A Probe into the Narrative Points of View in Thomas Hardy’s Novels—A Case Analysis of Jude the Obscure

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Abstract
By means of recent theories of narrative, this paper attempts to explore the narrative points of view Hardy employed in his novels, with Jude the Obscure as an example text, which encompasses authorial narration, figural narration and third-person objective. The author or implied author can enter into many minds of the characters. Meanwhile, figural narration is another approach to achieve objectivity and authenticity in that assumes access to only one mind or several limited minds by using the perspective of some character or characters in the novel. Third-person dramatic or objective point of view is used to create suspension. Multiple perspectives fuse the above three points of view together to depict an omni-faceted analysis of certain characters. By employing multiple points of view, Hardy revolted against the traditional Victorian narrative norms and ventured into new forms which were to be the modernist forms of narrative, thus achieving a polyphonic result in his novels.

Key words: Jude the Obscure; Narrative point of view; Authorial narration; Figural narration; Third-person objective

INTRODUCTION
At present novel is acknowledged as one of the most significant literary genre, which is also most representative in western culture ever since the 19th century, in that “a narrative is a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do” (Abrams, 2004, p. 173). However, narratives used to be overlooked. Only in the aftermath of World War II did critics of the novel begin to concentrate on analysis of form of the novel. According to them, as long as discussions of the novel emphasized its subject matter and content, disregarding the formal issues that were then important in criticism and aesthetics, it would remain an un-canonized genre in literary study (Martin, 2006, p. 16). Mark Schorer proposed a view of the novel that was soon to gain wide recognition:

Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that only when we speak of the achieved content, the form the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art is technique. When we speak of technique, then, we speak of nearly everything…We are no longer able to regard as seriously intended criticism of poetry which does not assume these generalizations; but the case for fiction has not yet been established. (Schorer, 1961, p. 67)

Schorer and most of his contemporary contempt the inherited technical vocabulary that treated the novel as a combination of plot, character, setting, and theme (terms that also apply to drama).

All stories are told, narrated, by someone, and one of the first choices writers make is who tells the story or who is the narrator, and novels are no exception. This choice determines the story’s point of view, “the vantage point from which events are presented” (Kirszner & Mandell, 2004, p. 222). The narrative point of view (also known as viewpoint or perspective) determines the person whose eyes the story is viewed through, and narrative voice, which determines how it is expressed to the audience. The
person whose point of view is used to relate the story is regarded as the “narrator,” a character developed by the author for the specific purpose of conveying the story. The narrative point-of-view is meant to be the related experience of the character of this narrator—not that of the actual author.

All too often, while reading a novel, readers are vigorously tempted by its fascinating plot, characters or themes, etc as exposed in the content of the novel. The techniques or strategies unique to the novel, nevertheless, involve “the author’s relation to the narrator, the narrator’s relation to the story, and the ways in which they provide access to the mind, or consciousness, of characters—matters of ‘point of view,’” (Martin, 2006, p. 16) which has now been the most frequently discussed aspect of narrative method. According to Martin, rather than being added as an appendage that will transmit the plot to an audience, narrative point of view creates the interest, the conflicts, the suspense, and the plot itself in most modern narratives (ibid., p. 131).

Just as a writer creates characters, she also creates a narrator for the story, so the writer speaks to us through the narrator, rather than directly as in an essay. If we assume that the author tries to achieve objective, realistic presentation—free from intrusive commentary that would turn characters into puppets by judging them as long as they are introduced, and credible by virtue of the ways in which we gain access to minds and events—then analysis of point of view becomes a means of understanding how form and content are fused in the novel (ibid., p. 16). Also Anna Barbauld’s conceptual distinctions exert a crucial influence on current criticism in this field. As Barbauld points out, first there is that of grammatical person or voice: who writes? Apart from experimental fiction, the narrator tells either a story about others (referring to all characters in the third person, just as in Jude the Obscure), or one in which the author or implied author is involved. Second, there are different kinds of discourse: narration, dramatic presentation (quoted dialogue or monologue), and a catchall category often called “commentary” (exposition, interpretation, judgment, and possibly digressions interpolated by the narrator). Access to consciousness is a third basis of classification. The narrator may be able to enter many minds (he or she is omniscient, all knowing) or only one, and of course has the option of keeping the story in the outer world (ibid., p. 131).

