cognitive investigations. Moreover, Shen has revealed the complementary rather than mutually exclusive relation among three kinds of narratological approaches: (1) the decontextualized investigation of generic textual structures; (2) the investigation of hypothetical generic reader’s understanding of narrative, and (3) the empirical study of actual readers’ cognitive processes. What is more, her shrewd examination of Monika Fludernik’s cognitive narratological investigation paved the way for her discussion in “Two Conceptions of Experientiality and Narrativity.”

As for the deconstructive ananarratology as represented by J. Hillis Miller, Shen insightfully reveals the hidden complementary relation between Miller’s ananarratological approach and narratological approach in critical practice. Shen’s discussion in this book echoes her “Broadening the Horizon: On J. Hillis Miller’s Ananarratology” in *Provocations to Reading*.

Shen has also addressed unnatural narrative theory. In “What are Unnatural

1 Peking University Press, 2002-2011.

2 Winner of two prestigious national book prizes.

3 See Wang’s article in this issue focusing on Shen’s contribution to rhetorical narratology in the West.

Narratives? What are Unnatural Elements?” (2016) Shen clarifies the picture by revealing the essential difference between the “unnatural” in Shakespeare’s plays/realist fiction and postmodernist fiction and by classifying different kinds of unnatural elements that do not break the mimetic illusion of the whole work. Unnatural narrative theory is defined by Brian Richardson as “the theory of fictional narratives [whole texts] that defy the conventions of nonfictional narratives and fiction that closely resembles nonfiction” (385). Shen points out that this theoretical concern with whole texts is shared by “unnatural narrative theory,” “unnatural narratology,” and “poetics of unnatural narrative,” but, in practice, scholars in this field often deal with unnatural textual elements in works that maintain the mimetic illusion. In order to get rid of this inconsistency, Shen proposes a clearer new definition: “*Unnatural narrative theory is the theory of fictional narratives and fictional elements (in generally mimetic texts) that defy nonfictional and mimetic conventions*” (486)¹.

Shen has altogether published nine books (seven being single-authored), two collections of essays, and more than one hundred articles in the areas of classical narrative poetics, post-classical narratologies, fictional stylistics, literary theory, and translation studies in major Chinese and Western journals. Whether in China or in the West, Shen has played a leading role in revealing and clarifying the essence of relevant key theoretical concepts, important models, or relations in narrative studies. What is more, Shen has also put forward various new theoretical concepts and models, such as “context-determined irony” (Shen, “Non-ironic”), “overall-extended close reading” (Shen, “Overall-Extended”), the association between unreliability and characterization (Shen, “Unreliability and Characterization), the distorting function of the linguistic medium in realistic fiction (Shen, “Distorting Medium”), and “deceptive equivalence” or “deceptive correspondence” in fictional translation (Shen, *Literary*; Shen and Fang “Stylistics”).

3. Shen’s Contribution to Narrative Criticism through Discovering Covert Progression

Before 2005, Shen’s books and articles are primarily theoretical in orientation, including both classical narrative poetics and postclassical narratologies, aimed at introducing, clarifying, and developing theoretical topics and issues. Since 2005, however, she has been increasingly engaged in narrative criticism with an interdisciplinary narratological-stylistic approach that is characterized by the uncovering of deep or hidden meanings in classic narratives, most of which enjoy a publication history of more than one hundred years. Thus, Shen’s interpretations

¹ The original quotation is italics.

challenge or subvert those of generations of critics. It is in this period that Shen gradually identified the shortcomings of existing approaches in the fields of literary, narratological, and stylistic criticism of narrative texts that invariably focus on the plot development, to the neglect of what she designates “covert progression” existing in many literary narratives. The term “covert progression,” coined by a Chinese scholar, has gained international acceptance and influence. Shen’s provocative and subversive interpretations of Western classic narratives have proved successful, accepted for publication in prestigious Western journals such as *Style*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Poetics Today*, *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *English Studies*, and *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*.

Shen’s discovery of “covert progression” was not a sudden revelation but rather an explorative process of many years. The success of Shen’s unearthing deeper or hidden meanings in classic narratives may be accounted for by the following factors: (1) her distinguished mastery of relevant literary, narrative, and stylistic theories and her strong ability in applying theories to critical practice; (2) her continuous efforts to search for and establish effective analytic models that facilitate the analysis; (3) her interdisciplinary approach; (4) her penetrating insight and ingenious analytical skills, able to probe into the subtle nuances of textual details, especially those that may appear trivial or irrelevant to the plot development.

