

AGAINST NARRATOLOGY

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A reader of literature and a student of literature are not invariably the same persons. A reader may express his views on a work of literature by merely stating whether he or she likes it or not. A student, on the contrary, is expected to substantiate why he or she likes or dislikes it. Of course, one does not always study a story; one may just read it for pleasure. A student of literature then becomes a reader of literature. So the idea of the reader and the student need not be kept in two watertight compartments. However, the functions of the reader and the student are quite different and should not be lost sight of.

Whatever literary theorists write is meant for students of literature rather than the common reader who relies solely on his personal likes and dislikes. In fact, it is easier to point out why one likes a book than why one dislikes it. In the latter case, it is difficult to pinpoint what makes the reader dislike a particular poem or a story. It is often like Tom Brown's translation (or rather, imitation) of an epigram by Martial:

*I do not love you Dr. Fell, but why I cannot tell;
But this I know full well, I do not love you Dr Fell.* (Howell 177)

A student of literature can do more. He can provide reasons for his dislike, which a common reader cannot. The reasons may not be accepted by all, but giving reasons for his or her dislike is expected of a student of literature.

What has been said above, stands to common sense. Nevertheless, such a distinction is conspicuously absent in contemporary literary theories. No distinction is made between the reader and the student by Barthes or Iser. The word 'reader' itself has been apotheosized and, to use another current expression, problema-tized. The author, according to some theorists, is dead, as dead as the Dodo. The reader, on the contrary, is very much alive and kicking. And what does this reader read? Here, too, common sense tells us: 'Why, stories.' Of course, some readers also read poems but they are treated as belonging to a very special category. Undoubtedly story readers are more numerous than poetry readers.

This brings us inevitably to the question: What is a story? Prince attempts to show that 'a finite number of explicit rules could account for the structure of all the sets and only the sets which are generally and intuitively recognized as stories.' (Prince 5)

The word 'intuitively' is suspect; so are the 'rules' that Prince sets out. He splits up a story into several 'events'; a single sentence might contain one or several events and that is how he proceeds.

And what are the events? *A man laughed is such an event; A man laughed and a woman cried would represent two conjoined events; A man laughed, then as a result a woman cried and a bird sang would represent three conjoined events.* And so on and so forth.

Even at the risk of being dubbed an ignoramus or a spoilsport or both, it is better to venture to assert that all this is an exercise in ingenuity, futile and nerve-wracking. Earlier literary critics were content to break down stories into two or three or more episodes. But grammar-oriented narratologists prefer to get down to every sentence that refers to an event. Whether such events contribute to the storiness of the story is not their concern.

This is what intuitive understanding of a story leads to. Narratology and structuralism working hand in gloves seek to undermine the totality of a story, be it a short story, a *novella* or a novel. Such breaking down into narremes that Prince has used as examples, stories and non-stories, of which he is the author (Prince 5) leads us nowhere. Such an approach is of no use either to the reader or to the student of literature, or even to the student of language. Works by Prince and his like are reminiscent of medieval schoolmen, engaged in splitting hairs and belabouring the obvious.

What constitutes the storiness of the story? Two basic elements are apparent to all: it is written in a language, living or dead, and it narrates a fictional event or events, either realistic in intent or something exaggerated or supernatural. The narrative aspect is not insignificant, for one must distinguish a story, whether told or written, from a play, film and comic strip. In the latter case the visual element predominates whereas one listens to or reads a story.

The second aspect, event or events, deserves closer attention. No doubt plays and films and comic strips also contain a story line, but the way of narration has a different sort of impact on the hearer/reader. The presentation of the story, particularly in its written form, requires an event or events, which, in their turn, call up one or several characters.

This is not all. Almost all stories contain a purely descriptive part and some conversation. Conversation, of course, is the only mode of narration in case of a play, but it is the descriptive part that distinguishes a story from a play. In the age of silent films, short descriptions at the beginning or the middle of the film were found necessary for the benefit of the viewing public because, in the absence of dialogue, the story line could not be followed so easily.

One may add, besides these two aspects, another item, namely, what the event is about. Every story is dated and located at a particular time and space and the theme of the story depends on how the characters and events are placed in the spatial and temporal axes. So far as the grammarians of stories are concerned, no other element except the linguistic one is of any importance to them. If the nineteenth—and early twentieth-century literary critics erred in overlooking the

linguistic aspect, the narratologists may also be blamed for disregarding the thematic aspect of the story. Yet no story, be it a short story or *novella* or novel, can be studied without paying due attention to both of them. It is by judging both the language and the events of a story that a student of literature may arrive at his or her view regarding it. If the opinion is favourable, reasons can be assigned as to how the two ingredients have been perfectly matched to make it a successful story; if unfavourable, the student of literature will be in a position to point out where and how there has been a mismatch: the linguistic aspect may not have been well-adapted to the theme of the story or vice versa.

Grammarians of stories are so enamoured of tables and figures and trees and formulas that they tend to miss the humour of the situation of their own creation. The “stories” they write themselves are more often than not ridiculous (see the example given above). Sometimes they are lacking in all links except the grammatical ones, such as ‘and’ or ‘but’. No reader of stories will care to call such conjunctive pieces stories at all. And no student of literature worth his salt would care to call the event or events (invented by Prince and his like) as stories proper. Ian Reid mentions Prince, Claude Bermond and others who have “written” such skeletal stories as “Eve took a bite of the apple and then at her urging, Adam did so too, as a result of which they became crazy and bit each other.” Reid’s comment on this kind of ‘elementary sequence’ is a masterpiece of understatement: “Temporal movement and logical linkage are just enough to make it a story, though no doubt insufficient to make it an interesting one” (5). The invasion by the grammarians in the field of literature needs to be resisted by appealing to common sense rather than by falling in the trap of attempting to refute their arguments by equally opaque counter-arguments. ✍

Works Cited :

- Howell, Porter. *A Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial*. London: The Athlone Press, 1980.
- Prince, Gerald. *A Grammar of Stories The Hauge* : Mouton, 1973.
- Reid, Ian. *The Short Story*. London and New York: Methuen, 1984.