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▶ “Fictional Characters Are Synthetic Constructs”: So What?

Happy
Consensus

Everyone agrees.

Obvious truism
(yawn)

Hypothesis: To stop
there is to stop too
soon

Analogy with
Chomsky

Truism
Relevant to
Three
Parts of
Rhetorical
Narratology

- ▶ Approach to Fictionality
- ▶ Model of Audiences
- ▶ Model of Character

Case Study
of Realistic
Fiction:
Roddy
Doyle's
"Worms"

- ▶ Included in *Life without Children* (2021)
- ▶ Dublin during the Pandemic— foregrounds the mimetic
- ▶ Joe and Thelma, long-married, long-estranged

Joe and
Thelma
Reconnect
through
“worms,” e.g.,
“Whistling
Gypsy”; “I’m
Not in Love”

“He'd been miserable—for years, before the lockdown. He got up, made it through the day, went to bed, got up. The lockdown hadn't made much difference—until he met Thelma. *Re-met her*. They were laughing together one day and they'd looked at each other and he'd started to cry, and so had she. He'd gone to hug her. She let hm.

--I'm sorry, he said.

She knew what he meant.

--Me too, she said.” (138, my emphasis)

Doyle's
Ending, I

--I — heard — one. Joe.

--Did you? He said.

--At first — I was — afraid — I
was pet-rified.

He knew the song.

--“I Will Survive,” he said.

The words were heavy — she
worked hard at pressing them
out.

--I — might.

--Jesus — I love you, he said.

--

Doyle's Ending, II

Something struck him now, the thought that had been lurking for months. Your worms, he said. – You've been making them up all the time, haven't you?

He looked at her mouth on the screen, and waited. It was ages before she answered. (147-48)

Claim:
Radically
open ending
works
brilliantly.
Questions:
How and Why?

Hypothesis: Doyle converts rhetorical readers' question, "what happens next?" into "what's gained by not telling what happens next?" and guides them to answer: "a lot!"
Conversion and answer depend on tacit knowledge that Joe and Thelma are fictional characters/ synthetic constructs.

Rhetorical Approach to Fictionality: Communicative

- ▶ Different from alternatives: Discussion in *Fictionality in Literature*: Referent (possible worlds); Text (distinction of fiction); Activity (speech act)
- ▶ PW—ontological distinction; fictional world shares and departs
- ▶ SA—serious v. nonserious illocutionary acts
- ▶ Rhetorical: posits equivalence--different means to the same ends

Working Definition of Nonfictionality

Nonfictionality is a communicative act that directly engages with and seeks to intervene in some part(s) of the world through its reporting, interpreting, evaluating or other references to actual states of affairs. Example: Jim Phelan loves narrative.

Working Definition of Fictionality

Fictionality is a communicative act that indirectly seeks to intervene in some part(s) of the world through its inventions, projections, or other departures from actual states.
Example: “One afternoon a fox was walking through the forest and spotted a bunch of grapes hanging from over a lofty branch. ‘Just the thing to quench my thirst,’ quoth he.”

Consequences

- ▶ Generic Fiction a subset of the Macro-Genre, Fictionality
- ▶ Cross-border traffic; local fictionality in global nonfiction; vice versa
- ▶ Zones of Literary Fiction and Literary Nonfiction

Audiences in the ZLF

- ▶ Actual (flesh-and-blood); rhetorical subset—2 roles:
- ▶ Authorial (aware of fictionality/the synthetic; reads for purposes)
- ▶ Narrative (observer position, not aware of fictionality; what happens next; nested within the authorial; nuance about immersion; absent from the ZLN)

Character

Synthetic—construct within the larger construction of the narrative; tied to aesthetics

Mimetic—character as possible person

Thematic—character as representative of group or of ideas, ethical values, ideologies.

NA—aware of mimetic and thematic

AA/RR—aware of all three components

Gaps in the Open Ending of “Worms”

- ▶ Thelma does answer, but how? How do rhetorical readers answer?
- ▶ Does Thelma survive?
- ▶ How does Joe respond?
- ▶ 4 main ways to close the gaps:
 - ▶ “Yes” and survives; “No” and survives; “Yes” and dies; “No” and dies; variations in Joe’s responses
 - ▶ Each has its own ethical and affective consequences

Power of Tacit Knowledge

- ▶ These questions are intriguing rather than infuriating because Doyle and his readers know Joe and Thelma are synthetic constructs/fictional characters.

My Turn to
Local
Fictionality:
“Worms” in
the ZLN

- ▶ Imagine Doyle inspired by New Journalism
- ▶ Joe and Thelma--actual people with lives outside the narrative
- ▶ No narrative audience, but NA question applies: what happens next?
- ▶ Doyle would ask readers to invest in fates of actual people and then withhold crucial information.
- ▶ Stopping point= an infuriating trick.

My Answers
(driven by
participation
in narrative
audience)

- ▶ Does Thelma die? Yes (nothing points to a turn-around)
- ▶ Has Thelma been making up the worms? Yes (this one too apt)
- ▶ Does Thelma admit it? Yes (she owes it to Joe as part of their renewed connection)
- ▶ How does Joe respond? It's complicated: disappointed not devastated, able to see Thelma's motive and consequences

Double Framing of Those Answers

- ▶ 1. Tacit knowledge that other rhetorical readers can offer different answers
- ▶ 2. Tacit knowledge that legitimacy of those answers depends on reading in the ZLF, which means that Joe and Thelma are synthetic constructs.

Reading for Purposes; Answering the Why?

Aesthetic Purpose: Double-consciousness yields rich affective and ethical engagement with mimetic component, within knowledge of fictionality.

Thematic Purpose: Each gap-filling contributes to larger purpose of capturing life for ordinary Dubliners during the 'Corona.'

