

## UNRELIABILITY IN THE SHORT STORY “BRIDGE OF MUSIC, RIVER OF SAND” BY WILLIAM GOYEN

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*Abstract: Unreliability is a narratological concept that is gaining more and more popularity in literary studies due to the insights it collocates from different approaches and its increasing use in contemporary literary fiction. The article draws on the multidisciplinary study of unreliability that combines the rhetorical and the cognitive approaches with a view to systematizing the categories and the criteria of unreliability in English literary fiction and identifying the array of discourse markers and clues that signal unreliable narrators. Generalizing from the results in the study of unreliability advanced by Ansgar Nünning, James Phelan, Vera Nünning and Monika Fludernik, the article seeks to analyze the manifestation of unreliability in the short story “Bridge of Music, River of Sand” by W. Goyen. The study focuses on two dimensions of the literary narrative, the narrative content, i.e. story, and the narrative form, also termed discourse, in order to determine the types and means of projecting the unreliable narrator in the selected text as well as the cognitive and epistemic functions of unreliability that impact on the reader’s reception of the content.*

*Keywords: unreliability, unreliable narrator, categories of unreliability, linguistic indicators of subjectivity.*

Unreliability is essentially treated, in its narratological sense, as a feature of narratorial discourse. This category generally combines two perspectives, the rhetorical approach, which regards unreliability as a textual property encoded by the implied author for the implied reader to decode, and the cognitivist approach, which focuses on the interpretative process and considers unreliability as being dependent on actual readers’ divergent readings for its very existence. Wayne C. Booth, the author of the concept under discussion, treats unreliability in relation to the implied author and regards it as the distance between the narrator and the implied author. In Booth’s account, a narrator is “reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (presumably the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not”<sup>1</sup>. The process of detecting unreliability encoded by the implied author in order to create irony determines the reader to experience a distance between the narrator and the implied author. As a result, the reader becomes the implied author’s ally in “judging the narrator”<sup>2</sup>.

In his article “Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches,” Ansgar Nünning insists on the combination of insights offered by rhetorical and cognitive narrative theorists in an attempt to build a more adequate model of unreliability. He emphasizes the role of the reader’s or critic’s schemata, previous conceptual knowledge brought to the text, in perceiving the unreliable

<sup>1</sup> Booth, W.C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. [1961] 1983, p. 158-159.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 304.

narrator. The conceptual framework of the reader or critic may determine them to suspect the trustworthiness of the telling agency. According to the narratologist,

...whether a narrator is regarded as unreliable not only depends on the distance between the norms and values of the narrator and those of the text as a whole (or of the implied author), but also on the distance that separates the narrator's view of the world from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy, which are themselves, of course, subject to change.<sup>3</sup>

The process of detecting unreliability relies on some moral, psychological and linguistic standards, also referred to as "frames of reference for unreliability" by Ansgar Nünning, which are of two types: 1) frames of reference that are the outcome of everyday experience and 2) those that result from knowledge of literary conventions<sup>4</sup>. The first frame stems from the assumption that the text world is an imitation of the real world, thus allowing readers to detect unreliability according to the narrator's behaviour in relation to the norms of that world, such as implicit models of psychological coherence and normal human behaviour. Readers' knowledge of the social, moral, or linguistic norms characterizing the period in which a text was produced are also ascribed to this referential frame. The frames of reference dependent on literary conventions include, after Ansgar Nünning, general literary conventions, conventions and models of literary genres, intertextual frames of reference, stereotyped models of characters and the structure and norms established by the respective work itself<sup>5</sup>.

In various modern and postmodern literary works, in specific circumstances a narrator loses credibility because she or he violates social norms represented in the fictional text. As Monika Fludernik posits, such an unreliable narrator may give a skewed picture of the fictional reality as a result of being obsessed with certain ideas; may reveal her/himself to be an immoral or dishonest person; may turn out to be a naive and unsuspecting party to the events portrayed, lacking any grasp of the story background – in contrast with the reader, who forms an understanding of the situation by inference<sup>6</sup>.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies three main sources of unreliability: the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme<sup>7</sup>, which partly overlap with Monika Fludernik's causes underlying unreliability: it may arise either from "deliberate lying" or from "the narrator's insufficient access to the complete data" or it may form "symptoms of a pathological scenario"<sup>8</sup>.

