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题目：The Unreliable Narration in S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*

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The Unreliable Narration in S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*

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Abstract: This thesis delves into the exploration of unreliable narration within S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*, a contemporary psychological thriller novel. The research aims to explore the characteristics of unreliable narration and its unique role in revealing themes and enhancing the atmosphere of suspense, uncovering the intricate layers of unreliable narration that have been previously underexplored. Employing a detailed textual analysis and the rhetorical approach, the thesis identifies three primary narrative characteristics and further applies Phelan's three axes theory to analyze the manifestations of unreliability, innovatively proposing six dynamic relationships among these axes, enhancing the understanding of the narrative's complexity. By integrating "higher-order" mathematical concepts into literary analysis, the concept of "higher-order unreliability" is explored, highlighting the transitivity and multi-dimensionality of unreliability in the narrative, then showing the intertwined themes of being lost and awakening, memory and identity, as well as the metaphorical representation of modern life.

Key words: S.J. Watson, *Before I Go to Sleep*, unreliable narration, rhetorical research approach

摘要: 本文深入探讨了 S.J. Watson 的当代心理惊悚小说《别相信任何人》中的不可靠叙述。该研究旨在探究小说中不可靠叙述特点，及其在揭示主题和增强悬疑氛围的独特作用，揭示以往研究中未充分探索的不可靠叙述的复杂层次。通过详细的文本分析和修辞性研究方法，本研究识别出三个主要叙述特征并进一步利用 Phelan 的三轴理论分析了不可靠性的表现，并创新性地提出了这三轴之间六种动态关系，加深了我们对叙述复杂性的理解。通过将“高阶”数学概念引入文学分析，探索了“高阶不可靠性”的概念，突出了叙述中的不可靠性的传递性和多维性，揭示了迷失和觉醒、记忆和身份的交织主题以及现代生活的隐喻性表达。

关键词: 沃森；别相信任何人；不可靠叙述；修辞性研究方法

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 S.J. Watson and *Before I Go to Sleep*

Born in 1971 in a city in central England, S.J. Watson has emerged as a new generation British writer renowned for his gripping psychological thrillers. After studying physics at the University of Birmingham and becoming an audiology specialist, he worked for many years in the British National Health Service. With a passion for writing in his spare time, Watson decided to take a creative writing course organized by the prestigious Faber Academy, marking the start of his writing career with his debut novel *Before I Go to Sleep*. Inspired by real cases of amnesia patients and by Watson's own dealings with those suffering from memory loss, the novel not only achieved international success but also established Watson's distinctive narrative style characterized by suspense and psychological intrigue. His subsequent novels, *Second Life* and *Final Cut*, published in 2015 and 2020 respectively, further showcased his talent in the domain of psychological thrillers.

His works are known for their thrilling plots and tense narration with unpredictable twists and engaging mysteries. Excelling at depicting characters' psychological states and exploring the human inner world, S.J. Watson reveals the dark side of human nature and buried secrets through the struggles of his characters, thus showing psychological reaction and evolution of humans to adversity, whose unique narrative style has also brought fresh perspectives to narrative structure and techniques.

Published in 2011, *Before I Go to Sleep*, has achieved extraordinary success internationally, selling over six million copies worldwide and having been translated into more than 40 languages, which won the Crime Writers' Association Award for Best Debut Novel and the Galaxy National Book Award for Crime Thriller of the Year. Critics have praised Watson's intricate plot design, captivating narrative skills, and

deep exploration of complex psychological states. Denis Lehane, the American author of *Mystic River*, commented, “It left my nerves jangling for hours after I finished the last page.” *The New York Times* described the author as an “out-of-nowhere literary sensation,” and *the Sunday Times* hailed it as “mesmerizing and unsettling... the best debut thriller for years.” Furthermore, receiving considerable attention across fields, the book was adapted into a film in 2014, whose success showcases the appeal of psychological thrillers genre in contemporary literature in the field of cinema.

It tells the story of Christine, a woman with a rare form of amnesia that erases her long-term memories over twenty years and also makes her forget the previous day each morning. From her perspective, the story unfolds as she wakes up one morning to reacquaint herself with “Ben” who claims to be her husband, relying on her own diary and clues from those around her to reconstruct her identity and past, which she does virtually every day. Doubting the truthfulness of “Ben,” her doctor Nash, and her old friend Claire, Christine discovers clues revealing a disturbing past involving “Ben,” actually Mike, with whom she had an extramarital affair, and the cause of her amnesia being an assault from him as she attempted to end the affair, ultimately successfully rescued through the efforts of herself, her family and friends. The novel explores themes of memory loss, identity recognition, love and betrayal as well as self-loss and awakening through Christine’s quest to rediscover herself, utilizing a unique narrative setup of a first-person diary from an amnesia victim’s perspective, creating an unsettling and unreliable atmosphere that immerses readers deeply into Christine’s inner world.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Review of the Novel

As a debut work by a contemporary author, although *Before I Go to Sleep* has

garnered widespread attention among the public and critics, showcasing its commercial and artistic value in the film industry, academic focus on this work has been relatively limited, with emphasis primarily on its thematic depth and aspects within psychology and linguistics. Li Bainian delves into the use of interpersonal grammar metaphors within the novel, analyzing their role in depicting the character and psychological changes of Christine, and their significance in character shaping in literature (2018: 42). Professor Gao Jianguo focuses on Christine's psychological journey from being lost to awakening, by analyzing her struggle with memory loss and her gradual detection to the truth, exploring the themes of identity loss and reconstruction (2016: 117). These studies not only enhance the understanding of the use of language and profound themes from different perspectives, but also provide new insights into evaluating other literary aspects of the novel. Nonetheless, narratological research on the novel is less explored, offering a significant text case for studying themes such as memory, identity, and narrative techniques, providing a valuable perspective for discussing the representation of unreliable narration in contemporary literature.

1.2.2 Review of Theories of Unreliable Narration

As a literary narrative technique, the concept of unreliable narration has captivated Western literary theorists, critics, and authors since Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961 and has attracted the attention of many scholars in China in recent years. By questioning the reliability of the narrator, unreliable narration challenges the traditional omnipotent narrative stance, introducing complexity, depth, and the possibility of multiple interpretations to literary works.

