



Lost and Found: Dual Narrative Progression in *The Sun Also Rises*

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Abstract. *The Sun Also Rises* employs a dual narrative structure, wherein the character depictions and thematic implications in the covert progression subvert those in the overt plot. Applying the framework of dual narrative progression theory, an analysis of the contrasting plots and characters in these two narrative strands reveals that the novel conveys distinct themes. Beyond the explicit themes of nihilism and hedonism, a latent progression emerges, portraying a positive thematic essence through the favorable portrayal of the main characters.

Keywords: dual narrative progression • *The Sun Also Rises* • overt plot • covert progression

1 Introduction

The Sun Also Rises marks Ernest Hemingway's inaugural foray into full-length novel writing, establishing him as a prominent voice for the "lost generation". Set against the historical backdrop of 1924 to 1925, the narrative delves into the heedless lifestyles of youth in the West and their tumultuous emotional entanglements, vividly illustrating the pain and despondency of the post-World War I generation grappling with a clash of values and ideologies.

Since its publication, *The Sun Also Rises* has garnered significant attention from scholars both domestically and internationally. So far, there have been many related studies that have interpreted the novel in detail from multiple perspectives such as trauma theory, new historicism, literary ethics, psychology, existentialism, feminism, etc., including analyzing the character traits of the characters in the novel, the theme of the lost generation, the American consumer culture, the religious meanings and so on ^[1]. These extensive studies have significantly broadened and deepened the scope of novel analysis. In China, narratology is one of the main perspectives in the study of Hemingway's novels ^[2]. However, most of these studies on narratology focus on one-way narrative movement-plot development, such as Wang Ting's study of the narrative strategy and artistic effect of *The Sun Also Rises* from narrative perspective and narrative discourse ^[3]. Notably, in the existing literary criticism, the narratological criticism of this novel only focuses on its surface narrative strategy, and the hidden process in

the depths of the novel has been neglected, leading to one-sided interpretations and conclusions.

Adopting Shen Dan's dual narrative process theory as a methodological framework, this paper is dedicated to unveiling the shifts within the overt narrative progression in *The Sun Also Rises* in parallel with the evolution of the covert progression. It delves into how the implicit narrative process communicates the intricate and profound meanings of the novel by either complementing or contrasting with the explicit plot. The central argument posits that beneath the unfolding of the explicit plot characterized by nihilistic and hedonistic inclinations, lies a covert progression striving to convey an optimistic thematic essence through a narrative approach that showcases positive character portrayals.

2 Lack of Faith: The Perplexed in the Overt Plot

As a quintessential piece of the "lost generation" literature, *The Sun Also Rises* distinctly embodies the zeitgeist of its era. Penned during the mid-1920s, in the aftermath of the First World War, the novel encapsulates a period of profound economic, social, and cultural metamorphosis in the Western world, driven by the burgeoning forces of capitalism. The whirlwind of global transformations during this epoch left its inhabitants grappling with an acute sense of loss, struggling to keep pace with the rapidly evolving societal cadence. These characters perpetually shift from one locale to another, seeking to satiate their inner void by constantly exploring new experiences amidst the backdrop of a transient lifestyle.

In the overt plot, the characters in the novel are usually considered by critics as representatives of nihilism. As direct victims of the war, they are irreversibly battered physically and mentally, and thus behave like idle losers in their daily lives: Jack is sexually deprived during the war and loses his manhood in the physical sense. He hates the fact that although he and Brett are in love, they cannot be together, so he becomes cynical. He often uses negative, angry words such as "Hell" and "Rotten" to express his dissatisfaction with his current life situation, and even develops an aversion to life. Brett is a nurse who lost her husband during the war. Thereafter, Brett relies on men to sustain her hedonistic lifestyle. She indulges herself in alcoholism and sexual desire and has no faith in true love. Cohn is a whiny, sensitive Jew who tries to protect himself from bullies by boxing, but he is always humiliated and ostracized by the homeless community. As Puckett illustrates, Cohn is always their spectator, observing and judging others rather than presenting himself^[4]. He is a financially struggling yet vexing outsider. While Mike holds the nominal position of being Brett's fiancé, he struggles to assert his influence over her in the presence of Jack and Romero. Consequently, he succumbs to his frustrations and resorts to alcohol as a means of self-escape and coping. In the explicit plot, the central characters of the novel find themselves leading dissatisfying lives, characterized by excessive drinking, revelry, and aimless wandering as outlets for their emotions. These behaviors serve as a desperate attempt to numb the lingering pain of war. Amidst their self-indulgence, they continually forfeit their moral

compass, societal norms, religious convictions, financial stability, and emotional equilibrium, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of chaos and moral decay.

