

# Analysis of *The Story of Your Life* From the Perspective of Deconstruction

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Received: September 25, 2022

Accepted: November 9, 2022

Online Published: November 23, 2022

doi:10.5539/ells.v12n4p59

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v12n4p59>

*Program: A Study of Humanistic Ideas in Chinese-American Science Fiction Literature (NMDSS2169).*

## Abstract

The growth of Western science fiction steadily slowed down after the last century's "Golden Age", but the emergence of Chinese-American science fiction writers has given the genre fresh life. This study investigates the deconstruction of Anti-Logocentrism and binary oppositions in the famous science fiction *The Story Of Your Life* by Chinese American author Ted Chiang applying Derrida's deconstructionist theories as a theoretical framework. First, the paper analyses the traditional relationship between the self and others in terms of the attitude toward aliens; the author's deconstruction of the conventional male-female interaction is then analyzed in light of the work's depiction of the heroine, and the author's analysis of the conventional cause-and-effect relationship follows. Based on above, the paper reveals Ted Chiang's intention to create a just and peaceful society in the book, providing readers with a fresh perspective on how to understand it.

**Keywords:** deconstruction, Ted Chiang, Chinese American Sci-Fi, *The Story Of Your Life*

## 1. Introduction

One of the most well-known Chinese American science fiction authors in modern America is Ted Chiang. He has won practically all of the American science fiction awards with his few works, including the Hugo and Nebula. The science fiction film *Arrival*, which is based on the novella *The Story of Your Life*, has generated a lot of conversation about the book because of the variety and depth of its topics. The novella is undoubtedly Ted Chiang's best-known work.

Lu Hongchen, for instance, analyzes *The Story of Your Life* from a philosophical standpoint, and contends that temporality, causality, and relativity are crucial to how humans comprehend the universe; Yu Ying explores Ted Chiang's oriental plot and attachment to oriental culture in *The Story of Your Life* by interpreting the metaphors in this novel, reflecting the author's struggle and reflection between his Chinese and American identities; Wang Yuyan analyses the narrative features of *The Story of Your Life* from the perspective of chaos theory, holding that the novel seems to have a disordered narrative, but actually implies order; Ge Xiaoshi thinks that the incompatibility between the alien and the human in *The Story of Your Life* is a metaphor for the conflict and integration between Eastern and Western civilizations, and discusses the unique narrative logic of the novel. As a novel with a high degree of integration of philosophy and art, the deconstructionist features embedded in *The Story of Your Life* offer the possibility of multiple interpretations of the novel and are worthy of study and exploration, while direct application of deconstructionist theory to interpret the work is rare.

Traditional philosophical structuralism sees cultures as a structure of interrelationships, which always contains dichotomies, such as fat and thin, beautiful and ugly, and in this dichotomy the relationship between the two is often not equal. Deconstructionism, however, believes that there is no opposition in both the subjective and objective worlds, but just has its own characteristics. Deconstructionism rejects 'binary oppositions' and logocentrism, and advocates discrepancy and pluralism out to be remained. These fundamental philosophical positions have profound academic and practical implications for the reading of the novel. The dissolution of the dichotomy between self and other, the subversion of the traditional image of women, and the deconstruction of causality all reflect the core ideas of deconstructionist theory.

## 2. The Elimination of Cognitive Barriers Between Self and Others

From the macroscopic perspective of the universe, the whole planet can be seen as a global village of interdependence. In contrast to the “self” of the Earth, the whole of outer space beyond the Earth belongs to a different place, and any creature that exists in outer space is the “other”. The concept of the “other” is extremely important in the field of foreign cultural studies. It has been defined by various experts and scholars in different fields, such as literature, philosophy, figuration and other areas. The “other” is a concept of interrelationship and is an antagonistic relationship between “subject” and “object”. The “other” is a concept formed in relation to the “self” and refers to all persons and things outside the self. Whatever exists outside the self, in whatever form it appears, visible or invisible, perceptible or imperceptible, can be called the “other”. In addition, according to French academic Régis Dibois, the term “other” refers to something that is “different from oneself”, or in other words, anyone or anything but me.

