

Focalization in “When We Leave”

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Abstract:

The concept of “point of view” in narrative has taken on a number of theoretical transformations through narratological study. Gerard Genette’s worked on focalization in Narrative Discourse. An overwhelming amount of words have been written on this subject in regards to literary and filmic narratives. The common use of “first person” and “third person” in many discussions shows a distinct lack of specificity for addressing this often complicated issue.

The article is about the “regulation of narrative information”. It is investigated whether narrative information is filtered through a single character or it is the reader who is aware of what the character is thinking? Is the reader made to see through a character’s eyes? Or does the reader observe the entire actions from an external place? The reader is given insight to the internal thoughts of many characters along with the actions shown from these characters. These are only some of the narrative questions that will be addressed.

This article is meant to be analytic and descriptive with a purpose to evaluate the effects of any of these narrative strategies; all have their uses and effects. My purpose is to investigate how these strategies are created and how they can create meanings for the reader/audience and how the action in the film narrative is made to see through the eye of a character who is a part of the narrative. The attempt on the part of the narrator imposes intended meanings of the narrative on the reader’s conception.

Key words: Focalization, Narrative, Filmic narrative, Reader’s conception

1. Introduction

Focus of the study is specifically on texts about “point of view” in relation to narrative. Writings on focalization in literature are numerous, with many variations of theories. I have settled on Genette’s work as a basis for my discussion and to detail the model offered by Mieke Bal. Many authors have followed his work by adding, in my opinion, often unnecessary complications to his system. These complications offer little gain in descriptive power. I shall attempt to discuss the concept of focalization by analyzing the movie *When We Leave* and find out the point of view by the narrator in respect to the conceptions of the viewers.

Writings on this topic in regards to film are also quite numerous. Being a visual media, filmic theories bear some relation to the studies of meaning making, but there are many places where the two differ. In particular are issues of the “camera” and the “profilmic” (that is, the material that exists as that which is filmed (actors, sets, all the spectacular means etc). There is always a multiple layer of meanings in the visual signs of the movie, offering the audience to perceive and to extract meanings out of it.

1.1 Focalization

In his highly influential work, *Narrative Discourse*, French narratologist Gerard Genette posited the concept of focalization, originally describing it in such ways as “the question who sees?” (Genette 1980, 186), “who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective,” (Genette 1980, 186) and the “regulation of narrative information” (1980, 162). Later, he offered, the “selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience” (Genette 1988, 74). The concept has been debated by narratologists ever since, with numerous refinements, expansions, and criticisms. It is not possible to address even a majority of the debate, though two of the most cited authors are Bal (1997) and Rimmon-Kenan

(2002). Bal in particular takes Genette's work and adds layers of complication and terminology, creating a system that becomes less descriptively useful the larger it grows and the more it focuses on micro-level changes of focalization. Rimmon-Kenan, on the other hand, offers the useful addition of considering focalization through multiple facets—perceptive, cognitive, and ideological.

For our purposes, focalization is a restriction on narrative information, usually in relation to characters. Though one can imagine narratives with animal or object related focalization, I will refer to focalization in relation to characters to simplify my writing. Focalization is often associated with the protagonist of a narrative.

1.2 Narrator vs. Focalizer

An important part of Genette's original purpose for the concept of focalization was to take the idea of "point of view" or "perspective" in its conventionally considered literary sense and separate out the issue of the narrator from the issue of the "restriction of narrative information." The classic "first person" point of view tends to focus on the grammatical "I" of a narrator without providing the kind of specificity that allows for an "I" narrator who is telling a story through someone else's perception. Genette's classification of narrators can be quickly summarized, as further details will be offered in the analyses below.

Narrators are classified by their relation to the main narrative (diegesis). A homodiegetic narrator is telling a story in which she herself takes part. A heterodiegetic narrator tells a story in which she does not take part. Narrators can also be categorized in relation to the story "levels." An extradiegetic narrator is narrating from outside the story, while an intradiegetic narrator is a narrator inside the story. There can also be hypodiegetic narrators who are narrating from within an intradiegetic narrator's narrative.

1.3 Location of Focalization

The facet is concerned with the location of focalization as seen through the number of characters used for focalization. Free focalization or “zero focalization” or “non-focalized”) is a narrative with access to the perceptions of any character where focalization can shift between any number of characters. Fixed focalization is when only one character is accessed (“limited point of view”). In between these two extremes are degrees of variable focalization, where the focalization shifts between a limited number of characters.

Focalization is not always consistently located. Even the most fixed focalization, where the whole story only offers narrative information through one character, often includes small moments where information outside the focalizing character’s perception/knowledge is available. Genette calls this a “paralepsis.” The shift from variable focalization to free focalization cannot be easily demarcated outside of a specific narrative context. One can imagine a narrative wherein each of a hundred sections is focalized through a different character that could be considered variable focalization, whereas another narrative where the narrative is focalized through one hundred characters seemingly at random could be considered free focalization. As noted above, the location of focalization is often, but not necessarily, connected to the protagonist of the narrative. An observing focalizer who acts as a witness to the protagonist’s actions could also be used.