In this aspect, Hardy’s last and best novel—Jude the Obscure (JO) serves as a prime example for us to make sense of the writer’s artistic manipulation of point of view. As reflected in Jude the Obscure, Thomas Hardy flexibly employs pluralistic points of view to tell the story.

First and foremost, the author or implied author, for the most part, stands apart from the characters depicted in the novel, as an omniscient narrator, can enter into many minds (he or she is omniscient, all knowing). This type of third person omniscient narration is also referred to as “authorial narration”, which is proposed by Stanzel. In Jude the Obscure authorial narration is designed to introduce the setting or predict the development of the plot.

Meanwhile, in order to achieve objectivity and authenticity, another approach is manipulated, i.e. “third person limited point of view without reference to the author”. Since it is an unwieldy phrase, we might accept Stanzel’s suggestion that it be called “figural narration”, as opposed to “authorial narration”, the former assumes access to only one mind or several limited minds by using the perspective of the character or characters in the novel. Figural narration is adopted to depict details concerning the character.

A third approach adopted by Hardy is dramatic or objective point of view, which the narrator is neither the author nor characters in the story, but a bystander with the purpose of creating suspension.

Sometimes multiple perspectives are brought into full play in the characterization of one character. A case in point is Sue Bridehead. Unlike other characters in the novel, Sue is depicted from an external perspective, that is, from the viewpoints of the other characters in the story or a bystander rather than an omniscient narrator. In the eyes of her love, Jude, she is a deity or goddess, a sweet saint “so pretty that he could not believe it possible that she should belong to him,” “light and slight, of the type dubbed elegant …There was nothing statuesque in her; all was nervous motion. She was mobile, living, contrived to reach this pitch of niceness.” (88-91). To Jude, she is “a kindly star, an elevating power”, a tender friend, one “lovely conundrum”, a “disembodied creature”, a “dear sweet, tantalizing phantom”. However, before her husband Philloston, such a dainty girl is “an odd creature,” merciless and incomprehensible, while a goddess of wisdom—Aphrodite. As to her rival in love—Arabella, she is “a slim, fidgety little thing,” who has “nothing to complain of; or jump at. Not much to depend on, though”. This multiplicity of perspectives displays a multifaceted profile of Sue.

By employing these multiple points of view, Hardy revolted against the traditional Victorian narrative norms and ventured into new forms which were to be the modernist forms of narrative, thus achieving a polyphonic result in his novels.

1. AUTHORIAL NARRATION

In The Form of Victorian Fiction, Miller described third-person omniscient narration as “the standard norm of Victorian novels: this norm is so crucial to 19th century novels that we may define it as a decisive principle of the novels in that period” (1979, p. 86). As an eminent novelist, Thomas Hardy was extraordinarily adept at this technique. In Jude the Obscure, he mostly employed a third-person omniscient narrator or an implied author
as a narrator to tell the story. This type of omniscient narration is also referred to as “authorial narration”, which is proposed by Stanzel. In *Jude the Obscure*, authorial narration has several functions:

First, authorial narration is applied to introduce to the reader the general setting or background knowledge of the story. The God-like narrator gives thoughts of the implied author and dimension to the story. This is the most flexible narration; the author can control the omniscience. On the commencement of Part First, the author stands as an omniscient narrator beginning the story “THE schoolmaster was leaving the village, and everybody seemed sorry” (Hardy, 1991, p. 3). This short sentence at once informs the reader of the setting and background of the novel. It is a story filled with departure and arrival and this sets the tone of the whole story, thus a melancholic emotion is roused in readers’ heart. Also the story must be a tragic one, especially to the protagonists which would come into the spotlight later on.

Also, by means of authorial narrative voice, the author, fully detached from the story, tells the life of generations on the land of Marygreen where the protagonist used to live with his objective and omniscient eyes just like a historian: “Every inch of ground had been the site, first or last, of energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickering, and weariness. Groups of gleaners had squatted in the sun on every square yard” (9).

Second, authorial narration is used to achieve bitter irony of love, marriage and the fate of the characters in the story. As an omniscient narrator, the author knows the ins and outs of the love matches between the Wessex young couples bred in the field and predict the future development of the plot as well:

Love-matches that had populated the adjoining hamlet had been made up there between reaping and carrying. Under the hedge which divided the field from a distant plantation girls had given themselves to lovers who would not turn their heads to look at them by the next harvest; and in that ancient cornfield many a man had made love-promises to a woman at whose voice he had trembled by the next seed-time after fulfilling them in the church adjoining (9).

