

Ambiguity in Focalization and Barthes' Hermeneutic Code

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This essay considers how ambiguity in focalization within a fiction text can be explained by an application of Roland Barthes' hermeneutic code. It begins with an overview of focalization theories and how they apply to two extracts from a novel. It then introduces Barthes' codes of reading and considers the same texts from the perspective of one, the hermeneutic code. It ends with some criticisms of the study and a consideration of what conclusions may be drawn.

Focalization concerns the presentation and perception of point of view within a narrative; the orientation of the reader based on their understanding of the positions of the narrator and characters. The current tradition of focalization theory began with Gerard Genette and his splitting the concept of 'point of view', into the questions 'who sees?' (the 'orientation') and 'who speaks?' (the authority for the words) (1980:186). Genette divided narrative three ways. First, nonfocalized (also termed zero focalization; the negation referring not necessarily to the 'focalization' but its (absence of) application to a *character*), the narrator 'saying' more than the character knows. Internal focalization, where the narrator says only what a character knows, and external focalization where the narrator says less than the character knows. Focalization here is not strictly visual, but concerns what is 'known'.

Genette's model was revised by Bal (1983) who proposed that an 'actor' creates the story (the unsorted raw material of the tale), the 'focalizer' creates the narrative (selecting actions and angles for presentation) and the 'narrator' puts the narrative into words. Rather than having an implied author (i.e. the reader's (un)conscious manifestation of the actual author) selecting the story and a narrator 'presenting' it, Bal theorises three overlapping levels, each having implied cognitive abilities in 'presenting'. Hence Bal's focalizer is not a lens, but an agent capable of selecting what is presented in a text. For Bal, everything within narrative comes through a focalizer, either internal (character) or external (the narrator position) leading to multiple layers and embedded focalization. For example, she quotes (1981:204) a segment from Colette's *La chatte*, "She watched him drink and was suddenly troubled because of the mouth pressing the brim of the glass. But he felt so tired that he refused to participate." and states, 'The word watched denotes a changing in the level of focalization. From that moment there is embedding: the first and external focalizer watches Camille watching Alain.' Bal also describes two kinds of 'focalized' - what the focalizer is focused on - either external (what is 'literally visible' to them) or internal (their thoughts and feelings).

For many theorists, Bal applies the role of focalizer too broadly - her model tends towards a view that any perception within the narrative is conceived as being through *some* kind of focalizer. Nelles (1990:368) criticises the idea of 'character' as focalizer, seeing focalization as a '*relation* between the narrator's report and the characters' thoughts' and emphasising, 'It is crucial to imagine this relation without resorting to the postulation of a relator and relatee'.

Chatman (1986:196) replaces 'focalizer' with the term 'filter'; a construct or function through which the narrator may or may not choose to present aspects of the story. He regards the narrator as fundamentally 'outside' the story events. He judges *everything* in the story to emanate *from* a narrator utilizing a variety of narratological devices, focalization through characters (filter) being one, and therefore by definition the narrator position as unable to assume that role. To regard it so, would, he claims, be to confuse the 'who sees?' and 'who speaks?' He states (ibid:195) that a story cannot be told "through" the narrator's perception since he/she is precisely *narrating*, which is not an act of perception but of encoding'. He does acknowledge however (ibid:197) that narrator's may demonstrate 'attitude', or 'slant' as he terms it. Similarly, Nieragden (2002:689) argues against Bal's model of heterodiegetic narrator as focalizer on the grounds that such positioning breaks the distinction between story and discourse (the organised telling of the tale); that logically, if the focalizer-focalized relationship were 'two way', it would open the narration to comment by the characters!

