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Searching Focalization in *The Prussian Officer* by D. H. Lawrence

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Abstract

In this paper I will try to analyse the underlying meaning of the short story *The Prussian Officer* from the level of narration and focalization. Narration is the process of narrating a story mediated through the voice of the narrator (identified as who speaks?) And Focalization is viewpoint or the perception through which the events are being reported (identified as who sees?). The novel focuses on the suffering and self-deterioration of a young soldier by his captain who seeks forbidden sexual admiration that makes the soldier victim to the captain's sexual frustration. The narrator allows readers to learn the minds of characters from shifting the internal focalization simultaneously. Under the light of Narrative theory of Gerard Genette *Narrative Discourse* this paper will focus on how the narrative information filters through the shifting focalization between the two main characters in the story and their repressed conscious struggle and how this influences the narration. All the narratological models prepared and presented for analysis of the text based on the basic difference between story and discourse. On this basis an author can create multi-layers to present his story in different aspect. Since, the story remains same and is independent of its narrative form mainly discourse therefore, we may report same course of event in more than one version or point of view. On this basis the original chain of events presented through the discourse may have several different ways other than one single perspective. Gerard Genette named it *focalization* and discussed in detail in his work *Narrative Discourse*.

Keywords: Narrative, Focalization, Discourse, Narrator, Frustration

Focalization is a narrative technique in a particular view point from which the story is told. This viewpoint may belong either to the narrator or any of the character or one from outside the characters world. If the narrative focalizes through a chosen character then it reflects the perception of that character. It is the complete choice of the narrator that whether he limits his focalization to one or many characters and thus presenting a different perspective of a single occurrence. The analysis of focalization in the fiction has an aim to differentiate between various types of narrative transmissions: Does the narrator have access to one or more

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characters inner thoughts? Does the narrator remain covert (hidden) or he marks his presence in between the happenings through his comments or addressing directly to the narratee.

The Prussian Officer is the first story in the collection of 'The Prussian Officer and other stories' published by D H Lawrence by Duckworth in London in 1914. The story focuses its narrative on the relationship of a captain and his orderly. The orderly is young and an innocent soldier who falls victim to the sexual frustration and forbidden admirations of his commanding officer. "To his orderly, he was at first cold and just and indifferent: he did not fuss over trifles" (5).

The narrator summarizes the past of the captain that how he has wasted his youth in gambling and has military career as the only left option. He is still single and has always taken on a mistress because his financial position doesn't allow him. On the other hand the orderly is passionately in relationship with a woman. As soon as captain comes to know this his admiration for the orderly turns into contempt. '*The Captain perceived it, and was mad with irritation*'. (Here the focalizer is captain) The admiration of the officer turns into strong feeling of contempt that results in physical attack on the orderly. '*He felt lost, and dazed and helpless*'. (Here the focalizer is orderly).

This incident leaves the young soldier in void of emotion and a shell for his former self whereas the officer feels great sense of satisfaction. The Prussian captain manifests his desires through his authoritarian position and display of power. This misuse of the authority drove the orderly to take his revenge on the captain by killing him, but he find himself too in state of severe pain of bruises and thirst and he kills himself subsequently. The final chapter shows, the corpses of the captain and his orderly lay side by side.

The narrative of the Prussian officer is strictly limited to third person omniscient narrator; an external narrator who does not belongs to the characters world. The narrator that passes all the information through indirect discourse (reported speech) except at a few places and has full access to the inner feelings, thoughts, dilemma and desire of both the characters. The narrator keeps shifting his narration about the captain's inner thought to the orderly's thought and mind which greatly helps in understanding the kind of trauma the soldier is facing without letting the captain and other servants know and vice versa for the captain.

Once, when a bottle of wine had gone over, and the red gushed out on to the tablecloth, the officer had started up with an oath, and his eyes, bluey like fire, had held those of the confused youth for a moment. It was a shock for the young soldier. He felt something sink deeper, deeper into his soul, where nothing had ever gone before. It left him rather blank and wondering. (6).

The lines above are the inner thoughts of the captain summarised by the narrator to show captains determination. Throughout the narration the reader becomes passive and silent observer of the emotional turmoil that characters goes through but their role is limited to stand and observe their changing psyche.

According to Genette's theory of focalization, there is heterodiegetic narrator (narrator does not belongs to the character's world) but the focalization lies internally within

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the characters. The perception of story telling lies within the captain and his orderly simultaneously. The narrator remains suspended in the background as depersonalized-lacking definable personality but has a distinguished voice and own opinions about characters. The narrator sees through the minds of both characters that helps in recognizing the complexity of the situation in the characters world and allows reader to observe more closely their world. The narrator is free to comment on a situation: “*It was not that the youth was clumsy*” (narrator calls the orderly a youth who is not clumsy but innocent). The way Lawrence has depicted his characters sufferings with employing omniscient single narrator with two different focalizer’s presents very well the discourse on the implications of suffering on humankind.

Order of the story:

According to Gerard Genette, order represents a relation between the arrangement of events in the story and their presentation in the narrative (actual presentation in the plot). It is completely the choice of the narrator that which events he presents first and which he choose to narrate later. Narrator can recount the events in order he wishes to and this variation in the order of events and their presentation has a unique impact on the narrative. This difference in the order of the event sequence has a more clear illustration as follows:

Story – There was a king and a queen. Enemies killed the king and queen died out of grief.

