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What can we learn from narratology?

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Children's literature scholarship is a relatively recent academic discipline, more or less comparable in its status with feminist criticism. The first serious studies on children's literature in the West appeared in the 1960s. They were primarily historical and thematic surveys, with a strong pedagogical bias. Among the very first to bring forward the formal aspects of children's literature was a Swedish study: Vivi Edström's *Barn bo ken form* ("Form in Children's Literature", 1980). Since then, a number of narratological studies of children's literature have been published, focused on the specific features of plot, characterization, perspective and other narrative elements in children's literature as opposed to the mainstream.

In what way is a narratological approach different from conventional approaches to children's literature? (I am not using the word "conventional" in a pejorative sense). The decisive question for a literary historian is, for instance, "What makes *Alice in Wonderland* an outstanding children's book?" The question for a narratologist is: "What makes *Alice in Wonderland* a children's book?" The former question has been successfully answered by many critics, who have examined the portrayal of the child and the society, the linguistic acrobatics, the philosophical implications, and so on. The latter question has given those who have cared to pose it at all a lot of headache. We know by intuition that it is a children's book, but it does not match any conventional definitions. It is not uncommon to interrogate books that do not match our preconceived opinions about children's literature. We have heard critics say that *Alice in Wonderland* or *Winnie the Pooh* are great books because they in actual fact are not children's books.

Very often such statements are made without further reflections, based on assumptions like: "It is too difficult for children, children don't understand it" In doing so, critics apply readerresponse ideas and construct an abstract, ideal picture

of a "child" who can or cannot enjoy the particular book. They also apply pedagogical criteria and judge the books on the basis of their own opinions about pedagogical values (which may be educational, moral or ideological). Not seldom people also trust what authors say about their books ("I write for children" or "I do not write for children") or how publishers and library services classify them. All these are arbitrary criteria, which in addition change throughout history. The narratological question: "What characterizes a children's book, as distinct from all other text types?" presupposes a totally different methodology.

I am not sure that the international children's literature scholarly community will in the near future agree on a common ground about what exactly makes a children's book. Still, narratology offers a number of other, less metaphysical questions which can be used as points of departure for exciting studies.

Some conventional questions about a literary text as a whole may be: "What is the book about, superficially and on a deeper level? What is its message and the author's intention? What ideology and values does it convey?" This is what most studies of children's literature, both surveys and studies focused on individual authors and works, have so far been concerned about. This is of course fully legitimate and can sometimes produce brilliant results. The questions for a narratologist are: "What constitutes a narrative? What elements is a narrative made of?" The concept of narrativity implies the sum of all features in a narrative that make it a narrative. The study object of narratology is thus narrativity, and not the narrative as such. This study object demand other analytical tools than other critical theories and methods. I am in no way claiming that narratology yields *better* results than other methods, merely different results.

Most scholars who have examined narrativity agree about the distinction between the content of the narrative, the story ("what is being told"), and its form, the discourse ("how it is told"). The majority of studies in children's literature have only concentrated on the story level, analyzing it from many different angles. Concerning plot, the conventional questions are: "What happens in the book? Who does what, when, where, how and why?" These questions can be dealt with by a variety of methods. We can examine how the story reflects the time and society within which it was written. We can investigate the author's overt or covert

opinions. We can see how the story is relevant for its readers. Within children's literature research much discussion has concerned what subjects and themes are suitable or not suitable for young readers.

The narratologist's question is: "What are the constituents of a plot?" The early formalist and structuralist studies were often focused on the grammar of story, its morphology (classification of narrative elements) and its syntax (rules for how narrative elements can be combined into a meaningful whole). Since the structure of children's books is generally more rigid than in modern, especially modernist and postmodernist literature, it may be quite fruitful to start a narratological analysis of children's literature with surface structures, but we must remember that we will not come further than to a very general picture of plot and character gallery. Formulaic fiction, such as adventure, crime and mystery novels, is especially suitable for structural studies. But also in quality literature we can discern what events constitute a plot and how they are related to each other. For instance, a recurrent element in children's literature is the protagonist's physical dislocation, a transportation to a new, unknown territory, which allows the freedom to explore the world without the adult supervision. This element, corresponding to Vladimir Propp's initial function of "absence" in folktales, is a morphological structure typical for children's literature. From syntactical point of view, it must necessarily appear in the beginning of the story. This is just a very primitive example of how the grammar of narrative can be applied to children's literature.

