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Narratology

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Abstract

The following is a very brief summary of Narratology. Narratology is an evolving, multifaceted method of studying the various forms of narrative or storytelling from the earliest linguistic and literary forms to the many mediums and genres of the present day. While encompassing many and different methodologies the basic thrust of Narratology is to accept the 'text' as it is presented to the reader and to experience the differing realities in the text and through the medium of the text. Many of the ideas and concepts presented in this paper deserve a more robust treatment and a much closer examination than given here.¹⁰

Introduction

Narratology is the science of narrative. It is a multi-disciplinary field involved in the study of narrative, which negotiates and incorporates the insights of many other critical discourses that involve narrative forms of representation. Narrative may, in a rather broad sense be defined as 'a work with a plot.' Narratology, in this sense, concerns itself with the study of the narrative aspects of both literary and non-literary genres and representations which are not strictly narrative, such as, lyrical poems, film drama, even advertisements. A more narrow definition would relate to linguistic narrative which concerns itself with any work, which is mediated through the discursive activity of a narrator, e.g. novel, short story, even history. Spanning between these two definitions there are of course a wide range of linguistic and nonlinguistic discourses, presentations and strategies which could and do include some or all of the elements of 'narrative'.

For the purposes of this short study I will adopt the following definition of 'narrative': '*A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.*'¹¹

Each medium or genre, whether it is text, drama, or film allows for a particular presentation of the fabula, i.e. the events or happenings of the plot of the narrative. Each in its own and sometimes quite different way communicates the story. The depiction of various perspectives and different points of

¹⁰ In *Narratology*, Eds Susana onega and Jose Angel Garcia Landa longman Group Ltd. 1996, one gets an idea of the scope of study involved in Narratology See table of Contents v & vi

¹¹ *Narratology*, op. cit. see p.3

view, the degree to which the narrator enunciates, informs, creates suspense, anticipation etc., these factors are at the discretion of the author and the skill with which he uses a particular medium or genre. In text, say a novel, the narrator is very often omnipresent, all-knowing and usually though not always anonymous. In classical Greek drama the chorus is the narrator, in film¹² it is the camera itself that unfolds the events of the story and can be termed the 'narrator', though some would argue that narration of its very nature must be enunciated in some fashion or other and that the visual unfolding or non-verbal revelation of the events of the story does not therefore qualify as narration in the strict sense.¹³ Each medium or genre is specific in the way it can manipulate and handle time within its presentation. Each narrative medium, because of its limitations, its potential to be innovative and its possibility to expand the boundaries of technical parameters, must adopt a specific analytical approach to narrative structures and levels.

Narratives have, of course, been around from time immemorial. Interest has tended to concentrate on the genre or medium through which they have been communicated, from the Greek epics, the Passion plays of the middle ages, the classic novels of Dickens, James and Trollop to the Oxo cubes advertisements, even history,¹⁴ can all come within the above definition of narrative.¹⁵ In the past thirty or forty years the study of narrative and 'pure' narrative form has regained some prominence.

All narratives are forged by reality and imagination. The basic subject matter of the narrative, whatever it may be, is subject to the forces of the outside world. Though it must be said that certain types of narrative, the folktale, the epic, etc. and archetypal characters such as the hero, the heroine, the villain have remained virtually constant throughout the history of storytelling. With regard to what stories are told and the way in which they are told, opinions vary as to whether the individual and his/her worldview is more dominant and influential than the cultural and social circumstances from which they arise. It can also be argued that the various literary traditions peculiar to a society or indeed a to a language is a third element on a par with reality and imagination in the determination of the type and form of a narrative.

There has always been, up to the recent past at least,¹⁶ a strong link between textual narrative and oral tradition. In the oral tradition of any culture one finds certain compositional elements, which remain

¹² Cf. *Narrative Mortality*, Catherine Russell, concerning the place of narrative in cinematography.

¹³ For Types of Narration see, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. Wayne C. Booth, The University of Chicago Press 1983, Ch 6, pp. 149-165

¹⁴ Georg G. Iggers in his book *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* gives a good analysis of the developments and changes which have occurred in the science of history. See Ch 10, The "Linguistic Turn": The End Of History as Scholarly Discipline, pp. 118-133.