Here authorial voice is manipulated to depict the absurdity of this kind of ‘love matches’ and foretell the love tragedy between the protagonists, especially that of Jude and Sue. In addition, the implied author might as well transmit to the readers there is invariably a disharmony or irreconcilable conflict between character and environment or nature, which is a typical theme of Hardy’s late novels. In *Jude the Obscure*, nature is apathetic and blind to the suffering of his subjects. Thus by using authorial narration, a sense of irony is achieved craftily. In the following example, irony is further intensified and a tragic effect is accomplished:

Though Farmer Troutham had just hurt him, he was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything. He had never brought home a nest of young birds without lying awake in misery half the night after, and often re-in-stating them and the nest in their original place the next morning. He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been a positive grief to him in his infancy. This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. He carefully picked his way on tiptoe among the earthworms, without killing a single one (ibid., p. 11).

In this part, the omniscient narrator vividly depicts Jude’s character—he is born with benevolence and greatest sympathy for all living things, human or creature, yet this virtue is a ‘weakness’ of character in that it is the very source of his tragedy. He was induced into marriage with Arabella for her pseudo pregnancy and taken in by “Physician” (in *Jude’s innocent eyes*) Vilbert who is nobody but ‘an itinerant quack-doctor’. In this way the author also interferes into the narration by making his comments on things.

Finally, the omniscient narrator intervenes into the narrative mode with the identity of the writer to state Hardy’s own comprehension of a novelist’s writing purpose: “THE purpose of a chronicler of moods and deeds does not require him to express his personal views upon the grave controversy above given. That the twain were happy—between their times of sadness—was indubitable” (ibid., p. 303).

To summarize, an omniscient narrator is one who knows all and sees all. It allows the reader an indirect insight into the actions and emotions of specific characters. The omniscience of the narrator allows the reader not to be influenced by the character in the interpretations of the character’s behaviour and feelings and also encourages the reader to sympathize with the protagonists Jude and Sue Bridehead in their tragic and unfortunate predicament. Using such a narrative technique, Hardy allows himself to be somewhat detached from his characters, often appearing as though he himself does not sympathize with the tragedy of the characters. The effect of the novel not being narrated by the characters is that we as the reader are given a perception of the lives of other characters which Jude and Sue are unaware of. It allows us to interpret for ourselves the predicament which the other characters are placed in through our own eyes with the influence of Hardy and not through Jude and Sue. As Woolen points out, “He can write in third-person as an ‘omniscient’ author, which, no doubt, is a traditional and ‘natural’ narrative model. The author stands beside his works, just as a speaker illustrates in pace with the slides or documentary” (ibid., p. 251).

However, this style of narration prevents the reader from having a direct insight into the thoughts and feelings of the characters, and does not allow for the character to directly communicate with their readers in a way which would inform the readers of the workings of the character’s mind, what they do, and why they do it.
Besides, the author can come between the reader and the story and shifting from character to character may destroy unity. “An authorial narrator (one who plays no part in the action) tells the story but does not indulge in commentary or use of the pronoun “I”; the reader is never reminded that a writer has created what is in fact a fictitious tale” (Martin, 2006, p. 133).

Hardy manages to overcome this difficulty through the use of “third-person limited point of view without self reference by the author” (it may be called figural narration, according to Stanzel or ‘close third person narration’) and dramatic or objective point of view. A figural narrator preserves access to the mind of only one character, thus reproducing an aspect of authenticity found in the first-person novel, in which, as in life, we do not know what goes on in other minds. This “limited point of view” often involves a visual as well as a psychological constraint: the narrator represents only what the character sees, as if looking through the character’s eyes or, as “invisible witness” standing next to him. As Percy Lubbock pointed out, Henry James and other novelists who use this method often step to one side of their protagonists so that they can describe conversations drastically (Lubbock, 1921, p. 57).

