

## **From Narratology to Pragmatics: Narrators, Focalizers and Reflectors in Some Works by William Faulkner.**

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Han aparecido muy pocos artículos últimamente respecto al uso de herramientas narratológicas para determinar el papel de los narradores en la ficción contemporánea. Este artículo intenta explicar el fallo de la narratología en la solución de los problemas planteados por la presencia y la ausencia del narrador en obras contemporáneas, a la luz de algunos intentos de análisis narratológico y con ejemplos de la novela de Faulkner *Light in August*. Las ideas de Genette con respecto a la focalización y el concepto de Bal de imbricación narrativa es de poca ayuda a la hora de explicar los cambios de ángulos de visión en Faulkner. Se presenta la teoría de que para la determinación de la presencia o ausencia de un narrador y en la determinación -muy compleja- del punto de vista, las herramientas de la narratología son satisfactorias a nivel de oración, pero no son adecuadas en otros niveles de discurso. La delimitación de voz y visión según Genette, no resulta suficiente para explicar la presencia de modalidad y otros signos lingüísticos que indican la presencia del narrador en una narración en tercera persona. En estos casos, parece que la pragmática literaria puede ofrecer una alternativa posible. Un análisis pragmático de un diálogo en el cuento «That Evening Sun» de Faulkner nos muestra cómo los diferentes niveles pragmáticos interaccionan para producir el contraste entre la inocencia de los niños protagonistas del cuento -reforzada por el papel del niño narrador- y la experiencia del lector, para aumentar el impacto causado en éste último.

The last few years have seen many publications whose contents can be summed up by the question «What is narratology and why do they say such horrible things about it?», many of them in *Poetics Today* which is the journal where our most important narratologists have published so many of their contributions to narratological analysis. It has been said that Genette's

ideas, as published in *Figures III* (Genette 1972) have been «perverted» by critics that have contributed to the development of narratology and especially by Mieke Bal. Examples of such thinking are EDMISTON 1989 and NELLES 1990, both published in *Poetics Today*. It has to be said that Genette's ideas are very general and permit ample discussion and development, including both precisions and amplification. Genette's contribution to literary criticism, establishing the difference between «who sees» and «who tells», i.e. between vision and voice is seminal, and has not been revised up to date, not even by Genette himself, either in *Nouveau Discours du Récit* of 1983 or in *Nouveau Nouveau Récit* of 1988.

Very few articles have appeared lately using narratological tools to determine the role of narrators in contemporary fiction. Bal herself has used narratology to demonstrate the pernicious influence of male chauvinism on language (BAL 1990) and other authors to determine what is invention and what is study of history (GENETTE 1990, STANZEL 1990) It would thus seem that fortune's wheel turns downwards for the narratological studies devoted to Genette's original creation: the focalizer. This paper ventures an explanation: the failure of narratology to come to terms with the problems of narrator presence and absence in modern writing lies in the confusion created between narrator and focalizers.

Mieke Bal's studies on what she terms «embedding», which describes what has traditionally been called «chinese-box technique» works extraordinarily well when limited to one single sentence. There are authors who refer to the embedding phenomenon to explain the hierarchy that can be established between implicit author, narrator and actors in the novel as does Marie-Laure Ryan in her article «The Pragmatics of Personal and Impersonal Fiction» in *Poetics* as early as 1981. This hierarchy does exist and Bal's system of embedding takes it into account: there are several focalizers and also «focalizeds», which are traced sentence by sentence as for example in her exhaustive study of *Wuthering Heights*. This novel is a typical example of one narrator handing over the telling to another narrator, and lends itself perfectly to Bal's purpose. Nevertheless, the existence of several narrators - or narrators/focalizers as Bal tends to merge them - does not automatically produce a superposition of voices - grammatical embedding is one thing and tales within a tale is something totally different. Embedding exists when one utterance reveals the co-existence of several points of view, but such co-existence does not produce a superposition of **narrators**.

If we analyse an imbricated structure such as

1. Peter noticed that I was thinking...

according to Bal (1980), there is a narrator in the first person - **I** - and a focalizer - **Peter**. This example, still according to Bal, can be complicated including several levels of perception:

2. Peter told me that in his dream he had seen a dead child looking through the window.

Bal would analyze this as a compendium of several perceptors «I», Peter and the dead child. I do not accept Bal's idea that the dead child could be in charge of a level of perception, not because the child is dead, but because «I» is the narrator (teller of the tale) and it is Peter who sees, or imagines, the dead child. The dead child does not introduce another point of view. Narrators in a first-person narration do not introduce another point of view, nor a new angle of vision. The narrator, in this case an «I», is limited to telling what Peter tells «me».

