

A Structural Analysis of Narrative Discourse : Focusing on the Manner of Regulating Narrative Information

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A Structural Analysis of Narrative Discourse: Focusing on the Manner of Regulating Narrative Information¹

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1

In the theoretical study of narrative, it is commonplace to distinguish narrative into two aspects: story and discourse. According to the *Dictionary of Narratology*, story is “The content plane of NARRATIVE as opposed to its EXPRESSION plane or DISCOURSE; the ‘what’ of a narrative as opposed to its ‘how’; the NARRATED as opposed to the NARRATING” (91) whereas discourse is “The EXPRESSION plane of NARRATIVE as opposed to its CONTENT plane or STORY; the ‘how’ of a narrative as opposed to its ‘what’; the NARRATING as opposed to the NARRATED (21).”

Likewise, Chatman says in *Story and Discourse*:

Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of settings); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*. (19)

A story does not have to be conveyed through language. It can also be conveyed through other media, such as images and body movements. In theory, there are various discourse; the discourse of language, the discourse of film, the discourse of dance and so forth. But the object of the study here

A Structural Analysis of Narrative Discourse: Focusing on the Manner of Regulating Narrative Information is written narrative discourse, where the focus is placed on language used in narrative discourse.

In this article, I would like to describe the mood of narrative discourse, that is, the ways of regulating narrative information. There are two categories relevant to this task, voice and focalization. Traditionally the voice has been discussed with the terms such as “the first person” and “the third person.” Focalization is the matter of point of view where such terminology as “omniscient point of view” and “objective point of view” has been employed.

2

Terms such as “first person” and “third person” are not accurate to describe narrative phenomena because it is possible for narrative to be written in the first person without having the narrator “I” in it. In that case, even though every character is referred to as “he” “she” or “Elizabeth,” the status of the narrative maintains that of the first person.

In *Jealousy* by Allan Robbe-Grillet, the narrator “I” does not appear anywhere in the story. Below is a short extract from the story.

Now A...has come into the bedroom by the inside door opening onto the central hallway. She does not look at the wide open window through which—from the door—she would see this corner of the terrace. Now she has turned back toward the door to close it behind her. She still has on the light-colored, close-fitting dress with the high collar that she was wearing at lunch when Christiane reminded her again that loose-fitting clothes make the heat easier to bear. (39)

All the characters in this story are referred to in the third person such as “A...” “she” or “Franck.” But obviously the story is narrated from the

perspective of a character who does not participate in the story. In other words, he exists in the story only as a point of view. In this sense this story is a “first-person” narrative.

On the other hand, in *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding, for example, we can encounter “I” many times.

For all which I shall not look on myself as accountable to any court of critical jurisdiction whatever; for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein. (Book 2, Chapter 1)

In this short extract “I” appears four times, but Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, as a whole, is a third-person narrative.

As we see, although in *Jealousy* we encounter no “I” as a narrator, it is a first-person novel whereas in *Tom Jones*, although we see lots of “I”s in it, it is a third-person narrative. Therefore, Gerard Genette says:

Indeed, these common locutions [first-person and third-person] seem to me inadequate, in that they stress variation in the element of the narrative situation that is in fact invariant—to wit, the presence (explicit or implicit) of the “person” of the narrator. This presence is invariant because the narrator can be in his narrative (like every subject of an enunciating in his enunciated statement) *only* in the “first person”... (*Narrative Discourse* 243-4)

According to Genette, every narrative cannot be anything but first-person.

Insofar as the narrator can at any instant intervene *as such* in the narrative, every narrating is, by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person. (*Narrative Discourse* 244)

Therefore, instead of using the “first person” and “third person,” Genette proposes “homodiegetic” for first-person narrative and “heterodiegetic” for

third-person narrative.

