
NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE: AN ART

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Abstract

Narrative techniques have been considered as seminal to any work of art. It is the technique which helps in providing a meaning to the artist's madness of material. The raw material of the writer achieves a proper form with the help of the techniques employed, rendering a work of art which rides the crest of immortality. History is evidence of the fact that writers have made conscientious effort to choose the right technique in order to pen their thoughts. Fictional narratives, as we have them today, can be traced as far back as we have written records. But they differ from their original counterparts and a distinct line of development in the novel can be traced showing glimpses of the romance and then a movement from the Gothic novel through science fiction to fantasy works. Narrative is often viewed as an extraordinary complex term. Very often it is confused and interchangeably with story, form, plot or even the structure of a work of art.

Keywords: Narration, Technique, Cliché, Narratology, Homodiegetic, Heterodiegetic

Narrative techniques have been considered as seminal to any work of art. It is the technique which helps in providing a meaning to the artist's madness of material. The raw material of the writer achieves a proper form with the help of the techniques employed, rendering a work of art which rides the crest of immortality. History is evidence of the fact that writers have made conscientious effort to choose the right technique in order to pen their thoughts. It is no more a secret that the thousand – paged Stephen Hero by Joyce, underwent three drafts in ten years to become his masterpiece and also his most popular work A Portrait of the Artist as a Youngman. For, as the legend goes, dissatisfied with the looseness of the haphazard material that went into the making of the Stephen Hero, Joyce sought a suitable technique to give his novel a proper form. He ultimately settled for the Stream of Consciousness technique and rest as they say in history. So, any work of art is what it is not only because of 'what' it has to say but also because of the 'way' in which it is said.

Fictional narratives, as we have them today, can be traced as far back as we have written records. But they differ from their original counterparts and a distinct line of development in the novel can be traced showing glimpses of the romance and then a movement from the Gothic novel through science fiction to fantasy works. Narrative is often viewed as an extraordinary complex term. Very often it is confused and interchangeably with story, form, plot or even the structure of a work of art. Defining narrative succinctly Paul Colby states "narrative is a

particular form of representation implementing science.”¹ Accordingly it can be inferred that a narrative is a system of science, which can be verbal, written, aural, gestural, or iconic, in a particular sequence. In fact, the evolution of communication in terms of narrative language was an important factor in human revolution which shaped the evolution of human cognition, societies and human culture. However, now the fact that the art of narration i.e. story telling is as old as civilization has become a cliché. With the passage of time, in literally circles, narrative is often conceived as a sophisticated art form, rather than serving primarily a communicative function. For our purpose here or more generally for those of literature and cultural analysis, narrative art can be seen as “Intrinsically linked to language.”²

So, narrative by definition is the retelling of a story. Literally speaking, a narrative is a story which can be conveyed through pictures, songs, poetry, speech, fiction and non – fiction as well. When it switches over to the writing mode, its telling is relegated to a special person; it becomes a technique used by that person. This person who is consigned the duty of narration is the narrator and his perspective serve as a prism through which ideas are transmitted to the readers. Arnold Kettle, the English critic, in his famous introductory book on novels has said that most novelists, while writing their work, show a preference towards either life or pattern. What he means is that the novelists try either to present with clarity the feel of living or some interpretation of the importance of life itself. Expanding his thesis Kettle further deliberates that those novelists who start with pattern “try to ‘inject’ life into it, while the novelists who start with life try to make a pattern emerge out of it.”³

Thus, the distinguishing feature of a novel is that it is a narrative and whatever we read in it comes to us through some sort of ‘telling’ rather than ‘enacting’ (as in a drama). What happens in a novel is related by the novelist (though he may make some scene dramatic). In general, there are two types of narration, diegesis and mimesis. Diegesis means telling of a story while mimesis shows rather than tells, by means of action that is enacted. This is Plato’s distinction between the two terms. Later Genette popularized both the terms and owing allegiance to Plato presented his views in *Narrative Discourse* (1972), where the focus was not on the tale itself but on the way, it was told.

A novelist has to make certain choices in his attempt to reshape the material at his disposal which determines the technique he employs. Some of the most important are include:

Choice of a narrator or narrative source

1. Selection of a medium

2. Choice of language

3. Point of view

4. Tense. Tone and mood

5. Voice and perspective

The last two choices have been recent contribution by narrative theorists because the advent of structuralism in the twentieth century greatly helped and made easier the study of

narratives. Various Structuralist theorists provided illuminating analyses of narrative and its forms. This was the time when a closely related term “Narratology” was coined by Tivetan Todorov. The term is an anglicized version of the French word “Narratologie,” meaning the study of narrative structure. So it refers to that branch of literary study which is devoted to the analysis of narratives, and more specifically of forms of narration and varieties of narrator. It is assumed that “among the many pressing needs of literary theory – poetics in the broad sense – is a reasoned account of the structure of narrative, the elements of storytelling, their combination and articulation.”⁴ It is primarily focused on narrative analysis and on deconstructing existing narrative but simultaneously it provides a rich theoretical basis for narrative generation technique. It asserts that a narrative may be deconstructed into a story and discourse where the story represents a chronology of the information to be communicated and the discourse represents the manner in which several parts of the story are told or related. French Structuralists like Ronald Barthes and Gerard Genette said similar views. Seymour Chatman too sings the same song when he says “I posit a what and a way. The what of narrative I call its “story”; the way I call its “discourse.”⁵