In speaking about literary characters, the traditional questions are: "What do characters represent? Who or what are they?" An interpretation of a character can be done from the text itself and not uncommonly from our extra-textual experiences. For instance, we can discuss how boys and girls, parents and teachers, immigrants and minorities are portrayed in children's literature of any given period. We can also analyze concrete characters, such as Pippi Longstocking, Anne of Green Gables, or the Moomintroll. We have a variety of tools for such analyses: we can treat characters from a socio-historical viewpoint, as representatives of their time and social group; or from a psychological, even psychoanalytical viewpoint, as bearers of certain psychological features; or from a biographical viewpoints, as reflections of their authors' lives and opinions. The gender aspect has become a significant point of departure for looking at texts. For a narratologist, the essential

question is: "How are characters constructed by authors? How are they revealed for readers?"

One of the most profound problems in dealing with literary characters is their ontological status: are we to treat them as real people, with psychologically credible traits, or merely as textual constructions? In narratology, a distinction is made between mimetic and semiotic approach to characters. With a mimetic approach, we view them as real people and ascribe them a background which may not have any support in the text. The semiotic approach treats characters, as all other textual elements, merely as a number of words, without any substance. I believe, like many other scholars, that a reasonable attitude is somewhere in between; but I will gladly admit that I lean toward the semiotic end of the spectrum.

The ontological question is highly relevant for children's literature research. There is a still stronger tendency to treat and judge characters in children's books as if they were real people. When schoolteachers ask questions like: "With whom would you like to be friends in this book?", it presupposes an understanding of characters as real people, likewise statements such as: "If Tom Sawyer lived today he would be an ecological activist, or a neofascist, or a juvenile delinquent" However, literary characters do not exist outside their texts, and all questions that cannot find support in the text are pointless. Yet, we have read many articles and student papers about literary characters that are reminiscent of medical case records, ascribing them psychological qualities from real life, not from the texts. There is nothing wrong about employing analytical tools from other disciplines, but we must remember that literary character need not behave according to patterns described in psychology textbooks.

Instead, narratology offers a number of epistemological questions, that is, questions about how we as readers can understand characters we meet in books. For many critics, the appeal of literature is exactly the fact that we can more easily understand literary figures than we can ever learn to understand real people. Characters are transparent in a way real people can never be. However, far from all means of characterization allows this transparency. In children's literature, characters are usually less transparent than in the mainstream, because children's writers have a tendency to use external rather than internal characterization

devices. This is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, children's literature is supposed to be simple and easy to understand. We can then expect writers to employ narrative devices that would enable readers to come closer to characters and understand them better. But on the other hand, such devices are the most complex and therefore are used only sparsely in children's literature.

External description is the simplest device: readers get a direct portrait of the character: Pippi Longstocking has red hair and a nose like a small potato. Illustrations in children's books contribute to our immediate perception of characters. They can both complement textual descriptions or wholly substitute for them. Writers are free to give us many details about the characters' looks or omit them altogether. Being an authorial narrative form, external description is tangibly didactic.

Narrator's statements are of course also didactic; they manipulate readers toward a certain interpretation of character. For instance, the text says explicitly that Pippi's friends Tommy and Annika are nice and well-behaved children. There is not much left for the reader to do than accept these statements. Characters' actions present them in a more indirect way. For instance: Pippi repeatedly treats her friends to nice food and gives them presents. We understand that she is generous. Repetition of actions can thus emphasize character traits. Reactions to events can also reveal character properties: Pippi reacts strongly when she encounters injustice and violence. She does not hesitate to save two small children from a fire. The narrator can comment the character's actions and reactions or allow readers to draw their own conclusions. When the narrator explains and comments too much, we usually say that the book is over-didactic.

Characters' direct speech presents them immediately, through what they say as well as through how they say it. Pippi is extremely verbal and witty, but we cannot really trust everything she says. Indirect speech is mediated through the narrator. We no longer hear the characters' voices, but a report of their statements, which may have been manipulated by the narrator. It is sufficient that a comment is added, such as "he said with irritation" or "she said resentfully", to affect our understanding of the character.

Mental representation is, as already hinted, the most sophisticated

characterization device. It allows us to penetrate the characters' mind. This device is uncommon in *Pippi Longstocking,* but it is all the more important in books by many contemporary writers, where the reader is allowed to take part of the innermost thoughts and mental states of characters. Characters become fully transparent, in a way that real people can never be. On the other hand, even the most complex character can never be as multidimensional as a real living person.

The fact that mental representation is uncommon in children's literature depends on its implied readers. We need certain life experience to be able to interpret characters' thoughts, and still more their unarticulated emotions, such as fear, anxiety, longing or joy. Of course, a writer can simply say "He was anxious" or "She was scared" But the words "anxious" or "scared" are very simple labels for complex and contradictory mental states. Not even a long description can necessarily convey all the shades of a person's feelings.

