

## On Narrative Judgments of *Gravity's Rainbow*

Danni Guo

Gannan Normal University, China

**Abstract:** Thomas Pynchon is one of the most influential novelists of the late twentieth century, and has won both the National Book Award and a huge audience around the world. *Gravity's Rainbow*, considered as Pynchon's masterpiece, has been a focus in literature world since its publication in 1973. In the light of James Phelan's Narrative Judgments Theory, this article attempts to analyze the narrative nature of the novel text from the perspectives of the narrative judgments made by the main narrator, Slothrop, the implied readers and implied author, in order to illustrate the important role of narrative judgments in analyzing the deep meaning of the text. On one hand, it mainly makes a deep exploration to the narrative judgments of *Gravity's Rainbow*; On the other hand, it explores Pynchon's outstanding achievements in writing and provides a new angle to evaluate the novel.

**Keywords:** Thomas Pynchon; *Gravity's Rainbow*; narrative Judgments; focalization; implied author;

### I. Introduction

As an important representative writer of American black humor novels, Thomas Pynchon's unique experimental writing style laid the foundation for the direction of American novels in the 1960s and 1970s. Since his first novel *V* was published in 1963, Thomas Pynchon has created several splendid novels which includes: *The Small Rain* (1959), *Morality and Mercy in Vienna* (1959), *Low Lands* (1960), *Entropy* (1960), *Under the Rose* (1961), *V* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Vineland* (1990), *Mason & Nixon* (1997), *Against the Day* (2006) and *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013). Thomas Pynchon was born in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York in 1937. In 1953, Pynchon initially majored in engineering physics after entering Cornell University, but in his second year of college, he stopped studying and served in the US Navy for two years. When he returned to college, he changed his major to English.

*Gravity's Rainbow* was one of his representative works, perfectly showcases his unique creative style. This novel has become one of the bestsellers and also won major awards such as the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize nomination in the United States since it published. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon showcases his vast knowledge and employs many creative techniques that deviate greatly from traditional novel writing rules, bringing readers a brand new reading experience. In such a bizarre narrative structure, there is no inherent logical connection between all the plots, but it seems like a superposition of many scattered details, with dreams and reality intertwined, making it difficult to organize a complete clue to the story plot. The whole novel may seem scattered and surreal, but upon closer reading, one can perceive the author's considerable craftsmanship and profound intention. In the novel, the hero Slothrop participated in an experiment during his infancy, which allowed him to predict rocket explosions. However, this ability will only bring disaster to Slothrop. The secret agents and organizations want to use him and began to monitor and control him. Slothrop wants to get rid of this kind of life, so he begins his journey of finding answers and solutions.

Many critics and writers have highly praised this book, and the quality of this novel is increasingly recognized by scholars and readers. Time magazine rated this novel as one of the "100 Greatest Novels of All Time", which was the best English novel ranking from 1923 to 2005. The research on Pynchon abroad has yielded fruitful results, including various studies on history, politics, postcolonial criticism, cultural criticism,

and feminism. However, there is still room for development in analyzing from the perspective of rhetorical narratives. As the main force of post classical narratology, rhetorical narratives pay particular attention to the communication relationship between authors, narrators, and readers. The famous post classical rhetorical narrative theorist James Phelan proposes that, the audiences will make three types of narrative judgments, which is interpretive judgments, ethical judgments and aesthetic judgments. Interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative, ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions, and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts(2007: 9).

This article cites the theory of narrative judgments and focuses on the disastrous consequences of science on humanity in the novel. The aim is to explore the narrative judgments made by the character narrator, implied reader, and implied author. By reading this article, readers will have a deeper understanding of the novel, especially the narrative structure carefully designed by Pynchon, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ethical value of the novel. The following analysis will be based on the interpretive, ethical, and aesthetic judgments of the character narrator, implied reader, and implied author on this event, in order to explore the reasons why the main characters failed to pursue their true selves and freedom due to their own irresponsibility, corruption, and indifference, as well as extreme individualism and absolute control of the ruling class, with an aim to discover the guiding effect of narrative judgment on the multi-level display of deep meanings in novels.

## II. Narrative Judgments of Slothrop

This novel takes Slothrop as the main character narrator, which is the first person in narratology. Character narration is an indirect form, through the communication between the character narrator and the narratee to deepen the engagement of the implied readers. The story takes place in the last few months of World War II. The novel portrays many absurd, pathological, and irrational character images, whose deformities and flaws in their personalities become a perfect example of the absurd and distorted spiritual world of post-war Westerners. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes how rockets fly in the air and how people react to rocket explosions. Slothrop suspects that there is some kind of relationship between him and the rocket. Therefore, he embarks on a journey to find the answer. During the long journey, Slothrop encounters various people from different social classes and engaged in different jobs. Throughout the novel, Slothrop is the focal point. Most of the important events in the novel are presented to readers through his perspective, while other characters are only used as supplements.

