

# On Translation of Children's Literature Based on Reception Aesthetics: A Case Study of *The Secret Garden*

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Grounded in reader-centered theories, Reception Aesthetics prioritizes the active engagement and acceptance of target readers. This study examines the translation of children's literature through the lens of Reception Aesthetics, using Li Wenjun's rendition of *The Secret Garden* as a case study. The objective is to scrutinize various aspects of the translation—including vocabulary, syntax, rhetorical devices, and cultural nuances—and to discern how the adaptation and application of diverse translation strategies cater to the aesthetic expectations.

*Keywords:* Reception Aesthetics, translation of children's literature, *The Secret Garden*

## Introduction

As one of three children's literary works of Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* was published in 1911 and has received great popularity among the general public. This classic children's book, which is filled with friendship, perseverance, optimism, and goodness, shows us that people who have a rough life or are physically and mentally ill can change their destinies through the reconstruction of the environment. *The Secret Garden* has been translated into Chinese by some scholars, like Xu Hong, Liu Rongyue, Zhang Runfang, Zhang Jianping, Bao Huinan, and Li Wenjun. However, only a few researchers study the translation of it, few researchers study it based on Reception Aesthetics. With rich experience in children's literature translation, Li Wenjun had translated two of Burnett's Works named *A Little Princess* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* before he translated *The Secret Garden*. Many of his translations have exerted a far-reaching influence on Chinese literature in that the language is straightforward, vivid, and humorous. By using the Reception Aesthetics theory, this paper will analyze the translation of *The Secret Garden* from a linguistic level, a rhetorical level, and a cultural level.

## Application of Reception Aesthetics in Translation

Reception Aesthetics, which puts great emphasis on the interaction between works and readers, was proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in the 1960s. It has three main concepts: the status and role of readers, the horizon of expectations, and the vacancy of text meaning. Jauss (1982) argues that literary work is fundamentally created by the receiver. In the triangular relationship of author, work, and reader, the reader

plays an active and dynamic role in the reception process rather than a passive receiver. That means the reader is an initiative subject to participate in reading activities. Without target readers, a literary work would lose its value and meaning. This indicates that reader reception is the main purpose of the translation, and translators need to take readers' unique characteristics into account when translating literature work.

One distinctive feature of reception theory is the emphasis on target readers. Instead of advocating text-oriented or author-oriented in previous research, Reception Aesthetics pays more attention to readers' acceptance and tries to fill their horizons of expectation. For "horizon of expectation", it is "an inter-subjective system or structure of expectation, a system of references or a mindset that hypothetical individual might bring to any text" (Jauss, 1982). Zhu Liyuan (1989) sums up in his book *Reception Aesthetics* that readers' horizons of expectation should be established in terms of their worldview, knowledge, cultural background, artistic level, experience, and reading competence. The distance between readers' horizons of expectation and the horizons of the text is considered as aesthetic distance, which may attach great importance to the reading activity. In consideration of children's peculiar traits, the translators' horizons of expectation need to keep up with children's, by which an acceptable translating version could be created.

Furthermore, although the content of a literary work is fixed, the meaning of it is strongly connected with the interaction between the reader and the text and will change as time goes by. Iser (1974) proposes "vacancy of the text meaning" and argues that artwork is an intentional object composed of a multidimensional schema structure, including lots of potential factors called "indeterminacy", which refers to "the absence of exact correlation phenomena described in literary texts and objects in the world of real life" (Jauss, 1982). The great inspiration this concept brings to translators is that the meaning of the text is a dynamic, constantly updating, and changing process instead of remaining stable. In the same text, different readers may have diverse understandings and reading feelings. Only when the text is read by the readers, can it come into life and achieve artistic value. This theory emphasizes more on readers' acceptance and tries to fill their horizons of expectation, which lays a theoretical foundation for the translation of children's literature. Considering the special features of target readers, translators choose some translating methods and approaches to provide vivid images and improve their understanding. Reception Aesthetics is used to analyze the original text and the translations, and the translator should create an interesting and creative text to satisfy the aesthetic expectations.