¹⁵ Cf. Ch 2 of *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Wallace Martin, Cornell University Press, 1986, pp.31-54 for a detailed account of the various types of narrative.

¹⁶ Newman, in *A Grammar of Assent*, articulates very well the impact of rapidly developing technologies and scientific discovery and the importance of nurturing perspective in a world that is changing so quickly. Cf. p. 191, *A Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979 edition.

constant and easily recognizable, type-scenes, action motifs, characterization modes etc. These have been carried into the narrative text and are only subject to change and development very gradually. Often the study of literature has looked beyond the formal structures of the narrative to the subject matter and content to see how man and the world are mirrored in the literature. The text is regarded as a mirror through which the reader views the real world. The study of the text itself and the reality to be found there is often marginalized or disregarded. At the other end of the spectrum there is a school of thought which would content that the only reality is the text itself.

The use of literary devices, which, in a sense, distort or 'defamiliarize' reality and which are different from the normal ways of seeing and speaking, together with the presuppositions we bring to the text tend to shock us initially and perhaps urge us to revise our perception of our own reality.¹⁷ The problem or perhaps the blessings of the study of narrative is that we need constantly to study, to analyze, to understand the literary devices or formulas through which the plot is communicated and to revisit again and again the history of narrative and that way it has used and manipulated the basic laws of literary structure.

This is not to say that Narratology is merely the study of the elements, which made up a narrative or of the literary devices one finds within them. If one were to confine oneself to the above it would be bring the study of narrative to the level of deconstruction. Deconstruction of the text may have merit in itself, but it is only one part of the exercise. So also are the delimitation of the various parts of the narrative, the exposition of the plot and subplots, the characterization of the personae, the revelation of the points of view,¹⁸ focalization, keywords, wordplay, the ways the author or the narrator maintains the interest of the reader, his use of temporal, geographical or spatial indicators, the fate of the characters and the final resolution of the plot and its various complications.¹⁹ All of these combine together to convey and communicate the reality of the narrative, whether that reality is factual or fiction. There are some who are of the opinion that the narrative defamiliarizes the world or the reality of the world from which it takes its starting point and those who contend that it defamiliarizes ways in which we speak about the world. What is sometimes forgotten is it there is a reality within the narrative itself, which is not just 'represented' by the subject, form and content of the narrative. In the eyes of the reader the words of the 'character' is the character and when the character speaks he/she speaks to someone or about something. 'Representation' comes at the level of interpretation, which in turn springs from the reality to be found within the narrative, as it is presented to us and in the form it is presented.

¹⁷ Cf. IV The Individual's Understanding of Himself, p.43ff. *The Undiscovered Self*, C.G. Jung Redwood Press Ltd. 1990 (first published in 1958)

¹⁸ See Viewpoints and Interpretations pp.129ff. in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Meir Sternberg, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987

¹⁹ An extremely fine example of how all these elements are utilized to great effect can be found in Gore Vidal's *The Smithsonian Institution*, Random House, Inc., 1998.

The history of narrative can be traced through the history of various civilizations and in the history of languages.²⁰ Certain narratives, such as the epic, which refers to adventures and to a time far distant from the narrator and his audience, come to us in a unified language of an ordered hierarchical society. Interaction with different cultures and languages did not mean simply viewing the same 'reality' though different 'words' but it also mean experiencing different worldviews, different interests and attitudes to 'reality'. This in turn meant a development of narrative forms and methods of expressing the various strata of societies and languages communities.²¹ One path of development was found in the contrast between the language and style of a literary work and the language of nonliterary styles and everyday modes of speech. The discourse of characters and even the dialogues between characters also began to reflect the difference in class, language community, culture, point of view and expectation. The level of activity to be perceived within the narrative is particularly significant when there are seeming differences of agenda and perception between the author and/or the narrator and the characters present in the narrative and the audience to which the narrative is addressed.²²

