



## THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*A narrative, story or tale is any account of a series of related events or experiences, whether nonfictional (memoir, biography, news report, documentary, travelogue, etc.) or fictional (fairy tale, fable, legend, thriller, novel, etc.).*

Narratives can be presented through a sequence of written or spoken words, still or moving images, or any combination of these. The word derives from the Latin verb *narrare* (to tell), which is derived from the adjective *gnarus* (knowing or skilled). Along with argumentation, description, and exposition, narration, broadly defined, is one of four rhetorical modes of discourse. More narrowly defined, it is the fiction-writing mode in which the narrator communicates directly to the reader.

Oral storytelling is the earliest method for sharing narratives. During most people's childhoods, narratives are used to guide them on proper behavior, cultural history,

formation of a communal identity and values, as especially studied in anthropology today among traditional indigenous peoples.

Narrative is found in all forms of human creativity, art, and entertainment, including speech, literature, theatre, music and song, comics, journalism, film, television and video, videogames, radio, game-play, unstructured recreation and performance in general as well as some painting, sculpture, drawing, photography and other visual arts, as long as a sequence of events is presented. Several art movements, such as modern art, refuse the narrative in favor of the abstract and conceptual. 1



Narrative can be organized into a number of thematic or formal categories: non-fiction (such as definitively including creative non-fiction, biography, journalism, transcript poetry and historiography); fictionalization of historical events (such as anecdote, myth, legend and historical fiction) and fiction proper (such as literature in prose and sometimes poetry, such as short stories, novels and narrative poems and songs, and imaginary narratives as portrayed in other textual forms, games or live or recorded performances). Narratives may also be nested within other narratives, such as narratives told by an unreliable narrator (a character) typically found in the genre of noir fiction. An important part of narration is the narrative mode, the set of methods used to communicate the narrative through a process narration (see also "Aesthetics approach" below).

A narrative is a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narrative (although there may be more than one of each). Narratives are to be distinguished from descriptions of qualities, states, or situations, and also from dramatic enactments of events (although a dramatic work may also include narrative speeches). A narrative consists of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse), in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot, which can also mean "story synopsis").

The category of narratives includes both the shortest accounts of events (for example, the cat sat on the mat, or a brief

news item) and the longest historical or biographical works, diaries, travelogues, and so forth, as well as novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms. In the study of fiction, it is usual to divide novels and shorter stories into first-person narratives and third-person narratives. As an adjective, "narrative" means "characterized by or relating to storytelling": thus narrative technique is the method of telling stories, and narrative poetry is the class of poems (including ballads, epics, and verse romances) that tell stories, as distinct from dramatic and lyric poetry. Some theorists of narratology have attempted to isolate the quality or set of properties that distinguishes narrative from non-narrative writings: this is called narrativity.<sup>3</sup>

In India, archaeological evidence of the presence of stories is found at the Indus valley civilization site, Lothal. On one large vessel, the artist depicts birds with fish in their beaks resting in a tree, while a fox-like animal stands below. This scene bears resemblance to the story of The Fox and the Crow in the Panchatantra. On a miniature jar, the story of the thirsty crow and deer is depicted, of how the deer could not drink from the narrow-mouth of the jar, while the crow succeeded by dropping stones into the jar. The features of the animals are clear and graceful. Owen Flanagan of Duke University, a leading consciousness researcher, writes, "Evidence strongly suggests that humans in all cultures come to cast their own identity in some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers. Stories are an important aspect of culture. Many works of art and most works of literature tell stories; indeed, most of the humanities involve



stories. Stories are of ancient origin, existing in ancient Egyptian, ancient Greek, Chinese and Indian cultures and their myths. Stories are also a ubiquitous component of human communication, used as parables and examples to illustrate points. Storytelling was probably one of the earliest forms of entertainment. As noted by Owen Flanagan, narrative may also refer to psychological processes in self-identity, memory and meaning-making. Semiotics begins with the individual building blocks of meaning called signs; semantics is the way in which signs are combined into codes to transmit messages. This is part of a general communication system using both verbal and non-verbal elements, and creating a discourse with different modalities and forms. In *On Realism in Art*, Roman Jakobson attests that literature exists as a separate entity. He and many other semioticians prefer the view that all texts, whether spoken or written, are the same, except that some authors encode their texts with distinctive literary qualities that distinguish them from other forms of discourse. Nevertheless, there is a clear trend to address literary narrative forms as separable from other forms.