### 2.1 *The Traditional Binary Opposition Between Self and Others*

One of the prominent features of the traditional dualist framework is the extreme exclusion and distinction by which an either-or split is created, the continuity and relevance of the duality is erased and the differences between them is enlarged in order to maintain the permanence and stability of the hierarchy, and the dichotomy between self and other becomes one of the focal points of the dualism. With this mode of thinking, an insurmountable gap has gradually formed between the human “self” and the alien “other” under the dualism, to the extent that humans on Earth are completely different from any other creatures on the alien planet. In the face of aliens, humans also fell into the fence of anthropocentrism, defied itself as a ruling tool, and formed a personal identity that was neglected from other creatures (Chen, 2020, p. 48).

The worldview setting of science fiction writer offers the essential foundation for the production of science fiction stories, while the science fiction imagination is primarily portrayed in the novels through the characters and their activities. Through research and analysis, we find it easy to discover that the worldview, which is embodied in Western science fiction works represented by the United States frequently, has a strong confrontation, particularly there are frequent confrontations and irreconcilable conflicts between alien species and humans on Earth. Ted Chiang, as the main force of the new generation of science fiction, one of the characteristics of his works is the strong rebelliousness, which is a new philosophical view rarely found in other works.

The term “other” typically refers to aliens in conventional science fiction works. These entities frequently take on a range of frightening shapes and looks and evoke a fear of the unknown in humans. For instance, they are shown as towering and nimble creatures with long, narrow heads, razor-sharp claws, and long, spiky tails in the classic science fiction film *Alien*. They have a strong tongue that is quite aggressive, and their mouths are frequently full with unpleasant saliva. In addition, the aliens in the film *Independence Day* display an astonishing technology and military might; they blow up buildings, refuse to speak, engage in negotiations, and even make threats to wipe out the human being.

### 2.2 *The Elimination of Cognitive Barriers in The Story of Your Life*

The aliens in the science fiction *The Story of Your Life*, however, are not the conventionally hostile and aggressive aliens; instead, they are polite, friendly, and their relationship with humans is no longer aggressive. Although the extraterrestrial called “Heptapod” has an odd look, it is not hostile in the book; To decipher the aliens’ language, human linguists represented by Louise and physicists, had to interact frequently with the “Heptapods”. Even when humans feel clueless and difficult, two aliens are still waiting patiently for the human to continue to talk. “Heptapods were completely cooperative and they were anxious to teach us their language, but they never asked us to teach them more English” (Ted, 2015, p. 22). Even Colonel Weber feared to leak information about humans to the aliens, and the soldiers who represented him were puzzled by this. The “Heptapod” did not exhibit their mysterious and advanced scientific technology and don’t exert any terrible effects on humans. Even in the process of communication with human beings, the aliens are warm-hearted. “Although Heptapods was clear about the result, they still keep ardent as usual and played a positive part” (Ted, 2015, p. 60). In addition, the attitudes of humans and aliens towards each other have also formed a sharp contrast. The human government ordered linguists and scientists to divulge as little information about human society as possible to prevent the aliens from using the information gained to threaten the humans in future negotiations, and Louise did as she was ordered and found it easy to comply because “Heptapods didn’t ask us anything at all” (Ted, 2015, p. 32). In the book, the author Ted Chiang utilizes the protagonist Louise’s mouth to express his views on extraterrestrial species: the interaction between humans and aliens need not be antagonistic, and it is not always the case that what they gain is also what we lose. This so-called non-zero-sum game can result in

winners on both sides if handled appropriately.

“Binary oppositions” always has been attacked by Deconstructionists and “logocentrism” enjoys dividing ideas or dimensions into oppositional pairs, such as “self” and “other” or the adult and the children, etc. The underlying purpose of “Binary oppositions” is to emphasize the one of the two and regards one side as the dominant “center”. Scholars and philosophers from the postmodernist school have tried hard to understand this phenomenon. Science fiction writer Ted Chiang is no exception, as his exploration of the relationship between the human “self” and the alien “other” highlights the rejection and deconstruction of central, dominant, authoritative, ruling and hierarchical cultures. These dominant oppositional cultures are based on the denial and rejection of equality, not only between the “self” and the “other”, but also those disadvantaged groups who are considered to be “other”. The difference between the “self” and the “other” is alienated and distorted, and it becomes the cornerstone that a discursive and powerful group devalues and alienates the disadvantaged. Therefore, in building a harmonious and equal relationship between the “self” and the “other”, Ted Chiang expresses a new idea for difference and a recognition of relevance in the novel, which is actually a call for diversity and multiculturalism.

