

The Magic of Time Puzzle in Non-Linear Narrative— A Analysis of the Narrative Technique in “Story of Your Life”

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Abstract: “*Story of Your Life*” is a famous Sci-fi novella written by Ted Chiang (a Chinese American writer), combining linguistic elements with oriental philosophy. Since its first publication, many readers and critics have been impressed by its attractive narrative technique and thought-provoking theme. This essay mainly analyzes the narrative strategy of this novella from the perspective of Linguistics and narratology. With several conclusions of main traits in composing the story, it intends to uncover the roles that non-linear narrative plays in forming the story and revealing the main idea, to further discover the attractiveness of novel narrative approaches in science fiction and hopefully provide some inspirations for future post-modern literature creation in Sci-Fi genre.

Keywords: *Story of Your Life; Non-linear Narrative; Narrative Technique; Linguistics*

1. Introduction

“*Story of Your Life*” is a science fiction novella written by Chinese American writer Ted Chiang, first published in *Starlight 2* in 1998 and Chiang's collection of short stories, *Stories of Your Life and Others* in 2002. As a huge success for the writer, it won the 2000 Nebula Award for Best Novella, as well as the 1999 Theodore Sturgeon Award. It was nominated for the 1999 Hugo Award for Best Novella. years later, a film adaptation of the story by Eric Heisserer, titled “*Arrival*” (降临) and directed by Denis Villeneuve, was released in 2016, which has also received widely positive recognition.

As an English Sci-Fi writer of Chinese origin, Ted Chiang writes his works with a philosophical contemplation of destiny and humanity under an imaginative reality. Among all his creative works, “*Story of Your Life*” is undoubtedly the most thought-provoking one with its amazing storytelling strategy and touching description of the love between a mother and her future daughter as well as the unforgettable depiction of the protagonist's time perception ability. More importantly, the narrative strategy in this story is the most catching and impressive one among all these fascinating elements.

This article proceeds from a perspective of narrative technique with the support of some specific theoretical explanations of linguistics and narratology, to find out the storytelling characteristics as well as its narrative magic.

2. The Synopsis

Time is intangible yet pervasive in our world. Especially in the philosophical world of Science fiction, the perception of time continues with the unique storytelling of Ted Chiang which we can refer to as the narrative of a story. As a result, the narrative in every story becomes a crucial part of understanding the plot as well as analyzing the structure. The study of narrative is particularly important since our ordering of time and space in narrative forms constitutes one of the primary ways we construct meaning in general. Using the second-person narrative, this story is narrated by linguist Dr. Louise Banks on the day her daughter is conceived. Addressed to her daughter, the story alternates between recounting the past: the advent of the aliens and the deciphering of their language; and foreseeing the future: what will happen to her unborn daughter as she grows up, and the daughter's untimely death.

The pivotal point in the story is the arrival of aliens in spaceships that land in different parts of the world, including the US, Russia, China, etc. And not just one or two, a total of 112 gigantic semi-circular spaceships land all over the planet. Our protagonist Dr. Louise Banks, a renowned and capable linguist, is sent to join other outstanding scientists including her future husband Gary (an intelligent physicist) to

help the U.S. government investigate the reason why these Aliens are here and find a way to communicate with them. Gradually, as her research goes further, she develops the ability to see time non-linearly by picking up the Alien ("Heptapods")'s language. In the end, the language of Heptapod changed Louise's life, and once she knows the future, she never acts contrary to that future. Gary and Louise start spending time together and eventually marry. When Gary asks Louise if she wants a baby, she agrees, knowing that they will divorce, and their daughter will die young.

3. The Amazing Narrative Strategy

Literature is, like music or cinema, a sequential form of art; a literary work, just like any other linguistic product that unfolds itself in time. It requires a sensitive understanding of the logical order between the actual perception of time and the narrative sequence of events. The discourse can rearrange the events of the story as much as it pleases, provided, of course, that the story-sequence is ultimately discernible.^[1] According to the time sequence theory of Nonlinear narrative, disjointed narrative or disrupted narrative is a narrative technique, which is commonly seen in literary works, movies, and other multimedia texts, where events are described out of chronological order or somehow depicted in a disjointed time pattern of the events featured. For example, in this Sci-Fi story, the narrative of the main character is portrayed in ways of flashbacks which contain a lot of recollections of the past or predictions of the future.