Structuralist theory believes that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what we call the existents (characters, items or settings); and a discourse (*discours*), that is the expression by which the content is communicated. In simple terms it can be said that the story is that what in a narrative that is depicted, and the discourse is how. So it is said that “Every narrative – so this theory goes – is a structure with a content plane (called “story”) and an expression plane (called “discourse”).⁶

A brief discussion of the aforesaid mentioned choices before a novelist will help to provide a better perspective on the issue under consideration.

Choice of a Narrator: An author can choose to tell the story through the mediation of a personified narrator, who is a distinct person with individual characteristics like a name, personal history, gender, social class and specific likes and dislikes. Such narrators have either witnessed or heard about or even participated in the events about which they tell. They can thus be called ‘overt’ or ‘dramatized’ or ‘intrusive narrators’ like Mr. Lockwood in Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* or Nick Carraway in Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or the narrative source can’t be clearly defined or recognized as a distinct individual with a name or history. As such the narrator remains just a voice or a ‘telling medium’. They can be called ‘covert’, ‘effaced’, ‘non – intrusive’ or ‘non – dramatized’. Such disembodied narrator is actually an ‘authorial persona’ and not the author himself.

Further these dramatized narrators may be either ‘homodiegetic’ or ‘heterodiegetic’. ‘Homodiegetic’ means “same telling” and refers to such narrators who are a part of the story they relate or as Genette says “is present as a character in the story he tells.”⁷ For example, Jane Eyre is a homodiegetic narrator for the story she tells is her own. In contrast a “heterodiegetic narrator is one who is not a character in the story he or she narrates, but an outsider to it.”⁸ For example, Mr. Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* is a heterodiegetic narrator.

Apart from this there is a third party whom we call the 'implied author'. "As he writes, [the real author] creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's work..."⁹ Kathleen Tillotson has recently revived the term and called it the 'second – self'. By 'implied' we mean the one who is reconstructed by the reader from the narrative. He is not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator. The implied author, unlike the narrator, can tell us nothing. It has no choice and no direct means of communication. It instructs us silently through the design of the whole. The implied author establishes the norms of the narrative which are general cultural codes and whose relevance to the story can't be underestimated. Just as we have the implied author we also have an implied reader, by which we do not mean flesh – and – bones like us sitting in our living room and reading the book, but the audience pre – supposed by the narrative itself. The implied reader, just like the implied author, is always present.

Selection of a medium: -

Along with the choice of narrator lies the choice of a stated or implied medium. The printed words used to present a novel form its stated medium. But a novel may be presented to the reader as if it were spoken rather than written or thought. For example, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* has an interpreted comment on the very first page. Similarly, sometimes, the novelist does not state the implied medium and the novel is presented as a medium – less narrative. For example, *Wuthering Heights* opens like a diary but other parts of the novel read like thought processes of Mr. Lockwood.

Choice of Language:

A reference to the Choice of Language becomes imperative when we have considered the selection of language. For whether a novel is formal or colloquial, depends upon the type of narrator – personified or unpersonified. Language is no doubt the medium in which the novel is written but at times "novelists do often represent language: *Heart of Darkness*, for example, is not just in language, it represents language – the language uttered by Marlowe."¹⁰ So here we see that the actual medium, the language is also the implied medium. But it is not necessary that the actual and implied medium in a narrative be the same. In fact a novel may not have any implied medium at all, and the text of a novel may represent a state of mind; that is it may be a sequential representation of experiences and incidents translated by the novelist for the reader without any verbal help from character.

Point of View:

When describing a narrative, one of the most important aspects is the point of view from which a story is being told. Chatman has called it "one of the most troublesome of critical terms"¹¹ and which is replete with "plurisignification."¹² It can be used in three senses.