### **A Brief Analysis of The Translation of *The Secret Garden* from the Perspective of the Reception Aesthetics**

Children are more likely to be appealed by vivid characteristics, fascinating pictures, wonderful stories, and plain language. Given children's acceptance and experience, an excellent children's literary work should be understandable, humorous, fascinating, and attractive. In this part, the author tries to explore the characteristics of the main characters, and analyze this work from three aspects: linguistic level, rhetorical level, and cultural level. At the linguistic level, the translator elects some straightforward and vivid expressions for children to understand easily, attract their interests, and improve their reading abilities, such as colloquial words, reduplicated words, onomatopoeia, interjections, and complex sentences. Colloquial words are usually used in ordinary or familiar conversations. In consideration of children's intellectual and cognitive competence, colloquial expressions can be seen in many children's literary works. If the translator just conveys literal

meaning or conceptual meaning, the text may be flat and boring and miss children's horizon of expectation. The application of childish words could express children's true feeling—happiness, anger, surprise, sorrow, and so on. E.g. "I see tha's got back," he said. "An' tha's browt th' young'un with thee." "Aye, that's her," answered Mrs. Medlock (Burnett, 1987, p. 17) ("俺见到你回来啦,"他说,"还带回这小不点儿哪。" "可不,就是这小丫头,"梅德洛克太太回答道。). This example is a brief conversation between Mrs. Medlock and the station master who spoke Yorkshire in a rough and good-natured way. In the translation, the translator uses Chinese colloquial expressions, such as "小不点儿", "小丫头", aiming to represent an aesthetic expectation of the original text and also create a pleasing reading atmosphere.

Reduplicated words refer to the combination of two single-syllable words to create a new form, like ABB, or AABB, which can have a musical effect and let reader enjoy the beauty of rhythm. E.g. "I felt the lump—I felt it" choked out Colin. "I knew I should. I shall have a hunch on my back and then I shall die," and he began to writhe again and turned on his face and sobbed and wailed but he didn't scream (Burnett, 1987, p. 158) ("我摸到有鼓包,我摸到了。"科林哽咽咽地说,"我早知道我必定会有的。我的背会长出个大罗锅,到那时我就死定了。"说完他又开始扭动身子,转过脸去哭哭啼啼了,不过他却没有尖叫。). This example is a conversation between Colin and Mary when Colin is broken-hearted on account of the fear of having a lethal lump. Li translates "choke out" into "哽咽咽咽" and "sobbed and wailed" into "哭哭啼啼" which can vividly describe a sorrowful situation and stimulate readers' sympathy for Colin. What's more, reduplicated words are acceptable to children's speaking styles and meet their horizons of expectation.

Onomatopoeia refers to some words that sound similar to the noise they refer to, like "hiss" "buzz" "pop" and so on. For example, "Just listen to them birds—th' world seems full of 'em—all whistlin' an' pipin'" (Burnett, 1987, p. 165) ("你就听听那些鸟儿的声吧——世界上哪儿没有鸟儿啊——全都在叽叽喳喳、咕呱咕呱地鸣唱。"). In these examples, the translator uses "叽叽喳喳" and "咕呱咕呱" to describe the sound of birds singing. With onomatopoeia used in the text, the translation is more interesting and lovely, thus many young readers can't help imagining the beautiful and vivid natural scenery. In the meanwhile, it could bring wonderful musical effects and create a fantastic atmosphere where readers can enjoy themselves and read more happily.

Chinese Interjection such as "啊", "呀", "哇", and "呢" is frequently used by children when communicating with others. "Aye, there tha'art!" "Oh! Look at him!" (Burnett, 1987, p. 83) ("瞧,臭小子来啦" "喔唷!你瞧它呀!"). Interjections can be frequently seen in the translated version. In this example, to create a musical effect, Li translates the original text more lovely by adding some modal particles, like "瞧呀", "喔唷", "啦". It could create a fantastic sound effect that is similar to children's speaking habits and consequently arouses their reading interest. Therefore, this translated version is more interesting and vivid to satisfy children's horizon of expectation.

