
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF PLOT IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *AND THEN THERE WERE NONE*: A NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACH

Sayyed Rahim Moosavinia¹

Associate Professor at the Department of English language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.

Alirezakhaleghpanah² (Corresponding Author)

Adjunct Professor at the Department of English language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Yasuj University, Yasuj, Iran.

Abstract

The present study is to investigate the effects of readers' past personal and social experiences on the development of narrative plot in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. It is suggested that both plot and events are ultimately readers' constructs. In other words, the readers' experience of the narrative events and plot (i.e., story and discursive features, respectively) seems to control and channel both the narrative content and expression, or the fiction (i.e., what is told) and the narration (i.e., the telling). Assuming plot and events closely interrelated, plot is largely defined as a sequence of logically (or better causally) connected events and coherent characters providing narrative scheme and discursive mechanisms. This traditional definition can best be understood in terms of the notion of story, which is assumed to represent the narrative content or chronological array of the narratorial events. Such classical definitions of story

and plot cannot be satisfactorily mapped onto the psycho-narratological and psychoanalytical insights concerning the active part of the readers in construction and completion of the narrative expressiveness and discourse (i.e., plot). Both plot and story are indeed ineluctably textual properties, and thus they can be internalized and signified through the readers' sensory experiences.

Keywords: Discursiveness, Text, Author, Sympathy, Reader

As a challenge for Structuralism, with insistence on mere interrelations to understand pre-created structures, Hermeneutics asserted that readers are necessary for meaning formation. According to Bo Petterson structuralist

RESEARCH ARTICLE

narratology and twentieth-century hermeneutics, then have different historical and theoretical foundations. The one has primarily formal interests, the other broadly interpretive ones. The one has positivist roots the other ontological ones which—in part due to an emphasis on the historical situations of readers—were bound to lead to interpretive relativism. (Heinen & Sommer, 2009, p. 12)

As reader's identification with the narrator can be classified into five distinct categories of "associative, admiring, sympathetic, cathartic and ironic" (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003, p. 85), the present study is to hypothesize that textual features and reader effects are thoroughly projected onto one another. In other words, textual content of any literary product is reasonably capable of inviting and exciting readers to shape a mental image of the narrated events in proportion to their real-world fears, hopes, beliefs, sorrows, happiness and speculations. Readers may show sympathetic behaviors towards ascertain character in a story so that the character is perceived to have something in common. In the considered novel, *And Then There Were None*; for example, Mr. Justice Wargrave is normatively represented in a way that he is more probable to invoke the readers' sympathy with the narrator's "personal resonance when the reader is reminded of personal experiences from the past in which he had

an active role" (Seilman& Larsen, 1989, p. 165).The selected narrative text seems to produce increased reminding in the readers since it entails the associative and thus the active participation of the readers in meaning formation so that the corresponding crime mystery can best be grasped and dissolved.

As said before, the notion of sympathy describes a case, where the readers are assumed to share in the emotions, thoughts, and actions of a certain fictional character. "Narratorial implicatures" (Mullins & Dixon, 2007, p. 35) paves the way for production of sympathy in the narrator through attribution of the readers' knowledge and experience to the narrator; as at the end of the novel, Mr. Wargrave gives a description of how he chose his victims:

But-incongruous as it may seem to some-I was restrained and hampered by my innate sense of justice. The innocent must not suffer. It was a doctor to whom I was talking... And he instanced a particular case-that of an old lady, a patient of his who had recently died... He was, he said, himself convinced that her death was due to the withholding of a restorative drug by a married couple who attended on her and who stood to benefit...(His description of recognizing Mr. and Mrs. Rogers) During the time I was in a nursing home I collected the case of Dr. Armstrong – a violently teetotal sister who attended on me being

RESEARCH ARTICLE

anxious to prove to me the evils of drink by recounting to me a case many years ago in hospital when a doctor under the influence of alcohol had killed a patient on whom he was operating. (Christie, 1987, p. 247)

In spite of the fact that, in our considered novel, the narrator underscores his innate sense of justice and thus acquits the innocent from any criminal charges, the judge does not bother himself to prove the charges which strangers attribute to the victims, and thus unwittingly challenges the narrator's attitude. However, under the assumption of the narrative cooperation, the readers will generally presume that the narrator's attitude is reasonable and that the narrator is providing sufficient information for the reader to understand that attitude. Resultantly, inferences are drawn by the readers to address the said inconsistency, and so they seek to imagine and participate in the experiences and situations, which are a verification of the narrator's successes and failures.

