

A Study of Focalization in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

This study is primarily concerned with applying Genette's narratological framework of focalization to the study of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. It aims to pursue an approach for insights about the working of narrative by looking into indicators of subjectivity. The study falls into two parts.

The first part deals with theoretical considerations concerning the genesis of the term and typology. As far as genesis of the term is concerned, there are a number of labels suggested by well-known scholars as equivalent to focalization. Genette uses focalization to avoid the visual connotations of Brook's 'focus of narration', Stanzel's 'narrative situation', Pouillon's 'vision', and Todorov's 'aspect'. As far as typology is concerned, there are two main types of focalization, namely internal and external focalization. Internal focalization, in turn, is divided into three sub-types (fixed, variable and multiple).

The second part applies Genette's focalization to Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. As a modernist novel, Mrs. Dalloway reflects the heavy use of focalization. Although this novel is written with the third person narration, in so many instances point of view differs and a number of focalizers operate. The reader is invited to enter the story and experience it without frequent interruptions from external narration. This is very obvious in the adopting of variable internal focalization. Every character is given a significant voice, which produces the sense that people experience realities differently, have unique ways of making sense of it and different ways of seeing it.

1. Introduction

The two old questions of (*who sees?*) and (*who tells ?*) have been dominant in the modern accounts of narrative. These two questions led to various directions in the field of narratology and a number of terms has been presented to encompass these terms. The areas covered by these two questions involve perspective, point of view, narrative

situation, orientation, stand point etc. In order to avoid certain problematic visual connotations of such terms, Genette (1980) introduces his abstract term focalization. Genette (1980:189) hypothesizes that terms like 'vision', 'field', and 'point of view' have visual connotations. Thus, he suggests the term focalization as an alternative. This term, he adds, is a more abstract one. Undoubtedly, this term has undergone a number of reformulations by Genette and others to the extent that, now, we have Genette's Focalization Theory and Post-Genettean Focalization Theory.

However, this study is primarily concerned with applying Genette's narratological framework as regards focalization to the study of a narrative text, i.e. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The aim of such an attempt is to pursue an approach for new insights about the workings of narrative by looking into indicators of subjectivity and narrative techniques.

2. Focalization: Theoretical Considerations

2.1. Genesis of the Term

Since the end of the nineteenth century, which witnessed indisputable critical results, point of view has been most frequently studied. Many scholars have been studied point of view using different terms and notions. In 1943 and under the term 'focus of narrative', Brooks and Warren (as cited in Genette, 1980) introduced a four-term typology which is, in turn, divided into two axes. The horizontal one is related to the identity of the narrator. The vertical one, on the other hand, is related to point of view. The following diagram illustrates Brooks and Warren's typology:

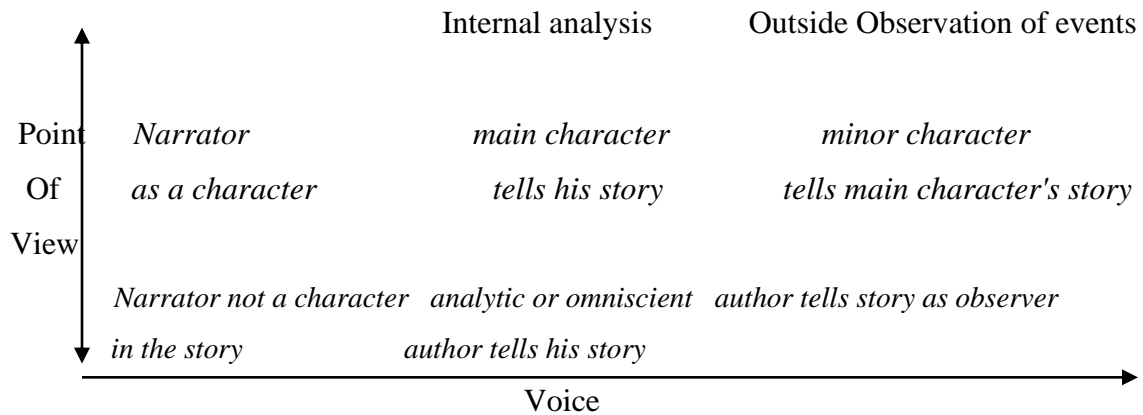


Diagram (1)

Brooks and Warren's Typology According to Genette (1980:186)

In 1955, Stanzel pointed out that there are three types of novelistic 'narrative situations.' These types involve the omniscient author, the narrator (who is one of the characters), and, according to the point of view of a character, a narrative conducted in the third person. In 1961, Wayne Booth wrote an essay entitled 'Distance and Point of View.' The main concern of this essay was the distinction between implied author and narrator (either dramatized or undramatized, and reliable or unreliable). Such problems mainly are related to voice. Furthermore, Pouillon and Todorov introduced the terms 'vision' and 'aspect' as equivalents of point of view. They suggest that there are three states of vision: when the narrator knows more than the character or says more than any of the characters know, i.e. vision from behind; when the narrator says only what a given character knows, i.e. vision with; and when the narrator says less than the character knows, i.e. vision from behind (Genette, 1980:187-188).

