FOCALIZATION-NARRATOR EFFECT ON PERCEIVED LIKABILITY AND VILLAINY IN KEPNES'S *YOU: A NOVEL*

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Abstract

The goal of this research is to identify the narrator and focalization structures of the novel "You: a novel" by Caroline Kepnes. After identification is made, a discussion on what they do to the reader is provided. The method of study used in this paper is the descriptive qualitative method, wherein the text is analyzed, tagged, then used as points to back up the argument. The main theory used in this research article is narratology, specifically the subsection of narrator and focalization. A secondary theory of narrative empathy is employed to show how the narrator and focalization affects the reader's perception of the character Joe. The results show that the novel uses a character bound, autodiegetic narrator, while also using internal focalization. This combination creates the biggest identification with readers to Joe as the character, narrator, and focalizer of the story. This is further extended by focalization techniques of sharing feelings and immersion to make the reader sympathize with Joe. Then narratorial techniques of focusing on Joe's loss instead of his villainous actions primes the reader to empathize with him instead of fully condemning him. Thus the text invites the reader to understand and therefore like Joe instead of hating him.

***Keywords**: focalization; narrator; likability; villainy*

A. Introduction

A novel can create dissonant feelings within the reader. This can be achieved by the structure of the novel. The literary theory used to describe the structure of a novel is called narratology. Within narratology, two aspects discussed is narrator and focalization. Focalization is the way readers can perceive the story world, and narrator is the person who speaks to the reader. The combination of these two things is the biggest factor into how a reader understands and judge elements of the story, such as the characters, plot, and setting.

In 2015, the book "You: a novel" was published by Caroline Kepnes. The book tells a story of a man who falls in love with a woman and proceeds to stalk her. The book got great reviews and was subsequently adapted to the silver screen. Thus, this book becomes an interesting topic to be researched. The book has many themes of a stalker kind of obsession and therefore quite a few research has been conducted on it such as using psychological, sexual, or feminism theory. Yet these studies take from the presumption of Joe as a likable character. This is despite him being a stalker and killing people. The book presents him in a favorable light too. Thus, the question of what the book does to convince the reader of Joe's likability is worth investigating. This requires the use of narratology to closely examine the novel's structure, then those structures are explained in relation as to how they affect the reader to be empathetic with Joe. Empathy in this sense is how a reader identifies with elements of the story such as the characters (Keen, 2013).

The primary theoretical framework used in this paper is narratology. Narratology can be understood as the literary theory which describes the innate structures of the text. The object of focus in this theory is not the content, but rather how they are presented. Aspects of the text such as the plot, fabula, story, the distinction between characters and actors, between location and space, and who the implied reader is, these are all topics within this literary framework. Specifically, for this research, the topic of narrator and focalization is used as the lens to pick apart the text. This paper uses these two concepts because they make up the concept of a narrative situation, and therefore are inextricably linked theories because the novel uses a specific type of structure that essentially combines the two, which is a stream of consciousness type of narrator and therefore the narrator and the focalizer are the same person.

Narrator, within the context of narratology, is the part of the text which answers the question of who speaks. According to Bal, narrators can be either external narrator (EN) or character-bound narrator (CBN) (2017). This is based on how the narrator is positioned within the story, are they part of the story world or not. Meanwhile, Genette names this distinction as homodiegetic or heterodiegetic (1980). Homodiegetic means the narrator exists within the story, heterodiegetic means the narrator is not part of the story world. A homodiegetic narrator can be classified further as autodiegetic, which is when the narrator is the hero or the main character of the story. Guillemette finally adds that a narrator's function can be described in five terms, that being narrative, directing, communication, testimonial, and finally, ideological (2016).

Focalization, as a concept in narratology, can be described as the relation between the vision and what is seen, perceived. In this sense, focalization is the lense by which the story is perceived, be it by the basic five senses of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste, or by whose mind is thinking. It has three aspects, the focalizer, the focalized object, and the level of focalization. Focalizer is the mind that is used to filter the world of the narrative. Some separate it into two kinds, which are Character Focalizer, shortened to CF, and External Focalizer, shortened to EF (Bal, 2017). CF is when the focalization is tied to one or more characters, whereas EF is when it is exclusively not tied to any characters. Another way to differentiate though, is to distinguish between zero, internal, and external focalization (Genette, 1980). Zero focalization is when the narrator knows more than the characters. He may know the facts about all of the protagonists, as well as their thoughts and gestures. This is the traditional "omniscient narrator". Next is internal focalization, which is when the narrator knows as much as the focal character. This character filters the information provided to the reader. The narrator cannot report the thoughts of other characters. Finally, external focalization is when the narrator knows less than the characters. Here the narrator acts essentially as a camera lens, following the protagonists' actions and gestures from the outside, unable to guess their thoughts. When determining focalization and focalizer, we can also describe what is being focalized, or rather the focalized object. This can be categorized into two separate objects, the perceptible (p) and non-perceptible (np) object. A p object is something tangible, concrete, perceived by the body of the focalizer, such as buildings, food, smells, and colors. An np object is something that's within the mind and cognition of the focalizer, such as their emotions and thoughts. Focalization types in general remain constant throughout the text, but within certain stories, the focalizer can shift between characters, which creates a focalization that embeds upon itself.

