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Narrative Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

Narrative criticism is a branch of literary criticism that entails a variety of established methodologies and approaches. According to this discipline, a “narrative” is any work of literature that tells a “story.” This is a very broad definition, but not all literature is narrative. Essays, for example, are not.

In the Bible, the best examples of narrative are the four Gospels and Acts. Much material in the Old Testament qualifies as well, but prophetic oracles and New Testament epistles do not. Some scholars employ narrative criticism to study the underlying story that appears to be assumed by these writings (e.g., the story of Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church that underlies his letters to that community), but narrative criticism is used most prominently in the study of the Gospels and Acts.

Narrative criticism views the Gospels as communications between an “implied author” and an “implied reader.”

implied author: the author as he or she may be reconstructed from the text; the sum total of the impressions (values, worldview, etc.) that the reader gains from the narrative

implied reader: the reader presupposed by the text; the imaginary person who is to be envisioned as always

responding to the text with whatever knowledge,
understanding, action, or emotion is called for

The Goal of Narrative Criticism

The goal of narrative criticism is to read the Gospels in the manner intended by their implied author and in the manner expected of their implied reader. To determine what this expected response would be, modern readers must use their imagination in order to approach the text in the following ways:

1. *As a person who receives the text in the manner the author assumed it would be received.* For a Shakespearean play, this might mean seeing the work performed on stage (as opposed to reading a script). For a Gospel, it might mean hearing the entire Gospel read out loud from beginning to end at a single sitting.
2. *As a person who knows everything the author expected the reader to know, but no more than this.* The reader of a Gospel is expected to know the Old Testament and certain things about the Roman world but probably is not expected to know material from the other Gospels or doctrinal propositions from later Christianity.
3. *As a person who believes everything the author expected the reader to believe, but nothing other than this.* The reader of any one of our four Gospels is assumed to hold certain

beliefs and values that may or may not coincide with beliefs or values of modern readers today (e.g., the reader may be expected to believe that demons are literal beings; that ghosts actually exist; that slavery is an acceptable social institution; that women are intrinsically inferior to men). To determine the response expected of an implied reader, modern readers must ask, “How would a reader with these assumed beliefs and values respond to this story?”

Note that narrative criticism temporarily brackets out questions of historicity or interpretation in order to first understand the Gospels on their own terms.

Story and Discourse

Every narrative may be understood in terms of story and discourse. “Story” refers to what the narrative is about: the events, characters, and settings that make up its plot. “Discourse” refers to how the narrative is told: the way in which the events, characters, and settings are presented to the reader.

What Narrative Critics Do

Narrative critics analyze *events*, *characters*, and *settings* in terms of both story and discourse. What follows here is a survey of some questions that they typically ask.

Events

1. *Story*. What is it that happens in each episode of the story, and how do the individual episodes relate to what happens in the story as a whole?

Events may be classified as:

kernel: event that is integral to the narrative, such that the event could not be deleted without destroying the logic of the plot. Kernels represent the major turning points in the narrative.

satellite: event that is not crucial to the narrative but fills in the story line as determined by the kernels. A satellite could be removed from the narrative without destroying the logic of the plot, though of course it might weaken the story aesthetically. If an event is regarded as a satellite, the next question is, “To which of the kernels is it related?”

Narrative critics also ask, “What elements of conflict are present in each episode, and how do these relate to the development and resolution of conflict in the story as a whole?” Conflict may be described in terms of threats that characters or other elements in the story pose to one another. As conflict develops in the narrative, its nature may change: a new threat may be added or an existing one removed. Or the essence of the conflict may remain the same, with changes only in its intensity. Conflict that is left unresolved in the narrative tends to impinge most directly on the reader.

2. *Discourse*. How does the author incorporate individual events into the narrative? What rhetorical techniques does the author use?

Examples of rhetorical technique include foreshadowing, suspense, irony, symbolism, and narrative patterns (framing, step progression, concentric patterns, etc.).

Particular questions about the narration of events involve:

order: the place that the narration of each event occupies in the sequence of other events in the narrative

duration: the length of time taken up in the narrative with each event relative to the duration of other events in the narrative

frequency: the number of times each event is narrated or referred to in the narrative

Narrative critics also examine events in terms of causality: What is the link between each event and other events in terms of cause and effect?

possibility: event makes the occurrence of another event possible

probability: event makes the occurrence of another event more likely

contingency: event makes the occurrence of another event necessary

Characters

1. *Story*. Who are the characters and what type of characters are they? What traits are assigned to the characters? Are these traits consistent throughout the narrative? “Traits” may be defined as “persistent personal qualities that describe the character involved” (Sherlock Holmes is “perceptive”; Ebenezer Scrooge is “stingy”).

