

Analysis of Temporal Arrangement in Lu Hsun's "The New Year's Sacrifice" from the Perspective of Narrative Stylistics



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Abstract: Temporal arrangement refers to the artistic reconstruction of the chronological order of events, a process not only closely related to narrative techniques, but also to stylistic features. In the analysis of temporal arrangement in Lu Hsun's "The New Year's Sacrifice", the three aspects of order, duration, and frequency are discussed on the narratological level. In the aspect of order, a typical round-trip narrative structure is adopted in the story with two types of analepsis reflecting the fragmented and unreliable thoughts of "I"; as for duration, special attention is given to ellipsis and scene, the former arousing readers' curiosity to fill the blanks with imagination and the later inviting readers to experience the sense of substitution; and in terms of frequency, repetition is prominent in the story, as is shown in the repetitive narratives of Ah Mao's being taken away by wolf. Meanwhile, the stylistic features of the text are also analyzed, including foregrounding effects of repetition, meticulous arrangement of events' timing, as well as unconventional grammatical and syntactic structure. The analysis is to uncover the well-constructed narrative structure and carefully-designed stylistic features, so as to help us better understand author's sympathy towards women of miserable destiny in the old society and criticism against townspeople's mercilessness, indifference, and numbness. To put it simply, the integration of narratology and stylistics helps us get closer to the implied author and become the implied reader.

Keywords: Narrative Stylistics; Temporal Arrangement; Tense; Event

DOI: [10.57237/j.cll.2025.03.002](https://doi.org/10.57237/j.cll.2025.03.002)

1 Introduction

Temporal arrangement refers to the artistic reconstruction of the chronological order of events, and accordingly, Gérard Genette's comprehensive analytical framework of Tense [1], further supplemented by Mieke Bal [2], as shown in the figure below, is used in regards to the analysis of temporal arrangement in Lu Hsun's short story "The New Year's Sacrifice".

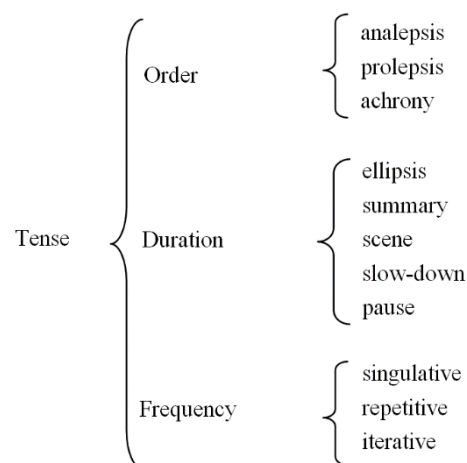


Figure 1 Theoretical framework for the analysis of temporal arrangement

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The theoretical framework of tense above is intended for the analysis from the perspective of narratology, but it is worth noting that, temporal arrangement is a process not only closely related to narrative techniques, but also to stylistic features. To some extent, any textual detail that makes reader aware of the changes in order, duration, and frequency could be seen as a temporal technique, which naturally includes stylistic/linguistic features. Therefore, the analysis of “The New Year’s Sacrifice” will be con-

ducted from both the narrative and stylistic levels, in short, from the perspective of narrative stylistics.

2 Order

In terms of order, “The New Year’s Sacrifice” adopts a typical round-trip narrative structure, with the temporal arrangement of major events listed in the figure below.