- a. "literal: through someone's eyes (perception);
- b. figurative: through someone's world view (ideology, conceptual system, *Wettanschauung*, etc.);

- c. transferred: from someone's interest – vantage (characterizing his general interest, profit, welfare, well – being, etc.)”¹³

Although authors have developed many different ways to present a story, the simplest classification which is generally recognized by all and can help as the basic framework for analyzing traditionally written novels is the broad division between third person and first-person narration. In the third person narrative, the narrator is a person outside the story and refers to all the characters by their names. For example, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. In the first-person narrative, the narrator is involved to a greater or lesser degree in the story and speaks as 'I'. For example, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Voice and Perspective:

These two terms can best be understood by asking two simple questions 'who speaks' and 'who sees'. At times, the narrative voice is different from the characters present in the novel. For example, in Katherine Mansfield's story *The Voyage* we are purged to see and feel through Fenella's eyes though the voice is that of a third person narrator who is semi – omniscient. So, the perspective is Fenella's but the voice is that of the narrator.

Tense, Tone and Mood:

Tense refers to the ratio between narrated and narrating time. It means that at times a novelist may devote twenty pages to describe one day in the life of the protagonist and five pages to describe fifty years. In a single novel, the relationship between narrated to narrating time may vary.

Tone refers to the attitude of the narrator towards the matter being related or narrated. For example, the tone of *Gulliver's Travels* is satirical throughout and the novel can be best determined in this vein.

Mood refers to the type of discourse used by the narrator. The term is taken from the theories propounded by continental critics. It can also be represented by the word 'mode'. In short mood or mode describes the relationship between what is narrated and its narration.

A novelist makes his choices out of these options thereby determining the technique of the novel. These choices are important, so far as technique is concerned, for the simple reason that 'who' tells a story and 'how' he tells it are relevant and affect a narrative. "...different narrator; different narrative media change a story, they affect not just we are told something but what we are told and what attitude we make towards what we are told.”¹⁵

It is the eighteenth century which is generally accepted as the period when novel, as an art form, developed wings and took to the air of fame. Since then novels have emerged as a stronger and more beautiful art form and a lot depends on the myriad techniques employed by different writers down the ages as experimentations to make their narrative appear both different and appealing. A novelist chooses from the many choices discussed earlier. The classification of novels has been done both on the basis of history as well as technique. A brief discussion here on the major novelists and their representative works since the eighteenth century will help us understand the modes of techniques and the way they have been employed by the skillful artist to immortalize his work of art.

The world of eighteenth-century novels is marked by the strong presence of Samuel

Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne, together called the 'four wheels of the novelwain'. Richardson is known for popularizing the epistolary technique through his novels Pamela or Virtue Rewarded (1740) and Clarrisa (1748). Being fully convinced in the art of letter writing he believed that letters could be used to portray the traits of the characters accurately. So he quickly adopted the epistolary mode which granted him the tools, the space and the freedom which he needed to develop distinctly different characters speaking directly to the reader.

An 'epistle' is an archaic term for a letter. The word 'epistolary' is derived through Latin from the Greek word 'epistole,' meaning a letter. So it is a writing directed or sent to a person or group of people, usually as an elegant and formal didactic letter. The epistle genre of letter writing was common in ancient Egypt as part of the scribal – school writing curriculum. A scribe is a person who writes documents or books by hand as a profession and helps the city in keeping track of its record. Therefore, an epistolary novel is a novel written as a series of documents. The usual form of writing is letters although diary entries, newspaper clippings, are also used sometimes. Later apart from letters, journal entries and occasionally newspaper reports were also included.

The first epistolary novel to expose the complex play that the genre allows was the seventeenth century work, named Love–Letters between a Nobleman and his Sisters (1684) which was penned by Aphra Behn and appeared in three successive volumes in 1684, 1685 and 1687. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the epistolary form was a matter of much ridicule, which resulted in a number of savage burlesques. The most apt and suitable example of this was Henry Fielding's Shamela (1741), which was written as a parody of Pamela. With the passage of time in the late eighteenth century, the epistolary novel slowly went out of use and fashion. Later novelists have opted for alternative devices in order to limit the narrative point of view to one or another single character. However, this technique is still occasionally revived – for example in Mark Harris' hilarious novel Wake up Stupid (1959) or more recently by Alice Walker in the Color Purple (1982) and Arvind Adiga in The White Tiger (2008).

Fielding has been known for popularizing formal realism in his novels Joseph Andrew (1742), and Tom Jones (1743). Formal Realism is defined as truth discovered by the individual through his senses. This novelistic convention was defined by Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel where he says that it aimed at a "full and authentic report of human experience."¹⁶ Therefore what defined the new narrative was less about content and more about the particularized way in which that content was presented.

So formal realism is a matter of construction over content. For example, in Tom Jones, the narrator enters the novel from the very beginning and rarely leaves for an extended length of time. Fielding fills the novel with heteroglossia. He uses different types of texts which include English, Latin, French and different form of English accents. The most original and memorable element of Tom Jones is the narrative voice. From a narratological point of view, the author is omniscient (he knows everything about the characters, is everywhere, in possession of truth). Fielding has used the third person narrative technique, the narrator is obtrusive because he

intervenes in the narration with warning, ironic comments and moral reflections about what happen. The tone used by fielding is conversational and ironic, the humor and sharp irony save his works from excessive sentimentality.

