

## Is There a Narrator in This Narrative?

### Abstract

Some narratologists insist on the fact that a narrative cannot do without a narrator that has to be distinguished from the real author. Indeed, the narrator is considered as that mediating agency whose task is to prepare the reader's entrance to the diegetic world by organizing all the necessary elements which may facilitate this entrance. This is what has been labelled *the pan-narrator theory*.

Others, on the other hand, advocate the idea that not all fictional narratives contain a fictional narrator (Köppe/Stühling 2011). Hence, they adopt something called the *no-narrator theory*. These positions lead us to raise such questions as: do all narratives contain a narrator? And if not, does the death of the narrator engender the death of the narrative?

**Myriam BOUSSAFSAF**

Department of Letters and English Language  
Faculty of Letters and Languages  
University of Constantine 1  
(Algeria)

### ملخص

يعالج هذا المقال أحد أكثر مفاهيم نظرية السرد (السرديات) إثارة للجدل، ألا وهو مفهوم الراوي.

إذ يلج عدد من الباحثين في علم السرديات على أن لا رواية دون راو؛ وعلى أنه يجب التمييز بين الراوي وكاتب النص الفعلي. فالراوي يُنظر إليه على أنه عامل وساطة تتمثل مهمته في تهيئة دخول القارئ إلى عالم السرد، وذلك من خلال نظم العناصر الضرورية لجعل هذا الدخول ممكناً. وهذا ما سمي بنظرية الراوي الجامع.

بينما يدافع البعض الآخر عن فكرة أن النصوص الروائية لا تشتمل كلها بالضرورة على راو وهو ما يسمي بنظرية اللا راوي (نظرية انعدام الراوي).

هذا التباين في الآراء يدفعنا إلى طرح الأسئلة التالية: هل لكل النصوص الروائية راو؟ وإن لم يكن الأمر كذلك، هل يؤدي موت الراوي إلى موت الرواية؟

### Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the concept of narrator. In fact, this concept is central to the entire discipline of narrative theory (narratology). It has been commonly agreed upon the fact that whenever there is a story being told, there is a narrator telling it.

According to Michael J. Toolan, any "narrative study should analyze two components: the tale and the teller." (1) Moreover, it has been acknowledged that the borderline between fiction and non-fiction is denoted by the existence of a narrator in the text. Said differently, the speaker, in nonfictional texts, makes use of his own voice. The communication process is done directly without any *mediating voice*. However, in fictional discourses, the real author uses a speaking voice to deliver his message. This speaking voice is called the

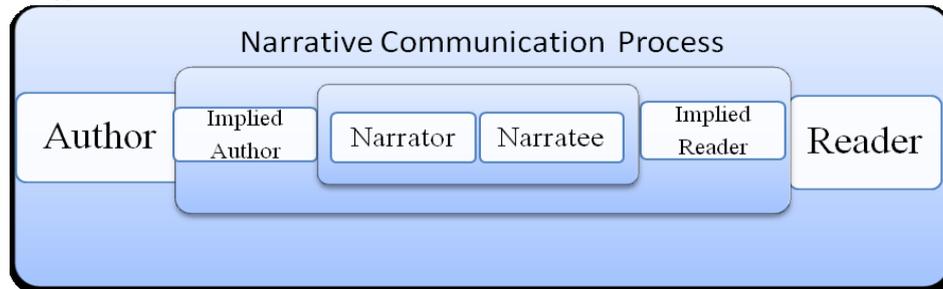
narrator and has to be distinguished from the real, historical author. (1)

In fiction, we distinguish two elements serving the act of narration: the author and the narrator. The author is the real person located in the real world and presenting his fiction to another real person: the reader. The past decades (from 1940's) have witnessed intense researches and studies concerning the concept of the author. (2) Scholars reported that the latter is not only used to determine who is "the maker or composer of a narrative" (Prince 8), but also to find out the meaning of a text, to relate texts composed by the same author to each other, or to historical contexts which enable them set up distinctive traits related to ethics and values, style, and theme patterns.