2. FIGURAL NARRATION

Figural narration is a type of third-person limited perspective which is distinct from the omniscient mode in that the reader experiences the story through the senses and thoughts of just one character. In third-person limited, the narration is limited in the same way a first-person narrative might be, i.e., the narrator cannot tell the reader things that the main character does not know, or depict scenes at which the main character is not present—but the text is written in the third person. Third-person limited is a type of third-person subjective narration in that it gives the reader access to the character's thoughts and feelings. It can be so close to the character as to be written in that character’s voice, but it can also be used in a more distant mode, telling the story from that character’s perspective but without the filter of that character’s personality.

Third-person narrators can have limited omniscience, focusing on only what a single character experiences. In other words, events are limited to one character’s perspective, and nothing is revealed that the character does not see, hear, feel, or think (Kirszner & Mandell, 2004, p. 224). It is more realistic in that we see world through one person, imbued with ready-made unifying element and useful characterization of focalized character. Limited omniscient narrators, like all third-person narrators, have certain advantages over first-person narrators. When a writer uses a first-person narrator, the narrator’s personality and speech color the story, creating a personal or even an idiosyncratic narrative. Also, the first-person narrator’s character flaws or lack of knowledge may limit his or her awareness of the significance of events. Figural narrators are more flexible: they take readers into a particular character’s mind just as a first-person narrator does, but without the first-person narrator’s subjectivity, self-deception, or naïveté.

In this limited perspective, Hardy challenged the traditional first-person narrative point of view or third-person omniscient narration, which had been the invariable norm before the 20th century by venturing into new forms of narrative mode. The third-person limited mode (figural narration) grew dramatically in popularity during the twentieth century, such that it can be associated with the twentieth century much as the third-person omniscient or authorial narration is associated with the nineteenth century.

In *Jude the Obscure*, figural narration (in some text it is also described as internal perspective) is ingeniously brought into play by restricting the narrator’s perspective to the consciousness of some character or characters rather than that of a God-like one. This type of narration is marked by its comparative objectivity and authenticity. In Part Six the child-murder and suicide committed by Little Jude or Little Father Time might function as the best instance of figural narrative.

On reaching the place and going upstairs she found that all was quiet in the children’s room. . . A shriek from Sue suddenly caused him to start round. He saw that the door of the room... was open, and that Sue had sunk to the floor just within it. Hastening forward to pick her up he turned his eyes to the little bed spread on the boards; no children were there. He looked in bewilderment round the room. At the back of the door were fixed two hooks for hanging garments, and from these the forms of the two youngest children were suspended, by a piece of box-cord round each of their necks, while from a nail a few yards off the body of little Jude was hanging in a similar manner. An overturned chair was near the elder boy, and his glazed eyes were slanted into the room; but those of the girl and the baby boy were closed. (Hardy, 1991, pp. 353-354)

This horror scene might be ranked among the most catastrophic in British history of letters. The precocious Little Father Time, observing the problems he and his siblings are causing their parents, murders Sue’s two children by strangling them with box cord and then commits suicide by hanging himself. He leaves a note reading: Done because we are too money [sic]. On such occasion the author could not bear to depict the gothic and most terrified scene as an omniscient narrator who bears apathy and indifference to everything he or she revealed. Instead, Jude acts as the focalized character and thus his perspective is utilized to ‘show’ or describe, instead of telling, the scene of murder.

Just like a camera, Jude’s vision provides the readers with a spatial scene of the child-killing along with Jude’s scope of sight from afar to close: Jude hearing a shriek from Sue – the door of the children’s room opened – no children on the bed – Jude looking round – two hooks for...
hanging garments—body of the two youngest children suspended there—the body of little Jude. With this figural narration, the readers may gain an increasingly vivid perception of what happened on the spot as if they were placed hither, thus creating a “dramatic” atmosphere.

However, figural narration has its disadvantages. With limited omniscience, the narrator is liable to limited field of observation and difficulty in having the character aware of all important events. As a result, sometimes the author uses a third perspective—the focus of a bystander or spectator as narrator, i.e. dramatic or objective point of view to “show” the story.

