

# Narrative Forms and Ethical Structures in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel: A Review of *The Angel and the Dove* and *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels*

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**Abstract:** *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* and its sequel *The Angel and the Dove: A Study of Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels*, both authored by Chen Lizhen, are interdisciplinary studies on the intersection of ethical literary criticism and narrative theory in the nineteenth-century British novel. *The Angel and the Dove* demonstrates the duality of narrative discourse and gender politics in Gaskell's novels from the perspective of narrative theory, focusing on Gaskell's efforts to address the issue of women's social status in Victorian England. *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* approaches the narrative forms of a series of influential Regency novels from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. The two monographs are closely related to form a continued effort to depict the evolution of the nineteenth-century British novel, revealing the diversity, complexity and originality of this literary genre. They shed new light on the study of English literature and are undoubtedly valuable sources of inspiration for future research.

**Keywords:** ethical literary criticism; narrative form; *The Angel and the Dove*; *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels*

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**标题:** 19 世纪英国小说的叙事形式与伦理结构: 评《天使与鸽子》及《伦理透视法》

**内容摘要:** 《天使与鸽子: 盖斯凯尔小说研究》及其序篇《伦理透视法: 英国摄政时期小说叙事图景》均为专论 19 世纪英国小说的学术著作, 是运用文学伦理学批评和叙事学理论进行跨学科研究的成果。《天使与鸽子》从叙事学视角发掘了盖斯凯尔为构建维多利亚女性地位所做出的努力, 展现了盖斯

凯尔小说叙述话语和性别政治的双重性。《伦理透视法》则从文学伦理学批评角度关注摄政时期一系列富有影响力的小说，探究其中的叙事形式。这两部关联递进的作品跨越历史时空，共同展现了英国 19 世纪小说的演进历程，揭示了其中的多样性、复杂性和独创性，为英国文学研究提供了可资借鉴的范例。

**关键词：**文学伦理学批评；叙事形式；《天使与鸽子》；《伦理透视法》

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Wide attention has been paid to the nineteenth-century British novel and fruitful research has been carried out both in China and abroad. However, systematic studies regarding Regency novels from the perspectives of narrative theory and ethical literary criticism are still underrepresented. Published by Zhejiang University Press in 2021, *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* explores the overall trend, development, and interconnection of the narrative forms and ethical structures of novels during the different stages of the Regency period in the United Kingdom. Written by Professor Chen Lizhen of Hangzhou Normal University, this book uses the term “Regency Novels” instead of “Romantic Novels” to stand for the novels that are greatly diversified in the early nineteenth century. Chen Lizhen has not only done insightful research on Regency novels, but also on Victorian novels, especially those of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865). He published his monograph *The Angel and the Dove: A Study of Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels* in 2018. As a critical work with broader cultural canvas and larger literary landscape, *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* functions as an academic successor to *The Angel and the Dove*. In the chronological sense, nevertheless, the Regency period precedes the Victorian era. Put in the chronological order, *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* serves as, in fact, the prequel to *The Angel and the Dove*.

### **Duality of the Narrative Forms in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels**

Since the turn of the new century, Gaskell studies have benefited from a variety of theoretical methods, including, to name a few, feminist narratology, gender studies, post-colonialism, consumer culture, New Historicism, and reception theory, which have propelled its development in a great way. Many scholars have

explored different aspects of Gaskell's works and succeeded in achieving academic excellence. Yin Qiping points out that the story of Mary Barton "symbolizes the endless pain of 'two nations' in the wake of 'progress', which is accelerated by British industrialization" (91). Cheng Wei states that "as a literary realist of strong ethical concerns with poverty, Mrs. Gaskell intends implicitly to deromanticize Haworth and the moors in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*" (158). The promotion of the ethics of responsibility in *Ruth* "helps to guard against selfishness and to guarantee the presence of self-consciousness" (Li Hongqing 158). Chen Lizhen moves on to argue that "these new trends demonstrate the diversification and innovation of recent developments" (155). He also stresses the resurrection of the fame of Gaskell by stating that "with the publication of Gaskell's letters, works, biographies and research monographs, Gaskell has become a phenomenal figure in Victorian studies in recent years" (64). Due attention must be paid to Gaskell's fictional endeavors in terms of narrative forms and ethical structures. Specifically, we need to find out how she displays the duality of narrative forms within a single piece and between works, which has a direct impact on the deeper formation of Gaskell's works.

