



Biwu Shang

# In Pursuit of Narrative Dynamics

A Study of James Phelan's  
Rhetorical Theory of Narrative



Peter Lang

This book makes an intensive study of James Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative. Apart from illustrating six basic principles in doing rhetorical theory of narrative, the author examines six major issues which are central to Phelan's rhetorical poetics, namely, focalization, character narration, unreliable narration, narrative progression, narrative judgments, and narrative ethics. For each narratological concept, the author minutely conducts a genealogical study to make the review work complete. The book not only compares Phelan's rhetorical narratology with classical narratology but also with other strands of postclassical narratology. A detailed bibliography makes this book a compendium of narrative theory which is of relevance for scholars and students of all literary disciplines.

Biwu Shang is an associate professor of English at Zhejiang Gong Shang University, China. He works primarily in the areas of narrative theory, literary theory, and the art of Ian McEwan. His articles were published or are forthcoming in such international journals as *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Journal of Literary Semantics, Language and Literature*, and *Semiotica*.

# In Pursuit of Narrative Dynamics

European University Studies  
Europäische Hochschulschriften  
Publications Universitaires Européennes

**Series XIV**  
**Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature**

Reihe XIV      Série XIV  
Angelsächsische Sprache und Literatur  
Langue et littérature anglo-saxonnes

**Vol./Band 463**



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

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**Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche National-  
bibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet  
at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:  
A catalogue record for this book is available from *The British Library*, Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shang, Biwu, 1979-

In pursuit of narrative dynamics : a study of James Phelan's rhetorical theory  
of narrative / Biwu Shang.

p. cm. – (European university studies. Series XIV, Anglo-Saxon language and  
literature, ISSN 0721-3387 ; v. 463 = Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe XIV,  
Angelsächsische Sprache und Literatur ; Bd. 463 = Publications universitaires  
européennes. Série XIV, Langue et littérature anglo-saxonnes ; v. 463)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-0343-0562-4

1. Narration (Rhetoric) 2. Phelan, James, 1951- 3. English philology. I. Title.

PN212.S48 2011

808-dc22

2011002719

E-ISBN 978-3-0351-0330-4

ISSN 0721-3387

ISBN 978-3-0343-0562-4

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2011  
Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland  
[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

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Printed in Switzerland

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## Acknowledgements

Upon the completion of this book, I feel extremely grateful to those who have offered me sincere encouragement and generous support in the past several years. First of all, I would like to extend my hearty thanks to my doctoral advisor, Professor Hu Quansheng, who has guided me with academic expertise, critical insights and mentor kindness through each stage of my study. Without his initiative, patience, conscientiousness, resourcefulness, and artistry, there would have been no completion of my dissertation, the prototype of this book.

I am deeply indebted to the core faculty of Project Narrative at Ohio State University: David Herman, Brian McHale, Frederic Luis Aldama, and James Phelan. David helped me to deepen my understandings of postclassical narratology; Brian ushered me into the fertile field of postmodernist study, and Frederic guided me to see the complicated connections between fiction and mind. During my one-year stay at Project Narrative, Jim plays multiple roles of my co-advisor, my mentor and friend. My heartfelt gratitude to Jim remains beyond narrative, for his encouragement, enthusiasm, and support that has made this book possible.

As for my wife, I really don't know how to express my gratitude. She is always ready to support and encourage. Her smile, greetings, and table talks cast away all my fatigue after a whole day's reading and writing. She brings enormous pleasure into my life. I owe it all to her. May this book bring her comfort and be the evidence of our enduring love.



# Introduction

In his oft-quoted monograph *Recent Theories of Narrative* (1986), Wallace Martin (1986: 15) claims that narratology “has displaced the theory of the novel as a topic of central concern in literary study.” Three years later, Martin’s view is reemphasized by James Phelan, who argues that narratology “is already taking its place at the centre of contemporary literary criticism” (Phelan 1989a: xviii). In the similar vein, at the turn of the century, Brian Richardson makes a positive prediction that “narrative theory is reaching a higher level of sophistication and comprehensiveness and that it is very likely to become increasingly central to literary studies” (Richardson 2000: 174). In *A Study of British and American Narrative Theories* (2005), Shen Dan and her co-authors argue that the present age witnesses “the most flourishing of narrative studies and narrative theory” (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 203). Perhaps, all these scholars’ points are best summarized by David Herman, who has recently observed that “The past several decades have in fact witnessed an explosion of interest in narrative, with this multifaceted object of inquiry becoming a central concern in a wide range of disciplines and research contexts” (Herman 2007a: 4).