B. Methodology

The research method used in this paper is the qualitative descriptive method, specifically of textual analysis. This is a method of data analysis which examines the content and structure of the object in question ("Textual Analysis", 2008). This means it can range from newspaper, television programs, to even architecture and fashion. For this research then, the data will be from the novel You by Caroline Kepnes, and thus it will be in the form of only text. Screenshots of passages will be provided alongside an explanation on the structure of it. This will indicate how the innate structure of

the text's narrative is presented, and how the narrative builds an understanding within the reader The object would be deconstructed to its parts, which will then be analyzed to describe and understand how it works according to the research's goal. The goal of this research is to determine how the text's intrinsic structure affects a reader's understanding of the character. Thus the structure of focalization and narrator used within the novel will be identified. Then, it will be discussed in regards to how each of those element builds a dissonant understanding of the character, specifically how the character does villainous and unscrupulous deeds, yet with a sense of likability. Secondary journal articles will also be provided to support the arguments made in this research.

C. Results and Discussion

This section of the research has to be broken up into two parts. Before effect of the novel on the reader is to be understood, the type of focalization and narrator used in this novel must first be identified. Then at the second part, it is explained how these structures affect the reader.

1. *Narratological Analysis: Identification of Narrator and Focalization*

a. *Narrator of the novel*

First for the narrator. The narrator is the character Joe Goldberg, who is essentially performing a monologue of his inner thoughts and judgments as events unfold and on what he learns. The following is an example of Joe narrating.

I talked to too many people in that state. I was sloppy and friendly and there's Officer Nico and Dr. K and all those junkies and the guy at the garage. What if they all got together? What if they know? The mug of piss flashes through my mind's eye and what have I done? (Short excerpt from the novel, page 217).

It can be seen from the excerpt that the narrator Joe, is commenting about the situation, and ponders about the possible troubles in the future. Here the narrator, asides performing the narrative function, is also performing the directing function, as in Joe is breaking the flow of events in real time to comment on the current situation. This also show that the narrator of the story is a character-bound narrator (CBN) and a homodiegetic one, specifically autodiegetic. The narrator is autodiegetic because Joe sees himself as the hero, the savior, the protagonist of his story. This is shown by the following excerpt.

You're not a fan of Monica's because you're not an imbecile. But you need to know and I can't get out of that bloated factory fast enough. I need to save you (Short excerpt from the novel, page 45).

The proclamation of "I need to save you" also serves as both testimonial and ideological function. It is testimonial in that Joe is expressing his thoughts and emotions of his perception as narrator, and ideological in that Joe shares his wisdom, in this case the implied proposition that "Monica is an imbecile, but the "you" is not".

b. *Focalization of the novel*

Next is the focalization. Because this is autodiegetic, and a monologue in nature, it is obvious that Joe is the focalizer. The focalization is CF and internal focalization. An example is shown in the following excerpt.

You never sounded farther away from me and I will take that balloon and stab the fuck out of it and at the same time I will take that balloon and tie it around Peach's neck because WHO THE FUCK CAN CUNT OUT OVER A BALLOON? (Short excerpt from the novel)

That excerpt shows that Joe is the focalizer. Physical real world things are describe in relation to him ("You never sounded farther away from me" indicates this, the subject "You" is related to how she sounds near him) which means the focalized object is p object, and his thoughts are described too ("Who the fuck can cunt out over a balloon" is Joe's thoughts, him being puzzled over a situation) which means the np object is also a focalized object. Also, despite there being multiple times where the story seems to take the focalization of another character, what happens is that it's always from Joe's thoughts, characters don't actually fully tell him things. Therefore, no focalization shifts happen within the story.

2. *Effects on The Reader*

Now that the narrator and focalization has been identified, it should be discussed as to the effect this has on the reader.

As previously hinted, this specific combination of autodiegetic narrator and internal focalization or CF is that narrative emotions are evoked to the reader, thus creating a sense of empathy and sympathy. This means that despite Joe being and doing things which can be unsavory, unscrupulous, or straight up villainous, the reader is primed to like him to an extent. This is because first, the focalization gives way for the reader to understand his mind, then the narrator as the speaker essentially persuades the reader to his side, or at the very least understand him. Here is an example of the focalization priming the reader

In the dark, Mo told me she was going to steal my virginity. I tried to run and she pinned me down. I punched her, escaped, and told the teachers. Mo told a story too, and she was good at crying. Who do you think got sent to the fucking psychologist, to the dean's office, to the "counselor" with the fucking show-me-who-touched-you-where doll? Not Mo Grady! But I don't dwell on the past. Mo's the fuckup now (a twice-divorced paralegal with a profile on OkCupid and a Pomeranian named Gosling—obviously, she'll be alone forever) (Short excerpt from the novel, page 169).