English and Chinese are different in many ways. The former is hypotaxis and focuses on language structure, while the latter is parataxis and pays more attention to semantics. Reception Aesthetics emphasizes the status and the role of target readers. Simple and short sentences are preferred in children's literature in consideration of their language competencies and reading abilities. Therefore, when translating this children's literature, complex long sentences should be translated into short and simple ones, to adjust sentence structure appropriately to meet children's horizon of expectation. Here is an example: "The sun was shining inside the

four walls and the high arch of blue sky over this particular piece of Misselthwaite seemed even more brilliant and softer than it was over the moor" (Burnett, 1987, p. 70) (园墙四围之外, 阳光明媚, 俯临米塞斯维特庄园这一特殊区域的蓝天苍穹, 也似乎要比荒原上空的更加灿烂, 更加妩媚。). This part describes the beautiful scenery of the secret garden Mary saw when she first stand inside it. The sun is shining and smiling and the blue sky looks brilliant. The robin flies down and hops happily. It is the most fantastic place for children to play lightheartedly. Although in the original work, the writer uses delicate words and complex sentences, the translator transfers them into vivid words and simple expressions for children to understand easily and imagine the beautiful garden.

Rhetorical devices also play a significant role in children's literature work. Actually, in the translating activity, aesthetic representation of the original work is a key criterion of a good translation, so the translator needs to adopt some rhetorical techniques and methods to represent the original style and preserve the original sound effect.

According to Dictionary, "simile" is a figure of speech that compares one thing to another thing, usually because they have some characteristics in common. Some words "like" and "as if" are frequently seen in sentences with similes. The usage of similes in children's literature could describe a vivid picture to arouse children's imagination and reading interest. "I've chased about th' moor in all weathers same as th' rabbit does". (Burnett, 1987, p. 96) ("不管在什么天气下, 我都能在荒原上撒腿疯跑, 就跟野兔子似的。). After Dickon and Mary entered the secret garden, he said excitedly that the smell of good clean earth is the best thing in the world. Then Mary wondered: "Do you never catch a cold?" Dickon relied on something above. The translator tries to express the original meaning of the text, by using some interesting simile, for example, "跟野兔子似的". This example shows readers the main characteristics of Dickon, a healthy moor boy.

Personification refers to a figure of speech applying human characteristics to non-human species and objects. Given the fact that children have special psychological and cognitive characteristics, personification is frequently used in children's literature. With personification, a literary work could become more interesting and lively for young readers. "And if all the flowers and leaves and green things and birds and wild creatures dance past at once, what a crowd it would be!" (Burnett, 1987, p. 188) ("若是所有的花花草草, 绿枝嫩叶和禽鸟动物, 都一起载歌载舞地走过去, 那该是多壮观的一支队伍呀!"). If the readers read this part carefully enough, they could find that it is a description of Mary and Colin's interesting imagination about spring coming. They believe that all animals and flowers and green things will dance to celebrate spring. In the translated version, the translator describes this bustling scene by using personification—"所有的花花草草, 绿枝嫩叶和禽鸟动物, 都一起载歌载舞地走过去". This translation would be loved by children from their expectation and vacancy of the text meaning.

According to Collins Dictionary, hyperbole means somebody says something larger or stronger than reality. It is usually used to put great emphasis on intense feelings and create an emotional effect. ("There's naught as nice as th' smell o' good clean earth, except th' smell o' fresh growin' things when th' rain falls on 'em." (Burnett, 1987, p. 95) ("对人最有好处的就莫过于肥沃、干净的土壤的香味了, 要说有什么比这更好, 那就只有雨水浇灌正在生长的新作物时所发出的气味了。"). When Mary said that she enjoys the smell of fresh earth, Dickon excitedly relied on that smelling clean earth is the most useful thing for human health. The translator translates this paragraph literally by using hyperbole to emphasize the important role

nature plays for human beings. If children embrace the wonderful nature more frequently, they may breathe fresh air and grow up happily.

Antithesis is a figure of speech that juxtaposes two opposing ideas or entities. It usually means the symmetry of two expressions with parallel grammatical structures, for example, “to err is human, to forgive divine”. The sun was deepening the gold of its lances, the bees were going home and the birds were flying past less often (Burnett, 1987, p. 197) (一束束阳光的金色变得更加浓厚了, 蜜蜂逐渐都回了家, 鸟儿们穿梭的次数俨然变得稀少了。)。Burnett describes beautiful scenery where kids worked in the secret garden and played with many lovely animals. In the original work, “the sun”, “the bees”, “the birds” and “deepening”, “going”, “flying” have similar structures and they are used to create a comparison to each other for a well-balanced structure. The translation is loyal to the original work by using some beautiful expressions, such as “蜜蜂都回了家”, “一束束阳光的金色” to create a pleasing and comfortable environment for readers and encourage them to imagine a wonderful afternoon. This actually can help children to improve their imagination and stimulate their interest in exploring the outside world.

