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Seeing Each Other, Seeing Oneself: Juggling Multiple Viewpoints in Fiction

Abstract:

Novels with variable focalisation complicate characterisation by providing access to the thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, making available several concurrent versions of each character – a character's interpretation of itself, and other characters' perceptions of it. This character's perceptions in turn influence our reading of the others, and so understanding character in such narratives is a matter of constant negotiation, of weighing up what we know of A with what they say of B and vice-versa. Characterisation therefore becomes a matter of juggling subjective information, not only for readers but also for writers, as we locate our understanding in the margins where A and B overlap. I will explore this concept from both a reading and writing perspective as it emerges in Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1998 [1994]) and my creative PhD, 'The Birthday Party'.

Biographical Note:

Brooke Dunnell is currently completing her second year of a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia. Her creative work has been published in *Best Australian Stories 2009* and in the 2006 collection *Allnighter*. Her story 'Nice Ladies', inspired by Michael Chabon's 'Werewolves in Their Youth', was a runner-up in the 2009 *Harper's Bazaar*/Orange Prize Short Story Competition.

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Introduction

Characters in fiction are constructed by various means. Literary theorist Uri Margolin (1990: 7) has identified five ways by which a character's traits may be imparted to readers: explicitly by direct narratorial statements; or implicitly, by either intratextuality or description of the character's physical appearance, mental actions, or relations to other characters. While ultimately all five aspects are utilised, this paper will consider only the last two: the way in which one character not only interacts with but also *represents* another by way of unmediated thought. It is this which is most likely to be subject to a two-way channel of information, as multiply-focalised narratives convey different characters' voices and views of one another contemporaneously, a diversity that is integral to the novel form, according to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Weighing up how characters perceive each other in narratives where focalisation changes is hence a dynamic process, a kind of juggling act, for the reader as well as for the writer. I will therefore consider both Rick Moody's (1998 [1994]) variably-focalised novel *The Ice Storm* and my own creative practice in showing how readers and writers may negotiate the complexity of differing character perceptions in novels with multiple points-of-view.

Margolin's (1990: 7) essay refers to the fact that one character's view of another informs both, arguing that 'characterisation statements made by a narrative agent about himself [sic] or about any other agent always implicitly characterise their maker, but are valid as regards their object only if not controverted by the narrator'. That is, the narrator has the potential to overtly confirm or reject characters' portrayals of one another. However, this does not always occur: The narrator may remain in the background or be unreliable, leaving us to locate our understanding among the observations and judgments of multiple subjectivities.

Negotiating the Hoods in Moody's *The Ice Storm*

The following reading of Moody's novel pays attention to the points where characters provide a mental assessment of themselves or of another character. At the same time I will provide a theoretical background for how readers may interpret these assessments.

The events of Moody's narrative take place over the weekend of the American Thanksgiving, 1973, with each member of the Hood family – father Ben, mother Elena, teenage son Paul and teenage daughter Wendy – becoming the focus in a regular pattern. This variable third-person focalisation is complicated by the use of a dramatised narrator who is mostly backgrounded but who makes occasional self-reference. At the end, however, it is revealed that the narrator is in fact the son telling the story twenty years later: '[T]hat's how I remember it anyway. Me. Paul. The gab' (Moody 1998: 279). It is interesting to compare this narrator with a more traditionally omniscient one, as Paul's frequent withdrawal into the background gives the narrative an air of transcendent knowledge, though his embodiment actually localises it: He is 'the imaginer of all these consciousnesses of the past' (206). Paul is basically guessing, which calls into question the accuracy of the perceptions he imparts to us.

However, it is not indicated that Paul is an unreliable narrator, as such: readers are given no reason to distrust what he tells us, and in practical terms the narrative

operates similar to any other with variable focalisation and impersonal narration as Paul the narrator does not expressly confirm, reject or augment any of the observations, thoughts, or beliefs of the characters, even those of his younger self. Rather, the personalisation of the narrator reflects the concerns of this paper as Paul can be seen as attempting to understand and contrast the individual points of view of his parents and sister by immersing himself in each.