This is first seen in Russian Formalism through Victor Shklovsky's analysis of the relationship between composition and style, and in the work of Vladimir Propp, who analyzed the plots used in traditional folk-tales and identified 31 distinct functional components. This trend (or these trends) continued in the work of the Prague School and of French

scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes.

In literary theoretic approach, narrative is being narrowly defined as fiction writing mode in which the narrator is communicating directly to the reader. Until the late 19th century, literary criticism as an academic exercise dealt solely with poetry (including epic poems like the *Iliad* and *Paradise Lost*, and poetic drama like Shakespeare). Most poems did not have a narrator distinct from the author.

But novels, lending a number of voices to several characters in addition to narrator's, created a possibility of narrator's views differing significantly from the author's views. With the rise of the novel in the 18th century, the concept of the narrator (as opposed to "author") made the question of narrator a prominent one for literary theory. It has been proposed that perspective and interpretive knowledge are the essential characteristics, while focalization and structure are lateral characteristics of the narrator.

The role of literary theory in narrative has been disputed; with some interpretations like Todorov's narrative model that views all narratives in a cyclical manner, and that each narrative is characterized by a three part structure that allows the narrative to progress is. The beginning stage being an establishment of equilibrium—a state of non conflict, followed by a disruption to this state, caused by an external event, and lastly a restoration or a return to equilibrium—a conclusion that brings the narrative back to a similar space



before the events of the narrative unfolded.<sup>4</sup>

Other critiques of literary theory in narrative challenge the very role of literariness in narrative, as well as the role of narrative in literature. Meaning, narratives and their associated aesthetics, emotions, and values have the ability to operate without the presence of literature and vice versa. According to Didier Costa, the structural model used by Todorov and others is unfairly biased towards a Western interpretation of narrative, and that a more comprehensive and transformative model must be created in order to properly analyze narrative discourse in literature. Framing also plays a pivotal role in narrative structure; an analysis of the historical and cultural contexts present during the development of a narrative is needed in order to more accurately represent the role of narratology in societies that relied heavily on oral narratives.

A writer's choice in the narrator is crucial for the way a work of fiction is perceived by the reader. There is a distinction between first-person and third-person narrative, which Gérard Genette refers to as intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrative, respectively. Intradiegetic narrators are of two types: a homodiegetic narrator participates as a character in the story. Such a narrator cannot know more about other characters than what their actions reveal. A heterodiegetic narrator, in contrast, describes the experiences of the characters that appear in the story in which he or she does not participate. Most narrators present their story from one of the following perspectives (called narrative modes): first-

person, or third-person limited or omniscient. Generally, first-person narrator brings greater focus on the feelings, opinions, and perceptions of a particular character in a story, and on how the character views the world and the views of other characters. If the writer's intention is to get inside the world of a character, then it is a good choice, although a third-person limited narrator is an alternative that does not require the writer to reveal all that a first-person character would know. By contrast, a third-person omniscient narrator gives a panoramic view of the world of the story, looking into many characters and into the broader background of a story. A third-person omniscient narrator can be an animal or an object, or it can be a more abstract instance that does not refer to itself. For stories in which the context and the views of many characters are important, a third-person narrator is a better choice. However, a third-person narrator does not need to be an omnipresent guide, but instead may merely be the protagonist referring to himself in the third person (also known as third person limited narrator).

A writer may choose to let several narrators tell the story from different points of view. Then it is up to the reader to decide which narrator seems most reliable for each part of the story. It may refer to the style of the writer in which he/she expresses the paragraph written. See for instance the works of Louise Erdrich. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is a prime example of the use of multiple narrators. Faulkner employs stream of consciousness to narrate the story from various perspectives.



In Indigenous American communities, narratives and storytelling are often told by a number of elders in the community. In this way, the stories are never static because they are shaped by the relationship between narrator and audience. Thus, each individual story may have countless variations. Narrators often incorporate minor changes in the story in order to tailor the story to different audiences.<sup>5</sup>

The use of multiple narratives in a story is not simply a stylistic choice, but rather an interpretive one that offers insight into the development of a larger social identity and the impact that has on the overarching narrative, as explained by Lee Haring. Haring analyzes the use of framing in oral narratives, and how the usage of multiple perspectives provides the audience with a greater historical and cultural background of the narrative. She also argues that narratives (particularly myths and folktales) that implement multiple narrators deserves to be categorized as its own narrative genre, rather than simply a narrative device that is used solely to explain phenomena from different points of view.

