

A New Reading of the Covert Progression in Alice Munro's "Something I have been to Tell You"

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Abstract

Professor Dan Shen calls the hidden dynamic that complicates the audience's response in various ways covert progression which has its own development orbit independent from plot development, creating a thought-provoking reading effect. This paper aims to penetrate into the cover progression of Alice Munro's short story "Something I've been meaning to tell you" and illustrate the the covert progression in the story by analyzing its narrative code and stylistic choices.

Keywords

Covert Progression; Narrative Analysis; Stylistic Choices.

1. Introduction

Alice Munro is an eminent Canadian female writer who is the first Canadian writer to win the Nobel Prize. She earns an international reputation as "our Chekov", the master of short story. Her short story "Something I've been meaning to tell you" describes a complicated relationship between sisters Et and Char whose fates have been intertwined for decades. "Something I've been meaning to tell you" is published in 1974 in a short story collection. The short story describes a complicated relationship between sisters Et and Char whose fates have been intertwined for decades. In 1918, the gorgeous elder sister Char has a short romantic relationship with Blaikie Noble. Then Blaikie abandons Char and marries another 40-year-old woman. Consequently, Char is caught trying to commit suicide by Et and she conveys her pessimistic life attitude to Et. Thirty years later, Blaikie comes back. Although Char has been married with a history teacher Arthur for years she seems to loves Blaikie deeply. In contrast, Char is indifferent to Arthur who admires Char's proud beauty while Et loves Arthur secretly at the same time. This love quadrangle comes into being. When Blaikie leaves for Toronto, Et makes up Blaikie's new marriage and lies to Char and Arthur that Blaikie will leave Mock Hill forever. A day later, Char is found dead. Finally, Et accompanied Arthur but she always has something she's been meaning to tell him about her lies.

2. Covert Progression of the Text

2.1. Narrative Analysis

Genette maintains that starting from the middle part of the story time is one of the traditional narrative ploys[1]. In accordance with the content and tense in these stories and with the purpose of setting a reference system for the temporal points, the time of the beginning of the story when Blaikie is back is designated as "narrative present" and the time prior to "narrative present" as "native past" and the time later than "narrative present" as "narrative future." However, the narration of the story is not only changing form present and past alternately but narrative gap is used as well: the author avoids the direction of the climax that Char commits suicide, leaving readings in the after taste of the story. The covert progression does not weaken the theme but enhance it instead, leaving readers pondering about people's especially women's

complex in their personalities. The sisters Char and At are the microcosm of the fate of female in the modern society. Standing in their situations, Char chooses to hurt and kill herself but At chooses to hurt others to achieve her goals.

In conclusion, the plot line is weaved through the life of sisters At and Char who are on different tracks and make different decisions on love and career.

2.2. Covert Progression

In the novel, what is noticeable is that the whole story is unfolded through the in third person narration but its narrative mode shifts between Et's limited perspective and limited omniscience narration. Although the two narration modes seem to share common characteristics with each other which mean focusing a third-person narration through the eyes of a single character. However, according to Dan Shen, there is essential difference between the two modes lies in the perspective or the point of view[2]. Different from the overt progression of the story, covert progression is hidden but has the power to unearth more information which is easily neglected by readers. In the novel, under the third person limited narration, the perspective or the point of view lies on the character At who is also the focalization of the story while when the perspective shifts onto omniscient narrator, At becomes the observed object in limited omniscience narration. According to Genette, the concept of focalization can be divided into zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization, among which, internal focalization means "the presentation of events is restricted to the point of view, perception, and cognition of a focal character"[3]. Consequently, Et's voice is likely not to be objective nor impersonal and that is the key point to discover the covert progression behind the plot.

