A Study of Educational Narratives and the Enlightenment Mission in Literary Works

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Abstract: *Educational narratives in literary works serve as a crucial vehicle for conveying Enlightenment thought. Through their unique textual construction and discourse generation mechanisms, they facilitate the shaping and sublimation of the subjective spirit. Grounded in theories of literary narratology and semiotics, this study systematically analyzes the character relationship genealogy, initiatory plot patterns, and symbolic spatial representations within educational narratives, revealing their internal logic and Enlightenment implications. It further explores the transmission methods of knowledge types, the driving role of dialogue and reflection within the narrative process, and the tension between disciplinary enlightenment and resistant enlightenment, thereby elucidating the dynamic generation path of Enlightenment discourse. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates the bidirectional shaping relationship between educational narratives and the Enlightenment subject, positing that the narrative form itself possesses an enlightening function, and clarifies the uniqueness and boundaries of literary enlightenment. This research aims to deepen the understanding of literature's educational function and provide new perspectives for the interdisciplinary expansion of Enlightenment theory.*

Keywords: *Educational Narratives; Enlightenment Mission; Subjectivity; Narrative Patterns; Discourse Generation; Semiotics*

Introduction

As a significant form of human spiritual activity, literature has long carried the dual mission of education and enlightenment. Educational narratives are not merely depictions of knowledge transmission but constitute a symbolic construction system embedded with deep-seated logic. Through the narrative artistry of characters, plots, and spaces, they achieve the aesthetic expression of Enlightenment ideals. However, existing research predominantly focuses on analyzing the educational function of literature or its ideological content, often neglecting a systematic interpretation of the mechanisms by which the Enlightenment mission is realized from the dimensions of narrative form and discourse generation. This research gap undermines a holistic understanding of literature's efficacy in enlightenment and constrains the deepening and expansion of educational narrative theory. Therefore, this study takes educational narratives in literary works as its object, focusing on the interplay among their textual structures, discursive dynamics, and subject construction. It aims to reveal how enlightenment is concretized and internalized through narrative practice. This research not only contributes to promoting interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and education but also provides a theoretical reference for understanding the continuation and evolution of enlightenment within contemporary cultural contexts.

1. The Textual Construction and Internal Logic of Educational Narratives

1.1 The Genealogical Relationship between the Enlightener and the Enlightenee

Within the configuration of literary texts, the Enlightener and the Enlightenee form a core narrative dynamic. This genealogical relationship exhibits complex interactivity and fluidity of power. The role of the Enlightener transcends the traditional image of a teacher or mentor; their function is more symbolic, potentially manifesting as an introducer of heterogeneous culture, a rebel against established order, or a forerunner who is themselves entangled in dilemmas. Their core function lies in introducing an "otherness" of a symbolic system into the Enlightenee's stable and enclosed cognitive world, thereby

triggering an imbalance and upheaval within their internal spiritual order.

The Enlightenee is typically placed in a "to-be-formatted" state of subjectivity, their cognitive schema insufficient for fully comprehending the symbolic order they inhabit. The relationship between the two is far from a static transfer of knowledge; rather, it is a dynamic contest revolving around discursive power and interpretative authority. Narrative tension precisely arises from the collision between the cultural capital—be it mainstream or marginal—represented by the Enlightener, and the Enlightenee's innate life instincts and latent reflective consciousness[1].

This collision gives rise to the distinctive phenomenon of "mutual scrutiny" within educational narratives. The Enlightenee is not a purely passive receptacle; their unadulterated perceptions or stubborn inquiries often constitute a sharp interrogation of the legitimacy of the Enlightener's knowledge system and their personal life experience. Consequently, a polyphonic dialogic relationship is established. The process of enlightenment thus ceases to be a unidirectional indoctrination and evolves into a bidirectional, intersubjective spiritual exploration. Within this genealogy, the evolution of character relationships directly mirrors the specific operational methods and inherent complexities of Enlightenment thought.

1.2 Analysis of the Narrative Pattern of Initiatory Plots

The internal logic of educational narratives is most intuitively manifested through their highly formulaic yet richly varied initiatory plot pattern. This pattern typically follows a classic sequence: the disruption of an existing equilibrium, followed by a cognitive trial, and culminating in the achievement of a new spiritual integration.

The initial state of the narrative is often one of disciplined tranquility or unreflective ignorance. An "intrusive event"—which may be the arrival of the Enlightener, the acquisition of a forbidden book, or a sudden existential crisis — serves as the narrative inciting incident, profoundly destabilizing the Enlightenee's original worldview. What ensues is a "symbolic journey" fraught with obstacles and discoveries. The plot in this stage is structured by a series of "cognitive disruption points." These narrative nodes, realized through intense dialogic confrontations, the experience of practical setbacks, or encounters with forbidden realms, systematically deconstruct the Enlightenee's established cognitive framework.

