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second edition

# *Narrative Fiction*

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan

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## Narrative Fiction

What is a narrative? What is narrative fiction? How does it differ from other kinds of narrative? What features turn a discourse into a narrative text? Now widely acknowledged as one of the most significant volumes in its field, *Narrative Fiction* turns its attention to these and other questions.

In contrast to many other studies, *Narrative Fiction* is organized around issues—such as events, time, focalization, characterization, narration, the text and its reading—rather than individual theorists or approaches. Within this structure, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan addresses key approaches to narrative fiction, including New Criticism, formalism, structuralism and phenomenology, but also offers views on the modifications to these theories. While presenting an analysis of the system governing all fictional narratives, whether in the form of novel, short story or narrative poem, she also suggests how individual narratives can be studied against the background of this general system. A broad range of literary examples illustrate key aspects of the study.

This edition is brought fully up-to-date with an invaluable new chapter, reflecting on recent developments in narratology. Readers are also directed to key recent works in the field. These additions to a classic text ensure that *Narrative Fiction* will remain the ideal starting point for anyone new to narrative theory.

**Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her most recent publications include *A Glance Beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* (1996) and *Re-Reading Texts: Re-Thinking Critical Presuppositions* (edited, 1997). Her current project concerns the

concept of narrative in different disciplines (psychoanalysis, historiography, legal studies and the medical humanities).

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Shlomith **Rimmon-Kenan**

# Narrative Fiction

Contemporary Poetics

2nd edition

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To Guy, who suffered

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

*New Accents* deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at

'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide-reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

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S.R.-K.



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Newspaper reports, history books, novels, films, comic strips, pantomime, dance, gossip, psychoanalytic sessions are only some of the narratives which permeate our lives. One species of narrative will be the subject of this book: the species called 'narrative fiction', whether in the form of novel, short story or narrative poem.

But what is a narrative? What makes the following limerick a narrative?

There was a young lady of Niger  
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.

They returned from the ride  
With the lady inside  
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

How can we differentiate between this limerick and the following discourse?

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
Sugar is sweet  
And so are you.

Why isn't the latter a narrative?

And what is narrative fiction? How does it differ from other kinds of narrative? In what sense is a newspaper report, like 'yesterday a

store in Oxford Street was burned out' a narrative but not narrative fiction? What are the features that turn a given discourse into a narrative text? What are the basic aspects of narrative fiction and how do they interact with each other? How does one make sense of a specific narrative text, and how can it be described to others?

These and other questions will be considered in some detail throughout this book. However, it is helpful to begin with working definitions of the key terms of the title, thus providing a framework for further deliberations.

Poetics is

the systematic study of literature as literature. It deals with the question 'What is literature?' and with all possible questions developed from it, such as: What is art in language? What are the forms and kinds of literature? What is the nature of one literary genre or trend? What is the system of a particular poet's 'art' or 'language'? How is a story made? What are the specific aspects of works of literature? How are they constituted? How do literary texts embody 'non-literary' phenomena? etc.

(Hrushovski 1976b, p. xv)

By 'narrative fiction' I mean the narration of a succession of fictional events. Self-evident as this definition may seem, it nevertheless implies certain positions with regard to some basic issues in poetics. To begin with, the term *narration* suggests (1) a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee and (2) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message. It is this that distinguishes narrative fiction from narratives in other media, such as film, dance, or pantomime.<sup>1</sup>

The definition further suggests how narrative fiction differs from other literary texts, such as lyrical poetry or expository prose. Unlike the latter, narrative fiction represents a *succession of events* (Tomashevsky 1965, p. 66. Orig. publ. in Russian 1925). At this early stage of our discussion, an event may be defined without great rigour as something that happens, something that can be summed up by a verb or a name of action (e.g. a ride—perhaps on a tiger). Although single-event narratives are theoretically (and perhaps also

empirically) possible (see [chapter 2](#)), I speak of a *succession* of events in order to suggest that narratives usually consist of more than one. Thus the lady in the limerick first rides on a tiger, then returns in it.

Finally, the main interest of this book is in narratives of *fictional* events. This is why I shall not consider here nonfictional verbal narratives, like gossip, legal testimony, news reports, history books, autobiography, personal letters, etc. The fictional status of events is, I believe, a pragmatic issue. It is arguable that history books, news reports, autobiography are in some sense no less fictional than what is conventionally classified as such. In fact, some of the procedures used in the analysis of fiction may be applied to texts conventionally defined as ‘non-fiction’. Nevertheless, since such texts will also have characteristics specific to them, they are beyond the scope of this book.

The foregoing definition of narrative fiction also gives rise to a classification of its basic aspects: the events, their verbal representation, and the act of telling or writing. In the spirit of Genette’s distinction between ‘*histoire*’, ‘*récit*’ and ‘*narration*’ (1972, pp. 71–6), I shall label these aspects ‘story’, ‘text’ and ‘narration’ respectively.<sup>2</sup>

‘Story’ designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events.

Whereas ‘story’ is a succession of events, ‘text’ is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective (‘focalizer’).

Since the text is a spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect—‘narration’. Narration can be considered as both real and fictional. In the empirical world, the author is the agent responsible for the production of the narrative and for its communication. The empirical process of communication, however, is less relevant to the poetics of narrative fiction than its counterpart within the text. Within the text, communication involves a fictional narrator transmitting a narrative to a fictional narratee.