Along with this overwhelming “narrative turn in the humanities” (Kreiwirth 1992, 2005), the United States has become, in replacement of France, a global centre of narrative theory, and of postclassical narrative theory in particular (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 2; Shen 2008b). And in North America’s rise and flourish of narrative studies, James Phelan deserves our greatest attention, whose rhetorical theory of narrative will be a central concern of this book.

As an introduction to the whole book, the current chapter identifies four major goals. First, it seeks to provide a brief introduction to James Phelan’s life and works. Second, it attempts to draw a brief sketch of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, namely, its basic principles, major issues, and significant contributions. Third, it tries to conduct a comprehensive survey of the studies of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, with their strengths and weaknesses critically examined and exposed. Fourth, the organization and structure of this book are to be disclosed briefly.

## An Introduction to James Phelan: Life and Works

James Pius X Phelan, often known as James P. Phelan or simply James Phelan, a Distinguished University Professor at the English Department, Ohio State University, is now an internationally recognized narratologist. When awarding “The Distinguished Scholar Award” (2004) to him, the Office of Academic Affairs at Ohio State University gives a lucid but insightful account of Phelan’s academic achievements in general and his contribution to the study of narrative theory in particular, which is worth quoting at length:

When James Phelan received his Ph. D. in 1977, the study of narrative as a genre was a minor branch of literary studies. Today, the field of narrative studies is flourishing largely because of his efforts. Of the three main lines of research in narrative theory, Phelan is widely acknowledged to be the most eminent scholar working in the rhetorical mode, but he also incorporates insights from the other two lines of research, traditional narratology and contextualist theory.<sup>1</sup>

To put it another way, the Office of Academic Affairs believes that Phelan has played a significant role in narrative theory’s finally becoming a flourishing field of study. In their newly published work, Shen, Han and Wang (2005: 256) speak highly of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, which is espoused as “a highlight of postclassical narratology, due to its being synthetic, dynamic and open to other critical theories.”

Phelan was born in Flushing, New York, on January 25, 1951. His father, James Joseph Phelan, was a banker, and his mother, Margaret Clare (O’Connell) was a teacher and homemaker. The academic training Phelan has received is impressive. He went to Boston College and received his B. A. there in 1972. After his graduation from Boston College, Phelan pursued his graduate studies at University of Chicago and received his M. A. in 1973, and Ph. D. in 1977. In the same year Phelan began working as an assistant professor at Ohio State University. In 1983, he was promoted to associate professor and, in 1989 to professor. He served as Department Chair from 1994–2002. In autumn 2002, Phelan served as a Northrop Frye Visiting Professor of Literary Theory, at Division of Comparative Literature, University of Toronto.

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1 See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2004/scholar.html](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2004/scholar.html).

On June 10, 1972, Phelan married Elizabeth Menaghan, a social scientist and professor, who is also currently working at Ohio State University. Phelan and Elizabeth have two children, Kathleen Phelan and Michael Phelan. In his memoir *Beyond the Tenure Track: Fifteen Months in the Life of an English Professor* (1991), which is highly praised by Wayne C. Booth, Phelan records in detail his life as a teacher, advisor, committee chair, father, husband, amateur athlete, and narrator, from January 1987 to March 1988.

Acknowledgedly, the following fields are of Phelan's profound interest: English literature, critical theory, English and American novel, ethics, and, most important of all, rhetorical theory of narrative. Phelan is active in various kinds of academic activities. He is currently a member of the following academic groups or associations: Modern Language Association of America, American Association of University Professors, Society for Critical Exchange, and International Society for the Study of Narrative (hereafter, shortened as ISSN),<sup>2</sup> an organization for which he served as president from 1988–1989, and for which he currently serves as secretary treasurer. English studies and pedagogy have also been a part of Phelan's interest, and he has produced a large number of publications concerning both of these two fields. Phelan has served as the department chair of English for eight years. Under his leadership, the department won the Departmental Teaching Excellence Award, an Eminent Scholar position, and a Selective Investment Award. What merits our particular attention is that Phelan is one of the founders, core faculty and the second director of Project Narrative at Ohio State University, the major mission of which is to promote "state-of-the art research and teaching in the field of narrative studies."<sup>3</sup>

