

'Objective' versus 'Subjective' Perception of Time in Literary Text: The Point of View of a Mature Female and an Adolescent Girl

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This paper is an attempt to demonstrate how the theories of binary oppositions and narrative modes in fiction can be used in analyzing 'perspective' in fiction with the purpose of singling out discourse elements "responsible" for establishing different points of view in the text continuum. The text of Kate Chopin's story *Ripe Figs* serves as an example of differentiating between a seemingly 'objective' perception of time by a mature woman and a 'subjective' perception of time in the mind of an adolescent girl.

The principle of binary oppositions as a universal means of cognition was discovered and widely used in the Humanities (especially in Linguistics) in the 20th century. The binary nature of human cognition is determined by the physiological features: the human brain functions as a unity of the left and right sides, people have two ears, two eyes, two legs and arms, etc. Thus, humans perceive the world in the binary way: life-death, happiness-unhappiness, left-right, good-bad, present-past, here-there, yes – no, etc. The left member of the opposition is considered to be marked positively (as the carrier of a certain marker), while the right member is marked negatively (as lacking this marker). Oppositions presuppose certain common ground between the members for the comparison to be made possible as well as certain differentiating features (positive and negative markers).

The theory of narrative modes (speech genres in fiction) distinguishes three varieties of text organization: narration proper, description and evaluation (alterna-

tively known as commentary, comment, consideration, argumentation). Narrative contexts are dynamic and have to do with *what happened* in the story. Description is static and the questions associated with it are who, what, where and when. Evaluative fragments render the ideas pertaining to the explanation of why and what for the narrative events happened. They are also “responsible” for rendering emotions, attitudes, feelings and reasons behind the facts, events and characters. In other words, narrative and descriptive contexts carry factual information (who, what, where, when, how) in the text continuum, while evaluative contexts provide non-factual information (why, what for, what kind of).

When dealing with a three-member system, it is necessary to reduce it to a binary opposition by uniting two elements and contrasting them to the third. In the three-member system of narrative modes the following oppositions are possible: narration-description VS evaluation, narration-evaluation VS description, description-evaluation VS narration.

The first opposition (narration-description VS evaluation) seems to be the most appropriate for the purposes of practical application for text interpretation. The idea of uniting narration and description and contrasting them to evaluation is supported by the fact that when “translating” a text into some other media (e.g. fiction into film), descriptive and narrative fragments are easily rendered by the camera while evaluative contexts can either be rendered indirectly or with the help of the “voice over” technique.

The text of *Ripe Figs* is given in full below. The textual fragments which represent evaluation within the text continuum are highlighted:

(1) Maman-Nainaine said that when the figs were ripe Babette might go to visit her cousins down on the Bayou-Laforche where the sugar cane grows. **Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was.**

(2) **It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait**, for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet, and the figs were like little hard, green marbles.

(3) But warm rains came along and plenty of strong sunshine, and **though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew was hot summertime.** Every day Babette danced out to where the fig-trees were in a long line against the fence. She walked slowly beneath them, carefully peering between the gnarled, spreading branches, but each time she came disconsolate away again. What she saw there finally was something that made her sing and dance the whole long day.

(4) When Maman-Nainaine sat down in her stately way to breakfast, the following morning, her muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face, Babette approached. She bore a dainty porcelain platter, which she set down before her godmother. It contained a dozen purple figs, fringed around with their rich, green leaves.

(5) "Ah", said Maman-Nainaine arching her eyebrows, "how early the figs have ripened this year!"

(6) "Oh", said Babette. " **I think they have ripened very late.**"

(7) "Babette," continued Maman-Nainaine, as she peeled the very plumpest figs with her pointed silver fruit-knife, "you will carry my love to them all down on Bayou-Laforche. And tell your Tante Frosine I shall look for her at Toussaint – when the chrysanthemums are in bloom."

This story adequately represents the amount and correlation of the descriptive and narrative contexts on the one hand and evaluative contexts on the other: most of the text is usually description-narration. The highlighted fragments are defined as evaluative because they serve as the carriers of factual information in the text (marked negatively in relation to description-narration). The sentence "Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was» is a kind of commentary to the previous sentence which carries factual information. The sentence: "It seemed to Babette a very long time to wait", contains a verb of sense perception *seem*, which makes it the carrier of non-factual, intellectual type of information. The clause: "... *and though Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird, the first thing they both knew it was not summer time*" contains tropes (similes and allusions) and the verb of sense perception *know*, which mark the type of information rendered by it as emotive-impressive. The sentence "*Oh... I think they have ripened very late*" also contains the verb (*think*), which describes the character's thoughts. The sentence that precedes it: "*Ah... how early the figs have ripened this year!*" is a mere statement of facts and is considered to be description-narration.