Narratology discerns a number of artistic devices to depict inner life or consciousness. The simplest is quoted monologue, corresponding to direct speech, when a person's thoughts are rendered literally, with tags such as "he thought". Since our thoughts are seldom as ordered and structured as spoken sentences, quoted monologue does not really reflect consciousness, but a rather organized picture of it. However, since quoted monologue is the easiest device to understand, it is used most frequently in children's literature. In this form, the character's discourse is clearly distinct from the narrator's discourse. In more complex forms, such as the interior monologue, the free indirect discourse and so on, it is not always possible to discern the source of utterance. Complex mental representation is in children's literature often used to manipulate readers, to create an illusion that the text reflects a character's mind, while it is in fact a narrator's comments about a character's mind. The specific feature of children's literature is that the narrative voice most often is that of an adult, while the character is a child. The difference in cognitive level between the two demands a delicate balance. The best contemporary children's writers have managed to keep this balance.

Mental representation brings about the question of narrative perspective. Of all narratological questions, this one has been discussed most. Conventional research is content with the question: "Who is telling the story?" The answer is usually simple and unambiguous. Narratology examines instead how the narrative

is manipulated through an interaction of the author's, the narrator's, the character's and the reader's point of view.

The conventional way of treating narrative perspective is to state that the story is either told in the third person, with an omniscient perspective, or in the first person. It is theoretically possible to have second-person perspective in a story, but narratology views second-person narratives as highly unusual and experimental. There is, however, a very well-known example in children's literature, the first chapter of *Winnie-the-Pooh.* Christopher Robin, who is a character in the story, is referred to in second person, as "you".

Narratology offers us much more precise tools to examine perspective. We must discern between the narrative voice we hear and the point of view, that is, through whose eyes we see the events. These do not necessarily coincide, and in children's literature they seldom coincide, since the narrative voice belongs to an adult, while the perspective lies with a child. Narratology forces us to differentiate who speaks (the narrator), who sees (focalizer) and who is seen (the focalized character).

Let us first take a closer look at the narrative voice, who speaks. An essential question is the distance between the narrator and the narrative. Irrespective of whether the narrator is covert or refers to himself in the first person, he can either tell the story in retrospect, after the evens, or more or less simultaneously, as the events unfold. Even an adult first-person narrator telling about his own childhood has a distance to the narrated events and can restructure them, and comment his own actions from a vaster life experience. The difference between first- and third-person perspective is in this case less important than the distance between the narrator and the story.

As far as the narrator's presence in the narrative is concerned, there are several possibilities. Sometimes the narrator is a character, even the main character in his own story. In other cases, the narrator is an outsider, telling the story from a superior, omniscient position. The picture becomes still more complicated when we add point of view, that is, not only examine who speaks, but also who sees. The

concept of the point of view is used in narratology both in literal and transferred sense. When we share a child's point of view, it is mostly the literal perspective: we see what the child sees. The transferred point of view, that is, the child's understanding of what he sees, the child's thoughts and opinions, can be problematic. How can an adult writer render a child's thoughts without sounding false? Narratologists often use Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* as a unique example of a description of a child's naïve and innocent perception. In this novel, we share both Maisie's literal and transferred point of view. As adult readers, we can liberate ourselves from the imposed point of view of the text and understand that things are not really like Maisie sees them. Since narratologists seldom know anything about children's literature, they have no idea that this supposedly unique device is a rule rather than an exception in children's books. On the other hand, young readers are mostly just as naïve and inexperienced as the child protagonists. The interaction of the various points of view becomes extremely intricate.

The concept of focalization helps us to examine the relationship between the narrator and the character or characters through whose eyes we see the events. Once again: since the narrator in a children's book is most often an adult, while the character is a child, if writers want to create an illusion of an authentic child perspective, they must pretend that the narrator does not know or understand more than the focalized character. In this case, too, the difference between first- and third-person narration is of less importance. In internal focalization, we take part of the character's thoughts and feelings in the same way that in a first-person narrative, and sometimes even better. It can work better, because a first-person narrator who is a child lacks both verbal and cognitive skills to articulate his emotions. An adult narrative agency who focalizes young characters can verbalize their thoughts and feelings for them.

However, children's literature does have its limitations, dependant on its implied readers. Not even every adult reader is capable of and will enjoy reading *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake,* and an attempt to directly convey a child's flow of thoughts in a children's book would probably result in an artistic failure. Just as children in real life need adults to survive, it is part of poetics of children's literature to use an adult narrative agency to provide young readers with at least some guidance. When this convention is abandoned, then either we are not dealing

with children's literature any more, or it is indeed an artistic failure. It would feel alien for me to propagate for a return to a conventional, authoritative narrative voice. Yet narratological studies of perspective in children's literature reveal how writers manage to achieve something that narratologists have judges as impossible: a rendering of a naïve perspective without losing psychological depth or verbal richness. Most narratologists make use of the same example: Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury.* If they read some children's books, they would not lack examples.

