

FIGURAL NARRATIVE SITUATION IN FLASH FICTION

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The present essay explores figural narrative situation in contemporary flash fiction. Drawing on the analytical framework of narrative typology proposed by Franz K. Stanzel, and redefined by Manfred Jahn, which includes the first-person narrative, authorial narrative, and figural narrative, each characterized by specific features of involvement, distance, access to knowledge, voice, narrative perspective or focalization, etc., the essay investigates the underlying linguistic features and narrative techniques of actualization of the figural narrative situation. By delineating the specific narrative categories and rhetorical means in the flash story "Before/After" by M. McCluskey, the undertaken analysis aims to determine the innovative constituting principles of the figural narrative type in contemporary fictional prose, both at the discourse and story levels.

Keywords : *figural narrative situation, flash story, focalization, free indirect discourse, narrative mode, modality.*

Cuvinte-cheie : *regim narativ figurativ, proză scurtă, focalizare, discurs indirect liber, mod narativ, modalitate.*

The present study is based on the morphological models of narratives proffered by Stanzel, i.e. *first-person narrative, authorial narrative, and figural narrative* characterized by specific combinations of narrative aspects and categories, including features of relationship (involvement), distance, pragmatics, knowledge, reliability, voice, and focalization (Stanzel, 1984). *The first-person narrative*, the correlative of homodiegetic narrative, in Genettian terminology, is told by a narrator who is present as a character in the story which presents events experienced by him- or herself, a story of personal experience. The entity acting as a narrator is also a character on the level of action. Concerning the category of focalization, the first-person narrative can be told from the retrospective perception of the narrating I, or the limited view of the experiencing I (functioning as an internal focalizer). Epistemologically, they are restricted to ordinary human knowledge, unable to display omniscience or exert omnipresence, or to report for certain the thoughts of other characters. (Jahn, 2021 : 51)

The authorial narration, on the contrary, is told from the point of an entity belonging to an ontologically different plane, somebody who is not a character in the story itself, and does not belong to the level of the action. Still, an authorial narrator may refer to himself- or herself in the first person, intervening between the reader and the story, expressing his comments on actions and characters, engaging in philosophical reflection, and interrupting the course of the action with detailed descriptions due to omniscience and omnipresence abilities that characterize this entity. (*Ibidem* : 53) Thus, the authorial narrator possesses a comprehensive ('Olympian') worldview that allows him to reveal the protagonists' perceptual horizon, his/her moral strengths and weaknesses.

The figural narrative, the third type of narrative situation in Stanzel's classification, presents the events of the story from the subjective stance of a third-person internal focalizer. (*Ibidem* : 54) The narrator of a figural narrative is covert heterodiegetic focusing on the internal focalizer's

consciousness, especially his/her perceptions and thoughts. In this type of narrative, mediacy through telling is replaced by an illusion of immediacy, giving the reader the impression that there is no narrator: events and actions are represented as in drama, directly from the internal perspective of one particular character. Figural techniques were first explored in modernist novels and short stories of 20th-century authors, such as Henry James, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and many others.

As M. Jahn posits, figural narratives begin *in medias res* (*Ibidem*), or with *etic openings*, i.e. the persons and objects from the fictional world are treated as given, known, and, therefore, in no need of being introduced. Hence such incipits contain character's naming with no accompanying explanation, *referentless pronouns* (a third-person pronoun whose referent has not yet been established), '*familiarizing articles*', and *noun phrases with definite articles* before any people or objects have been properly introduced by indefinite ones, presenting new information (in reader's interpretation) in the guise of given information (in character's acceptance). (*Loc. cit.*)

Usually, figural narratives belong to the subgenre of slice-of-life story or novel, whose story time, i.e. the fictional time taken up by an action episode, or, more globally, by the whole action, is restricted to a very short episode in a character's life, ranging from a single moment to a day.

Another plot device characterizing figural narratives is the *epiphany*, defined as a moment of intense insight, usually occasioned by the perception of a more or less ordinary object or event, termed by other authors as a *moment of vision*, a *moment of being*, or *glimpse*. As Beja affirms, "epiphany is a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind - the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it". (Beja, 1984 : 719)

The short story "Before/After" by Mary McCluskey (2013) belongs to the subgenre of flash fiction, a subtype of prose fiction characterized by extreme brevity, well-suited to our current fast-paced lives, and innovative narrative techniques that defy traditional reader expectations of narrative form, chronology, plot development, and style. The story under consideration displays various aspects of the narrative, such as the incipit, narrative modes, focalization, types of discourse, and storyline chronology that comply with features of figural narratives.

The first and foremost mark that connotes the figural type of narrative is the genre to which the text under consideration belongs. The flash story "Before/After" is tailored into the slice-of-life genre as it presents an extremely brief episode in the life of the protagonist Chloe that lasts less than an hour. She is the only actant at the level of the action. Other characters mentioned in the story but not assigned any active roles are her husband, sister, and an office colleague of hers.

Although the text opens with abstractions and generalizations "In an instant, a life can divide into Before and After. A phone call, a news flash can do it. Invariably, something remains as a reminder" rendered using gnomic present and two synopses drawing connections with the situation of the main character and, thus, introducing the reader into the subject matter of the story, the incipit contains features of the *etic beginning*, too. Formal features of the textual organization allow readers to ascertain that the story starts in the middle of things. The system of denomination employed in the initial part of the text "For Joseph, a colleague at Chloe's office...", "For Chloe's sister, Anna...", as well as the multiple occurrences of familiarizing articles present new, unknown characters in the guise of known ones. The narrator does not include any detailed exposition to announce the background of the protagonist, the setting in time and space, or her social status.

