Chapter 20

Understanding Narrative -II

Background

In this chapter we will continue with our earlier discussion on narrative, its key concepts, and theorists.

Fabula and Sjuzet

A text has a two-tier mode of existence that Russian Formalists call fabula (story) and sjuzet. While fabula is the raw material or the basic story, sjuzet is the transformation of the fabula into a narrative discourse of aesthetic form. Consider how Peter Suskind explores the mind of a serial-killer in his Perfume: The Story of a Murderer (1985).

Yes, he was Granouille the Great! Now it had become manifest. It was he, just as in his narcissistic fantasies of old, but now in reality. And in that moment he experienced the greatest triumph of his life. And he was terrified.

He was terrified because he could not enjoy one second of it. In that moment as he stepped out of the carriage into the bright sunlight of the parade grounds, clad in the perfume that made people love him, the perfume on which he had worked for two years, the perfume that he had thirsted to possess his whole life long... in that moment, as he saw and smelled how irresistible its effect was and how with lightning speed it spread and made captives of the people all around him---in that moment his whole disgust for humankind rose up again within him and completely soured his triumph, so that he felt not only no joy, but not even the least bit of satisfaction. What he had always longed for--that other people should love him---became at the moment of its achievement unbearable, because he did not love them himself, he hated them. And suddenly he knew that he had never found gratification in love, but always only in hatred---in hating and in being hated (p. 249).
You must note that when a novel is adapted into a film, generally the plot (story) takes over. I suggest you watch the film version of *Perfume*; I am sure you will miss several elements of Suskind’s *sjuzet*, in this otherwise well-made film. (2006)

**Hermeneutics**

The word traces its roots to the name of the messenger God Hermes, who was associated with transmuting what is beyond human understanding into something which human understanding can grasp. Hermeneutics essentially deals with the question of understanding the practice of interpretation; and also searches for a set of principles that will facilitate correct interpretations.

The scholarly names associated with the term are: Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) who built their theories upon the works of German theologians who worked on the development of methods of Biblical interpretation.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) are the important names in the German hermeneutic tradition; where Husserl’s theories of phenomenology had great implications for theories of interpretation.

E. D. Hirsch is credited for bringing the concept to the Anglo-American academia through *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). Interpretation has both supporters and detractors. In 1950, Archibald Macleish’s *Ars Poetica* emphasized that ‘A poem should not mean/ But be’; Susan Sontag took a similar position in *Against Interpretation* (1960), and in 1970 Roland Barthes’ reading of Balzac’s *S/Z* asserted ‘the hermeunitic code’ as the mainstay of literary narrative.

**Mise-en-abyme**

Term meaning "thrown into the abyss" and adapted from the language of heraldry to designate a part of a novel which is a replica in miniature of the whole novel; *Mise-en-abyme* leads towards an indeterminacy and a regress of duplications.
James Phelan and Rhetoric Narratology

Phelan (1951-) has developed and popularized the term ‘rhetorical narratology.’ In Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology (1996), Phelan implies that a rhetorical approach to narrative allows us to address the issues which are affective, thematic and ethical.

In Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative (2007), he posits, ‘can we read the same books?’ suggesting that shared experience in reading books are possible and desirable. The book includes a range of texts, such as Jane Austen’s Persuasion, Edith Wharton’s ‘Roman Fever’ and Ian McEwan’s Atonement. Scholars have observed a close affinity between Phelan and the New Critics, with his tendency to pay close attention to textual detail and a disdain for referencing to historical or biographical information.


Vladimir Propp and Morphology of the Folktale

Propp’s method of structuralist method of analysis was used in theories of narrative. In Morphology of the Folktale (1968), Propp states that although folk tales consist of a huge number of characters, they contain a relatively small number of functions. What he means that while there may be a large number of characters in folktales, the number of functions they perform is much smaller. Morphology categorizes the main characters as: Villain, Helper, Donor (magician), Female in distress, Dispatcher, Hero, and the False hero. (Though Propp draws on Claude Levi-Strauss’s analysis of myth, Levi-Strauss wrote a scathing essay on Morphology).

Narrative Levels:

A text may have more than one level of story. A character in one level may appear as the narrator of another. In other words, texts can have ‘stories within stories.’ These two narrative levels are typically referred to as ‘narrative’ and ‘metanarrative.’

