

## **Towards Framing Unreliable Narration: A Rudimentary Cognitive Model**

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### **Abstract**

This article is aimed at introducing unreliable narration in a cognitive framework. To reach that aim, a brief history of the term, its origin, its definitions and redefinitions is given. Then, different views about the term across a variety of frameworks such as formalism, structuralism, and cognitive approach are discussed and compared. Adapting the cognitive approach as the more adequate one, we draw on Minsky's frame theory, Albaladejo Mayordomo's possible world theory, Sternberg's idea of narrative as a removed quotation and Yacobi's integration strategies to describe the cognitive processes and interpretive strategies involved in recognizing and responding to a narrative as unreliable. Reaching this description would lead us to a working cognitive paradigm for reading and teaching unreliable narration and other literary texts. The strength of this paradigm lies in the fact that it relies mostly on process-conscious and active engagement of the reader in the reading experience.

**Key words:** unreliable narration, cognitive approach, frame theory, possible world theory, narrative as a removed quotation, integration strategies.

### **1. Introduction**

As readers of literary narratives and sometimes as teachers of literature we have strong judgments about the reliability and unreliability of narratives. But when we encounter different –and even contradictory- readings of one and the same narrative such as *Turn of the Screw* and *Wuthering Heights*, how do we account for these diverse responses and how much can we rely on our interpretations and responses? Do the incongruities lie with the ambiguous nature of the narrative or the reader's interpretive strategy? We are going to answer these questions by explaining the ways in which the reader

detects and recognizes unreliability and integrates it as a deviant form into his cognitive resources. Therefore our focus would be on the mechanism at work to construct and reconstruct such an effect in the process of analyzing a narrative. Before going on with our discussion, it would be better to note one thing in passing; that is the delimitation of our unit of study. We know that unreliability is not the case only in literary narratives; we can detect instances of it in different conditions extending over a wide range of interactional situations such as everyday conversations, media press, governmental reports, history and law courts where the recognition of which turns out to be very critical and directive. However, here we want to discard those narratives and focus instead on literary narratives that are manageable as social products having a delimited boundary, and so they are more suitable for our purposes. In real world narratives like those in everyday conversations, we have no finished and done with articulatory world against which we may decide reliability or unreliability. The incompleteness of real world experience gives way to a frame that is open to more and more manipulations and revisions.

## **2. Review of literature: definitions and refinements**

Now that we have determined our subject of analysis, it seems proper to have a historical survey of the unreliable narration in critical readings, to see the adequacy or inadequacy of those definitions in describing the constructional and reconstructional procedures of reading a narrative affected with the quality of unreliability. Then we would focus on a frame of analysis that takes in a reception-oriented frame of its reading and leads us to an adequate description of the mechanism at work in recognizing and interpreting such cases.

The term "unreliable narration" was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. He adopted a formalistic view of the notion and explained it in terms of the narrator's discordant speech and action against the norms of the implied author. This definition ignores the reader's reciprocal communication with the narrative, the narrator and the author and his complementary role in the process of reading. Instead he invests the narrator with quasi-human attributes and in consequence outbids the role of reader as an active agent who reconstructs the effect. Yacobi, relevantly, implies that this definition introduces an automatic personifying model lacking the empirical adequacy because of its theoretical preconceptions. Among them, we can note the author's way of assigning an anthropomorphic characteristic for the narrator whose unreliability is deemed just a

feature among others (Yacobi, 2000). However, we would not be able to call a narrator (un)reliable if we do not treat him as the pragmatic equivalent of a real life person such as a liar, for instance, Booth's definition regards (un)reliable narration as preexisting entity rather than a dynamic construct arrived at by the reader.