Literature work actually can carry cultural information and knowledge when it expresses its literal meaning, so readers can learn about different cultures through reading literature work. However, children may have some difficulties in understanding literature translation because of their limited knowledge base. And children's different cultural knowledge may greatly influence their understanding of the work and their horizon of expectations. So translator needs to consider children's particularities with culture-loaded words, domestication, and foreignization.

Culture-loaded words are closely related to unique cultural implied meanings, such as Chinese poems, idioms, colloquial words, and so on. Culture-loaded words may be culturally specific to the source language, so it is difficult to translate since it may cause misunderstanding and conflicts for target readers if translated word by word. On account of different social backgrounds, beliefs, customs, and ideologies, people from different cultures may understand the same word from different points of view. It may bring some difficulties in translation, especially in types of food, social customs, monetary measurements, and religion. The following examples may show us how translators treat those specific words to convey aesthetic value. “If you divide that into eight parts there will be half a crown for each of you,” he said (Burnett, 1987, p. 262) (“要是你把这钱分成八份, 那就每人能得到半个克朗。”他说。脚注: 相当于四分之一英镑。)。Different countries have different monetary measurements which could not be understood by others. “crown” is a monetary measurement used in England which are different from Chinese. In this example, the translator tries to narrow the gap between the original text and target readers by adding an explanation in the footnote. This can help children have a better understanding of the work.

In light of Reception Aesthetics, readers should be regarded as the center of the reading process. So translators can adopt domestication because they need to help children understand the source language and its culture. Domestication is a translating strategy of making text closely conform to the target culture. It advocates that foreign culture should be translated into culture readers are familiar with. “Tha' an' me are a good bit alike,” he said (Burnett, 1987, p. 36) (“你跟我是半斤八两。”他说。)

When Mary entered the kitchen garden, she found the old man digging there alone. With great curiosity, Mary tried to talk to him and they started a conversation. This old gardener Ben said to Mary that they are a

good bit alike in homely looking and nasty tempers. The translator translates it into “半斤八两” which is a vivid and simple expression for children to understand easily. In Chinese, “半斤八两” means two people have something in common. This translation can narrow the aesthetic distance between children's understanding. It also can reduce reading difficulties, create a pleasant and comfortable reading atmosphere for children, and raise their interest to read further.

Foreignization, a translation method to move the reader toward the author, means retaining words and concepts in the original work even in translation. Foreignization can introduce the foreign culture of the original text to children, which can not only broaden children's horizons of expectation but also give them more international information and interesting ideas. In the meanwhile, it can enrich children's knowledge and broaden their perspectives since readers may learn various information through reading which is different from their own culture. “They'll grow now like Jack's beanstalk. They're crocuses an' snowdrops, an'these here's daffydowndillys” (Burnett, 1987, p. 95) (“它们会像故事里的杰克的豆梗那样飞快往上蹿的。”)。 “杰克的豆梗” came from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, an old English fairy tale about a brave and kind little boy Jack who exchanges their only cow for five magic beans. These magic beans grow up quickly and become a huge beanstalk that Jack climbs up and reaches a kingdom in the sky. The translator cites this interesting story to illustrate that by cleaning small grass and making a place for the green shoots, Mary could help them thrive easily. This also shows readers Mary's good virtues—kindness and patience. Taking a foreignization strategy to translate children's literature work can benefit a lot, from stimulating children's curiosity to giving them more opportunities to know other cultures different from their mother tongue and expand their horizons of expectations.

In conclusion, Reception Aesthetics can be used as a theoretical basis for children's literature works as its emphasis on target readers is consistent with children's unique characteristics. Because of children's mental and cognitive development, the translator chooses more straightforward and interesting expressions to improve their interest in reading and also enhance their motivation to explore the outside world. In this chapter, the author has a brief analysis of the translation of children's literature work based on Reception Aesthetics, aiming to reproduce the childness of the work.

## Conclusion

Based on Reception Aesthetics, the translator should adopt appropriate translation methods and translation techniques to meet children's horizon of expectations in consideration of special characteristics of children, including psychological features, cognitive ability, knowledge level, and comprehensive capability. More specifically, vivid words, simple expressions, and rhetorical devices could be usually found in the translation to create an interesting and pleasant reading atmosphere. The brief analysis tries to bring translation study to a new perspective and prove its practicality and feasibility.

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