

English 2120: ESSAY 2 (~ 1500 words)

DUE Tuesday, 10 January 2017 at the beginning of lecture

Choose ONE of the following topics for your essay. While this second essay is a comparative assignment, you will be building on the close reading skills you exercised in your first essay. Your paper should provide a readily identifiable thesis statement, and should clearly articulate how the passages or phrases you have selected support your claims. You may discuss any of the fall-term texts assigned after *Oroonoko* – so any of the works assigned from 4 October to 22 November, inclusive of those dates. For clarification or questions about eligible works, please contact your tutorial leader.

Important factors in your essays evaluation will be the soundness, subtlety, and originality of your overall **argument**, the effectiveness with which you support your claims with specific, carefully selected **examples**, and your ability to offer a **persuasive analysis** of those examples.

1. The works assigned this term include broken, fragmentary, and interrupted narratives – from the intermittent letters written by Walton in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, to the telegrams sent in Henry James’s *In the Cage*, to the narrative discontinuities in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. For this essay, select one nineteenth-century text (by Shelley, Turner, or James) and one twentieth-century text (by Joyce, Achebe, or Pynchon) for your analysis. How would you compare the purposes served or the points made by the breaks, fragments, or interruptions in each? You might consider a break in the narrative as a whole, or a broken sub-narrative (for example, within a story told by one of the characters). Be specific.
2. Analyze one or more shifts in narrative voice within a single work, and make an argument for their significance to the larger themes or concerns of the work as a whole. The shifts might include a move from indirect discourse to free indirect discourse, between focalization through one character and focalization through another, or between external and internal focalization, from direct to indirect speech. (You need not and should not describe each and every shift that occurs within a work; select one or two or three that seem the most important.) What is the significance of these shifts? Why do they occur where they do? What do they convey? For this essay, select from assigned works by James, Joyce, Achebe, or Pynchon.

Notes:

These paper topics are designed so that you will be able to construct your own argument based on your reading of the assigned course material, and if you wish, on the lecture material. Aside from references such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *American National Biography*, or the *Dictionary of National Biography*, you should not need to consult outside sources or unassigned works.

Please include page citations to the readings within the text of your paper, and an MLA-formatted works cited list at the end. If you are using a non-paginated version (e.g., an online version), include volume and chapter numbers where applicable.

Your essay should be 5 to 6 pages long in a standard, 12-point font (or approximately 1500 words long). Please double-space your paper and **include page numbers**. Be sure to include your full name at the top. Your paper should include a title, but a separate title page is unnecessary.

Your essay is due at 12:30pm on Tuesday, 10 January 2017 – the first class meeting after the winter break. As indicated in the course syllabus, essays received after this time may be marked down one half increment for each day they are late. **Do not submit your essay by email or leave it in the departmental dropbox, unless you and your tutorial instructor have agreed to this in advance.** If you miss the deadline, please contact your tutorial instructor by email to arrange for its late submission.

Alex Slack

EN 2120

January 10th, 2017

Taking Control through Fragmentary Narratives

Broken and interruptive narratives are subtle but effective methods of controlling how a reader views a main narrative. When there are moments of narrative interruption, another focalization influences the main narrative through its own context and manipulates how readers view the main narrative, causing disparity between the main focalization's opinions and the readers expanded understanding of the main narrative. In the cases of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, both main narratives focus on black stories – one of Nat Turner's slave rebellion as told by him and the other of the people and culture of Umuofia, as experienced through Okonkwo, a well-renowned warrior – but these main narratives are interrupted by white interjections – Turner's interviewer Thomas Grey and the colonists invading Umuofia. Through the use of contrasting viewpoints and implied intellectual superiority, the narrative breaks in both works seek to control the main narrative, manipulating the reader's interpretation of the main narratives and ultimately vying for complete narrative control and dominance. In this, the struggle for narrative control is also symbolic of the racial struggles found in both texts.

During longer interruptions in the narratives, the opposing narrator to the main narrative finds the means to subjugate the main narrator through contrast. This contrast, in the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, comes in the form of divine guidance. As Turner tells his confession, he claims that the rebellion was heaven sent to him, as he states, "The Holy Ghost had revealed itself to me... and the great day of judgement was at hand" (137). However, Grey is careful to frame his

beliefs of the prophetic visions as madness, influencing how a reader interprets Turner's narrative before it begins, describing Turner as, "bewildered and confounded, and...corrupted" (131). Before Turner's narrative is even available, it is interrupted and defined by Grey's introduction. The power dynamic is inherently imbalanced in the narrative, as Turner is unaware of and unable to respond to Grey's interruptions while Grey is able to interrupt Turner's narrative and frame it in a way that biases a reader's impression. Grey is then also able to use the same element of divinity that Turner uses, and recontextualize it in his interruption as a means to affirm Turner's madness, telling the story of the girl who survived because, "The Lord helped her" (148). Breaking from the narrative, this sub-narrative contrasts against Turner's claim of having a godly mission, as a little girl survives through divine intervention, contradiction casting doubt on the legitimacy of Turner's visions as holy. This sub-narrative not only serves the purpose of making Turner appear crazy, but assures white people of security in their faith as well. Grey uses the story of the survivor girl to undermine Turner's narrative and reasoning, controlling the main narrative through his interruptions.

