

# BETWEEN THE SCYLLA OF THEORY AND THE CHARYBDIS OF PRACTICE: THE PECULIAR CASE OF A FRAME NARRATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

A frame narrative is usually defined as a narrative in which another narrative is embedded. Obvious as this definition is, it actually renders the notion of frame narrative inoperative as it can be applied to any narrative in which a character tells some story. This article argues that it is virtually impossible to define a frame narrative in strictly formal terms, even though there seems to exist a tacit agreement among literary scholars as to which narratives can and should be described as framed structures. The case of the frame narrative thus appears to involve a peculiar discrepancy between narrative theory and critical practice.

KEY WORDS: Frame narrative, narrator, narrative theory.

## RESUMEN

Se suele definir el relato enmarcado como una narración en la que se inserta otra narración. Esa definición parece obvia aunque, en realidad, no hace sino diluir el concepto del relato enmarcado, ya que puede aplicarse a cualquier texto narrativo en el que un personaje cuente una historia. Este artículo demuestra que resulta prácticamente imposible definir el relato enmarcado en términos puramente formales si bien hay un acuerdo tácito entre los estudiosos de la literatura en cuanto a qué textos narrativos se pueden y deben tratar como estructuras enmarcadas. Por tanto, parece ser que en el caso del relato enmarcado existe una peculiar discrepancia entre la teoría de la narrativa y la práctica crítica.

PALABRAS CLAVES: relato enmarcado, narrador, teoría de la narrativa.

It might seem that the notion of a frame narrative, also called a story-within-a-story or a frame story, is self-explanatory: all the major dictionaries of literary terms define it in an uncomplicated manner as a story in which another story (or a series of stories) is enclosed and cite the same set of examples, including such classics as *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron* and *Frankenstein*.<sup>1</sup> An equally simple definition can also be found in more specialist, narratological, studies. Mieke Bal, for instance, defines frame narratives in the fol-



lowing manner: “[they are] narrative texts in which at a second or third level a complete story is told” (Bal 143).<sup>2</sup> However concordant with our intuitions these definitions might seem, the category of the frame narrative proves to be less clear when subjected to a careful scrutiny. While everybody seems to know to what texts it can be applied in critical practice, the analysis of the above definitions suggests that virtually any narrative can theoretically be called a frame narrative.

The crux of the problem lies in the definition of “a complete story.” Consider the following example:

I had lodgings in this street when I first came to Edinburgh as a student. I must tell you a story about the landlady, who was very frugal. It was her habit to come to me every morning to ask what I would have for breakfast, and she spoke like this: “Wud [sic] ye have a red herrin?—no ye wouldn’t. Could ye eat a boilt egg?—no ye couldn’t.” The result was, I never had but bread and butter to my breakfast all the time I was in those lodgings, and very little of that. (Spark 40)

Not only is this passage self-reflexively called a story by an agent telling it, it also meets the theoretical requirements of Bal’s definition of a story (8). It is a sequence of events (a “fibula” in Bal’s terms) presented in a certain manner. The only problem is that it comes from Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*: it is a little anecdote told by Miss Brodie to her pupils during one of their numerous walks. Following Bal’s definition of a frame narrative, one would have to conclude that the rest of the novel constitutes a frame narrative embedding Miss Brodie’s story about her landlady, which would be a rather peculiar approach to the structure of this novel.

Furthermore, the passage quoted above appears rather longish when judged against theoretical examples of a complete story, the length of which varies from one to three sentences, depending on a narratologist.<sup>3</sup> These theoretical premises are pushed to their logical limits by William Nelles, who devotes a book-length study to the discussion of embedded narratives. Having demonstrated that one sentence can constitute a complete narrative and that an apparently non-narrative text can be narrativised, he asserts that any utterance of a fictional character can be regarded as an example of an embedded narrative (125).

The acceptance of Nelles’s reasoning has far-reaching effects. Firstly, it renders the notion of a frame narrative inoperative: any narrative which includes a passage which is directly quoted, in other words virtually any narrative, is an example of a frame narrative. Obviously, some examples of texts which are not frame narratives in the broad meaning of the term could be found: an interior monologue registering only the speaker’s impressions or a Robbe-Grilletian presentation of the visual

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Cuddon 354; Baldick 87; Myers and Simms 122.

<sup>2</sup> See also Prince 35.

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct summary of different definitions of a minimal narrative see Patrick O’Neill 17-18.

data deprived of any dialogues. However, the vast majority of narratives do include some directly quoted utterances. The implicit redundancy of the notion is probably the reason why Nelles himself fails, or omits, to define the notion of a frame narrative. The logical conclusion of his reasoning, though not expressed by him openly, is that the narrative of this type does not really exist, since one cannot find a set of distinctive properties whereby it can be identified. What one can discuss (and what Nelles does discuss) is a wider concept of narrative embedding. However, this notion designates a relationship between two sections, or levels, of a text (the one which quotes, or embeds, and the one which is quoted, or embedded); it does not define a specific class of narratives.

