

Reading Narrative: The Implications of Using Focalization in Narrative Fiction

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Abstract

This article is mainly focused on one of the elements of the narrative, focalization that is at work along with narration to produce desired literary effects. Focalization is basically a cognitively- minded narratological concept that deals with perceptual, psychological and ideological stances adapted in the narrative by either narrator(s) or character(s). In focalization studies we focus on the question of how the reader responds to the narrative drawing on the textual devices provided by the above stances. These assumed viewing positions attribute certain taint and color to narrative and help the reader to infer how the existents of the two levels of story and discourse perceive the fictional world and how they are related.

Key Words: Focalization, Genette's typology, types and facets.

1. Introductory Remarks

One of our significant experiences while we read a narrative or listen to it is that we unconsciously adopt a viewpoint and conceive the happenings of the narrative through that perspective. This is not what we bring to the narrative, but it is inherent in the making of the narrative, and the linguistic apparatus used in the text is responsible for the effects it produces. These linguistic artifices come to a narrative through nobody but the narrator. However, when we read the narrative, we feel divided between two stances: that of the narrator, the agent who tells the story, and that of another agent called focalizer whose viewpoint we have adopted and through whose senses we have seen and experienced the storyworld. This dichotomy is essentially a narratological concept and goes back to the distinction made between focalization and narration by Gerard Genette.

Understanding a narratological concept like this requires noting the difference between two levels of narrative proposed by structuralists i.e. story and discourse. Story is the sum of all the events that has happened in the fictive world of the narrative; all that the persons residing on the level of story have seen, heard, felt, experienced and judged about. Discourse is the telling of these events on the plane of text; our only access to the fictive world of story. In analyzing focalization, we take for granted the fact that the story is reflected in the discourse from several different stances and by different agents, either that be a narrator or a character. However, it is the narrator who ultimately verbalizes the artifact on which we have a grasp. Based on Toolan, when we study focalization, we try to find out the conceptual and perceptual position in terms of which the narrated situations and events are seen, felt, understood and evaluated (Toolan, 2001: 60) i.e. we determine the vantage point from which the narrative information is disposed.

2. Focalization: definitions and reorientations

As we said above, focalization is Genette's contribution to narratology. He used it first in *Narrative Discourse* as a critical term in contradistinction with narration to differentiate between "narrative mood" and "narrative voice". In point of view studies, this distinction is not clear and the focus is mainly on the question "who is the narrator?" at the expense of neglecting an equally important question "who is the person whose viewpoint orientates the narrative?" Sometimes a character serves as the focal point through whom we see the narrative. Based on what Genette proposes, there is an agent who tells us what happens in the fictional world of story. This agent called narrator, whether inside the story or outside of it, is capable of both expressing what he himself feels and perceives and what the characters on the plane of story see and feel. Sometimes narration and focalization coincide in one and the same agent and that is why Rimmon_Kenan claims that sometimes making a distinction between orientation and discourse-authorship is only a theoretical activity (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 71). Relatedly, Suzanne Fleischmann implies that changes in focalization do not lead to changes in narrative voice; it is the narrator who always verbalizes the angle of vision through which events in a text are filtered. What changes is the perception orientating the information, which can be attributed to both the narrator and character (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 217).

Manfred Jahn claims that Genette has drawn on four traditional approaches to come up with his idea of focalization: Warren and Brooks' point of view approach, built on the question 'who sees the story?'; Bouillon's vision approach based on the distinction among the vision modes of vision avec ('vision with' i.e. vision through a character's eyes), vision par derrier ('vision from behind' i.e. from omniscient narratorial vantage) and vision due dehors ('vision from outside'); Blin's field approach used in treating Stendhal's use of subjectivity restricted fields (restrictions de

champs); and Todorov's knowledge approach based on the questions whether the narrator knows more than, as much as, or less than the character (Jahn, 1999: 87). Genette uses these traditional approaches, exploits the gradability of selection and restriction and introduces a typology of focalization. What follows is a summary of Genette's typology and definitions quoted in Simpson's *Language, Ideology and Point of View*:

1. Zero focalization: used in narratives whose omniscient narrator says more than the character knows and communicates that in a neutral way; it provides the norm against which other types are defined.

2. Internal focalization: conceivable in narratives with restricted field or restricted omniscience, only fully realized in narratives of interior monologue or free indirect discourse.

3. External focalization: happens in a narrative where the narrator knows and conveys less information than what a character knows. This is because he has no access to the thoughts and feelings of characters. External focalization thus yields 'objectivist' or 'behaviorist' narratives (Simpson, 1993: 33).