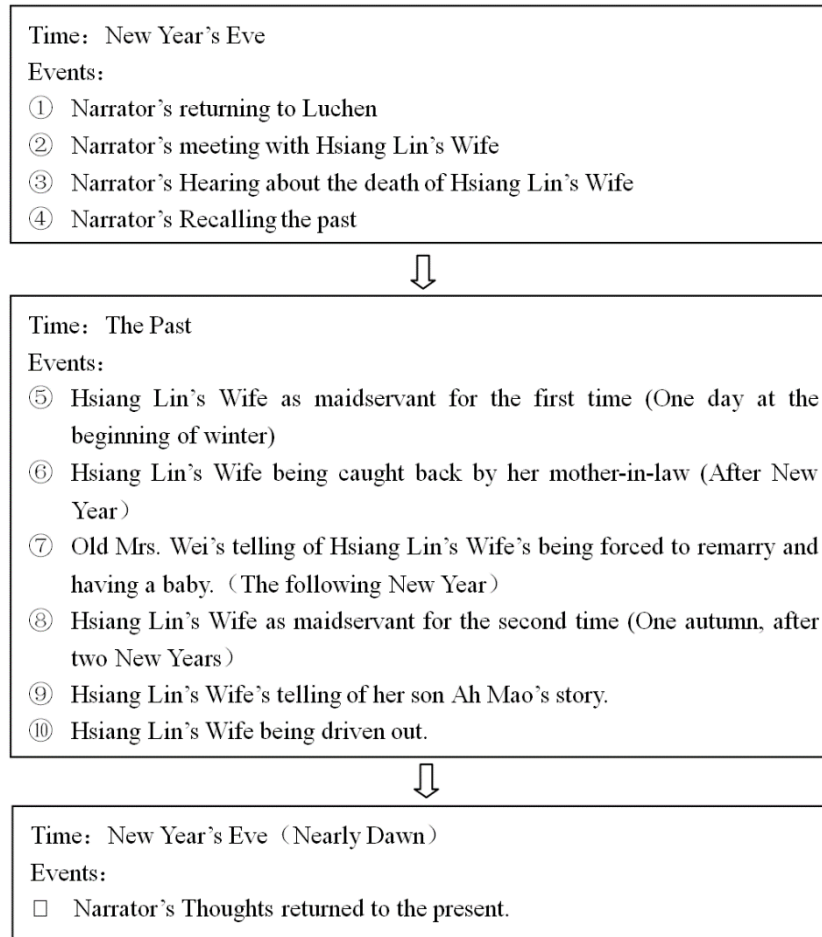


Figure 2 Temporal arrangement of major events in “The New Year’s Sacrifice”

As is shown above, analepsis (flashback) might be the foregrounding feature in the story, and there exist two levels of analepsis. On the first level, the narrative of “I” begins at New Year’s Eve of the old calendar, first telling my meeting Hsiang Lin’s Wife and hearing about her death, and then starting to recount the story of Hsiang Lin’s Wife, which could greatly arouse reader’s curiosity: Why did Hsiang Lin’s Wife die tragically? How did she spend her life? The arrangement of events coincides with Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily”, both of which begin with heroine’s death and then progresses to the past like peel-

ing an onion and finally returns to “the present”. The second level refers to the embedded narrative of Hsiang Lin’s Wife’s experiences, such as Old Mrs. Wei’s narrative about what happened to Hsiang Lin’s Wife after her being caught back to the mountains by her mother-in-law, and Hsiang Lin’s Wife’s account of Ah Mao’s being eaten by wolves in spring. The second level of analepsis plays an important role in the story, that is, filling in the gaps of narrative.

However, it is worth noting that analepsis might be fragmented and unreliable. On the one hand, analepsis is

in fact the recalling of the past, a process where only important or preferred events would be recounted. Therefore, there might be a lack of continuity, and in the case of "The New Year's Sacrifice", the fragmented narrative echoes with Hsiang Lin's Wife's broken life. On the other hand, the retelling of the past is always conducted by oneself or others after events occurred, and hence the unavoidable distance in time and the narrator's secondary processing of events will undermine the narrative reliability to a certain extent, which in the story contributes to the presentation of Hsiang Lin's Wife's passive, silenced, manipulated and distorted life.

In addition, the timing of events in the story also reflects the author's meticulous design: Hsiang Lin's Wife came to Luchen twice respectively in winter and autumn; Ah Mao was taken away by wolf in spring; Old Mrs. Wei talked about Hsiang Lin's Wife's forced remarriage and childbirth when the New Year holiday was nearly over; Hsiang Lin's Wife was caught back in the mountains shortly after the new year and found dead on the streets before the new year. Autumn and winter are usually regarded as bleak and desolate seasons, and hence arranging for Hsiang Lin's Wife to appear in Luchen in such a time implies her tragic destiny, and the child being taken away in the spring when everything comes back to life is undoubtedly the last straw on her unbearable life. New Year's holiday should be a happy time of family reunion, but the author arranged for Hsiang Lin's Wife to be forcibly arrested back to the mountains at this time, and it was right before the New Year that Hsiang Lin's Wife died tragically on the street after begging for many years. The striking contrast effect achieved through the timing of events highlights the tragedy of Hsiang Lin's Wife.