3. THIRD-PERSON OBJECTIVE

The third-person dramatic or objective mode tells a story without describing any character’s thoughts, opinions, or feelings; instead it gives an objective point of view. This point of view can be described as a “fly on the wall” or “camera lens” approach that can only record the observable actions, but cannot relay what thoughts are going through the minds of the characters. While this approach does not allow the author to reveal the unexpressed thoughts and feelings of the characters, it does allow the author to reveal information that the characters are not aware of. The third-person objective is preferred in most pieces that are deliberately trying to take a neutral or unbiased view, like in many newspaper articles. It is also called the third-person dramatic, because the narrator (like the audience of a drama) is neutral toward the plot—merely a commenting onlooker. Third-person narrators who tell a story from an objective (or dramatic) point of view remain entirely outside the characters’ minds. With objective narrators, events unfold the way they would in a play or a movie; they do not reveal the characters’ (or their own) thoughts or attitudes. Thus, they allow readers to interpret the actions of the characters without any interference. It was also used around the mid-twentieth century by French novelists writing in the nouveau roman tradition.

In Jude the Obscure, third-person dramatic is broadly designed to create suspension or elicit the appearance of main characters. On the commencement of the novel, for instance, Hardy intentionally substituted third-person omniscient for third-person dramatic to elicit the appearance of the protagonist—Jude by introducing the packing of the schoolmaster’s luggage:

A little boy of eleven, who had been thoughtfully assisting in the packing, joined the group of men, and as they rubbed their chins he spoke up, blushing at the sound of his own voice: “Aunt have got a great fuel-house, and it could be put there, perhaps, till you’ve found a place to settle in, sir.” (Hardy, 1991, p. 1)

Here the author applied ‘a little boy of eleven’ to refer to Jude’s identity rather than calling him by his name, so the narrator of the story is not an omniscient one who knows everything and everybody, but an onlooker or a bystander who has no prior knowledge about the event or character. Consequently, as such he or she can take a more objective, dramatic and especially more flexible perspective than the major characters in the story. With this approach, readers are eagerly tempted to ask: “Who is the boy? What role does he play in the story? What about his personality, his relationship with the schoolteacher and his story...” Also the narrator, in the beginning, avoids mentioning the schoolmaster’s name and his packing before departure. As readers they also wondered: “Why was the teacher leaving? What’s his next stop? Did he have any determined goal for his next stop...?” Questions like these may occur to readers’ mind in succession just as is the case in their reading or watching a detective. Suspension is created and readers’ interest or curiosity is sparked.

Then on Section II, the author conveyed to the readers the story of Jude in the voice of a spectator.

“And who’s he?” asked one, comparatively a stranger, when the boy entered.

“Well ye med ask it, Mrs. Williams. He’s my great-nephew—come since you was last this way.” The old inhabitant who answered was a tall, gaunt woman, who spoke tragically on the most trivial subject, and gave a phrase of her conversation to each auditor in turn. “He come from Mellstock, down in South Wessex, about a year ago—worse luck for ’n, Belinda” (turning to the right) “where his father was living, and was took wi’ the shakings for death, and died in two days, as you know, Caroline” (turning to the left). “It would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi’ thy mother and father, poor useless boy! But I’ve got him here to stay with me till I can see what’s to be done with un, though I am obliged to let him earn any penny he can.” (ibid., p. 7)

This dramatic perspective allows the readers to gain a gradual intensive insight into Jude’s relationship with the speaker and his miserable life as so young a boy of eleven. The last sentence “It would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi’ thy mother and father, poor useless boy! ... I am obliged to let him earn any penny he can.” implied how he is unwanted and a waste in his aunt’s eyes, and how he has to earn as much money as possible for his aunt. With this objective narration, we, as readers got to know the attributing factors to his melancholy and bashfulness—his inferior status in his aunt’s family with his parents passing away just accounts for that.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the authorial or omniscient narrator knows everything whereas the figural (selective or limited omniscient) narrator knows something. “The objective narrator does not tell but shows. He is like a camera that goes from scene to scene and records what can be recorded for the reader” (Shao, 2002, p. 30). This kind of point of view is also called the dramatic point of view because the reader is like the audience in a theater.
Third-person limited point of view evades the category of grammatical person by suppressing the narratorial use of “I”; With respect to kinds of discourse, it eliminates commentary and substitutes dramatic presentation for narration when possible; it assumes access to only one mind and often uses the visual perspective of that character (Martin, 2006, p. 134). In the presentation of the characters, Hardy explores the unconscious, but hesitates on the brink of interpreting their emotional changes, leaving the reader to judge and experience the unstated complexities of mind. But there is always some kind of observer on the scene, who might be another character involved in the story, or say, an implied narrator making speculations from what they see. With this approach, a sense of uncertainty and detachment of the characters’ fate are highly heightened.

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