In view of the aforementioned, it can be here suggested that the narrative experiences of the plot and story events are finally sourced by the readers' sensations and thoughts. By this, the present study is not to totally dispense with the authorial intention, but rather it is here hypothesized that the authorial content of any given text is just an intermediating position towards the ultimate discursiveness in the narrative

text. Fotis Jannidis and Booth; for instance, have something in common in saying "return of the author" and "implied author" (Fluderink, 2009, p. 14). In fact; from the emergence of New Historicism up to now, the author has been accounted as a representative of intellectual institutions ruling society or, in a word, ideology. Therefore, readers are given privilege of taking further and farther steps in the process of meaning formation while they are permanently ushered by the incessant presence of the covert and overt textual signs and features.

Our recent hypothesis seems to have something in common with the ideas suggested by Mark Currie under the notions of dualities and unconscious self-consciousness as follows:

As Paul de Man and others illustrate, one of the features of contemporary narrative criticism is to disassociate the term 'allegory' from authorial intention. I do not know whether Stevenson carefully plotted this collision of dualities for the purpose of making his narrative as Janus-faced as Jekyll and Hyde, as a kind of critical self-consciousness. Perhaps the idea, from the previous paragraph, of an unconscious self-consciousness should act as a warning that the idea of self-consciousness cannot really be sustained. It describes too many different levels of the logic of narration: the idea that

RESEARCH ARTICLE

identity is narrative in form, the idea of reference to the self as if to another, the possibility of authorial intended narrative self-consciousness and now the possibility that it is the narrative itself which has this consciousness and not any of the people, internal and external, involved with it. But I want to keep it exactly because it encompasses the characters, the narrator, the author, the reader and the narrative itself, to describe a situation in narrative which should not be thought of as a carefully plotted authorial intention but one which is produced by the unavoidable collision of these levels. (Currie, 1998, p. 121)

According to John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist at the University of Washington, “Our senses evolved to work together — vision influencing hearing, for example — which means that we learn best if we stimulate several senses at once” (Medina, 2009, p. 219). So it could be said that the readers’ sensual experiences, as well as their interests and emotions, also provide an effective tool for construction of the narrative plot. However, our argument is that readers’ input data of any kind and of any quantity need to be enlightened and reemphasized through the process of plot construction by the textual collectivity and tacit consciousness. This is not to merely take a radically formalist approach to the problem. The intention here is to design a

psycho narratological framework based on the notion of the interaction-in-talk, which evolves the narratorial and authorial events in light of the idiosyncrasies and collectivities of the readers who are presumed to perform some normatively creative processes of identification. In this context, textual properties are also of great importance. The textual contents should grip the reader and carry him or her forward. Psycho narratively viewed, these textual features are intended to invoke the readers to construct the final expressivity of the literary narrative. This fictional expressivity is tantamount to the realization of the narrative discursiveness (i.e., plot construction) on the part of the readers.

Understanding and identifying with the causal actions within any given plot is not just a matter of pursuing chain of events. In other words, disentangling different lines of causality in the narrative actions cannot be accomplished just by taking account of the textual features of the narrated events. Although both plot and story are indeed textual properties and hence associated with the narrated content, readers can inspire further meanings to the said content through their adoption of different levels of knowledge and understanding. Resultantly, due to the readers’ involvement, the narrated world of textual events evolves into a narrating world of expressiveness or discursiveness. Therefore, a fictionally presented series of

RESEARCH ARTICLE

events that has been integrated to form an action should be appreciated as an aesthetic, ideological, and intentional experiment. In brief, it is both an aesthetic product and a discursive construct, which can be verified for both authors and readers fictional endeavors. As suggested by Jan Christoph Meister:

Even a so-called minimal story requires the reader who wishes to construct an action to take into account various types of world knowledge in order to resolve inferences and find a plausible way of handling inconsistencies or contradictions at the level of basic events. Reading and reconstructing an action that is the appropriate equivalent of a narrated story is far more complex than we might suppose, and, particularly when understood as a hermeneutic process, it turns out to be based on implicit presuppositions which we normally ignore. (Meister, 2003, ps. 25,26)

It can be here suggested that different readers of any given literary product might reconstruct the fictional event complexes in two distinct ways as follows. One way is to consider an empirical and intentional concept of the plot constructed based on the real world of human experience, whereas the second approach is to assume “an aesthetic concept of action in which events are not reconstructed in terms of the motivations and goals of their agents but by necessity interpreted *ex post facto* from an external

perspective” (Meister, 2003, p. 33). Moreover, textual productivity can successfully pave the way for the development of the literary reader’s plot constructions. However, the aforesaid hypothesis is different from the so-called story grammars, which indeed exaggerate and overemphasize the textual underpinnings and functionalities (i.e., the grammatical functions and indexes) of all narrative event complexes, involving both fictional (i.e., story) and narratorial (i.e., plot) structures.

In spite of the fact that any given narrative plot can be managed and directed by the narrating agency of the story narrator, textual features also provide some built-in mechanisms for autonomous growth of the plot and discursive events. A narrative is mentally detectable only when it is totally “coherent and in the actual act of plotting” (Bamberg, De Fina &Schiffrin, 2007, p. 5).These innate textual potentialities are connected together to achieve the so called coherence by the real readers, who may or may not be affected by the author’s or narrator’s intentions or acts of storytelling. By so doing, the readers undertake to change the told of the plot into the telling of the plot. If the plot structure is merely designated to the story world, then a forthcoming problem is to distinguish the appropriate events among a network of parallel actions and subplots for the said plot construction. Therefore, it seems

RESEARCH ARTICLE

justifiable to move from a dominantly text-centered theory of plot to using a reader-response model to capture the complex procedures of plot comprehension. By this, a systematic connection between poetics and rhetoric is meant, in other words, between the aesthetics of production and the aesthetics of effect. As an attempt to consider the aforesaid synthetic combined perspective; Jan Christoph Meister, under the assumption of a constructivist narratology, postulated that:

True interdisciplinary models of this kind — and the present study does not claim to be among them — show clearly that we have to do more than taxonomically define a descriptive terminology if we are to turn a descriptive narratological model into a constructive model of a cognitive process. At least an equal amount of effort must be put into accurately modeling the separate stages of the process in which the descriptive terms are practically applied. This is the particularly true if our ultimate aim is to convert the descriptive model into a concrete program (i.e. a sequence of systematically executed heuristic and classificatory instructions). [...] However, narratology and literary criticism are concerned primarily with texts which contain a narrative representation of fictional events, where normative classification in this manner is not possible — it would violate the fundamental hermeneutic assumption that fictional

literary texts can be produced, and must be received, without relying on unambiguous preferentiality. As a key principle of aesthetic production and reception, referential ambiguity is therefore both a requirement and a limitation of practical implementation. (Meister, 2003, p. 209)

An important issue in narrative studies is to describe the readers' interaction with the plot. Most often than not, it is said that plot is a reader's construct rather than a textual arrangement or authorial property. This is due to the dynamic characteristic of the reading process, which gives the readers certain degrees of freedom. Perceived by the readers, narrative stories can ultimately evolve into complete discursiveness based on the reader's mental interaction and sympathy with the fictional agents and narrative situations. As suggested by Rimmon-Kennan, "the story is abstracted by the reader, and characters are constructed by the reader from various indications dispersed along the text-continuum" (Kenan, 2005, p. 123). Thus, the present study is to suggest that reader's psychonarratological sense of plot, guided by various textual and authorial implications, might result in identification of the narrative actions, which is attained based on the words of the text as well as the narrator's mediating and discursive act of storytelling.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