To Phelan, academic study or writing constitutes one of the most important facets of his intellectual life. In an interview by *Contemporary Authors on Line*, Phelan claims that "Writing is the hardest part of my job, yet in many ways it is the most essential. I love teaching, but I find that my own continued intellectual growth depends even more on my writing than my teaching. Writing forces me to think through critical problems, and I can then express my new understanding in the classroom."<sup>4</sup>

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2 Originally, ISSN is known as SSNL (Society for the Study of Narrative Literature). From 2008 on, it has been changed into its current name.

3 See [http://projectnarrative.osu.edu/aboutUs/what\\_mission.cfm](http://projectnarrative.osu.edu/aboutUs/what_mission.cfm).

4 See <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC?vrsn=149&OP=contains&locID=>

Rather than working in only one historical period, Phelan gravitates toward theoretical issues or problems, most often related to the genre of narrative, and pursues them in texts from different periods. His recent works, however, have focused primarily on twentieth-century British and American narrative, rhetorical theory of narrative, and ethics. He has written about style in *Worlds from Words: A Theory of Language in Fiction* (1981), about character and narrative progression in *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (1989), about narrative technique, narrative ethics, and audiences in *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (1996), about character narrator/narration, and narrative ethics in *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005), and about narrative judgments, narrative progression, rhetorical aesthetics, and hybrid forms of narrative in *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007). He has also published an autobiographical journal *Beyond the Tenure Track: Fifteen Months in the Life of an English Professor* (1991) and edited *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology* (1989). Together with Peter J. Rabinowitz, he has edited *Understanding Narrative* (1994) and *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005); he collaborated with Robert Scholes on a new edition of Scholes and Robert Kellogg's classic *The Nature of Narrative*, writing a new chapter titled "Narrative Theory, 1966–2006: A Narrative" (2006); with Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn, he has newly edited *Joseph Conrad: Voice, Narrative, History, and Genre* (2008), and with David Herman and Brian McHale, he has edited *Teaching Narrative Theory* (2010). In addition, with Gerald Graff, he has compiled two textbooks, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (1995, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2003), which was awarded the 1997 Nancy Dasher Award by the College English Association of Ohio as the best book on pedagogy from an Ohio faculty member for 1994–96, and *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2009).

Since 1992 Phelan has been the editor of *Narrative*, the official journal of ISSN. Directly under Phelan's leadership and guidance, *Narrative* won the 1993 CELJ Award for Best New Journal. He has been

working as a co-editor with Peter J. Rabinowitz for The Ohio State University Press series on “The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative” since 1992. So far, they have co-edited more than 30 books on narrative and narrative theory, including such influential narratological works as David Herman’s edited collection, *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis* (1999), Brian Richardson’s *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006), Richard Walsh’s *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (2007), Patrick Colm Hogan’s *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science and Identity* (2009), and Jan Alber and Monika Fludrenik’s edited collection *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analysis* (2010). In order to promote the studies of rhetorical theory of narrative, Phelan offered 1991 NEH Summer Seminar for College and University Teachers on “Issues in the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative”, 1995 NEH Summer Seminar on “Issues in the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative,” 2005 NEH Summer Seminar on “Narrative Theory: Rhetoric and Ethics in Fiction and Autobiography,” and 2008 NEH Summer Seminar on “Narrative Theory: Rhetoric and Ethics in Fiction and Non-Fiction.”

Particularly noteworthy is Phelan’s enthusiasm for teaching. As a matter of fact, even when he was a pupil, he dreamed of becoming a teacher. In *Beyond the Tenure Track* (1991), he writes,

I was one of those weird people who always liked school, liked it so much that the idea of never leaving it soon became very appealing. By the time I was in fourth or fifth grade, I began to imagine myself as a teacher, to guess how the process of my education looked from my teachers’ viewpoints, to think how I’d conduct that process if I were in charge. As I progressed through grammar school, high school, college, and graduate school, my desire to become a teacher remained constant, even as the form of the desire altered (Phelan 1991: ix).