Of the three aspects of narrative fiction, the text is the only one directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story (its object) and of the narration (the process of its production). On the other hand, however, the narrative text is itself defined by these two other aspects: unless it told a story it would not be a narrative, and without being narrated or written it would not be a text. Indeed, story and narration may be seen as two metonymies of the text, the first evoking it through its narrative content, the second through its production.<sup>3</sup> The relations among the aspects will be emphasized throughout this study, and the aspects themselves will inform the division into chapters.

Thus far I have suggested preliminary answers to all but the last two questions set forth in the beginning of this introduction. These two questions differ from the others in that they concern the specificity of individual texts rather than characteristics common to all works of narrative fiction. Indeed, the copresence of these two types of question is indicative of the double purpose of this book. On the one hand, I wish to present a description of the system governing all fictional narratives. On the other hand, I hope to indicate a way in which individual narratives can be studied as unique realizations of the general system.

This double orientation calls for a mixture of theoretical considerations and illustrations from works of narrative fiction. Of course, some issues are more amenable to illustration while others necessitate a more abstract discussion. The distribution of examples will vary accordingly. For reasons of space and variety, I do not analyse any text in full but prefer a discussion of extracts from many texts, deriving from various periods and various national literatures. Some examples are repeated in different contexts. This is done not only for the sake of reinforcement but also in order to emphasize that textual segments are junctions of various compositional principles, not ready-made examples of any one principle to the exclusion of others (although a predominance of one is obviously possible). Analysis requires emphasis on the issue under consideration, but texts are richer than anything such an isolation of aspects can yield.

My presentation draws upon Anglo-American New Criticism, Russian Formalism, French Structuralism, the Tel-Aviv School of Poetics and the Phenomenology of Reading. However, the book is

not structured according to 'schools' or individual theoreticians (as, for example, Hawkes 1977). Rather, it is organized around the *differentia specifica* of narrative fiction (e.g. events, time, narration). The predilection revealed here for certain approaches as well as the selection of specific aspects from each approach imply a personal stand on the various issues. Nor is this stand confined to tacit implication: on the contrary, it often manifests itself in explicit comments on and modifications of the theories which are brought together. Yet this book does not offer an original theory. Indeed the tension between an integration of existing theories and a presentation of a personal view is one of the inevitable frustrations of any attempt at a synthesis. Similarly, it was necessary to extract the relevant points from each theory without presenting the theory as a whole or following all of its implications. It is hoped that the reader will be encouraged to continue to explore this field, and by so doing to fill in some of these lacunae.



## 2

# STORY: EVENTS<sup>1</sup>

### THE QUESTION OF THE STORY'S AUTONOMY

Story was defined above as the narrated events and participants in abstraction from the text. As such, it is a part of a larger construct, referred to by some as the 'reconstructed' (or 'represented') world (or 'level') (e.g. Hrushovski 1976a, p. 7), i.e. the fictional 'reality' in which the characters of the story are supposed to be living and in which its events are supposed to take place. In fact, story is one axis within the larger construct: the axis of temporal organization. Since this is the axis whose predominance turns a world-representing text into a narrative text, I shall confine my discussion to it, leaving out the broader construct which is not specifically narrative.

Being an abstraction, a construct, the story is not directly available to the reader. Indeed, since the text is the only observable and object-like aspect of verbal narrative, it would seem to make sense to take it as the anchoring-point for any discussion of the other aspects—as I do in chapters 4, 5 and 6. What I believe is called for here is a defence of the decision to treat story in isolation in this and the next chapter.

Far from seeing story as raw, undifferentiated material, this study stresses its structured character, its being made of separable components, and hence having the potential of forming networks of internal relations. Such a view justifies attempts to disengage a form from the substance of the narrated content, a specific narrative form.<sup>2</sup> The theoretical possibility of abstracting story-form probably corresponds to the intuitive skill of users in processing stories: being

able to re-tell them, to recognize variants of the same story, to identify the same story in another medium, and so on. It is this intuition that has led almost every narratologist following in Vladimir Propp's footsteps to formulate a claim that an immanent story structure, sometimes called 'narrativity', may be isolated at least for the sake of description. What Propp studied in his *Morphology of the Russian Folk-tale*, writes Bremond, was an 'autonomous layer of meaning'. He goes on:

The subject of a tale may serve as an argument for a ballet, that of a novel may be carried over to the stage or to the screen, a movie may be told to those who have not seen it. It is words one reads, it is images one sees, it is gestures one deciphers, but through them it is a story one follows; and it may be the same story.

(Bremond 1964, p. 4. Ron's translation)

A stronger stance is taken by Greimas, according to whom an acknowledgement of Bremond's point

amounted to recognizing and accepting the necessity of a fundamental distinction between two levels of representation and analysis: an *apparent* level of narration, at which the manifestations of narration are subject to the specific exigencies of the linguistic substances through which they are expressed, and an *immanent level*, constituting a sort of common structural trunk, at which narrativity is situated and organized prior to its manifestations. A common semiotic level is thus distinct from the linguistic level and is logically prior to it, whatever the language chosen for manifestation.

(Greimas 1977, p. 23. Orig. publ. in French 1969)<sup>3</sup>

What emerges from these statements (and one could add Prince 1973, p. 13) is that story is an abstraction from: (1) the specific style of the text in question (e.g. Henry James's late style, with its proliferation of subordinate clauses, or Faulkner's imitation of Southern dialect and rhythm, (2) the language in which the text is written (English, French, Hebrew) and (3) the medium or sign-system