Based on the characters in the novel, the themes of the explicit plot can be interpreted as hedonism ^[5] and nihilism ^[6]. In addition to the characters, we can also deepen the interpretation of these two themes by reading the title of the novel. The title of *The Sun Also Rises* comes from Ecclesiastes, one of the most nihilistic books in the Hebrew Bible. “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose ...” ^[7] The same is true of the sun that rises from Jack and his friends, which reveals not movement, change, or possible development, but endless, purposeless repetition. Throughout the novel, Jack also occasionally realizes this, “I had the feeling as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated, something I had been through and that now I must go through again” ^[7] 64. The eternal sun symbolizes the disappointment that Jack and his friends will have again and again, continually experiencing the same feeling. This is where they belong in life during that time.

3 Regaining Hope: Explorers in the Covert Progression

“Covert Progression” is a new theoretical concept put forward by Shen Dan in the western narrative field, which refers to a strong narrative undercurrent that runs behind the plot development from the beginning to the end ^[8]. The “covert progress” is a powerful hidden narrative dynamic, which is different from the various deeper meanings that have been unearthed in the past, and which complicates the reader’s response in its own unique way. The explicit and implicit processes run side-by-side from beginning to end in the work ^[9], and this dual narrative movement, in which the two strands coexist, complicates the reader’s response in several ways. As far as plot development is concerned, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* has a negative and dishonorable ethos, reveals the inevitability of nihilism and pessimism, and implicitly shows the desolation of life. But the novel hides a more positive ethic behind its plot development. In this narrative undercurrent, it is an inevitable moment of artistic liberation that was necessarily accompanied by loss ^[10] 745. In the state of disorientation, all the characters unintentionally show diametrically opposite personalities and values when they hit the bottom, and they find a parallel value dimension in their wandering journey.

3.1 Duality of Characters

The covert process in *The Sun Also Rises* is largely presented through the ambiguity of the characters created by narrative techniques. In this novel, the event structure and narrative reliability of the implicit process are subverted from those of the overt plot.

In many works, the covert process and the plot development secretly and explicitly mirror each other and move forward side by side. The two contrasts with each other, exclude each other or complement each other, expressing rich and profound thematic meanings, shaping complex and multi-faceted characters, and producing outstanding artistic value in the contradictory tension and interaction ^[11] 38. In *The Sun Also Rises*,

the surface story revolves around the aimless exile of the exiles. Behind the plot, the implicit process focuses on the active exploration and growth of individuals. In other words, the event tension between the plot development and the implicit process is created by two different narrative contents. Both tell the story from different perspectives, so the main characters in different event structures present different character traits. In terms of explicit process, critics always consider the characters such as Jack and Brett as lost generation who keep moving from one place to another just to kill time and live a meaningless life. However, in the implicit process, the characters in the novel can be seen as active explorers. They are in a state of confusion, but they still insist on actively making choices and taking action to find meaning in their lives: Cohn wants to go to South America to look for traces of the travels of the characters in his favorite book, *The Purple Land*. Jack and Bill travel to Spain to explore their connection to nature. Brett chooses to go to San Sebastian with Cohn, a man he doesn't like very much, to avoid becoming emotionally involved with Jack. Toward the end of the novel, the Rangers gather in Pamplona for a celebration, immersing themselves in the bullfighting ring. This is their way of delighting in pursuing their hobbies and finding meaning in their lives. Their travels are not aimless; rather, it is a sign of their quick fixes and active exploration of life. "As an artist, he noticed—that he was objective, clinical in his observation. But everything Ernest wrote was autobiography in colossal cipher" [12] 76. Only by observing these characters in their implicit processes can we fully decipher their behaviors and psychological movements and construct comprehensive characterizations from the novels.