Ansgar Nünning lists a number of textual clues to unreliability ranging from compositional elements to linguistic expressions of subjectivity that fall into three

<sup>3</sup> NÜNNING, A. "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches." In: J. Phelan & P. J. Rabinowitz (eds.). *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> FLUDERNIK, M. *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> RIMMON-KENAN, S. *Narrative Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 100-102.

<sup>8</sup> FLUDERNIK, M. "Defining (In)Sanity: The Narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the Question of Unreliability." In: W. Grunzweig & A. Solbach (eds). *Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*. 1999, p. 76-77.

categories: intratextual, paratextual, and contextual. The first group of clues covers textual inconsistencies, discrepancies between story and discourse, incongruities within the narrator's discourse, contradictions between their uttered moral views and actual behaviour, inconsistencies caused by multiperspectival accounts of the same event<sup>9</sup>. The makers of linguistic and stylistic evocation of a narrator's subjectivity have been comprehensively systematized by Monika Fludernik in *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*. These linguistic devices cover a range of pragmatic categories of expressivity and syntactic, morphologic, and lexical indicators of subjectivity, such as addressee-oriented and speaker-oriented expressions, exclamations, interjections and sentence modifiers, incomplete sentences, hesitations, repetitions of sentence constituents, speaker-related sentence-modifiers, dialectal morphology and syntactic and lexical peculiarities of the narrator's dialect<sup>10</sup>. The listed signals correlate with the paratextual clues that render "a high degree of emotional involvement (or derangement) of narrators as well as their desire to establish contact with the reader and convince them of the truth of their version of the events"<sup>11</sup>. Contextual signals refer to the relation between the reader's beliefs about the world and the events portrayed in the story. Vera Nünning suggests supplementing the criteria listed above with the analysis of the adequacy of the narrator's behaviour in a given social situation<sup>12</sup>.

The detection of unreliability in a literary text also relies on the reader's awareness of the varied types of unreliability. In this regard, James Phelan's classification offers a systematized manifestation of unreliability that focuses on three axes: the axis of facts, the axis of values or ethics, and the axis of knowledge and perception<sup>13</sup>. He lists six types of unreliability that fall into two larger categories: (1) misreporting, misinterpreting and misevaluating; (2) underreporting, underinterpreting, and underevaluating. The distinction between the "mis-" category and the "under-" category is determined by the contrast between being wrong and being insufficient<sup>14</sup>. This typology stems, in Phelan's view, from the analysis of the "two main variables of the communicative exchange" that occurs among three actants: the implied author, narrator, and authorial audience. The first variable is the axis of communication along which the unreliability takes place, while the second is the variable that indicates if the implied reader needs to question the narrator's perspective or supplement it<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> NÜNNING, A. "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches." In: J. Phelan & P. J. Rabinowitz (eds.), *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> FLUDERNIK, M. *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 226-275.

<sup>11</sup> NÜNNING, V. "Reconceptualising Fictional (Un)reliability and (Un)trustworthiness from a Multidisciplinary Perspective: Categories, Typology and Functions". In: V. Nünning (éd.), *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness. Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/448866?rskey=dRdeNV&result=26> [accessed 18.05.2021]

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> PHELAN, J. *Living to Tell about It*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. P. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem p. 49-53.

<sup>15</sup> PHELAN, J. *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*. The Ohio State University, 2017. p.101.

Based on the insights from psychology, sociology, and linguistics on trust, Vera Nünning devises a typology of unreliability connected with the typology developed by J. Phelan<sup>16</sup>. The first type of unreliability is related to the “product of narration” and deals with the congruity between the narrative discourse and the factuality of the story world. The basic criteria to analyze this type of unreliability include 1) intratextual inconsistencies between the narrator’s discourse and the state of affairs represented in the text and 2) extratextual inconsistencies between the elements of the story world and the world view at the time of writing the story. The second type of unreliability concerns the reporter’s insincerity caused by either delusions or narrator’s deliberate decision to present an inconsistent account of events and functions as a foregrounded cognitive and rhetorical element. The third type of unreliability, in Nünning’s account, is associated with the narrator’s incompetence and possible lack of expertise. His inability to understand and, consequently, to present a plausible account of his feelings and states of affairs can be caused, according to Vera Nünning, by immaturity or lack of general knowledge or by problematic value scheme<sup>17</sup>.

