Exploring Points of View and Narrative Techniques in Fiction

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Approach

- English students in the EdUHK course *Approaching English Literature* are learning basic literary terminology and practising literary analysis, much as in the DSE subject.

- The students have limited previous exposure or can use more practice.

- Today, I present both methods of teaching narrative that I have used in *AEL* and other courses—

- — but I also present extensions of those methods. My intention is to offer some new or different avenues.

Approach

- To observe distinctions made in (classical) narratology

- To use these distinctions as teaching tools (yet without jargon)

"Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn."

—John Dewey

Find emphasis!

Literary analysis is only one thing: finding emphasis.

Or perhaps only two things

Repetition

When something repeats,
it creates emphasis.

Contrast

When two things contrast,
they create emphasis.

1 Concepts

2 Analysis of Story

3 Analysis of Plot Structure

4 Analysis of Narration

Emphasis in narrative

Story

repetition
contrast

Plot structure

repetition
contrast

Narration

repetition
contrast

1 Concepts

Six Stories, Three Concepts

Focusing on key features

Story
- 1914 James Joyce: "Araby"
- 1978 Anita Desai: "Games at Twilight"

Plot Structure
- 1986 Gish Jen: "In the American Society"
- 1998 Jhumpa Lahiri: "A Temporary Matter"

Narration
- 1985 Lorrie Moore: "How to Become a Writer"
- 1986 Tim O'Brien: "The Things They Carried"

Mieke Bal defines Terms

- "…a *text* is a finite, structured whole composed of language signs. A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent relates a narrative. A *story* is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused by or experienced by actors." (Bal 82)

Mieke Bal defines Terms

- "The distinction [between story and plot structure] is based upon the difference between the sequence of events and the *way in which* these events are presented." (83)

TIME distinguishes story from plot structure

- "narrative is a *temporal* sequence. …there is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative. …This duality … renders possible all the temporal distortions than are commonplace in narratives (three years of the hero's life summed up in two sentences of a novel….)" (Metz 87, writing about film)

What is a narrative?

Story

Or fabula
Or histoire
Or plot

And Plot structure

And story (or szujet)
And récit
And text

Distinguishing story from plot structure

- This distinction is fundamental and can be a primary point of departure for (any) students.

- An easy way to talk about the distinction is via adaptation. If it is possible to "make a novel into a film," what is transferred from one medium to another?

- Our answer is: story (what Bal calls *fabula*).

Terms

- "I know that story" is an everyday expression that isolates what I mean by "story." Normally, it does *not* mean "I remember each word of that book."

- Nobody says "I know that plot."

- This enables us to see that plot structure is something we might well *not notice* even as we are experiencing it.

- Whereas story is something we actively encounter, remember, and can summarise and transform.

- For students, the crucial thing is to introduce the notion of a detachable "story" that can be isolated from plot structure or narration and indeed from the text(s) in which it appears.

2 Analysis of Story

Getting Beyond Synopsis

If there is only one story

equilibrium > disequilibrium > new equilibrium
or
situation > conflict > resolution

(see similarly Vladimir Propp's 31 narratemes)
(see similarly Joseph Campbell's monomyth)

If there are only two stories

A person goes on a journey
or
A stranger comes to town

(where "person" and "stranger"
and "goes" and "comes" and
"journey" and "town"
may be metaphors)

If There are Seven <u>Stories</u>

- Overcoming the monster
- Rags to riches

- The quest
- Voyage and return
- Rebirth

- Comedy
- Tragedy

Booker, C. (2004). *The seven basic plots: why we tell stories.* London; New York: Continuum

Analysis of Joyce, "Araby"

- If there is one story?

- If there are two stories?

- If there are seven stories?

- This exercise works with students, who find the idea of a finite number of "possible" stories intriguing.