As a book on Gaskell and the Victorian era, *The Angel and the Dove* is published by China Social Sciences Press, a national level publishing house. It is the first monograph on Elizabeth Gaskell in China. *The Angel and the Dove* is a detailed analysis of Gaskell's important works including *Cranford*, *North and South*, and *Wives and Daughters*. It concentrates on Gaskell's efforts to construct the social identity of Victorian women through the perspectives of narrative theory and cultural-political criticism. The book explains how Gaskell's duality of progressive and conservative approaches to the theoretical issues of women's identity in her life and writing is revealed through narrative structures and covert progressions. *The Angel and the Dove* is a good academic specimen to find out that "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" (Shen 62). Chen Lizhen explores, in *The Angel and the Dove*, how these covert progressions are manifested in both the content and discourse. Furthermore, this book enhances the study of women's social status in Victorian England and explores a new ground on the duality of Gaskell's narrative stance. *The Angel and the Dove* provides an overview of Elizabeth Gaskell's life, including her writing career, literary reputation, writing style and literary themes.

"Flying Like a Dove" is a chapter that illustrates Gaskell's duality in enhancing women's social status through different narrative strategies. It briefly sums up

Gaskell's love for literature, her desire to "fly like a dove", the beginning of her writing career and her entrance into the world of literature. The chapter is divided into two sections to describe Gaskell's narrative conception of women's social status, which was a major social issue in the Victorian era. In her works, Gaskell, as a Victorian woman, demonstrates that she aspires for freedom and more space in addition to being a good wife and mother in her house. This is followed by a discussion of Gaskell's duality of the elevation of women's social status, which has mostly been either overlooked or overstated by critics. The following three chapters provide an analysis of the duality and complexity of Gaskell's novels. The second chapter is entitled "The Discrete Force of Story and Discourse in *Cranford*". It addresses the issue of non-plot narratives that disperse throughout the text, investigates the notion of "elegant economy" and reveals the separation of story and discourse in the narratives of a female utopia. On the one hand, it criticizes patriarchal society by describing the lifestyle of the female community in the town of Cranford; meanwhile, it confronts the limitations of the community itself. On the other hand, it euphemistically indicates to what extent that utopia relies on patriarchal society. Chen Lizhen emphasizes at the beginning how *Cranford*'s construction of the ideal of a female utopia was closely tied to the "redundant" crisis of spinsters in Victorian society. Focusing on "non-plot narrative", a distinctive narrative mode of *Cranford*, Chen Lizhen explores the social contextual factors and ideological connotations behind this unconventional narrative model. He continues to describe how Cranford's "elegant economy", the foundation of its lifestyle, is a means of resisting the historical constraints of Cranford's rural life itself through parody, and how the female community resists patriarchal society in the form of collective power, presenting a reflection on the process of modernization. Finally, the separation between the content and discourse testifies the contradiction between the construction and destruction of the ideal female utopia.

*The Angel and the Dove* approaches the notion of "the Angel out of the house" by focusing on the characterization and metonymy system of *North and South*. It addresses sexual politics in the separation of social spaces in Victorian England. He argues that while the patriarchal system provides women with the dislocation of two identities, the social space of the Victorian era is obviously artificially separated into private and public spheres, which are based on the duality of the male and female gender. Gaskell employs the strategy of inversion on the part of conventional social roles in *North and South*, allowing the protagonist Margaret to transcend the traditionally feminine private sphere and move into the public sphere. The book also uses a system of metonymy in the separation of social space to describe

women's resistance to the oppressive authority of the patriarchal society. Gaskell employs this strategy in *North and South* to make enough room for women's power to enter the public sphere. Finally, through a highly creative and original analysis of the metonymic-meaning-chain between Margaret and the South, Chen Lizhen stresses that the metonymic system of *North and South*, which uses the northern and southern geographic regions as the standard, should involve two metaphorical chains: Margaret-London (Helston)-South and Thornton-Milton-North (93). It transcends the stereotyped academic assumption that the conflict and reconciliation between Margaret and Thornton are symbolic of the industrial civilization of the North and the agricultural civilization of the South (90). He points out, at the same time, that Gaskell's inversion of the conventional social roles and metonymic meaning systems have contradictory dualities in elevating women's power.