Slothrop is not a hero in traditional literary works, but an anti hero character who always pursues love, ideals, missions, and so on. What he is pursuing the truth about his strange relationship with the rockets, he comes across some strange events that make his efforts and experiences seem preposterous and meaningless. In the first part, the narrator tells the origin of the story that Slothrop likes to mark the places where he has sexual relations with women on the map. Strangely, these places are always attacked by the rockets a few hours later. And then an organization called "White Visitation" knows about this, so they begin to monitor Slothrop and trying to control him:

The stars pasted up on Slothrop's map cover the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled "Darlene") sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys—mostly red and blue through here—a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent Garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and out to Wembley and up to Hampstead Heath—in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Annes, Susans, Elizabeths.

With the process of Slothrop's growth is the constant searching for who he is and where is he from. From his accusations, it reflects his strong sense of identity inferiority. He attempts to establish his ethical identity in order to have a clear understanding of himself. But reality is cruel, as it has been thrown into this world as an experimental object since birth, controlled by massive social machines, struggling to exist on the edge of society, and the wings of dreams are forcibly broken. All the beauty of the world such as love, hope and dreams which he desires are destined to be erased, even the most basic instincts of humanity, are stripped away completely. He is seen as a soulless creature, just a doll manipulated by those in power. In this society with ethical flaws and moral imbalances, it undoubtedly makes the narrator Slothrop heartbroken. The following selection is an example:

"O. K." Shaking Slothrop waves the crab at the octopus. "Chow time, fella." Another tentacle moves in. Its corrugated ooze touches his wrist. Slothrop tosses the crab a few feet along the beach, and what do you know,

that octopus goes for it all right: dragging along the girl and Slothrop staggering for a bit, then letting her go. Slothrop quickly snatches up the crab again, dangling it so the octopus can see, and begins to dance the creature away, down the beach, drool streaming from its beak, eyes held by the crab (Pynchon, 217-218).

This is the first time Slothrop has met Ketje, who is caught by a giant octopus, and Slothrop tried to save her by luring the octopus to catch crabs. This section can deepen readers' reaction to how interesting and bizarre his journey is, especially when they know that this rescue event is planned by Kajie. The encounter between Slothrop and Ketje is the beginning of a typical love story, where a hero saves a beautiful woman and falls in love with her. Unlike the romance and bravery typically created by the classic works, the encounter between Slothrop and Ketje is full of conspiracy and absurdity. When a huge octopus tried to catch Katje, Slothrop saved her with a crab. The rescue scene is bizarre and absurd because it is vastly different from the traditional description of heroic deeds. The tense atmosphere caused by this accident has become even more absurd. All of this is shown from the perspective of Slothrop, who believes that it is the beginning of his love story with Kajie. Because of the limitation of the knowledge, experience, feelings, and personality, he does not detect that everything is Kajie's plan, he even knows less than the readers, so he is unaware of the failure of his first romantic love.

Slothrop was sold by his father during his infancy to conduct infant sexual reflex experiments. Due to his previous injection of the chemical drug "Imipolex G", which caused erections in his genitals, as an adult, he falls into an endless pursuit of women and romantic relationships. He has lost morality and humanity, indulging in reckless pursuit of the satisfaction of physical desire. He has to face the cruel reality of losing his dreams when he is young. He lacks strong willpower and great wisdom, stumbling on a journey of pursuit and being controlled and fooled everywhere. More tragically, in the end of the story, his body has been destructed and broken down, which highlights the devastation and alienation of technology on humanity. As is well known, the most important point in ethics is to respect everyone's life, and abuse power to deprive others of their right to life breaks through moral bottom lines. The development of technology has not brought benefits to humanity, but rather devastates it at the cost of harming humanity, which is an extremely inhumane behavior. Faced with such a predetermined fate, Slothrop is powerless and could only allow his body and soul to be constantly trampled upon and torn apart. Therefore, the character narrator makes a negative ethical judgment, believing that the development of technology violates ethical morality.

