

Reconsidering the Unreliable Narrator: A Narratological Perspective¹

「信頼できない語り手」再考：物語論的な見地から

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すべての物語は語り手によって語られる。語り手によって語られない物語は存在しない。しかし、語り手は作者のような生身の人間ではなく、物語という言説が持つ一つの機能である。どんなに荒唐無稽な事柄であっても、それが物語世界における出来事である限り、読者は語り手の語ることを疑わない。しかし、読者は語り手の語る言葉をすべてそのまま真実だと受け入れるわけではない。なぜなら、語り手は読者に与える印象を考慮して、物語世界の情報を常に操作しているからだ。このように、出来事とそれについて語られた物語言説との間には常に間隙が生じる。「信頼できない語り手」はここに介在する。

拙論では、「信頼できない語り手」について物語論的な立場からその構造の記述を試みる。

キーワード

Unreliable Narrator (信頼できない語り手) Narratology (物語論)
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1

The definition of a narrator in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* reads that a narrator is “a person in some books, plays etc who tells the story.” But not only in books and plays but in ordinary everyday conversation, if one tells a story, there should be a narrator. In other words, not only in so-called stories but also in newspaper or magazine articles, as long as a story is told, there should be somebody who narrates the story; that person is the narrator.

When we read a newspaper article or an essay, we believe that what is written there is a genuine account of the author's ideas, opinions, or feelings, or at least, we assume that the person who writes the article believes that what he or she writes is his or her genuine ideas or feelings. When what is written in newspaper or magazine articles is false, it is usually written in a manner that clearly indicates that fact. Otherwise the reader becomes lost in a flood of

information that makes distinguishing reliable information from unreliable information difficult.

Not all narrators, however, are reliable; some narrators implicitly or explicitly do not make honest renderings of the events that happen to them. Although judgment of whether a narrator in a given story is reliable ultimately based on the reader's interpretation, in this article, I would like to describe the nature of the unreliable narrator and its function through the narratological perspective.

2

Wayne C. Booth defines the "unreliable narrator" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as follows:

I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not. (158-9)

According to M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

The fallible or unreliable narrator is one whose perception, interpretation, and evaluation of the matters he or she narrates do not coincide with the implicit opinions and norms manifested by the author, which the author expects the alert reader to share. (168)

Additionally David Lodge says in *The Art of Fiction*:

Unreliable Narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell...Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest.

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. (154-5)

To sum up these three definitions, the unreliable narrator is the one whose ideas, opinions, or sense of values do not agree implicitly or explicitly with those of the author, the implied author, or the work as a whole.

Before we start discussing the unreliable narrator, I would like to allocate some space to observing the nature of the narrator in general.

In a first person narrative, we use the word "narrator" for "I" who tells his story

and at the same time is also a character in the story. But in a third-person narrative, who is the narrator? Below is an extract from Hemingway's "The Killers":

Outside it was getting dark. The street light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. (215)

Although the point of view in the story is focused on a character, Nick Adams, he is not a narrator. In the third-person narrative, the person who narrates the story is not a character; rather, he narrates the story from outside the story world.

As Gérard Genette points out, the narrator can always identify himself as "I" if he wants to. He says:

in my view every narrative is, explicitly or not, "in the first person" since at any moment its narrator may use that pronoun to designate himself. (97)

Instead of using "the first person" and "the third person," Genette uses "homodiegetic" and "heterodiegetic," respectively. Homodiegetic is a narrative where "the narrator is present as a character in the story he tells" (245), and heterodiegetic is the narrative where "the narrator is absent from the story he tells" (244). So, the real question is not which pronoun is used in the narrative but from whose point of view the narrative is produced and who narrates the story. Again from Genette:

[M]ost of the theoretical works on this subject [narrative perspective] (which are mainly classifications) suffer from regrettable confusion between what I call here *mood* and *voice*, a confusion between the question *who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?* and the very different question *who is the narrator?* — or, more simply, the question *who sees?* and the question *who speaks?* (186)

So even if narrative perspective is focused on a character, it does not necessarily mean that the character is a narrator.

Seymour Chatman also points out in *Coming to Terms* that terms such as "point of view" and "focalization" are misleadingly applied to different entities such as a narrator and a character without discrimination. He insists that we should use different terms for them: "slant" for a narrator's point of view and "filter" for a character's:

It is high time that we introduce a terminological distinction between these two loci of "point of view": that of the narrator, and that of the character. I propose *slant* to name the narrator's attitudes and other mental nuances appropriate to the report function of discourse, and *filter* to name the much

wider range of mental activity experienced by characters in the story world — perceptions, cognitions, attitudes, emotions, memories, fantasies, and the like.