The hidden meanings Shen discovered in literary texts were respectively concerned first with “subtext” and then “covert progression,” which finally developed into “dual narrative progression.”¹ While these terms share a common emphasis on the underlying or concealed meanings in literary texts, their differentiation signifies Shen’s shift in critical focus and marks the step-by-step development of her theory. Prior to 2012, Shen seemed to adhere to conventional practice and was only concerned with the plot-based narrative progression in her pursuit of underlying meanings, a pursuit she referred to as the exploration of “subtext.” At this stage, due to the constraints of traditional plot-oriented analysis, she often adopted an either-or stance, tending to dismiss previous interpretations when finding the subtext presenting contrastive or subversive meaning. If she took the surface meaning into account, she also tried to bring the deeper meanings onto the track of the plot development together with the surface meaning. Later on, when she was analyzing Mansfield’s “The Fly,” she found that, if one could break free of the conventional hermeneutic framework that is limited to the plot-based single narrative movement, one may perceive another narrative movement in which textual details that appear irrelevant or digressive to the plot may become organized and meaningful, taking on important thematic functions.

1 To be discussed in the next section.

This additional narrative movement is what she designates “covert progression.”¹

Shen has contributed over twenty articles to the discussion of covert progression (since 2006) and dual narrative dynamics (since 2015). Her theorizing and critical efforts culminate in one book in Chinese on dual narrative dynamics, published by Peking University Press in 2021, and two books in English successively published by Routledge: one in 2014 (on covert progression) and the other in 2023 (on dual narrative dynamics). Although the book in Chinese has been highly influential in China, considering the lack of availability of the book to English-speaking readers, the present study will focus on the two books in English published in the West. The first is titled *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots* (reprinted in paperback in 2016). The book, as stated on the beginning page, “shows that to miss the covert progression is to get only a partial or false picture of the thematics, the characters, and the aesthetic values of the narrative” (i). It also reiterates the importance of stylistic analysis for the investigation of covert progression, evident in the repeated use of “style” as the initial word in all the chapter titles. The book discusses covert progressions in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, and Katherine Mansfield. As Porter H. Abbott lauds in his book review, it is “a shining example for 21st-century narrative theory in the forceful and comprehensive way it insists on binding the craft of interpretation to the craft of fiction” (560). Abbott’s commendation of Shen’s work highlights her dedication to unearthing hidden meanings, often overlooked even by capable and experienced critics because “their interpretive equipment won’t allow them to see” these meanings in another narrative movement as distinct from the plot development (560). By ingeniously analyzing the carefully-chosen exemplar texts, Shen persuasively demonstrates the presence of covert progression, and, in some cases, multiple covert progressions, which form a contrastive, complementary, or subversive relation to the overt plot-based progression. She reveals (1) two covert progressions, one main and the other subsidiary, in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” each of which forms an overall dramatic irony and implicitly conveys a moral; (2) a covert progression in Crane’s “An Episode of War,” which renders war devoid of meaning and satirizes romanticized notions of heroism; (3) a subversive racist covert progression behind an anti-racist overt progression in Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby”; (4) a covert progression in Mansfield’s “Revelations” directing irony at the patriarchal society’s subjugation of an upper-middle-class woman or upper-middle-class women in general behind an overt plot directing irony at the woman herself; (5) a covert progression in Mansfield’s “The Singing Lesson”

1 See Dan Shen, “Covert Progression, Language and Context,” *Rethinking Language, Text and Context*, edited by Beatrix Busse Ruth Page and Nina Nørgaard, London: Routledge, 2019, 17-28.

with deep sympathy for a singing teacher ensnared in a male-dominated culture behind an overt plot with scathing satire against her own emotional instability; (6) an ironic covert progression in Mansfield's "The Fly" that exposes the boss's vanity and self-importance behind a non-ironic plot development centering on big issues such as war and death. What enabled Shen to make such discoveries partly lies in her interdisciplinary combination of stylistic and narratological approaches to literature. Shen's analysis demonstrates that, to attain a more comprehensive understanding of a text's meaning, one must engage in rhetorical readings supported by stylistic analysis, while also considering relevant biographical, intertextual, and social contexts. This is exemplified by Shen's taking into account the "insanity debate" in American history when analyzing "The Tell-Tale Heart," and her exploration of variations in the author's attitude across his or her different works in discussing "Revelations" and "Desirée's Baby."