Interruptive narratives involving religion come up similarly in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as the missionaries introduce Christianity to the village of Mbanta, creating the conflict between Okonkwo and Nwoye. When the missionaries sing about God, Okonkwo mocks them and is "fully convinced that [they] are mad" (103). But Okonkwo's narrative is suddenly taken over by Nwoye, "who had been captivated" (103). In this, Okonkwo begins to lose control of the narrative, as missionaries become more present and influential in the novel. However, the process of the takeover is subtle, especially in beginning with his son, who decides "he would return later to his mother and brothers and sister and convert them to the new faith" (108). The invasion of Umuofia happens slowly like Okonkwo's loss of control over the narrative,

beginning with the conversion of natives like Nwoye to Christianity. This narrative interruption symbolizes the process of colonization, as the conflict between Okonkwo, who represents the traditions of Umuofia, and Nwoye, representing the influential younger generation that the elders depend upon to continue their traditions, comes to a climax. Okonkwo effectively predicts the results of colonization as he thinks about Nwoye converting to the “white man’s god” and experiences a moment of prolepsis while considering this “prospect of [cultural] annihilation” (108). As a result, Nwoye’s narrative interruption is one of the first that draws away from and criticizes the traditions of Umuofia and Okonkwo, taking narrative control and starting the process of giving it to the missionaries. In this way, narrative interruptions are methods of control that have the ability to take over the main narrative and symbolically represent the white takeover of black narratives.

As previously discussed, both these texts use contrasting opinions during narrative interruptions in the means to gain narrative control, but another method that these interruptions use is impressions of superiority, claiming a superior intelligence than the main narrative presents and taking control as a result of that entitlement. In the case of the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, the narrative is already framed by Grey’s preface before Turner’s narrative is introduced as a narrative fueled by madness. However, even during Turner’s narrative, Grey interjects comments within parentheses throughout, despite claiming that Turner’s account is presented “without comment” (130). As Turner begins his narrative, he discusses marks on his head and chest he had been born with that he felt marked him for “some great purpose” but Grey interjects into his narrative, commenting that the marks are “a parcel of excrescences which I believe are not at all uncommon, particularly among negroes” (133). In doing so, Grey immediately discredits Turner’s divine beliefs and positions himself as the intellectual narrative authority

through scientific objectivity. Such interruption serves the purpose of keeping the readers disillusioned and disbelieving of Turner's divine guidance, as they are more inclined to agree with Grey's introduction that frames Turner as crazy when presented with his factual interjections. In another instance, Turner discusses his encounter with a white party and Grey, in his longest interruption, supplies the reader with information on the party that Turner "knew nothing of" while also referring to Turner's group as "barbarous villains" and framing the white party heroically (143-4). The order of topics in Grey's narrative break is significant, as he first supplies the unknown knowledge, exhibiting intellectual authority, and then calls Turner's group barbarous villains while simultaneously framing their opposition as heroes. In first demonstrating intellectual authority, the weight of Grey's judgement becomes more impactful and seemingly justified. By using interruptive narratives to claim a higher intelligence, Grey seeks to use his interruptions to control how Turner's narrative is represented, while also symbolizing the racial struggle as Turner cannot tell his narrative without Grey's filtering commentary.

Although Turner faces Grey's intermittent interruptions throughout his narrative, Okonkwo's narrative is completely taken over during the conclusion of *Things Fall Apart*. There are an increasing number of narrative interruptions up until Okonkwo's suicide, when the District Commissioner takes over the narrative entirely and begins the process of reframing Okonkwo's story, stating, "The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading" (147). Despite Obierika informing him that Okonkwo was "one of the greatest men in Umuofia", the District Commissioner claims narrative authority in his interruption and decides the only significance Okonkwo holds in the narrative he tells is the killing of the messenger. This is a comparatively small moment when a reader considers the whole of Okonkwo's narrative, yet the District Commissioner feels entitled to judge the

important segments of the narrative, stating, “There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details” (148). He presents himself as an intellectual authority and implies that he will frame the book in such a way, even presenting the title to be “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger”, introducing readers to the imagined book as a figure of superiority over the ‘primitive tribes’. In this, the white taking over a black narrative symbolizes the process of colonization, as increasing narrative interruptions allows the missionaries to take over the narrative entirely.

The narrative interruptions found in the *Confessions of Nat Turner* and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* utilize contrast against their main narratives and seek to undermine the main narrative as a less intelligent source, using very deliberate methods of controlling the text through fragmentary narratives. The use of these interruptive narratives changes the representation of the main narrative and aims to control how the reader views the narrative as a result. On a symbolic level, the narrative structure also reflects the racial struggles highlighted within the two texts, as the black narratives are interrupted and overthrown by white narratives. By handling the narratives in a way that forces narrative conflict, a reader is forced to carefully consider the power dynamics not only in narrative, but in society and by those who are influencing the way a narrative represents someone.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, 1986.

The Confessions of Nat Turner, in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*. Humanities Press, 1966, 127-152.