Other theorists accept the idea of narrators as focalizer, but regard Bal's emphasis on focalization as primarily *visual*, as too narrow. Rimmon-Kenan ([1983] 2002:71) includes psychological and ideological forms of focalization. Manfred Jahn (1999:89) adds to this approach suggesting that determination of focalization revolves around whose *affect* (feelings), *perception* (sensual or imaginary) and/or *conceptualization* 'orients the narrative'. He consequently regards both character and narrator positions as capable of focalization and claims (ibid:94) 'focalization...is a matter of providing and managing windows into the narrative world, and of regulating...readerly imaginary perception'. Within his model, the reader metaphorically puts themselves in the 'focalizer's' position which the text has constructed and when sufficient change has occurred in the determiners of that position, the 'window of focalization' will change.

Monica Fludernik (1996:346) rejects the traditional view of internal/external focalization altogether. For her, 'Perception centrally correlates with perceptual consciousness, and narratorial descriptions *either* invoke an evaluative frame of mind on the part of the narrator (*slant*), which has absolutely *no* truck with perception, *or* they illusionistically project a character's perceptions, and then are definitely relatable to a consciousness factor of what is traditionally termed internal focalization.'

Despite the lack of agreement in focalization theory, it does have value in narratology. Toolan (2001:63) remarks the significance of its bi-directionality; how the focalizer informs the reader about the focalized, but that simultaneously this focalization process also communicates something about the focalizer. Nieragden (2002:688) writes that the focalization in a given narrative 'has great significance for matters such as characterization, completeness, and reliability'.

The following extracts from Patrick O'Brian's historical novel *Post Captain* ([1972] 2002:12) (see Appendix 1) will now be considered from the perspective of these models.

Extract A

(1) The wind breathed up the long hillside; remote clouds passed evenly across the sky. (2) Now and then Jack's big hunter brought his ears to bear; this was a recent purchase, a strongly-built bay, quite up to Jack's sixteen stone. (3) But it did not much care for hunting, (4) and then like so many geldings it

spent much of its time mourning for its lost stones: a discontented horse. (5) If the moods that succeeded one another in its head had taken the form of words they would have run. 'Too heavy – sits too far forward when we go over a fence – have carried him far enough for one day – shall have him off presently, see if I don't. I smell a mare! A mare! Oh!' (6) Its flaring nostrils quivered and it stamped.

Sentence (1) is the first ambiguity. Is this an example of nonfocalized external narratorial voice, or can we judge that since the words have an obviously visual quality, they must be focalized? If we accept *this*, are we to then conclude a narrator focalizer, or that the perceptions the sentence proposes are externally focalized through the character 'Jack' acting as internal focalizer? There is nothing absolutely within the text to answer these questions. Segment (2) introduces Jack's horse as the visually focalized element, once more potentially either narration or Jack's focalized within his field of vision. The following clauses in (2) tend towards narrator commentary (though the phrase 'quite up to' (an *evaluative* position) implies a *focalizer* narrator rather than nonfocalized position). In addition to this, it is not impossible to argue these thoughts are part of Jack's internal consciousness, albeit not a representation of consecutive thought processes.

Section (3), 'But it did not much care for hunting' is potentially Jack's internal perception of the horse (focalized) at this moment, or the narrator's 'narration', the narrator as focalizer with the horse as focalized, or the beginning of a focalization shift to the horse itself as internal focalizer. Section (4) drops the potential for Jack to be focalizer but the ambiguity of focalization from within the horse or through a narrator remains. However, if we take focalization to be a purely visual phenomenon then neither of these will be the case.

The hypothetical nature of part (5) is not of concern since all representation in a novel is metaphorical (simulated representation). In this instance the failure of clarity lies in the narrator introducing the hypothesis but then the text switching to a stream of consciousness style presentation of the horse's thoughts. We are still faced with the confusion of narrator focalizer versus horse as focalizer.

In section (6) the actions of the horse may be seen as 'witnessed' (metaphorically) by the narrator, witnessed through its rider (embedded through a narrator), or represent an action carried out by the horse as focalizer.

The second extract comes one paragraph later.

