

NARRATIVE EMBEDDING IN THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN NOVEL WITH REFERENCE TO STEPHEN KING'S *DESPERATION*

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of a story within another story is a device which implies that there is an embedding of at least an additional narrative subordinated to the one that seems to frame it. This invariably signifies the shift back and forth of enunciative levels and/or text-world dimensions. Stephen King's *Desperation* (1996) is the American postmodern novel which embodies the multiple framing of the fictional discourse by including some stretches and story-telling accounts based on chronicles, reproduced in chapter three, part III of the said novel. The embedded narrative is also given an autonomous subtitle "The American West: Legendary Shadows", dealing with how the Chinese mine workers were treated in 1858-1859, while the novel discourse narrates events that took place in the second half of the twentieth century.

The paper provides a sample analysis of the embeddings to reveal the intricate connection between the text-world polarities, its multiverse interaction, and the narrator's/narrators' presentational modes. Stephen King, as the inventor of the narrative levels, works out a complex set of diegesis vs. mimesis, as well as management of reporting distance in the representation of polyphony, voice, and voice-related issues in the embeddings. Despite the complexity and idiosyncracies of the structure, *Desperation* manages to attract the reader's attention to the end, owing to the symbiotic relations between the frame and the embedding; and, moreover, owing to the interchangeable positions of these two in the course of the events, as will be proved in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Frame narratives are narrative texts "in which at second or third level a complete story is told" (Bal, 1985: 143). Embedded narratives form part of the literary tradition, as *The Arabian Nights* (c. Middle Ages) and *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1376) attest, and they have appeared in all periods and in different genres. Traditionally, the inclusion of an embedded narrative, which can be oral or written, has tended to be justified or motivated in a realistic way so that the semblance of verisimilitude, the illusion of the "real," could be preserved, or at least parodied. Several devices have been used for this purpose, such as the gathering of characters who tell stories to each other, dreams or hallucinations experienced by a character, or the discovery of written documents, either diaries or manuscripts. In *Desperation*, the characters meet together in the The Movie Theatre Building called *The American West* and the members are called *The Collie Entragian Survival Society*, because they survived the murder attempts of the mad copcollie entragain. Frame narratives have continued to be written in the modernist and post-modernist periods, although now, and in accordance with the particular concerns of these literary movements,

giving the illusion of reality has ceased to be a major preoccupation. On the contrary, it would seem that the previously solid narrative frame which contained the invented within the invented tends to get vaporous and boundaries are blurred in two different directions: those separating the frame and the framed and those separating the whole narrative text and the real world outside.

A further distinctive trait of many twentieth-century frame narratives could be that the figure of the editor who has found an interesting manuscript and wants to divulge it or the device of the character who tells a story are often replaced by the figure of a writer who includes the novel s/he is writing in the text, a writer that makes any intermediary redundant and directly vouches for the authenticity of her/his narrative. In this case, it could be said that, very often, the main interest of the narrative is the creative process itself, thematized through the figure of this diegetic writer, for s/he usually comments on the problems encountered in her/his task as creator. Thus, in *Desperation*, much of the embedded narrative is done by *Johnny* who is a novelist. Frequently the narrative levels created in the text are not just two, frame and embedded narrative, but rather proliferate in a nesting of

authors, narrators and diegetic worlds. Thus, in *Desperation* there are *Johnny*, *David*, *Billingsley*, *Prudery*, and others who share their parts in the embedded narratives. The authorial and narrating stances and the diegetic world may be, as suggested by Patricia Waugh has remarked, "the possibility of endless repetition or circularity" (1984: 141-142). Jorge Luis Borges's "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" (Ficciones, 1944) provides a clear dramatization of a textual reflection ad infinitum, for in it a character remembers a version of *The Arabian Nights* in which one of the stories that Scheherazade tells is precisely *The Arabian Nights*, and consequently she remains forever trapped in her telling.

According to Lucien Dällenbach (1977: 52) "mise en abyme" is an internal reflection which mirrors the totality of the work of art within which this internal reflection is included. In his study *Le Récit Spéculaire* (1977), Dällenbach devised a typology based on the structural level of reflection in order to account for the different realizations of the mise en abyme, which may reflect the enunciated or represented world, the enunciating or narrative process and the code, either narrative or linguistic.

The concept of mise en abyme is then applicable not only to reflections of fictional worlds —fictional embeddings— but also to textual reflections — enunciative embeddings, that is, diegetic reproductions of the communicative structure of a narrative text.

Besides suggesting infinite regress, this multiplication of worlds, narrators and authorial surrogate figures may also indicate fragmentation and discontinuity, for the unity of the work of art is split up in a multiplicity of diegetic worlds and controlling subjectivities. It may also point towards the possibility of self-generation that a literary text has, or it may parody the conventions of the realistic novel by highlighting the fact that the narrative in question is an artefact. In any case, the effects achieved are multiple; they depend on the individual text and should be considered against the background provided by the whole text. According to Mieke Bal (1977: 62), this structure, which she calls encadrement, involves a simple subordination, either of characters or of action. She distinguishes a double subordination, of both characters and action: the action in the embedded narrative determines and is determined by the action in the first narrative. *The Arabian Nights* provides the paramount

example in the past. But, in the Postmodern Age, Stephen King's *Desperation* may be one of the most memorable examples.

GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

Desperation as a narrative text may opt for a complicated structure which combines enunciative embeddings —changes of narrative level— with fictional embeddings —changes of diegetic world— and establishes relationships of subordination as well as coordination among the different levels, enunciative and fictional. Even so, if the changes have been marked, are justified and follow the logic of the real, an attentive reading should be able to expose the narrative structure of the work. It could be said that the text is always divided within itself.

More significantly perhaps, and contributing to this air of transcendence, the "I" has completely withdrawn in this final passage and the voice seems to have no physical origin within the text. Conversely, it gains power and authority with every corporeal element of the symbiotic relationship between the frame and the framed.

Silverman argues that the effect of embedded structures of narrative is analogous in a written narrative which has shifted from the overwhelming presence of a unitary consciousness signified by the first-person pronoun to this coda where such presence is transformed into a voice coming from above, hence not immediately present in the text. In the case of *Desperation*, the voice from above is most probably the Heavenly voice overwhelming the diabolic will of destruction.

Narrative Embedding in Stephen King's *DESPERATION*

Accordingly to the sections above, novelists in general seldom deal with isolated story lines. They often relate two or more stories together. The outcome will be a cluster of narratives where the proto-narrative, the nucleus, or the central account receives focal attention as the frame-story that finds its objective correlative in one of the embedded levels of the work as a whole. Thus, the embedded narrative consists of mental models and added clusters. What the novelist does is to make the link, to make the connection between the two or more narratives. In this respect, Jean Aitchison in her *WORDS IN THE MIND* (4th edition, 2012), writes:

...mental models of the world we live in ...are private and cultural artifacts', and only partially in touch with "reality". Such models are referred to under various names: mental models, frames, scripts, internalized cognitive models or ICMs, cognitive domains, image schemas. The word FRAMES is perhaps the most widely used....(P.86)

In much the same context, Paul Simpson (*STYLISTICS*, 2004, p.61) states that embedding is a pattern that "involves taking a unit ...and squeezing it inside another", enveloping "one structure inside another". So far as embedding in *DESPERATION* is concerned, the novel deals with a small Nevada mining town inhabited by 260 people in 1996. It suddenly becomes a ghost town because *Collie Entragian* the Police Chief there, in his sudden outburst of rage, murders almost all the people there. It seems that the Police Chief was a victim to his inhaling of the poisonous, maddening fumes from the *China pit* mines. He is possessed by an ancient evil entity calling itself *Tak*, who/which lived under the Earth, in another dimension. The story-within-the-story narrates how the *Lushan Brothers* sacrificed their lives in the 19th century to prevent *Tak* from attacking people on earth-surface. They sealed the entry to *Tak's* hellish subterranean headquarters in the 19th century but it was broken in 1996. *Tak* breaks loose and destroys the town via the Police Chief whose mind, body, and soul fall victim to the old demonic spirit of *Tak*. Thus, the story and the story within-story meet in a symbiotic relationship.

The Chinese embedded story in the novel, is found in Section2, Chapter3 Part III (*The American West: Legendary shadows*). This part of the novel turns out to be the real focus of the novel. In 1858-59, a number of Chinese miners were hired to work in the copper mines of 1. *Desperation Town* in the American deserts. The company that employed them was called the *Diablo Mining Company* which re-opened an old mine re-named "*the China Pit*". The Wild West workers quit the job because it was poorly paid and unsafe. One of the characters from the *Desperation Town* of 1996, *Dr. Billingsley* the retired veterinarian, describes how the Chinese 2. workers were chained together when they arrived there. They were about seventy men and twenty women dressed in quilted pajamas and little round hats:

"I imagine the owners kicked themselves for not thinking of using them sooner, because they had all sorts of advantages over white men." P.445

Much like Scheherezade does with her enchanted audience in *The Arabian nights*, *Dr. Billingsley* relates, later on, how these workers were maltreated. Ultimately, there was a cave-in in which the men and women in question died. While the mine collapsed, the copper company share-holders were having a picnic-lunch above the location where the Chinese were losing their lives underneath the cave-in rubble. However, the same embedded story is retold in a different manner by *David Carver*, the God-fearing prayer-boy on pp546-556. *Dr. Billingsley's* account stressed the white man's maltreatment and exploitation of the Chinese. *David's* version, on the other hand, emphasizes the Chinese Brothers' (the *Lushan Brothers*) prevention of pollution and their combat of the mine disease. They obstructed the spread of the poisonous, igneous, contaminated gases by ruining the entire mine with complete disregard to the cry for help coming from their countrymen. The *Lushan Brothers* knew well that their kith-and-kin were affected with disease and were unable to go up to mix with the society of men, because their infection was fatal. In consequence to this, it can be inferred that the story-within-the story is both a closure and an opening as these mark the end of a beginning. As such, it is important to recall what Teun A. Van Dijk discusses in his *TEXT&CONTEXT* (5th impression, 1989): "...a possible world...may mean...a possible course of events" (P.30). It may also be "a state of such a course of events" (p.30). Each embedding instance is a trace of an autonomous universe, with the narrator as its ambassador. Thus, the two versions of the same embedding have, together, miscellaneous functions:

1- The Metaphysical Function and awakening sense of awe before the mystery of being. This can be seen in *David's* narrative, based on a vision he saw while in a trance. He was taken back, in spirit, to the 19th century to see exactly how the Chinese miners were victimized and how the two brothers sacrificed their lives to fight the evil *Tak*.