Haring provides an example from the Arabic folktales of *A Thousand and One Nights* to illustrate how framing was used to loosely connect each story to the next, where each story was enclosed within the larger narrative. Additionally, Haring draws comparisons between *Thousand and One Nights* and the oral storytelling observed in parts of rural Ireland, islands of the Southwest Indian Ocean, and African cultures such as Madagascar. "I'll tell you what I'll do," said the smith. "I'll fix your sword for you tomorrow, if you tell me a

story while I'm doing it." The speaker was an Irish storyteller in 1935, framing one story in another (O'Sullivan 75, 264). The moment recalls the *Thousand and One Nights*, where the story of "The Envier and the Envied" is enclosed in the larger story told by the Second Kalandar (Burton 1: 113-39), and many stories are enclosed in others.

Narrative is a highly aesthetic art. Thoughtfully composed stories have a number of aesthetic elements. Such elements include the idea of narrative structure, with identifiable beginnings, middles and ends, or exposition-development-climax-denouement, with coherent plot lines; a strong focus on temporality including retention of the past, attention to present action and protention/future anticipation; a substantial focus on character and characterization, "arguably the most important single component of the novel" (David Lodge *The Art of Fiction* 67); different voices interacting, "the sound of the human voice, or many voices, speaking in a variety of accents, rhythms and registers" (Lodge *The Art of Fiction* 97; see also the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin for expansion of this idea); a narrator or narrator-like voice, which "addresses" and "interacts with" reading audiences (see Reader Response theory); communicates with a Wayne Booth-esque rhetorical thrust, a dialectic process of interpretation, which is at times beneath the surface, forming a plotted narrative, and at other times much more visible, "arguing" for and against various positions; relies substantially on the use of literary tropes (see Hayden White, *Metahistory* for expansion of this idea); is often intertextual with other literatures; and commonly



demonstrates an effort toward bildungsroman, a description of identity development with an effort to evince becoming in character and community.<sup>6</sup> Within philosophy of mind, the social sciences and various clinical fields including medicine, narrative can refer to aspects of human psychology. A personal narrative process is involved in a person's sense of personal or cultural identity, and in the creation and construction of memories; it is thought by some to be the fundamental nature of the self. The breakdown of a coherent or positive narrative has been implicated in the development of psychosis and mental disorder, and its repair said to play an important role in journeys of recovery. Narrative Therapy is a school of (family) psychotherapy. Illness narratives are a way for a person affected by an illness to make sense of his or her experiences. They typically follow one of several set patterns: restitution, chaos, or quest narratives.

In the restitution narrative, the person sees the illness as a temporary detour. The primary goal is to return permanently to normal life and normal health. These may also be called cure narratives. In the chaos narrative, the person sees the illness as a permanent state that will inexorably get worse, with no redeeming virtues. This is typical of diseases like Alzheimer's disease: the patient gets worse and worse, and there is no hope of returning to normal life. The third major type, the quest narrative, positions the illness experience as an opportunity to transform oneself into a better person through overcoming adversity and re-learning what is most

important in life; the physical outcome of the illness is less important than the spiritual and psychological transformation. This is typical of the triumphant view of cancer survivorship in the breast cancer culture.<sup>7</sup>

Personality traits, more specifically the Big Five personality traits, appear to be associated with the type of language or patterns of word use found in an individual's self-narrative. In other words, language use in self-narratives accurately reflects human personality. The linguistic correlates of each Big Five trait are as follows:

Extraversion – positively correlated with words referring to humans, social processes and family;

Agreeableness – positively correlated with family, inclusiveness and certainty; negatively correlated with anger and body (that is, few negative comments about health/body);

Conscientiousness – positively correlated with achievement and work; negatively related to body, death, anger and exclusiveness;

Neuroticism – positively correlated with sadness, negative emotion, body, anger, home and anxiety; negatively correlated with work;

Openness – positively correlated with perceptual processes, hearing and exclusiveness

Human beings often claim to understand events when they manage to formulate a coherent story or narrative explaining how they believe the event was



generated. Narratives thus lie at foundations of our cognitive procedures and also provide an explanatory framework for the social sciences, particularly when it is difficult to assemble enough cases to permit statistical analysis. Narrative is often used in case study research in the social sciences. Here it has been found that the dense, contextual, and interpenetrating nature of social forces uncovered by detailed narratives is often more interesting

and useful for both social theory and social policy than other forms of social inquiry.

Sociologists Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein have contributed to the formation of a constructionist approach to narrative in sociology. From their book *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (2000), to more recent texts such as *Analyzing Narrative Reality* (2009) and *Varieties of Narrative*

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