Structuralists like Rimmon-Kenan(1983) and Chatman(1983) drew on the same line of thought about the question of unreliability. Although they were somehow reader-conscious in their definitions and they added some new aspects to that definition, again they insisted on a text-centered approach and failed to include the reader's active involvement in constructing these narratives. Rimmon-Kenan defines unreliability against reliability and notes that if a reader takes narrator's rendition and comments, as an authoritative account, then he is reliable, otherwise, he is unreliable. She also adds to this literature by mentioning the sources of unreliability that causes a narrative to lose its authoritativeness. These indexes consist of the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement and his problematic value scheme judged against the implied author's values (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 100-103). The fact is that in the above definition the reader is considered just as a connoisseur and her role is limited to inferences she makes simply based on the textual factors. It discounts the certain extratextual resources she brings to text and underrates the interpretive strategies and procedures she is involved in while responding to the reliability or unreliability of a narration. Rimmon-Kenan's definition and also Booth's have assumed the narrative to be the ultimate organizer, activator and constructor. Chatman also defines the unreliable narrator as a human-like entity and stresses on the narrator's striking divergent values of which reader become suspicious and doubts his sincerity or competence to tell the "true version". However he postulates an active role for the reader by mentioning that the reader "concludes by reading between the lines" to account for the (un)reliability of the narrator (Chatman, 1983:149). Touching on the reader's cognitive resources in reconstructing and responding to such narratives, Chatman heralded the cognitivists' later theorizations about this concept along the same lines. However, he does not depart so much from his structuralist views and instead of taking more note of the constructive processes engaged in reading unreliable narratives, he goes on to treat them as forms, or in his own words, "ironic forms"(Chatman,1983: 233).

After these structuralist orientations, we come across an ethical approach utilized by Phelan and Martin. They considered the reader's responses to unreliability in ethical terms and stressed on a reciprocal relationship, an interaction between the textual factors and ethical judgments the reader brings to bear on the narrative: "while a text involves particular ethical responses through the signals it sends to the authorial audience, our individual ethical responses will depend on the interaction of those invitations with our particular values and beliefs" (qtd. in Zerweck, 2001).

The above approach does not consider the reader as a whole construct; rather it takes into consideration one aspect of the readerly strategies, namely the ethical responses. This deficiency is compensated by the holistic cognitive approaches to the case. Conitivists preferred not to deal with unreliability in terms of a character-trait but as a referential construct depending on the reader's inferences about the narrator, in the course of which the reader responds flexibly and variably to the narrative's given incongruities in its rendition (Yacobi, 2000). In this approach, the narrative is taken as an interactive discourse in the course of reading which the reader draws on both the textual factors and her own mental schemata or frames corresponding to the context. In a sense they offer a reader-centered approach in order to account for the textual incongruities and inconsistencies by appealing to the reader's basic cognitive processes involved in frame making and interpretation.

### **3. Theoretical orientations in cognitive model**

Cognitive narratologists developed their ideas of the reader's interactive response to literature under the influence of cognitive sciences such as cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics and artificial intelligence that all focus on the question of information and data processing. They got their first inspirations from Marvin Minsky who introduced frame theory. The essence of which is that when we encounter a new situation, we select a structure, called frame, from memory to render it legible. However in order to fit reality, we might change the details when necessary. Then he defines the frame itself as "a network of nodes and relations". The 'top Levels' of the network are fixed and represent things that are always true about the supposed situation. The lower levels have many terminals -"slots"- that must be filled by specific instances or data." (Qtd. in Jahn, 1997). His theory and also Tannen's (framing discourse) make way for expectations and violation of these

expectations. When, the reader encounters an incongruent situation, she makes recourse to the fittest frame in order to take in the situation. If she cannot find a corresponding frame she reforms her earlier frames or forms a new frame to fit the situation and understand the potential meaning of that certain text. Unreliable narratives are among those cases that need the reader's active involvement in constructing, projecting, revising and sometimes replacing the frames in order to naturalize the instance. Thus, in order to be able to interpret such a case, the reader draws on both the textual information and her own conceptual information and cognitive resources, during which she is active in selecting relevant frames, testing them and discarding the irrelevant ones. Borrowing Jacobson's ideas, we might assert that the reader acts on two levels, selecting a suitable frame from the paradigmatic axis and projecting that on the syntagmatic chain of textual signals. Zerweck (2001) relevantly remarks that the recognition of an effective frame for naturalizing an unreliable narrative is the effect of interpretive strategies based on textual signals.