1.4 Cognitive Focalization:

A second facet of focalization concerns the narrative’s access to the focalizer’s inner thoughts, feelings, memories, and other intellectual processes. It is called internal focalization when the narrative has access to those aspects of the character, while external focalization is when those processes are not accessible except as perceptible from the actions and words of the character. External focalization may also disappear in the case of dreams, fantasies and flashbacks. In the famous dream

sequence from *Spellbound* (1945), it is the mind of the character that is visualizing the contents of the frame. Focalization is here only internal (and supported intermittently by internal narration). Flashbacks, a very common narrative aspect in classical film, are frequently supposed to express the memory of a character who would then become focaliser. In theory, external focalization would disappear throughout flashback. This is actually not so in most films.

1.5 Focalization in Film Narrative

Tolton says, referring to a scene from Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (1958):

(...) the spectator does not think to query this unexplained exit to the balcony by the narrating point of view. (Tolton 1984, 277).

The phrase «narrating point of view» reveals a confusion between narration and point of view which modern narratology has tried to solve in the field of prose narrative with the introduction of the concept of focalization. In a novel, accordingly, focalization is previous to narration and therefore, to a certain extent, independent from it. The same kind of information can be narrated, for example, by means of a homodiegetic or of a heterodiegetic narrator. Without disagreeing with Genette's concept, but underlining its relevance in the analysis of a text, Mieke Bal gives a detail account of explanation: "Focalization is [...] the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen', perceived" (Bal 1985, 100).

This definition implies the existence in a narrative text of a, focaliser - the origin of the vision or agent that performs the vision - and difocalized -the object of that vision. In this sense, the whole of the text is focalized in one way or another, whereas there would be elements of the fabula (story according to Genette and other narratologists) which would be "non-focalized" and therefore left out of the text altogether. It is only the "perceived" information, physical or psychological, that

appears in the text. For Mieke Bal then, clearly, selection of information equals perception.

It is obvious that the selection of information presented in the narrative is always, in a sense, performed "outside" the text, by the author, but precisely because the author is outside the text, his/her intervention is not necessarily relevant for an analysis which is concerned with the text itself. Mieke Bal says: Focalization is in my view, the most important, most penetrating and most subtle means of manipulation (Bal 1985, 116).

It is, therefore, Bals, rather than Genette's concept of focalization that will be used here from now on. By rejecting Genette's remarks, we are only considering the possibility that an agent of the fabula can focalize the information that we receive in the text, as well as an agent external to it. The study of this external focalizer, however, is not always as relevant as that of the internal focalizer, whenever character-bound focalization exists in a text.

Narratology is the study of narrative texts in general, not only novels. There are other ways of presenting a story, from the narrative poem to the cartoon strip. Some of them, do not use the written or spoken word as their only means of expression. Indeed, in some cases, spoken or written language is not used at all. These terms are rightly rejected by both Genette and Bal in as far as they have traditionally been confused with narrator, as in the example that opened this paper, but can usefully be kept in order to differentiate this activity within the text, from time, space and character aspects. It is through cinema, television and video, and not through novels that most stories are told nowadays. On the other hand, narratology has proved an efficient method of analysis when consistently applied to film texts. Mieke Bal (Bal 1985, 5). Focalization is like a character or a space, narrated in the text. A film narrative does not need the existence of an explicit narrator, as this agent is defined by theories of the novel, for the activity of narration to take place. As Branigan says:

In film, the narrator is not necessarily a biological person, not even a somehow identifiable agent like in the novel, but a symbolic activity: the activity of narration (Branigan 1984, 40)

2. Analysis

In *When We Leave*, Sibel plays Umay, a young mother who flees her abusive husband and leaves Turkey to return to her family in Berlin. She finds a devastating journey in Germany and gets surrounded by the darkness of patriarchal traditions.

Umay's younger sister is going into an arranged marriage, and it is implied that Umay's marriage had been likewise arranged. It's a marriage Umay can no longer tolerate. Along with other viciousness, her husband has beaten her and locked their five-year-old son in a closet. Yet after revealing this to her father, he tells her that she must return to Turkey, saying, "You belong to your husband now; you are a married woman." When she emphasizes that her husband repeatedly beats her, her father says, "The hand that strikes is also the hand that soothes." There's no way she can win. In sharp contrast to her marriage, the relationship that eventually develops between Umay and a German boyfriend is truly natural and loving, one based on mutual respect. Her father will no longer speak to her when she comes up with the idea of divorcing her husband.

At first, her family in Germany is delighted to see her, but they keep asking about Kemal. When her father Kader and older brother Mehmet learn the truth, they are disappointed.

Despite Umay's protests, Kader makes it unequivocally clear that Umay must return to her rightful owner or consider herself banished from the family. While Umay must protect herself and her son, she cannot turn her back on the only family she has ever loved. Unfortunately, the warning of her friend proves tragically correct—her family will always choose their community over a mere daughter.