I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not.

(Booth 1961: 158-159)

As the initiator of the concept of the “unreliable narrator,” Booth equates the norms of the work with those of the implied author, distinguishing between reliable and unreliable narrators based on whether the narrator violates or conforms to general norms and values. Normally, we have a natural affinity for the narratives of eyewitnesses and witnesses. However, American scholar William Riggan, in *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator*, introduced a second axiomatic principle regarding first-person narration.

Precisely because of these narrators’ simulated humanness and because of the realism inherent in the situation of a character’s speaking to us directly, the natural limitations of human knowledge and judgment and memory come into play—a phenomenon which Henry James terms the inconscience of a narrator or reflector. (Riggan 1981: 19)

This narrative thus eliminates any possibility of absolute reliability regarding all facts, events, and characters within the narrative and Riggan identified four typical unreliable first-person narrators: the picaro, the madman, the naif, and the clown. It can be seen that these narrators can be classified into three more abstract types of unreliable narrators: the clown with specific behavioral purposes, the picaro with divergent moral values, and the madman and naif with limited cognitive abilities.

Later, Booth’s student James Phelan significantly advanced the theory of unreliable narration by proposing the “axes of unreliability” theory, on the basis of which Phelan proposed six types of unreliability: “misreporting”, “misreading”, “misevaluating”, “underreporting”, “underreading”, “underevaluating” (Phelan & Martin 1999: 95; Phelan 2005: 51). He identified two axes from Booth’s work—facts/events axis and values/ethics axis—relating to unreliability in factual accuracy and value judgment, respectively, then innovatively introduced a third axis, knowledge/perception axis, overlooked by Booth, which attributes narration deviations from facts to insufficient knowledge or understanding. Compared with his description of the parallel

relationship between the three axes, domestic scholars Shen Dan noted potential causal relationships among these axes, that is, the “underreading” of his own personal interests (the knowledge/perception axis) inevitably leads to his “underreporting” of them (the facts/events axis) (2006: 135). Furthermore, Phelan introduced “estranging unreliability” and “bonding unreliability,” emphasizing the latter’s capacity to reduce the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, despite their awareness of potential misguidance or bias (2007: 224-225). This marked a significant milestone in the rhetorical approach to unreliable narration.

Inspired by cognitive science, the emergence of cognitive (constructive) approach challenged the dominance of rhetorical approach. Tamar Yacobi questioned the standard of “implied author’s norms” from a reader’s cognitive perspective, defining unreliability as an “integration mechanism” with five mechanisms, shifting the focus towards reader-centered interpretations (2005: 110-111). Another representative of the cognitive school is the German narratology scholar Ansgar Nünning, who sought to replace Booth’s concept of the “implied author” with the concept of a “structural whole” constructed by the reader, shifting the standard from the “implied author’s norms” to the “reader’s norms,” thereby centering unreliable narration around the reader (1997: 101). As the theories of unreliable narration evolved, Nünning critiqued the unilateral aspects of both rhetorical and cognitive approaches, proposing a synthesis that considers both the structure and norms established by the work and author, and “the reader’s knowledge, psychological disposition, and system of norms and values” (2005: 105). However, Shen Dan contested the feasibility of combining cognitive (constructive) and rhetorical methods, citing their focus on different issues, which makes their basic positions difficult to reconcile. Nonetheless, employing both methods in a complementary manner could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of unreliable narration (2006: 141).

The application of unreliable narration in literary works is quite extensive, enhancing

narrative depth, suspense, and thematic significance. Rhetorical narratology sees the norms of the implied author as embedded within the text, emphasizing a standard of norms, whereas cognitive narratology starts from the reader's agency, highlighting conflicting interpretations of the same textual phenomenon. Both methods provide complementary perspectives for understanding the phenomenon of unreliable narration, enriching literary analysis. In recent years, the cognitive constructionist approach has challenged the traditional status of rhetorical analysis within the domain of literary studies, offering a fresh perspective to literary theory and criticism. Despite this, rhetorical analysis continues to demonstrate its irreplaceable analytical strength and profound vitality, which delves into the structure and symbolism of texts, as well as the relationship between authors and their works, revealing the deep-seated meanings and values of literary pieces.

However, while rhetorical approaches have been extensively discussed within literary theory, their application has largely been confined to classical literature, with specific works in contemporary psychological thrillers and mysteries remaining underexplored. Moreover, Phelan's conceptualization of the three axes as parallel somewhat neglects their intricate causal and transmissive relationships and given the natural affinity of novels with themes such as memory, truth, and identity, their adept use of narrative techniques provides an exemplary text for studying these axis relationships. Additionally, this research intersects with fields like mathematics, psychology, cognitive science, and philosophy, potentially inspiring scholars across these disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of how narratives construct self-awareness and societal realities.

Therefore, to solve these problems, the thesis aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the unreliable narration in S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*, exploring its unique narrative techniques and how they create a tense, suspenseful, and immersive reading experience while probing into profound themes concerning human nature. To this end,

this study will primarily employ a rhetorical approach as its analytical entry point, focusing on how unreliability manifests within the novel's narrative features, and how a rhetorical perspective can unravel the complexity and diversity of unreliable narration in the novel, as well as its use in exploring themes of loss and awakening, memory, and identity. On the one hand, it will involve leveraging the text to creatively develop the theoretical framework of rhetorical analysis approach, thereby enriching the academic discourse in the field of narrative theory. On the other hand, it will offer a new perspective of unreliable narration in the literary critique of *Before I Go to Sleep*, further proving the significance and applicability of rhetorical analysis methods in contemporary literary research.

This thesis is structured into four chapters. Chapter 1 offers a concise overview of S.J. Watson's career and works, followed by an exhaustive literature review on the novel and the theoretical underpinnings of unreliable narration, discussing the value of employing unreliable narrative as an analytical lens, delineating the research's objectives, methodologies, significance, and its innovative contributions, thereby laying a robust foundation for the study.