Moreover, Todorov (as in Genette, 1980:189) suggests a formula for each of these states. This formula consists of the narrator from one side and the character from the other separated by a relationship. These formulas are:

1. Narrator > Character
2. Narrator = Character
3. Narrator < Character

Shaw (1972:293) proposes that there are three meanings for point of view: physical; mental and personal. Personal point of view refers to the relation with which a writer narrates or discusses a subject. He (ibid. : 284) defines perspective as a word derived from Latin meaning *to see through*. It refers to the author's mental view by which he can see characters, ideas, action, and all other elements of pertinent information. It is an application for one's point of view and ideas.

Lye (2002) argues that *who is telling the story* is one of the basic factors which determines the meaning of a story because there are many positions or perspectives or point of view from which a story can be told. He maintains that point of view means two different things. On the one hand, it refers to whether the narrator is a character in the story or a voice outside it. This one conveys the relation of the narrator to the action of the story. On the other hand, it refers to whether the narrator is sympathetic or not, i.e. whether he agrees to support or opposes a particular cultural practice or doctrine. This one conveys the relation of the narrator to issues and the characters that a story involves. Furthermore, Lye affirms that there are two types of point of view. The first is called non-focalized point of view which is conveyed by an external narrator. The second type is called focalized point of view which is conveyed by internal narrator.

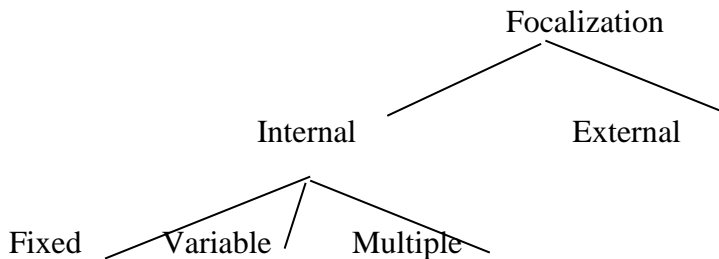
2.2. Typology

Genette (1980:189-190) states that there are three states of narrative:

1. Non-focalized or narrative with zero focalization. This type can be found in classical narrative.
2. Narrative with internal focalization which can be:

- a) fixed: where the focalizer is one of the characters in the story and every thing passes through him.
- b) variable: where the focalizer changes from one character into another within the story.
- c) multiple: according to the point of view of several letter-writing characters , the same event may be evoked in episode novels.

3. Narrative with external focalization. In this type, the narratee is not allowed to know the feelings and\or thoughts of the hero while he performs.



Diagram(2)
Types of Focalization

Lye (2002) uses the term ‘focalized point of view’ as an alternative for Genette’s internal focalization. According to this point of view, the narrator is a character in the story and aware that he is telling it. The narrator may be a main character, i.e. protagonist or a minor one or an observer of the main character's life.

The thoughts and perceptions of the focal character in the case of internal focalization are never analyzed by the narrator and never been described or even referred to from outside. In this case, we are not interested by what the hero does or thinks but mainly with what he sees (Genette, 1980:192).

Narrative with interior monologue is full of internal focalization because the central character is limited to his focal position alone. Interior monologue can be found in

plays or in novels. It is a device used to reveal the thoughts through a character's mind (Shaw, 1972:243-244).

Moreover, alternations may exist causing a change in focalization and analyzed as momentary infractions. Generally, there are three types of alternations. These types depend on the amount of information given to the narratee. If the narratee is given less information than it is necessary, this type is called paralipsis, this is on the one hand. On the other, if the narratee is given more information than it is necessary this one is called paralepsis (Genette, 1980:195).

In the case of paralipsis, which exists only in internal focalization, the narrator chooses a certain action or thought of the focal character and omits certain information which neither the hero nor the narratee can ignore. In the case of paralepsis, which exists only in external focalization, the information is accessed consciously through the course of narrative (ibid: 196-197).

3. Analysis of Focalization in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

As a modernist novel, Mrs. Dalloway reflects the heavy use of focalization. Although this novel is written with the third person narration, in so many instances point of view differs and a number of focalizers operate. The change in point of view and focalizers is one of the characteristic stylistic features of Woolf's novel. The present section of this study is an attempt to examine the shifts in point of view and thereby focalization.