- The larger point is that when the framework doesn't fit, we learn more than when it does.
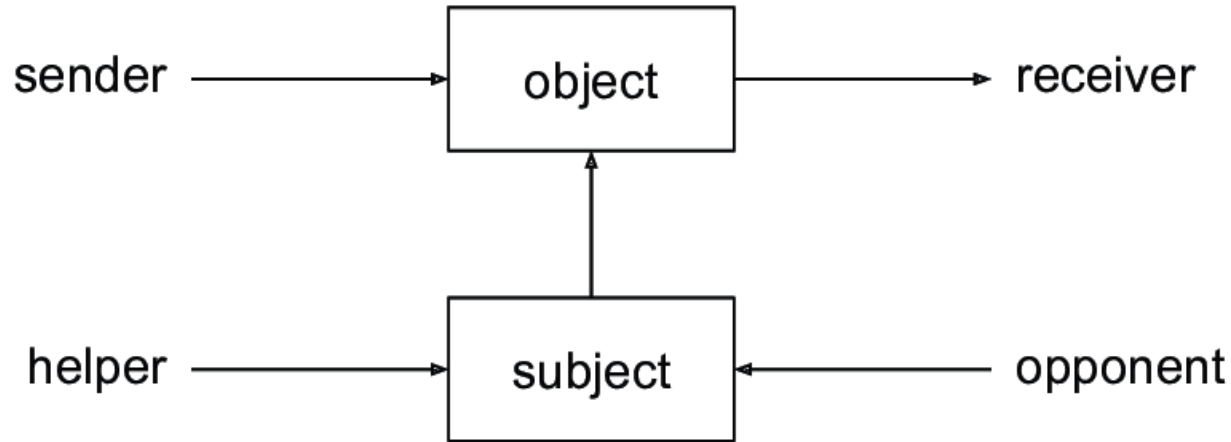
AJ Greimas' "Actantial" Model

Two concepts

- Actants
- Existents

Some are people, some are not.
We can call them "functions" instead.

Greimas: Six ~~Actants~~ Functions

Greimas: Six functions

Sender

introduces the object

Object

is desired

Receiver

benefits if the subject gets the object

Helper

helps the subject

Subject

desires the object

Opponent

resists the subject

Functions in "Araby"

Sender

the street [?]

Object

Mangan's sister

Receiver

the boy [?]

Helper

the aunt[?]

Subject

the boy

Opponent

the schoolmaster
the uncle
the train
the shoppers

"Araby" Exercise Observations

- The fact that we can very easily identify subject and object is significant.

- The fact that we can easily find many opponents in this story is significant.

- Lacking answers to one or more function is just as interesting, analytically, as "finding" all of them.

- Is there any major element of the story, of any kind, that is absent when we look at the story via Greimas' functions? (Maybe the house itself?)

Greimas in class

- Provide a handout with the six main functions to student groups.

- Together, gloss the object(s) as the main goal(s) of the subject.

- If more than one goal arises, assign different objects to different student groups.

- Emphasise that functions include but are not limited to characters.

- Emphasise that a single character might serve multiple functions at different points in the text.

- Ask students to complete the rest of the table, then discuss.

(adapted from Keen 29)

Analysis of Desai, "Games at Twilight"

- If there is only one story, explain this story.

- If there are only two stories, explain this story.

- If there are only seven stories, which one is this story? Explain.

- Analyse the story using Greimas' six functions.

Practising

Collaborate

Spend about 15 minutes in breakout groups, answering the questions.

Report

Return to the group and tell us one or two of your most interesting observations.

3 Analysis of Plot Structure

Aristotle on Plot Structure

- A paradigmatic plot movement, which for Aristotle is an ideal movement.

- Note that *plot time,* not *story time,* is on the x-axis.

Aristotle on Plot Structure

- The key question is how or whether this paradigm is manifested in any particular narrative.

- In the case of "Games at Twilight," we see something strikingly conventional:

  - Beginning: getting outside
  - Complication: hiding, waiting
  - Climax, reversal: bursting out to surprise everybody
  - Falling: their (disappointing) response

Aristotle on Plot Structure

- In the case of "Araby," one can say that the climax coincides with the end and the story therefore lacks falling action and resolution.

- This is an analytical observation that can contribute to an interpretation of Joyce's meaning.

- One could compare the two stories on this basis and show how the contrast distinguishes them despite their strong similarities in other ways.

- One could do the same using the Greimas exercise.

Aristotle on Lahiri

- In what ways does Lahiri's story conform to or depart from this paradigmatic model of plot?

- What do we learn about the story from these observations?

- Answer in the chat box.

Gérard Genette on Plot Structure

Order   Duration   Frequency

Genette on Plot Structure

Order

of related events

- Events occur in one order but are related in another.
- The differences in order, Genette terms "anachronies."