The term 'focalisation', theorised extensively by Gérard Genette (1980), is often more useful than the more common 'point-of-view' in describing the distance between a work's narrator and its sentiment. Genette's (1980: 185) distinction is between 'who speaks?' and 'who sees?', with the respective answers being 'the narrator' and 'the focaliser'. The latter is the entity whose thoughts and perceptions are conveyed without the supplementary knowledge of a narrator. In his exploration of narration Wayne Booth (1983: 160) points out that most narrators have superior knowledge and that taking an 'inside view' of another character – as in focalised passages – is actually a very privileged position. The term 'privilege' as I use it, therefore, relates to the narrator's knowledge *outside* of the character's; anything the narrator knows that the character does not falls outside of focalisation.

In order to distinguish narrator from focaliser, readers (and writers) must look to the sentiment being conveyed. As it is necessarily the narrator who conveys, however, it may be difficult to establish whether this is the source of the perception or just a kind of literary middle-man. Here it becomes a matter of pragmatism; of deciding, in any given case, whether the character would be capable of the knowledge or opinion being expressed. This practice, like the negotiation of multiple viewpoints, is a dynamic one, with what we know of the character informing the sentiment they may hold at the same time as that sentiment informs our knowledge of the character (Palmer 2004: 40).

The Ice Storm opens with the father, Ben, musing about his loneliness, appearance, personality and family while waiting in his mistress's house for sexual intercourse. Ben thinks of himself in contradictory terms: as someone who tries to be kind but whose 'touch could be cruel' (Moody 1998: 7); a man with 'scruples' (28) but who ultimately considers himself 'a spook, a fool, a voice from the beyond, a housebreaker' (29). His attitude to Elena, Paul and Wendy is similarly paradoxical, with Hood reflecting that '[h]e loved his wife and children, and he hated all evidence of them' (14).

This, then, is third-person focalisation: The sentiments regarding his failed endeavours to be kind and trusting come from Ben, who is attempting to justify his unfaithfulness. This attempt presents us with a self-pitying man who does not need anyone else – the narrator, for example – to catalogue his faults. Of course, the narrator *is* actually the communicator of these faults. Both voices are present and layered: Ben's resigned self-pity, and the narrator's patient documentation, which, by avoiding comment, makes it possible to sympathise with Ben rather than judge him.

Dorrit Cohn (1978) has outlined the three means by which a narrator may communicate the thoughts of a character: through psycho-narration, or a summary of a character's thoughts in the narrator's language; quoted monologue, an attempt at the

direct transmission of the thoughts in prose form; or narrated monologue. This last mode is more commonly referred to (for example, by David Lodge 2002: 45; James Wood 2008: 8; and John Mullan 2006: 76) as free indirect style; a combination of the idiom of both narrator and character. Thus, as stated, Ben Hood is calling *himself* 'a spook, a fool … a housebreaker' (Moody 1998: 29), as the sentence runs on to acknowledge 'it was time he faced up to these things' (29), a paraphrasing of realisation in the narrator's third-person discourse.

When readers take into account every incident of free indirect style, each sentiment of Ben's as they are conveyed to us, we go some way toward understanding him – or, at least, understanding how *he* understands himself. Alan Palmer (2004: 183), in exploring how readers are given access to characters' minds, uses Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991: 156) term 'embedded narrative' to describe their thoughts, goals, attitudes, and general demeanour. Ben's description of himself as an anxious, scrupulous fool, then, is part of his embedded narrative. From here Palmer (2004: 231) also theorises the concept of the 'doubly embedded narrative', which is this same content but as transmitted by a different character: that is, what this second character *thinks* makes up the first character's mind. The doubly embedded narrative, therefore, reveals two minds to us simultaneously.

We have seen that third-person access to Ben Hood's mind shows readers a man riddled with conflict. These tensions are in part reflected in the way his family sees him – Paul, for example, knows the love and hate that quarrel in his father, thinking of Ben that '[h]e hated the world, hated mankind, hated his family, but loved people, loved kids and dogs' (Moody 1998: 80). Paul's doubly embedded narrative, then, also reveals Ben as one whose thoughts are conflicted and miserable.

This mode of perceiving his father, however, may be a defence mechanism formed after Ben's apparent rejection of most of Paul's interests, so that 'Paul had given up trying. He hung out with the stoners. Paul was a garbage head!' (84). This shows defiance, a triumphing in what will displease his father as he cannot please him anyway, which contributes to *Paul's* embedded narrative. He is characterised as a sulker who wishes for 'a better family than the one from which he came' (102) but who at the first sign of trouble realises he is just a child but '[h]is parents could get him out of what he had done' (191). Thus, while Paul's doubly embedded narrative of his father as difficult is in harmony with Ben's interpretation of himself, Paul's reaction to this difficulty gives us an understanding of the teenager's own embedded narrative.