### III. Narrative Judgments of Implied Reader

The significance of a novel is to elicit a response from readers, whether positive or negative, it is an communication between the novel, the author, and the reader. As Phelan points out that, that audiences make three main types of narrative judgments, each of which has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two. The interpretive judgment includes the judgment of the characters and the judgment of the readers. It refers to the fact that when people read classic works, based on the judgments of the characters, the implied readers will have their own interpretive judgments. That is to say, through a positive and orderly rational thinking process, constantly exploring the meaning of the narratives and providing sufficient arguments to interpret and judge the essence of events and behaviors. The readers observe the actions of characters and makes multiple judgments on them, their choices, or their situations. These judgments constitute the response of the readers, that is, the readers' response to the changes experienced by the character. The same event may trigger various judgments, and characters may make their own judgments about the event. Therefore, readers can judge the judgments of these characters which leads to double judgments.

As the plot develops, readers develop a general understanding of the main story and have their own interpretation and judgments of each character and event. The characters' indulgence in sexual desire and

rampant abnormal behavior have shaken the already unstable true faith of love in readers' humanity. The story sets in Europe where is about to end World War II. The main background is quite meaningful, because the Second World War is an extreme manifestation of humanity's loss of rationality. After the catastrophe of war, Europe was shrouded in gloomy, with ruins and corpses everywhere, and everything was crumbling and disintegrating. The ruins and scenes of disappearance deliberately depicted by Pynchon are like the sword of Damocles hanging high, undoubtedly reminding the world that if humanity continues to slaughter, and the chaos continues to grow like this which undoubtedly will lead to the end of the world. In such a crazy world, the Allied officers and soldiers who defend their homeland and uphold justice also indulge in lust and live aimlessly. Pynchon deliberately depicts a absurd and unimaginable farce, which is obviously ingenious. By creating a tense relationship between the helpless Mexico and his love for Jessica, Pynchon once again exposes the cruelty of reality and its devastating impact on people's ability to love. This can also be observed in the scene where he met Jessica at the end of the war:

He hadn't thought he'd cry when she left. But he cried. Snot by the cubic yard, eyes like red carnations. Presently, every time his left foot hit the ground walking he'd get a jolt of pain through half his skull. Ah, this must be what they mean by the "pain of separation!" Pointsman kept showing up with armloads of work. Roger found himself unable to forget Jessica, and caring less about Slothrop (Pynchon, 731-734).

For Mexico, the pain of losing Jessica is accompanied by his understanding and recognition of the nature of war, that is, the war has never ended. This clear understanding of his situation does not help him release the pain of losing the one he truly loved, but instead magnifies the fact that he is unable to face reality. This makes him realize the fact behind the entire turmoil, and it can also demonstrate how insignificant and powerless Mexico is. Compared to the sincere, selfless, and passionate love of Maxico and Jessica, the experience of German rocket engineer Franz Pokler's separation with his wife and child and their difficult reunion reflect the depth and sadness of love. During the war, Pokler's wife and daughter are sent to a re-education camp for training. Later, his wife has become a prostitute on the streets of Berlin, and his daughter has become a hostage to coerce him into helping develop the A4 rocket. From then on, the meeting with his daughter on August 5th every year becomes the only pillar and sustenance of Pokler's life. The scene of the weathered Pokler's sitting in the park waiting for his seventh reunion with his daughter, which brings tears to the readers with its simple and realistic meaning.

Booth points out that, in any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical (1983:155). This change will lead to distance, especially the distance between readers, narrators, and other characters. In the process of reading or appreciating literary works, this distance will present a dynamic and changing process. A great work can enable readers to achieve a high degree of emotional collusion with the implied author in the work. Only by emotionally participating in the work can readers obtain a certain aesthetic pleasure. The use of internal focus brings the narrator and reader closer together, making the story more authentic and credible. Readers see everything from the character's experiences and experience their experiences, emotions, and anxieties. This internal focalization enhances the realism of the novel, increasing the complexity and suspense of the story. However, internal focalization also has its limitations. The description may be subjective and vary among different characters. In addition, the shift of internal focalization allows the story to be narrated in depth in various ways, and faithfully reflects each character's personality through the portrayal of their inner thoughts. In the final part of the novel, the narrator tells many independent stories:

There is a Bulb Baby Heaven, amiably satirized as if it was the movies or something, well Big Business, ha, ha! But don't let Them fool you, this is a bureaucracy first, and a Bulb Baby Heaven only as a sort of sideline. All overhead—yes, out of its own pocket the Company is springing for square leagues of organdy, hogsheads of IG Farben pink and blue Baby Dye, hundredweights of clever Siemens Electric Baby Bulb Pacifiers, giving the suckling Bulb the shape of a 110-volt current without the least trickle of power. One way or another, these Bulb

folks are in the business of providing the appearance of power, power against the night, without the reality.