Although the event might be seen to be an attempt into the history of Joe, and thus eliciting compassion from the reader within Joe, the more interesting thing to note is that the text focuses on sharing Joe's feelings (his rage at the injustice), and creates a sense of immersion (a flashback with vivid descriptions of the lighting, what happened, and the aftermath). Those two things are effective parts of focalization that creates empathy (Keen, 2013). Another excerpt shows how CBN, autodiegetic narrator can create likability within Joe.

"Um," I say and might piss my pants. "What is this, uh, what is this about?" He mocks me. "What is this about?" It happens so fast. He grabs me by the collar and yanks me close. His breath is made of onions, raw onions. He seethes. "You little fuck." Am I going to die? I close my eyes and he tightens his grip on my shirt. I'm innocent, innocent until proven guilty. He spits at me. And then he lets go. (Short excerpt from the novel, page 213)

In that excerpt, internal focalization of Joe's feelings are pertinent, however the more important thing is the narration, it is Joe's narrator role that tells the reader. As the speaker of the story, using modals ("might piss my pants"), commenting on the state of things ("His breath is made of onions, raw onions"), his choice of words ("mocks", "yanks", "seethes"), and even his racing thoughts ("Am I going to die?"), all of these things essentially makes it so the reader identifies with the narrator, creating a

sense of likability, a sense of pity is invoked so to say. This is in line with Jumpert's study, which states that readers will most likely side with an internally focalized autodiegetic narrator (2020).

Another note of narratorial empathy is built by sentence structure. Renkema notes that a speaker's empathy position can be seen my possessive pronoun referents, and subject position (2018). An example is these two excerpts

I don't wipe my face and I take a step back. (Short excerpt from the novel, page 213)

You groan and you block the door and you let your robe fall open. "You're breaking the Rule of the Robe, Joe." "Fuck," I say and you maul me and eventually I do leave and the day goes by so slowly and we text so much my thumbs are falling off. I want to bring you all the books in the world, but I settle on one of my favorites that you've never read, In the Lake of the Woods by Tim O'Brien. You let me into your place and you take it with tender hands and you kiss me with your sweet, soft Guiniverean lips. "I knew I was waiting to read this book for a reason," you say. "It's like I knew someday there'd be someone who gave it to me or something."(Short excerpt from the novel, page 221)

These two excerpts show the overall trend, that the narrator, the speaker of the story creates the empathy within mostly himself (using the pronoun I in subject position, and mentioning his belongings such as "my favorites") and the character of "You" (the object of his affection, the character Guinevere Beck). Thus, when the reader identifies with the narrator as mentioned in the previous parts, the narrator then also creates empathy within them to the character Joe, and the character Beck. This is so the reader can understand Joe's feelings about her, they are made to basically follow his train of thought which leads to the obsession. After all, if Joe is obsessed with her, and the reader sides with him, it stands to reason that he's trying to get the reader to also obsess over Beck, and therefore engage with Joe more. Also, and this is actually a contradictory note, the biggest show of this is finally when Joe kills Beck, despite failing the romance, the reader is moved to not hate Joe, the novel justifies and instead focuses on Joe's loss. So Beck is empathized in the reader as an object of obsession, not as a character who was murdered. This is shown in the following excerpt.

I think you would be happy to know...I am the sole reader of The Book of Beck. I had your short stories…the story of your life... You changed me, Beck. I will not grow lonely like Mr. Mooney. I have Ethan and Blythe. I have the girls... I am like Hugh Grant in Love Actually… Hugh Grant is single, like me. (cut off from long excerpt of the novel, page 266)

The focus of that excerpt is mostly on Joe, the I. The novel may put Beck's death into view once in a while ("story of your life"), but it focuses on how Joe is moving on. Beck the character is not on display, her icon of story, her status of obsession that has died is the one in the reader's mind. It even ends on Joe likening himself to an attractive and desirable celebrity. Thus the reader will fully be on Joe's side despite all the bad things he's done.

D. Conclusion

To conclude, the book "You: a novel" uses the character Joe as the narrator and focalizer. In the narrator, Joe is an autodiegetic, character-bound narrator. He believes he is the protagonist of this story. Also, the book uses internal focalization of just Joe as the focalizer. The reader is invited to perceive p objects, such as Beck's location and voice, and np objects, such as Joe's thoughts and emotions. This combination of Joe as character, narrator, and focalizer creates a maximum effort by the book to make the reader like Joe despite his flaws. The text shares his feelings, creates an immersion which sides with Joe, uses empathy techniques of sentence structure, and focuses on Joe's

loss which was the result of his own bad actions. All of this makes the audience more receptive of Joe, it creates him to be likable despite his villainous ways.

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