Chapter 2 synthesizes the narrative features tied to unreliability, subsequently employing Phelan's three axes theory for a granular analysis of the narrator's unreliability through rhetorical approach, and then it presents six dynamic interrelations among these axes through incisive textual analysis, additionally integrating "higher-order" mathematical concepts into literary analysis to articulate the notion of "higher-order unreliability," thus revealing the narrative's layered complexity and multidimensionality.

Chapter 3 explores how unreliable narration unveils profound themes of being lost and awakening with the metaphor of "Platonic repetition" and "Nietzschean repetition."

Finally, Chapter 4 concludes the thesis, highlighting the innovative aspects and

limitations of the proposed theoretical framework as well as anticipating and suggesting future research directions of unreliable narration.

Chapter 2 The Unreliable Narration in *Before I Go to Sleep*

This chapter embarks on an exploration of the novel's unreliable narrative techniques through a rhetorical research approach. It meticulously examines the narrative characteristics that contribute to the novel's unreliability, including its nested narrative structure, the employment of the first-person perspective, and the diary format, each playing a pivotal role in sculpting the reader's unreliable experience.

Further, through a detailed rhetorical analysis, this chapter dissects the layers of unreliability present within the narrative. It delves into the norms of the implied author and the three axes theory as manifested in the work, subsequently pioneering an exploration of the six dynamic interrelations among these axes, and innovatively proposes the concept of "higher-order unreliability" based on the intrinsic characteristics of the novel's unreliable narration. This analytical approach not only unveils the mechanisms of unreliability embedded in the narrative but also illuminates how the novel enriches thematic depth and complexity.

2.1 Narrative Features and the Unreliability

Before delving into the unreliable narration present in S.J. Watson's *Before I Go to Sleep*, understanding the novel's narrative features is crucial for revealing the essence of unreliable narration. The narrative structure, the use of first-person perspective, and the diary format provide a unique narrative framework for the story, which are not just embodiments of the novel's style but also foundational for building unreliable narration, adding depth and complexity. Thus, initially discussing these narrative features aids in a more comprehensive understanding of the application and impact of unreliable narration within the novel.

2.1.1 Nested Narrative Structure

The novel employs a unique nested narrative structure of “present-past-present,” effectively showcasing the process of the narrator search for memory. It is divided into three chapters: the first waking up, the second reviewing diary entries, and the third returning to the present moment. This structure not only organizes the narrative but also mirrors Christine’s fragmented and cyclical experience of time and memory.

There is nothing I can do but turn the page. I begin to read my history. (40)

I turn the page, but there is no more. The story ends there. I have been reading for hours. (287)

The novel cleverly links her current life with her exploration of the past through the diary by the last sentence in the first chapter and the first sentence in the third chapter, precisely mimicking the psychological process of the protagonist every day from the panic state of resetting memory to the calm state of regaining memory and accepting reality. In fact, forming a closed loop, the main thread of the novel unfolds around a single day—“today,” into which subtly weaves long-span storylines through the reading and recollection of the diary. Therefore, despite the vast and fragmented memories, it ensures the clear logic of “time travel” and prevents excessive dissonance and confusion for the reader, allowing them to uncover the mystery following the narrator’s perspective gradually and swimmingly. The reading process is paralleled with the reader’s reading journey, guiding the reader’s experience and closely connecting the reader with the protagonist’s journey of discovery.

In a sense, this arrangement is a form of internal analepsis, as it inserts the “past” diary into the “present” narrative. However, deepening the exploration of themes, it tightly binds the form and content of the novel, transcending the function of traditional analepsis.

2.1.2 The First-person Perspective

Employing the first-person perspective throughout, the novel's narrative immerses readers deeply into Christine's mental activities, feeling the limitations of a limited viewpoint, amplifying the suspense and unreliability of the narration. It does mean that the novel uses the first person "I" not only in the second chapter's diary part but the entire novel, whether it's the real-time point in the first chapter, the reading of diary contents in the second chapter, or the return to the moment in the third chapter.

The seamless narration displays Christine's psychological activities vividly, from the beginning placing the reader directly into the mind of someone extremely troubled by severe memory loss, making the reader an active participant in unraveling the narrative as if they were experiencing Christine's diary first-hand. This perspective not only allows the reader to empathize with her ordeal but also lends a sense of unpredictability to the narration, compelling readers to question the veracity of her fragmented memories and the intentions of those around her, effectively conveying the frustration, fear, and isolation accompanying her condition, making the novel a captivating psychological thriller.

2.1.3 Diary Format

With a high degree of subjectivity, the diary format as a narrative device allows the story to unfold in a non-linear manner. Although the diary entries have a clear chronological order by date, the process of her reconstructing the past by reading her own journal and documenting the present day is inherently non-linear, interweaving two timelines: one representing the current moment and the other, memories. These memories, pieced together like a puzzle, gradually construct a complete picture. She might skip readings and recordings, attain flashbacks of certain memories without clear temporal markers, or experience confusion in understanding time and events due

to the incompleteness of information and the fragmentation of memory. Because of the non-linear process of Christine's memory reconstruction, the overall storyline and causality exhibit an unpredictable nature, imbued with a strong subjective hue, thereby deepening the complexity, multi-dimensionality, and unreliability of the story. In this way, readers are able to participate in rediscovering the past alongside Christine, experiencing the fragmentation of time and memory, ingeniously showcasing the non-cohesive experience of memory recovery.

By initially exploring these narrative features, we lay the groundwork for a deeper analysis of the unreliable narration in *Before I Go to Sleep*, showing how the novel utilizes narrative structure, viewpoint, and format to create an environment that is both full of psychological empathy and full of suspense, not only making the novel itself an engaging work but also providing rich material for analyzing its unreliable narration.