Phelan proves himself to be an excellent teacher apart from being a prominent literary critic and narratologist. He is the first person in the history of the English Department at Ohio State University who has been awarded both the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award (2007)<sup>5</sup> and

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5 The Alumni Award for Distinguished Teaching honors faculty members for superior teaching. Recipients are nominated by present and former students and colleagues and are chosen by a committee of alumni, students, and faculty. They receive a cash award of \$3000, made possible by contributions from the Alumni Association,

the Distinguished Scholar Award (2004).<sup>6</sup> In 2008, Ohio State University awarded him the title of “The Distinguished University Professor”, its highest honor for faculty.<sup>7</sup> To phrase it another way, Phelan is recognized as distinguished in both teaching and academic research. As for the first award, some of his students acknowledge that Phelan “is the kind of teacher that makes you work harder than you’ve ever worked before, the kind that demands and receives your very best work”; some remarks that “I admire his incisive comments on papers, his passion for teaching, his unflagging devotion, and loyalty to his students.” Phelan takes an in-depth approach to his material, encouraging his students to think on their own. “Dr. Phelan has a vast degree of knowledge but conveys it to you in a way that you understand,” one student says, “he is not dogmatic; instead he allows you to work with him and together create understanding,” another student notes.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of his academic achievements, Phelan is now considered to be “an internationally recognized expert in narrative theory,”<sup>9</sup> “interna-

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friends of Ohio State, and the Office of Academic Affairs. They also receive a \$1,200 increase in their base salaries from the Office of Academic Affairs. The recipients will be inducted into the university’s Academy of Teaching, which provides leadership for the improvement of teaching at Ohio State. See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2007/dist\\_teach.php](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2007/dist_teach.php).

- 6 The Distinguished Scholar Award, established in 1978, recognizes exceptional scholarly accomplishments by senior professors who have compiled a substantial body of research, as well as the work of younger faculty members who have demonstrated great scholarly potential. The award is supported by the Office of Research with honoraria provided by The Ohio State University Foundation. Recipients are nominated by their departments and chosen by a committee of senior faculty, including several past recipients of the award. Distinguished Scholars receive a \$3,000 honorarium and a research grant of \$20,000 to be used over the next three years. See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2004/scholar.html](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2004/scholar.html).
- 7 The Distinguished University Professor title is awarded permanently to no more than three exceptional faculty of The Ohio State University per year. The title recognizes accomplishments in research, scholarly or creative work, teaching, and service that are both distinguished and distinctive. The Office of Academic Affairs awards honored faculty an annual budget of \$10,000 for a period of three years to support their academic work. Honorees are expected to continue a regular program of teaching, research, scholarly or creative work, and service. See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2008/professor.php](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2008/professor.php).
- 8 To have a full view of these remarks, see [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2007/dist\\_teach.php](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2007/dist_teach.php).
- 9 See Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*,

tionally known and highly respected for his work in narrative studies.”<sup>10</sup> When awarding “The Distinguished University Professor” (2008) to him, the Office of Academic Affairs of Ohio State University espouses that Phelan’s work “is taught in universities around the world, demonstrating his far-reaching influence on the study of narrative.” Highly recommending that Phelan deserve the title of “The Distinguished University Professor”, one nominator straightforwardly claims that “James Phelan is the first name that comes to mind as essential reading in debates concerning narrative, rhetoric and ethics – areas of crucial relevance across the academic spectrum in the humanities and social sciences, from literary and cultural studies to law, linguistics and philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> Phelan is “that rarest of colleagues whose intelligence, dedication, forethought and sustained accomplishment have truly altered an entire field,” another scholar writes, “he is one of the world’s most prolific and important scholars of narrative; his several books and myriad essays comprise a rich canon of ideas built around a strong commitment to narrative as a rhetorical project.”<sup>12</sup>

## A Brief Sketch of Phelan’s Rhetorical Theory of Narrative: Principles, Issues, and Contributions

In addition to his frequent contributions to a series of leading journals such as *Narrative*, *Narrative Inquiry*, *Poetics Today*, *Style*, *PMLA*, *Pedagogy*, *College English*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*, Phelan has published *Worlds from Words: A Theory of Language in Fiction* (1981), *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (1989), *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (1996), *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005), *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007), all

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Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: the backcover.

10 See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2008/professor.php#2](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2008/professor.php#2).