Narrative – The queen died in the grief of the king who was killed by his enemies.

This kind of manipulation in the events order sequence termed as Anachronies, helps yielding a more interesting, surprising and gripping plots. The order of the events in ‘*The Prussian officer*’ begins in the media res telling that the captain and his regiment are marching in their targeted destination. “They had marched more than thirty kilometres since dawn, along the white, hot road where occasional thickets of trees threw a moment of shade, than out into the glare again” (4).

The story begins with above described event without any formal introduction of the characters or their occurring actions unlike a traditional beginning. The narrator’s voice is covert in the background and he begins by unfolding the setting of the tale. Then the narrator becomes focus on the first character by moving towards his present position. “He walked on and on in silence, staring at the mountains ahead, that rose sheer out of the land, and stood fold behind fold, half Earth, half Heaven, the heaven, the banner with slits of soft snow, in the pale, bluish peaks”(4).

The order of events begins by setting of the character’s world and leading towards the actants or characters. No temporal indicators (now, once, then) have been used. So that the readers may freely move their own imagination in order to know the position of actors or the location. But sometimes absence of such temporal indicators (once, now) may also create difficulty in identifying the status of the Anachronies (non-chronological order) in the plot. “He could now walk almost without pain. At the start, he had determined not to limp” (4).

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In above dialogue ‘*now*’ indicates that the event is taking place in the present situation of the story by the character. ‘At the start’ indicates to a thought that occurred in the past to the character. It is called Analepsis, a recount of the past events by narrator in reference to the present situation with the use of temporal indicators like *now*, *once*. The function of the Anachronies is helpful in developing a characters psychology by relating events from his past actions.

The orders of the events are so arranged that the readers are able to realize the psyche and the subconscious of both the characters simultaneously. And thus, this method needs a constantly shifting focalization that creates and develops an equal understanding of the trauma of both characters. It could not have been possible if there would be a fixed focalization through a single character. A behavioural comparison is narrated by the narrator for both captain and his orderly simultaneously defines their nature. “He was a man of passionate temper who had always kept himself suppressed. Whereas the young soldier seems to live out his warm, full nature, to give it off in his very movements, which has a certain zest, such as wild animals have in free movement” (7).

The discourse in the lines above narrates a general nature and behaviour that has been flaunted by captain and orderly publically. It reveals that captain is caged with a lot of rage and egoism that forces him to limit his expressions even in the toughest moment where he tries to hold back “he kept himself hard” On the other hand, the orderly is warm, open and moves freely like wild animals who feel no boundaries neither of his mind nor of the society around. Narrator further compares the growing frustration of captain to reveal that how his unlawful likings are turning into a severe hatred for the orderly.

“The words never pierced to his intelligence,” as the orderly was unable to figure out, the sudden anger, rage and insulting remarks of his master. Though he was extremely disturbed and uncomfortable and abstains from facing the captain yet couldn't come over this circumstance. Terms like confused, shock, uneasiness, blank and wondering have been used to refer the mental uproar of the orderly “Servant’s heart ran hot, and he could not breathe” reinforces the suffocating dominance of captain on the orderly. The final confrontation that takes us to the climax depicts the orderly in his long suppressed desires to react against the captain that leads orderly to kill the captain and eventually he too dies.

The narrative weaves overall a fight between these two opposite forces throughout the strong combat of psyche and mind between the aristocratic captain and his orderly. This leads to destruction as a result of inability to control one’s feeling in the most stressful moment. The gripping plot shows the stressful journey of both the characters in 4 progressive parts symbolising a true tragedy- introduction, exposition, rising action and finally climax.

One more important thing that has been shown in the tale other than the silent conflict going on between the two men is between a contrast in the humans and nature. The dark, greedy, self-centred ambitious egoistic human soul has been contrasted to the natural surrounding many times in the text. This produces a soothing effect amid the stressful agonies and battle of two human souls. “He sat up. Something scuffled. It was a little, brown

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squirrel running in lovely, undulating bounds over the floor, its red tail completing the undulation of its body—and then, as it sat up, furling and unfurling. He watched it, pleased” (24). Nature is eternal and its influence is heaven on humans even in their most traumatic moments nature can have healing power. The unpleasant agonising condition of orderly is compared by the natural surroundings. In the end when the orderly is killing the captain it was a struggle for him, but the ultimate struggle in which he forced all his power and life to overcome his trauma. “He did not relax one hair's breadth, but, all the force of all his blood exulting in his thrust, he shoved back the head of the other man, till there was a little cluck and a crunching sensation”(20). He killed the captain that gave him a great satisfaction as this was his final combat, he thought “It was a pity it was broken”. In *The Prussian captain* narrator plays thus, a very crucial role for the subjective expression of the characters and their conscious. The single voice approaches both the minds simultaneously which is in itself a challenging modernist technique applied by the Lawrence. By the end of the story protagonist become the antagonist and reader finally sympathizes with both the victims as it was only death of two human beings.

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