

# Analysis of the characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* under the perspective of covert progression

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**Abstract:** Taking Shen Dan's "Covert Progression" as the theoretical perspective, this paper aims to analyze multi-sided characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Through the comparative analysis of the explicit narrative and the covert progression, the paper aims to discover the other sides of the two characters different from the traditional comments. In shaping the characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude, there is a contradictory relationship between the explicit narrative and the covert progression. Under the perspective of "Covert Progression", we can see the multi-faceted character images, which is quite important for future research.

**Keywords:** William Shakespeare, Hamlet, explicit narrative, covert progression, Claudius, Gertrude

## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has long been hailed as a timeless masterpiece, renowned for its intricate plot, profound themes, and distinct characterizations. In this famous tragedy, there are two dual narrative dynamics, one light and one dark, flowing through the whole narration together. When paying attention to the explicit plots of the narrative, we must not ignore the covert progression; otherwise we will not be able to see the multi-faceted character images. Based on Shen Dan's theory of "Covert Progression", this paper aims to analyze multi-sided characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude, hoping to discover the other sides of these two characters different from the traditional comments.

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### **An overview of Shen Dan's theory of "Covert Progression"**

Starting from Aristotle, critics have focused solely on the narrative movement of plot development in narrative works. Based on continuous research for many years, Shen Dan, a famous scholar from Peking University, found that "in many narrative works, there is a dual narrative movement, that is, behind the plot's development, there is still a narrative undercurrent that goes hand in hand and runs through the text" (Shen 2018, 84). She named this narrative undercurrent as "covert progression". This narrative undercurrent is essential for a comprehensive understanding of literary works. However, due to the influence the critical tradition, covert progression in some works is usually ignored by critics and readers. Therefore, Shen Dan's covert progression has important theoretical value. It reminds researchers to pay attention to the narrative undercurrent in the text to see the multifaceted characters and the pluralism of themes.

The publication of Shen Dan's *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions behind Overt Plots* (2013) marked the completion of the theoretical framework of "Covert Progressions". This monograph has attracted wide attention from the Western academic circles. Hillis Miller has praised it as "a shining example for 21st century narrative theory in the forceful and comprehensive way it insists on binding the craft of the interpretation to the craft of fiction." (Abbott 2013, 560) For B. Richardson (2021, 68) "Dan Shen has done impressive work in several fields of narrative theory for many years. Perhaps her most substantial achievement is her theory of covert progression, a contribution that promises to extend and refine our concept of plot." W. Schmid (2021, 83) also regarded Shen Dan's theory as "a central phenomenon of narration and enriches narratology with essential insights into the acts of reading and giving meaning." Besides, some famous journals such as *Style, Language and Literature*, and *Journal of Literary Semantics* successively published book review articles on this topic. Shen Dan's theory of "Covert Progression" has expanded the dimension of the development of narratology and opens new horizons for the research in the field of literature.

### **Literary review on Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

As William Shakespeare's most famous tragedy, *Hamlet* has long been a subject of literary attention, attracting critics across different fields

such as writing techniques, ethics, politics, religion, reception and adaptation of the play as well as analysis of character images.

The research of *Hamlet* through the lens of writing techniques provides valuable insights into the creative process and the evolution of key scenes within the play. George Mandelbaum (2018) examines the different versions of the closet scene in *Hamlet* and argues that as Shakespeare moved through various versions, he delved into defensive fantasies, unraveling inner states, and crafting a lifelike Hamlet. By scrutinizing the various versions of the dumb show and its anomalous presence in the play, Rory Loughnane (2019) engages with the intricacies of information conveyed through this theatrical device and demonstrates how Shakespeare manipulates the form to generate critical arguments. Matthew Wagner (2019) explores Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost and its prophetic implications. Wagner examines how the articulation and resistance to prophecy in *Hamlet* disrupt the audience's sense of time during the performance and highlights Shakespeare's skill in manipulating temporal experiences through the performance of prophetic elements.

Delving into the ethical dimension of the play, Richard Boyd (2009) investigates the response of the contemporary legal community to *Hamlet*, focusing on the central ethical dilemma posed by Hamlet's delay in seeking violent retribution for his father's murder, contemplating the tricky relationship between private vengeance and the law. Jonathan Baldo (2014) examines the ethical implications of distraction in Shakespeare's works, shedding light on the multifaceted exploration of the distracted self. While not exclusively focused on *Hamlet*, his article provides a broader perspective on Shakespeare's overarching concern with ethical questions related to self-awareness and consciousness.