“Slant” well captures, I think, the psychological, sociological, and ideological ramifications of the narrator’s attitudes, which may range from neutral to highly charged. (143)

“Filter,” on the other hand, seems a good term for capturing something of the mediating function of a character’s consciousness — perception, cognition, emotion, reverie — as events are experienced from a space within the story world. (144)

But Chatman uses the word “narrator” for a narrator in a first-person narrative such as Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, and “implied author” for a type of narrator in a third-person narrative such as “The Killers.” In other words, in a first-person narrative, the narrator is the same entity as a character, whereas in a third-person one the narrator has the same status as an implied author.

According to my personal view, in a third-person narrative, whether the narrator “I” appears in the text or not, he has the same status as an implied author, and in a first-person narrative where the narrator “I” appears as a character — whether as the protagonist of the story or a witness — the narrator “I” is not an implied author. If the author of a first-person narrative intrudes upon the story world referring to himself as “I” but neither as a narrator nor as a character, which is rare, he can be regarded as an implied author. As for whose terminology may we adopt, Booth’s, Genette’s or Chatman’s, the dispute over the matter of the narrator is continuing and has not yet been settled among critics.

3

Let us go back to the question of the unreliable narrator. According to Booth, Abrams, and Lodge, if what a narrator says is different from what the author or the work as a whole means, the narrator is unreliable. Here is a well-know fable from Aesop.

There was a shepherd who was fond of playing practical jokes. He would drive his flock some distance from the village and then shout to the villagers for help, saying the wolves had attacked his sheep. Two or three times the inhabitants came rushing out in alarm — and then went back with the shepherd laughing at them. Eventually, however, some wolves really came. They got between the shepherd and his flock and he called the neighbours to aid him. But they thought he was up to his usual trick and did not bother

their heads about him. So he lost his sheep. (200)

The norms or implicit opinions manifested in this fable is that “telling a lie is bad.” Although this moral judgment does not appear anywhere in this fable, the reader can infer this message without difficulty; the events told in this narrative seem to support this interpretation.

Who is the narrator of this fable? Obviously the shepherd is not the narrator because he is addressed as “he,” and he is a character in the story. The narrator of this story does not appear in this narrative. He is an impersonal, unidentified entity outside the story world, but his opinion or evaluation of the events seems to coincide with the work he produces. Therefore we can regard this narrator as reliable.

Then what is an unreliable narrator?

Ring Lardner’s “Haircut” is narrated in the first person by Whitey, one of the characters in the story. He tells a story about another character, Jim. Whitey describes Jim as “a good fella at heart.” But the real Jim, if we met him, would be nothing but a nasty, mean, selfish man whom nobody likes. So here what the narrator, Whitey, says is different from what the story as a whole implies. There is an irony between what the narrator says and what the reader interprets from the story. Therefore, Whitey, the first-person narrator in this story, is unreliable.

Henry James’s “The Aspern Papers” is a story in which a hero, an editor, makes attempts to obtain the letters written by a poet, Aspern, from an old lady who used to have a relationship with the poet. The letters are now in her custody. The reader encounters a passage which implies that the sense of mission as editor is the motive for his pursuit of the letters.

My eccentric private errand became a part of the general romance and the general glory—I felt even a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art. They had worked for beauty, for a devotion; and what else was I doing? That element was in everything that Jeffrey Aspern had written and I was only bringing it to the light. (305)

And in another scene in the story, the hero expresses his opinion about Aspern as follows:

That was originally what I had loved him [Aspern] for: that at a period when our native land [America] was nude and crude and provincial, when the famous “atmosphere” it is supposed to lack was not even missed, when literature was lonely there and art and form almost impossible, he had found means to live and write like one of the first; to be free and general and not at all afraid; to

feel, understand and express everything. (51)

When we read such passages as quoted above, we may well have the impression that the “implicit opinions and norms manifested by the author” are to depict the editor’s genuine devotion to art, who tries to bring what the dead poet wrote to light for the benefit of the general public. But it might not be so, as many critics have pointed out.

Wayne C. Booth says in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that “Our attention from first to last cannot help being centered on the comedy of the biter bit, the man of light character who manipulates others so cleverly that he ‘destroys’ himself” (356). In other words, one of the themes of this story is to describe the ugliness of humans who would go to any length to obtain what they covet and by doing so not only fail to get what they want but also expose their “moral deterioration and ultimate baseness” (358) in deceiving and taking advantage of others. Since this way of reading does not agree with the previous positive interpretation of the story, the narrator in the latter interpretation is regarded as an unreliable narrator.