The real question is whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters*. We will therefore distinguish here two types of narrative: one with the narrator absent from the story he tells..., the other with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells. I call the first type, for obvious reasons, *heterodiegetic*, and the second type *homodiegetic*. (*Narrative Discourse* 244-5)

3

As for the narrative perspective traditionally called “point of view,” in *Narrative Discourse*, Genette proposes to replace it with “focalization” because such a term as “point of view” has “too specifically visual connotations (189)” and classifies it into three categories: zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization. Zero focalization “corresponds to what English-language criticism calls the narrative with an omniscient narrator...(where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly *says* more than any of the characters knows) (188-89).” Internal focalization is the narrative where “the narrator says only what a given character knows (189).” “This is the narrative with ‘point of view’ after Lubbock, or with ‘restricted field’ after Blin (189).” External focalization is the narrative where “the narrator says less than the character knows (189).” “[T]his is the ‘objective’ or ‘behaviorist’ narrative (189).”

Genette cites Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* as an example of what he defines as fully realized internal focalization wherein the narrative’s perspective is strictly limited to that of a single character although the character to whose point of view the narrative perspective is restricted does not appear in the story.

Internal focalization is fully realized only in the narrative of “interior monologue,” or in that borderline work, Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie*, where the central character is limited absolutely to—and strictly *inferred* from—his focal position alone. (193)

In homodiegetic narrative in which one of the characters tells his story as the narrator, the narrator usually tells what he sees, thinks or feels; in other words, he reveals everything in his inner thoughts or feelings. Especially when the narrating type from the point of view of temporal position is subsequent, the focalization the discourse is likely to take is zero focalization. That is, the narrator “*says* more than any of the characters knows (189)” because the narrator can tell things he could not have known when he was experiencing them as a character.

In “The Black Cat” by Poe, the narrator “I” relates his experience with a cat and relates things he could not have known at the moment he was experiencing them.

The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting in my wrath the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal, which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. (228)

At the moment of killing a cat with an axe, the narrator says, “forgetting in my wrath the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand.” One cannot recognize feeling when he is forgetting it. Therefore, the narrative piece “forgetting in my wrath the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand” does not express the character’s perception while he is performing the action but the narrator’s when he is recalling and recounting his past experience.

Likewise, internal focalization in which “the narrator says only what a given character knows (189)” has also affinity with homodiegetic narrative.

The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger, for example, is homodiegetic narrative. The hero of the story, Holden Caulfield, is the narrator “I”; he tells his own story. In chapter 2, Holden visits a history teacher, Mr. Spencer, and in their conversation, he observes Mr. Spencer as follows:

Old Spencer started nodding again. He also started picking his nose. He made out like he was only pinching it, but he was really getting the old thumb right in there. I guess he thought it was all right to do because it was only me that was in the room. I didn't *care*, except that it's pretty disgusting to watch somebody pick their nose. (13-4)

Holden sees Mr. Spencer pick his nose, and describing what he sees, he tells the reader what he thought of his observation. This is typical and natural for a first-person narrative where the narrator “I” reports not only what he perceives but also what he thinks and feels about what he has perceived. Therefore, the homodiegetic narrative is more likely to adopt the internal focalization.

Then, is it possible for homodiegetic narrative to have external focalization? In other words, is it possible for a narrator in first-person narrative to “say less than the character knows”? We often encounter first-person narrative where the narrator “I” deliberately reveals less than he knows, which is called paralipsis, and we will discuss it later in this article. But can a first-person narrator speak less than he knows without knowing it? If he does not know the whole, how can he tell that he is speaking less than he knows?

As an example for this type, Genette cites Camus's *The Outsider*. He says:

“Meursault tells what he does and describes what he perceives, but he does not say (not: *what he thinks about it*, but:) *whether he thinks about*

it.” That “situation,” or rather, here, that narrative *stance*, is for the moment the one that best, or least badly, resembles a homodiegetic narrating that is “neutral,” or in external focalization. (*Revisited* 124)

In other words, Meursault in *The Outsider* is a first-person narrator who is supposed to tell a story about himself and his experiences and knows everything about what happens to him. However, according to Genette, since he does not say what he thinks about his experiences, or we cannot know whether he thinks about them, Camus’s *The Outsider* is a story told by the homodiegetic narrator in the external focalization, which is quite rare.