The political exploration of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is concerned with themes of tyranny, race, and the aesthetics of political authority, offering critical insights into the socio-political dynamics in the play. By aligning the play with classical models of tragedy and drawing on Aquinas's conditions for the right use of anger and vengeance, Nicole Coonradt (2021) argues that Shakespeare intentionally disrupts Aristotelian conventions, presenting Hamlet's choice not to remove the tyrant Claudius as a significant and ironic Shakespearean twist, suggesting that Hamlet's inaction serves as a call to action for Shakespeare's contemporary audience, interrogating traditional views on tragedy. Ethan John Guagliardo (2021) explores the political

aesthetics of majesty in *Hamlet*, framing the crisis of political authority within an aesthetic context. Guagliardo calls into question the interpretations that solely emphasize the epistemic nature of Hamlet's crisis, positioning its aesthetic modernism at the intersection of phenomenology and political theology.

In the religious exploration of *Hamlet*, Rajiv Thind challenges the prevalent focus on Catholic-nostalgic aspects in *Hamlet* and contends that the purgatorial Ghost can be read as a caricature within the context of contemporary Protestant culture. By situating *Hamlet* within the literary aesthetics and populist appeal of Protestantism, Thind highlights the comedic and parodic depictions of Roman Catholic doctrine and beliefs, particularly evident in Hamlet's mockery of the Ghost in Scene 1.5. Dieter Fuchs investigates the conflict between England's Catholic past and the rise of Protestant culture, the meta-dramatic dimension, the theatricality of Renaissance court life, and the play's reflection of the emerging modern subject triggered by the reformation discourse. Two focal points, the courtly discovery of perspective and Hamlet's request to tell his story, bring overlooked aspects into sharp focus.

As regards the reception and adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* across different cultures, Elena Luludova (2017) approaches *Hamlet* as an archetype in the artistic sense, emphasizing its everlasting popularity and continual reinterpretation. Utilizing structural-semiotic and structural-functional analysis, Luludova compares different adaptations, revealing changes influenced by scriptwriters and directors that impact dialogues, time, and place while maintaining the emotional core of the text. McKenzie Bergan (2023) focuses on the uncanny quality of adaptations, especially within tragic narratives. By examining the video game "Elsinore", Bergan explores how adaptations, when imbued with temporal ambiguity and uncanny elements, carry ethical potential within tragic narratives, suggesting new ways of thinking about the future of such narratives.

The characterization in *Hamlet* has always been an important perspective among researchers. Among them, Hamlet's personality is undoubtedly the most concerned by critics. Some critics regard Hamlet as the representative of Renaissance humanism, believing that he is bold, upright, and open-minded. Others have focused on flaws in Hamlet's character, such as melancholy, indecision, and contradictions. Bjorn Quiring (2022) delves into Hamlet's frequent references to silence and its philosophical interpretations by Friedrich

Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, contributing to a deeper understanding of Hamlet's worldview and its relation to both Dionysian experience and Protestant melancholy. Anna F. Mackenzie (2017) inquiry into the phenomenon of maternal absence in Shakespeare's works believes that the analysis of Gertrude is crucial to understanding *Hamlet*. Mackenzie explores the fundamental reasons for the phenomenon of maternal absence and its significant impact on interpersonal relationships in the play. Richard Levin (2008) discusses the theme of Gertrude's sexuality and raises questions about the reliability of the narrators in the play. Levin engages with the ambiguity surrounding Gertrude's character and the interpretative problems posed by narrators with complex internal perspectives. Chelsea Phillips et al. (2023) focus on the character of Ophelia and the symbolism associated with her bouquet, scrutinizing the evolution of Ophelia's representation in different productions, and emphasizing the connection between the botanical choices and the interpretation of her mental state.

In the previous research achievements, no researcher has explored the other side of the characters in the drama from the perspective of covert progression. Therefore, my research is innovative. It will help to see the multifaceted character images.

### **Analysis of the characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude under the perspective of covert progression**

According to Shen Dan (2018, 85), "the relationship between the explicit plot and the covert progression can be divided into two broad categories: mutually complementary and mutually subversive". In *Hamlet*, the explicit narrative and the covert progression that focus on the characterization of Claudius and Gertrude show the traits of mutually subversive. The following part will explore another side of the two characters through the analysis of details related to the covert progression.

