



Aspects of Focalization in Narratological Perspective

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‘Narratology’ or the narrative theory has been very popular for the last few decades as a tool to look into literature in structuralist method. Its unfortunate that the Indian schools are not quite enthusiastic about the post-modern theories rapidly developing in the western countries and rather stick to the older modernist theories and new criticism in analyzing literature. It should be our responsibility to assimilate ourselves to the latest theories of the west to modify our critical qualities and understand literature better. Learning narratology may set the stepping stone for this optimistic endeavor.

The term ‘narratology’, coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969 in his phenomenal work ‘The Grammar of Decameron’ came out to be an important branch of structuralism, although it has its own perspective, quite different from structuralism. Narratology is actually the theory of narrative – to be more specific – structures of a narrative – its component parts and the various relations existing between these parts. Narratologists switch much of their critical attention away from the raw ‘content’ of the narrative, often focusing in its place on the narrator and narratee and a number of other aspects.

The first question arises where the arena of narratology actually lies, i.e. what one means by a ‘narrative’. The ‘Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory’ a narrative is ‘a written or oral account, whether true or fictional, of some situation or events’.

Genette defined ‘narrative’ to be verbally narrated texts, while Chatman and Bal take a broader view – anything telling a story can be termed narrative. Thus, jokes, cartoons, novels, films, paintings are as well dealt with in Narratology. We are however more concerned with literature very naturally.

Arguably, narrative has far wider perspective. Earlier E.M. Foster made us aware of the stylistic device called ‘point of view’. It is now called focalization in a broader sense. There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a phenomenal variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man’s stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances: narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short

stories, epic history, tragedy, drama [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation and so on. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies. Narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds. Besides for the individual types of narrative Barthes applied terms like 'genres', 'media', 'substances', and 'vehicles'.

If you come across a genre not accounted for by any prototype – there are radio plays, hypertext narratives, comic strips – we have now no restriction to try fitting it in. Even the forms may overlap each other in any possible combination.

Earlier there had been a concept of an overarching distinction between fictional and nonfictional narratives. Fictional Narrative presents an imaginary narrator's depiction of a story that came about in an imaginary world. A fictional narrative draws appreciation for its amusement and didactic significance. This type of narrative offers a vision of characters that might exist or might have existed, and a vision of things that might happen or could have happened. Although a fictional narrative may freely refer to actual people, places and events, it cannot be applied as a confirmation of what took place in the real world. A nonfictional discourse presents a real-life person's account of a real-life story. Unless there are reasons for questioning an author's credibility, a factual narrative can serve as evidence of what happened in the real world. In principle, the author of a factual narrative is accountable for the truth of its statements and can always be asked from where he had gathered those information. Because of the methodical connection between these concepts, many factual narratives such as historiographic texts or biographies have fictional counterparts like historiographic fiction, fictional biographies, etc. The concept or 'doctrine' of panfictionality problematises and subverts the fact/fiction distinction.

The point 'perspective' is, now-a-days, more technically termed as 'focalisation'—i.e. the means of selecting and restricting narrative information, of seeing events and states of affairs from somebody's point of view, of foregrounding the focalizing agent, and of creating empathy or irony with the focalizer, the focalizer being the agent whose point of view orients the narrative text. A 'focalizer' can be external or internal. 'Internal focalizer's can be 'character-focalizer', 'reflectors' or 'filter-characters'. 'External focalizers' are also termed 'narrator-focalizers'.

'Focalization' can occur in several ways. 'Fixed focalization' is the presentation of narrative facts from the constant point of view of a single focalizer, while 'variable focalisation' is the presentation of different episodes of the story as seen through the eyes of several focaliser. 'Multiple focalisation' is a technique of presenting an episode repeatedly, each time seen through the eyes of a different internal focaliser. 'Collective focalisation' takes place through either plural narrators or a group of characters. Genette suggests the term 'homodiegetic narration' to replace 'first person narration'. 'Homodiegetic narrators' do not essentially refer to themselves in the first person, there can be homodiegetic narrators who refer to themselves in the third person. The main criterion of homodiegetic narration is that the narrator must be

present in the story. In ‘autodiegetic narration’ the narrators is the central figure in the story. It is obviously a special case of homodiegetic narration. Depending on how the presence of a narrator is signaled in the text, narrators can be ‘overt’ or ‘covert’. An ‘overt narrator’ is one who refers to him or himself in the first person directly or indirectly addressing the narratee and offering a reader-friendly exposition whenever it is needed, a ‘covert narrator’ on the other hand, is one who exhibits none of the features of covertness, specifically, he/she is one who neither refers to him-or herself, nor addresses any narratee, one who has a more or less neutral voice and style.

‘Authorial narration’ involves telling a story from the point of view of a narrator who is not, and never has been a character in the story itself, whereas ‘figural narration’ is presenting the story’s events as seen through the eyes of a third person reflector character. Genette will term this ‘heterodiegetic narration plus dominant internal focalization’. A ‘reflector mode narration’ is the mode in which the story is presented as seen through the eyes of either a third person or a first person reflector character or internal focaliser. Some more additional elements of figural stories are to be closely noted – ‘referentless pronoun’, ‘familiarising article’, ‘slice of life story’ or novel’ and ‘epiphany’. Many figural stories begin with a third-person pronoun whose referent has yet not been established. These are termed ‘referentless pronoun’. Usually, the pronoun identifies the text’s internal focaliser. Similarly, a ‘familiarizing article’ presents new information as far as the reader is concerned in the guise of given information as far as a story-internal character is concerned. Thus focalization as a tool to narratological investigation opens up several new avenues, suggesting how meanings are constructed in narratives. We are optimistic that serious students of literature will come forward enthusiastically and proceed with tireless endeavor to assimilate aesthetics with the help of the mechanism of narratology.

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