The picaresque tradition was popularized by Tobias Smollett through his novels *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) which later influenced writers like Dickens. Picaresque narrative emerged in the sixteenth century Spain though the most popular example *Gil Blas* (1715) was written by the Frenchman Le Sage. Such narratives are usually “realistic in manner, episodic in structure....and often satiric in aim.”¹⁷ It depicts in realistic and humorous detail, adventures of a roguish hero belonging to low social class, living in a corrupted society, by the wit. There a nearly seven qualities which distinguish the picaresque narrative form.

1. A picaresque narrative is usually written in the first person as an autobiographical account.
2. The main character is often of low character or social class. He or she gets by with wit and rarely pleads to hold a job.
3. There is no plot. The story is told in a series of loosely connected adventures or episodes.
4. There is little character development in the main character. Once a picaro, always a picaro. His or her circumstances may change but rarely result in a change of heart.
5. The picaro's story is told with a plainness of language or realism.
6. Satire is a prominent element.
7. The behavior of a picaresque hero or heroine stops just short of criminality.

Lawrence Sterne published *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* in nine volumes between (1759 to 1767) presenting a wholly new concept of form. He has used the first-person narrative technique and the narrator's personality and train of association determine the tone and organization of the narrative. “*Tristram Shandy* is on the surface a rambling and eccentric patchwork of anecdotes, digressions, reflections, jests, parodies and dialogues centering on the character and opinions of the narrator's father, Walter Shandy, and those of his brother, the narrator's uncle to be....”¹⁸

Sterne thus presents a very different kind of novelistic form and gave to the novel freedom never before enjoyed but which was to be celebrated and to be put to use in the twentieth century. So he has been considered as the most modern of the eighteenth century novelists because of “his attitude to time, to the individual consciousness, his use of shifts in perspective.”¹⁹

The nineteenth century saw the novel, which had taken strong roots in the eighteenth century, in its full blossom. The arrival of *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Bronte, on the literary scene created quite a stir because of its distinguished narrative technique. Bronte introduced two narrators – Lockwood and Ellen “Nelly” Dean. The primary narrator is Lockwood, who begins and ends the narrative and is recording the story that he hears from Nelly. So Nelly is Lockwood's inside source of information. But dramatic scenes have also been etched by Bronte and dialogues play an important part in the novel. Different levels of narration construct the

story of *Wuthering Heights*. Although there are two obvious narrators, a variety of other narratives are interspersed throughout the novel. The story is constructed through eyewitness account first through Lockwood followed by Nelly. The responsibility of Lockwood is shaping the framework of the novel whereas Nelly handles and promotes the intricate account of the personal lives of the characters.

However, the sweeping changes at the beginning of the twentieth century impacted the matter and manner of literary forms including the novel. With gods long dead, values crumbling, the relationship between man and his institutions (like religion, government) undergoing a sea – change, new concept of time as continuum (given by Henri Bergson); the revolutionary theories of psychology given by Freud and Jung, man's concept of 'reality' was bound to change. Since the nature of reality changed, fiction too had to undergo a change in order to survive. Old wine would not go in a new bottle. So, novel in the twentieth century began to do away with conventions. New style and structure became imperative because of the novelists' concern for experimentation, innovation and improvisations.

Closely linked with stream of consciousness technique is the interior monologue, sometimes used interchangeably for the former as suggestive of the name it hints at all that goes on in the of the character – as if he is talking to himself. So the name is "reserved for that species of stream of consciousness which undertakes to present to the reader the course and rhythm of consciousness precisely as it occurs in a character's mind."²⁰ There is minimal interference by the writer, who appears (if and when he does), as describer or guide who does not give any logical order to the ramblings of the mind.

As time had free flow in the novels of the twentieth century, flashback as technique was often used to recall and recreate the past. Flashbacks are recreations of scenes as memory or a reverie representing events that happened before the time at which the work opened. It is also known as 'analepsis' literally meaning 'back take'. Similarly, a narrative may 'flash forward' to hint at, or refer to an event which will happen later. Such parts of the narrative are called 'proleptic' literally meaning 'fore – take' when a story begins 'media's res', the writer uses both these modes to keep – up the narrative momentum – analeptic events to relate what has happened and proleptic tools to hint at things to come.

On the Indian front, the triumvirate – Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao had set the stage for the grand celebration of the Indo – Anglian novels that was to unfold in the coming years. They wrote under the influence of the English novelists, more in their modes of presentation of the story than on the matter of the story. Apart from these novelists who heralded the Indian English novel on the literary scene, the last two decades has witnessed a proliferation of novelists like Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Shashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Upmanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

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