The tense that concatenates the texture is *the narrative present* meant to create the illusion of a simultaneous or concurrent narration where *discourse NOW* and *the story NOW* seem to be identical. The isochrony, i.e. the rhythmical mapping of story time and discourse time, contributes to realizing the showing mode of presentation, particularly the scenic presentation, strengthening the dramatic point of view and enhancing the sense of immediacy that the reader experiences, with actions unfolding before his/her eyes, “*Right now she chooses a pretty china cup, Staffordshire, patterned with red roses. She pokes the tea bag with a spoon while she pours in the boiling water and then decides to start the laundry while the tea steeps*”. (McCluskey, 2013) The retrospection of previously developed actions is presented in the text from the subjective point of view of the protagonist. The past perfect that marks the flashback “*Then remembers, of course, the business conference in New York City. Seven days had stretched to ten; Dan had been exhausted when he came home,...*” (Ibidem) denotes anteriority from the character’s temporal perspective. The prospective narration employed in the same story is presented both from the narrator and the character’s stance. The narrator’s objective flash-forward “*Chloe will be reminded of these conversations in four minutes*” alludes to an event that will occur later in the story, while the subjective flash-forward “... *Chloe sees that these stubs will lead to questions that she does not want to ask, but must ask.... Later, a Decree Absolute, loneliness” represents the character’s vision of her future married life. An important category that amounts to the effect of immediacy is modality. The modalized assertions that express the epistemic “*Then remembers, of course...*” and deontic “...*questions that she does not want to ask, but must ask...*” types of modality reveal the character’s subjectivity since they seem to echo her original discourse.*

As the consideration of tenses has proved, the focalization of the figural story under analysis is internal, materialized predominantly through the perceptual and psychological facets. The reader experiences the referential content of the story through the focalizer’s sensory range. Visual perception is marked by the content of the visual domain, as in the excerpt “*As she shakes the shirt, something flies out, floats up like confetti to land on the lid of the dryer*” (Ibidem). Taste, another sub-type of the perceptual facet of focalization, is verbally represented by nouns that denote the object of gustatory perception, verbs of sense perception, and descriptive adjectives that qualify the object of perception: “*Chloe knows as she stirs her tea, stirs what is now gungy, tarry soup, that she is already in the after. She throws the tea away, gets a fresh teabag, starts over. The tea, though freshly brewed, still tastes thick and stale” (Ibidem). The taste of tea she perceives, *thick and stale*, is the correlative of her desperate mood at that time.*

The protagonist’s mind and emotions represent the psychological aspect of focalization. Chloe displays restricted knowledge, thus complying with the characteristics of an internal focalizer. Being a part of the represented world, she has limited access to situations and states of affairs developing in the story. Her cognition is mainly achieved through inferences, suppositions, and speculations. Finding two ticket stubs for a New York City theatre flying out of her husband’s shirt, she tries to explain to herself what had happened, tying together the scraps of information offered by her husband and her retrospective understanding, eventually gaining an insight into the motives behind her spouse’s behavior:

(1) *She is puzzled at first.* (2) *Then remembers, of course, the business conference in New York City.* (3) *Seven days had stretched to ten; Dan had been exhausted when he came home, complaining about the demands of clients, the tedious conversation of his colleagues.* (4) *Chloe studies these tickets with a sense of unreality, as if she is watching herself on a movie set, frowning for the camera.* (5) *But her mind is seething with questions.* (6) *Dan had not told her*

of this theatre visit. (7) *Off-Broadway does not seem appropriate, somehow.* (8) *Hedda Gabler is an odd choice for an evening with a client.* (9) *Or a colleague (Ibidem).*

Therefore, the character experiences a moment of revelation, her husband's betrayal, occasioned by the mere perception of ordinary objects "As she shakes the shirt, something flies out, floats up like confetti to land on the lid of the dryer. She studies, frowning, a pair of ticket stubs for a New York City theatre". The indefinite pronoun in the syntagm "something flies out" denotes the limited knowledge of the experiencing self that usually characterizes a narrator-focalizer, emphasizing the limited apprehension of the perceptual domain and reliance on inference. Gradually Chloe realizes that this "*something*" is two ticket stubs serving as clear evidence that her spouse is involved in an extramarital affair.

Except for the cognitive component, the excerpt presented above displays the focalizer's emotive state too. Realizing the bitter truth about her husband's adultery, Chloe becomes bewildered and frustrated: "*She is puzzled at first*", "*Chloe studies these tickets with a sense of unreality*", "*her mind is seething with questions*" (Ibidem). The verbal indicators of focalization mirror the emotive orientation of the focalizer, i.e. Chloe, towards the focalized entity – Dan, her husband, and his adulterous act. In this respect, the narrator resorts to the narrative techniques of free indirect discourse and free direct discourse that grant immediate access into the character's inner state – sentences (6) – (9). Although the free indirect discourse is not embedded in a reporting clause, the piece represents the content of three indirect thought that echoes Chloe's consciousness. The mimetic syntax including detached constructions (sentence 7) and incomplete sentences (9) mirror the emotions and the impressions captured in the focalizer's mind.

Having undertaken an attempt to analyze the realization of figural narrative in contemporary flash fiction, the study has mainly focused on the narrative techniques, story elements, and verbal indicators that actualize the type of narrative in question. Thus, in addition to the figural techniques widely acknowledged in narratology, such as etic openings, internal focalization, and epiphany, the following means are worth considering too: narrative tense and narrative modes, durational aspects and discourse representation techniques, mainly free indirect and free direct types of discourse encompassing mimetic syntax, deixis, modality, indefinite reference and idiolect that connote a story-internal perspective.

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