In traditional science novels, the humans are the enemy of aliens and the conflicts of them are irreconcilable. In contrast, the novel interprets the relationships of humans and aliens from a novel respect, where it advocates to observe aliens in a universal perspective rather than consider them an opponent of humans. The story is constructed from the perspective of goodness, seeking to convert hostile situation, establishing a benignant, mutually beneficial rapport and realizing a scene of harmonious coexistence in the truest sense of the word.

### **3. The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Female Image**

Behind the culture lies a strong hand veiled by the gender system of the society. While we cannot resist our biological gender, social gender is not innate; rather, it is an acquired formation that is influenced by certain social customs and social expectations, thus forming different behavioral characteristics of men and women. This division of male and female has been emphasized throughout history in all societies and cultures. In male-dominated societies, women are often placed in a position of domination and control by men, even objectified and looked down upon by men, and are seen as subordinate to men in social relations. In science fiction written by traditionally male authors, men are often the deciders of discursive power and language construction, but the female community is not given enough attention and women are unable to air their voice for themselves.

As Beauvoir mentions in her book, women are not born women; a woman’s sense of identity is bound up with the needs of men, so that women cannot think for themselves and are not given ‘social meaning’ in this social atmosphere. All this is not innate, but imposed on women by the cultural institutions and ideas of society, and women themselves cease to be women themselves.

#### *3.1 Strong Thinking and Excellent Execution*

As one of Ted Chiang’s classic female characters, Louise is characterized by a multiplicity of traits, with her “androgyny” feature fleshing her out and making her more complex to interpret. On the one hand, Louise is a strong thinker and an excellent performer, which distinguishes her from the traditional submissive female characters; on the other hand, she has a positive attitude and a strong will, which contrasts with the weak and flighty male figures. In this novel, Louise displays qualities that are so distinctive in a society where women didn’t be given enough attention, and her irreplaceability and initiative in all respects break the existence of women as a marginal group.

Louise is completely different from traditional sensitive women. Her strong thinking and learning ability, rigorous and serious work attitude, and quick and decisive execution are the subversion of women’s position in others.

At the beginning of the story, it is clear from the conversation with Colonel Weber that he is always suspicious and dismissive of Louise because he feels that she is not capable of deciphering the complex, clueless alien language. That women are sensitive and less capable of working than men and this idea is Colonel Weber’s own imagination of women, and behind this behaviour is a subconscious belief that women are weaker than men. The irony of this obviously prejudiced conversation is even more ridiculous against the backdrop of Louise’s great capacity for thinking and learning language. In this novel, Louise is not significantly different from Colonel Weber and physicist Gary in many ways, including education, thinking ability and agility, and even has a greater capacity for learning than men, but lacks a platform and an opportunity to show herself, and the arrival of the alien “Heptapods” is the perfect opportunity. As a PhD in linguistics, her day job is to study human language, but

then an alien ship arrives on Earth. The aliens don't understand human language, and humans can't communicate with them. In this situation, the military, represented by Colonel Weber, approached Louise and could only ask for her help, hoping that she could take on the job of translating the alien language. So, Louise found her own stage, and her abilities were maximized. She led a group of linguists and scientists to decipher the "Heptapods" language, even took the lead in mastering it and communicated with it, while physicist Gary was her assistant, following her instructions and assisting her in her work. Moreover, during the time she worked in the barracks, her status and treatment were the same as other men or even better than them. Here, women become an independent group and are no longer a secondary social role. Louise's strong work ethic clearly shatters this prejudiced male image of women as weak.

During the initial conversation, Colonel Weber was reluctant to tell Louise about the aliens, and even when Louise asked for information about the recording, he did not hesitate to say "I am not authorized to disclose that information." "What I can offer you is this recording" (Ted, 2015, p. 5). The implication was that he was afraid that Louise would reveal the secrets of the aliens, either out of indiscipline or curiosity, and that subconsciously he did not believe that Louise has a serious attitude to her work. However, the truth was that Louise had been concentrating on deciphering the language of the aliens and had never revealed a single word about them to anyone, despite all the rumours that had been circulating.

In addition, Louise's quick and decisive execution should not be overlooked. After the initial encounter with the "Heptapods", things did not go very well because of the huge difference in thinking and language between the two sides, and because it was the first time that humans had come into contact with aliens. But instead of complaining and hesitating, Louise kept her wits and decisively suggested to her superiors about the use of more equipment after analysing the situation, which made a great contribution to the smooth development of the translation work. No matter how difficult the task or how mean her superiors were, she always kept her head, controlled the situation to the best of her ability and moved the work forward, and her strong heart and resilience were evident. It can be seen that Louise is the real leader. It is Louise's strong sense of subjectivity that overturns the image of women in a patriarchal society and shatters the stereotype of women as the "other".