3 Duration

In terms of duration, the five narrative techniques of ellipsis, summary, scene, slow-down, and pause are all involved in the story, and accordingly the narrative rhythm alternates between the light and the heavy with the implicit events intertwined with the explicit. Among the five techniques, the typical ones discussed here are ellipsis and scene.

In the story, some events are omitted, and the author even writes directly with the voice of the narrator "I": "However, did she go out from the fourth uncle's house and become a beggar, or did she first go to Mrs. Wei's house and then become a beggar? I don't know." [3]. If it

is reasonable to omit here because when Hsiang Lin's Wife's wife became a beggar is not an important event, why does the author apply the same narrative technique for the critical event of Hsiang Lin's Wife's death? The following is the dialogue between "I" and a servant about the death event.

"When did she die?"

"When? Last night, or else today, I'm not sure."

"How did she die?"

"How did she die? Why, of poverty of course." He answered placidly and, still without having raised his head to look at me, went out." [4]

With hardly useful information provided from the dialogue, it seems that no one knows the exact time and direct cause of Hsiang Lin's Wife's death. Meanwhile, the rhetoric device of repetition is used here, with every question answered firstly with the repetition of the question itself. Both the narrative technique of ellipsis and the stylistic device of repetition are intended to show the author's criticism of the prevailing indifference and numbness among townspeople in the old society. Even the narrator himself, a young man with new thought, at the end of the story, finds himself "relaxed and at ease" with the doubts arising from the death of Hsiang Lin's Wife "swept clean away by the atmosphere of celebration" [3].

Another example of the integration of ellipsis and repetition might be Fourth Uncle's two comments: the first one, "Disgraceful! Still..." [5], is after his hearing about Hsiang Lin's Wife's being caught back to the mountains, and the second, "Still..." [6], is after Old Mrs. Wei's explanation of the event. Different from the example shown in the paragraph above, the integration of ellipsis and repetition here goes further and it could be termed as "repetition of ellipsis", and the two comments could be analyzed respectively as well as comparatively.

For the first comment, what Fourth Uncle didn't say is closely related to what he had said, that is, "Disgraceful!". There might be two explanations here. First, if he regards the action of forcefully catching back Hsiang Lin's Wife as disgraceful, what he didn't say might be "Still they have the right to do so" or "Still she shouldn't have run away". Second, if the word "Disgraceful" is a moral judgement on Hsiang Lin's Wife, what is omitted might be "Still they shouldn't have been so rude to her" or "Still she had a reason to run away". Which one is closer to Fourth Uncle's thought? The answer could be inferred from what he said when Hsiang Lin's Wife's mother-in-law came to request for bringing her back, "Since it

is her mother-in-law who wants her to go back, what is there to be said?" [7], and his repetitive comment of "Disgraceful!" at the sight of Old Mrs. Wei who came to make an apology. Judging from the contextual comments, it is fair to say that Fourth Uncle, a representative of the old generation strongly believing in the idea of "preserving natural laws and eliminating human desires", cares less about Hsiang Lin's Wife's sufferings than the event's influence on his family's reputation. Therefore, the first explanation might be closer to Fourth Uncle's thought, and the comment could be understood as follows: "How disgraceful they are! They should cause such a stir! Still they have the right to do so because a woman should have the virtue of submission".

Following the clue here, it is much easier to speculate what is omitted in the second comment made by Fourth Uncle after hearing about Old Mrs. Wei's explanation which consists of three parts: her apology for recommending Hsiang Lin's Wife, her compliment to Fourth Uncle that "your family is always so generous and kind, and unwilling to be hard on your inferiors" [6], and her promise to find someone good to make up for the mistake. Accordingly, the second comment could be elaborated as "Your apology, compliment, and promise are accepted. Still you shouldn't cause such a stir which might bring trouble to my family". What is omitted here is logically coherent with what is inferred in the first comment, both of which show Fourth Uncle's selfishness and indifference. And the repetition of ellipsis causes the effect of foregrounding, which not only gets readers involved in the process of filling the blanks with their own imagination, but also once again exposes the old society's suppression on women's freedom.

