**Week 6**

**NARRATIVE**

**SPACE, TIME and MEANING**

**SPACE** IN DISCOURSE AND STORY[[1]](#footnote-1)

On the level of DISCOURSE

- spatial dimensions of the medium (length of book, layout of chapters, paragraphs etc.)

On the level of the STORY

- space = setting (one of the “existents” in the story world)

Setting is an important aspect of NARRATIVE – essential for the communication of meaning

FICTIONAL and REAL SPACE

* space (setting) is presented verbally in narrative – it exists only in the (author’s and) reader’s imagination (the same goes for the character and the fabula)
* recipients project their lived and readerly/cultural experience into how they imagine the existents, including the described setting

SPACE and MEANIG

* setting is the space in which the characters exist
* it affects and enhances meaning by providing plausible or contrasting environments for the characters/different parts of plot

Important aspects to be considered in setting:

* **atmosphere** (stereotypical presentation – dark = gloomy; sunlit = cheerful; cramped = oppressive)
* **space and character**

- setting presentation is often **part of characterisation**; e.g. Dickens *Great Expectations* Mr. Pumblechook is described through his space – organised, impersonal, imposing, sterile, limited, stiff etc.)

- **MILIEU** – space and character influenced by social situation/background

* **space and plot**

- especially with multiple plots; each subplot has its characteristic setting (including the atmosphere) which facilitates orientation

* **symbolic space** – space can be symptomatic of the character’s social status/disposition etc.

**TIME**

Two most important aspects of TIME in narrative:

- use of tense

- arrangement of time sequences in a narrative

**TENSE**

* narratives are mostly in the past tense, aka **NARRATIVE PAST** – this creates distance between narrator and action/story
* less frequently in the **NARRATIVE PRESENT**– this creates a sense of immediacy
* sometimes **TENSE SWITCH** is involved – the two aforementioned effects combine
* **GNOMIC PRESENT** included in a NARRATIVE PAST – grammatically the same as narrative present, though it is not used to refer to the action but to offer **generic comments** (e.g. When a person gets old… When two young people meet…)

**TIME ANALYSIS**

We distinguish between:

STORY-TIME

- sequence of events and the length of time that passes in/is covered by the story

DISCOURSE-TIME

- sequence of events as presented in discourse and the pacing of the narrative (length of time taken by the narrative to tell the individual episodes/events of the story)

**3 basic aspects** (according to G. Genette; see also Bridgeman) which concern the relation of story-time and discourse-time in a narrative:

1. DURATION (how long scenes or events last)
2. ORDER (of events)
3. FREQUENCY (how often events occur)

**ad 1. DURATION**

Narratives are selective in terms of what details they focus on and how much discourse time is dedicated to these (cf. Pip’s description of Miss Havisham’s house and room).

Variations in discourse time determine which scenes are perceived as more important by the recipient/reader.

* **key events** – detailed description, slower than real time; given most discourse space/time
* **marginal events** – passed over quickly (cf. Atkinson)
* NB the variable relation between real time and discourse time:

- The story of a week’s journey abroad would take a week to narrate in real story time. But the discourse time will be compressed into 30 minutes, for example, i.e. the time needed to read the short story which gives an account of these (selected) events.

- The real ‘action’ time in Mansfield’s ‘A Dill Pickle’ takes 20 minutes or so, i.e. the time of the actual meeting. The time span presented by the narration, however, includes reminiscing on the part of both characters and is thus extremely elastic.

Possible relations between story-time and discourse-time:

* **scene/real time** – story time and discourse time are equal in terms of duration (e.g. dialogue)
* **summary/compression/speed-up** – story-time longer than discourse time (e.g. they lived happily ever after)
* **stretch/detailing/slow-down** – discourse-time exceeds the story-time
* **ellipsis** – discourse-time skips over a stretch of the story-time
* **pause** – story-time pauses while discourse-time proceeds (e.g. description or narrator comment. E.g.: On entering Miss Havisham’s room, Pip engages in a detailed description of the setting. As a self-conscious homodiegetic narrator he even offers a meta-fictional commentary on this pause in narrative time: ‘It was not in the first few moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed’.)

**ad 2. ORDER**

* Events in the story/fabula **develop chronologically** from a knowable beginning to a knowable end. In discourse (and we have commented on this with regard to the plot as part of discourse), the chronological order can be inverted.
* Basic techniques used in discourse to deliver the story in its completeness when **chronology abandoned** (**anachrony**) (as drawn out by G. Genette)

- **flashforward** = **prolepsis** (anticipation)

- **flashback** = **analepsis** (recovery)

- **ellipsis** = skipping over significant portions of story time

2.1. BEGINNINGS

* the place in the story where the narrative discourse starts is called **POINT OF ATTACK**
* when the place coincides with the story’s beginning, the narrative is said to begin **AB OVO** – such narratives usually start with preliminary info about the character(s), setting, situation…
* or narratives start **IN MEDIAS RES** – the point of attack at a point where the story is already under way – a more productive manner of beginning
* when the point of attack comes at the end of the story, the narrative starts **IN ULTIMAS RES**
* these techniques create SUSPENSE (*how* things happened or *what* will happen next)
* detective stories – interesting combination of beginnings AB OVO and IN ULTIMAS RES – the story of the crime begins in ULTIMAS RES – the discovery of the crime (e.g. body); the story of the detective begins AB OVO – from the beginning of investigation to the discovery of the criminal

2.2. ENDINGS (not so much about the order of events, but still worth considering)

Two categories:

* **CLOSED** – all plot complications resolved – death, marriage, killer identified and caught…
* **OPEN** – no resolution offered (sometimes multiple endings offered; e.g. John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* – even though each of those constitute a closed ending, the effect is of an open ending)

**ad 3. FREQUENCY**

In this, we compare the number of times an event is narrated with the number of times it is supposed to have taken place in the storyworld. We thus distinguish (with Genette) between:

* **SINGULATIVE** – an event that occurred once is referred to only once
* **REPETITIVE** – an event that occurred once is referred to multiple times
* **ITERATIVE** – an event that is supposed to have occurred several times is referred to only once

1. Based on Stefanie Lethbridge and Jarmila Mildorf, *Basics of English Studies*,‘Chapter 2, Prose’, 47–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)