2.2 Analyzing Unreliability in the Novel through Rhetorical Approach

Expanding on the narrative groundwork, this section advances into a nuanced analysis of unreliability in *Before I Go to Sleep* through the rhetorical approach, providing a framework for a thorough understanding of the textual narrative features and the reliability of the narrator. By focusing on the implied author's subtle shaping of the protagonist's portrayal, and employing the triadic theory of knowledge/perception, facts/events, and values/ethics, we are positioned to explore how she reconstructs her self-awareness and past experiences amidst memory loss, and how this reconstruction process impacts her reporting and evaluation of events. Building on this foundation, this section innovatively leverages textual analysis to investigate the interplay among three axes, revealing the intricate outcomes of unreliability in Christine's narration as her personal cognitive state, evaluations, and factual recounting interact, shedding

light on the complexity and diversity of unreliable narration within the contemporary literary discourse.

2.2.1 The Implied Author and the Three Axes Theory

Initially, a general analysis from the perspective of the three axes theory proposed by Phelan can be instrumental in helping the reader have a better understanding of unreliability in the novel. On the knowledge/perception axis, Christine wakes up every day with no memory of the previous day, so her understanding of herself, her environment, and the people interacting with her is based on very limited information, so her limitations in knowledge and perception make it impossible for her to provide complete and accurate information in her narration, while on the facts/events axis, the content Christine records in her diary is part of her efforts to reconstruct her memory. However, these memories are fragmented and influenced by her current understanding and emotional state, making her narration of past facts or events unreliable. Even her diary is subject to being altered, forged, or edited by those around her to steer her memory in a specific direction.

“Mike must have removed the pages from your journal that night. That was why you didn’t think anything was wrong when you gave me the journal on Tuesday, and neither did I... It’s fair to assume he’d been reading your journal for at least the last week or so, probably longer.” (362)

Actually, a significant part of the diary from the past few days was taken by Mike, greatly affecting the completeness of the events recorded. Then, on the values/ethics axis, when Christine evaluates her experiences, the people she interacts with, and the situations she faces, her values and judgments may be based on incorrect information or outdated emotions, which might affect her understanding of her own and others’ actions, leading to misjudgment of certain events or characters.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that her unreliability doesn't stem from an intentional deception, but rather from the inherent limitations she faces as a narrator. Nevertheless, when attempting to understand the implied author's character construction of Christine, it is evident that he also continuously hints at the possibility of her being not entirely honest, potentially even a liar. "Obviously, the implied author manipulates the narrator behind the scenes and indicates the direction along which he should proceed" (Ding 2017: 32). With her exceptional educational background and a fervent love for literature, she emerged as a distinguished fiction writer, having successfully published a book that underscored her intelligence and competence.

I saw myself in a library and recalled vague ideas of writing a thesis concerning feminist theory and early twentieth-century literature, though really it was just something I could be doing while I worked on novels, something my mother might not understand but would at least see as legitimate. (58)

As an intellectual and self-reliant woman, she ardently champions women's rights, staunchly opposes domestic violence, demonstrating both independent thought and financial independence. From her determination to recall her once passionate love for her husband Ben and her instinctual love for her son Adam, which even amnesia cannot obstruct, it can be assumed she must have been a good wife and loving mother who cherished her family's happiness.

Despite the nebulous, shimmering memory I have of him, I feel love for Adam, an instinct to protect him, the desire to give him everything, the feeling that he is part of me and without him I am incomplete. (221)

Undoubtedly, the implied author is attempting to create an image of an exceptional woman. But as the plot progresses, we discover that she also harbors a rebellious heart amidst a stable and calm life, yearns for a stimulating and unrestricted life. "I laugh and take the joint back, inhaling a lungful as if to prove that I am not boring. We have promised ourselves that we will never be boring" (65). She has experienced writer's

block, sitting in front of the computer unable to produce anything substantial. She once thought women who are victims of domestic violence are foolish and weak, yet faced with the fake “Ben’s” violent treatment, she becomes cowardly and confused, scared yet reliant on him.

I remembered how I had always looked down on women who found themselves with husbands who beat them and stayed put. They were weak, I thought. Weak, and stupid.

Was it possible that I had fallen into the same trap as they had? (323)

Additionally, the once family-loving woman also had an affair with a man, secretly meeting with him in her and her husband’s home, and even after losing her memory “developed a ridiculous, childish crush” on a much younger doctor who already has a beloved girlfriend, meticulously treating her as a patient merely, giving her great help and comfort (211).

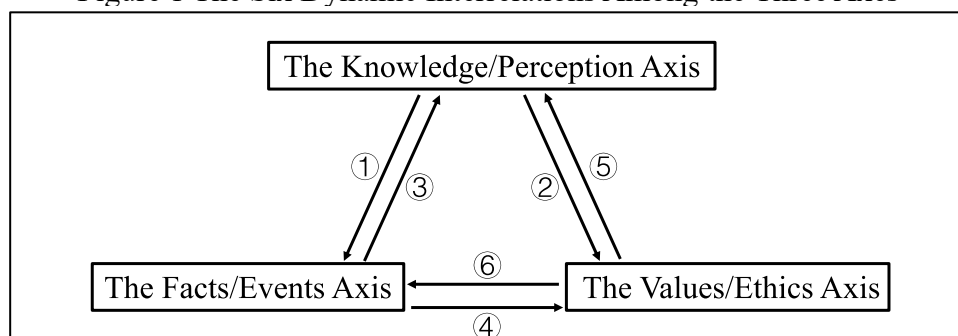
The implied author’s setting of such a complex character image and contradictory plot for Christine is not only possibly intended to guide readers toward misunderstandings or incorrect judgments for dramatic effect, thus adding complexity and multi-dimensionality to the narrative, but also likely aims to lead readers into a deeper contemplation, challenging their expectations and judgment, provoking a thorough discussion on human nature, memory, and authenticity. By revealing the complexity and uncertainty within the character’s inner self, emphasizing the intricacy and unpredictability of life, the story’s suspense and appeal are enhanced, as well as the literary depth and thoughtfulness of the work.