4. Going beyond Covert Progression to Dual Narrative Dynamics

However, before 2015, Shen still more or less neglected the joint functioning of the covert progression and the plot-based overt progression. This deficiency was made up since 2015 when she started to elucidate the interplay between plot development and covert progression. This approach allows for a more balanced and more comprehensive interpretation of literary narratives, and goes beyond her previously discussed covert progression towards a fuller exploration of the two types of narrative progressions. It is during this phase that she has frequently employed the term "dual" to characterize the previously-neglected important phenomenon, as seen in articles such as "Dual Textual Dynamics and Dual Readerly Dynamics" (2015), "Joint Functioning of Two Parallel Trajectories of Signification" (2017), "Dual Narrative Progression and Dual Ethics" (2018), "Dual Narrative Progression as Dual Authorial Communication: Extending the Rhetorical Model" (2018), "Fictionality as a Rhetorical Resource for Dual Narrative Progression" (2019), "Focalization, Dual Progression, and Twofold Irony" (2022). The shift from the focus on covert progression to a broader concern with dual narrative progression signifies the maturation of her theory.

In her 2015 article "Joint Functioning of Two Parallel Trajectories of Signification: Ambrose Bierce's 'A Horseman in the Sky'," Shen explores how the same words simultaneously take on two incompatible meanings in the plot development and the covert progression. This narrative has been regarded by many critics as concentrating on criticizing the cruelty of war, which has caused the tragedy of patricide, but Shen uncovers a covert progression that at once contradicts

and complements the plot development. In this undercurrent, not only the soldier's carrying out his duty by killing his father is justified but also both the father's and the son's taking duty to be of primary importance is glorified. The conflicting, conditioning, and complementing relation between the two narrative movements invites complicated reactions from readers.

This broadening of perspective to the joint functioning of more than one narrative movement has enabled Shen to offer a new theoretical perspective on literary signification. In her article "Same Words Generating Dual or Multiple Meanings in Different Narrative Movements: An Overlooked Aspect of Literary Signification," Shen argues that the overt and covert progressions "constitute different trajectories of signification, in which words tend to take on dual or even multiple literary, implied, or symbolic meanings" (721). Shen challenges the shared interpretive assumption in the fields of literary criticism, narratology, stylistics, and translation studies that the meaning of words is generated *in a text* and argues that since different narrative movements in the same text call into being different meanings of the same words, in a text with more than one narrative movement, *meaning is actually generated in a given narrative movement as a particular trajectory of signification*. This article, with examples taken from different narratives, convincingly shows that the same words can yield dual or even multiple meanings in different narrative progressions of the same text, a literary phenomenon that has hitherto been neglected both in China and in the West.

Moreover, Shen's investigation of parallel narrative movements in the same text has provided a new way of dealing with critical controversy. Franz Kafka's famous short story "The Judgement" has aroused fierce critical debates and the text is regarded as being enigmatic. Previous interpretations tend to concentrate on the plot's depiction of conflicts between the father and the son, taking either the father or the son as the victimizer, treating either the former as being tyrannical or the latter as being self-centered. Shen, however, discovers a covert progression that portrays both the father and the son in the same boat as pitiable victims of societal pressures ("Hidden Conflicts"). With the discovery of the covert progression, various textual elements that appear illogical or conflicting in terms of the plot development will fall into place and the picture will turn from an enigmatic one to a clear one with two mutually conflicting, conditioning, and complementary narrative movements, each moving along its logical and coherent trajectory of signification.¹

In her article "Dual Narrative Dynamics: Different Kinds of Interaction and

¹ See Dan Shen, "Covert Progression, Language and Context," *Rethinking Language, Text and Context*, edited by Ruth Page, Beatrix Busse and Nina Nørgaard, London: Routledge, 2019, 17-28.