#### *Claudius*

Focusing on the explicit narrative, most of the traditional studies viewed Claudius as shameless, sinister and vicious. For instance, Matthew Wagner comments Claudius as "a treasonous, fratricidal villain" (Wagner 2019, 262). According to Erich Freiberger (2020, 279), "Claudius, like Plato's description of the sophist, is the 'kindless villain,' the false suitor whose lies have manipulated this feminine

frailty in language to help seize the crown”. For Aktar-ul-Alam (2020-2021, 53), “Claudius prioritizes his security and power”. Centered on power, Claudius killed his brother and became the king himself. Attracted by Gertrude, he commandeered his sister-in-law shortly after he had ascended the throne. When he came to power, he was surrounded by sycophants. Upon learning that Hamlet was aware of his crime, Claudius planned to kill his nephew to cover up his crime. Because of what he did in the explicit narrative, Claudius was criticized by many critics as the embodiment of darkness and ugliness.

However, when we turn to the covert progression, we can see a new image of Claudius different from the traditional analysis. In the covert progression, Claudius loved Gertrude a long time ago. His feelings for her were more than mere sexual lust. He admired her decorum and her grace as a tender mother. Because Gertrude was the Queen and the wife of his brother, he had to suppress his feelings. Many hidden plots show that Gertrude served as an important reason for Claudius to murder his brother. In other words, Claudius was not a mere political schemer. He was in fact a man crazy for love. Because of love, Claudius murdered his brother regardless of ethics. Since then, he has been in deep regret. It also reflects that he is not a shameless person without remorse. His heart was always occupied by regret and remorse. As a result, he could hardly fall sleep at night. This can be shown from Claudius’ inner monologue in the play. That cannot be, since I am still possessed of those effects for which I did the murder, my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. In the covert progression, Claudius is not a completely negative figure, which is clearly reflected in his attitude towards Hamlet. Knowing Hamlet can be a potential hazard, Claudius had no intention of killing him at the beginning. Instead, he spoke highly of Hamlet for his filial piety and pure nature. Therefore, he adopted Hamlet as his own child and appointed him as the direct heir to the throne. Besides, Claudius suggested Hamlet not to return to Wittenberg for further education, but to stay with him and strengthen his throne. It also proves that he was not wary of Hamlet. As the plot progresses, Hamlet found himself in conflict when he learned the truth about his father's death. He went insane because of it. Worrying about Hamlet’s mental state, Claudius contacted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, hoping that they would accompany Hamlet, relieve him of his troubles and probe his mind to cure the trauma.

To sum up, the covert progression in the drama shows us the other side of Claudius' character. He is not a complete villain or cold-blooded creature. As heinous as his crimes were, his love for the queen was genuine. Besides, Claudius was aware of his sin. Therefore, he has confessed his sin before the icon. In fact, he has lamented the burden of embarrassment all the time. His attitude towards Hamlet proved that he is not a man who had lost all conscience. Although he had long known that Hamlet was a big danger for him, he tried all the way to get along well with him. His admiration for his nephew's character and ability was genuine. It was not until Hamlet publicly expressed his desire for revenge that Claudius became murderous for the fear of being killed. Through the analysis of the covert progression, we can see the good side of Claudius' ideology. Although in the battle between good and evil in Claudius' mind, evil always takes the upper hand. In real life, everyone has a good side and a bad side. Through the covert progression, we see the good side of Claudius. This also rounded out the character.

### *Gertrude*

Gertrude, a character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has always been presented in an obscure manner to readers. Throughout the play, she speaks only a limited number of lines, often of brevity, and frequently responds to queries posed by male characters. Lacking her own soliloquies or depictions of internal thoughts, her primary role appears to be propelling the plot forward. Consequently, readers are left to speculate about Gertrude's inner struggles, life choices, and handling of relationships primarily based on the words of Hamlet, the Ghost, and Claudius. However, Gertrude should not be a neglected role. She showed completely different character characteristics in explicit narrative and covert progression.

From the explicit narrative, the traditional commentary defines Gertrude as a fickle, frivolous, unfaithful and even lewd figure. Her hasty remarriage shortly after her husband's death was one of the important factors that caused Hamlet's inner trauma. Elizabeth Mazzola (2019, 121) regards Gertrude as an immoral woman by pointing out that she has collapsed "the moral and logical structures which consign women to the roles of mourner, witness, and mother". According to Abena Asefuaba (2022, 245), "Gertrude, the most prominent female character in *Hamlet* is projected as a frail woman, betrayer, selfish, and highly weak". "Gertrude is the victim of a bad

press, not only on the stage and screen and in the critical arena” (Shakespeare 2009, 189). All in all, most of the comments saw her as a negative figure and chastised her for remarrying.