3.1 The dual narrative

From the perspective of narratology, every story has its way of narrative. According to the renowned scholar of narratology Gérard Genette^[4], time structure can be generally divided into two categories based on its form (whether it is subjective or objective): story time and narrative time. "Story time" refers to the chronological sequence of the events and incidents in a story. While "narrative time" refers to the 'pseudo-temporal order' of the events and how they are organized during narrating.

In this work, the writer intends to obscure the story time and narrative time by incorporating the actual events into the present narrative by creating an alternate narration of the past and the future in fragmented narrative pieces instead of separating the two timelines according to natural time sequence. The story has two specific narrative threads: one is the recounting of the alien incident in the past and the other one is the foreseeing of the life of Louise's daughter in the future. Both threads are narrated in turns through the voice of our protagonist: Dr. Louise Banks. What separates these two threads is the moment when she foresees the conception of her daughter. It is since this day, this moment, this second that she starts to tell this story of her and her daughter's life.

First thread: It begins with the narration of Dr. Louise banks. She speaks to her future daughter in a very gentle way, as a kind of prediction of her unborn daughter's life which actually has not happened yet.

This is the start of the story:

"Your father is about to ask me the question. This is the most important moment in our lives, and I want to pay attention and note every detail. Your dad and I have just come back from an evening out, dinner, and a show; it's after midnight. We came out onto the patio to look at the full moon; then I told your dad I wanted to dance, so he humors me and now we're slow dancing, a pair of thirty somethings swaying back and forth in the moonlight like kids. I don't feel the night chill at all. And then your dad says, 'Do you want to make a baby?'....."^{[2]63}

Second thread: It follows the first thread and starts from Louise's mission of discovering the secret to the Alien's language. She recalls the whole Alien incident from the beginning of the mission. By this recounting, readers can slowly understand why Louise's narration is jumping from the future to the past.

Here we can clearly see that the writer intends to switch the narrative thread from the first (the future) to the second (the past) with the voice of Dr. Louise Banks:

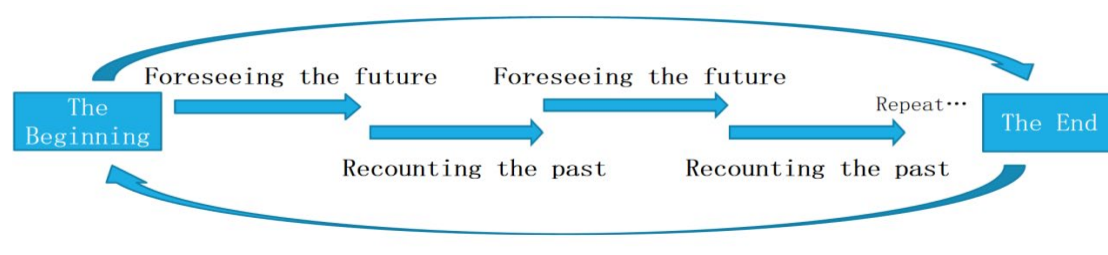
"I know how this story ends; I think about it a lot. I also think a lot about how it began, just a few years ago, when ships appeared in orbit and artifacts appeared in meadows. The government said next to nothing about them, while the tabloids said every possible thing.

And then I got a phone call, a request for a meeting.

I spotted them waiting in the hallway, outside my office. They made an odd couple; one wore a

military uniform and a crew cut, and carried an aluminum briefcase....” [2]64

The whole story continues in this way with two threads overlapping and the general structure can be framed like this:

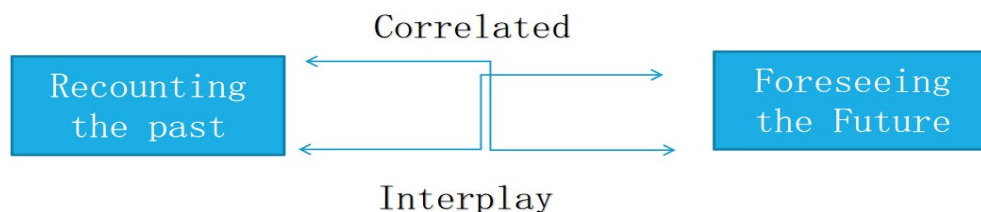


3.2 The Meeting of two threads

Just like two trains depart from different stations but head in the opposite direction, these two threads are destined to meet each other at some point. During the development of the story, they are not independent but correlated and serve as a motivation for the story to move on, which also plays a huge role in revealing the magic of the non-linear narrative technique that the writer adopts in this novella.