11 See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2008/professor.php#2](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2008/professor.php#2).

12 See [http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university\\_awards/2008/professor.php#2](http://www.osu.edu/facultystaff/university_awards/2008/professor.php#2).

of which are primarily concerned with the rhetorical mode of narrative studies, and in particular, with six basic principles and six major issues of rhetorical approach to narrative. The rest of this section is mainly devoted to a brief explication of these principles and issues.

## Basic Principles

Despite his repetition, it is mainly in *Living to Tell about It* (2005), *Experiencing Fiction* (2007), and “Rhetoric/Ethics” (2007) that Phelan fully fleshes out six basic principles in doing rhetorical theory of narrative, which run as follows.

The first and overarching principle is concerned with the rhetorical conception of narrative, which goes, “narrative can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (Phelan 2005a: 18, 2007c: 3, 2007f: 209). Yet the rhetorical situations are manifested in different ways in fictional narrative and non-fictional narrative. In fictional narrative, the rhetorical situation is doubled: the narrator tells his/her story to his/her narratee for his/her purposes on the one hand, and the author communicates to his/her audience for his/her own purposes both that story and the narrator’s telling of it on the other (Phelan 2005a: 1). In non-fictional narrative, the extent to which the rhetorical situation is doubled usually depends on the extent to which the author signals his/her difference from or similarity to the “I” who tells the story. No matter whether it is fictional or non-fictional, a narrative text serves as the site of narrative transaction for both the author and the narrator to achieve their respective purposes.

As already shown above, the rhetorical conception of narrative has much to do with the longstanding tradition of rhetorical poetics. Phelan (2007f: 207) himself admits that his rhetorical approach to narrative “has its roots in Aristotle’s *Poetics* with its definition of tragedy as the imitation of an action that arouses pity and fear and leads to the purgation of those emotions.” Following the Aristotelian tradition, the Chicago School critics or the neo-Aristotelians have done much to pave the way for the rhetorical principles that Phelan practices.<sup>13</sup>

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13 For more about “the Chicago School,” see Shang 2010b.

Perhaps, what Phelan says somewhere else sheds much light on this principle. According to Phelan, the rhetorical theory is designed to enable its practitioner to achieve a certain kind of knowledge about texts, knowledge about them as communicative transactions between the author and the reader. The text is the very site of that rhetorical transaction, which is endowed with a formal and an effective structure (Phelan 1989c: 329). The nature of the rhetorical transaction between the author and the reader directly points to the second principle.

The rhetorical conception of narrative results in a second principle, which is concerned with the rhetorical triangle, assuming “a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response” (Phelan 2005a: 18–19, 2007c: 4, 2007f: 209). According to this principle, the texts are designed by the authors for the purposes of affecting readers in particular ways. These designs are concretized not only by the language, techniques, forms, structures, and the dialogic relations of texts but also by the narrative conventions and genres that readers are familiar with. The readers’ responses perform double functions: to serve as “a guide to how the designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena,” and to test “the efficacy of those designs” (Phelan 2007c: 4). Since the meaning of the narrative derives from the feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader responses (Phelan 2005a: 18), it therefore follows that “a rhetorical critic may begin with the interpretive inquiry from any one of these points on the rhetorical triangle, but the inquiry will necessarily consider how each point both influences and can be influenced by the other two” (Phelan 2007c: 5).

To better understand what Phelan means by the readers’ responses and how these responses are generated, I will examine the next two principles, which are mainly concerned with the types of readers as well as the types and the nature of the readers’ responses.

The third principle focuses on the rhetorical conception of the reader, which identifies five main types of audiences: the flesh-and-blood audience or the actual reader, the authorial audience (the author’s ideal reader, hypothetical reader or the implied reader), the narrative audience (the observer position within the narrative world that the flesh-and-blood audience assumes), the narratee (the audience addressed by the narrator), and the ideal narrative audience (the narrator’s hypothetical perfect audience, the one he expects to understand every nuance of his communi-

cation) (Phelan 2007c: 4, 2007f: 210). On the five types of audience that Phelan categorizes three points need to be made. First, the flesh-and-blood audience, in the process of reading, seeks to enter the position of the authorial audience and the narrative audience. Second, the distinction between the concept of the flesh-and-blood audience and the concept of the authorial audience is significant for the rhetorical approach: the former allows the rhetorical approach to see that the differences among individual readers can lead to their different responses and interpretations; while the latter makes it possible for the rhetorical approach to consider the ways in which readers can share the experience of reading narrative. Third, the ideal narrative audience, like the narratee, is not the one the actual audience takes on but is the narrator's ideal audience. This audience is not necessarily to invoke as a part of a rhetorical interpretation.