3.2 Narrator Reliability

In addition to plot, the reliability of the narrator in the dual narrative process contributes to the interpretation of the novel's implied themes. For a long time, Wayne Booth's rhetorical method of implying the distance between the author and the narrator has been regarded as the dominant paradigm in the study of unreliable narratives. In Shen Dan's view, however, she suggests that "we need to abandon the criterion of judging on the basis of the distance between the implied author and the narrator, and in addition we need the dual paradigm to account for the phenomenon that the same narrator is unreliable in one narrative process but reliable in another" [11] 87. In the plot, although Jack is a keen narrator, he does not actually possess an omniscient perspective. He simply gathers information in the company of other people, records and tells the reader information that interests him and represents his own position, and unavoidably incorporates his own emotional tendencies in his narration. In the opening scene, Jack as the narrator then speaks, "I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together" [7] 11. Thus, Jack tells the story by selecting and shaping the events and details he believes in from his own point of view. At the beginning, he depicts Cohn's experience as a boxing champion and having his nose stepped on by a horse with sharp irony, thus making the reader's first impression of Cohn a biased judgment.

More importantly, Jack's emotions are at the center of the novel, and everything that happens in the book only makes sense if it is explained through Jack's personality [13]. Jack's sexual impotence makes him feminine and emotional. When he falls in love with

Brett, he praises that Brett is good-looking. But when he grieves over his impotence in the middle of the night, he condemns Brett by saying, “I suppose she only wanted what she couldn’t have”^[7] 35. This statement maps that Brett’s rejection of Jack’s affection is his consolation for abandonment without authenticity or credibility. Also, as his sexual rivals, Cohn’s weakness and Mike’s alcoholic behavior are reflected through Jack’s prejudices and their characterizations are filtered through the narrator and become less authentic. Therefore, the narrator’s seemingly reliable reports of plot developments are often just exaggerations and conjectures of the characters in their covert progression.

3.3 The Hidden characteristics of the Figures.

The implied author of a work tends to take two contrasting or even opposing positions in creating two parallel narrative movements, and thus the text invites the reader to derive two different images of the author from these two narrative movements^[9]. In creating this novel, Hemingway did not just give his characters negative qualities. He once said that he regarded his first inscription, “You’re all a lost generation,” as a “splendid bombast”^[12] 59. The reason why he quoted this line from Ecclesiastes is to prove the opposite. In the explicit process the main character is always portrayed negatively, while in the implicit process the implied author presents the reader with a very different characterization. Cohn, a very imaginative, romantic, sentimental but intelligent literary man with strong self-esteem. In the face of true love Brett incarnates as a woman of high morals. In order not to satisfy her own desires to the detriment of the other, she abandons her true love Romero and chooses to leave. Mike is a man of rude actions and words, and although he is addicted to alcohol, he is genuinely devoted and infatuated with Brett. Although the main characters are confused about life, they also learn life lessons from their setbacks and grow in the process. Their inner positive attitude towards life and morality allows them to remain hopeful for the future.

In the subtext, Jack subtly portrays the positive deeds of various characters, aiding readers in a comprehensive interpretation of their personas and themes. This aligns with the implied authorial inclination, establishing his narration as authoritative and reliable in the covert process. Through this credible narrative, we discern the true thematic essence of the novel: within the implicit process, the author regards loss as an inherently valuable attribute that allows the protagonist to derive meaning in life through continual loss experiences. For those grappling with lasting scars, lost love, and shattered souls, there exists an avenue to live purposefully and honorably—by persistently making choices amidst life’s perplexities and finding meaning through affirmative actions. As depicted in the uplifting title of the book, the sun symbolizes truth, implying that hope’s illumination will ultimately dispel confusion for generations to come.

4 Conclusion

There exists a narrative undercurrent in literary texts, and this undercurrent often shows a different or even opposite direction to the plot development, and “forms a comple-

mentary or subversive relationship with the plot development in terms of thematic significance, characterization, and aesthetic value”^[13]. At the level of plot development, the novel depicts the protagonists as a group of lost wanderers in the ever-changing post-WWI world, disturbed by desire and confusion. Through the depiction of the perplexed generation, the novel presents two main themes: nihilism and hedonism. Behind the development of the plot, however, there exists a narrative undercurrent, which reconstructs the plot of the events from another angle, praising the moral qualities of the characters and their positive hopes for the future. Analyzing the covert progression, the main characters image and thematic implications starkly contrast with the overt narrative, challenging conventional interpretations of the novel, deepening its thematic significance, and expanding the realms of critique.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, two narrative trajectories operate autonomously yet concurrently. These narrative trajectories both mirror and supplement one another, offering a nuanced portrayal of individual psychology and personal conduct. The interplay between plot development and the covert progression amplifies the novel’s thematic depth, giving rise to multifaceted characters, and significantly elevates the aesthetic and semantic intricacy of the text, enhancing the richness and depth of the novel.

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