The most obvious and significant one is the discussion of the term “non-zero-sum game”: in the second thread (the future), Louise foresees that her daughter will consult her about a scientific term that describes a situation in which both parties can gain benefits from it without hurting each other. At that moment, She does not know its exact name, so her daughter is about to leave in disappointment. However, the narration swiftly switches to the first thread (the past) in which Louise was having a meeting with other scientists. It is during the discussion that her colleague also her future husband Gary said the name of that scientific term: non-zero-sum-game, which is quickly followed by another switch of threads. The narration flashes back to the first thread in which Louise will give this answer she just required from the past to her daughter.

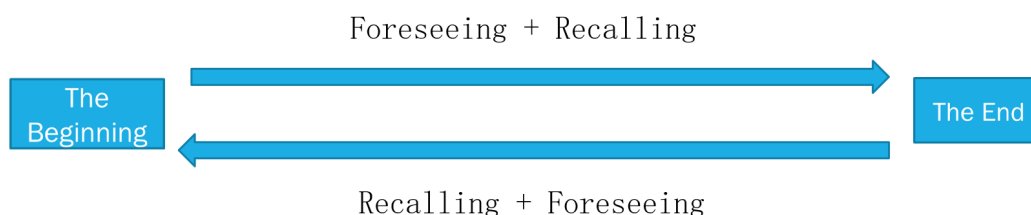
To put it more vividly, this narrative meeting can be described like this:



From this amazing meeting of two threads, the story has gained much more dynamic power through the proceeding of narration without simply dividing two independent threads. Furthermore, the writer successfully shows readers Louise’s ability to foresee the future by using the encounter of two separated threads of a different time, which greatly strengthens the dramatic tension and tightens the connection of the plots.

3.3 A loop of narrative

The characteristics of Heptapod’s mind are also reflected in the narrative of this novella.[7] we pay a close look at the structure of the whole story, we might surprisingly find that the story itself forms a narrative loop in which the narrator Dr. Louise Banks guides readers to experience her life and her daughter’s life since the day she met those foreign friends. As a result, the beginning of the story is the end of the story and vice Versa.



Once readers finished the reading, they will suddenly discover that the end of the story perfectly matches the beginning of the story, which is a perfect completion of the narrative loop:

The beginning: “Your father is about to ask me the question. This is the most important moment in our lives, and I want to pay attention, and note every detail... I don't feel the night chill at all. And then your dad says, ‘Do you want to make a baby?’” [2]⁶³

The end: “From the beginning, I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. But am I working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain? Will I achieve a minimum or a maximum?”

These questions are in my mind when your father asks me, ‘Do you want to make a baby?’...” [2]¹⁰³

What’s more fascinating is that this narrative loop is in fact formed by Louise herself. With the support of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (your mind determines your language and the language you use affects your mind in return), The hypothesis of linguistic relativity is a principle suggesting that the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview or cognition, and thus people's perceptions are relative to their spoken language. Since she has picked up Heptapod’s “non-linear language” which is not confined by time, she sees the future as what has already happened and tells this story alternatively in past tense and future tense. Therefore, as a free walker in the flow of time, she tells the past and also the future without any restrictions. That’s why her narration is exactly like her non-linear mind——jumping back and forth between the past and the future.

What’s more interesting is that readers will slowly get accustomed to these kinds of strange ways of narration and become more and more familiar with Louise’s mind. Eventually, readers might just feel the same kind of uncanny feeling as Louise first gets in touch with those aliens and seemingly grasp this sort of ability non-linear time perception ability as Louise does.