In order to distinguish between James Phelan’s different types of unreliability, Vera Nünning suggests correlating the intratextual signals of unreliability to Paul Grice’s conversational maxims of Quality (truthfulness), Quantity (informativeness), and Manner (clarity, which concerns matters of style and wording) and to Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s relevance theory<sup>18</sup>. The Maxim of Quality is related to the narrator’s sincerity and to the congruity between the facts in the story world and the story uttered by the narrator. Breaches of the Maxim of Quantity are marked by the process of withholding the necessary information or by excessive repetitions of obvious information, the latter being related to Sperber and Wilson’s principle of relevance too. Breaches of the Maxim of Manner may be caused by the narrator’s intention to capture the attention of the narratee and persuade them of the importance of the particular story and can be connected with the emotional involvement of the speaker. At the level of discourse, these breaches are marked by the use of different pragmatic signals, such as frequent reader addresses, rhetorical questions, repeated emphases or explanations aimed at persuading readers of the relevance of the story<sup>19</sup>.

The analysis of unreliability in a particular fictional narrative can be enriched if we correlate the exhaustive typology of unreliability presented above with the dyad of story and discourse proffered by Seymour Chatman in his seminal work under the same title<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, the manifestation of unreliability can be approached on two dimensions of the literary narrative: *the narrative content or story*, and the *narrative form*, also termed *discourse*. In the context of unreliability, *the narrative content*

<sup>16</sup> NÜNNING, V. “Reconceptualising Fictional (Un)reliability and (Un)trustworthiness from a Multidisciplinary Perspective: Categories, Typology and Functions”. In: V. Nünning (éd.), *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness. Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/448866?rskey=dRdeNV&result=26> [accessed 18.05.2021]

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> CHATMAN, S. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978. 277 p.

encompasses various inconsistencies stemming from the narrator's words, beliefs, and actions, whereas the discourse refers the particular linguistic and stylistic choice regarding the textualization of these inconsistencies as well as the stylistic features that signal a high degree of the narrator's emotional involvement determined by their desire to establish contact with the reader and convince them of the truth of their version of the events. Different distortions of the linear presentation of narrative events or inconsistent account of actions are also attributed to the narrative form.

The narratorial discourse in the autodiegetic short story "Bridge of Music, River of Sand" by W. Goyen is characterized by a high degree of unreliability that constitutes a challenge for the reader in terms of text understanding and interpretation. The story focuses on the sentimental trip of a man through home regions after fifteen years away. The narrator functions as a story-internal medium/focalizer that provides a perceptual screen enabling the reader to see fictional events and existents through his subjective prism. The emotions he experiences and the visions he witnesses contradict the reader's world-model and standards of normalcy. Therefore, unreliability in this text stems from a pathological scenario. The nature of the rhetorical device in question, the story content and its linguistic representation ascribe it to the axis of facts and the axis of knowledge and perception. The storyteller sees a naked man "diving from the old railroad trestle" into the damp sand of the dry riverbed. Horrified, he abandons his car and makes his way off the bridge, hurrying to where he can still see the body:

*"...a figure on its knees with its head buried in the sand [...]. And then the figure began to sink as if someone underground were pulling it under. Slowly the stomach, lean and hairy, vanished; then the loins, thighs. The river, which had swallowed half his body, now seemed to be eating the rest of it. For a while the feet lay, soles up, on the sand. And then they went down, arched like a dancer's"<sup>21</sup>.*

In this story the narratorial unreliability is achieved by various intratextual and contextual means. The first element that causes uncertainty and alerts the reader's attention relates to the frames of reference dependent on literary conventions and include a particular type of opening called *etic incipit*<sup>22</sup> that casts the reader into the middle of the action without being provided sufficient information concerning the story events and protagonist. The story begins with a sequence of rhetorical questions, highly emotional, intended to establish a connection with the narratee and, therefore, convince them of the importance on the narrated account:

*Do you remember the bridge that we crossed over the river to get to Riverside? And if you looked over yonder you saw the railroad trestle? High and narrow? Well that's what he jumped off of. Into a nothing river. "River"! I could laugh. I can spit more than runs in that dry bed. [...] That's your remains of the grand old Trinity. Where can so much water go? I at least wish they'd do something about it. But what can they do? What can anybody do? You can't replace a river"<sup>23</sup>.*

<sup>21</sup> GOYEN, W. "Bridge of Music, River of Sand". In: *The Atlantic Monthly*. 1975. Vol. 236, p. 61-63.

<sup>22</sup> FLUDERNIK, M. *An Introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009. p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> GOYEN, W. "Bridge of Music, River of Sand". In: *The Atlantic Monthly*. 1975. Vol. 236, p. 61-63

Formal markers of this type of opening are cataphoric reference or the use of pronouns without antecedents (referentless pronouns), noun phrases with definite articles (familiarizing articles) before any people or objects have been properly introduced by indefinite ones. These are classic device for engaging the reader's attention as they have to piece the connections together, slowly, and deduce who the pronouns *he* in "*Well that's what he jumped off of*" or *they* in "*I at least wish they'd do something about it. But what can they do?*" stand for, what bridge and river the narrator is referring to, and what happened to that river. Unknown information to the reader is presented in the guise of given information with resort to the definite articles. Since the text is devoid of any exposition that would introduce readers to the protagonist's situation, they are compelled to use more than just the text to establish referents; the narrator expects readers to share a world with him irrespective of the text and convince them of the trustworthiness of his implausible story.

Chronology is another element that challenges the truthfulness of the story and, consequently, precludes the coherence of the text. Different forms of *anachrony* employed in the presentation of the story hinder the decoding process and, consequently, call for the reader's judgment and inference. *Repetitive anachrony* is based on the iterative representation of the same event – the initial moment of seeing the naked man dive from the railroad trestle. The second paragraph of the short story contains the first reference to the scene "*I was driving across the old river bridge when I said to myself, wait a minute I believe I see something.*" which recurs in the fourth paragraph "*it was when I was in the middle of this rocking vehicle that seemed like some mad carnival ride that I saw the naked figure diving from the old railroad trestle*"<sup>24</sup>. Completive anachronies present events that are omitted in the primary story line: crossing the old bridge over which the passage was prohibited (the fourth paragraph); driving the car off to the side of the road and getting out of the car to approach the half naked human body after crossing halfway of the "*ghostly thoroughfare*" (the third paragraph); the emotions of horror and bewilderment experienced by the narrator at seeing the scene (the fourth and sixth paragraphs). The discourse that deviates considerably from the chronology of the story postulates an untrustworthy storyteller suffering from memory slips caused by old age or, possibly, by "*a kind of bridge madness*" or "*a vision that sometimes comes from going back to places haunted by deep feeling*"<sup>25</sup>. Hence, depicting repeatedly a scene that contradicts the standards of normality with excessive resort to syntactical deviations, the narrator violates Paul Grice's maxims of Quality, Quantity, and Manner.

The category of modality is another powerful means of supporting unreliability of the narratorial discourse in the story. The storyteller verbalizes the perceptual content and his emotions with constant recourse to perception and epistemic modality systems. As epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

in the truth of a proposition expressed, it perfectly frames the state of uncertainty that characterizes the narrator. Lexical and grammatical means employed in the text convey varying degrees of epistemic commitment to the propositions uttered by the narrator as a result of witnessing the scene of accidental diving. The modalized assertion chiefly realized through modal lexical verbs *"I said to myself, wait a minute I believe I see something"* and modal auxiliaries *"His hands must have cut through the wet sand", "it could also mean that he was a suicide", "it could also mean that nobody else was involved. Or it could mean that I was suffering a kind of bridge madness"*<sup>26</sup> render a medium degree of commitment to the factuality of propositions. Perceptual modality predicated on the reference to narrator's perception, normally visual perception, conveys doubt, surprise, and perplexity. Basically, it is attained in the short story through modal lexical verbs of perception *"everything else seemed unnatural", "it seemed out of place", "The river, which had swallowed half this body, now seemed to be eating the rest of it"* and comparative structures that contain counterfactual conditionals *"a figure on its knees with its head buried in the sand, as if it had decided not to look at the world any more. And then the figure began to sink as if someone underground were pulling it under"*<sup>27</sup>.