Although it may seem easy to judge whether the narrator is reliable or not, in the case of the third-person narrative, things are not as easy as in the case of the first-person narrative. In the following sections, I would like to describe the ambiguity created by the unreliable narrator in the third-person narrative, how the effects of the unreliable narrator are produced, and how the narrative discourse with the unreliable narrator succeeds in winning the reader’s trust.

4

Henry James’s “The Liar” is narrated in the third person. The main character of this story is Oliver Lyon, who is referred to as “he.” Lyon is the reflector of this story, in other words, every event in this story is told through his perspective. But, of course, as is often the case with the third-person narrative, it does not mean that every part of the narrative comes from Lyon’s perspective. In the second chapter, after he saw a woman he had once proposed to, he parted with her with a promise to meet again. Here the narrator makes his own comments on Lyon’s thoughts.

If she liked him why had she not married him or at any rate why was she not sorry she had not? If she was sorry she concealed it too well. *Lyon’s curiosity on this point may strike the reader as fatuous, but something must be allowed to a disappointed man.* [Italics are mine] (414)

Although most of the narrative discourse in this story is focused on Lyon’s thoughts and feelings, there are some occasions where the narrator intrudes upon the discourse.

As in the case with “The Aspern Papers,” Booth introduces two different interpretations of this story, and it is not unusual that the two completely opposite interpretations are made of a literary work. One is a straightforward interpretation — the title “The Liar” refers to Colonel Capadose, who is the husband of the woman to whom Lyon once proposed to when he was young. Colonel Capadose has a habit of fabricating a story or lying about small facts. People around him know his habit, and they do not mind it much. The reader comes across a dialogue between Lyon and Sir David in which Capadose is called “a thumping liar.”

“He [Colonel Capadose] was a taking dog, but he had a monstrous foible.”

“A monstrous foible?” said Lyon.

“He’s a thumping liar.” (406-7)

The fact that Colonel Capadose often tells lies is a well-known secret, and this story appears to be about him.

The other interpretation is that the title implicitly refers to Lyon. According to this interpretation, Lyon’s acts in this story are based on his selfish motive. Marius Bewley says in *The Complex Fate*:

He [Lyon] no longer looks for fineness of appreciation, but has grown eager for the most vulgar public applause...to secure this applause, he is willing to betray his friendship with Mrs. Capadose, and simulate a friendship with the husband that is entirely a lie. (86)

Booth himself takes side with Bewley:

He [Lyon] lies about his portrait of the Colonel’s daughter, in order to pursue his unacknowledged courtship of the wife...if one were to detail all of his lies, the whole story would be retold, because it consists largely of them. (350)

In other words, Lyon is not “‘inspired by the Muse of Truth,’ both as artist and as man” but is a man “caught by his own machinations.”

In order to support his interpretation, Booth compares the original version of “The Liar” with that of the revised one so-called the New York Edition:

Where the original says that “Lyon lashed him on,” the revision says that he “lashed his victim on.” The many changes of this kind take us toward a clearer view of the artist caught by his own machinations. (353-4)

According to Booth, James’s revisions help the reader to interpret that Lyon is a dishonest artist who uses art for his own selfish motives. But how do James’s revisions help the reader to obtain an understanding of Lyon’s real self?

Booth points out that the intrusions by the narrator (He calls this narrator reliable) occur

four times, and they “are used to underline the difference between Lyon’s picture of himself and the true picture” (351). Since Booth uses the word “narrator” for both the intruder “I” who appears four times in the original version and Lyon, a character, from whose perspectives the narrative is produced, it is unclear whether he means by the narrator the one who intrudes upon the story from outside or the character from whose perspective the reader perceives the story. He calls the former “reliable” and seems to call the latter “unreliable” because the title of the chapter in which he discusses this matter is named “The Unreliable Narrator.” When Booth juxtaposes his interpretation of the events in the story with Lyon’s interpretation, he uses the word “narrator” to refer to Lyon:

Actually she [Mrs. Capadose] refused the *narrator* [Italics mine] because she knew that happiness would be impossible with any man as self-centered as he. (348)

Obviously, “the narrator” in this quotation refers to Lyon.