Some inconsistencies are noted in Genette's typology due to a number of incongruent parameters involved in defining the terms. For example, in his discussion on external focalization, he shifts from the question 'who sees?' that is basic to the study of focalization to the question 'how something is perceived?' (that is the scale of access or non-access to the inside feelings). Besides, Bal points out the inadequacy of his zero focalization, since one cannot present any kind of event verbally without presenting it through a criteria vision. A narrator always has a way of seeing things that restricts his narration, therefore a neutral way of seeing things that is zero focalization, is impossible (qtd. in "Bon pied et Bon Oeil"). In short, Genette's typology has not met with general approval but it became a turning point in point of view studies.

3. Types of Focalization

Meike Bal and Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan adapted the above typology in a binary framework and tried to distinguish an object of focalization, a focalized, from its agent, the focalizer to shake off confusions originating from this incongruity in Genette's typology. They argued that in the same way that there is a focalizer who assumes a viewing stance, there is a focalized that falls prey to the focalizer's intrusion. Then, there emerges a four way typology to work with, based on the focalizer's position relative to the narrative: *internal* focalization vs. *external* focalization considering the position of the agent of the focalization and focalization *from within* vs. focalization *from without* concerning the extent of the focalizer's access or non-access to the inner life of the focalized (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 74-85).

The internal focalization is homodiegetic that is the locus of which is on the level of story and the medium of which is one of the characters. It can be easily detected in first person narratives. Let's consider the following extract from Salinger's "For Esme- With Love and Squalor" as an example of internal focalizer who reports his own viewpoint:

All the same, though, whenever I happen to be, I don't think I'm the type that doesn't even lift a finger to prevent wedding from flatting. Accordingly, I have gone ahead and jotted down a few revealing notes on the bride, as I knew her almost six years ago. (Salinger, 1952: 188)

The above extract is the opening of the character-focalizer's narrative that moves retrospectively. He is one of the main participants of the story whose sole, however unreliable, viewpoint provides a slant through which we perceive the fictional world of his narrative. The syntax seems complex, or as he claims, it is going to be "cunning", but as we move on, it becomes obvious that he suffers aphasia as a result of a breakdown in war. In contrast with this type, the external focalizer is heterodiegetic and exists on the level of the text within some distance from the characters that act and react on the

level of the story. He reports how the characters see, feel and assess their surroundings. It is commonly employed in third person narratives where the narrativizing stance of the external focalizer takes over that of the performing characters. In the following extract, the narrator-focalizer's perception of the situation is employed to establish the setting:

It was late and every one had left the café, except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the daytime the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late... (Hemingway, 1971: 150).

In the above extract, the narrator-focalizer introduces the place and time of the story and goes on to acquaint us with characters.

In order to distinguish the internal focalizer from the external one, Genette and Barthes suggested writing the given segment in first person. If this is feasible logically and we can attribute the perceptions to the character-focalizer considering the whole narrative, the segment is internally focalized, if not, the focalization is external. However Suzanne Fleischman argues against first-person substitution test, implying that it is a necessary condition for recognizing internal focalization but it is not sufficient. Sometimes in first-person narration (Like Camus' *The Stranger* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*) the grammatical 'I' is a linguistic marker that conveys two subjectivities: those of the narrating 'I' and the experiencing 'I'.

Considering the object of focalization, it might be *from within*, giving a detailed account of the character's feelings and thoughts or *from without*, sufficing to report the visible phenomenon. The use of external focalizer who perceives the existents of the narrative from within is common in Thomas Hardy's novels and most of 19th century English novels where an omniscient focalizer has an unlimited access to the inner life of the characters. As an example of this type, let's look into an extract from *Tess of*

the D'Urbervilles where the focalizer watches the baptizing scene and intrudes upon the inner feelings and attitudes of Tess and her siblings and comments on it:

Then their sister, with much augmented confidence in the efficacy of this sacrament, poured forth from the bottom of her heart the thanksgivings that follows, uttering it boldly and triumphantly.... The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a willing for questioning. She did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering and awful, a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common. (99-100)

In contrast with this type, if a focalizer experiences the events from without, he abstains from any intrusion into the characters' subjectivity and reports only their acts and gestures from outside. The following is the opening sentences of "The Killers" by Hemingway that are focalized from without by the narrator-focalizer who reports the particulars of setting and characters but moves on in the same tone with no access to the inner feelings and motives of the killers and the wanted:

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.

"What's yours?" George asked them.