Our model of analysis, as can be inferred from Minsky's definition of frame theory, does not lend itself to be categorized as a top-down or bottom-up process. Instead, here the emphasis is on a self-conscious reading process in which the reader is aware of the choices involved and also that the same situation can be solved in different ways: there is no all-agreed-upon end product and interpretation (Cohn, 2000). Rather, in Fludernik's words, the reader oscillates between adopting a "constructivist top-down processing of projected semantic schemas and a bottom-up analysis entailing deciphering the textual information (Fludernik, 1997). The reader jumps backward and forward in her reading process and thus, appealing to her expectations and interpretive strategies, she constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs a holistic frame of the text. Hence the nature of such a study entailing the reader's cognitive processes does not lend itself to a clear-cut analysis and we cannot split this holistic experience in to independent components. What we suggest in the following lines is only a rough sketch of processes involved in recognizing and interpreting unreliable narratives and so it is open to objections, emendations and refinements.

The frames a reader constructs while reading an unreliable narrative, especially the focused-on-here literary narratives are *identifying the world-structure of the narrative*; *identifying the mediator*; and *naturalizing incongruities*.

### 3.1. Identifying the world-structure of the narrative

By identifying the world-structure of a narrative we mean the holistic frame of the fictional world and its constituent subworlds, what, as Amorose asserts, is constituted out of the frame text and the inset text. To explain a narrative world-structure, we can draw on Albaladejo Mayordomo's possible world theory (1986) and also Amoroso's adaptation of it (1991). They recognize three types of world model, namely the real world model, that of reports of a meeting or a sport event; verisimilar fictional world, modeled on the real world model and discernible in the so-called realistic novels; and nonverisimilar fictional world, an example of which can be seen in science fictions in which they not only do not imitate the real world model but violate it. In a text we cannot put a clear-cut boundary to each of the world models and we often have a mixture of them, e.g. in *The Return of the Native*, we have a natural setting devastated by an uneasy sense of supernatural forebodings. One more thing about the narrative structures is that we have as many worlds as the characters involved and each character has different subworlds due to his different attitudes along the temporal developments of the narrative or what Albaladejo calls referential set structure. The text is the reader's only access to the possible and real world structure of the narrative. The reader based on the existing perspectives and their corresponding world frames, infers which one or ones would make up the articulatory or the global world of the narrative. This articulatory world is the norm, the frame text or the holistic frame of the narrative against which the reliability or unreliability of a represented possible world is judged. To reach this articulatory world as the holistic frame of the narrative, the reader employs, on one hand, the textual information such as conflicts between story and discourse, internal discrepancies within the narrator's discourse, the implied and determining stance of the implied author and multiperspectival accounts of the story and on the other her own conceptual frames such as general world knowledge, literary competence about literary conventions, genres, and fictional and characterological models (Nunning qtd. in Zerweck, 2000). Therefore at this stage the reader draws on the referential set structure that is in turn ruled by the producer's cognitive processes in constituting the world model and chooses a reference world frame that might be consolidated, revised or replaced. By choice, we imply that the reader surely experiences a variety of alternative readings due to the elements of mediation and perspective taking.

### 3.2. Identifying the mediator

Identifying the mediator in narrative entails a review of its levels that are *fabula*, *suzhet*, narration and text, with a special focus on narration where the mediator shows up. *Fabula* is the pre-artistic and real organization of the articulatory world of the text in a linear progression; *suzhet* is the artistic rearrangement of the elements included on the base structure of *fabula* and also gives way for the constitution of different subworlds the assemblage of which determines the articulatory fictional world; narration maps on to the text the information derived from earlier levels and has the two functions of verbalizing or quoting; and finally text is the *suzhet* that is mapped onto linguistic codes by the mediation of narration and has a specific sentential arrangement (Amoros, 1991). The two functions of narration give way to their respective frame counterparts that are the frame text and the insert text.