Different from ellipsis, the narrative technique of scene, where the discourse time equals to the story time, provides adequate information for readers. The most well-known example in the story might be the description of Hsiang Lin's Wife when the I-narrator met her beside the river at New Year's Eve:

"In one hand she carried a wicker basket, in which was a broken bowl, empty; in the other she held a bamboo pole longer than herself, split at the bottom: it was clear she had become a beggar." [8]

The long sentence starts with two parallel short sentences and ends with a conclusive one, generating foregrounding effects as follow. Firstly, from the perspective of stylistics, both of the two short sentences adopt inverted grammatical structure, placing adjective clauses,

"empty" and "split at the bottom", at the end of the sentence, as to highlight the miserable condition of Hsiang Lin's Wife. Meanwhile, the scenic presentation here is exactly what Leech and Short define as "PSYCHOLOGICAL SEQUENCING" [9], where readers seem to be on the scene, following the narrator's point of view and gradually acquiring more information about Hsiang Lin's Wife's condition. It is owing to the psychological sequencing that the text arouses readers' empathy and sympathy. Furthermore, to strengthen the psychological effect on readers, the sentence ends with a conclusive sentence of subjective judgement, which is seemingly in contrast with prior sentences of objective description, but is in fact the narrator's inner voice easily finding resonance among readers. To put it simply, with narrative technique of scene, readers' perception and emotion are in line with the narrator, that is, the sense of substitution.

4 Frequency

In terms of frequency, repetitive narrative is prominent in the story, and it is worth noting that different from the rhetoric device of repetition which focuses merely on linguistic features as referred to in the second part above, the repetitive (or repeating) narrative is defined as "narrative or part thereof with a FREQUENCY such that what happens once is recounted n times (with or without stylistic variations)" [10], which involves both narrative techniques and stylistic features. In the story, the event of Ah Mao's being taken away by wolf is the most representative example, which is directly narrated for 7 times, among which 4 typical narratives are quoted below.

No. 1: Old Mrs. Wei's narrative

"Luckily she had the boy, and she can work, whether it is chop-ping wood, picking tea-leaves or raising silk-worms; so at first she was able to carry on. Then who could believe that the child, too, would be carried off by a wolf? Although it was nearly the end of spring, still wolves came to the village—how could anyone have guessed that? Now she is all on her own." [11]

No. 2: Hsiang Lin's Wife's narrative

"I was really stupid, really..." Hsiang Lin's Wife raised her listless eyes to say. 'I only knew that when it snows the wild beasts in the glen have nothing to eat and may come to the villages; I didn't know that in spring they came too. I got up at dawn and opened the door, filled a

small basket with beans and called our Ah Mao to go and sit on the threshold and shell the beans. He was very obedient and always did as I told him: he went out. Then I chopped wood at the back of the house and washed the rice, and when the rice was in the pan and I wanted to boil the beans I called Ah Mao, but there was no answer; and when I went out to look, all I could see was beans scattered on the ground, but no Ah Mao. He never went to other families to play; and in fact at each place where I went to ask, there was no sign of him. I became desperate, and begged people to go to look for him. Only in the afternoon, after looking everywhere else, did they go to look in the glen and see one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. 'That's bad,' they said, 'he must have met a wolf.' And sure enough when they went further in there he was lying in the wolf's lair, with all his entrails eaten away, his hand still tightly clutching that little basket.' At this point she started crying, and was unable to complete the sentence.

My aunt had been undecided at first, but by the end of this story the rims of her eyes were rather red." [12]

No. 3: Hsiang Lin's Wife's narrative interrupted by others

"In the end, almost everyone in the town could be recite her tale, and it bored and exasperated them to hear it.

'I was really stupid, really...' she would begin.

'Yes, you only knew that in snowy weather the wild beasts in the mountains had nothing to eat and might come down to the villages.' Promptly cutting short her recital, they walked away.

She would stand there open-mouthed, looking at them with a dazed expression, and then go away too, as if she also felt disconcerted." [13]

No. 4: Hsiang Lin's Wife's narrative repeated by townspeople

If she saw a child of two or three, she would say, 'Oh dear, if my Ah Mao were still alive, he would be just as big...'