The core conflict of the plot is internalized into an "intellectual drama" within the Enlightenee's mental world. External confrontations in action are merely superficial; the true drama lies in the intense contest among different values and cognitive models within. The narrative climax is typically marked by a "moment of epiphany." At this point, the Enlightenee does not necessarily obtain answers to all questions but rather achieves a decisive shift in cognitive paradigm, gaining a completely new perspective for understanding the self and the world[2].

The final resolution signifies the Enlightenee's re-anchoring into a new subject position. Armed with a restructured cognitive framework, they are prepared to engage with life in new ways. The value of this narrative pattern lies in its successful transcoding of the philosophical concept of "enlightenment" into a literary path that readers can emotionally follow and internally experience.

1.3 The Representation of Educational Significance in Symbolic Space

Within the symbolic system of educational narratives, spatial settings transcend their physical attributes and are systematically encoded as symbolic carriers for various educational concepts, power relations, and forms of knowledge. Different types of space collectively constitute a tense and metaphorical "educational topography."

Enclosed and orderly spaces such as studies, laboratories, or traditional academies serve as the material embodiment of systematized, canonical knowledge. Their internal spatial arrangements, object displays, and behavioral norms silently articulate a cultural logic emphasizing inheritance, order, and discipline. In contrast, expansive natural landscapes, purposeless wandering journeys, or bustling streets and marketplaces—these open, fluid spaces symbolize experiential, individualized, and freely explorative modes of knowledge acquisition, acting as breeding grounds for inspiration and rebellious spirit.

Crucial "liminal spaces" within the narrative, such as thresholds, corridors, staircases, and windows, frequently function as metaphors for cognitive leaps and spiritual growth. Characters' lingering or

passage through these spaces symbolizes their state of being on the threshold of intellectual transformation. Furthermore, texts often construct "heterotopian" spaces—for example, secret attics, settlements of marginalized groups, or underground reading circles. Operating outside the mainstream educational order, these spaces shelter and nurture excluded or suppressed knowledge and values, thereby becoming sites for the production of counter-enlightenment discourses.

Through the juxtaposition, contrast, and transformation of these symbolic spaces, the narrative embodies the abstract struggles over educational power and the competition for knowledge legitimacy. Space ceases to be a passive backdrop and actively participates in the dynamics of enlightenment. It functions both as the site where disciplinary power operates and as the fissure where free thought germinates, guiding readers toward a deeper semiotic interpretation of the sites of knowledge production and the conditions of its dissemination[3].

2. The Generation of Enlightenment Discourse in the Narrative Process

2.1 The Narrative Transmission of Knowledge Types

The core of the enlightenment process lies in the transmission and reconstruction of knowledge, and the advantage of literary works resides in their ability to transform abstract knowledge types into concrete narrative elements. This narrative transmission is firstly manifested in the identification and conversion of knowledge forms. Systematized classical knowledge is often materialized as specific textual carriers, such as a canonical text, a letter, or a set of manuscripts. The very process of revealing and acquiring their contents constitutes a key driving force for plot development. In contrast, experiential and tacit knowledge is difficult to present directly through words. Narratives encode such knowledge into content that requires personal experience to comprehend, through embodied practical scenarios—such as the imparting of a skill, an episode of survival in the wilderness, or participation in a ritual[4].

This transmission process is by no means a smooth downloading of information but rather a semiotic practice fraught with friction and transformation. Narratives, by introducing "obstacles to reception" such as misreading, misinterpretation, or cultural barriers, expose the incommensurability between different knowledge systems. This, in turn, provokes critical inquiry from the Enlightenee and even the reader into the authority and validity of the knowledge itself. Certain knowledge deemed "forbidden" plays a crucial catalytic role within narratives. Its impact on the established symbolic order directly precipitates crisis and reorganization within the Enlightenee's cognitive world. Ultimately, various knowledge types undergo processes of selection, competition, and fusion within the narrative progression. Their value is no longer predetermined by external authority but is re-evaluated and affirmed within the specific narrative context and the fates of the characters, thereby completing the narrative internalization of their enlightening utility.