This concept gained more ground when it was related to some theories. Some would describe the author as a genius (creativity); others would consider him as a crossing point where two or more texts would meet (textuality); and some others would claim that a text is the expression of its author's feelings and thoughts (communication). Moreover, the concept of the author is employed as a determiner of the creator's stylistic and thematic individuality and distinctiveness. Again, this concept possesses a historical importance in establishing a complete historical interpretation of the text. This is due to the fact that the author is the central tie between a narrative and its historical, linguistic and cultural contexts.

The narrator, on the other hand, is the textual *agent* located in a textual fictional world imparting his fiction to a textual entity: the narratee (diagram 1).

This is the reason why, the concept of the narrator has been the source of many complexities. In fact, in some narratives, the distinction between narrator and author becomes very problematic, especially in autobiographical fiction. Such narratives create a close connection between the real author, the narrator and the protagonist himself.



**Diagram 1**

**What is a Narrator?**

In any **oral** narrative situation, the narrator represents that flesh-and-blood person whose task is to recount a given story. Now, things turn harder to define when this narrator becomes **textual**. In other words, how can it be possible to identify or define *who* the narrator is, when all we get is "a print on paper."

An agent, a voice, a subject, a person, an individual, a position, an authority: all these nouns are frequently used to name or to identify the narrator of a given narrative. Numerous literary studies have attempted to delineate and clarify the concept of *narrator*. The following are some definitions as expressed by some narratologists and literary scholars.

Michael J. Toolan defines the narrator as “the individual or ‘position’ we judge to be the immediate source and authority for whatever words are used in the telling.” (76)

Mieke Bal, questioning the identity and the status of the narrative agent, prefers using the pronoun ‘it’ in her attempt to define it. She emphasizes the fact that “a narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story.” (16)

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies the narrator as being that “agent which at the very least narrates and engages in some activity serving the needs of narration.” (91).

Note that in this definition, the relative pronoun *which* is used instead of *who* to draw attention to the “impersonality” of this agent. This reminds us of the position held by Mieke Bal when she considers the narrative agent as being “a linguistic subject, a function, and not a person.” (16)

Gerald Prince considers it as “the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one narrator per narrative, located in the same diegetic level as the narratee (3) he or she is addressing.” (66)

In the narrator entry in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, James Phelan and Wayne C. Booth, on their turn, assume that despite the complexities that the concept of the narrator raises, it represents “the agent, or in less anthropomorphic terms, the agency or instance that tells or transmits everything \_ the existents, states, and events\_ in a narrative to a narratee.” (388)

Now, whether personal or impersonal, there is a consensus among literary scholars that *a narrative cannot exist without a narrator that has to be distinguished from the real author*. This is what has been called the pan-narrator theory.

Accordingly, these definitions indicate that there is a strong connection between the concept of narrator and that of narrative.

### **On the Narrator-Narrative Relationship**

All the previously mentioned definitions contain some intricacies as far as the relationship between narrator and narrative are concerned:

a. One major theoretical issue (structuralism) that has dominated narratological studies for many years insists on the importance of the narrative agent in telling the narrative. In his *Coming to Terms*, S. Chatman declares that “every narrative is by definition narrated – that is, narratively presented – and that narration [...] entails an agent even when the agent bears no signs of human personality” (115)

Thus, this agent becomes vital to the narrative itself. This will surely lead to the exclusion of visual narratives such as, film and drama, from the domain of narrative. (4) This is on the one hand.

b. On the other hand, some narratologists have subscribed to the belief that “the essence of narrative” is found “in any transmission of existents.” (5) In so believing, these theorists put an end to the narrator-narrative connection. In this case, visual narratives are included within the narrative field.

c. From another perspective, several linguistically oriented theorists (6) have advocated the so-called *no-narrator theory*.