Extract B

The noise died away: a young hound came out and stared into the open. Stephen Maturin moved from behind the close-woven thorn to follow the flight of a falcon overhead, and at the sight of the mule the chestnut mare began to caper, flashing her white stockings and tossing her head.

The reader receives no clarification whether the opening clause continues to be focalized by Jack from the preceding paragraph, or whether the paragraph change implicitly signals a focalizer change. From 'the hound came out and stared into the open' do readers infer that 'stared' makes the hound the focalizer of what follows, or is this the act of narrating? Does Stephen Maturin become focalizer, or the narrator's focalized? The mare sees the mule, but do we focalize through the mule as we did through the gelding earlier or are the mare and mule focalized – of the hound, Stephen or the falcon? Or is the narrator providing initial focalization of the scene with one of the 'characters' providing further focalization in an embedded structure as Bal might suggest? Such a structure would be criticised by Nelles on the grounds that the first level of this narration is a metaphorical point of view while the character's view would be literal, 'camera angle' point of view.

These questions may be ultimately unanswerable from within the text. The irony of the confusion highlighted in these brief analyses is that none of the issues interferes with the normal reading process. All the potential confusion highlighted by *analysis*, fails to materialize. It is therefore in *this* process that answers may be sought.

In S/Z ([1974] 1990), Roland Barthes considers Balzac's short story Sarrasine. His analysis attempts to render typographically, the 'reading process' - or rather 'a' reading process, for Barthes highlights the uniqueness of each individual reading. His study aims 'not to manifest a structure but to produce a structuration ... all the movements and inflections of a vast "dissolve," which permits both overlapping and loss of messages'. Barthes proposes five codes within which the signification emerging from the text can be grouped, though in explaining the codes Barthes stresses that their meaning is not inherent but that it is born of the way a reader brings their whole self, experience and understanding to the text. Thus he sees textual meaning as an infinite network reaching out (or rather drawn out) beyond the text by a reader. The five codes are, in summary: the semic, concerning aspects of characters; the reference code concerning references beyond the text; the symbolic code concerning the projection of meaning through dichotomy; the proairetic code concerning action, event and sequence; and the hermeneutic code concerning the movement to and delay in, closure of the 'plot' (meaning the way the story material is structured).

Brevity limits this essay to a consideration of only the hermeneutic code, and how its application to the Post Captain extracts may provide some explanation, reinforcement, or clarification of the strengths and weaknesses of focalization theory.

In Extract A the forward movement of the plot is halted. From Jack's and Stephen's actions and perceptions of the fox hunt the discourse makes a sudden shift to a 'discussion' of Jack's horse, first with regard to its acquisition and qualities, then the horse's hypothetical thoughts. Four paragraphs earlier Stephen was interrupted ("I tell you what it is, Jack ... I tell you what it is...") and two paragraphs earlier Jack has responded "'Tell me later, Stephen'". We have an unanswered enigma, and Extract A rather than addressing this, and rather than continuing to address the immediately preceding issue of the young horsewoman Jack is eyeing, instead enters a digression (a paragraph devoid of temporality); a move away from the progression of the plot as a revealing or 'rolling out' what we as a reader are anticipating, in which 'this was a recent purchase' takes the reader into a new conceptualisation – away from any of the characters whose lives we are following and into the details of the horse and its internal

musings. This 'delay' in the story acts as what Barthes (ibid:75) terms an 'aphasic stoppage of disclosure', a shift away from the sequence leading to the hoped for/expected revelation of 'truth'. The extract also poses two new enigmas: whether the horse will 'have him off presently'; and regarding the mare Jack's horse is able to scent.

Barthes proposes that (ibid:80) 'the discourse has no responsibility vis-a-vis the real...[imagine] the disorder the most orderly narrative would create were its descriptions taken at face value, converted into operative programs and simply *executed*.' He continues, 'what we call "real" is never more than a code of representation...*the novelistic real is not operable*'. To view novelistic discourse otherwise would be to render it as an operable system akin to film – a criticism directly applicable to Bal's theory of embedded focalization which is easily conceivable as analogous to camera angles in a film. What we can draw from this is that Extract A does not signify focalization. It is 'read' in a non-real way and has plot *function*.