"I don't know," one of the men said. "What do want to eat, Al? (63)

Related to this type, we can draw on Genette's illuminating remark. He suggested that in such narratives, like what we see in Balzac's, "the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings' (qtd. in "Use of Narratology"). The outcome of such a rendition is a behavioristic narrative in mood that depends mostly on guessing from outward manifestations.

4. Facets of Focalization

Besides the question of the subject and the object of focalization, which

has been the basis for the above typology, some questions remain regarding its boundary and implications. To come up with an answer for this question, Rimmon-Kenan adapted Uspensky's four planes of point of view along with the above typology and concluded that we should not limit this concept to its optical-visual significance. It should be defined in a wider sense to encompass the focalizer's attitudes, feelings and evaluations as well. Therefore, working in a broader textual network, focalization has three facets that are *perceptual*, *psychological* and *ideological* (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 78-81).

Having defined the perceptual facet as that aspect which relates to the focalizer's sensory experiences, Rimmon-Kenan argues that this facet has the two coordinates of time and place as its components that shapes and monitors the span of their possible perceptions. The narrative as it unfolds, it progresses in time and place and the linguistic marks in the narrative like deixes show the focalizer's orientations and help the reader to infer the temporal-spatial stretch of the narrative. Therefore, setting is shaped around the focalizers' temporal and spatial standpoint in the same way that the narrative reveals the focalizers and their narratives.

Time is one of those narrative elements that entail knowledge or we can claim that it is the basis of narrative since in W. Wolfgang Holdheim's words, narrative 'reflects and actualizes, nothing less than our experience as essentially temporal beings, it produces and verbalizes our very shaping of the flux of time' (Burton, 1996: 60). Relatedly, Paul Ricouer claims time is that structure of existence that reaches language in narrative and narrative is the language structure whose ultimate referent is temporality (Ricouer, [N.D]: 256). So, time is both a structural and structuring element that moves forward in a linear movement in its pure form. However, most of the time, this movement is violated in narratives and the order in which the events of the story have happened might be arranged and reoriented in accordance

with the temporal focalization of the narrator or the characters. As evidence, consider *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, the exposition of whose temporal scheme shows the extents to which the representation of time has been affected by different focalizers. There are rare cases where the temporal schemes of the narrative are rendered without too much dependence on the temporal orientations of one or other focalizers.

To study time in a narrative we should determine the zero point for time measurement i.e. when the first narrative begins and then try to find out the anachronies in order, duration and frequency of the events drawing on the linguistic indices of time. Thus, considering the basic temporal level of the story, there might be retrospective, synchronic and panchronic focalization of the events. When a focalizer is retrospective, he usually goes back to the past and invokes an event that has happened before that point in the text. These flashbacks to the past are important in that they complete the first narrative and enlighten the reader about a missing antecedent event (Genette, 94). Sometimes, they might add or change the meaning or the emphasis of an event. (Toolan, 2001: 64). Moreover, in a retrospective narrative, more than one version of the one and the same characters or narrator is given. The best example of this case where different and sometimes opposing orientations of the focalizer-narrator and focalizer-character bring about different focalizations of the self can be obviously seen in the autobiographical work by James Joyce, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The narrative moves retrospectively through different stages of the narrator-focalizer's life as a baby, a schoolchild, an adolescent, and finally as a young artist having certain aesthetic theories. At the same time each version of the narrator-focalizer that is a character in a certain stage focalizes the self and the world in a way that is unique to that time in the first narrative. The focalizer may also adapt a synchronic view of the events in the same way that we can discern in "The Killers" by Hemingway. There, the narrator-focalizer move

forward along with the happenings of the story and much remains untold such as the killers' motives and Ole Anderson's reason for dread--what in other cases, for example detective stories, might have brought about a retrospective narrative to make the points in question clear. Panchronic viewpoints are common in third person narratives where omniscient narrator-focalizers have access to all the possibilities of time—past, present, future. *Jude the obscure* is a rich narrative in this aspect in that there are moments when the narrator-focalizer comments both retrospectively and proleptically on Jude's predetermined fate as a result of his nature, his probable failure in "matrimony" and "scholarly pursuits".

In addition to anachronies in order, there might be some deviations from the norm in duration, the amount of text span allotted to the representation of an event, and frequency, the number of times a happening in a story is reported in the text. For example, a focalizer might be haunted with a significant event and bring it up several times and deal it in all its details to show its centrality. Exposing the temporal scheme of narratives is specially promising when we study modern literature such as James Joyce's works where we encounter fuzzy schemes of plot development slanted through the consciousness of different focalizers.