4. The magic of the time puzzle

Sometimes, Time can be strict, while it can be quite erratic at some other times. This perfectly reflects the interesting charm of time that the writer attempts to express in this story. It is similar to a puzzle game in which players need to rack their brains to solve the question and bring all those missing pieces together to reproduce the original image. This story uniquely adopts a gaming-like way of reading to offer readers an opportunity of perceiving the beauty of time in an amazing contact between humans and aliens. What’s more, under the delicate arrangement of narrative, readers who have deeply considered the protagonist’s unthinkable experience will inevitably participate in a philosophical discussion of whether to accept one’s predicted fate or to deliberately avoid one’s written fate. Naturally, due to the separated narrative time, fragmented recalling of the past, and the prediction of the future which requires patient sorting and careful apprehension, the whole story is more of a puzzle waiting to be solved for every reader.

4.1 *A wonderful combination of linguistics and science fiction*

The whole story is based on a famous hypothesis: the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, also known as “The hypothesis of linguistic relativity”. It is a principle suggesting that the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview or cognition, and thus people's perceptions are relative to their spoken language.

In the story, our protagonist Dr. Louise Banks is a typical example of this hypothesis. As a linguist, she devotes herself to deciphering the Heptapod’s completely non-linear language. She gradually understands the way of their communication: to see time as a non-linear object. The result is that she can use the Heptapod’s language in written form. This language changed her view of the world and then reconstructed her understanding of time.^[5] Being seriously affected by this kind of non-linear language, she is able to see her future, including her future husband and daughter.

4.2 *A beautiful encounter of two worlds*

There is a huge metaphor of two opposites hidden in the story: “Heptapods” stands for the eastern world; human stands for the western world.^[6] To some extent, the Heptapods can be seen as a representation of the mysterious east world, while the human being is a representation of the western world. The Heptapod uses a quite foreign language system, composed of two independent forms (one for spoken, the other one for written), hieroglyphic and written in ink-like media; and “i”, as an outstanding linguist, work together with other scientists for the U.S. government trying to figure out the alien’s intention.

In the end, The language of Heptapods bestows Louise with a brand-new way of perceiving time, and Louise herself does not refuse these future-foreseeing abilities but lives with them peacefully by

accepting what is about to happen, which can be viewed as a co-existence of east and west culture realized in her mind, just like the term she learned by using the time perception ability: “non-zero-sum game”.

4.3 *The bravery to embrace the known things*

No one can live their lives deep enough to know everything but to drift along things uncontrollably^[3] If we pay attention to the narrative point of view of this story, we will be surprised that it is a quite rare novella written in the second narrative point of view, which is a confession of a mother gently conveyed to her unborn daughter. In this way, readers have somehow become the ones that Louise is talking to, which is greatly conducive to the immersion of personal feelings.

Besides, this is a story about alien contact. The writer uses the narrator Louise’s voice to directly talk with us as if we are foreign visitors from another planet. Thus, we can easily grasp the main idea of this story -- learning a stranger’s language as well as their mind as a gift and later choosing to accept what will be brought after this unexpected encounter.

What moves readers the most is the final decision made by Louise. She knows that everything in her life is laid out in front of her eyes since she learned Heptapod’s language, yet she chooses to embrace it because it is not the denial of her free will but an unfulfilled reality that she can choose to make way for it to happen.

5. Conclusion

Ted Chiang gives us a quite different way to know the role that narrative plays in the storytelling of a story, especially a relatively complicated Sci-Fi story. As a matter of fact, as a literary genre, science fiction explores a brand-new way to see and reflect our present reality through a series of unique strategies and techniques to portray the reality side of imaginary experiences. Just like the title says, this is the story of a mother and her future daughter. On the one hand, it adopts the theoretical hypothesis of linguistics to uncover the mystery of mind and language; on the other hand, it amazes us with the touching bond between parent and child to unveil a trenchant topic of fate and choice from a cultural and philosophical angle.

Imaginative, captivating, mesmerizing, and affecting is what this unique Sci-fi novella has brought into readers’ hearts. Through a series of exquisite arrangements of the plot and the application of non-linear narrative techniques, readers’ minds can be deeply blown away. It is not the spectacular scenery but the most simple and gentle description of the feeling of the protagonist that can actually touch anyone who has finished this story.

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