Genette says that he has conceived this idea from Claude-Edmonde Magny. Magny says in *The Age of the American Novel*:

In *L’Etranger (The Stranger)* Camus systematically uses ellipsis to express a particular form of nonbeing—the absurd. His problem is to present us with events that have carefully been sifted, filtered, in such a way as to remove from them all meanings not appropriate to his purpose. (63)

Camus’s artificial filtering consists of the presentation of a character who says “I” while telling us only what a third person might know of him. He does not say “I felt like shooting the Arab” (and actually he is not conscious of feeling anything like that), but “The trigger gave....I fired four shots more...”; not “I wanted Maria,” but “She had a pretty dress with red and white stripes and leather sandals.” (64)

As seen above, where in first-person narrative, the narrator “I” describes situations that the character “I” experiences without interpreting what is happening, the discourse is likely to have the effect of homodiegetic narrating in external focalization. If a first-person narrator tells “The human with whitish hairs on the top of this head held a flaming stick close to him, and smoke began to rise from a white tube attached to his body (Culler 85)”

instead of “The old man lit a cigarette (Culler 85),” the focalization is external. Therefore, it could be said that if one describes something without knowing what it is he is describing, the description is likely to have external focalization.

4

Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” mainly consists of the dialogue between a man and a woman. At the beginning of the story, the topic of their dialogue is about the drinks they have, and then they start talking about an operation. At first we do not know what operation they are talking about, but as the dialogue proceeds, we can figure out that the operation they are discussing is an abortion. But the word “abortion” never appears in the text. We only infer from the text that what the couple is talking about is an abortion; it is only referred to as “operation” or “it.” Although Hemingway could have written the word “abortion,” he did not. His famous style is often called “the ice-berg theory.” According to Roger Fowler in *Linguistics and the Novel*:

Hemingway is usually cited as an example of the impersonal, objective writer who neither reveals himself nor pretends to privileged inner knowledge of his characters; and who creates narrators with these same characteristics. (52)

If we use Genette’s terms, Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” is narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator whose focalization is external. Heterodiegetic narrative is “one with the narrator absent from the story he tells (*Narrative Discourse* 244)” and homodiegetic narrative is “the one with narrator present as a character in the story he tells (*Narrative Discourse* 245).” External focalization is one of the perspectives taken in narrative in

which “the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings (*Narrative Discourse* 190),” in other words, “the narrator says less than the character knows (*Narrative Discourse* 189).”

But obviously the combination between heterodiegetic narrator and external focalization is not the only one in which a story can be put into narrative. Narrative with a heterodiegetic narrator and internal focalization is one of the choices the writer can choose.

Here is an extract from “A Domestic Dilemma” by Carson McCullers:

Martin withdrew from the room saying: “For God’s sake go to sleep. The children will forget by tomorrow.”

As he said this he wondered if it was true. Would the scene glide so easily from memory—or would it root in the unconscious to fester in the after-years? Martin did not know, and the last alternative sickened him. He thought of Emily, foresaw the morning-after humiliation: the shards of memory, the lucidities that glared from the obliterating darkness of shame. She would call the New York office twice—possibly three or four times. Martin anticipated his own embarrassment, wondering if the others at the office could possibly suspect. He felt that his secretary had divined the trouble long ago and that she pitied him. He suffered a moment of rebellion against his fate, he hated his wife. (268)

In this extract, the narrator of this story tells the inner thoughts or feelings of a character, who is “absent from the story he tells (*Narrative Discourse* 244).” Although the narrator of this story is heterodiegetic, we can know what the character is thinking or feeling. The focalized point of perception is placed inside the character. This type of focalization is called as “internal focalization” by Genette. According to the *Dictionary of Narratology* by Gerard Prince, internal focalization is “[a] type of focalization whereby information is conveyed in terms of a character’s (conceptual or perceptual) point of view or perspective (45).” In other words, the narrator with this type

A Structural Analysis of Narrative Discourse: Focusing on the Manner of Regulating Narrative Information of focalization “says only what a given character knows (*Narrative Discourse* 189).”