In the ‘No-Narrator Theory’ entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Ann Banfield stated that the no-narrator theory indicates “that certain sentences of fiction do not occur in the spoken language and cannot be said to be enunciated by a narrator.” (396). She also declares that in no-narrator stories the narration is by no means “located in a distinct speaker.” (388). According to her, any text which does not contain a first-person pronoun, or any ‘linguistic sign of the speaker’ is a text which is *narratorless*. (“Unspeakable Sentences” 34-5)

In *The Logic of Literature*, Kate Hamburger shares Banfield’s position by stating that “there is only the narrating poet and his narrative acts. And only in cases where the narrating poet actually “creates” a narrator, namely the first-person narrator of a first-person narrative, can one speak of the latter as a (fictive) narrator.” (140)

Richard Walsh, on the other hand, calls for a sharp distinction between narrators and authors. Moreover, he claims that there is no qualitative distinction between narrators and characters. For him, “the narrator is always either a character who narrates or the author.” (qtd. in Logan 559)

In fact, no-narrator accounts are considered as one kind of narration; more precisely as a kind of “effaced narration in the heterodiegetic mode”. (7) (Herman et al 388)

Generally speaking, an “effaced narration” is realised by a covert (8) , absent, undramatized narrator. In this case, the narrator and the implied author seem to be one, and the narrative voice becomes objective.

It has been stated that “a covert narrator must be an inconspicuous and indistinct narrator -- a narrator who fades into the background, perhaps, one who camouflages him- or herself, who goes into hiding.” (Jahn N1.9). Said differently, in order to be and remain covert, the narrator may avoid presenting “him/herself (one could almost say: itself) as the articulator of the story or does so almost imperceptibly.” (Fludernik 22)

Moreover, Stanzel’s model of narrative situations considers three possible narrative situations: the first-person, the authorial and the figural (9) . The figural text is the one in which the narrator is an “inconspicuous presenter, silent arranger and recorder” (qtd. in Herman et al 365). Some narratologists (10) go farther by assuming that figural texts are *narratorless*.

For Gerald Prince, on the other hand, a covert narrator is a “non-intrusive, undramatized narrator” whose task consists in “presenting situations and events with a minimum amount of narratorial mediation” (17) without, and by no means, “referring to a narrating self or a narrating activity.” (1)

Hiding or becoming invisible is the distinguishing feature of a covert narrator. S/he may avoid using the first-person pronoun (I / we); s/he “tries to avoid evaluative descriptions as much as possible” (Herman and Vervaeck 87). S/he makes use of a great number of quotations, and avoids giving details about himself/herself. (11) Another hiding strategy consists in avoiding the use of “any pragmatic or expressivity markers” (Jahn N1.4). These markers are indicators of the narrator’s milieu, culture, beliefs, convictions, interests, ethics, political, philosophical and ideological attitudes towards all the events, characters, and actions in the narrative. As far as the pragmatic signals are concerned, M. Jahn states that these are related to all the expressions that signal “the narrator’s awareness of an audience” (*ibid*). In other words, since there is a communication situation the narrator (the addresser) is generally aware and conscious of his/her addressee. All these features are avoided by the narrator to remain covert. (12)

Covertness, as already stated above, brings the implied author into life, especially when the narrator is not perceptibly noticeable. In this case, the implied author is “transformed into a persona responsible for the ‘speech act’ of the narration.” (Fludernik 65)

Referring to S. Chatman’s *Story and Discourse*, Rimmon-Kenan lists, in her *Narrative Fiction*, the different signs (13) of the narrator’s overtness (and by opposition covertness). She contends that covert and overt narrators are concerned with the degrees of visibility in the text or what she labeled “degrees of perceptibility.”