### 3.2 *The Positive Mindset and Strong Willpower*

The novel also has another plot, in which Dr. Louise shares memories with her daughter besides the linguist's conversation with the Heptapod. When Louise has the power to see into the future, she predicts that she would be stay with her beloved and that her daughter would pass away while mountain climbing. However, even as Louise learns that, her husband is still unable to handle it and decides to leave. Her life's narrative was presented to her. She displayed a strong spirit of living until the death, knowing that her life would end in a specific way but always staying put and not doing anything that she would later regret. After learning her awful fate, she did not feel gloomy, lost all hope, or spent her days in tears. This courageous, rash lady not only challenges the conventional view of women, but also contrasts her with the husband who flees the conflict, which emphasizes the autonomous and egalitarian gender consciousness of American women in the post-feminist period and challenging the conventional view of women (Chen, 2020, p. 52).

The deconstructionists, who are represented by Derrida, hold the strategies of "to eliminate center" and "to interpret subject" that overturn traditional social order featured by male-dominated. Deconstructionism constructs a world in which there is no absolute dominance and all people are equal. The deconstruction is evident in Ted Chiang's novels, which reflects his more free-spirited and bold writing style. For example, Louise, a woman in his novel, is equal to men in diverse aspects, and she is even in a critical position to a certain degree. The author does not look at the world and women from a traditionally male perspective, and this way of framing itself is a revolution. The subversive reshaping of the traditional image of women in *The Story of Your Life*, which breaks the traditional vulnerable image of women stuck in the popular impression, has a strong rebellious authoritarian character, which precisely reflected author's sense of deconstruction.

## 4. Deconstruction of Traditional Causality

Although there are many different types of world theories, they may be essentially categorized into two groups: cause theories and consequence theories. Socrates, a well-known philosopher, first presented the cause-and-effect hypothesis. He believed that all things do not arise and develop by chance, but have their corresponding causes. It is generally accepted that there are objective links between phenomena in the material world and that one phenomenon is necessarily caused by another or some phenomena, leading to the emergence of one or some new phenomena. Thus, what causes a phenomenon is the cause and what produces it is the effect. Cause and effect exist objectively in the movement and change of the material world (Huo, 2021, p. 135).

In the case of seasonal changes and earth's movement, the earth rotation was considered as the cause, while the

movement of earth results in their changes in the traditional way of thinking (Wang, 2018, p. 116).

#### *4.1 The Deconstruction of the Causal Linear Character*

In addition, time is often considered as a necessary condition for causality, which cannot exist without the continuity of time. Causality exists as a process, where the cause precedes and its effect follows. In this process, the cause and the effects are considered as the beginning and the end respectively. As a result, people in the past contend the transformation from cause to effect must occur under time, and time is an essential prerequisite for the process of causation (Gao, 1995, p. 10).

Ted Chiang, however, deviates from the norm. It is difficult to understand the novel because the author abandons the conventional linear style of thinking and there is no causal relationship between the events in the work. In Louise's own words, when she mastered the "Heptapod" writing rule, she began to think in a different way, that is, "causes and effects are no longer independent, but interconnected, influenced by each other and inseparable". Under the influence of this new thinking, Louise began to feel that there was no necessary order between ideas, and certainly no so-called "chain of thought". No one notion gets primacy in her mental process since all factors are equally important. The "Heptapods" in the book are able to observe all occurrences simultaneously, and there are no distinctions between the past, present, and future in their view. The distinctive quality of Ted Chiang's invention is this non-linear method of thinking, where there is no sequential order in terms of cause and consequence. The linear qualities of causation in conventional philosophy are deconstructed and subverted by this way of thinking.