- Analepsis (sort of like "flashback")
- Prolepsis (sort of like "flashforward")
- In medias res ("in the middle of things")

Genette on Plot Structure

Order

of related events

- Often, original chronology is not easily reconstructed (or impossible).

- A match between story order and plot order, which might seem like a "basic" or "ancient" or "classical" form, really isn't; it is not really significant in and of itself to disrupt this kind of order.

Genette on Plot Structure

Duration

of textual time

- In narrative, there are usually major differences between story time (the amount of time passing in the story world) and plot time (the relative space given to events in words).

- Plot time can speed up or slow down relative to story time.

Genette on Plot Structure

Duration

of textual time

- *Dialogue* provides only slight distinction and so serves as a kind of reference point. ("isochrony")

- *Scene* links the two forms of time relatively closely; it "shows."

- *Summary* is more disjunctive. It moves story time along in little plot time; it "tells."

- *Description* "pauses" story time while using plot time; there can be a nearly complete distinction between the forms of time.

- *Ellipsis* skips forward in story time while using zero plot time ("ten years later"...).

Genette on Plot structure

Frequency

of related events

Common types
- Happened once and told once ("Singulative")
- Happened multiple times and told once ("Iterative")

Uncommon types
- Happened multiple times and told multiple times
- Happened once and told multiple times

[related to grammatical *aspect*]

Genette on Lahiri, "A Temporary Matter"

- Order: anachronies in first paragraph, small-scale:

  The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

- Order: "Six months ago, in September," larger scale and a canonical example of *in medias res.*

Genette on Lahiri, "A Temporary Matter"

- Duration: Alternation of scene and summary in first two pages.

- Duration: Use of summary in "Six months ago, in September."

- Duration: Use of scene as soon as the lights go out for the first time; the increasing use of scene, and dialogue, across nights of darkness one and two; return of summary for three and four and through the conclusion. (Contrast creates emphasis!)

Genette on Lahiri, "A Temporary Matter"

- Frequency: the story is primarily singulative/iterative, in conventional ways. There is no use of less common techniques. (Think about the possibilities for "first night, second night, etc.")

- Frequency: an exception is the events at the hospital, and references to going to the hospital. (Repetition creates emphasis!)

Analysis of Jen, "In the American Society"

- Would you teach this story using Aristotle's paradigmatic/ideal plot structure? If so, how?

- Would you teach this story using the elements of order, duration, or frequency? If so, how?

Practising

Collaborate

Discuss in breakout rooms for a few minutes

Respond

Return with one or two ideas for how these concepts can illuminate Jen's story.

4 Analysis of Narration

Conventional Distinctions

$1^{st}/3^{rd}$/otherwise

Limited/omniscient

Reliable/unreliable

Recurring problems

- Most narratologists do not regard these distinctions as very fundamental ones, and suggest there are other aspects of narration which have a greater effect on the meaning of a literary text.

- If these categories *are* used, which isn't wrong, at least they should not be used in a binary form, to identify a text as simply having such-and-such a kind of narrator.

- The most awkward are arguments that attempt to reason from the nature of the narration to a conclusion about the meaning of the work. This rarely proves convincing.

Grammatical Person (1ˢᵗ/3ʳᵈ)

- Narrative theorists downplay the importance of this category in the analysis of narration:

- "The novelist's choice, unlike the narrator's, is not between two grammatical forms, but between two narrative postures (whose grammatical forms are simply an automatic consequence): to have the story told by one of its 'characters' or to have it told by a narrator outside the story. The presence of first person verbs in a narrative text can therefore refer to two very different situations which grammar renders identical but which narrative analysis must distinguish":

- Virgil: "I sing of arms and the man"
- Crusoe: "I was born in the year 1632."
  - (Genette 244)

Grammatical Person (1st/3rd)

- We can also note the rather limited effect even of a radical option, like the second person (e.g. Moore's "How To Be a Writer").

- The initial shock of the unusual grammatical person wears off. By the third page, this "you" already has a name ("Francie").

- It is not a negligible aspect of the story, but it is not determining. The use of 1/3 is the same: not much can be said on this basis.

"Limited" and "Omniscient"

- Narratologists also agree that these categories are not very useful.

- All narrators are limited insofar as they say relatively little about anything. It's always selection.