The effort to perpetuate a unified style continued in certain forms of narrative right to the present day particularly in some forms of romantic literature, where unity of language, belief system and point of view are imposed by the author on narrator, characters and genre. Side by side with the above there developed a style in which the competing languages, belief systems, points of view were allowed to speak for themselves and given mutual recognition.²³ Most, if not all, narratives can be classified, basing classification on form and content, by time. The time in which a narrative came to literary form

²⁰ In many respects the history of narrative is commensurate with the history of the visual arts. See *From Giotto to Cezanne, A Concise History of Painting*, Michael Levey, Thames and Hudson, 1962

²¹ One can find a very good example of this on pp. 95-96 of *The Outsider*, Albert Camus, Penguin ed. of 1982.

'Even when you're in the dock, it's always interesting to hear people talking about you. I must say, during the prosecutor's speech and my lawyer's speeches, a great deal was said about me, possibly even more about me than my crime. Was there so much difference, anyway, between the two speeches. The lawyer raised his arms and pleaded guilty, but with mitigation. The prosecutor held out his hands and proclaimed my guilt, but without mitigation. There was one thing though, that vaguely bothered me. In spite of all my worried, I'd occasionally feel tempted to intervene and my lawyer would always tell me 'Keep Quiet, it's better for you.' In a way, they seemed to be conducting the case independently of me. Things was happening without me even intervening. My fate was being decided without anyone asking my opinion....'

²² The Urge to be creative both within and outside traditions and conventions is part of the study of the history and development of narrative. Charles Handy sums this up very well when he says; '...research into creativity has suggested as part of the make-up of the creative personality – the urge to express oneself. Why else do artists paint or poets write their intimate thoughts? Why do writers write...?' P. 32 *The New Alchemists*, Charles Handy, Hutchinson, London, 1999.

²³ Benchmarks, indicating insights and new possibilities in the way in which man expresses himself in relation to his world can sometimes be easily identified, such as the writing of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, regarded as one of the first of the Enlightenment thinkers, who in 1486 said the following: *We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and molder of yourself, you may fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shall prefer.*

Cf. pp.39-40, *Consilience*, The Unity of Knowledge, Edward O. Wilson Little, Brown and Company, 1998

characterizes a certain projection of a world and an effort to discover a true concept of reality, which in turn lends itself to classification within a particular time span.²⁴

While it is sometimes difficult to define exactly what narrative is, one can recognize certain characteristics which distinguish narrative from other forms of literature and other mediums of expression and communication. The history of narrative, of storytelling is rich in stages of development and diversification, some of which are easily recognizable and chronicled. The novel as a dominant literary form and its relationship to other forms of narrative has long been a matter of debate among literary critics. Some of the characteristics long thought to be peculiar to the novel and which differentiate it from other forms of narrative are no longer considered to be outside the domain of general theories of narrative, or have been adapted successfully by new emerging forms of narrative.

One can easily find examples of narratives to support particular theories. One of the challenges to Narratology is to formulate theories that speak to narrative in general. One way of doing this is to select a work that one is familiar with and then apply a theory to it to discover if the theory has any merit.

Narratives are formed within the confines of the conventions of particular ages, times, cultures societies and technologies. Certain circumstances of storytelling, of narratives differ from one time to another, scenes, events, careers, physical environment, social and political changes, all affect the ways stories are told and the forms and conventions which can be utilized in the shaping of a narrative.²⁵

What remains constant is the effort to convey and experience reality, the reality of the reader, the reality of the text and the reality behind the text.²⁶

²⁴ See Mikail Bakhtin's essay 'From the prehistory of novelistic discourse' pp. 104-136 in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds. David Lodge and Nigel Wood, Longman 2nd ed. 2000.

²⁵ One recent development of note is the presentation of scientific subject in narrative form, 'popular science'. Works such as 'A tour of the Calculus, by David Berlinski, Fermat's Last Theorem by Simon Singh, Richard Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker*, and *The Lying Stones of Marrakech* by Stephen Jay Gould, to mention but a few.

²⁶ See Pp. 63-70 of *Recent Theories of Narrative*, op. cit.