If Hemingway had written “Hills Like White Elephants” using internal focalization, he could have revealed that what the man and the woman are discussing is abortion because if the inner thoughts or feelings of people are disclosed, as a corollary, we can know the causes which produce these thoughts and feelings. But since he is “an example of the impersonal, objective writer,” he consistently abstains from exposing the inner knowledge of the characters. The reason the word “abortion” does not appear in the text is not a haphazard outcome of his writing style but a result of Hemingway’s aesthetics as a writer who has chosen a particular mode to represent his story.

To take another example, Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” is also a story about man and woman, and few events happen in it. An American couple is staying at a hotel in Italy. The wife looks out of the window and finds a cat trying to avoid being wet from the rain. She goes down to rescue the cat but cannot find it. She comes back to her room. Later a maid of the hotel brings up a cat for her. This is the end of the story.

What makes me interested in this story is that, as in many literary works, two different interpretations are made about the identity of the cat. One interprets that the cat in the last scene is the same one the wife saw from her hotel room, and the other the cats are different. One of the reasons which makes the identity of the cats ambiguous is that the text does not say it. It leaves the reader room for interpretation. But how is it made ambiguous in the text? Cited below is the last scene of “Cat in the Rain”:

Someone knocked on the door.

‘*Avanti,*’ George said. He looked up from his book.

In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big tortoise-shell cat pressed tight against her and swung down against her body.

“Excuse me,” she said, “the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora.” (131)

Discussing this last scene, David Lodge says in the “Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text: Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Cat in the Rain’”:

We can now fully understand why the ending of the story is so ambiguous; it is primarily because the narration adopts the husband’s perspective at this crucial point. Since he did not rise from the bed to look out of the window at the cat sheltering from the rain, he has no way of knowing whether the cat brought by the maid is the same one—hence the non-committal indefinite article, ‘a big tortoise-shell cat’. If, however, the wife’s perspective had been adopted at this point and the text had read,

‘Avanti,’ the wife said. She turned round from the window.
In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big tortoise-shell cat...

then it would be clear that this was not the cat the wife had wanted to bring in from the rain (in which case the definite article would be used).
(29)

As David Lodge points out, matters of perspective affect the reader’s interpretation. If the wife’s perspective is adopted in the last scene, the text would show the mark of the identification of the cats.

But Lodge says:

[T]he narrator describes nothing that is not seen by either husband or wife or both. Yet it is not quite true to say that the narrator has no independent angle of vision: he has. As in a film, we sometimes see the wife from the husband’s angle, and the husband sometimes from the wife’s angle, but much of the time we see them both from some independent, impersonal angle. (28)

In other words, although David Lodge interprets that the last scene of “Cat in the Rain” is focalized through the husband’s perspective, he is indicating that we could argue that the scene is adopting the external focalization. Genette also points out:

[T]he distinction between different points of view is not always as clear as the consideration of pure types alone could lead one to believe. External focalization with respect to one character could sometimes just as well be defined as internal focalization through another. (*Narrative Discourse* 191)

It is not my task here, however, to decide which perspective is adopted in the last scene of “Cat in the Rain” since it is a matter of interpretation, but to point out that the formal factors of narrative discourse have effects on the reader’s interpretation of a story.

5

Other formal elements of narrative discourse pertaining to the narrators or the focalizations are paralipsis and paralepsis.

The definition of paralipsis given by Genette is “giving less information than is necessary in principle,...in the code of focalization governing the whole” (195). In other words, when a given narrative discourse adopts zero or internal focalization as its mood of representation of the story, if it does not disclose some information important to understand the story, its abstaining from the information is paralipsis.

In Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, the narrator “I” tells Mme. de Rochefide a story about Sarrasine and Zambinella. The narrator “I” knows everything about them; in other words the focalization the narrative discourse adopts is zero, that is, the narrator knows more than any of the characters in the story. He

can say anything anytime. But the most important information that Zambinella is a man is not revealed until near the end of the story. And this is one of the strong forces which makes the reader read this story.

Let me show you another canonical example. This is a scene from Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in which the first-person narrator "I" is the murderer.

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing. With a shake of the head I passed out and closed the door behind me.

I was startled by seeing the figure of Parker close at hand. He looked embarrassed, and it occurred to me that he might have been listening at the door.

What a fat, smug, oily face the man had, and surely there was something decidedly shifty in his eye.

"Mr Ackroyd particularly does not want to be disturbed," I said coldly. "He told me to tell you so."

"Quite so, sir. I...I fancied I heard the bell ring."

This was such a palpable untruth that I did not trouble to reply. Preceding me to the hall, Parker helped me on with my overcoat, and I stepped out into the night. The moon was overcast, and everything seemed very dark and still.

The village church clock chimed nine o'clock as I passed through the lodge gates. (41)

The narrator "I" killed Roger Ackroyd during the ten minutes between "The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine" and "It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread," but he did not mention anything about his murder.

Not only in the first-person narrative but also in the third-person one the same technique can be used. Roland Barthes cites the case of *The Sittaford*

Mystery where the murderer is referred to as “he,” but he “is described from within when he is already the murderer” (113). So paralipsis is not a matter of the person but of focalization, that is, the “*regulation of narrative information* (*Narrative Discourse* 162).” Although in Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” the specification of the operation is not made in the discourse, it is not paralipsis because the governing code of the narrative mood adopted in this story is the external focalization where the narrator says less than the characters know. The narrative abides by the code it chooses to represent the story.

Paralepsis is “giving more [information] than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole” (*Narrative Discourse* 195). In Chapter 7 of *The Great Gatsby* there is a passage which tells us how Myrtle was behaving immediately before she is hit by Gatsby’s car, and in Chapter 8 there is a long passage which recounts what Wilson, Myrtle’s husband, did after the accident. These are pieces of information Nick, the narrator, could not have attained unless we assume that somebody reported them to him because the narrative of this story is focalized on Nick’s perspective and Nick was not with Myrtle before the accident, nor was he with Wilson after the accident. According to this code, in principle, anything other than what Nick perceives should not appear in the discourse. If in “Hills Like White Elephants,” what the man and woman are discussing were disclosed as the characters’ inner thought, the particular part of the discourse would be regarded as paralepsis.

In this article the way in which narrative information is regulated has been discussed. Mainly there are two categories, voice and focalization. The voice, traditionally, has been discussed with the terminology such as the first

person and the third person. This is the field that has dealt with the matter of who the speaker of the story is. Instead of the first person and third person, we used homodiegetic and heterodiegetic to describe the narrator's position in narrative discourse.

Probably the matter of focalization is the most frequently discussed field in the study of narrative discourse under the heading of "point of view." This is the field that deals with the problem of from whose point of view the story is told. We have been using the terms such as omniscient point of view, restricted point of view, impersonal or objective point of view. Instead of them, zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization are employed in this article.

Depending on the combinations between the types of narrators and focalizations, the same story can be expressed in several different ways and create different effects on the reader and different significance of the story. We discussed how the effects of the rhetorical devices such as paralipsis and paralepsis are created by combining the types of the narrator and focalization. As we have observed, different effects that a story has on the reader partly result from how the story is told, that is, who tells the story or with whose perception events in the story are experienced. Storytelling is one of the most fundamental human activities. The ability to understand and create a story is innate as deeply as acquiring language itself, and when a story is told, how the story is told is as important as what the story is about.

Note

- 1 This article is revised and translated into English from previously published articles in the following publications: "Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants': Its Form and Message." *Kansai University Studies in English Language and Literature* 39. Osaka: Kansai University, 1999. 181-94; A Study of Narrative Structure in the First Person Novel: the Focalization in Albert Camus's *The Outsider* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*." *Kansai University*

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