- Even an "omniscient" narrator will be making continual choices about whose internal thoughts or feelings they are narrating, and these choices make a lot more difference to a text's meaning than the idea that a narrator simply is of a certain type.

- This leads us toward the concept of "focalisation," as theorised by Gérard Genette.

Focalisation

Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). New York: Cornell University Press.

(Un)reliability

- Similarly, even the most wildly unreliable narrator is telling the plain truth about many things much of the time. There's no way to dichotomise.

- Also, "unreliability" is used to describe a wide variety of types, from those related to ability and maturity to questions of ethics. The category encompasses too much.

- This leads us to the more flexible concept of "distance" as theorised by Wayne Booth.

Distance

Booth, W. C. (1983). *The rhetoric of fiction* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Focalisation, Genette

- In *Narrative Discourse,* Genette argues that the notions of "perspective" or "point of view," when used to analyse narrative, combine two separate ideas: the relationship of the narrator to the diegesis, and the relationship of the narrator to the story.

Or

- He points out that *who sees* is not the same as *who speaks*.

Or

- "The question "who is the narrator"? versus "who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective"?" (186)

Genette breaks down "Who speaks?"

By narrative level:
- **Internal: narrator is a participant in the story ("homodiegetic")**
- **External: not a participant ("heterodiegetic")**

By relationship to the story:
- Intradiegetic: narration is part of diegesis e.g. a letter that is part of a story
- Hypodiegetic: a character relates diegetic actions e.g. tells a story in a story
- Extradiegetic: a narrator relates diegetic actions

An act of narration can be extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, or homodiegetic-hypodiegetic. A text can involve all of the options or only one.

But immediately

- There is an asymmetry in the categories of **internal** and **external**:

- The heterodiegetic narrator is absent, and "Absence is absolute."

- Whereas the homodiegetic narrator is present, and "presence has degrees" (245).

SO, breakdown again:

Homodiegetic narrators can generally be**:**
-**autodiegetic**: they are protagonist heroes and the tellers of their own stories
-observers or bystanders.

Genette breaks down "Who sees?"

The narrative is "**focalised**" by the character who sees, who is also called the "**reflector.**"

Three forms of focalisation:

- **Non- or zero focalisation**: roughly a synonym for omniscience.

- **Internal focalisation**: "the story's events are focalised through one or more story-internal reflector characters, and narrative information is restricted to data available to their perspective, cognition or thought" (Jahn 98).

- **External focalisation**: outside views; camera eye.

Three Types of Focalisation

Zero

Internal

External

Narrator > character

Narrator = character(s)

Narrator < character

Three Types of ==Internal== Focalisation

Fixed

A single focal character

Variable

More than one, often in large sections

Multiple

As it sounds—often with the same events narrated repeatedly.

Narrator as focaliser?

- There has been a long debate about this.

- When the narrator is an older person telling a story in which a younger version of themselves is also the focaliser, it is probably best to treat these as two separate entities.

- But two relevant cases arise: the narrator who is external but who also continuously comments upon the story and shapes it with an overt purpose or set of values;

- And border cases, where we drift between external narration and internal focalisation, and sometimes find it difficult to determine the source of the perceptions related to us.

Analysing Focalisation

Tip on finding focalisers: look for sensation verbs (X heard, Y noticed). Doesn't determine but does indicate. Then:

- Where a text is internally focalised, who is the reflector or reflectors? Why?

- What relation does the reflector have to other reflectors and characters?

- What kinds of information are filtered through the reflector(s)? Sense information? Factual information? Views and comment? Why?

- If the narrator is also a reflector/focaliser, do the perceptions and views reflected differ from those of others in the text? Why?

[adapted from Jahn 105-6]

A bit of literary history

- The category of narration, unlike story and plot, can benefit from a bit of literary history, even for students.

- There has been a broad shift toward internal focalisation and away from other types of focalisation (zero/external).

- The "reflector" has in many cases displaced a more "present" homodiegetic narrator, like Irving's in "Rip Van Winkle," so there is longstanding pattern or trend which means that many of the possibilities Genette maps are rare.

A bit of literary history

- In English, this is largely attributable to Henry James. (In French, to Flaubert, and earlier than in English))

- James both pioneered and theorised the ideas of "effacing" the narrator and relating the novel through a "reflector."

- This mode, which was experimental in the 19c, has become a norm.