From the perspective of plot, content, and form, this story has nothing to do with any other part of the story. But the international organizations mentioned in this story do exist in history. In this story, the author tends to imply the tragic fate of Slothrop and satirize reality that ordinary people sometimes cannot change their tragic fate, even if they have been work hard to. Because compared to strong organizations and power, their strength is too weak. These powerful organizations prioritize their own interests and fail to consider that what they do may bring disaster to ordinary people. In Part 2, readers can observe that the narrator only recorded the dialogue between Slothrop and Tantivy, with report about their actions and reactions. The narrator seems to be not far from the two people, but he maintains a distance from them and does not enter their world to create the story:

“Tantivy, it was no accident. Did you hear that Bloat?”...

“Either what you’ve got is contagious”, Tantivy begins, “or else they’ve an eyeon me too.”

They look at each other. Slothrop remembers that except for Tantivy he’s allalone here. “Tell me.” (Pynchon, 1973:194-195)

From the conversation, we can see that the narrator knows less than the character, the narrator doesn’t know why Tantivy didn’t tell Slothrop the truth, and how Slothrop ensures that Tantivy knows the truth. To some extent, the narrator here is like a reader who can only observe the story. The narrator’s blank space in certain things makes the story more mysterious and interesting. Faced with so many doubts and gaps, readers must constantly think and participate in the re-creation and interpretation of the story, which widens the distance between readers and characters and guides readers to think more objectively, therefore, it makes the story more dramatic. Abbott believes that focusing has a significant impact on our thinking and feelings while reading, focalizing can contribute richly to how we think and feel as we read. Just as we pick up various intensities of thought and feeling from the voice that we hear, so also do we pick up thought and feeling from the eyes we see through. And just as the voice we hear can be either a character in the narrative or a narrator positioned outside of it, so also our focalizer can be a character within or a narrator without(2002: 67).The combination and transformation of different focusing modes provide a special narrative context for the novel and the distance between readers and characters is constantly changing. Through expressing ideas through different focal points, creating obstacles for readers, but at the same time, which also make reading more interesting and give the text new meaning.

#### IV. Narrative Judgments of Implied Author

Narrative judgments involve a dual layered narrative progression phenomenon. The first layer is text dynamics, which involves characters or their situations undergoing some changes through a series of related events, which are referred to as instabilities. In other words, instabilities is the introduction, complication and resolution of unstable relationships between or within characters, or between characters and their situations. Unstable dynamics are often accompanied by tense dynamics, manifested as implicit differences in knowledge, beliefs, or values between the author, narrator, and the author’s audience. Rhetoric reading requires the audience to reconstruct the ethical principles of specific narratives and evaluate their ethical standards. The ethical values of the audience may be influenced by the ethical principles constructed by the narrative, or they may refuse to accept or even negate the ethical principles of the novel. The narrative text explicitly or implicitly establishes its own ethical standards, guiding readers to make specific ethical judgments. From a rhetorical perspective, Phelan believes that narrative is not only a pure form of skill combination, but also a tool for ethical communication. The purpose of narration is to convey instructions, emotional values, and beliefs to readers.

In Pynchon’s novel, we see the author’s skepticism towards the human world and the disasters that technology brings to the world. Technology has not only failed to help people escape the threat of death, but has instead become a tool for creating mass destruction and death. Amidst the overwhelming destructive power brought by technology, human choices are difficult and uncertain. As Brownlie condemns that, free of religion and reason which, in combination, have produced the machinery which in *Gravity’s Rainbow* rapes the earth and reduces the Preterite to machines and presents a critique of intellectualization in part by illuminating mechanism’s failures(2000: 130-131).Through descriptions of science and technology lunatics, the novel

accuses and refutes technological hegemony, and expresses sympathy and care for the suffering masses. However, the author does not feel completely pessimistic and hopeless about this increasingly chaotic, crazy, and dying world. Pynchon pays attention to humanity's exploration of eternity, which is the longing for freedom, the pursuit of love and responsibility. This is a unique spiritual need of humanity and one of the characteristics of human civilization. As long as human nature still exists, the spiritual inclination towards beautiful realms such as sunshine and freedom is what people aspire to, and any monopoly or suppression will not last long. The power of freedom, responsibility, and love infused by Pynchon in his works is indeed weak against the backdrop of rocket bombardment, but they flicker like sparks in a world of ruins, giving warmth and hope to those in distress. He believes that there is still something that could rival it, which is the rich human communication and vibrant nature between people. Although this power is insignificant compared to the power of technology, it still exists. In the third part, the novel tells the story of the voyage of the Anubis (a ship), which is a difficult journey: Up on the bridge of Anubis, the storm paws loudly on the glass, great wet flippers falling at random in out of the night whap...Behind Procalowski the clinometer bob goes to and fro with his ship's rolling...Are the Russian lookouts watching from shores, waiting in the rain...Vaslav –is the pip you see there even a ship...How probable is the Anubis in this estuary tonight? (Pynchon, 1973:496-497)