Last but not least, let us have a look at temporality. The usual question concerning time in fiction is "When does the action take place?" At best, it can also be "How long does the story take?" The narratological question is: "How are the temporal structures of the discourse organized in relation to the temporal structures of the story?" The three components of temporality are duration, order and frequency. All the three acquire a special significance in children's literature.

It is self-evident that the plot of a children's book cannot take many years, as is the case of *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations,* which follow their characters from early childhood into adulthood. Such a long plot would lie beyond a young reader's comprehension. The beginning of *Mansfield Park* is not unlike some famous children's books, such a *Heidi* or *Anne of Green Gables:* a poor girl comes to stay with relatives or foster parents. However, while *Mansfield Park* immediately presents a gap of five years in Fanny Price's life, until she is grown up and marriageable and therefore can participate in the adult issues, half of Anne *of Green Gables* depicts Anne's first weeks in her new home, whereby each event is described in detail, since it is important for the young protagonist. Thereafter, the plot is accelerated; the speed of the story is varied; some episodes are described minutely, while long periods can be dismissed in just one sentence: "A year has passed' Speed and duration in a children's book are essential aesthetic elements. In *Ulysses,* the story takes merely one day, time is stretched, since the novel depicts characters in a critical moment of their lives. It has become more common for children's books to have short duration, as compared to classic books such a *Anne of Green Gables* or *Heidi,* which take several years. Studies of duration point at the changing aesthetics of children's literature. It is apparently more important for today's authors to catch a turning points in a young person's life than to follow him or her during many years. We would not notice such changes in children's

literature with conventional methods.

Most children's books are told in chronological order, but it has also become common (not so say banal) to make use of flashbacks, interplay of different temporal levels and other complex temporal patterns. Finally, concerning frequency, we can observe that the iterative frequency, telling once about events that take place regularly, which narratologists present as unique for Proust, is one of the most common devices in children's literature. Thus, by studying temporality, we can once again demonstrate in what ways children's literature is different from general literature.

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Every new theoretical direction is only legitimate if it allows us to disclose such dimensions in literary texts that we would not be able to discover with other methods. We have recently seen how children's literature research has reached new depth as it has borrowed analytical tools from two separate, but in some respects resembling areas: the feminist and the postcolonial criticism. Both directions have taught us to read literary texts from the point of view of a marginalized social group. Children in our society are also marginalized and oppressed. With tools from feminist and postcolonial theories, we have learned to discern between conservative and subversive elements in children's books, classic as well as modern.

In its turn, narrative theory has given us tools to analyze in detail how texts are constructed and to understand why certain devices work well in children's books while other do not. It has also facilitated a historical comparison, which not only pinpoints changes in themes and values, but the profound changes in the aesthetic form of children's literature. Perhaps eventually we will be able to answer the tantalizing question of exactly what makes *Alice in Wonderland* a great children's book.

The weight of a Butterfly's Wing

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Let us begin by taking up the attitude of the 'Philosopher watching two butterflies', a painting by Hokusai from 1814 or 1819[1]. What is of interest to us here in the image of this man's contemplating the mating dance of insects, is the scene of meditation on the mystery of life: the mystery of delicate life exalted as two white forms meet each other. The butterflies' wings evoke motion in the air, but they hover above the figure's head more like two enigmatic ideograms than two living forms. The silence of their fluttering allows, above all else, for the very essence of representation, for a depiction that is free of any artifice, which the portrayal of squawking birds would require.

And it is the meaning of these visual messages addressed to the children in the world, and to readers in general, that I wish to consider in this celebration. The union of word and image has made reading a complex process; the contemporary book, the conveyor of writing and the "product of screen thought", as described by Anne-Marie Christin[2], is full of surprises, and is aimed at those who, in my book *Jeux et enjeux du livre d'enfance et de jeunesse,* I term "children of the videosphere", e.g. our children that use the world network of digitalised images and read these in picture-books, comics or films, but also in computers and video-games.

These can go to museums, and then witness on their "game boys" the fight between Starmie, the Pokémon, "that has a jewel at its center glowing like the seven colours of the rainbow", against Butterfree, the Pokémon-Butterfly, that

[1] See Matthi Forrer, *Hokusai*, translation by Catherine Bednaereck, Bibliothèque de l'image, Paris: 1996, p. 32.
[2] Anne-Marie Christin, *L'image écrite*, Paris: Flammarion, coll. Idées et Recherche, 1995, p.6.