If this example is changed and a narrator in the third person is introduced:

3. Peter told Maria that he had seen Isabel's dead child looking at him through the window,

according to Bal (1984), the narrator is still a first-person narrator because the narrator is supposedly somebody who says «I tell you that Peter told Maria...». Bal's idea of there being no third-person narratives will not be commented on here. Bal identifies three levels, Fsub one Peter, Fsub two Maria and Fsub three Isabel's son, this latter being not a focalizer but a focalized. This distinction between focalizer and focalized is one of Bal's favourite features.

This type of analysis, which posits the replacement of the narrator for focalizers on several levels, does not work if the analysis, going from utterance to discourse, takes more than one sentence into consideration. This is why, in my analysis of Faulkner's works, the narrator has been found to be a superior entity, not compatible with the system of focalizers such as Bal understands it.

A term that has been present in literary criticism since Percy Lubbock (1921) is «reflector», parting from the idea of Henry James's «highly polished reflector», and this term I have found useful when analysing Faulkner. A reflector needs logistic help from the narrator. In Faulkner's third-person narrations with omniscient point of view or with limited point of view there is usually a narrator who appears by means of linguistic signs: modality, deictics, superposition of expressions uttered by a protagonist that indicates doubling of identity, all this combined with changes of angles of vision that can make us look at a certain scene from different points of view - using different characters' eyes or seeing the scene from a vantage point («from above»). In Faulkner, such changes in angle of vision can occur several times in one single short paragraph. The changes from one angle to another are so frequent and so abrupt that there can be no question of attributing them to different agents.

One instance is illustrated by a scene in *Light in August*, where Lena is sitting by the road waiting for a wagon. She had seen this same wagon when she walked past it «a mile back down the road». Page eight in the 1977 Penguin edition brings the wagon into sight, in one single line cast in the present. The narration lapses back into past tense, to sum up Lena's movements from the moment she passes the wagon on the road up to the moment it reaches her. The change in time is accompanied by a change in place, as Lena passes the wagon a mile back. Reflection is lodged in Lena but the narrator is still present, as is shown by no less than three typical markers of narrator presence:

4. She saw it and she saw the two men squatting beside a barn beyond the fence. She looked at the wagon and the men once: a single glance all-embracing, swift, *innocent and profound*. She did not stop: *very likely* the men beyond the fence had not seen her even look at the wagon or at them. Neither did she look back. She went on *out of sight*, walking slowly, the shoes unlaced about her ankles, until she reached the top of the hill a mile beyond. Then she sat down on the ditchbank, with her feet in the shallow ditch, and removed the shoes. After a while she began to hear the wagon. She heard it for some time. Then it came into sight, mounting the hill. (*Light in August* p. 8, italics added)

Lena is not narrating the passage herself and she is not the focalizer either. She reflects part of it, but she is not the only reflector. She might have described her own glance as «swift and all-embracing», but the

adjectives «**innocent and profound**» reveal the presence of another mind, qualifying and passing judgement. The reference to the men beside the barn who **very likely** have noticed Lena but who are not aware of Lena's powers of perception is another marker of narrator presence. But as Lena walks by, there is a change in reflection: Lena does not look back, but the narrator tells us that the two men are watching her. «She went on **out of sight**». Lena surely cannot watch herself walking out of sight, nor does she disappear out of the reader's sight. What she does is walk out of Armstid's and Winterbottom's sight, and their short role as reflectors anticipate their comments on Lena on the following page. As soon as Lena reaches the top of the hill, reflection is again lodged in her mind.

The Armstid-Winterbottom episode gives us a good opportunity to observe Lena and her physical appearance as she walks past the farmers on the road. The importance of Armstid and Winterbottom -apparently two minor characters whose presence in the story might be taken as an excuse to introduce a humorous scene - lies in the fact that they produce an important change in perspective: the omniscient narrator changes his vantage point and limits his field of vision. The scene/dialogue between Armstid and Winterbottom is rendered in the past tense, and the change into the present occurs just as Armstid halts the mules in front of Lena. This change in tense indicates that Lena is back again as an actor: present tense indicates that her journey progresses. The description of Lena as she is waiting for an invitation to climb into the wagon is reflected by Armstid. The passage abounds in verbs indicating perception. The words used are subject to repetition and there is no semantic complication whatsoever: **see** and **look** are the only verbs of perception employed. Variation is expressed by the addition of prepositions indicating direction: **look back, look ahead, look up**. Both protagonists perceive each other but they never look at each other directly. Armstid's mind is used for reverberating the impressions.

If the narrator's function as an intratextual but not necessarily intradiegetic organizing device is emphasized, the usefulness and thus the importance of the term focalizer diminishes considerably. If the focalizer is necessarily intradiegetic it follows that it must be a character in the story.