2.2 Dialogue and Reflection as the Internal Driving Force of Enlightenment

The generative mechanism of enlightenment discourse derives its core momentum from the dialogic structure and profound reflective dimension constructed within the narrative. Here, dialogue transcends its basic function as character interaction, constituting a micro-arena where different consciousnesses and worldviews collide and contend. Its essence lies in presenting the polyphony of thought rather than in achieving consensus. Truly enlightening dialogue does not conclude with one party persuading the other. Instead, by presenting logical confrontations and perspectival differences, it exposes the limitations of any single cognitive framework, thereby catalyzing the emergence of a new, more inclusive, and more critical thinking space within the Enlightenee. This clash of discourse keeps thought in a perpetually unfinished, dynamic state, effectively preventing its solidification into rigid dogma.

Structurally echoing this external dialogue is the internal reflective monologue of characters, particularly the Enlightenee. Through modernist narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse, interior monologue, and stream of consciousness, the narrative concretizes the Enlightenee's hidden intellectual struggles for the reader. This reflective practice is essentially the internalization and deepening of external dialogue, serving as the crucial juncture where the subject transforms external symbolic stimuli into internal cognitive schemata. It meticulously portrays the Enlightenee's subjective becoming—the process evolving from passively receiving information to actively organizing meaning, and from instinctive emotional reactions to rational self-analysis. Thus, the narrative progression

depicts enlightenment as a spiral, upward movement―from outside to inside, and then from inside out again. Within this process, dialogue provides the necessary stimuli and raw materials, while reflection accomplishes the integration of meaning and the sublimation of cognition. Together, they constitute the indispensable dual driving force for the construction of subjectivity[5].

2.3 The Narrative Tension between Disciplinary Enlightenment and Resistant Enlightenment

The enlightenment discourse presented in educational narratives is not monolithic; it contains profound internal tension, centrally manifested in the coexistence and contestation of two discursive modes: "disciplinary enlightenment" and "resistant enlightenment." Disciplinary enlightenment seeks to successfully assimilate the individual into the existing social symbolic order. It imparts knowledge sanctioned by authority, emphasizing adaptation, compliance, and socialization. In narratives, it is typically associated with institutionalized educational spaces, the figure of the authoritative Enlightener, and a system of explicit reward-punishment mechanisms.

In contrast, resistant enlightenment aims to awaken the individual's capacity to question and critique the established order, its value standards, and the legitimacy of knowledge. It is often carried by Enlighteners outside the system, suppressed historical texts, or transgressive personal experiences; its content is heterogeneous, marginal, or even forbidden. The narrative tension precisely arises from the pull and tug between these two orientations of enlightenment within the Enlightenee's psyche. The Enlightenee often must first acquire basic cognitive tools and symbolic competency within the disciplinary framework, only to then use these very tools to effectively reflect upon and transcend the framework itself.

This intrinsic tension prevents enlightenment narratives from serving a singular didactic function, instead revealing profound ethical complexity. The narrative resolution is not necessarily a simple replacement of discipline by resistance. It may present a difficult coexistence, a reluctant compromise, or a tragic lucidity achieved upon recognizing their paradoxical relationship. It is precisely this unresolved tension, rather than any definitive conclusion, that constitutes the most profound characteristic of literary enlightenment―it does not provide answers. Instead, by showcasing the very dilemmas and choices inherent to thought, it invites the reader into a state of sustained critical thinking, thereby transforming enlightenment from a narrative goal that can be completed into an endless process of speculation.

3. The Bidirectional Shaping between Educational Narratives and the Enlightenment Subject

3.1 The Evolutionary Path of Subjectivity from Ignorance to Self-Awareness

Literary narratives present enlightenment as a dynamic generative process through their meticulous delineation of the evolutionary path of subjectivity. This path typically originates from a state of lacking or passive subjectivity, where characters are immersed in uncritically accepted customs, authority, or instinct. Their self-consciousness has not yet differentiated itself from the external symbolic order, leaving them in the object position constructed by discourse. The progression of the narrative is accompanied by a series of cognitive disruptions and identity crises. These critical moments, manifested as conflicts of knowledge, paradoxes of value, and ethical dilemmas, force characters to detach from their original subject positions and initiate a systematic examination of the relationship between self and world.

In this process, the art of narrative vividly traces the trajectory of subjectivity formation by showcasing the transformation in characters' discursive modes. The evolution of a character's interior monologue ― from non-existence to existence, from fragmented to systematic, from quoting others' viewpoints to forming independent judgments―signals their transition from a "spoken-about object" to a "speaking subject." The core of this transformation lies in the ultimate awakening of critical self-consciousness. At this stage, characters no longer passively accept assigned roles and social definitions. Instead, they begin to consciously analyze and interrogate their own situation and the underlying power structures and ideological foundations, utilizing the cognitive tools and symbolic competencies they have acquired.