Sternberg notes that even the frame text itself is sometimes quoted and thus transformed by a mediatory teller. Sternberg (1991) proposes “four universals of quotation” in which one can see the role of mediator in both the rendition of articulatory world and its manipulations. His universals say that

- a. In every literary work that inescapably entails quotation, we have a relation established between two discourse events or more and not a discourse event and reality. Thus a discourse is mediated in another discourse and the agent of which at a higher level of production may be an author and at the lower level of production, a narrator. Here the unreliability of implied author turns up due to the fact that the quotee is going to be approved, sometimes manipulated and thence mediated by the reader or that it might be slanted idiosyncratically in the narrator’s discourse.
- b. This discourse within discourse involves the quoted discourse to be the inset discourse inserted within the frame discourse and a transformer to combine them.
- c. As the original discourse becomes an inset in the articulatory frame, it entails a communicative subordination of part to the whole enclosing it. This subordination is a kind of recontextualizing or

retextualizing since the reporters subject the original to their own rules, norms, ends and desires. Here, both the narrator as quoter-manipulator and the implied author as quoter-manipulator might be possible creators of the (un)reliability frames.

- d. Quotation involves a distinctive point of view. In the narrative we have a perspectival montage of the quoter and quotee and sometimes we cannot say for certain where one's ends and the other's begins. The same frame text and inset text shows a multiple point of view. The last universal leads us to the challenges the reader encounters in his interpretation (qtd. in Yacobi 2000).

Therefore in this stage of reading unreliable narratives, we postulate the narrative as a quotation that is removed from its abstract unaffected form and accordingly, we study how different characters' subworlds and also the narrator's and the implied author's are mediated and what kind of relationship can be detected among them. It helps us to explain our judgments as to the origin of inconsistencies and ambiguities in the text. In "My Last Duchess", the Duchess and her possible subworld is slanted through the Duke's viewpoint and we as readers have only access to his description and imagine her based on the picture the Duke provides us with. However, in depiction of his last duchess and representing her world, he betrays himself as unreliable mediator. We reach at such a conclusion out of the assemblages of different subworlds included in his rehearsal and thus build up an articulatory world for the narrative against which we put to test the duke's seemingly encapsulating and global world.

### 3.3. Naturalizing incongruities

Naturalization of narrative incongruities: when a narrative structure is not congruent with the reader's early experiences and frames and so the referent structure remains illegible, the reader tries to find the reason of illegibility and thence to find a relation between that particular instance and a prevalent, natural frame and modulate that frame or replace it with some other frame so as to integrate it as legible. When the reader is aware of the articulatory or frame world and the inset possible world and the relation among them and the way in which one is mediated in the other, the reader's next move is toward integrating the narrative inconsistencies in to a legible whole and so naturalizing



it. Yacobi (2000), in this regard has proposed a model, or what she calls 'mechanisms of integration' that works on different levels and brings about a multiplicity of readings or at least a multidimensional reading. These mechanisms are:

a) *The genetic mechanism*: it explains the inconsistencies in terms of causal factors that produced the text. A narrator might seem unreliable because he is textualized based on the author's norms and values and slanted through his worldview. An example of which can be seen in historical narratives manipulated by the author due to his certain orientations. When this is the case the reader can naturalize it by having recourse to the genesis of a work and the author's historical context and his tendencies.

b) *The generic framework*: different genres entail certain conventions and styles that in turn lead to divergences from the generally accepted picture of real world models. We can see instances of it in sonnets and odes; the most expressive one is 'To His Coy Mistress'. We naturalize the exaggerations in that poem by appealing to its generic framework.

c) *The existential mechanism*: it reconciles the incongruities in the narrative by ascribing them to the norms of the represented norms. We integrate the inconsistencies or oddities in science fiction by considering the way we have defined them and their subsequent worlds. Or in "Metamorphosis", we naturalize the change to insect by appealing to the world-structure in a surrealist literary narrative that allows for such existential happenings.

d) *The functional principle*: it defines a narrative's oddities by taking in to consideration the goals they want to achieve. A narrative slanted through a psychopathic personage might have the portrayal of a certain personality disorder as his agenda. Or an author might employ a certain mediator and attribute some discordant reportages and worldviews to achieve a certain effect. Therefore, here, the works aesthetic, thematic and persuasive goals operate as a major guideline for making sense of its peculiarities.