Both embedded and doubly embedded narratives have the capacity for misinterpretation: In the former, the character may misrepresent itself (Bal 1997: 130), while in the latter, another character cannot completely know the one being interpreted. Every representation is thus subjective: no one agent can be relied upon to give an entirely accurate account.

The distinction between narrator and focaliser and between embedded and doubly embedded narratives helps us to pinpoint where evidence about character originates. There are three figural sources that can shed light on a character's personality – the character itself, the narrator, and other characters in the storyworld. A consideration

of the source of information about a character is highly important, as it is here that the juggling act really picks up. As Lisa Zunshine (2006: 47) has shown by applying cognitive to literary theory, the source colours the content of any sentiment; thus, a sentiment is not just a *representation* but a 'metarepresentation'. It has two equally important aspects: What it says, and who is saying it. For this reason readers must always weigh up the information with where – or, more specifically, who – it has come from in determining its value. Thus metrepresentations in a way convey two things simultaneously: an aspect of the subject of representation, and an aspect of the figure doing the representing. Hence, as shown, Paul's metarepresentation and doubly embedded narrative of Ben tells us about the son at the same time as it does the father.

As metarepresentations are dependent on the source character, they will often vary even when the *subject* of representation remains the same. For example, Wendy Hood's representation of her father is different from her brother's. She reflects that '[t]here was something fake about [Ben]': (Moody 1998: 46), perhaps related to his being 'ordinarily immaculate … the Mike's Sports mannequin, the L.L. Bean dad' (47). So, while this description of Ben's manner of dress indicates a tidy lack of originality, it also reveals Wendy's preoccupation with authenticity, with finding something 'real' in the world. Her paratactic desires indicate as much: 'Wendy wanted to know why conversations failed and how to teach compassion and why people fell out of love and she wanted to know it all by the time she got back to the house' (50); as a corollary, 'Wendy wanted her father to make restitution for his own confusion and estrangement and drunkenness' (51). This latter yearning again not only describes Ben but indicates Wendy is both intelligent enough to see the cracks in her world and idealistic enough to hope for their repair.

Of course, as has been established, while Wendy is metarepresenting her family members, they are doing the same to her. Ben believes his daughter to be 'the only sensible kid on the block' (19), while her mother admires Wendy less for her sensibility and more for her bravery, indicating that Elena may regret her own lack of 'pluck' (69). She is also envious of her fourteen-year-old daughter's feminine appearance, which again betrays Elena's desire to be different, a quality supported by her endless reading of psychology books in order to understand both others and herself.

This is a necessarily brief outline of how variable focalisation in *The Ice Storm* gives readers competing sides of the family dynamic, revealing how the Hoods relate to and (mis)understand one another. Readers negotiate among the multiple perspectives in a pattern not unlike the act of juggling: there are many balls in the air here, different ones passing through the reader's grasp at any one time. Each makes its own arc, sometimes intersecting, sometimes not. Like juggling, a reader's negotiation of character is ongoing, exhilarating, and complex.

The Balancing Act: Character Through Character When Writing Fiction

I will now round out my investigation of variably-focalised character interpretation with a discussion of how writers also juggle multiple points-of-view, referring to my own creative writing practice. The theories my paper has discussed all consider the 'end product', as it were – the text as it may be accessed by readers. However, ideas

of focalisation, embedded narratives and metarepresentation are all highly applicable to the creative process itself, and this knowledge has informed and structured my writing of a variably-focalised narrative.

The novel I am writing as part of my PhD, 'The Birthday Party', takes its structural cues from *The Ice Storm*. Like Moody's, my narrative takes place over the course of one day, rotating through the third-person perspectives of each member of one nuclear family. In it, the middle-class Australian Sinclairs – mother Laura, father Rob, daughter Georgia and son Nathan – are preparing for Laura's surprise fortieth birthday party while each going through a private crisis. The use of variable focalisation without overt narratorial commentary allows each of their stories to be told while also providing a basis for errors and misunderstandings: each character is stuck inside his or her own head, his or her own problems, and can only navigate what they see of the others from there.