With these various audiences in mind, Phelan explains how his rhetorical approach differs from the structuralist one. The structuralist approach "remains anchored to the idea that the discourse of the narrative will define the features of the audience," while his rhetorical approach, by contrast, "considers the presuppositions and beliefs that operate for the different audiences that are always present in the apprehension of narrative" (Phelan 1989b: 140–141).

The fourth principle is about the types and the nature of the audiences' responses, which fall into three broad categories in correspondence to three particular components of narrative. Phelan argues that "As flesh and blood readers enter the authorial and narrative audiences, they develop interests and responses of three kinds, each related to a particular component of the narrative: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic" (Phelan 2007c: 5). To be more precise, each of the three types of audiences' responses is closely related to a particular component of the character: the mimetic refers to the component of character directed to its imitation of a possible person; the thematic refers to the component of character directed to its representative or ideational function; and the synthetic refers to the component of character directed to its role as artificial construct in a larger construction of the text. Phelan further argues that the mimetic and thematic components may be more or less developed, while the synthetic component, though always present, may be more or less foregrounded (Phelan 1989c: 3).

According to Phelan (2005a: 212–219, 2007c: 5–6), the narrative audience treats the fictional action as real and focuses on the mimetic element of the character; the authorial audience operates with the tacit knowledge that the characters and events are synthetic constructs rather than real people and historical happenings; while the flesh-and-blood reader grasps the theme and meaning of the narrative, seeing the lesson that narrative and the character try to teach. Therefore, the narrative audience usually produces responses to the mimetic component of the narrative, which involves an interest in the characters as possible people in the narrative world like his own; the responses of this type include the narrative audience's evolving judgments, emotions, desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments. The authorial audience generates responses to the synthetic component of the narrative, which involves his interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs. The flesh-and-blood audience, in turn, makes responses to the thematic component of the narrative, which involves his interest in the characters' ideational functions as well as in the cultural, ideological, philosophical or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative. However, as far as the nature of narrative progression is concerned, the proportion and relationship among the types of responses vary from one narrative to another. "Some narratives are dominated by mimetic interests," Phelan (2007c: 6) says, "some by thematic, and others by synthetic, but developments in the progression can generate new relations among those interests. Furthermore, there is no necessary reason why a narrative cannot make two or even all three interests important."

The fifth principle is concerned with the significance of narrative judgments for the multilayered nature of narrative communication, which assumes that "readers make three main types of narrative judgments, each of which has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two: interpretive judgments, ethical judgments, and aesthetic judgments" (Phelan 2007f: 211). To put it simply, interpretive judgments are about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative; ethical judgments are about both the telling and the told; aesthetic judgments are about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts. It should be pointed out that directly under the guidance of this principle, Phelan fully develops the issue of narrative judgments.

The sixth principle involves "the importance of narrative progressions," which assumes that a narrative's movement "from its beginning

to its end is governed by both a textual and a readerly dynamics, understanding their interaction provides a good means for recognizing a narrative's purposes" (Phelan 2007f: 212). The textual dynamics exists at the level of story, involving the events and existents, while the readerly dynamics exists at the level of discourse, involving the narration and its techniques. In effect, it is largely due to this principle that Phelan fleshes out his theory of narrative progression.

Actually, the last two principles not only echo but also further consolidate what Phelan has argued somewhere: "The rhetorical act of telling a story entails a multileveled communication from author to audience, one involving the audience's intellect, emotions, and values (both moral and aesthetic), and that these levels interact with each other" (Phelan 2007c: 6).

It is no exaggeration to say that the six principles mentioned above are the cornerstone of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative. In fact, Phelan (2007f: 209) himself confesses that these key principles "underlie my own practice of the approach." Within the frameworks of these principles, the major rhetorical issues of narrative are elaborated and practiced, to which I am going to turn below.