2- The Cosmological Function, dealing with the shape of the universe. This is expressed by the co-existence, in the bottom of the mine, of an anti-universe, a negative version of the "real" world.

3. The Sociological Function, opposing the existing social order that is based on exploitation.

4. The Psychological Function, to prove that the laborer's conditions are pathological and detrimental to sanity.

The embedded narratives, likewise, highlight two additional themes which could not have been easily focalized or accentuated otherwise. They include:

1. The dualism of the Profane and the Sacred: This can be seen in the use of the images called "can-tahs" of the deep layers of the well-of-the-worlds in the bowels of the Earth.

2. The Terror of History, or the Eternal Return of Terror. In *Tak*, the Ancient Enemy is lying in wait for unwitting victims.

In all the above, the novelist used the embedded narrative as the vehicle to disclose his optimism that the *Divine Will* and *Virtue* will emerge as victorious from the painful confrontation against evil, the devil, and all its diabolic manifestations. To stress the cosmological features of the narratives well as its embedded levels, Stephen King used a minor character in addition to a major character, to suggest the magnitude of the subordinated story line.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Not all literature before modernism was realistic, but that the strategies used to introduce embedded narratives almost always responded to the logic of the real.

2. If we concentrate on the narrative embeddings and separate the text into its two main components, that is, autobiographical frame and student's novel, the relationship between both can be illustrated by means of a syntactic analogy.

3. At the beginning, and responding to a vertical embedding, the relationship would be hierarchical, similar to the relationship of dependence that is established between a main clause and its subordinate. Later on both parts are placed side by side in a horizontal independence whose syntactic parallel would be that of two coordinate clauses. As the reading process goes on and both worlds get increasingly entangled, independence gives way to interdependence.

4. To put it differently, these two coordinate clauses keep being coordinate while simultaneously there is the suggestion that both are subordinate to a superior design. It is precisely their interdependence that signals the

presence of a master-plan, a totality that is composed of both and neither of them, that includes yet transcends them. This transcendence is explicitly signified in the text by the cryptic final section, the final full stop that announces silence, as well as shift of strength.

4. The shift from initial subordination to subsequent coordination between the two narratives is quite in accordance with the general purpose of this peculiar novel, which is the simultaneous erection and demolition of barriers. If the project of the text is to exist in a zone of indeterminacy, it is quite understandable that it should choose to replace subordination with coordination, for the former is always much clearer in its relational proposals, while the latter very frequently implies that it is left to the reader to decide what the actual relationship is. Thus, the embedded narrative exactly speaks of demolishing the well-of-the-world where the evil doer *Tak* stays.

5. Taking up two of the main points of our analysis, the excessive awareness of narrative conventions that presents and the two contrary pulls towards distance and proximity or differentiation and undifferentiation that preside over this text, it is clear that both express the text's abandonment of a conventional narrative logic and its choice of a para-logic, the prefix "para" representing what the text simultaneously affirms and denies, an alternative logic whose purpose and effect are analogous to those of the erotic fetish. Thus, there is the 19th-century Universal and *Nevada Town* in 1996 as two text-worlds.

It is evident that there is relinquished narrative linearity and progress in favor of textual excess, thus developing spatially rather than temporally and becoming spectacle rather than narrative.

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التضمين السردى في رواية ما بعد الحداثة الأمريكية بأنموذج رواية اليأس لمؤلفها ستيفن كنج

إخلاصة

يعني التضمين السردى، إشتغال البناء القصصي على جزء إضافي واحد أو أكثر، مأخوذ من بنية سردية خارج النص المؤطر للرواية قيد البحث. و هذا بدوره يبتدع مساراً حركياً في النص الروائي يتجه من الاطار العام إلى المسرودة التضمينية و من هذه الثانية رجوعاً الى الاولى على مستوى الأبعاد الخاصة بعوالم النص التدويني الداخلية. و خير مثال على هذه الظاهرة الروائية هي رواية اليأس (١٩٩٦) لمؤلفها ستيفن كنج. يعتمد كنج في حبكة هذا الكتاب على تكوينات العوالم الداخلية في النص، وهي بنى ذات إطار مرجعي شامل سردياً يضم في ثناياه عناصر حكائية منتقاة من أكوام بينية و جانبية تتيح للمؤلف مجالاً للعلاقة التعايشية السيميائية بين المجرى الأساس و التفرعات الجانبية في الوقائع و الأحداث الجانبية ظاهرياً و لكنها في الوقت ذاته تضيف معادلاً موضوعياً لدائرة الحدث الأصلي وبؤرة الصراع الدرامي.