2.2.2 The Six Dynamic Interrelations Among the Three Axes

Although Phelan conceptualizes the three major axes as parallel, Shen Dan initially suggests the potential for the knowledge/perception axis to influence the facts/events axis. Delving deeper into Booth’s tri-axial theory uncovers not merely unidirectional

but reciprocal influences among these axes, crafting a more complex network. Considering all possible interactions necessitates the construction of a theoretical framework involving three axes and six pathways of relationship, as follows:

Figure 1 The Six Dynamic Interrelations Among the Three Axes



The first is the influence of the Knowledge/Perception Axis on the Facts/Events Axis. A narrator’s understanding of an event shapes their reporting, leading to possible omissions or inaccuracies. For instance, when Christine encounters a fabricated article by Mike about Adam’s death in Afghanistan, she truly recalls the experience of attending his funeral, complete with a medal, a coffin, and a flag.

I closed my eyes, and saw it then. A brief flash. An image, hanging in front of me, shimmering. A medal, given to me in a black velvet box. A coffin, a flag. I looked away from it, and prayed that it would never return. There are memories I am better off without. Things better lost for ever. (241-242)

Despite these strong mental images, subsequent diary entries and conversations reveal Adam is alive, indicating her vivid memories of Adam’s death were purely a product of her imagination. Rooted in her lack of accurate knowledge influenced by the false article and her cognitive distortions, this misinterpretation results in fictitious memories that confuse her perception of reality, in turn, influencing her narration of the fact of whether Adam was truly dead, thereby delivering false information to the readers, which corresponds with a comment made by the fictional Dr. Hilary Wilson in one of the diary entries on amnesiac patients’ “confabulation” that “things around them don’t seem to make sense, and so they feel compelled to invent details” (196).

This highlights how limitations in knowledge and perception can distort an individual's understanding and recounting of events, further emphasizing how unreliability in personal experience and internal cognitive processes can lead to misleading effects in event narratives.

The second is the influence of the Knowledge/Perception Axis on the Values/Ethics Axis. A narrator's knowledge and perception of an event can affect their value judgment and evaluation of that event. Christine, whose memory often stalls at her early twenties or even younger, subconsciously perceives herself in youthful vitality and full of feminine charm, so she feels embarrassed and flustered whenever Dr. Nash holds her hand, making her misinterpret Dr. Nash's later professional caring as a fondness for her, leading to a misguided advance of her boldly kissing him.

He put his hand on top of mine, where it lay on the desk between us. It felt heavy. Warm. He squeezed my fingers, and for a second I felt embarrassed, for him, and also for me...He seemed reluctant to make eye contact, instead leafing through the papers on his desk, shuffling awkwardly. At first I thought he was embarrassed about squeezing my hand... (79-80)

In truth, Dr. Nash's excessive attentiveness stems from a mix of sympathy for her condition and his academic interest in her amnesia, not romantic feelings. His actions, meant as a young doctor's compassion and comfort to an older patient, are misconstrued due to Christine's cognitive bias, which locks her self-image in a younger, more attractive phase of her life. This discrepancy skews her interpretation of Dr. Nash's intentions, turning compassionate professional care into perceived personal affection. This scenario illustrates how one's knowledge and perception significantly influence value judgments and evaluations, demonstrating the complex relationship between self-perception, cognition, and the interpretation of others' actions.

The third is the influence of the Facts/Events Axis on the Knowledge/Perception Axis.

A narrator's misinterpretation of events can affect their knowledge and perception of related situations. Mike's recount of their supposed romantic beginnings of encounter and marriage—meeting in a university library with accidentally spilling coffee and proposing with a ring hidden in soap—evokes sadness in Christine for not remembering their love tale.

I could not, and felt the hot stab of sadness. I imagined how every couple must love the story of how they met — who first spoke to who, what was said — yet I have no recollection of ours. The wind whipped the tail of the little boy's kite; a sound like a death rattle. (58)

Despite her yearning for these shared memories, the truth diverges sharply. Their actual encounter occurred post-marriage to real Ben during a life phase marked by mundanity and creative stagnation, not the idyllic university setting Mike fabricates. Their affair, far from the depicted romance, was cloaked in secrecy and moral dilemma, fraught with conflict and struggle, intertwining betrayal's thrill with guilt towards her husband and child. This distortion skews Christine's perception of their relationship's nature, imbuing her with undue nostalgia and affection for a nonexistent past. This scenario underscores how factual misinterpretations profoundly affect one's cognitive and emotional landscape, altering relationship valuations and emotional response based on fictionalized event.

The fourth is the influence of the Facts/Events Axis on the Values/Ethics Axis. Narrators' misinterpretation of events can affect their value judgments about those events. Upon interacting with Claire and reading real Ben's letter, Christine discovers her own past unfaithfulness, so given recent performance of "Ben", she perceives him as forgiving, nurturing post-accident, enduring repeated queries and silently bearing the anguish of Adam's death. She rationalized all the reasons why the "Ben" in the diary was full of lies, discrepancies, inconsistent words and deeds.

He has not told me about the novel I wrote so that I will not be devastated by the fact that

I will never write another. He has been telling me my best friend moved away to protect me from the fact that the two of them betrayed me. Because he didn't trust me to love them both far too much to not forgive them. He has been telling me that I was hit by a car, that this was an accident, so that I don't have to deal with the fact that I was attacked and what happened to me was the result of a deliberate act of ferocious hatred. He has been telling me that we never had children, not only to protect me from the knowledge that my only son is dead, but to protect me, too, from having to deal with the grief of his death every single day of my life. (282)

Driven by profound guilt and a yearning to atone, she resolves to fully open up to the "husband" who was about to return and to rebuild a loving home with him, utterly convinced of his love for her. However, the reality is that Mike, posing as "Ben" after taking her from the psychiatric hospital a few months ago, not the devoted caregiver she imagines, has been manipulating and deceiving her only to prevent her from recalling that the real reason for her amnesia was his attack, making her more compliant to his vengeful desires and need for control. Stemming from the incorrect reporting of the events, Christine formed a positive evaluation of Mike, demonstrating how event misinterpretations can skew characters' value assessments, showcasing the intricate effects of unreliable narration on character psychology and emotional dynamics.