The textual fragments, which represent evaluation, are contrasted in this story to the descriptive-narrative contexts semantically. Evaluative contexts are connected with how reality is perceived by a little girl (Babette) for who things develop very slowly. The verbs *seem*, *think*, the simile *restless as a humming bird* contribute to the impression of the subjective perception of time. Descriptive-narrative contexts, on the other hand, create an illusion of an objective representation of reality (cf., the absence of verbs like *think*, *seem*, tropes, commentary, etc).

In this way, the evaluative fragments in this story are contrasted to the descriptive-narrative fragments both on the level of verbal expression (the linguistic means described above) and on the level of content (oppositions: subjective vs objective perception of time; Babette vs Maman-Nainaine).

This opposition, which may be called the opposition on the level of the "deep structure" of the text as it is singled out on the basis of a thorough linguistic analysis, is supported by a semantic opposition represented by two sets of key words.

The second opposition may be called the opposition on the level of “surface structure” as it is based on lexical means. The two sets are grouped around the idea of “ripe figs” on the one hand and “tender leaves” on the other.

The first set includes such items as the title of the story (*Ripe Figs*), the “ripening of figs” mentioned in the second sentence of the first paragraph, “gnarled spreading branches” in the third paragraph, “purple figs” in the fourth, the exclamatory sentence “How early the figs have ripened this year!” (Paragraph 5) and the clause “when chrysanthemums are in bloom” (Paragraph 7).

The second set includes such lexical units as “hard green marbles” and the clause “for the leaves upon the trees were tender yet” in the second paragraph, “figs fringed with their rich, green leaves” (Paragraph 4) and the sentence “I think they have ripened very late” (Paragraph 6).

The first set of key words represent “the world through the eyes of Maman Nainaine” – a mature woman who is Babette’s godmother and guardian who in addition to that, is characterized through a series of complex imagery ranging from the comparison to the statue of Virgin Mary (“as patient as the statue of la Madone” – Paragraph 3) to the description a kind of halo over the woman’s head (“muslin cap standing like the aureole about her white, placid face” – Paragraph 4). The Biblical allusions are completed with the mention of the “platter” on which Babette puts the ripe figs (Paragraph 4).

The second set of key words pertains to the worldview of Babette who is impatient in her desire to become a grown up woman. The symbolism associated with her includes her desire to cross the bay (Bayou- Laforche “where the sugar cane grows”), “a dainty porcelain platter which she set down before her godmother” (Paragraph 4) and the simile “restless as a humming bird” (Paragraph 2).

In addition to the two sets of key words, the surface structure of the text contains a semantic field of plants and a semantic field of natural phenomena. The following lexical units represent the first one: figs, sugar cane, leaves, branches, chrysanthemums; while the second field comprises such elements as “warm rains”, “strong sunshine”, “hot summertime” and the season “when the chrysanthemums are in bloom”.

Two sets of key words and the semantic fields which we singled out work together in contrasting the two “worlds” in the text continuum that we discovered in the deep structure.

Thus, our analysis of the “deep” and “surface” structures of *Ripe Figs* has helped to establish the opposition of two concepts of time represented by the main characters. The application of the principle of binary oppositions to fictional texts can

help create a theoretical model of the text as well as analyse the whole space of the text singling out its essential linguistic and topical parameters.

Literature

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'Objective' versus 'Subjective' Perception of Time in Literary Text: The Point of View of a Mature Female and an Adolescent Girl

The paper deals with the problem of representing time in fictional discourse from different perspectives. The principle of binary oppositions is used in it to investigate "surface" and "deep" layers of meaning in the text of the short story *Ripe Figs* by the American writer Kate Chopin. It is established that the "surface" semantic layer includes the opposition of the key words "ripe" (adult) and "green" (young) as well as the corresponding semantic fields. The "deep" layer of meaning includes an opposition of descriptive-narrative contexts and evaluative textual sequences. The analysis shows that narrative and descriptive sequences are connected with the perception of time by an adult woman (which may be called "objective fictional time") while evaluative contexts are connected with the perception of time by a teenage girl ("subjective fictional time").

Keywords: *fictional discourse, cognitive approaches, time representation, adult vs adolescent world view.*

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