What the narrative ultimately accomplishes is not the portrayal of a perfectly mature subject. Rather, it meticulously outlines a trajectory of subject formation: a path that begins with the certainty of ignorance, traverses the anguish of reflection and the reconstruction of cognition, and finally arrives at

a state of self-awareness—a state where one assumes the weighty responsibility of one's own freedom. This trajectory itself constitutes the most powerful literary interpretation of the Enlightenment spirit.

3.2 The Inherently Enlightening Function of Narrative Form

The profound mechanism through which literature fulfills its enlightenment mission lies in the fact that its narrative form itself can serve as a practice of enlightenment. Specific narrative strategies compel readers to transcend the role of passive recipients and actively participate in the production and critique of meaning. This participatory process essentially constitutes the self-enlightenment of the reader as a subject. For instance, unreliable narration creates a cognitive gap between textual information and readerly judgment. By producing a discrepancy between the narrator's and the implied author's values, it continuously trains the reader's capacity to question narrative authority, thereby transforming the habitual trust in reading into a sustained practice of critical interpretation.

Multi-perspective narrative systematically dismantles the illusion of a singular, authoritative truth that an omniscient viewpoint might foster, by juxtaposing the contradictory and limited cognitive perspectives of different characters toward the same event. This narrative structure reveals to the reader that all cognition is bound by specific historical contexts and positional limitations, and that truth requires constant reconstruction through the dialogue and fusion of perspectives from multiple subjects[6].

Furthermore, the intervention of meta-narrative techniques, by exposing the artificiality and fictionality of the narrative act itself, not only breaks the reader's immersive illusion within the story world but also prompts a shift from emotional identification to deep reflection on the mechanisms of narrative construction and their ideological foundations. Together, these formal techniques constitute a comprehensive system for enlightenment training, transforming the reading process into a practical field for critical thinking. In navigating the complexities of textual interpretation, readers unconsciously exercise cognitive abilities such as questioning, comparing, synthesizing, and judging. Thus, narrative form transcends its function as a mere carrier of content, becoming an aesthetic space where Enlightenment rationality is cultivated and performed.

3.3 The Uniqueness and Boundaries of Literary Enlightenment

Compared to philosophical discourse or theoretical doctrines, the enlightenment borne by literary narrative possesses its own irreplaceable uniqueness and inherent boundaries. Its uniqueness first lies in the embodied nature and affective dimension of its enlightening method. Literature operates through sensible imagery, concrete situations, and the interplay of emotions. It transforms abstract rational principles into tangible life experiences and moral dilemmas, rendering enlightenment not a cold intellectual deduction but a holistic event deeply connected to human emotion, will, and choice.

Secondly, literary enlightenment maintains a respect for the complexity and unfinished nature of life. It does not provide simplified answers or closed systems but tends to preserve the openness of dialogue, presenting internal paradoxes and unresolved tensions. This ambiguity and complexity more closely approximate the true state of human existence; what it inspires is not blind obedience but the courage to think and live amidst uncertainty. However, it is precisely these strengths that delineate its boundaries.

The emotional appeal of literature may overwhelm rational deliberation, and the particularity and specificity of its narratives may be difficult to directly elevate into universal laws. The strength of literary enlightenment lies in awakening the subject, stimulating thought, and presenting dilemmas, yet its essence is to pose "questions" rather than deliver "definitive conclusions." It transforms enlightenment from an attainable endpoint into an ongoing speculative journey sustained through aesthetic experience and rational reflection. This is precisely its irreplaceable value within the realm of human spirit.

Conclusion

This study, through a systematic analysis of the textual construction of educational narratives, the generative mechanism of enlightenment discourse, and their bidirectional shaping relationship with the subject, reveals the complex pathways and internal logic through which literature fulfills its enlightenment mission. Educational narratives construct a field of meaning imbued with tension through the dynamic genealogy of character relationships, the narrative sequence of initiatory plots,

and the representation of meaning in symbolic space. Within the narrative progression, the transformative transmission of knowledge types, the driving role of dialogue and reflection, and the paradoxical coexistence of discipline and resistance collectively propel the generation and evolution of enlightenment discourse.

Ultimately, literary narrative not only delineates the subject's evolutionary trajectory from ignorance to self-awareness, but its very form also becomes a practice of enlightenment, engaging readers' critical thinking to participate in the construction of subjectivity. The uniqueness of literary enlightenment lies in its embodied, affective, and unfinished nature. It does not provide definitive answers but initiates an ongoing speculative journey of sustained reflection. Future research may further explore paradigmatic differences in educational narratives across different cultural traditions, or focus on how transformations in narrative forms in the digital age reshape models of enlightenment, thereby continuing and deepening the scholarly vitality of this subject.

Fund Projects

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