- For this reason, what Genette calls "internal focalisation" is actually (almost) all we need to think about.

Our Stories

Bearing in mind that it is *not ideal* to characterise entire texts in this way:

- Joyce: homodiegetic (autodiegetic), extradiegetic, narrator-focaliser (boy)
- Desai: heterodiegetic, extradiegetic, fixed internal focalisation (Ravi)

- Lahiri: heterodiegetic, extradiegetic, fixed internal focalisation (Shukumar)
- Jen: homodiegetic, extradiegetic, zero focalisation/narrator-focaliser (Callie)

- Moore: heterodiegetic, extradiegetic, fixed internal focalisation (Francie)
- O'Brien: heterodiegetic, extradiegetic, variable internal focalisation (Cross)

Analysis of Moore

Who speaks?

- The narrative is heterodiegetic, with the narrator not participating in the story.

- The narrative is extradiegetic, with narration emerging from beyond the diegesis.

- The narrator is "absent."

- All are common, but the story also differs from the norm, because the narrator is hardly a recessive voice. This is primarily the effect not only of grammatical person, but of the imperative mood.

Analysis of Moore

Who sees?
- The story consistently uses fixed internal focalisation. Notice: "you notice."

- Sometimes, the use of the future tense interrupts this focalisation:

> Decide that you like college life. In your dorm you meet many nice people. Some are smarter than you. And some, you notice, are dumber than you. You will continue, unfortunately, to view the world in exactly these terms for the rest of your life.

Analysis of Moore

- Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (2006) discusses Moore's book *Self-Help* (1987), in which "How to Be a Writer" appeared.

- The following analysis applies:

> Here we find three features generally absent from standard second person narration: the consistent use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee.[5] The protagonist is a possible future version of the narratee, though it soon takes on an independent, parallel existence. Equally noteworthy are the unspecified and virtually

Analysis of Moore

Moore's story takes advantage of its unusual features to achieve a remarkable result: that a diegetic isolation of narrator and focaliser creates an impression of diegetic *identity*:

1) that the story represents a bitter prognostication based directly on the narrator's own experience;

2) that the story is simply autobiographical, with the narrator relating their own experience under grammatical mask, and hence "in reality" **autodiegetic**.

From Focalisation to Distance

- As this conclusion suggests, what we really want to know is not how to apply terms to Moore's story, but how to describe the literary effect of Moore's choices.

- Wayne Booth's concept of "distance" can help with this.

Distance, Booth

- Booth adds to Genette that distinguishing narrative levels or types of narration doesn't tell us much about the infinite variation of possible relationships between these levels and types.

- Or about how those relationships might change across a text.

- For the purpose of literary analysis, describing that relationship (and its vagaries) is really the fundamental point.

Distance, Booth

- "Narrators…differ markedly according to the degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters in the story."

- "Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, or aesthetic [including] distances in time and space, differences of social class or conventions." (155-6)

Five Distances

1) Narrator to implied author
2) Narrator to characters
3) Narrator to readers
4) Implied author to readers
5) Implied author/readers to characters

Distances

- Booth is most interested in ethical or moral stances, as for example a novel in which the narrator is skeptical of some characters, or in which an implied author/readers are skeptical of some narrators.

- (Another way to describe this concept, then, is via the word "tone"—what is the tone taken by the narrator when discussing a character?)

Booth Analysis of Moore

- We have already established via an analysis of focalisation that there are two clearly defined figures, a narrator and an internal focal character ("Francie").

- How can we describe the distance(s) between these two characters? Does this distance change across the course of the narrative?

- How can we describe the distance(s) between the narrator and the other (minor) characters (the mother, the teachers, the fellow students)? Does this distance change across the course of the narrative?

Practising

Collaborate

Discuss how students can achieve better understanding of "The Things They Carried" using any of today's concepts.

Report

Present one or two key teaching ideas emerging from your discussion.

Analysis of O'Brien

- Story: it has one! Which?

- Story: analysis of functions

- Plot: a paradigmatic one?

- Plot: order-duration-frequency

- Narrative: Who speaks and who sees? How is the narrative focalised?

- Narrative: What are the most relevant distances among narrator, focaliser(s), other characters?

THANKS!

Any questions?

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Recommended

- *The Living Handbook of Narratology*
  - *https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/index.html*

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