## Major Issues

Practising the six basic principles mentioned above, Phelan proceeds to work on the following six major issues in rhetorical theory of narrative, which are not only closely interrelated with each other but also related to and sometimes are overlapping with the six rhetorical principles.

To begin with, Phelan starts his rhetorical theory of narrative from the issue of narrative progression, which "refers to a narrative as a dynamic event, one that must move, in both its telling and its reception, through time. In examining progression, then, we are concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interest in narrative" (Phelan 2002: 211). In Phelan's opinion, the poetics of plot is much confined to the intratextual matters, with the reader's role almost entirely overlooked.

In building up his theory of narrative progression, Phelan postulates that both the textual dynamics and the readerly dynamics propel the narrative forward. To be exact, the textual dynamics mainly resides at the story level, which is composed of "instabilities between characters,

created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions”; while the readerly dynamics mainly resides at the discourse level, which derives from the tension “of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation-between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other” (Phelan 2002: 211). When synthesizing the textual dynamics and the readerly dynamics, Phelan proposes twelve aspects of narrative progression in correspondence to a beginning, a middle, and an end of a narrative. These twelve aspects are Exposition, Launch, Initiation, Entrance, Exposition, Voyage, Interaction, Intermediate Configuration, Exposition/Closure, Arrival, Farwell, and Completion (Phelan 2007c: 15–22). It is under the broader umbrella term “narrative progression” that Phelan makes a further distinction of three components of character, and five types of the reader.

The second major issue is concerned with character narrator. Dissatisfied with the complexity of previous distinctions of narrators, Phelan proposes a set of more user-friendly terms. He classifies narrators into two basic types: character narrators, and non-character narrators, by taking the presence of the participant in the story events as the yardstick. Instead of elaborating on both character narrators and non-character narrators, Phelan chooses the former category as his focus of study, leaving the latter category almost entirely untouched.

Instead of defining the term character narrator, Phelan explains what is character narration, which designates “an art of indirect communication: an author communicates to her audience by means of the character narrator’s communication to a narratee” (Phelan 2005a: 1). This art is composed of the author’s ability to make the single text function effectively for its two audiences (the narratee, and the authorial audience) and its two purposes (author’s and character narrator’s), combining in one figure (the “I”) the roles of both character and narrator. Phelan dwells much upon the six prominent types of character narration (unreliable narration, restricted narration, suppressed narration, serial narration, observer narration, and mask narration) and the two overarching functions of the character narrator (narrator functions, and disclosure functions).

The third important issue of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative deals with the much disputed concept “unreliable narration.” In establishing his theory of unreliable narration, Phelan inherits as well as goes beyond the classical rhetorical approach to this issue pioneered by Wayne C. Booth and Seymour Chatman. When making his first revisit to

the rhetorical approach, Phelan points out the theoretical inadequacy of Booth's model of unreliable narration, redefines the term "unreliable narration" as well as the classical rhetorical yardstick of evaluation – the implied author, and broadens the axes of unreliability from two to three and discusses the six subtypes of unreliable narration – misreporting and underreporting along the axis of "facts/events", misregarding and underregarding along the axis of "ethics/evaluation", and misreading and underreading along the axis of "knowledge/perception" (Phelan & Martin 1999; Phelan 2005a: 66–97).

When making his second revisit to the rhetorical approach to unreliable narration, Phelan (2007b) brings in a new standard to measure the unreliability of the narrator – the narrative distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, and elaborates on the two major categories of unreliability thus classified – estranging unreliability, bonding unreliability, and the six subtypes of the latter in particular. More importantly, Phelan has also expanded the scope of unreliable narration by investigating the unreliability in such non-fictional narratives as memoir and autobiography.

The fourth issue of Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative is chiefly concerned with focalization. So far as focalization is concerned, some classical narratologists like Seymour Chatman (1986, 1990) and Gerald Prince (2001) persistently argue that only characters can be focalizers, since they dwell in the storyworld in which they perceive things happened; while narrators can never be focalizers, since they dwell in the discourseworld, in which they can only report what the characters see and perceive. In contrast to this view, Phelan frees himself from the bondage of the story/discourse distinction, claiming that "any report entails an act of perception" (Phelan 2005a: 115). Therefore, he arrives at a conclusion that narrators can be focalizers.