The features of unreliability considered above are backed up by syntactic indicators of subjectivity also regarded as writer's idiosyncratic features due to their constant recurrence in "Bridge of Music, River of Sand". The most conspicuous of these expressive means are exclamations containing interjections to express disbelief, astonishment, and fright coupled with questions-in-the-narrative *"and when I got closer, my Lord Jesus God Almighty", "Christ, what was I caught up in?"*. Besides the function of expressing the speaker's emotions, these indicators are aimed at making phatic contact with the narratee. Other signs of rhetorical and emotional discourse are inconsistent syntax, i.e. instances of elliptical questions, repetitions of sentence constituents or repetitions of syntactical patterns: *"Who was the man drowned in a dry river? eaten by a dry river? devoured by sand? How would I explain, describe what had happened? I'd be judged to be out of my senses. And why would I tell somebody – the police or – anybody?"*<sup>28</sup>.

Based on Vera Nünning's<sup>29</sup> account of functions reliability exerts upon the reader and its manifestation in William Goyen's story, one can deduce that unreliability fulfills the cognitive and the epistemic functions in "Bridge of Music, River of Sand". The cognitive function is determined by the reader's flexibility solicited in the continuous process of drawing inferences, creating impressions, formulating hypotheses and confirming them with regard to numerous cases of achrony, disjointed narratorial discourse or insufficient exposition elements that characterize the etic opening of the story under analysis. The epistemic function of unreliability is marked by the breaches in the standards of normalcy that the story exhibits, i.e. how can a dry river devour a

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> NÜNNING, V. "Reconceptualising Fictional (Un)reliability and (Un)trustworthiness from a Multidisciplinary Perspective: Categories, Typology and Functions". In: V. Nünning (éd.), *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness. Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/448866?rskey=dRdeNV&result=26> [accessed 18.05.2021]

man? It compels the reader to constantly interact with the text by comparing their knowledge and experience of the world to the truth of the world depicted in the story. However, one cannot deny another purpose of unreliability considered by James Phelan<sup>30</sup>, i.e. to allow insight into the mind of the narrator controlled by delusions or emotions or to function as metaphors.

### Conclusions

Detecting unreliability and solving the inconsistencies posed by unreliable narrators in the literary fiction depend on the reader's awareness of various types of unreliability as well as the textual clues and frames of reference involved in projecting unreliable narrators. Knowledge of these aspects contributes to the actualization of the reader's divergent reading, indispensable in tracking unreliability of the narratorial discourse.

Having analyzed the manifestation of unreliability in William Goyen's short story "Bridge of Music, River of Sand", it can be concluded that the rhetorical and cognitive device under consideration belongs to the category of misreporting in recounting the narrator's experience and perception determined by his pathological state or deliberate choice.

On the dimension of the narrative content, unreliability is achieved by means of temporal discontinuities, arbitrary chronology of events, incoherent narratorial presentation of story actions and specific plot compositional elements, such as *in medias res* incipit. With regard to the narrative form or discourse, the scale of expressive elements that mark unreliability in the short story "Bridge of Music, River of Sand" include lexical and syntactic signals denoting a high level of the narrator's emotional involvement: the category of modality, exclamations, and unorthodoxies of syntax.

As a rhetorical and cognitive category, unreliability in the given text, attained by the unusual plot design and deviation from the norms of textual composition that challenge the canons of text coherence, requires a significant amount of the reader's participation in the sense-making process of text comprehension.

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<sup>30</sup> PHELAN, J. "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of Lolita." In: *Narrative*, vol. 15, no.2, 2007, p. 226.

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