Narrator: The author or character who produces the narrative. Narrators are classified according to the narrative level to which they belong and their participation in the
diegesis. A narrator who is outside the diegesis is an heterodiegetic narrator, and a
narrator who functions in the diegesis is a homodiegetic narrator. Read the following
extract from Gerard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*:

Gil Blas is incontestably the hero of the story he tells, Lockwood is incontestably not…
Absence is absolute, but presence has degrees. So will have to differentiate within the
homodiegetic type at least two varieties: one where the narrator is the hero of his
narrative (Gil Blas) and one where he plays only a secondary role, which almost always
turns out to be a role as observer and witness: Lockwood, the anonymous narrator of
Gatsby*, Zeitblom in Doctor Faustus---not to mention the most illustrious and most
representative one of all, the transparent (but inquisitive ) Dr. Watson of Conan Doyle. It
is as if the narrator cannot be an ordinary walk-on in his narrative: he can be only the star,
or else a mere bystander. For the first variety (which to some extent represents the strong
degree of the homodiegetic) we will reserve the unavoidable term autodiegetic. (p. 245).

If in every narrative we define the narrator’s status both by its narrative level (extra- or
intradiegetic) and by its relationship to the story (hetero- or homodiegetic) , we can
represent the four basic types of narrator’s status as follows: (1) extradiegetic-
heterodiegetic----paradigm: Homer , a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is
absent from; (2) extradiegetic-homodiegetic ----paradigm: Gil Blas, a narrator in the first
degree who tells his own story; (3) intradiegetic-heterodiegetic---paradigm: Scheherazade, a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent
from; (4) intadiegetic-homodiegetic---paradigm: Ulysses in Books IX-XII, a narrator in
the second degree who tells his own story (p. 248).

**Point of View:** Every narrative has a narrator. The angle of vision or perspective from
which events in a narrative are represented. Genette prefers the term "focalization" and
emphasizes the critical importance of not confusing "who speaks" (voice) with "who
sees” (perceptive). The narrator of the novel need not necessarily be the holder of its point of view.

R.K. Narayan in The Guide (1958) bisected the line of his story between an omniscient narrator and a key character in the novel, that is, the hero, Raju. While the first person point of view is used to describe Raju’s childhood, his relationship with other inhabitants of his town, Malgudi, his affair with Rosie, her rise to fame as a dancer, and his subsequent moral and social decline. The omniscient point of view is employed to give Raju a greater world-view, which runs parallel with his new-found status as a ‘reluctant’ guru. A mix of two approaches gives us a better insight into Raju’s character, and makes The Guide a coming-of-age novel. Henry James in Portrait of a Lady ( ) employs the device of an omniscient narrator, but at times the author steps in the narrative to offer his personal observations:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not---some people of course never do,---the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. (p. 1).

The choice of the point(s) of view from which the story is told is perhaps the most important single decision that the writer has to make. Imagine for example, the story of Aeschylus’ Oedipus being retold from Jocasta’s (Oedipus’ wife/mother) point of view. How different would that narrative be from Oedipus’? Again, how impactful would Anna Karenina be if told from the husband, Count Karenin’s point of view?

**Unreliable narrator**

The point of using an unreliable narrator is to reveal an interesting gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. This need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself, too late to profit by it. A well-known example of using the device of an unreliable narrator is Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw discussed earlier.
Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) is plotted with competing points-of-view in flashbacks, and details unreliable perspectives. The narrative is replete with facts submitted as evidence but immediately questioned. In other words, every narrator is untrustworthy, along with the overall film which dismisses the search for truth.

Stevens, the English butler in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1993) is an example of unreliable narrator, who suppresses his passions and beliefs to such an extent that the readers cannot take anything he says at face value.

Similarly, in the Chinese film *Hero* (2002), the messenger-hero, intriguingly called the Unnamed one, is an unreliable narrator. A nameless warrior is allowed an audience with the emperor who wants to know if the swordsman has really killed three potential assassins who once threatened the emperor’s life. The warrior narrates his different stories of how he rid the kingdom of the three enemies. The king, however, remains unconvinced and questions the tale, as do the viewers.

**QUIZ**

1. **Answer in brief:**
   
   i. Write a brief note on the concept of the ‘unreliable narrator.’
   
   ii. Explain what you understand by the narrative levels.
   
   iii. What do you understand by the term ‘point of view’.

2. **Fill in the blanks:**

   i. ………………wrote a scathing essay on Propp’s *Morphology*.
   
   ii. Hermeneutics deals with the practice of…………..
   
   iii. Gil Blas, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story is an example of………..paradigm.

**Answer key:**

2: i-Claude Levi-Strauss ; ii-interpretation ; iii- extradiegetic-homodiegetic
Suggested readings:


Suggested websites

- [http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnreliableNarrator](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnreliableNarrator)
- [http://web.viu.ca/guppy/crewlink5/unit_one.htm](http://web.viu.ca/guppy/crewlink5/unit_one.htm)