The events, as they are temporalized, need to be spatialized in order to be conceivable and made possible. In David Herman's words, making sense of a story entails situating participants and other entities in emergent networks of foreground-background relationships, i.e. the reader understands a narrative if she can infer a cognitively mapped storyworld (Herman, 2000, [N.P]). In order to map the trajectories of individuals and objects as they move or are moved along narrative paths, we should draw on the focalizer's viewing position. As we know, the space is formed around the viewing position assumed by the focalizer and the scope of which is an index to the focalizer's knowledge and control over his surroundings. The focalizer

might adapt a panoramic view and see the fictional world from a *bird's-eye* view that is how scenes are introduced in most of Thomas Hardy's novels, the impact of which is that man is shown in miniature, hardly perceptible, against the overarching nature. If the focalizer assumes a *close-up* view, it would be restricted to the details of the immediate situation and show the limitation of the focalizer's perceptions. Likewise, if the focalizer chooses a *stationary* viewpoint, it would be an index to a restricted consciousness, like what we see in "Evelyne" by James Joyce. Evelyne is too confined and paralyzed to act and her inner situation is crystallized in the spatial point of view attributed to her. The focalizer might also give a *sequential survey* of the happenings that involve a moving viewpoint similar to camera movement in films and gives the reader the task of piecing together the separate descriptions into one coherent picture (Simpson, 1993: 12-20). In a narrative, we encounter different combinations of these viewing positions crystallized through the use of deixes and locative phrases that lead the reader from one place to another in a definite order suggesting an initial viewing position and a chain of perceptions derived from that position. In this way each visual scheme contributes certain significance to the overall structure of the narrative.

In contrast with the perceptual facet, the psychological facet deals with the focalizer's attitude, knowledge and emotion. It refers to the way, in which the narrative is mediated through the consciousness of the focalizer; how the narrative framework is employed: does it provide an omniscient perspective or a restricted one? This facet gives a narrative its color and taint. In this facet, we can detect two components based on the focalized orientation to the fictional world that are cognitive and emotive.

The cognitive component relates to the focalizer's knowledge as it reflects the constructive realities of the storyworld. The extent of the internal and external focalizers access to knowledge that is in turn determined by the

fact whether they focalize them from within or from without leaves the perceptual input a matter of degree and so gives way to different emergent cognitive frameworks. The external focalizer who is able to penetrate the mental state of the existents of the storyworld has an unlimited knowledge and his cognition is the determinant factor in construction of the fictitious realities. The use of words of emotion and knowledge like “he thought”, “he knew”, “he felt”, etc. is an index to his unrestricted privilege. There are times when the internal focalizers themselves give a detailed account of their inner state; however their accounts are restricted to their impressions of themselves and their own past and present. Internal monologues and *verba sentiendi* used in appropriate syntactic structures corresponding the focalizer’s attitude and worldview is an index to this type. The following extract from *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf gives an instance of how the above mentioned cognitive types might be interwoven in a single segment of narrative (the impressions attributable to the character-focalizer, Mrs. Ramsay, are given in italics):

At the far end, was her husband, sitting down all in a heap, frowning. What at? She did not know. She did not mind. She could not understand how she had ever felt any emotion or any affection for him. She had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, as she helped the soup, as if there was an eddy... and she was out of it. ... Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy-that was what she was thinking, this what she was doing-ladling out soup-she felt, more and more, out of eddy.... (112-3)

In some narratives, the domain of the focalizers’ knowledge is restricted to the visible phenomena and their marked out accessibility is shown in their regular use of the words of estrangement such as ‘as if’, ‘apparently’, ‘it seems’, ‘it might have been’ or other corresponding syntactic structures. These structures show that they can only report the gestures and behaviors of the fictional existents and are not allowed to interfere with their inner lives.

The best example for the external focalizer who has no privilege to the existents' feelings and thoughts is easily noticeable in Hemingway's "The Killers" where no indication of the killer's motives and Anderson's dread is rendered. Let's again compare the following extracts from *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf to note the difference between these last cognitive types:

But what a face... What had made it like that? Thinking, night after night, she supposed-about the reality of kitchen tables, she added, remembering the symbol in which her vagueness as to what Mr. Ramsay did think about Andrew had given her. (210)

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time, she did it-a third time. And so pausing and so flickering... as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related... (213-4)

In the first extract, Lily Briscoe, one of the characters focalizes on Mr. Ramsay's mind another character on the same level with herself. Since she has a restricted access to his mind and she is alien to the nature of it, therefore she adopts the analogy Andrew has provided her with earlier about what his father thinks about. Andrew has given her the concrete analogy of "the reality of kitchen table" in order for her to reach at an understanding of what goes on in Mr. Ramsay's philosophical mind, though Lily can not tell us anything worthwhile about his mind. The second excerpt is focalized by the narrator who describes the process of Lily Briscoe's painting.