The difference between focalizer and reflector resides in the fact that a reflector has no voice and is limited to the use of sensory faculties. A focalizer covers a much broader area of narrative discourse: as soon as

a character describes an event or the workings of somebody's mind (his own mind or other characters' minds) he is a focalizer. It has to be noted that a change from reflector-mood to focalizing requires the presence of a narrator, as it always occurs in a third person narrator environment. This is what happens in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, where deictics indicate narrator presence even in extracts such as the one where Quentin talks to himself «two different Quentins talking in not-language» and which starts «This demon Sutpen...». The presence of the demonstrative clearly points to a filtering entity. The problem, as so often in Faulkner, is to find out whose consciousness is filtering.

The problems that appear in narratological analyses as illustrated above have their root in a confusion among levels: it is not only the narrator and the characters who perceive, see and tell in a novel: at the same time as their voice and vision come through to the reader, another level is superposed. The reader adds to the immediate perception of a scene, where characters interact, accumulated knowledge that contains presuppositions at sentence level and allows inference to be formulated in the subsequent deductive process. In determining the different levels and interpreting them, going from sentence in description and from utterance in dialogue to discourse, pragmatics has an important role to play. Not many pragmatic readings have been produced up to date. The pragmatic analysis performed by Michael Stubbs (1987) to demonstrate that Hemingway's short story «Cat in the Rain» is not ambiguous is based on a scrutiny of propositions and presuppositions produced by summarising the story. The approach developed recently by a research group in Vigo (see VARELA, forthcoming) is different, as it starts with dialogue and works bottom-up, instead of going top-down from summary to characters' utterances. One of the inconveniences of a top-down analysis is that it mixes two points of view: the one originating in the (implied) author and the other originating in the reader. A merging of points of view is not possible: human beings look at things and events first from one point of view, then from another, but not from two points simultaneously.

In one of Faulkner's short stories, «That Evening Sun» , where dialogue plays an important part, the possibility of using a pragmatic type of analysis is very tempting. There is a character who frames the events but does not take part in them. The person who takes part in the story is his younger ego, who is an acknowledged first-person narrator in a very special environment: that of scene/dialogue which excludes quotation and

narrative embedding. There is no explicit handing over of the task of narration. The transition from frame to story is practically imperceptible in this short story, giving rise to confusion in interpretation.

«That Evening Sun», begins with a long paragraph which describes the Jefferson streets fifteen years after the story's main action. The narrator is Quentin, telling the story in the first person at the age of twenty-four. Quentin is standing on the square. A comparison is established between the activity on the square now and fifteen years ago. Quentin is acknowledged as a narrator as soon as the pronoun «we» appears (p. 290). The tense used is the conditional, describing the things that the character Nancy (the black woman who used to do the cleaning for the Compson family) «would» always do. This indeterminacy in the past is maintained during the first two pages in the short story (pp. 289-290). A change then occurs as a scene is presented:

5. - and we would throw rocks at Nancy's house until she came to the door, leaning her head around it without any clothes on.'What yawl mean, chunking my house?' Nancy said, 'What you little devils mean?' («That Evening Sun» p. 290)

The change from conditional past to the use of the simple past in a scene/dialogue structure marks the change in perspective from the twenty-four-year-old Quentin to the nine-year-old Quentin. Apart from the break in narration type, there are no other formal marks to indicate the change from one acknowledged first-person narrator to another. The problems that arise when trying to maintain two sustained visions filtered through two different consciousnesses are patent in this story where Faulkner uses a first-person narrator in oblique narration and then introduces another, who is a character in the Nancy story. Both first-person narrators are intradiegetic, and they are the same person but not the same character. All formal traces of the older, wiser narrator disappear completely when the time frame is changed from conditional indicating habit in the past to consecutive scenes/dialogue with inquit phrases in the past tense. All reference to circumstances that lie outside the possibilities of interpretation of a child are given in the child's own idiom: there is no presence whatsoever of the older mind. The fact that the story has been interpreted as narrated with «multiple point of view» will have to be ascribed to the fact that the shadow of the framing narrator hovers over the scenes which include conversations referring to Nancy's pregnancy and the father of her child.