T. C. Boyle's
"Chicxulub"

- ▶ Story with strong closure
- ▶ Story with a twist
- ▶ Twist depends on the introduction of new minor character
- ▶ A story with a strong thread of nonfictionality

Setting up the Ending

- ▶ Two strands of Character Narration by Ted Biehn
- ▶ 1. The Maddy Story clearly in the ZLF: Ted and Maureen's experience on the night they learn that their daughter has been taken to the ER.
- ▶ 2. The Nonfictionality about Chicxulub and other "civilization enders"
- ▶ Ted's point: He and Maureen about to experience similar catastrophe

Juxtaposition
of Strands
before the
Twist: Maddy
Story

“... at a quarter past two, the inner door swings open, and there he is, a man too young to be a doctor, an infant with a smooth bland face and hair that rides a wave up off his brow, and he doesn't have to say a thing, not a word, because I can see what he's bringing us and my heart seizes with the shock of it. He looks to Maureen, looks to me, then drops his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he says.”

Juxtaposition of Strands before the Twist: Next Chicxulub

“If it is Chicxulub-size and it hits one of our landmasses, some two hundred thousand cubic kilometers of the Earth’s surface will be thrust up into the atmosphere, even as the thermal radiation of the blast sets fire to the Earth’s cities and forests. This will be succeeded by seismic and volcanic activity on a scale unknown in human history, and then the dark night of cosmic winter. . .

“So what does it matter? What does anything matter? We are powerless. We are bereft. And the gods—all the gods of all the ages combined—are nothing but a rumor.”

The Twist

It takes us a moment—the shock of the bloated and discolored flesh, the crusted mat of blood at the temple and the rag of the hair, this obscene violation of everything we know and expect and love—before the surge of joy hits us. Maddy is a redhead, like her mother, and though she's seventeen, she's as rangy and thin as a child. . . . I can't speak. I'm rushing still with the euphoria of this new mainline drug I've discovered, soaring over the room, the hospital, the whole planet. Maureen says it for me: "This is not our daughter."

Boyle's
Introduction
of crucial
minor
character

Maddy had loaned her ID
to a friend , Kristi Cherwin,
so she could see an NC-
17 rated Brad Pitt film.
It's Kristi's body on the
gurney.

Ted's Final Reflection

I try to picture the Cherwins-- they've been to the house a few times, Ed and Lucinda--and draw a blank until a backlit scene from the past presents itself, a cookout at their place, the adults gathered around the grill with gin-and-tonics, the radio playing some forgotten song, the children, our daughters, riding their bikes up and down the cobbled drive, making a game of

Ted's Final Reflection (continued)

- ▶ it, spinning, dodging, lifting the front wheels from the ground even as their hair fans out behind them and the sun crashes through the trees. Flip a coin ten times and it could turn up heads ten times in a row—or not once. The rock is coming, the new Chicxulub, hurtling through the dark and the cold to remake our fate. But not tonight. Not for me.
For the Cherwins, it's already here.

Case against This Ending

Boyle does drop hints to prepare for the reveal about Kristi Cherwin. But adapt Woloch: minor characters given little space AND sacrificed so that Maddy may live and Ted and Maureen can go from the brink of despair to joy.

Abuse of synthetic constructs.

Turn to Local
Fictionality:
“Chicxulub”
in the ZLN

Ted : author and narrator; Kristi a real person who dies. Ed and Lucinda have lives outside the text.

No narrative audience

Okay for Ted to focus on his and Maureen’s experiences.

But to be ethically sound, Ted would have to include more about the Cherwins—or at minimum explicitly address why he doesn’t.

The story is built on the metaphor of the death of a child as a civilization-ending event, and the Cherwins are the ones who experience that event. To give so little attention to them would be callous at best and horrific at worst.

Tacit Knowledge of Fictionality

Boyle's challenge: direct rhetorical readers' interest away from "why not more about Cherwins?" to "what can be gained by subordinating the Cherwins to the Biehns?"

Answer found in the nonfictional thread about civilization enders.

Mask Narration: An Affordance of Character Narrators as Synthetic Constructs

A subtype of reliable narration author puts a character narrator's reporting function on hold and foregrounds their interpreting and evaluating.

Author uses the character narrator as a spokesperson for their own views, Author relies on their audience's ongoing relationship with the character narrator to give those views more force.

Author uses mask narration as a mimetic means in service of their thematic purposes.

Boyle's Mask Narration

Ted's strand on civilization ends
is a set of evolving interpretations
and evaluations *about the fragility
of life, the inevitability of
catastrophe, and our collective
helplessness in the face of such
inevitability.*

Deeply-felt, in the moment
responses that give them a
powerful affective force.

Tacit Knowledge of Fictionality

However harrowing rhetorical readers' experience in the narrative audience, they retain the knowledge that the characters and events are fictional.

That knowledge allows for an openness to the claims in the mask narration. Safety in the ZLF

Balance between narrative audience and authorial audience.

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“For the
Cherwins, it’s
already
here.”

Ted’s experience framed by
knowledge of what the Cherwins
have experienced.

Rhetorical readers know what
Cherwins have experienced.

Cherwins don’t “need” more space.

Boyle gives rhetorical readers a
stronger affective and ethical
engagement through the twist. We
see Ted’s trajectory and the
Cherwins’ similar trajectory without
the twist.

This experience reinforces Boyle’s
mask narration, contributes to his
purposes.

Takeaways and Next Questions

Tacit knowledge:
consequences for the
construction and understanding
of narratives in the ZLF

Mimetic-Synthetic Relationship
more complex. Not a see-saw.
More like a Russian Doll.

Metafiction? Reading
in the ZLN?



Narrative as
Rhetoric:
Work in
Progress





Grazie!