In covert progression, readers can find out the reasons why Gertrude remarried with Claudius. Firstly, Gertrude had no choice in the face of the new king. If she objected to Claudius’ proposal, she was likely to live a lonely life in her remaining years. The chance of remarriage for her may be the only one that Claudius has given her. If she does not accept it, then she may never have the chance to marry again, for who but the king is entitled to marry the widow of a former king? If so, there are only two options for Gertrude. One is to pursue the asceticism advocated by the church, to abandon and restrain sexual desire and lust, which is how cruel it must be for Gertrude. On the other hand, if you want to satisfy your sexual desires without getting married, the only way to do that is to have a love affair secretly. And this is unlikely for a queen, after all, neither her status nor her circumstances allow her to deviate. In addition to the physiological reasons and the helplessness before the royal power, her remarriage was more about the practical consideration of Hamlet’s future succession to the throne. Hamlet’s future was the most important thing to the middle-aged Gertrude. Like all mothers, Gertrude wanted her son to be a hero, a genius, and a smooth succession to the throne. For this, she was willing to lose her reputation. However, her love for Hamlet was compounded by his incomprehension. As a mother, Gertrude has great tolerance for Hamlet out of strong maternal love. She married Claudius without knowing the truth, and Hamlet attacked her in a way that bordered on a vicious attack. In the face of Hamlet’s anger and endless reprimands, one can imagine the pain in Gertrude’s heart. For example, when Hamlet accused her of being ensnared by lust and falling into marriage with a murderer, Gertrude repeatedly implored him to stop, crying, “O, speak to me no more. These words like daggers enter in my ears,” (Shakespeare, 2009, 95-96) and admits that Hamlet “hast cleft [her] heart in twain” (Ibid, 157). In the dialogue, Hamlet completely stood on his own position, without considering his mother’s feelings. The unequal relationship between them reflects Hamlet’s selfishness and Gertrude’s tolerance. During the plot development, Gertrude tried hard to defend Hamlet, not only by helping him to keep the secret of pretending to be mad, but also by doing everything she could to protect him. When Hamlet proposed a duel with Laertes, Gertrude dissuaded: “For love of God forbear him.”



(Ibid, 275) At the end of the play, the queen drunk the poisoned wine in Hamlet's place. This reflected her deep love for Hamlet. In fact, Gertrude had been very clear about the nature of her marriage to Claudius. She "elaborates with her metaphors of the grave as a marriage bed, the death's head is held up to female vanity as a compelling image of 'the skull beneath the skin'" (Holderness 2007, 226).

Therefore, she has used the word "overhasty" to describe her marriage with Claudius. This signifies her negative emotions concerning the swiftness of her remarriage, suggesting that she acknowledges her marriage to Claudius is not a matter of mutual consent but rather a necessity forced upon her. As a woman who is not powerless, it was the only possible means for her to resolve the insoluble conflict. Regrettably, Hamlet remains oblivious to his mother's predicament, and instead, during the closet scene, he subjects her to harsh and reproachful words. Hamlet's misunderstandings and vehement accusations bring significant psychological harm to Gertrude.

Gertrude used to be a happy woman. She had a good husband and a handsome son whom everyone admired. However, her happy life disappeared in smoke with the death of her husband. In this struggle for the throne, she was only a defenseless woman. But for the sake of her son's future, she endured all the spit and finger. She wanted to be an ostrich and live without thinking about troubles in life. But under the repeated pressure of Hamlet, "her eyes and ears are turned inwards, gazing at her soul, listening to the sound of her conscience." (Holderness 2014, 96) From the covert progression, we can see that Gertrude is a poor woman who is willing to sacrifice everything for her son. For this, we should be less critical of her and show more sympathy for her.

## **Conclusion**

From the above analysis, we can draw a reasonable conclusion that the Shen Dan's theory of "Covert Progressions" is of great significance to the analysis of the characteristics of Claudius and Gertrude. Only by comprehensively studying the explicit narrative and covert progression in the text, can we see the multifaceted character images of these two characters and overcome the singleness and limitation of previous criticism. If we ignore the covert progressions in a literary work, we will possibly trap into one-sided understanding or even completely

misunderstanding the character images and the aesthetic value of the work, no matter what method we use, or how deep and careful we analyze. Once the covert progressions are discovered, many seemingly trivial and irrelevant elements of the text can become crucial. These neglected narrative dynamics will gain strong thematic relevance and produce subtle and superb aesthetic values. The characters in literary works are derived from daily life. Therefore, this study is of great practical significance. Human beings are complex creatures with multi-faceted characteristics. For example, many famous comedy stars are silent in their daily lives, and some even suffer from depression. The research in this paper shows that the theory of “Covert Progression” helpful for us to analyze the characteristics of human beings from a different perspective. Besides, this study also guides us to get rid of the shackles of traditional concepts and re-understand people and things in real life.

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