The difficulties that appear when trying to apply a narratological analysis to Faulkner are great. No pragmatic study has been published so far, and I believe it could be revealing to apply a study of non-verbal relevance and inference to this story. It might reveal whether the interpretations offered of this story as containing two narrators are adequate. (HARRINGTON ET AL 1952:54-59; FREY 1953:33-40; HENRIQUES (1982:123-134). HENRIQUES (1982:126), referring to the older Quentin, even goes as far as to maintain that «the fact that Quentin effaces himself emphasizes his role as observer, as it gives the other characters more involvement in events». The confusion between a narrator's interpretation, which would have been perceptible if another narration type had been chosen, such as for example quoted memory monologue (COHN 1983), and the reader's interpretation of a simple transcription of dialogue is at the root of the divergence of opinions presented with reference to this short story. In scene/dialogue narration type, characters' speech and behaviour are presented, and the reader interprets using clues presented.

The following scene gives important information about Nancy and Jesus and the shape of Nancy's belly:

6. ...Jesus was in the kitchen, sitting behind the stove, with his razor scar on his black face like a piece of dirty string. He said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress.

«It never come off of your vine, though,» Nancy said.

«Off of what vine?» Caddy said.

«I can cut down the vine it did come off of,» Jesus said.

«What makes you want to talk like that before these chillen?» Nancy said. «Whyn't you go on to work? You done et. You want Mr Jason to catch you hanging around his kitchen, talking that way before these chillen?»

«Talking what way?» Caddy said. «What vine?»

This scene can be interpreted on three main levels, following SPERBER AND WILSON (1986) and VARELA (forthcoming): Character level, narrator level and reader level.

**1. Character level** includes 2 layers

a) **Caddy's layer**, taking utterances at face value.

and

b) **Nancy's and Jesus's layer**, including knowledge common to both: Nancy is pregnant and Jesus is not the father. New information for Nancy is that Jesus, through an indirect speech act implies a threat to kill the father of the child. Jesus continues using the watermelon metaphor, so the little girl Caddy expresses her confusion. Nancy who is in possession of situational knowledge common to Jesus and herself, immediately infers the meaning. What is more, she finds it so evident that she takes for granted that the children present will also understand it. She upbraids Jesus and sends him out of the kitchen, threatening him. Nancy and Jesus share knowledge which Caddy and Quentin have no access to.

**2. The narrator level.** 9-year-old Quentin is the narrator, or rather transcriber, of the dialogue. The text as quoted here shows no evidence of his presence and he does not interpret what the characters say. We therefore have to take the context into consideration. Previous information has been given by young Quentin about a problem Nancy has had with a certain Mr Stovall, for whom she has «worked» three times without being paid. The quotation marks around work are the reader/analyser's, as Quentin evidently has no idea what kind of job Nancy performed. Nancy is taken to jail where she tries to kill herself. The jailer cuts her down. She is naked, but she is alive. A sublevel can be spotted here: the **Authorial intrusion level**: When Nancy is cut down by the jailer, a scene which is included in the summary on the page previous to the quotation, «her belly is **already** swelling out a little, like a little balloon.» The narrator, Quentin, nine years old, would certainly not use the time adverb **already**, because he does not know that Nancy is pregnant. The childish expression «swelling like a little balloon», clearly marks it as the younger Quentin's «mindstyle». (FOWLER 1979)

**3. Reader level.** The reader has access to all the levels, by degrees, and can make up the total picture from subsequent inferences. No narrator spells out the fact that Nancy is pregnant: it is the interaction between character and narrator levels that allow the reader to interpret.

The effect in *That Evening Sun* is produced by the clash between the reader's experience and the children's innocence. In the scene quoted above, this is reinforced by Caddy's expression of childish surprise. What's wrong with cutting down a branch of vine? Irony is produced here by the clash between a linear dialogue and its context.

The question asked by Quentin at the end of the story, when the worst is supposed to have happened to Nancy, has been interpreted by critics as pronounced by the older Quentin, but there is nothing in the text to warrant such an interpretation.

7. «'Who will do our washing now, Father?' I said» («That Evening Sun», p. 309)

Some critics have maintained that this is a callous comment that comes out of the mind of the older Quentin (HENRIQUES 1982: 119-134). If the «I» who utters this comment is the -presumably-innocent nine-year-old Quentin, it is the readers and not the older Quentin who add their superior knowledge to this natural childish remark.

«That Evening Sun» contains a framing device that is typical of the short stories where Quentin Compson takes part. MATTHEWS (1989), whose essay discusses *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and three short stories, establishes the relationship between the frames and the circumstances of the narrative's production. The stories found themselves on a «double movement» produced by the narrator in the framing device. In the case of «That Evening Sun», Matthews says, the story returns to an adult perspective mentioning suicide («That Evening Sun», p. 291), but he also admits that «the frame refuses to establish that perspective» (MATTHEWS 1989, p. 82), i.e. the older Quentin does not take part in the events that follow his introduction. I agree with Matthews' comment on the frame, and would like to assert the value of pragmatic analysis to prove it.

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