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Frankenstein by Mary Shelley & Turn of the screw by Henry James: The narrative voice

The author of Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, at one instance, propounded that, "I busied myself to think of a story, -- a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror" (Cobley). Frankenstein, a gothic novel, is the outcome of the author's journeys to Switzerland, where she was accompanied by a constellation of famous authors. This novel was a result of an amalgamation of ideas ranging from occult ideas to Darwinism with a hint of science and its passion that is pursued by many people.

The narrative structure of this novel is highly complex. There exists a multi-strand narrative throughout the novel, with three distinct narrators voiced in the first person. The author has deployed a framing device and an epistolary narration, as well. The framing device is the main reason for discerning the main narrative, and the epistolary narration signifies the instance when a story is merely told through letters. There is also an involvement of embedded or framed techniques of narration in the plot. The author has deliberately adopted the approach of not sticking to one voice in the story regarding the narrative technique. This has enabled the novel to stand out from many of its contemporaries and is widely acclaimed to date. Shelley did not adhere to one defined technique of narration, and this strategy influenced the readers in a multi-faceted manner. Through deploying different narrators, the author strived to provide the readers with various perspectives of the story leading to a multitude of interpretations.

The narrative structure of this novel closely resembles the structure of Russian dolls, indicating to a story within a story. This technique is also sometimes regarded as the frame narrative so that the reader is fully aware of the contextualization of the primary narrative. The frame narrative largely acts as a linkage between many stories. In the novel, the narrative structure first utilizes the framing device, which is provided by Robert Walton. Then comes the embedded or framed narrative by the monster and in the third place, there is the protagonist of the novel, Victor, who serves in the capacity of the main narrator.

Robert Walton – Victor Frankenstein – Monster – Victor Frankenstein – Robert Walton

Frankenstein can be viewed as a beautiful amalgam of many ideas that pursues to draw the attention of the readers towards everyday struggles of the social lives with a fair share of entertainment. The critical debates among the literary circles have established that can be many possible interpretations of the novel. The novel can be viewed through a political, biographical, psychological, gothic, or religious lens. The critics also signify towards the contradiction between these multi-faceted interpretations of the context. This directly connotes the fact that a reader cannot align these metaphors and their associated meanings with their own preferred ideologies.

The reader appears to feel slightly uncertain and unsettled by the first-person narratives as they seem to be unreliable or limited to a greater degree, but it also assists in their distancing from the subsequent horrific and terrifying events which are the highlights of the plot. There are three distinct frames comprising the intricate structure of narration. The first frame indicates the storyline of Robert Walton, which revolves around his travels to the Arctic. In the first frame of narration, Walton himself surmises that the letters provided by Victor and the monster’s sight “brought to me a greater conviction of the truth of his narrative than his [Victor’s] asseveration,” (Shelley 172). The second frame is a story of Victor Frankenstein as he narrates his life experiences, which are closely associated with the insane behavioral patterns of his personality. The third frame is the account narrated by the monster, which he is able to delineate after his creation.

The portrayals of different narratives in the novel are not just present to create an atypical effect; rather each narrative is an attempt to draw a lasting impression on the reader of the novel. Firstly, the tone of Walton's letters is reportorial, and the readers are already aware at the start of the novel that evil things will happen as the story unfolds. The first letter which Walton reads to his sister opens with the following quote, *“*I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river (Botting).”

The monster's narrative persuades his creator, Victor Frankenstein, to finally have some empathy as a parent or creator and focus his concerted efforts to make a mate for the monster. The reader feels a great deal of sympathy for the monster, but the feelings are in the middle of an emotional spectrum as the monster has also committed a lot of terrible acts that had grave consequences. Following this line of approach, the narration by Victor strives to pushes Walton towards the destruction of the monster. Apart from providing the readers with multiple perspectives, these narratives also exuberate shared desires and ambitions among different characters of the novel.

In the second novel, Turn of the Screw by Henry James, the narrative technique simultaneously makes the novel interesting and convincing for the readers. Here again, a framed narrative strategy is used which deploys the first-person narrative and the flashbacks from the past. The unusual standpoint of this novel is that there is a deployment of two narrators. One of them exists only existing in the prologue and is nameless. In the subsequent chapters, there is an introduction of a guest, Douglas, who sketches out the governess's story, which primarily entails the rest of the story. The creation of mystery and distance is strengthened by an introduction of an embedded frame that occurs half a century later. The narration is voiced by the third person who is not directly present in the scenario of the novel. The exact details are not identified transparently because of the presence of a multitude of narrators. The embedded narratives instill a spirit of curiosity among the audience and the readership. The author of Turn of the Screw takes a leap beyond conventional wisdom and describes the plot as a 'rather shameless potboiler.' It is the ironic nature of ambiguity that completely revolves around the narrator’s credibility and at the same time, keeps the book active in the consciousness of its readers. Practicing a deliberate choice, the author is persistent in disguising many central facts in many instances of the novel. This is evident from the fact that the name of the central narrator in the novel is also withheld from the reader. The identification of the narrator can only be done through the character of ‘the governess.’ can only identify to the narrator as the ‘governess.’ The embedded narrative technique is instrumental in shaping and reshaping the readers’ imagination throughout the novel. One of the critics righteously argued that this critically acclaimed work by Henry James engages the readers as implicit characters. This is supported by the substantiation that the readers are in a constant attempt to evince their own subjective truths regarding the storyline. In the Turn of the Screw, the governess is portrayed as the most capricious narrator. As the story unfolds, her state of mind paves the way for serious interrogation because she loses self-control over her actions. The following quote from the book fortifies the governess’s loss of self-restraint, “They are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion. ‘What does he matter now, my own? - What will he ever matter? I have you,’ I launched at the beast, ‘but he has lost you forever!' Then, for the demonstration of my work, 'There, there!' I said to Miles (James, 121). There are no conclusive answers available to the readers about the exact unfolding about the events in the novel, but there is are remnants of suspicion and wariness. The narrator of the story projecting her guilty conscience can also be regarded as a possibility for the prevalent uncertainty at the end of the novel. This can largely be attributed to the fact the governess’s troubled state of mind was largely triggered by her inherent sense of inadequacy and guilt (Smith).

The narrative technique of both these novels illustrate the slippery nature of literature and expresses the subjectivity of readers when they read and interpret a given text. A plethora of interpretations that these books offer is the main reason for their critical acclaim among the readers.

# **Works Cited**

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