As said before, readers are assumed to construct and comprehend the narrative discourse and plot through the mediating act of the fictional narrator and characters, which are designed to mark the fictional actions and pave the way for a better understanding of the narrative causality (i.e., causes and relations of the fictional events). As textual features, these mediating agents or actants are in the service of the ultimate act of reading story, which is to be performed through the behavioral and cognitive responses and experiences of the actual readers. As Halliday says, there is a social pattern of language choices based on which, a speaker has certain expectations about what the other interlocutor would utter in a conversation. (Muntigel, 2004, p. 50)Based on the above statements, it can be suggested that causality is indeed a construct of the reader's involvement with the story world. Text can only provide hints and implicit indications for the reader's explicit generation of discourse causality. So there must be a potential relationship between two events that may or may not be causal depending on the assumptions used by the readers for the narrative plot analysis. In this regard, the following excerpt from Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* can be used as an example:

Young Marston was a fairly reckless car driver-had his license endorsed twice and he ought to have been prohibited from

driving, in my opinion. That's all there is to him. The two names John and Lucy Combes were those of two kids he knocked down and killed near Cambridge. Some friends of his gave evidence for him and he was let off with a fine. (Christie, 1987, p. 239)

A likely causal inference in this case is that the authority's neglect on having Marston's driving license prohibited was the cause of John and Lucy Combes deaths. The reader's inference is, of course, based on his or her awareness of this social background that the authorities punish those who violate the driving laws. Characters' goals could also be causes; their goals are internal, psychological events that provide a cause of other sub-goals and events in the story world. Therefore, in the novel, Mr. Wargrave's goal is to punish the murderers on whom the law has failed to touch. During his dealing with his planning his victims' death, he changes sub-goals from killing Mrs. Rogers to fooling Dr. Armstrong and making the noose for Claythorne.

As said before, plot is cognitively and narrative structured by the reader's creative imagination. Reader is presumed to elicit textual (story) features, combine them with the attitudes and discourses of the narratorial actants, and finally integrate them into his or her real-world perceptions and experiences. To this end, the reader actively participates in real-like

RESEARCH ARTICLE

conversations with all possible speech-agents and speech positions (i.e., discourses) in the literary product. Accordingly, plot features can also be recognized through the discourses involved. Bortolussi and Dixon defined two textual features for plot in the discourse. The first is called “epistemic features” (Bortolussi‘et al.’ 2003, p. 123). These features indicate what the narrator knows or believes about the events and plans in the story world. Sometimes epistemic features take the form of explicit evaluations of those events. For example, the following excerpt from Agatha Christie’s novel is highly illuminative:

General Macarthur shouted: "A pack of damn lies! Slander!" Vera cried out: "It's iniquitous!" Her breath came fast. "Wicked!" Rogers said hoarsely: "A lie-a wicked lie . . . we never did-neither of us." Anthony Marston growled: "Don't know what the damned fool was getting at!" The upraised hand of Mr. Justice Wargrave calmed the tumult. He said, picking his words with care.... (Christie, 1987, p. 55) The narrator, here, describes the event of “protesting” done by the characters by verbs “shout”, “cry out” and “growl” and the adverb “hoarsely” which denote the internal tension of the characters and the fact that they feel somehow guilty under the accusations. On the other hand, the narrator implies Mr. Wargrave’s calmness against the accusation, when he

says that the judge “picked his words with care”.

The second is “Index features” (Bortolussi‘et al.’ 2003, p. 124), indicating what the narrator expects the reader to know or understand concerning the plot. From the beginning of Christie’s novel, the narrator through different methods informs the reader that the judge is a super secretive man, Lombard a curious and intelligent one, Marston a playboy, and Miss Brent and Macarthur with military department. Consequently; in chapter three after the guests have refreshed spirits from the boredom of the long journey and begun to talk to each other with more freedom and intimacy the narrator says:

Mr. Justice Wargrave, mellowed by the excellent port, was being amusing in caustic fashion, Dr. Armstrong and Tony Marston were listening to him. Miss Brent chatted to General Mac arthur, they had discovered some mutual friends. Vera Claythorne was asking Mr. Davis intelligent questions about South Africa. Mr. Davis was quite fluent on the subject. Lombard listened to the conversation. Once or twice he looked up quickly, and his eyes narrowed. Now and then his eyes played round the table, studying the others. (Christie, 1987, p. 37) In this excerpt, the narrator makes use of the phrase “caustic fashion” for the judge because he expects

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the reader to get the notion that the judge is so mysterious, describes Marston as listening to what the “mellowed” and intoxicated judge says because he supposes the reader realizes that Marston is silly, says that Miss Brent and the General, in spite of age difference, have found pleasure in talking to each other. The narrator wants the reader to have remembered Miss Brent’s military bringing up under her father’s strict discipline as well as her disapproval of “The present generation being shamelessly lax-in their carriage, and in every other way”. The last two sentences about Lombard are also index features because the narrator expects the reader to know why Lombard’s eyes were scrutinizing everything while his ears were involved in listening to the conversation.

It is assumed that just gathering textual clues from the text for plot planning and construction is insufficient, and rather the readers commonly collect information on the textual properties based on the same processes used for real people. In general, readers assume the fictional narrator and characters as their real-world conversational interlocutors. This assumption is of great importance in the understanding of the reader’s processing of the literary narrative plot since the narrator and characters in the story world are indeed actants of the narrative causality – which is to be finally detected and characterized by the reader. Variations in the speech position

or attitude of the said narratorial actants may result in significant changes in the causal relations between the fictional events, and hence the reader’s generation of the narrative plot as well as the discursive outcome of the narration may drastically change. Regarding the novel, the textual speech position, which shows to be in close affinity with the attitudes of Mr. Judge Wargrave, appears to remain unchanged throughout the story up to the moment when he finally reveals himself. However, it should also be noted that the traces of variations in Wargrave’s intangible narrative agency might be evident from the first for any vigilant reader.

On the other hand, the readers’ perceptions and experiments are also needed to be taken into account in order to show how readers construct plans of plot and make identifications in association with the perceptual information in the text. As stated before, readers are not always in direct connection with the occurrences in the world of the story, but rather they are obliged to extract the narrative implications based on the attitudes and ideologies of the fictional narrator. Sometimes, the readers are invited by the narrator to draw inferences concerning the causal series of events in the narration. However, these ideas and attitudes are not always clear throughout the text. Besides, some textual implications might seem irrelevant to the current speech position or message of the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

novelistic narrator. The following excerpt from the novel is an example:

General Macarthur looked out of the carriage window. The train was just coming into Exeter where he had to change. Damnable, these slow branch line trains! This place, Indian Island, was really no distance at all as the crow flies. He hadn't got it clear who this fellow Owen was. A friend of Spooft Laggard's, apparently-and of Johnny Dyer's. (Christie, 1987, p. 9)

The fact that "The train was just coming into Exeter where he had to change" and the general was angry with that "Damnable, these slow branch line trains" do not have an obvious relationship to the message the narrator appears to convey, but it could easily have some impact on the reader's interpretation of the situation in the story world. However, under most circumstances, such information is processed only in the service of understanding the narrator. That is, the reader is generally interested in what the narrator is trying to say, and if such details are not relevant to that understanding they may have little direct impact on the reader's constructions.

Narrator's attitude and discourse provide the readers with a straightforward access not only to the authorial world of the narrated but also to a more imaginative and discursive world of the narrating. In other

words, narrator acts as a transitional agent, who is to evolve the reader and the text from the conventional level of the told (i.e., fiction or story) to the more revolutionary world of the telling (i.e., the narration, plot, or discourse). On the other hand, narrative schemes and structures employed by fictional narrator and characters exert effects on the readers' strategies of plot construction. Similarly, these narrative plans and structures are more recognizable in terms of the discourse provided by the narrator rather than the characters' behaviors in the world of the fiction. An example would suffice to demonstrate the abovementioned hypotheses. In the novel when accusations are declared every character denies the charges but the way in which the narrator shows them defending themselves, thinking, talking with others and so on, invites the reader not to believe the characters, to know that they are lying. These excerpts are from the time after the murder of Tony Marston.