Reasons for their Eluding Attention,” Shen conducts a thorough and systematic investigation into the various types of relationships between covert and overt narrative progressions. She categorizes these relationships into two types: complementary and subversive. The complementary category encompasses several distinct sub-types, including: (1) different conflicts depicted in two parallel progressions (as in Kafka’s “The Judgement”), (2) portrayal of different images of the same character in two parallel narrative movements (as in Katherine Mansfield’s “Life of Ma Parker,” in which Ma Parker is depicted as a deplorable and pitiable working-class woman inviting sympathy in the plot development and, by contrast, in the covert progression as a person embodying traditionally-conceived strong male attributes like perseverance, self-restraint, and open-mindedness, assuming the role of the family’s pillar, thus inviting reader’s respect and even admiration), (3) two parallel narrative movements, one with and the other without symbolic meaning (as in Mansfield’s “The Fly,” where the plot development is rich in symbolic meaning whereas the covert progression is non-symbolic), (4) a satirical covert progression paralleling a non-satirical plot development (as in Stephen Crane’s “An Episode of War,” where the plot development appears to be a non-ironically realistic or naturalistic depiction of war, but the covert progression directs scathing satire against war and traditional notions of heroism), (5) parallel progressions with differing moral implications (as in Bierce’s “A Horseman in the Sky,” where the plot development criticizes the cruelty of war while the covert progression extols the son’s dutiful actions), (6) parallel progressions with contrastive ironies (as in Mansfield’s “Revelations”), (7) mutually conflicting triple narrative progressions with distinct directions (as in Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings”), (8) the triple parallel narrative progressions in the same general direction, though each with a different thematic concern (as in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”).

As for the subversive kind of relationship between the covert progression and the plot development, there are at least two distinct sub-types: (1) socially acceptable plot development and socially unacceptable covert progression (as in Chopin’s “Desirée’s Baby” (1893) where the real thematic meaning affirming racist prejudice can hardly be accepted by social morals at the time of publication and therefore has to be hidden in the covert progression behind an anti-racist plot development), (2) contrasting character relationships in different progressions (as in Mansfield’s “Psychology,” where the female protagonist projects her passionate unrequited love on the male protagonist, forming a contrast with the plot development where they secretly love each other). As Shen explains, the reason why these hidden narrative dynamics have been neglected for a long time, sometimes even more than a hundred years, can be primarily attributed to the Aristotelian tradition that confines narrative

dynamics to the plot-based progression, thereby impeding the perception of different thematic meanings, character images, and techniques that pertain to another narrative movement (97).

Following the publication of this pivotal article on the taxonomy of covert progression and given the term's widespread acclaim among literary scholars, Shen received an invitation from *Foreign Literature*, one of China's esteemed literary criticism journals, to contribute an explanatory article on "covert progression" to the journal's "Keywords in Western Critical Theory" column. This article, published in 2019, significantly bolstered the term's influence. Shen further elaborated on the term's significance and application potential to Chinese scholars and published "Different Trajectories of Signification and Transformation of Stylistic Models" in *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, the top journal in linguistics and stylistics in China. Shen advocates for a transformation of stylistic models by getting rid of the long-term confinement to only one textual trajectory of signification and by investigating linguistic techniques along different trajectories of signification as constituted by overt and covert narrative movements, so as to gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of the relevant texts.

Apart from extending her theory of dual narrative dynamics to the field of stylistics, Shen has also pointed out the application potential of the theory in translation studies. In her article "What Challenge Does Covert Progress Pose to Translation? And How to Meet This Challenge?" published in *Foreign Languages Research* in 2015, Shen builds upon her concept of covert progression and argues that covert progression in many narratives carries distinct thematic significance and character portrayals, aspects that have so far been overlooked by literary critics and translators alike. As a result, a translation that effectively captures the plot development may fall short in conveying the covert progression. Consequently, Shen asserts that translators, like literary critics, should liberate themselves from the long-standing critical tradition that concentrates on the plot development. Translators should consciously search for the possible existence of covert progression in the source text and ensure that the relevant textual elements serving both progressions are effectively conveyed into the target text. Moreover, Shen argues that, in terms of translation theory and criticism, the existence of dual narrative dynamics calls for extending and transforming the criteria of translation in order to account for the success and failure in translating both narrative movements. In this article, Shen systematically offers strategies and methods for rendering satisfactorily both dynamics in fictional translation.