In demonstrating how narrators can be focalizers, Phelan not only elaborates on the phenomenon of "dual-focalization" but also says much about its consequences. For instance, the view of seeing "narrators as focalizers" throws new light upon the many possible combinations of focalization, discovers the self-consciousness of the narrator, and regards the story/discourse distinction as a heuristic construct rather than a natural law.

The fifth issue of Phelan's rhetorical theory is about narrative judgments, which is a rather new topic in contemporary narrative studies. From Phelan's point of view, "judgments are crucial to the activation of

our multileveled responses and to our understanding of the interrelations among form, ethics, and aesthetics” (Phelan 2007c: 6). According to Phelan (2005b, 2007c: 7–15), there are mainly three types of narrative judgments: interpretive judgments, ethical judgments, and aesthetic judgments, all three of which are interconnected and sometimes overlapping.

In order to explicate the working mechanisms of narrative judgments, Phelan (2007c: 7–15) proposes seven general theses. It merits our attention that Phelan also concentrates on the interrelationships among narrative judgments and reading experience, narrative progression, and rhetorical aesthetics.

The sixth issue of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative goes to narrative ethics. Phelan argues that his conception of rhetoric “not only includes both form and ethics but also sees them as interrelated” (Phelan 2005a: 5). To Phelan, when a rhetorical narrative theorist examines narrative ethics, he will proceed from the “inside out” rather than the “outside in”. To phrase it another way, the rhetorical narrative theorist does not do ethical criticism by directly applying a pre-existing ethical system to the narrative but “seeks to reconstruct the ethical principles upon which the narrative is built” (Phelan 2007c: 10).

As a matter of fact, Phelan’s conception of narrative ethics entails both the ethics of “the told”, the ethics of “the telling” and the ethics of “the reading”, in terms of which Phelan proposes four basic ethical positions: (1) that of the characters within the story world, (2) that of the narrator in relation to the telling, to the told, and to the audience, (3) that of the implied author in relation to the telling, to the told, and the authorial audience, and (4) that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations of the previous three (Phelan 2005a: 23). It should be emphasized that the issue of narrative ethics is a constant element in building up Phelan’s whole rhetorical theory of narrative. Along the lines of ethical situations, Phelan says much about the interrelationships between narrative ethics and other issues like narrative progression, focalization, unreliable narration, and narrative judgments.

In summary, narrative progression, character narrator, unreliable narration, focalization, narrative judgments, and narrative ethics constitute the bulk of Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative. Unfortunately, all of these issues are suffering from inadequate studies, and will accordingly be the focus of this book.

## Significant Contributions

In an interview, Phelan has been labeled as “one of the leading figures in post-classical narrative theories” (Tang 2007: 9). What the interviewer intends to say has already been specifically suggested by Ansgar Nünning and Shen Dan, when they refer to him as a representative of postclassical rhetorical narratologists (Nünning, A. 2003: 250, Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 242–256). All these critics successfully teach us a point that, as “an internationally recognized narratologist” (Scholes, Phelan and Kellogg 2006: the backcover), Phelan has made tremendous contributions to the study of narrative theory, postclassical narratology and postclassical rhetorical narratology in particular.

First, Phelan helps to bring forth narrative theory from the classical phase to the postclassical phase. In the period between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, narrative theory with its roots in structuralist linguistics was declared dead. With Phelan’s continuous contributions, rhetorical theory of narrative gradually takes its full configuration and prevails in literary studies. Together with feminist narratology, cognitive narratology, and other strands of contemporary narrative theory, rhetorical theory of narrative makes its greatest contributions to the renaissance of narratology. As disclosed by its major principles and issues, Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative lays much weight upon “the context” and “the reader”, which, according to Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck (2005: 9), constitute “the most important new ingredients of contemporary narrative theory.” No wonder, some critics argue that Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative is “a highlight of postclassical narratology” (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 256), which is also called contextual narratology (Darby 2001; Shen 2005a).

Second, Phelan helps to shift the global centre of narratological studies from France to the United States. Shen Dan argues that along with the overwhelming “narrative turn” in literary studies, the United States has become, in replacement of France, a global centre of narrative theory, and of postclassical narrative theory in particular (Shen, Han and Wang 2005: 2). Since the 1970s, the narratological studies in France, being much criticized and attacked, has lost its original momentum; in England, dwarfed by stylistics, the narratological studies have always been in a