The fifth is the influence of the Values/Ethics Axis on the Knowledge/Perception Axis. A narrator's values and standards of judgment can affect their perception and understanding of information. For an amnesiac, any sense of contradiction and fear should trigger self-defense and vigilance mechanisms. Yet, after reading her journal minus the last few critical days, her gratitude and love for "Ben" reached the same peak as it had a week before thus overshadowing suspicion, despite blatant warning signs. Her wrong appreciation for "Ben" blinded her to inconsistencies, convincing herself not to escape and that "I have come here to be reconciled with him" and "I am

safe with Ben”, a prime opportunity lost (304).

The absence of an entire week’s entries, contrasting handwriting on the whiteboard and on the genuine letter from Ben, “Ben’s” altered behavior, and the intuitive fear of the room “Ben” brought her to incredibly failed to alert her, as her value judgments clouded her perception.

In a single rush I see it all, realize why the board in the kitchen so disturbed me. The handwriting. Its neat, even capitals looked totally different from the scrawl of the letter Claire had given me. Somewhere, deep down, I had known then that they were not written by the same person. (334)

It is then that it hits me, finally, properly. How else could he have known about this room, about so much of my past? (342)

It was only until trapped in a hotel room, the site of her past trauma, that Christine fully grasped the deceit and then had multiple epiphanies, reflecting and reinterpreting the actual situation deeply and properly. Her emotional valuation of “Ben” led to selective perception, acceptance, and events narration, ignoring intuitive fears and warning signals, thereby reducing internal conflict and anxiety. This psychological mechanism, based on her erroneous evaluation of “Ben,” further exacerbated biases in knowledge and perception, leading to a series of decisions based on incorrect information and judgments.

The sixth is the influence of the Values/Ethics Axis on the Facts/Events Axis. A narrator’s value judgments can influence which events they choose to report and how they report them. Owing to the positive image she had built up for him, when she discovered that he had deliberately hidden the fact that she had once written and successfully published a book, even lying about it as she inquired, instead of doubting “Ben,” she self-brainwashed herself into imagining that “Ben” moved those books to spare her from the despair of not being able to match her past success.

I had remembered us...murmuring our love for each other...No wonder Ben might want to hide it from me. I picture him now, removing all the copies, burning them in the metal barbecue on the back porch, before deciding what to tell me. How best to reinvent my past to make it tolerable. (96-97)

In truth, “Ben” aimed to keep her weak and dependent, yet Christine, due to her emotional trust and fragmented memory, constructed a narrative of scenario rationalizing his lies as protection. This misjudgment severely affected her ability to accurately perceive her situation and the events around her, causing her to selectively interpret events to align with her positive evaluation of “Ben,” obscuring the reality of her situation. It demonstrates the complexity of unreliable narration under the influence of personal values and judgments.

In summary, this multidimensional interaction emphasizes the increased complexity in the narrative process, not merely limited to the relationship between the narrator and the facts, but involving a composite network of knowledge, perception, value judgments, and fact understanding. This intricate interaction offers a more detailed and nuanced framework for analyzing unreliable narration and potential insights into narrative theory. Thus, these three axes are intertwined, jointly determining the reliability of narration and the complexity of interpretation, highlighting the multidimensional nature of storytelling.

2.3 Nested Unreliability—“Higher-order Unreliability”

Traditionally, rhetorical studies of unreliable narration typically concentrate on the text created by the implied author, the subjective or objective reasons why the narrator produces such bias or erroneous narration, and the impact of these factors on story presentation and reader comprehension. This process from narration to reception typically generates only one to two transmissions of information, focusing mainly on

the direct reliability issue of a single narrator and their narrative, while in the novel, Christine's narrative form embodies a complex path of unreliability transmission, manifesting a mathematically progressive structure of unreliability, which stems not only from the traditional subjectivity of the narrator but also from the continuous accumulation of errors in the multiple stages of transmission and reconstruction, leading to a layer-by-layer decrease in the authenticity and credibility of the narrative.

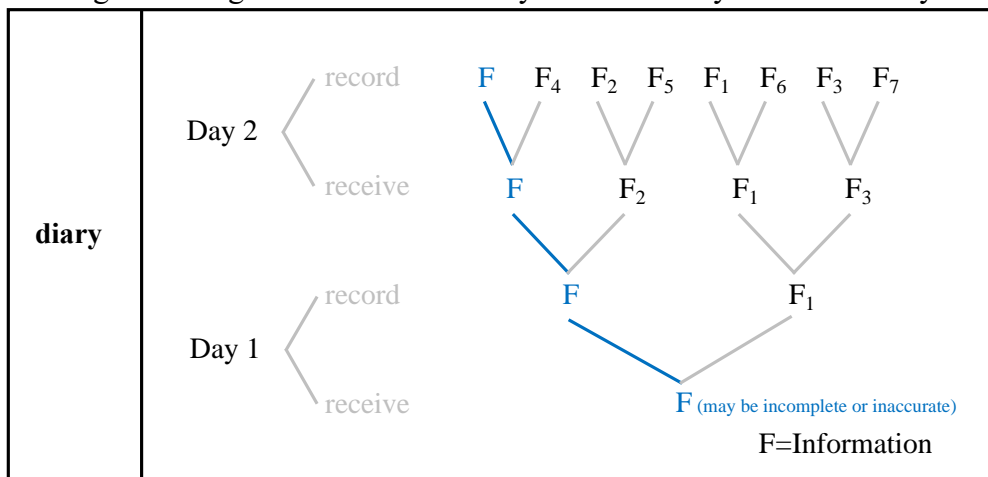
To understand this phenomenon, the mathematical concept of "higher-order" is introduced, originating from mathematics and logic to describe complex structures surpassing basic operations, functions, or theories. In these fields, "higher-order" involves advanced abstraction levels, like in mathematics where it pertains to deriving derivatives of derivatives or in logic where it involves propositions about propositions themselves, allowing for deeper abstraction and reasoning. The core of higher-order theory is its capacity to handle and explain phenomena and structures more complex than the basic level, by integrating new dimensions or levels into existing frameworks to uncover deeper structures and principles. This approach unveils underlying rules and connections through surface phenomena, providing an effective tool for analyzing and understanding complex systems in research.