Chen Lizhen elucidates debates and reviews surrounding Molly's female "central consciousness", in the fourth chapter "The Duality of the Narration of Female Status in *Wives and Daughters*". He further indicates that although in *Wives and Daughters* there is a certain similarity in applying free indirect discourse as a narrative technique between the limited point of view and Henry James's "center of consciousness", there is an obvious difference between the two in terms of the number and the frequency of use. This chapter illustrates how the dual voice of free indirect discourse breaks the silence of Molly and weakens the female subject consciousness in *Wives and Daughters*. Based on this, Chen Lizhen brilliantly explores women's way of seeing the world and emphasizes that though it provides Molly with the chance of expressing the consciousness of subjectivity and enhancing women's social status, it fails to challenge the authority of patriarchy. Lastly, Chen Lizhen highlights that the description of body and sight in *Wives and Daughters* are not intended to show the strength of women, but to maintain the moral rules and hierarchy under patriarchy, reinforcing the class distinction and shaping the image of Molly as a "Victorian lady". Gaskell pays great attention to the value of moral teaching in her works, which, in the perspective of ethical literary criticism, is the ethical value of literature (Nie, "Value Choice and the Theoretical Construction of Ethical Literary Criticism" 88). Chen Lizhen also underlines that *Wives and Daughters* is relatively conservative in the aspect of gender issues, which forms a sharp contrast with *Cranford* and *North and South*. In this sense, the duality of Gaskell's narration of women's social status is constructed in a larger scope. It is worth mentioning that this book also contains two appendices, including "A Brief Review of Studies on Elizabeth Gaskell", and "A Chronology of Elizabeth Gaskell's Life and Works". There is also an "Afterword" at the end of the book. All these

elements are combined to form a well-constructed and balanced piece.

### **The Ethical Landscape of Regency Novels**

*The Angel and the Dove* delves into the literary, historical, and cultural contexts of nineteenth-century England. Viewpoints of other important scholars are also cited to support the central argument of this book. Based on the cyclic meanings of text and history, *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* reveals the inter-influences of ethical structures of Regency novels by illustrating how these novels are affected by social-ethical values and changes in the narrative strategies. Meanwhile, it studies how the narrative strategies, in turn, influence and promote the evolution of ethical values in Regency novels. In taking an interdisciplinary approach of ethical literary criticism and narrative theory, this book facilitates our understanding of the idea that “the task of ethical literary criticism is to explore the ethical values of literature and help us make right ethical choices by analyzing and interpreting literary works” (Ross & Yang 75). Furthermore, different types of novels, such as sentimental, marital, historical, Gothic, and allegorical novels are fully analyzed to reveal the narrative features of different novels and demonstrate how these novels capture and reproduce the ethical milieu of the society.

Accordingly, this monograph is divided into three parts: Preface, seven main chapters and Conclusion. In the Preface, readers can have a general idea about the monograph and understand the theoretical frameworks, exquisite layout, and sound research basis. Starting with the explanation of “Regency”, the first chapter illustrates the changes of British literature by introducing Walter Scott’s transition from a poet to a novelist, and ends with the investigation of the moral tradition in Jane Austin’s novels. In this way, Chen Lizhen depicts the narrative panorama of Regency novels. From the second chapter to the sixth chapter, he makes in-depth research on novels of different types from the perspectives of ethical structures and narrative forms. Focusing on the sentimental and marital novels, *Camilla* (1796) and *Emma* (1815), Chapter Two explores how narrative skills influence the construction of moral elements. Chapter Three and Chapter Four explore how national and historic novels, such as *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and *Waverley* (1814) can demonstrate the history of national unity and conflict. These two chapters deal with the complex relationship of aesthetics and ethnics in the nineteenth-century British novel. Nie Zhenzhao holds that “In Britain, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the esthetic concept of literature was established. It was closely linked to the nationalistic sense of English literature” (Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory” 202). In this book, Chen Lizhen delves into the interconnected aspects of