The paragraph preceding Extract B comprises a sequence of actions (Jack's observation of the young woman), which Extract B then abruptly halts - its opening 'The noise died away' follows directly from an enigma posed by 'then a bellowing roar inside the covert gave promise of great things'; an expectation raised for the reader but then not fulfilled. This part of the hermeneutic code Barthes terms a 'suspended answer'; again functioning to delay. Despite an appearance of temporality, this is arguably lacking in Extract B, which also employs highly 'textual' expressions ('flashing her white stockings') making this extract unreal and not operable. This is significant in explaining the failure of focalization theory to, again, successfully 'explicate' the paragraph. Essentially it has all the *appearance* of marking focalization positions but such positions do not 'materialize' in a recognisable form for the reader during the reading process.

Barthes (ibid:75) claims the hermeneutic code 'structures the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution' – maintaining the enigma becomes key. The code must set up delays in the discourse flow. This code's structure is, Barthes writes, 'essentially reactive'. The functioning of the code will be fundamentally different in a long historical novel compared to a short story of a family mystery, which was Barthes' study, but its function remains.

The job of the hermeneutic code is to offer the promise of truth as a final reward for reading, but also to delay that reward (for a Freudian perspective on this concept see Brooks 1980,1982) indeed Barthes claims (ibid:54) there exists an implicit assumption in the act of narration that the narrator has the truth to give. Barthes (ibid:62) deduces that communication of the story via the text occurs through *connotation* rather than *denotation*, since the latter would lay bare a 'nameable truth' (everything would be revealed instantaneously at the point of reading), while the former has a 'hermeneutic value' generating a system whereby a connotative signified brings an 'insufficient half truth' acting as an index, 'pointing but not telling' – the essence of plot; drawing the reader through a story.

This analysis using the codes does not 'untangle' any of the ambiguities identified within the focalization models, but it does begin to explain why an ambiguity found in analysis is not found during the 'normal' reading process. To a degree the hermeneutic code 'explains away' (rather than 'explains') some of the issues proposed in focalization theory. If the extracts function at plot and discourse level in the hermeneutic system,

notions of focalization become somewhat moot, though the analysis suggests that in more detailed studies, by working backwards from an identification of the textual function of focalization we are more likely to reach an accurate sense of the *nature* of any focalization.

This study can be criticised for its attempt to use one framework of narratological analysis to critique another from an 'unrelated plane' of narratology. In addition, both models used have been considered in a simplified form with certain subtleties and details ignored (criticism of Barthes' model has been suspended altogether) although in attempting to determine potential redundancies in theory this might be considered to have *some* validity. It might also be suggested that a focus on just one model of focalization would be more fruitfully pursued, at least in terms of producing more concrete or generally supportable conclusions, but that would also reduce the potential for drawing *any* useful conclusions in an initial study, which a broader analysis is more likely to yield. One significant proviso must also be stated, namely, the findings here specifically relate to heterodiegetic narrative and need also to be tested against examples of homodiegetic narrative. One final criticism might be that the 'implied author' within the presented theories of focalization has been ignored. This role does have bearing on the (non)focalizing positions but is judged in this instance to be peripheral to the ambiguities raised and does not bear directly on the results arrived at by application of Barthes' model. It also keeps this study to manageable proportions.