Applying "higher-order" to literary analysis allows us to dissect narrative structures and narrators' reliability, especially amidst intricate narrative strategies and multi-level perspectives. For instance, in a novel, the narrator may review and narrate past events through diaries, letters, or other textual forms. These texts themselves constitute one layer of narrative, while the narrator's current interpretation and reaction add another layer of narrative. If the information in these diaries or letters contains misinformation or omissions, then the narrator's understanding and expression when interpreting this information will also be affected, thereby affecting the reader's understanding of the story. In summary, this unreliability, triggered by the unreliability of narrator's direct description within the text, further complicated

intensified at a deeper level by the narrator's re-narration and re-interpretation, significantly increases the complexity of the narrative, as readers need to reinterpret the texts referenced and interpreted by the narrator while understanding the narrator's current narrative, which the writer of the thesis call it "higher-order unreliability."

Therefore, when we analyze Christine as a narrator in *Before I Go to Sleep*, we can sense a kind of nested unreliability. Due to her character setup of losing her memory every day, her narration naturally possesses fragmentation and uncertainty. Diaries, as tools for her to record and retrieve memories, require her to undergo a repetitive cycle of receiving information—recording information—receiving information again—recording information again. From her perspective, assuming "I" lose my memory on day 0, start receiving and recording information on day 1, read the information from day 1 and record it for day 2, and continue on day 3... Based on this, we can find: First, when the cognitively impaired "I" on day 1 receives information based on outsiders and her limited understanding, it might be incomplete or inaccurate. Second, when "I" on day 1 records information, it might be selectively recorded or misunderstood due to the emotions, cognitive limitations, or other motives at that time, creating a second layer of unreliability. After all, "I" on day 2, as a reader, is reading about "her" from yesterday from a third-person perspective, unable to judge yesterday's "her" motives, thus unable to trust yesterday's "her" reliability. For example, due to guilt towards others, one might beautify their actions, or maliciously hide some facts known internally, which we have mentioned in the previous section. Third, when "I" on day 2 as a reader again receives information, that is, reads the diary, there will be a new third layer of errors due to the trust barrier between the information left by yesterday's narrator and "my" reception of information, and again leave information today that will be questioned by "I" tomorrow. This cycle repeats, making the unreliability of narration exhibit a layered, complex, and nested escalating characteristic.

Figure 2 “Higher-order Unreliability”—Transitivity of Unreliability



For her, reading the diary each time feels like peeking into someone’s privacy. “I felt nervous, excited. It felt like snooping, but on myself” (52). In fact, based on this natural fragmentation caused by memory, we can consider each day’s Christine as a new person, since from receiving information to the narrator retelling it multiple times to passing it to the reader, the story telling has gone through many unreliable narrators “Christine.” As she thought:

I stared at the photograph...thought about how much I share with her. But all of it is physical. Cells and tissue. DNA. Our chemical signature. But nothing else. She is a stranger. There is nothing linking her to me, no means to thread my way back to her.
(240-241)

Consequently, the path of information acquisition becomes excessively long and passes through “many hands”, creating a multifaceted and complex web of unreliability rather than a simple layer, akin to a telephone game—passing information, where inevitable differences arise from the first person to the last.

The application of “higher-order unreliability” in *Before I Go to Sleep* provides us with a new perspective for understanding unreliable narration in specific literary works, offering new tools and frameworks for literary theory and criticism. First, it extends from the subjectivity of a single narrator to multiple levels of self-information processing and individual psychological cognition, emphasizing the

multidimensionality and multilevel nature of unreliability in narration, suggesting we need to consider the interplay between different textual levels in the narrative. Moreover, its analysis further develops the rhetorical research approach. The reliability of the information provided by the narrator, the narrator's own motives, and the process by which the reader within the book (i.e., the "I" in the book) receives and understands this information are all focal points of rhetorical methods, that is, how the text uses narrative strategies to influence the reader's understanding and perception.

Chapter 3 Exploring Loss and Awakening Through Unreliable

Narration

Unreliable narration serves not merely as a narrative technique but as a window through which the complexities and contradictions of human nature are revealed. This chapter is devoted to how unreliable narration can expose the deep-seated themes of loss and awakening, alongside the intricate interplay of memory and identity within novels. By examining the “repetition” inherent in daily life, we uncover the narrative paths through which characters become lost amidst temptations and find awakening in self-redemption, thereby enriching our understanding of memory’s pivotal role in constructing individual identity. On one hand, the once Christine, lost herself and committed erroneous acts amidst the dreariness of daily existence. On the other hand, post-amnesia Christine, once again shattered the loop of memory by breaking the cycle of repetitive daily life, reclaiming her identity.

3.1 Loss in “Repetition”

Family-wise, Christine and her husband shared a profound love, blessed with a lively and adorable newborn son. In the realm of friendship, her bond with Claire, a long-standing friend with shared interests, allowed for unreserved communication. Professionally, both were accomplished, with Christine achieving her youthful aspiration of publishing her debut novel. Despite this, her quest for excitement led to professional ruin, familial disintegration, and estrangement from friends. On the surface, what we see is that Christine inconceivably rebelled against an ideal life, but upon deeper contemplation, we can uncover more hidden psychological motives.

I tried to picture myself, arguing with Ben, looking after a baby, trying to write. I imagined bottles of milk, or Adam at my breast. Dirty nappies. Mornings in which

getting both myself and my baby fed were the only ambitions I could reasonably have, and afternoons in which I was so exhausted the only thing I craved was sleep – sleep that was still hours away – and the thought of trying to write was pushed far from my mind. I could see it all, and feel the slow, burning resentment. (267)

From this text, we can infer the likelihood of her experiencing postpartum depression to some degree. Following Adam's birth, her romantic fervor with Ben dimmed progressively, and was riddled with anxiety over failing to connect with Adam. Subjectively deemed her husband's absence of parental involvement, she found herself beleaguered by tormented by the trivialities of nursing and diaper changing to the brink of exhaustion, and as a writer she even could no longer focus on writing, becoming less like herself day by day amidst the repetitive drudgery of a housewife's life. Consequently, she became disillusioned with this static existence, since stability was never her pursuit; instead, she yearned for change and thrill. Claire said about her, "We had fun at university, you know? But no more than most. And once you met Ben that stopped. You were always faithful to him" (271). Despite the daily nuances, she perceived this lifestyle as fundamentally oppressive to herself. Engaging in erroneous acts, she perhaps subconsciously revolted against life's tedium, seeking to disrupt the cycle of monotony. Gilles Deleuze's *Logique du sens* outlines two repetition theories: "only that which resembles itself differs" and "only differences resemble one another", signifying two distinct worldviews, which Miller defines as "Platonic repetition" and "Nietzschean repetition" (Miller 1982: 5). The former focuses on similarity and consistency, the unchanging within change, whereas the latter emphasizes transformation and diversity, the change within the unchanging. Through the lens of Platonic repetition, this life's cyclicity mirrors an unvarying emulation of an ideal state yet neglects the individual's inner needs for diversity and change, culminating in a disconnection from self-identity.