In her *The Narratorial Functions*, Marie-Laure Ryan has provided a denouement to all these debates. She, first, introduces us to the notion of *narratorhood* (14). Then, she proceeds by making the concept of narrator bear three (3) distinct functions:

1. The creative (or self-expressive) function which concerns the narrator’s “activity of shaping the story as a mental representation.” By the time of Boccaccio and G. Chaucer, authors of fictional narratives tended to grant more personality to their narrators. For this to happen, they emphasized the creative function.
2. The transmissive (or the performative) function which represents “the narrator’s mode of communication.” In other words, the *mental* representation (stated in the creative function) is materialized (it is no longer mental) through the transmissive function.
3. The testimonial (or the assertive) which consists of “presenting the story as true of its reference world.” Said differently, the narrator is responsible for ‘the accuracy of the representation.’. In other words, one of the most distinctive features of early times storytelling was the use of narrators as reporters of events in a very authoritative and straightforward way. Such narrators may be found in the Bible, or in Greek mythological accounts (e.g., Homer’s *The Odyssey*). In this case, the narrators’ dominant function is the testimonial one.

According to her, narrators who perform the three functions are those *who* possess a complete narratorhood. Those *who* accomplish only one or two functions are of lesser degrees of narratorhood. A narrator without creative and transmissive functions is “an effaced heterodiegetic narrator.”

## Conclusion

Now, regarding both the degrees of perceptibility and the degrees of narratorhood, we can come to conclude that the existence of a narrator depends on the number of functions s/he fulfils. In this case, whether personal or impersonal, overt or covert, first or third person, the concept of narrator is preserved and the rest is just a question of degrees. Consequently, “a narrative without a narrator [...] seem(s) to me pure illusion.” (Genette, “Narrative Discourse Revisited” 101)

## References

- 1- On the author/narrator/ implied author distinction see, Booth (1961); Toolan (1988); Bal (1997); Rimmon-Kenan (2002); Prince (2003) Bortolussi and Dixon (2003); Herman and Vervaeck (2005) Jahn (2005); Fludernik (2009).
- 2- For more critical studies on the concept of “author” see, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley’s essays ‘*The Intentional Fallacy*’ and ‘*The Affective Fallacy*’; Roland Barthes’s ‘*The Death of the Author*’(1977[1967]); Michel FOUCAULT’s ‘*What is an Author?*’ (1979).
- 3- Here again another complexity is introduced, that of the identity and nature of the narratee. On the question see, G. Genette (1980); G. Prince (1973); S. Chatman (1978); Sh. Rimmon-Kenan (2002); M. Fludernik (2005, 2009); D. Herman (2007); Herman et al (2008).
- 4- Some narratologists including G. Genette argued that “narrative is a mode of verbal representation which involves the linguistic recounting or telling of events, rather than their performance or enactment on stage.”
- 5- Seymour Chatman defines the existents as “the objects contained in story-space [...] namely character and setting (107). For G. Prince, “existents and events are the two fundamental constituents of the story, states and events” (qtd in Herman et al 388).
- 6- Emile Benveniste, M.J. Toolan, Sh. Rimmon-Kenan, Ann Banfield, M. Fludernik,
- 7- The heterodiegetic narrator belongs to the fictional world but does not participate in the events of the story. i.e., the narration is done by a third-person narrator, as opposed to the homodiegetic narration in which the narrator is also a character.
- 8- As opposed to the overt narrator which is “one that can be clearly seen to be telling the story – though not necessarily a first-person narrator – and to be articulating her/his own views and making her/his presence felt stylistically as well as on the metanarrative level.” (Fludernik 22)
- 9- For more details consult Stanzel’s *A Theory of Narrative* (1984 [1979]).
- 10- Such as: Kate Hamburger (1973 [1957]); Emile Benveniste (1966); Ann Banfield (1982).
- 11- The majority of Ernest Hemingway’s short stories consist of a great number of quotations and dialogues such as: *The Killers*, *Hills Like White Elephants*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *Cat in the Rain to name only a few*.
- 12- As, again, opposed to the overt narrator which is referred to by the first-person pronoun and whose physical appearance, gender, life, thoughts, desires, dreams and ideological affiliations are clearly and fully portrayed.
- 13- This list comprises: the description of setting, identification of characters, temporal summary, definition of character, reports of what characters did not think or say, commentary and the use of footnotes. For a more detailed account see Rimmon-Kenan (2002) pp. 100-2.
- 14- S. Chatman’s term in *Story and Discourse* (1978).

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