Furthermore, it is not only the notion of the frame narrative which is at stake. If any utterance of a fictional character can be regarded as a narrative, then any character who utters anything should be labelled a narrator. The danger involved in such an approach is aptly expressed by Susan Sniader Lanser: "Theoretically, any persona who utters discourse on his or her own behalf may be called a 'narrator,' though such a stretching of the term renders it rather useless" (137). Commenting on Lanser's misgivings, Nelles optimistically declares that "in practice the problem does not arise" (123). I would, however, argue that the opposite is true: the assertion that any speaker in the narrative text is a narrator is theoretically sound and valid if one accepts Nelles's premises, but it renders some theoretical notions completely unclear and makes critical practice a very complex endeavour. As noted above, his argumentation turns the notion of the frame narrative into a tautology, almost every narrative being a case of a frame narrative. As regards critical practice, to present a comprehensive account of narrators in any narrative text, one would have to analyse each and every speaker who makes any directly quoted statement. By the same token, each and every character to whom any statement within the fictional world is directed would have to be called a narratee. How many narrators and narratees can an average narrative text in the form of a novel accommodate? Their name is legion.

Nelles claims that "using the term 'narrator' for all speakers is not a 'rather useless' extension but a strategically necessary one" (125). If one looks at his, undoubtedly strategically motivated, selection of examples on the basis of which he analyses the functions of embedded narratives, one may experience a "déjà vu": *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron*, all the classic examples of traditionally understood frame narratives, figure prominently in his discussion. Likewise, his example of a minimal embedded narrative, consisting of a single word "Love" is not very original. This one-word long utterance comes from John Barth's "Menelaid," the story which ostentatiously explores the limits of narrative embedding, its most embedded fragment being eight times removed from the first, extradigetic level.

What Nelles fails to do is to demonstrate how "a strategically necessary extension of the term 'narrator'" can fruitfully be employed in an analysis of some less obvious examples of narrative embedding. But perhaps there is not so much to be gained from such an approach. The only benefit of calling the characters who just exchange *hello*'s a narrator and a narratee seems to be a realisation that the



Genettean terminology describing narrative levels can also be used to describe the position of a character's utterance in relation to the discourse of the narrator who is quoting it.

The discrepancy between Nelles's purely theoretical assertions and the examples he discusses seems to suggest that he, unconsciously perhaps, agrees that there exists a class of texts, traditionally called frame narratives, the distinctive feature of which is the framed, or embedded, structure. The only problem is that it seems impossible to present a set of strict, formal criteria whereby this class of texts can be distinguished, Bal's definition being much too general. One solution to this problem could be the addition of the criterion of importance to Bal's definition. The narrative (or narratives) which is (are) embedded in a frame narrative constitutes (constitute) something which can be regarded as the main narrative(s) of a given text. This, of course, does not mean that the frame narrative is an insignificant, negligible element of the text structure. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings of that type, one could perhaps suggest an additional criterion of the relationship in length between the embedding and embedded narrative(s): if the former is shorter than the latter, then it can be labelled a frame narrative.

I am fully aware that the above definition is not completely satisfactory, not least because the criterion of importance shifts the emphasis from a purely formal description onto the interpretative one. Likewise, the criterion of length invites criticism from the perspective of borderline cases of narratives in which the ratio of words in the embedding narrative to words in the embedded one is 49% to, 51%. The only problem is that no better solution has been suggested so far. My attempt to present some, provisional as it is, definition of a frame narrative is motivated by the fact that I am convinced—and I believe that the majority of literary scholars, including both narratologists and people not necessarily concerned with narrative structures, would agree—that there is a difference in structure between *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The only problem is that it is not so easy to express this difference in absolute terms.

The difficulties which one encounters while attempting to offer an applicable definition of a frame narrative can be construed as an illustration of more general theoretical issues. Paradoxically, the formal theories of narrative appear unable to account in consistent and applicable terms for something which can be intuitively understood. Furthermore, the case of a frame narrative and Nelles's, internally consistent in its theoretical logic, deconstruction of this notion seems to illustrate a clash between two approaches to the objectives and procedures of a theory of narrative texts. Is the purpose of narrative poetics to provide a set of terms whereby we can make meaningful statements about texts and the elements of their structure, pointing out and categorising similarities as well as differences between them? Or should it rely on the internal logic of theoretical propositions, even though this logic produces conclusions which cannot really be employed in the description of actual narrative texts? The obvious answer to these questions is that a well-constructed poetics, or a mere definition of some textual element, should combine applicability with internal consistency and clarity. But the example of a frame narrative demonstrates that it is not necessarily an easy task. Perhaps the solution to this



dilemma is to accept the inherent fuzziness of such categories as a frame narrative or a narrator. Elements of narrative poetics as they are, they seem to lack absolute formal criteria determining their application. Paradoxically, their usage in analytical (and theoretical) practice seems to provide the best basis for the understanding of their meaning and application. Even a cursory look at studies devoted to narrative structures will reveal that there exists a tacit agreement—based on the intuitive understanding of the terms, perhaps—that categories of a narrator or a frame narrative are not really applicable to any instance of a fictional character's words being directly quoted, even though the borderline between a character who may be called a narrator and a character who may not is not as clear-cut as one might wish.

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