The main focalizer in the novel is Clarissa, through whose eyes we see the events and evaluate themes. Nevertheless, other characters are given significant roles as focalizers. In many instances, there are examples of mix where the real focalizer is not easy to pinpoint:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when , with a little squeak the hinge, which she could know, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into open air(MD:5).

It is difficult, here, to pinpoint the focalizer especially whose thought is represented in the two exclamations that the open this quote. Of course, it might be Clarissa that focalizes here or some other entity. This is an instance of adopting free indirect discourse where the speaker is not identified. Who said "What a lark? What a plunge!?" Such a technique will make who communicates the narrative very difficult to assign. In other parts of the novel, the focalizer changes as well. The following two quotes give an indication that a number of characters in the narrative undertake the role of focalization. The narrator in the novel sometimes makes it very clear that a character's thoughts pop up:

*So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me.
Not indeed in actual words ; that is, he could not read
the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty,
this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes... (MD:21).*

In this part, there are two focalizers: Septimus and the narrator. As far as Septimus, his thought is represented through the free indirect technique. By using this technique the narrative operates to bring the reader very close to the events or thoughts. This kind of focalization is internal one. Then, there is a shift back to the point of view of the third person narrator but the link between the two focalizers is made by "*Not indeed in actual words*". Again this shift is not clear as regards whose words or thoughts these are.

However, there are sections in the novel where two kinds of focalization found: internal and external. Clarissa is compared with a virgin nun in a white dress:

*Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid
shut the door, she heard the swish of Lucy's skirt, she felt
like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her
familiar veils and responses to old devotions (MD: 27).*

The narrator probes into the feelings of the character; the narrator does not only tell what the character is doing but goes deeper into the thoughts and preoccupations of Mrs.

Dalloway. The use of the verb *'felt'* and *'feels'* indicates that this narrator has full knowledge of the interior of the main character.

Then, as the narrative unfolds, the character of Peter Walsh becomes an internal focalizer. Through his thoughts, Peter says, *"I was more unhappy than I've ever been since (MD: 42)"*. This shows that he allows his own mind to go to such places. The indirect method is telling that Peter has such thoughts, which is not the case with Clarissa.

This character, after his love being refused by Clarissa in the party, shows his feelings and thoughts:

*As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London;
and falls on the mind. Effort leashed. Time flaps on the most.
There we stop; there we stand. Where there is nothing, Peter
Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within.
Clarissa refused me, he thought (MD: 45).*

Peter continues to be the focalizer. He dreams and through his dream the reader can see him as traveler, who is at the end of the path. After being rejected by Clarissa, Peter is the traveler: *"The traveler is seen beyond the wood; and there, coming to the door with shaded eyes, possible to look for his return (MD: 53)"*. This dream is a shift from the narrative situation or what Ryan (1991) calls Text Actual World into another possible text world, i.e. the dream world. The indirect method is used again with Peter which makes him the focalizer *"There was always something cold about Clarissa, he thought (MD: 49)"*.

Septimus becomes another focalizer when he imagines a dog turning into a man. He succeeds in making readers understand and see what is in his mind particularly men of politics who were soldiers in World War I. The picture of dogs represents those men who cannot turn into men of politics because they were *"war dogs"*. Then, Septimus imagines that he is speaking to the dead, his friend Evans, who died in war:

*It was at that moment that the great relation took place.
A voice spoke from behind the screen, Evans was*

speaking. The dead were with him(MD:83).

Moreover, when his special doctor, Dr. Holmes, comes, Septimus makes readers see how deep his hate to Dr. Holmes is. He compares Dr. Holmes with the evil of human nature:

Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. They rack and the thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless (MD: 87).

Septimus expresses his last thought and shows the beauty of life and goodness. He spends his last moment hopeful, loving nature and shows the ugliness of death represented by Dr. Holmes:

Going and coming, beckoning, signaling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the strand grew, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus...(MD:124)

The focalizer, Septimus, is offering a kind of immediacy of the event by the recurrent use of the deictic term “now” four times in the above extract. The use of this deixis brings the events and thoughts very close to the time of reading although the tense is the narrative past.

4. Conclusion

This study of focalization in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* has arrived at a number of findings. The reader is invited to enter the story and experience it without frequent interruptions from external narration. This is very obvious in the adoption of variable internal focalization through a number of characters. Every character is given a significant voice, which produces the sense that people experience reality differently, have unique ways of making sense of it , and different ways of seeing it. The manner, in

which the novel present diverse perspectives on the same situations, provides comprehensive looks inside the minds of the major characters and the chance to objectively evaluate events. The transitions Woolf creates as she waves in and out of the perspectives of different characters provide a complete portrait of the realities of several characters and generate intimacy between reader and novel. Woolf, waving in and out of the lives minds, and realities of each character also show the connection between characters. The seamlessness of how Woolf moves from character to character is effortless, and she achieves it without sudden halts between them.

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