Additionally, alongside the publication of numerous articles in China, Shen

has extensively published in the West at the same time, explicating her model of dual narrative dynamics and applying her theory to various works. The warm international reception of Shen's theory is evident in the inclusion of "covert progression" in the glossary of narratological concepts that are widely circulated in the international research community at the French website RéNaF.¹ Shen was invited to give a keynote speech titled "How Dual Narrative Movement Can Metamorphose or Extend Narratology" at the Fifth Biannual European Narratology Network Conference (2017), where she delivered an extended presentation lasting sixty minutes, which was well received and aroused heated discussion in the ensuing twenty-minute Q&A session.

The most notable indication of the significance of this theory by Shen is the special issue of *Style* in 2021, which is devoted to the discussion of her theory and which is the seventh of this kind of special issue in the history of the journal. It begins with Shen's target essay "'Covert Progression' and Dual Narrative Dynamics," followed by sixteen 2000-word responses² that offer their considered opinions, as well as a rejoinder by Shen. In the target essay, Shen expounds her theory in a systematic and concise way. The responses from other scholars appreciate the insightfulness of Shen's theory and its remarkable potential in helping yield new interpretations, with some of them applying Shen's theory to the analysis of drama, short stories, novel, fairy-tale, and comics. They also discuss provocations and questions dual progression theory has raised and offer their challenges. In her 39-page rejoinder, Shen addresses the challenges presented by the responses, provide clarification regarding relevant misinterpretations of her theory, and discuss the application of the theory to different genres and media.

Shen's second monograph from Routledge, *Dual Narrative Dynamics* (2023), epitomizes her investigation in this aspect. The monograph is divided into two parts. Part I comprises theoretical discussions that begin by differentiating covert progression from previously explored deeper or ironic meanings, the latter still operating within the realm of the plot while the former being a separate narrative movement paralleling the plot development. It then delves into the reasons underlying previous neglect of covert progression and dual narrative dynamics, and offers strategies for uncovering this significant phenomenon in many literary narratives. This paves the way for Shen's discussion of how dual narrative dynamics

1 See Dan Shen, "Progression cachée / Covert Progression," translated by Raphaël Baroni. Glossaire du RéNaF, Dec. 2019. 2 March 2024 <<https://wp.unil.ch/narratologie/2019/12/progression-cachee-covert-progression/>>.

2 By fourteen Western scholars and two Chinese scholars.

can extend and transform respectively narratology, stylistics, and translation. As regards narratology, Shen explicates systematically how dual narrative dynamics calls for the doubling of narratological models, such as a dual model of authorial communication, a dual model of event structure, a dual model of unreliability, a dual model of focalization, and on a higher and more general level, a dual model of story and discourse.

Part Two of the book is devoted to the application of the theory to the analysis of specific works, including “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” “A Horseman in the Sky,” “The Judgment,” “Psychology,” “A Dill Pickle,” and “Life of Ma Parker.” This book has gone a step beyond its sister book coming out earlier from Routledge in that it devotes Part I to theoretical discussion whereas the body of the earlier book is only concerned with practical analysis, and, moreover, it pays continuous attention to the interplay or joint functioning of plot development and covert progression in critical practice, which is very much neglected in the earlier book.

Not surprisingly, Shen’s originating and comprehensive development of the theory of covert progression and dual narrative progression has substantially reshaped scholars’ perspectives on narrative dynamics, previously characterized by the confinement to the dynamics of the plot development. There have already appeared nearly one hundred and fifty articles in Chinese journals discussing her theory or applying her theory to the analysis of two or more parallel narrative movements in short stories, novels, films, drama, and television series.

Shen has won numerous book prizes and research awards in the field of narrative studies, and since 2014, because of her influential publication in the West, she has been continuously on the Elsevier annual list of the Most Cited Chinese Researchers and she is on Stanford List of World’s Top 2% Scientists 2022. However, it is neither possible nor necessary to enumerate all of Shen’s achievements and recognitions. But it is worth mentioning that in China, Shen’s work has proven to be beneficial and inspiring for numerous Chinese scholars, motivating them to adopt a more rigorous and innovative approach to literary research. In Europe and North America, Shen has remained the best known and most influential non-Western narrative theorist since the beginning of this century, which has also constituted a significant source of inspiration for younger generations of Chinese scholars.

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