[...] Later everybody knew what she was like, and it only needed a child present for them to ask her with an artificial smile, 'Hsiang Lin's Wife, if your Ah Mao were alive, wouldn't he be just as big as that?' [14]

Narrative is usually made up of three elements: narrator, narrated, and narratee. Narrators always intend to achieve some purpose through his/her narrative, and that is why they might differ from each other in what is narrated and how it is narrated, and accordingly narratees' reactions/attitudes towards the narrative do not remain unchanged. The same is true with the repeating narratives about Ah Mao's death, as summarized in the following table.

Table 1 Narrator, narrated, and narratee

No.	Narrator	Narrator's Purpose	What is narrated / How it is narrated	Narratee	Narratee's attitude
1	Old Mrs. Wei	Informative	Summary		
2	Hsiang Lin's Wife	Informative; Self-consolation; Seeking solace	Detailed narrative	Fourth Aunt	Sympathy
3	Hsiang Lin's Wife	Self-consolation; Seeking solace	Repetition of the beginning sentence	Townspeople	Impatience
	Townspeople	"Cutting short"	Repetition of her words	Hsiang Lin's Wife	Dazed; Disconcerted
4	Hsiang Lin's Wife	Self-consolation; Seeking solace	Change of the beginning sentence	Townspeople	Indifference
	Townspeople	Mocking and Teasing	Repetition of her words	Hsiang Lin's Wife	Silent

Different from Old Mrs. Wei whose narrative of Ah Mao's story is short and simple, merely providing necessary information to achieve her purpose of recommending Hsiang Lin's Wife as a housemaid once again, Hsiang Lin's Wife's repetitive narratives are more than informative: on the one hand, her narrative can be seen as an act of self-condolence, or an attempt to find atonement for not taking care of her boy, which is why her narratives always begin with the self-blaming sentence "I was really stupid, really..."; on the other hand, her narrative also reflects her desire to seek solace from the narratee/audience whose empathetic feedback is of great comfort to the narrator and helps to relieve her pain. At the beginning, Hsiang

Lin's Wife could finish her narrative and receive empathy and sympathy from the narratee whose eyes became red with tears. However, gradually people in the town became impatient and indifferent, as is shown in their interruption of Hsiang Lin's Wife narrative and their leaving self-mumbling on the street. Finally, they were so merciless and malicious as to deliberately provoke Hsiang Lin's Wife by making fun of her dead boy. With the changing of townspeople's attitudes from empathy & sympathy to impatience & indifference, and finally to mercilessness & maliciousness, Hsiang Lin's Wife's narratives, complete and organized at the beginning, became fragmented owing to townspeople's interruption. Even though she tried to

change the beginning of her narrative by linking Ah Mao's story to children on the streets, once again her narrative was mocked and distorted by townspeople who find pleasure in making fun of her. As for Hsiang Lin's Wife herself, she was also changed from a narrator into a narratee with the loss of her voice, finding "that there was no need for her to say any more" [13].

Similarly, as for the scar on Hsiang Lin's Wife's head due to her resistance to remarriage, the townspeople not only did not have the slightest sympathy, but regarded it as a sign of shame and a "new taste". Faced with the hypocritical, indifferent, and numb people in Luchen, Hsiang Lin's Wife's repetitive narration did not help her to get out of the miserable destiny, but instead she lost her voice, her mind, and finally her life.

5 Conclusion

In the closing statement for Stylistics Seminar in 1958, Richard Jakobson said, "a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconvertant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms" [15]. Since then, scholars have been committed to the integration of stylistics and narratology, and Professor Shen Dan [16] classifies stylistics' attempts to draw on narratology into three types; moderate, aggressive and parallel, calling for "a parallel investigation of stylistic techniques and narratological techniques and see how they interact with each other in the text" [17]. The preceding analysis of temporal arrangement in Lu Hsun's "The New Year's Sacrifice" is such a practice: based on theoretical framework of tense, not only the narrative techniques like analepsis, ellipsis, scene and repetitive narrative are involved on the narratological level, but also stylistic features of the text are also concerned, including foregrounding effects of repetition, meticulous arrangement of events' timing, as well as unconventional grammatical and syntactic structures. The analysis is to uncover the well-constructed narrative structure and carefully-designed stylistic features, so as to help us better understand author's sympathy towards women of miserable destiny in the old society and criticism against townspeople's mercilessness, indifference, and numbness. To put it simply, the integration of narratology and stylistics helps us get closer to the implied author and become the implied reader.

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