The narrator “I’s” intrusions in “The Liar” occur four times in the original, and three out of four happen in the scene in which Lyon overhears what Mr. and Mrs. Capadose do to his unfinished portrait in his studio. In the revised version, the narrator “I” does not appear in this scene. For comparison, let me quote this scene from both versions although they are long quotations:

(The original)

He [Lyon] pushed aside the curtain that hung in the door of communication — the door opening upon the gallery which it had been found convenient to construct at the time the studio was added to the house. When I say he pushed it aside I should amend my phrase; he laid his hand upon it, but at that moment he was arrested by a very singular sound. It came from the floor of the room beneath him and it startled him extremely, consisting apparently as it did of a passionate wail — a sort of smothered shriek — accompanied by a violent burst of tears...I may add that it [Lyon’s motive to overhear what the Capadose are doing] also had the force to make him avail himself for further contemplation of a crevice formed by his gathering together the two halves of the portiere. (428)

(The Revised)

He [Lyon] laid his hand upon the curtain draping the door of communication, the door opening upon the gallery constructed for relief at the time the studio was added to the house; but with his motion to slide the tapestry on its rings

arrested in the act. A singular startling sound reached him from the room beneath; it had the appearance of a passionate wail, or perhaps rather a smothered shriek, accompanied by a violent burst of tears...This same force [A force that made Lyon step back behind the curtain], further — the force of a need to know — caused him to avail himself for better observation of a crevice formed by his gathering together the two halves of his swinging tapestry. (372)

As we can see, the narrator “I,” who appears three times in the original version, disappears in the revised version. According to Booth, these changes may help us to interpret Lyon-as-liar. He says, “one notes that all of the unequivocal intrusions by the reliable narrator — I count four and those very brief — are used to underline the difference between Lyon’s picture of himself and the true picture” (351). But since this interpretation is possible without these revisions, we cannot use these revisions as the evidence to resolve the matter of interpretation.

To resolve which interpretation is more persuasive is not my task here since it is a matter of opinion. What concerns me more here is that these revisions produce the effects that make the reader experience the events with Lyon rather than be informed of them by the narrator. In the original version, the reader encounters the narrator “I” three times, which spoils the illusion of reality. In comparison, in the revised version, since no “I” appears, the reader can experience the events happening in the scene as Lyon does. As a result, the author succeeds in making the reader feel as if he were experiencing the events in the story with Lyon.

To take another example, in the original version right after Lyon witnesses Colonel Capadose’s vandalism against his portrait, the narrative reports as follows:

Lyon left it [the portrait] where it was, never touched it, scarcely looked at it; he only walked up and down his studio, still excited, for an hour. (431)

In the New York edition, the same part is revised as follows:

Lyon left it [the portrait] there where it grimaced, never touched it, scarcely looked at it; he only walked up and down his studio with a sense of such achieved success as nothing finished and framed, varnished and delivered and paid for had ever given him. (376)

In the revised version, we have access to the more detailed descriptions of Lyon’s inner thoughts or feelings, such as “[the portrait] grimaced” and “a sense of such achieved success.” The more the narrator shows the story through the reflector’s consciousness, the more intensely the reader feels the illusion of reality. In other words, because of these revisions, the focalization of the narrative discourse shifted from the impersonal narrator “I’s” focalization to the more internal focalization of Lyon. As a result, these revisions strengthen the effect

that makes the reader feel as if he were experiencing the events in the story in the same way as Lyon.

5

This effect is similar to the effect that Benveniste's term, "discourse," evokes. Emile Benveniste presents in "Tense in the French Verb" the idea of two systems in which the tenses of French verbs are distributed.

These two systems show two different planes of utterances, which we shall here distinguish as that of history and that of discourse. The historical utterances...characterize the narration of past events. These three terms, "narration," "event," and "past," are of equal importance. Events that took place at a certain moment of time are presented without any intervention of the speaker in the narration. (206)

He explains a plane of discourse as follows:

Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way. It is primarily every variety of oral discourse of every nature and every level, from trivial conversation to the most elaborate oration. (208-9)

We might be able to paraphrase his distinction between "history" and "discourse" as between the objective account of what happened in the past, that is, history, and the present account of what happened in the past tinted with the subjectivity of the person who perceives them at the time of his narrating it, discourse. In "history," events that happened in the past are reported "objectively" as facts. The job of the narrator is to record them as objectively as he can. In "discourse," however, events are reported as if they are happening here and now, and the narrator's job is to persuade the reader to share his view of the events with him.

Furthermore, Benveniste argues that the aorist is a feature of history and the perfect is a feature of discourse. He says, "as the tense of historical narrative, the aorist holds its own very well, and moreover it is not threatened at all and no other tense could take its place" (210). As for the perfect, he says:

The perfect creates a living connection between the past and the present in which its evocation takes place. It is the tense for the one who relates the facts as a witness, as a participant; it is thus also the tense that will be chosen by whoever wishes to make the reported event ring vividly in our ears and to link it to the present. Like the present, the perfect belongs to the linguistic

system of discourse, for the temporal location of the perfect is the moment of the discourse while the location of the aorist is the moment of the event. (210)

To use Benveniste's dichotomy "history" and "discourse" for analogy, the revisions James made in the New York Edition contribute to making the narrative of "The Liar" more "discourse" than "history." This may be true of other revisions James made for all his works in the New York Edition. In other words, one of the characteristics of James' later style is featured by Benveniste's term "discourse."