In drafting 'The Birthday Party' using the viewpoints of each family member, I initially assumed I would variously wear four hats – one for each protagonist. When writing a section focalised through the third-person perspective of, for example, the mother character, I foresaw myself burrowing into Laura's 'mind' as it were: I would simply write what she saw, conveying her thoughts and attitudes in free indirect style. When her time was up I would emerge, dust myself off, and move on to the next character.

However, in writing my novel I have realised the simplistic nature of this assumption. While I obviously must be aware of what is passing through a character's mind when he or she is the focaliser for the purposes of both the narrative and the discourse, I must also know the mindset of the characters that he or she encounters. I must imagine what is going on in this secondary character's fictional mind and life, decide the results that would be visible to the focalising character, and *then* determine how the focaliser would perceive this. Every encounter between two characters who alternately focalise must be treated as a site of metarepresentation, a building of embedded and doubly embedded narratives, with attention given to what the interaction means *for both characters*. In this way, as a writer, I am engaged in a similar juggling act to readers; a constant mediation between views that build up a picture of multiple characters simultaneously.

In my novel, Laura Sinclair is perceived differently by her two children depending on what they think a mother should be like; thus, they construct doubly embedded narratives of her depending on the degree to which she conforms to their expectations. Again, this sheds light not only on her character but also on her children's. Georgie, a sixteen-year-old swimmer with a cast-iron work ethic, is critical of what she sees as Laura's failure to have a career and her preoccupation with her appearance, as these traits clash with Georgie's own principles. Conversely, her fourteen-year-old brother, a gentle, non-confrontational boy who likes the theatre, interprets his mother through these qualities. He reacts badly to Laura's quick temper and criticisms, thinking she should be more kind and easygoing. Thus each Sinclair child's expectations and beliefs inform their evaluation of Laura, and, as stated, I must be aware of this as I write their interactions from all perspectives.

Georgie Sinclair sees her mother as too soft, while Nathan considers her to be too hard. The 'actuality' of Laura's construction lies somewhere in the middle; my intention is that she be a kind of contradiction. Laura's embedded narrative of herself is one of both success and failure: Her children are good kids and she has mothered them as best she can, but she still feels there is something amiss in her relationship with them. As the juggling balls rotate, of course, we also see how Laura represents her children from the perspective of her own personality: she thinks her daughter should be more relaxed, and she wishes her son were stronger and more accomplished. Both of these views arise as and are informed by a combination of Laura's conflicted personality and the personas her children project.

Furthermore, the familial relationship between Laura and her children means that their characters are both interpreted by the others and affected by them. That is, Georgie is not only highly-strung and competitive as seen by her mother, but also partly *because* of her mother. Literary theorists have pointed out that characters not only engage with and interpret one another's personalities but influence them in two ways: a character may construct him- or herself in a direct response to others, wanting to be either similar to or different from them (Doležel 1998: 102); or a character may view itself based upon what they know others think of him or her (Palmer 2004: 137). This too affects the writer, forcing one to consider multiple points of view not only at the times when characters interact but during the whole process of forming the social world of the novel.

Alan Palmer (2004: 168) states that in such a social world, an individual is made up of all the text's embedded and doubly embedded narratives, the sum of which he calls a character's 'situated identity'. As I have argued in this paper, the situated identity of each character in variably-focalised fiction is always dependent on those of others; they feed each other symbiotically. The writer of such fiction is constantly engaged in establishing the multiple equations that lead to the sum of situated identity – though they will, of course, be re-calculated by readers in time.

Conclusion

Though fictional characters are not real people, in realist narratives they often operate in a socially recognisable manner: They only know what they have the possibility of knowing, and they utilise this knowledge and their own disposition in their perceptions. A reader's understanding of one character's disposition therefore informs the conclusions the character – and the reader – may come to about others. As the web of characters grows and they focalise one another in turn each becomes more complex – A said this about B, but B said this about A, but B is like this and A is like that…

As many have pointed out before me (such as Marie-Laure Ryan 1991: 156; Lubomir Doležel 1998: 74; and Alan Palmer 2004: 233), much of the interest of narrative fiction lies in the conflict that arises when characters' viewpoints engage in this way. The negotiation of character through portrayal *by* character in narratives such as mine and Moody's brings this appeal to the fore, presenting us with multiple voices and thus making us – reader or writer – operate in multiple minds. Each is a ball launched into the air alongside others and making a slightly different trajectory from its

neighbour, intersecting at some points while claiming other spaces for itself. In these margins of overlap readers and writers both find their understanding.

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