Chatman writes (1986:200) of Bal's analysis of the previously discussed fragment from *La chatte*,

Do we really know any more about the relationship between Alain and Camille in *La chatte* by saying that the former is focalized at the second degree by the latter, herself a focalized focalizer? Is it not, as Genette says, simply that one character sees the other? More importantly from the theoretical point of view: should we not be making the clearest distinction possible between an act of seeing that takes place, like other plot events, within the story and a decision at the discourse level to use a character as a filtering consciousness through which the plot events pass

Here he hints that focalization structures may in fact be nothing of the kind. It might be concluded that focalization theory, considered with regard to Toolan's earlier stated proposition of its value, does not in fact reveal anything in the Post Captain extracts because it is misapplied. The aspects potentially read 'as focalization' *at these points* function otherwise, not saying anything about the focalizer, filter or focalized but performing a different narrative function, one more concerned with endowing the text with the quality of readability than meaning within the story. Fludernik (ibid:344) states, 'Focalization on the story level (i.e. one character observing another) does not properly belong to macro-focalization, i.e. the focalization of an entire text, but it is a small-scale management of the plot function'. We can now push this point further to say that at certain points, attempts to apply focalization theory may be quite redundant because notions of 'focalization' are *subsumed* by the plot function.

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In drawing these conclusions we can argue against Bal's proposition that everything has some focalizing point, but also the view that necessarily separates narrator from acting as focalizer, orienting ourselves to the views of Jahn and Fludernik that the readerly process is the angle from which to usefully consider focalization in future.

Appendix 1

From Post Captain (2002:12-13) by Patrick O'Brian

Extracts A and B are labelled and shown in bold. Other sections in bold are also quoted in the study. The text occurs at a point in the novel where Royal Navy captain Jack and his friend and ship's surgeon Stephen have been made redundant by the peace of 1802 and are setting themselves up in a rural Hampshire community. In this scene they are at a fox hunt.

[Stephen Maturin]...**'I tell you what it is, Jack,'** he was saying, **'I tell you what it is...'**

'You sir – you on the mule,' cried old Mr Savile's furious voice. 'Will you let the God-damned dogs get on with their work? Hey? Hey? Is this a God-damned coffee-house? I appeal to you, is this an infernal debating society?'

Captain Aubrey pursed his lips demurely and pushed his horse over the twenty yards that separated them. **'Tell me later, Stephen,'** he said in a low voice, leading his friend round the covert out of the master's sight. 'Tell me later when they have found their fox.'

The demure look did not sit naturally on Jack Aubrey's face, which in this weather was as red as his coat, and as soon as they were round the corner, under the lee of wind-blown thorn, his usual expectant cheerfulness returned, and he looked eagerly up into the furze, where an occasional heave and rustle showed the pack in motion.

'Looking for a fox, are they?' said Stephen Maturin, as though hippogriffs were the more usual quarry in England, and he relapsed into a brown study, munching slowly upon his bread.

[EXTRACT A] **The wind breathed up the long hillside; remote clouds passed evenly across the sky. Now and then Jack's big hunter brought his ears to bear; this was a recent purchase, a strongly-built bay, quite up to Jack's sixteen stone. But it did not much care for hunting, and then like so many geldings it spent much of its time mourning for its lost stones: a discontented horse. If the moods that succeeded one another in its head had taken the form of words they would have run. 'Too heavy – sits too far forward when we go over a fence – have carried him far enough for one day – shall have him off presently, see if I don't. I smell a mare! A mare! Oh!' Its flaring nostrils quivered and it stamped.**

Looking round Jack saw that there were newcomers in the field. A young woman and a groom came hurrying up the side of the plough, the groom mounted on a cob and the young woman on a pretty little high-bred chestnut mare. When they reached the post and rail dividing the field from the down the groom cantered on to open a gate, but the girl set her horse at the rail and skipped neatly over it, just as a whimpering and then **a bellowing roar inside the covert gave promise of great things.**

[EXTRACT B] **The noise died away: a young hound came out and stared into the open. Stephen Maturin moved from behind the close-woven thorn to follow the**

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flight of a falcon overhead, and at the sight of the mule the chestnut mare began to caper, flashing her white stockings and tossing her head.

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