history, aesthetics and national politics. Chapter Five deals with Gothic novels such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Vampyre* (1819) from the perspective of narrative theory. Chapter Six mainly analyzes *The Pickwick Papers* (1837), a novel of humor and hilariousness, to explore the interaction between the serialization of novels and readers' reading ethics, thus attempting to find out the ethical consideration of Charles Dickens in adopting rhetorical narratives. Chapter Seven explores the anti-romanticism trend by depicting the important ways in which *Edinburgh Review* and other literary magazines have participated in the cultural hegemony between the British bourgeoisie and the aristocracy in the early nineteenth century. The cultural warfare, to some extent, has manipulated the discourses of mainstream culture and literature, shaped the cultural values of the younger generation in Britain and provided cultural nourishment for the novelists in the Victorian era (10). In Conclusion, the significance of Regency novels is summarized in a good shape.

In *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels*, the notion of "Regency novels" is used instead of "Romantic novels". Chen Lizhen points out that elements of Romanticism can be found in many novels over time and that novels published during the early nineteenth century may, on the contrary, lack the characteristics of Romanticism. It is misleading to name British novels in the early nineteenth century as novels of Romanticism (4). This title also highlights that ethical considerations and narrative forms are two major theoretical pillars in this monograph. The structure of *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* is clear and complete. It is well-founded under a structure of deduction and summary, starting with the definition of "Regency". Seven chapters are dedicated to analyzing different types of Regency novels with explanations on some important works and the anti-romanticism trend. This monograph pays great attention to the whole-part relation. It not only investigates the ethical structure of a single novel from the perspective of narrative form, but also reveals the overall ethical features of different novels, making a comprehensive analysis of the cultural trends and literary features of British literature during this specific historical period. In *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels*, Chen Lizhen keeps a good balance between general topics and concrete narrative strategies of the novels, making his research an organic whole.

### **Continued Efforts to Approach the Undercurrents of Literary History**

As insightful and inspiring monographs on the study of the nineteenth-century British novel, *The Angel and the Dove* and *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* form a continuation of academic endeavors, sharing some common



traits to make them noteworthy and successful works of literary criticism. The titles of both books are wisely designed with multiple meanings. In the phrase “The Angel and the Dove”, the symbolic significations of “the angel” and “the dove” are achieved with great resourcefulness. Gaskell is an understanding wife, a loving mother and a dedicated writer, who always keeps her great passion and ideal towards literature. But these elements would not always exist in a harmonious way. She once expressed her dissatisfaction in a letter: “But as I happen to be a woman instead of a bird, as I have ties at home and duties to perform, and as, moreover, I have no wings like a dove to fly away, but if I travel I must go by coach and ‘remember the coachman,’ why I must stay at home and content myself with recalling the happy scenes which your books bring up before me” (Gaskell, 14). Gaskell’s different social identities form an interesting tension for herself as well as for her works. Chen Lizhen’s adoption of the title “*The Angel and the Dove*” is highly creative. “The Angel” and “the Dove” in the title are both parallel and contrastive, which not only arouse readers’ interest and encourage readers to delve into the connotation of the two, but also summarize precisely, properly, and comprehensively the duality of Gaskell’s identity. Meanwhile, the title serves as an allusion to the duality of various narrative structures and gender politics in Gaskell’s novels. To make the content more explicit to readers, the subtitle “*A Study of Elizabeth Gaskell’s Novels*” is added to enlighten readers and stimulate their interest to explore this specific writer.

Both *The Angel and the Dove* and *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* succeed in breaking new ground and applying suitable, reasonable and tactical perspectives to textual analysis. The narrative panorama and ethical landscape of Regency novels are illustrated to designate their exquisite shape with historical concreteness. In these two books, novels of different types are analyzed respectively, demonstrating the diversity and complexity of the nineteenth-century British novel. Chen Lizhen makes an intensive study of social and emotional experiences in the Victorian era on the level of story and discourse. He explores the complex and subtle interactions between different historical factors in the novels. Through close reading and critical analysis, Professor Chen Lizhen’s insightful monographs depict, in a persuasive way, the narrative forms and ethical structures of the nineteenth-century British novel. *The Angel and the Dove* and *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* form a significant critical practice to help us get the ethical values of the nineteenth-century British novel. They shed new light on the study of English literature and will undoubtedly serve as valuable sources of inspiration for future research.



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