Christine's past of self-loss is gradually unveiled through the exploration and

recollection of the unreliable narrator. Through the eyes of the unreliable narrator, we see the deeper causes and motives behind the betrayal and infidelity. This mode of narration places the reader in a world full of uncertainties and blurred moral boundaries, prompting reflections on modern interpersonal relationships and social values. In fact, the unreliability of the narrator is to some extent caused by her loss, and her unreliability precisely reflects her confusion and struggle. Christine's unstable narration allows readers to experience disorientation alongside her, simulating the sensation of floundering, perplexity, and helplessness in life. As readers endeavor to unravel the truth, they confront doubts, hesitations, and fears akin to Christine's, echoing the post-traumatic state faced by individuals after unexpected accidents and identity crises.

3.2 Struggle and Awakening in "Repetition"

Furthermore, post-amnesia Christine, is forced to explore and rebuild herself amidst the repeated lies. Before she started writing a diary, she woke up each day in panic, puzzled by lying next to a stranger, then seeing photos and information on the mirror unable to accept the reality, then within the day slowly accepting reality under "Ben's" persuasion, spending the day in a daze, and sleeping with unease. The next morning, as if entering a loop of time and cycle, she repeats these events. Even though she attempts to explore her past within the day, it's like a futile struggle, with all efforts vanishing the next day. Just as Sisyphus repetitively pushes the boulder up the hill, Christine seems to have fallen into a Sisyphean punishment. Psychologically, her time flow stopped on the day she was attacked, while spatially trapped in a non-home dangerous location, a psychiatric hospital, later in Mike's house. Towards the end of the story, as Mike burns the diary in front of Christine, one can imagine if she wasn't rescued, even if Mike didn't kill her, she would have returned to a state of being someone else's pet several weeks ago without self-identity. In her narration, the

inability to accept her current situation and the questioning of self frequently appear, suggesting a modern life's tragic metaphor in this fast-paced and uncertain era, where individuals face inescapable predicaments, feeling lost and powerless, with the meaning of life gradually dissolving in loss if unable to establish self-identity and self-connection.

However, as she grapples with repetition, the diary enters her life, serving as a testament to the continuity of identity akin to the tethering of Theseus' ship. This seemingly despairing repetition transforms into the inception of her self-redemption and awakening. Each day's reading of the diary and new discoveries are her attempts to break the memory cycle and rebuild herself. Although this process is formally repetitive, each experience and understanding are filled with differences, as her interpretation of information and emotional responses also continually change. It is this unreliability that tears the veneer of repetition, guiding her to delve into the truth, ultimately finding her true self. This difference in repetition embodies the discontinuity and heterogeneity of Nietzschean repetition. In this process of awakening, the unreliability not only shows Christine's internal changes but also reflects the profound theme of progress in self-doubt, finding hope in despair, and seeking self-redemption in the face of adversity.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

As a burgeoning writer in contemporary psychological thriller novels, S.J. Watson excels in reflecting the complexities of human psychology and nature through adept narrative techniques. Rendering an immersive atmosphere of suspense, *Before I Go to Sleep* portrays Christine's quest for self-discovery and truth amidst constantly overlaid memories through her perspective, showcasing a unique allure of unreliable narration. While prior analyses have touched upon themes and linguistic employment, they've not expounded upon the intricate layers of unreliable narration. Through meticulous textual analysis and rhetorical research approach, this thesis reveals the multifaceted roles of unreliable narration in the novel, innovatively proposing the interplay among the three axes and the concept of "higher-order unreliability," thus further pioneering development of the rhetorical analysis dimension in the field of narrative studies, shedding light on memory's significance and metaphors of being lost and awakening in the mundane complexities of modern life.

Initially, the paper outlines three narrative characteristics associated with unreliable narration: nested narrative structure, first-person perspective, and diary format. Employing rhetorical methods, it then analyzes manifestations of unreliability from the implied author and Phelan's three axes theory, subsequently innovatively developing six dynamic relationships among these three axes to unveil its complexity more profoundly. Furthermore, by introducing "higher-order" mathematical concepts into literary theory, it explores the concept of "higher-order unreliability," namely the transitivity and multi-dimensionality of unreliability in the story. Finally, the intertwining themes of being lost and awakening, memory, and identity in the novel are further revealed through the unreliable narration in the metaphor of modern life of "repetition".

While the three axes' interrelations and nested "higher-order unreliability" proposed

in this paper based on rhetorical research methodology represent significant progress in understanding Watson's adoption of complex narrative strategies, it must be acknowledged that, owing to the innate character of narrative discourse, there are limitations to applying this theory extensively and comprehensively to explain this aspect. Additionally, despite the research providing exploration of the interaction between narrative unreliability and reader engagement to a certain extent, further research is warranted to comprehensively understand the interaction between readers' reading mechanisms and the text from the perspectives of cognitive (constructivist) research methods and cognitive psychology.

Hopefully, a more nuanced exploration of unreliable narration, not only within Watson's novels but also across a broader literary landscape, adopting interdisciplinary approaches, will deepen our understanding of narrative techniques' potential, urging scholars, critics, and readers to interactively explore the fascinating labyrinth of unreliable narration through perspectives such as cognitive psychology, narrative theory, and philosophy.

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