As discussed above, the main plot of the story is narrated through the eye of Et accompanied with Et's inner thought unveiled. The choice of Et's eyes to tell the story itself indicates important information. Firstly, Et's attitudes and comments to different characters varies, for example, Et, on the one hand, when Char is helping doing chores, Et sharply not only notice Char's beauty "was not of the fleshy timid sort most often featured on calendars and cigar boxes of period, but was sharp and delicate, intolerant, challenging" but perceive her unique personalities as well, "Et understand, in some not entirely welcome way, that the qualities of legend were real, that they surfaced where and when you least expected". In description of Et's inner thought, on the other hand, Et is jealous of Char's charm, "all the same it would have suited her better to have found one of those ladies beautiful, not Char. It would have been more appropriate." In other words, even in "wet apron with her cross expression," Et can not deny Char's beauty. Munro's sophisticated use of words outlines the subtle relationships between the sisters. In Et's eyes, Char seems to be indifferent to Arthur even plans to hurt Arthur so that she can be with Blaikie and that's what Et predicts when she finds a bottle of rat poison at Char's home. Meanwhile, through the perspective and minds of Et, the descriptions of Blaikie are mostly negative expression like "nervy as always" and he can flatter women freely, in contrast with Et's impression on Char's husband, Arthur, an innocent man faithful to his wife Char even after her death.

3. Et's Voice as Unreliable Information

The thoughts of a single character as the focalization of the narrative possibly become the unreliable source of information especially many unsolved questions arisen by narrative gaps like. What is the real cause for Char's death? Is Et responsible for Sandy's drowning? What kind of relationship between Char and Blaikie after they met again years ago is? Digging into the details and the textual undercurrent, it is easy to find out that it is Et who is truly cruel and merciless and the characters of both Et and Char seems to be filtered through Et's eyes. In the story, Char and Et's sibling Sandy who dies of drowning but the narrator only mentions Sandy when narrating Et's inner thoughts which can reflect Et's personalities. Et "didn't like the bleak

notoriety of having Sandy's drowning attached to her" and the selectivity of words "bleak notoriety" may hint that apart from Char's death, Et also probably gets involved in Sandy's death. Contrary to Et's uncaring attitude, Char's tone of mentioning Sandy's death in front of Blaikie has been emphasized not "tragically, but almost with amusement". The narrative code of the story draw Et closer to readers but leave Char silent, open to readers' interpretations affected by Et's voice. Besides, the scene of Sandy's death is mentioned again in detail when Et finds Char's mental weakness: "Sandy drowned, with green stuff clogging his nostrils, couldn't look more lost than that." Recalling her brother's death in tragic details and compares it to her sister mental collapse, imaging her sister's paralysis is more terrible. In the end, Et's lies appear to accelerate Char's death but what has haunted Et's minds over the years is how to cover up her lies when Blaikie comes back, without signs of sorrow about Char's sudden death. Apparently, Et shows little sympathy for her sibling's death, let alone her suspicion of hurting her siblings in order to achieve her goals.

Despite stylistic choices, the rearranged story time intensifies the tension between plot and textual undercurrent. What is worth noting that the anachrony in the climax close to the ending, is used at Char's sudden death. Given Et's repeated check about the the bottle of rodenticide, Et's fear "like the absurd and harmless fears young girls sometime have", "though it was not her own acts she was frightened of". Under the fears, Et lied to Char and Arthur that Blaikie "has taken up with a well-to-do woman down at the hotel". At this point, the suspension has been set which invites reader's curiosity to see what happens next but it is followed by Et and Arthur's tranquil life after years. Char's death is such a sudden but it is downplayed in a part of flashback without anybody standing out to doubt the cause of her death especially Et who should be the first one. What's more, in such a short flashback, Et easily steps out as an outsider and observes Blaikie's acts in an ironic way, trying to enhancing his irresponsibility. Et's inner voice implicitly reinforce the contrast: "she did not know what she wanted; only to throw things into confusion, for she believed then that somebody had to, before it was too late." Through the rearranged story time, the consequence of Char's death is gradually extinguished and the guilt is shifted to Blaikie in a tacit way.

4. Conclusion

If we look the story in an overall way, the overt progression of the story is Et's recalling of her and Char's past life. After the analysis of the story plot guided by the narrative mode and stylistic devices, we can discover the subtle interaction between the overt progression and people's complicated and hypocritical personalities in different parts of the text which actually unveils the covert progression: the complexity of personality. Although the story is full of narrative gaps, leaving readers to linger on the indeterminacy of the narrative plot, the complexity of personalities has been amplified.

References

- [1] Gerard Genette: *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Cornell University Press, America 1990).
- [2] Dan Shen: *Narratology and the Stylistics of Fiction* (Peking University Press, China 2004).
- [3] David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*(Routledge, England 2004).
- [4] Alice Munro: *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: 13 Stories* (Vintage, England 2004).