*e) The perspectival mechanism:* it is also called by Yacobi as the “unreliability hypothesis” that help the reader to naturalize discordant as well as otherwise unrelated elements by attributing them to the peculiarities of the mediator through whom the articulatory world is reflected. When a reader has this mechanism as his last recourse, she tries to explain the peculiarities and inconsistencies based on the mediator’s untruthfulness, lack of knowledge, limited knowledge or distorted judgments. When we encounter Marlow’s colonialist ideals in ‘The Heart of Darkness’, we might naturalize his ideologically discordant ideas in favor of imperialism by recourse to his distorted judgments and the perspective he adopts; we have to integrate his judgments into a neutralized articulatory world frame to make sense of his personage. Thus, as Zerweck has pointed out, the reader attributes the problematic elements of a narrative text to the individual perspective of a fictional reflector.

A reader might naturalize a text and account for its oddities by referring to one of these mechanisms and one and the same narrative might be naturalized by employing different mechanisms listed above. For example “To His Coy Mistress” can be read both by appealing to its generic framework and its functional mechanism. Or in *The Sound and the Fury*, we might explain Benji’s distorted reportage by ascribing it to his limited perspective, to the narrative’s existential mechanism or simply to its functional principle in that his reportage alongside other’s reportages makes up the articulatory world.

The multiplicity of reading to which we referred above, leads us to one of the important principles governing frame making, the so-called “proteus principle” or “the many to many correspondences between linguistic form and representational function” (Sternberg qtd. in Jahn 1997). The reader in the process of reading makes frame of the fictional world and its constituent subworlds and also the mediator who is responsible for their particular representations and thence she puts those frames and interpretive conclusions to test and analyze them; if that frame works, she would keep it, otherwise she would replace it wholly or revise it in that she replaces some of the “slots” with new subframes or borrow subframes from other frame(s). These new subframes account for the exceptions and those instances that violate her horizon of expectations. Therefore the reader needs not to

stick to one and the same frame throughout all her reading experience. She can adopt some frames, deconstruct those frames and combine the relevant subframes with subframes of an alternative relevant frame so as to make an incongruent narrative legible. One and the same reader might

choose different and even contrasting subframes and frames every time she indulges in reading a narrative and get at different ways of integrating that narrative. Hence this

principle in turn explains the disagreements among readers about the same narrative by appealing to their adaptations of different frames and strategies.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As I mentioned before, we cannot put clear-cut boundaries to these overlapping cognitive processes involved in reading an unreliable narrative and determine its constituent components, but at least we may claim that such processes exist. The cognitive model is flexible enough for the reader as to where to begin and to end a reading process or when to move forward or backward to revise her orientations and interpretation. Sometimes the reader might come across a single sentence in a narrative or some implied clues that gives rise to the reevaluation and reconstruction of the whole frame. Then the concept of unreliable narration is among those concepts that become clear only on a prolonged study and this calls for the reader's retrospective and introspective reading during which the narrative effect is built and rebuilt. Sometimes the reader can only make sense of such instances in a postreading stage.

Such a model of analysis is exception-conscious and reader-centered and lays the most emphasis on a self-conscious and active involvement of the reader in the process. In that, this model can be effectively utilized in teaching literature and specially in teaching unreliable narratives. If we guide our students through the procedures and help them with their individual preferences in adapting the appropriate frames to render the narrative's oddities and inconsistencies legible, we have really helped them to engage actively in the process and respond knowingly to such literary effects. We have also provided them with a genuine example of how we respond to literature in general and why our interpretations disagree. We should, however, bear in mind and be conscious not to engage our students with unnecessary jargons introduced here and make a boring mess out of them.

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