What is the point of view of the characters, and does it concur with the point of view of the implied author or narrator? Is this consistent throughout the narrative? “Point of view” may be defined as the norms, values, and general worldview that govern the way a character looks at things and renders judgments upon them.

Character groups: Consistency of traits and point of view sometimes indicate that various characters belong to a “character group” that is treated as a single character throughout the narrative. For example, the disciples of Jesus in the Gospels often function as a group of people who act and think alike. When the Gospel reports, “The disciples said . . . ,” the reader is not expected to think that they spoke in unison but rather that they spoke as though they were a single character.

Types of characters include:

round: exhibits inconsistent or unpredictable traits

flat: exhibits consistent and predictable traits

stock: exhibits only one trait or very few consistent ones

dynamic: shows development or change in basic profile
(i.e., traits and point of view) over the course of the
narrative

static: basic profile remains the same through the
narrative

Opposition of characters: Divergence of point of view and
incompatibility of traits between characters and character
groups often forms the basis for the development of conflict.

Readers tend to regard characters with empathy, sympathy, or
antipathy:

empathy: reader identifies with the character and experiences
the story from that character's point of view (empathy may be
either realistic or idealistic)

sympathy: reader may or may not identify with the character,
but feels favorably disposed to the character

antipathy: reader may or may not identify with the character,
but feels unfavorably disposed to the character

Readers typically feel sympathy for characters for whom the
protagonist feels sympathy and antipathy for characters for whom
the protagonist feels antipathy.

2. *Discourse*. What method of characterization does the author use in the narrative? How do readers know what the characters are like (in terms of traits and point of view)?

telling: narrator describes the characters for the reader from the implied author's own point of view (e.g., "Joseph was a just man.")

showing: narrator describes the characters from the point of view of other characters within the story by reporting the actions, speech, thoughts, or beliefs of those characters (e.g., when Jesus says that the Pharisees are hypocrites, the reader gets some impression of both Jesus and the Pharisees)

Four planes of expression on which characters may be revealed:

spatial-temporal: actions of the characters in space and time

phraseological: speech, including thoughts if they are verbalized as speech

psychological: inside views of the character's motives

ideological: norms, values, and general worldview ascribed to the character

Narrative critics notice which of these planes are used to reveal characters to readers.

“Incongruity” occurs when the author provides conflicting characterization: a character’s own self-description may differ from the perception of that character attributed to others, or a character’s speech may present the character differently than the character’s actions (Herod says that he wants to worship Jesus but then tries to kill him). The reader must decide which level of characterization is the more reliable.

Settings

1. *Story*. What are the place, time, and social situation settings for the story, and does this have any special significance?

Settings may be *spatial*, *temporal*, or *social*.

Spatial settings include the physical environment (geographical and architectural locations) in which the characters live, as well as the “props” and “furniture” (articles of clothing, modes of transportation, etc.) that make up this environment.

Temporal settings include the broad sweep or concept of time assumed by the narrative (“monumental time”), as well as the chronological and typological references to time as it is measured by the characters in the story (“mortal time”). Examples of monumental time: “the days of Noah,” “the age of the church.” Examples of mortal time: “year,” “day,” “night,” “Sabbath.”

Social settings include the political institutions, class structure, economic systems, social customs, and general cultural context assumed to be operative in the narrative (e.g., the social institution of

slavery is part of the social setting for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the Roman occupation of Palestine is part of the social setting for all four New Testament Gospels).

Settings may be symbolic:

the wilderness: a place of testing

the sea: a place of danger

night: a time for secrecy

Settings may be set in opposition to each other:

day and night

land and sea

heaven and earth

Certain settings may also serve as boundaries that bridge such oppositions:

evening or dawn may be a boundary between day and night

a beach, a boat, or an island may be a boundary between land and sea

a mountain may be a boundary between heaven and earth

2. *Discourse*. How does the author or narrator describe the settings for the reader?

Settings may be described with either an abundance or a paucity of detail. How much is left to the reader's imagination? What is the reader simply assumed to know?

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