#### *4.2 The Deconstruction of the Relation of Necessity*

In addition, Ted Chiang also introduced the "Fermat's law of least time", which simply means that light will be refracted when it passes through water, and the path of light must be the least time-consuming one. From the viewpoint of human traditional causality, because the refractive index of air and water are different, light changes its path. While in the Heptapod's view, the reason why light changes its path is to minimize the time it takes to reach its destination. Humans and the "Heptapod" have developed entirely distinct theories in response to the same objective fact, but they are not conflicting with each other. The awareness of humans are sequential while "Heptapod" are completely different from us in that they are synchronous modes of consciousness. We perceive the various types of events sequentially in temporal or spatial order and see their relationship as cause and effect, but the "Heptapod" perceives all things at the same time and understands them in such a way that all events have a purpose, except for a minimal and maximal objective. It is incredibly difficult for both sides to comprehend one another, as a result of this fundamental difference, and they may even drift apart on the path of temptation. The "Heptapod" leave for no cause, and from the beginning to the conclusion, their stay has no rationale, and probably no explanation at all, despite humans' repeated attempts to learn the reason for the aliens' visit to Earth in the book.

There is no doubt that the belief that free will and the future are not unrelated, but that a causal relationship exists, that is, that choices made today will determine how things turn out tomorrow. However, compared with humans, "Heptapod" argues distinct thinking pattern where free will and the future don't exist at all. Dualistic thinking permeates every aspect of the problem because humans are unable to overcome their deeply ingrained thought habits.

In the traditional law, when thinking about a problem, individuals frequently reduce them to formulas to describe causality, with the help of formulas to explain certain things or laws that happen in life. For example, one thing happens because of another, an outcome must have its corresponding cause present, and it is because of the existence of this relationship that things continue to develop, as they have always done from the past to the present. The "Heptapod" is the exact opposite of humans in that they predict the outcome before learning what caused it. The plot of novel is unique, giving expression to abundant vision and anti-logocentrism. He does not follow the traditional theory of cause and effect in conceiving the story, but breaks the linear boundary between cause and effect, so that the words of the alien have no backward and forward connection and can be read at will, and there is no cause and effect in their thinking; the "past" and the "future" can be seen at any time, which subverts previous philosophy and laws. Ted Chiang's deconstruction of traditional causality provides a basis for innovative thinking about causality, and explores a wider scope for the creation of science fiction, encouraging people not to seek a simple one cause in one result, but to restore the cause of the result from multiple perspectives and levels, thus providing a more three-dimensional and diversified understanding of things.

### **5. Conclusion**

One may argue that science fiction is both a potent world-correction tool and a battle between science,

technology, and the real world (Wang, 2018, p. 116). *The Story of Your Life* is the classic work of Ted Chiang—a Chinese American science fiction author. Through the analysis and study of the work by means of close reading, we can easily find the deconstruction ideas contained in it, the kindness and friendliness of the aliens, the independence of women, and the non-linear theory of cause and effect all reflect Ted Chiang's sense of deconstruction.

Ted Chiang does not set the relationship between the human self and the alien other in an antagonistic form, and the novel ends not with one side winning over the other, but with a thought-provoking ending in which humans and "Heptapod" communicate amicably and build a good state of harmonious coexistence. At the same time, Louise's feminine writing in the work creates a new female image that adheres to the values and will of the moment, giving readers a deeper female mirror image. To a certain extent, they also reconstruct the structure of gender discourse in science fiction, and have the power to counteract social reality, promote the awakening of women's consciousness in real society, encourage women to actively pursue subjectivity and independence, and realize their self-worth. Additionally, Ted Chiang rewrote the linear character of traditional causality. Dialecticians have always held that causality is the link between a pair of things in the objective world that are interconnected and interact with each other, and has its own objective and universal existence. Of course, we do not deny the fact that causality is universally valid, but this does not mean that there are no other possibilities, and Ted Chiang offers us one such possibility.

Reconstructing the text's meaning involves deconstructing it first and then rebuilding it. As a literary work, science fiction also reflects the potential paradoxes and issues in social reality and this is a unique form of humanistic thinking as a science fiction writer, even if it is a type of fantasy that depicts human existence in a future world or the vision of science and technology. Each life has its own different form, and Ted Chiang respects its uniqueness while understanding that one of the essential characteristics of the world is its diversity. As culture moves forward, it should be inclusive and allow for diversity so that it can promote its own development and prosperity. At the same time, he hopes to use words to build a multicultural world and create a harmonious and equal social atmosphere.

The "Non-zero-sum game" strategy proposed by the novel's protagonist provides important insights for the development of global modernity. At present, we should abandon our single-mindedness, develop pluralistic thinking, strive for the symbiosis of different civilizations, and seek the unlimited power of pluralism.

### Acknowledgments

Funding: The paper was funded by the project, entitled "The Study of Humanistic Thoughts in Chinese-American Science Fiction Literature" of Inner Mongolian Minzu University (Grant Number: NMDSS2169).

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