6

Henry James's "The Bench of Desolation" was published in 1909, seven years before his death. Below is the beginning of the story:

She had practically, he believed, conveyed the intimation, the horrid, brutal, vulgar menace, in the course of their last dreadful conversation, when, for whatever was left him of pluck or confidence in what he would fain have called a little more aggressively the strength of his position — he had judged best not to take it up. But this time there was no question of not understanding, or of pretending he didn't; the ugly, the awful words, ruthlessly formed by her lips, were like the fingers of a hand that she might have thrust into her pocket for extraction of the monstrous object that would serve best for — what should he call it? — a gage of battle. (369)

This is a third-person narrative, where the story is narrated by an impersonal narrator. But the point of view is consistently focalized on a character in this story, Herbert Dodd. Everything is presented to the reader through his perspective.

Because we can know all his inside views, we are likely to believe that what he thinks and feels is the reflection of the facts in the story world. In other words the reader is likely to build sympathy for him. This is one of the rhetorical devices available to writers. Booth explains the effect of this rhetoric in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* as below:

If an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, then the psychic vividness of prolonged and deep inside views will help him. If an author wants to earn the reader's confusion, the unreliable narration may help him. (378)

"The Bench of Desolation" is a story about a man who pays reparation to a woman he promised to marry because he fails to keep his promise. The woman insists that the man

started seeing another girl before he let her know that he would break off his engagement to her. Although he is a character that the reader cannot trust, since every detail of his inside view is shown through his perspective, we are likely to believe what he says, thinks and feels at its face value. In other words, we are likely to believe that the woman factually made “the horrid, brutal, vulgar menace,” his last conversation with her was actually “dreadful,” and the statement “the ugly, the awful words, ruthlessly formed by her lips, were like the fingers of a hand that she might have thrust into her pocket for extraction of the monstrous object” objectively describes her attitudes, not as his subjective opinion.

This is the effect that Benveniste’s discourse evokes. What is reported here is not simple “events that took place at a certain moment of time” which are “presented without any intervention of the speaker in the narration,” which is “history,” but “discourse” produced by the speaker who has “the intention of influencing the other [a hearer] in some way.”

As we can see, when James was making revisions for the New York Editions, what he did was to transform his type of narrative discourse. He altered his narratives into more “discourse” than “history.” Of course, we need a more comprehensive study of narrative discourse to make this assertion more legitimate, but the analogy based on Benveniste’s study of language helps us, from the narratological perspective, to understand the effects a given narrative discourse produces on the reader.

7

The nature of the narrator is not as unequivocal as we assume it to be. First, one of the characters in the story is sometimes a narrator, whereas in other stories the narrator never appears in the story as a character in which case no characters in the story act as narrator. The demarcation between a narrator and a character is not always easy.

Second, the narrator who narrates a story is not always reliable. Sometimes he may intentionally distort the events in the story and give false impressions to the reader. Or he may be lacking in the ability to depict the events as they happen and unintentionally give the reader inaccurate accounts of the events.

From the reader’s point of view, it is easier to identify himself with a character whose inner thoughts and feelings are depicted. In other words, the reader is more likely to sympathize with a character if he can read the character’s inner views. Therefore, the matter of focalization is crucial for the interpretation of the story.

These are some of the elements that regulate narrative information. By controlling these elements, the writer can produce several different discourses from one story. In other words,

several different discourses can be produced from the same event, and each discourse creates different effects on the reader. By paying close attention to the structure of narrative discourse, we can pave the way to a more comprehensive understanding how we structure and understand the world in the language of narrative.

Note

1 This article is revised and translated into English from previously published articles in the following publications: "A Study of the Narrator in Henry James's 'The Liar'." *Essays and Studies By Members of the Faculty of Letters* 49.2. Osaka: Kansai University, 2000. 49–66; "A Study of the Narrative Discourse of Henry James's 'The Bench of Desolation'." *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Research* 2. Osaka: Institute of Foreign Language Education and Research, Kansai University, 2001. 47–57; "A Study of the Role of the Narrator in Narrative Discourse: Focusing on the Unreliable Narrator." *Foreign Language Education Aspects of Language, Culture, and Education: Collected Essays Commemorating Professor Minoru Oda's Seventieth Birthday*. Ed. Usami Taichi, et al. Osaka: Unius Inc., 2002. 213–222.

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