The psychological facet in its emotive implications is concerned with the questions of subjectivity vs. objectivity. When the narrative is slanted through an internal focalizer's consciousness or the account is given from within, the inner processes color the narrative. The outcome is an involved, idiosyncratic representation of the storyworld like what we saw in extracts

from *To the Lighthouse*, a narrative that is mostly focalized from within by different internal focalizers. Focalization from without, on the other hand, leads to a behavioristic, uninvolved rendition of the fictional world drawing on the physical manifestation without penetrating the focalized mind, in the same way that we perceive in “The Killers” by Hemingway.

Under the ideological facet, we deal with the norms of the text, or in Uspensky’s words, the “general system of viewing the world conceptually with which the events and characters are evaluated” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 81). Each focalizer has his own set of beliefs, values and categories by reference to which he comprehends the world. In traditional narratives, they might be seen as subordinate to the authoritative perspective of the narrator. However, the polyphonic nature of the narrative does not allow the narrator to sustain a hierarchical privileged position and gives way to an interplay among the different concurring, opposing or juxtaposing ideologies that exist on the same level with that of the narrator. The possible outcome is multiple readings of the narrative preferred by modern ideologically-oriented readings.

The question remains regarding how we can have an access to the focalizer’s ideologies. We can draw on their own behavior in the fictional world and their speech that is an even more direct and reliable way to infer their ideologies from. Therefore we should analyze the linguistic artifices at work to build up a picture of the focalizers’ ideological stances. One of these linguistic marks is modality that as Fowler suggests is the grammar of explicit comment, the means by which people express their degree of commitment to the truths of propositions they utter and their judgments on the states of affairs (Fowler, 1996: 165). The forms of modal expression include: 1) *modal auxiliaries* (may, must,); 2) *modal adverbs or sentence adverbs* (like certainly, probably, it’s certain); 3) *evaluative adjective and adverbs* (such as fortunate, luckily, regrettably); 4) *adverbs of knowledge*,

prediction and evaluation (believe, guess, approve); and 5) *generic sentences* that are generalized propositions which claim universal truth, and are usually cast in a syntax reminiscent of proverbs or scientific laws (Fowler, 1996: 166-167). In this facet, we try to identify the vehicle of ideology and his way of disclosing it in the text drawing on the modal devices. For example, in Thomas Hardy the omniscient external focalizer uses generic sentences along with overtly intrusive comments to establish the overall deterministic framework of his storyworlds and sometimes to introduce new scenes and events. However, the narrator-focalizer could not sustain a high position and sometimes gives way to character-focalizers. For example in *Jude the Obscure*, there are times when the distinction between the external focalizer and Jude, the internal focalizer, can not be easily drawn, especially because the ideological stances themselves remain ambivalent. This ambivalence is justified by Raymond Williams as an “anxiety of voice, [that entails] a shifting or doubleness of tone and style between those of the experienced countryman and the educated observer”(Boumelha, 2000: 6).

The facets attributed by Rimmon-Kenan to focalization really changed the doom of the concept and revitalized it in a more dynamic field of critical theory. Studying these facets assist us in interpreting multi-layered texts relying on several voices with different spatio-temporal, psychological and ideological orientations. They might also overlap and concur in one and same focalizer or occur in different opposing characters. So far it has become obvious that there is an incessant change from one type to another, one facet to another in a narrative and sometimes even in a single sentence.

5. Conclusion

Up to this point, it has surely become clear that if we dispense with the study of focalization we might miss a lot. In some narratives the character

puts a demand on us to see thing differently from what the narrator sees or a minor character wants us to see a major character in a different light from that of the major character himself or the narrator. Therefore, this concept lets us experience the narrative as a network in which different layers are involved.

With all the above said, we can conclude that focalization is primarily a cognitive concept the workings of which highly depend on the reader's response in order to bring about its network of effects. Focalization provides a shared window for the focalizer and the reader in a way that the reader draws on the linguistic devices used in the narrative to re-create the fictional world for himself. As a textual factor, it exists in a borderline between story and discourse and there always emerge confusions between this concept and narration on the level of discourse and characterization on the level of story. Studying focalization does not mean doing away with the concept of narration on behalf of focalization since focalization, though nonverbal, can only be expressed by language in a text through narration and the narrator does it in a way that it appears as 'a transposition of the perceptions of a separate agent' (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 82). We can not also cancel characterization in favor of focalization since focalization is primarily concerned with the focalizers' sensual and mental processes and stances while characterization provide us with other invaluable insights about the character.

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