It describes the violent storm and the tense consciousness of the people on board. The first sentence is a description of bad weather, and the second sentence is a description of people's consciousness. The narrator uses some interrogative sentences to express people's concerns, without indicating whose concerns they are. It also describes the psychological condition of soldiers and the thunder reminds them of war. It can be seen that the prolonged war has left soldiers with fear, and many things in life can remind them of war and terrible memories. The ruins and devastation in the city center of London vividly witness the devastating impact of war and technological hegemony on human civilization. The scenes of ruins can be seen everywhere in the novel, telling the story of the fragility of European consumer culture and the decline of civilization in that era, reflecting life's difficulties and absurdity. While people often resist and self-rescue themselves in an extreme way in this crazy world, such hopeless and fearful condition is truly shocking and thought-provoking, allowing the readers to deeply contemplate the fate and future of humanity in a technological society.

As Mark Curry said, if our access to the inner lives of characters is access to a sick mind, to twisted motivations, evil or anything else that offends our ready-made moral values, the result will not be sympathy (1998:19). As the narrative progression unfolds, the implied author uses skillful narrative strategy to make the reader's ideological norms align with the implied author's basic ideological norms, and the readers or viewers unknowingly ultimately accept the beliefs and norms displayed by the implied author. The most noteworthy aspect of the distance control between the narrator, character, reader, and author mentioned above is the astonishing achievement achieved in the distance change where the narrator starts away from the reader at first and ends close to the reader. The contact between the reader and the text motivates the textual dynamics, and it is precisely this process that ultimately produces the result of awakening various reactions within itself. In this tremendous change, people can also understand the value and moral standards that the implied author presents in the work. The beliefs and norms displayed by the implied author in the work gradually converge with those between the reader and the author, and the reader unknowingly ultimately accepts the beliefs and norms displayed by the implied author. In this way, the work not only allows readers to truly understand the character and resonate strongly with his thoughts and emotions, but also completes the shaping of this unforgettable image. By limiting the reader's perspective to the narrator's perspective, sustained internal perspectives often lead the reader to think from the narrator's perspective, giving the reader an opportunity to experience the character's experience. The readers attempt to make moral judgments about the character and their behavior, but the overall moral judgments of the story and narration is unsatisfactory, which drives the progress of narrative in reading. Interpretive and ethical judgments play an important role in the reader's reading response to the narrative progression and help them find the ultimate goal of the implied author's creation. Meanwhile, aesthetic judgments relies on the first two types of narrative judgment, mainly focusing on the reader's evaluation of various narrative techniques in the novel and the overall artistic quality of the narrative. Make a long story to a short, interpretive judgments, ethical judgments, and aesthetic judgments are intertwined during the reading process, and each judgments may overlap or affect other judgments, ultimately leading to consistency in narrative judgment. From the perspective of the working mechanism and interrelationships of narrative judgments, it is an indispensable bridge to strengthen narrative communication, which has a significant impact on the narrative experience, as well as the understanding of narrative form, narrative ethics, and narrative aesthetics.

## V. Conclusion

Drawing theoretical support from James Phelan's narrative judgments, the article presents a systematic analysis of the narrative judgments of the character, implied reader and implied author in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It

presents how Pynchon controls the reader's response through the change of distance between readers and characters. Through the shifting focalization, it can provide readers with multiple perspectives and also bring the readers and the characters closer, which can constantly motivate readers and maximize the readers' aesthetic experience. This narrative mode can not only deepen readers' understanding, but also promote readers to reflect on the living conditions of modern people. In conclusion, the superb narrative techniques and literary charm contained in *Gravity's Rainbow* are worth our constant exploration and there is still some room for the further study of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

#### References:

- [1] Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. (Columbus: The Ohio University Press, 2007).
- [2] Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Second Edition). (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- [3] Abbott H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. (Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- [4] Brownlie, Alan W. *Thomas Pynchon's Narratives: Subjectivity of Knowing*. (New York: Lang Publishing Inc., 2000).
- [5] Currie, M. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- [6] Pynchon, T. *Gravity's Rainbow*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2006).