Having grown up in Germany, Umay is a German citizen. So she struggles with questions of identity: She still

loves her family, and she knows that in their minds she has brought disgrace to them. She tries to make amends for, but every attempt is snubbed. When her family continues to insist on her returning to Turkey and her husband, she burns her passport in the kitchen sink. It is a very bold act, a point of no return. But the family's ties to the community are stronger than those to a daughter. In one heartbreaking scene, Umay's boss at a catering company tells her, "If the choice comes between you and the community, they will not choose you", and that what happens in the movie.

In one revealing scene, Umay's older brother throws her down in an alley outside of the hall where her sister is getting married. Umay interfered in the ceremony as she needs to confirm to the promise made with her son about attending the marriage ceremony. The family, on her sight, secures glances from the people as they suspect her presence may pose of threat of disgrace for them and eventually spoils the ceremony. She is dragged out of the hall and is carried to blind alley by her elder brother Mehmat. As she's crying in the gutter, he says to her, "I never want to see you again." But then, as he walks away, he stops for a moment to strike her and then climbs the stairs. That moment visually shows his ambivalence about what he has just done. He loves his sister, but he can't break away from his perverted sense of "honor." In one second, the conflict between love and tradition is illustrated.



In another remarkable scene, Umay's father, in the hospital

after suffering a heart attack, apologizes to Umay, but the apology turns out to be terribly ironic in a way that is devastating to both Umay and the audience. Her father, after his return from his own native village and perhaps seeking advice from his own father, the traditional authority of the family, decided to kill Umay in the name of honour, but unfortunately, the task given to the younger brother failed owing to his commitment and relation with his elder sister. He runs away after aiming at Umay and dropped the pistol. The elder brother, on the other hand is employed to keep the task but when he darted the knife into the flesh of Umay, her abrupt movement caused the knife kill his son. The scene is tragic and sensational as the killer, Mehamt sheds the tear over the attempt.



When We Leave is a truly intense film that depicts all manner of crimes committed in the name of so-called honor. We witness spousal abuse, abduction attempts, stalking, and worse. Yet, for Umay, the emotional isolation for her family is the hardest to bear.

The ending of the movie is heart rending as she moves with the dead body of her son in her hands and feels uncomfortable to hold him while he is dead. She walks along the road to nowhere as she loses the entire meanings of her life. Throughout the story, one feels sympathy for Umay and her life. The entire narration is focalized in the single character of Umay.



On the other hand, there are clues in the narration regarding the stubborn and undaunted spirits of Umay that bring about her tragedy. She, being a Muslim woman, was brought up in the family where the norms of the society were given value. We see Umay at the dining table with her family and her father scolding the younger son for coming late home. He even slaps him for his impudence. On the other hand, when Umay's husband slaps his son for not listening to him while having dinner, we feel pity for the little boy locked up in a closet. The grind may be taken as the act of training on the part of the little boy who must learn to behave in early age. The difference between both the act of scolding and slapping sons has different interpretations and responses. These responses are just the offshoot of the focalization on the part of the narrator who makes the act of slapping an act of tyranny on the part of Kemal, and casual routine on the part of Kader, father of Umay.

The second evidence is strong enough to analyze the event with a *point of view*. The movie starts with Umay lying on the patient's table with the operation apron. The nurse asks her if she is ready for the proceedings, to which she nods. She went to the hospital for an abortion. She gets the child aborted for reason that she was not happy with her husband, and beating of son claims to be the last event before her departure. The audience does not feel pity for the baby child who was yet to be born. She kills him/her. She does the same act as her brother in the last scene does. She is equally a killer as her brother Mehmet, but the excuse for Mehmet is strong enough

as he does not attempt to kill her son, he gets accidentally murdered. Umay kills her baby intentionally while the act of killing by Mehmat is unintentional. The audience does not take Umay to stand responsible for the act of killing but they do take Mehmat for granted.



The other event to advocate the focalization as the device for generating views or looking at the certain event through the very eyes of the character is evident when Umay's Husband, after beating the son, plays in a childish way to make him happy and makes love with Umay at night but she gives cold responses. We find a contrast in the character of her Husband as he is cruel and quick tempered on the one hand, solacing and loving on the other. But the later side of the picture gets unwatched go. The father has got the right to tame the children if they are not behaving, the attitude we find in Umay's father, but being an audience, fail to accommodate similar behavior in Kader.

Conclusions

Umay is herself responsible for whatever comes into her way, as she is decisive and not ready to yield. The argument she has with her mother in the kitchen is evident to perceive her character as a flat one. She argues with her mother that she will not return to which she receives harsh words. She ends up the debate saying that she does not like to be like her mother. She evidently opted the way of life she desires. The utterance

states that her mother also led a similar life to which she is not willing to agree. She wants her own world.



In spite of the fact that she challenges the set norms of the society, she still receives sympathy from the audience. The reason is focalization on the part of the narrator that he made audience to look at the events through the eyes of Umay and not through the other characters. The family including the father and brothers of Umay do require response from the audience as they, being the part of the society; have to maintain the norms and values of the set pattern. The vision through audience witness the events in the movie is colour in Umay's eyes. The narrator clearly focalized her character and presented before the audience what Umay sees and perceives.

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