"Vera Claythorne lay in bed, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling. The light beside her was on. She was frightened of the dark. "Hugo... Hugo . . . Why do I feel you're so near to me tonight" (Christie, 1987, p. 75)? The narrator shows Vera Claythorne as tense, frightened, and extremely in need of her lost lover to take refuge in him.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DR. ARMSTRONG was dreaming . . . It was very hot in the operating room. . . Surely they'd got the temperature too high? The sweat was rolling down his face. His hands were clammy. Difficult to hold the scalpel firmly. . . How beautifully sharp it was. (Christie, 1987, p. 77) By the words "hot", "operating room", "sweat" and the paradoxical phrase "beautifully sharp", the narrator invites the reader to suspect the doctor's honesty. When the doctor and Mr. Rogers come to the dead body of Mrs. Rogers, the doctor trying to find the reason of her death asks the husband: "Did she sleep well?" and the narrator continues: "Now Rogers' eyes evaded his. The man's hands came together and turned and twisted easily. He muttered. "She didn't sleep extra well-no"" (Christie, 1987, p. 77). Such narrative shows that the deceased had difficulty sleeping because of letting the poor old lady, who had employed them to take care of her, die. When the ruling atmosphere under the attempt on the part of the narrator is that of murder and the reader is directed to believe that Mrs. Rogers has been killed, the narrator presents a scene of self-deceiving of two characters; an action which is a confirmation of their being guilty. Thus, after

Vera said: "She was a very nervous-looking creature. And she had a shock last night. It might have been heart failure, I suppose?" Dr. Armstrong said drily: "Her heart certainly failed to beat-but what

caused it to fail is the question." and suddenly Emily Brent ejaculates: "Conscience!" Armstrong turned to her. "What exactly do you mean by that, Miss Brent?" Emily Brent, her lips tight and hard, said: "You all heard. She was accused, together with her husband, of having deliberately murdered her former employer-an old lad," "I think that that accusation was true... She literally died of fear.". (Christie, 1987, p. 7) Accordingly, these women try to disperse the notion of murder which is driving them mad.

Based on the aforementioned, it can be concluded that fictional narrator plays a key role in the reader's perception of events. Furthermore, as our theoretical results show, the narrator acts as a transitional agent, who is to move both the reader and the text from the conventional level of the told (i.e., fiction or story) to the more revolutionary world of the telling (i.e., the narration, plot, or discourse). This result is in agreement with the recent hypotheses in the narratology such as the unread ability and undesirability of literature at large; as proposed by the post-structuralists' or deconstructionists' theories. Besides, seen from a psycho narratological perspective, our obtained results demonstrate the dominant role of the readers' empirical senses and perceptions and their aesthetic responses in furthering and reconstructing the causal relations between the event sequences in the fiction. In this context, it

RESEARCH ARTICLE

can be suggested that the discourse of any narrative plot can extend as far as the readers are actively participating in real-like communicational situations and cognitive negotiations with the textual (story) positions indicants.

References:

- Bamberg, M. De Fina, A. & Schiffrin, D. (2007). *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Bortolussi, M. & Dixon, P. (2003). *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Christie, A. (1987). *And Then There Were None*. New York: Penguin Pub.
- Currie, Mark. (1998). *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Dixon, P. & Mullins, B. (2007). Narratorial Implicatures: Readers Look to the Narrator to Know What is Important. *Poetics*, 35 (4-5), 262-276.
- Fludernik, M. (2009). *An Introduction to Narratology*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Heinen, S & Sommer, R. (2009). *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter
- Medina, J. (2009). *Brain rules*. Seattle, WA: Pear Press.
- Meister, J. C. (2003) *Computing Action: A Narratological Approach*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Muntigl, P. (2004). *Narrative Counselling Social and linguistic processes of change*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Rimmon, K. S. (1983). *Narrative Fiction*. New York: Routledge Pub.
- Seilman, U & Larsen, S, F. (1989). Personal resonance to literature: A study of reminders while reading. *Poetics*, 18 (1-2), 165-177.