Filología y Lingüística XXV(1): 133-142, 1999

FRAMING VS. FRAMED: STORYNESS IN CHOPIN'S "ELIZABETH STOCK'S ONE STORY"

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RESUMEN

El siguiente análisis explora las maneras en que diferentes tipos y niveles de estructuras interactúan formando tanto la narración como la construcción del significado en la historia de Chopin. La estructura de la historia anuncia la acción literal de la construcción en el núcleo del argumento, establece parámetros para el proceso cognitivo de la historia y compara la estratégica apropiación de las dos estructuras que hace el sujeto de la enunciación de la historia principal, para contar y hacer valer su historia a su manera.

ABSTRACT

The following analysis explores the ways in which different types and levels of frames interact in structuring both the narration and the construction of meaning(s) in Chopin's story. The frame story foreshadows the literal action of framing at the crux of the plot, establishes parameters for cognitive processing of the story, and parallels the strategic appropriation of both frames by the subject of the enunciation of the main story for both telling and validating her story in her own way.

Stories are an integral part of human existence, means of framing life experience which are, in all probability, as ancient as human language, or perhaps even predate it in the form of hieroglyphics. While theories of narrative have always been quick to acknowledge their origin in oral traditions of storytelling, it has often been a rather cursory homage whose effect (if not intention) has been more one of dismissal than of giving due credit. This undoubtedly has to do with contemporary privileging of the written over the oral, the wrought over the spontaneous. For as Suzanne Ferguson (1989: 176) asserts in her essay "The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres," "like societies of people, the society of literary genres has its class system, in which, over time, classes reorganize themselves, accept new members, and cast old members into the dustbin. It has its aristocracy, its middle classes, and its proletarians...". According to Ferguson, the "highs" and "lows" of literature are closely related to social stratifications of wealth and power; those which are "popular" tend to be less complex formally, more geared towards entertainment, and regarded by both their creators

and their audience as designed for immediate consumption rather than permanence. Thus stories, while surely the oldest of narrative genres, have tended to be given "low status" because of their connections with anecdote, fable, ballad, folk tale, legend, myth, and above all, orality in general. The following discussion examines the repercussions of extended issues of status and storyness in terms of different levels and types of framing in Kate Chopin's short story entitled "Elizabeth Stock's One Story."

Short story theorists ascribe a great deal of importance to their attempts to define exactly what constitutes "story." Early twentieth century critics, such as Brander Matthews, E. M. Forster, Henry Seidel Canby, and J. Berg Esenwein, tend toward traditionalist definitions in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe, who insisted on a tightly structured plot aimed at producing a single effect in a single setting. For these critics, plot is synonymous with action, structural unity is essential, and character and motivation are inextricably bound to incident. The short story, however, has been a dynamic form which readily escapes all attempts to define it in very restricted fashion. Contemporary short story theorist from Charles May to Austin Wright seem to prefer to describe rather than ascribe basic characteristics of the short story, to establish tendencies which permit loose classification of the short story as a genre rather than rigid parameters which inevitably fail in their attempts to exclude certain candidates for the label and include others. Increasing awareness of the ineluctable links between literary theory and cognitive psychology –especially the psychology of reading– has led to closer examination of how "storyness" functions as a cognitive category, rather than as an imposed set of traits or criteria. Susan Lohafer (1989: 272) suggests that "stories may be expressions of fundamental drives or ways of interacting with the world" and that "storying" thus goes beyond mere self-expression to constituting a primary means of "cognitive management". Lohafer affirms that while "storyness" can well be considered a frame in itself, "it is more aptly described as a cognitive mode in which frames are deployed" (273). In either case, for the purposes of this discussion, storyness is a concept which can be productively employed to indicate the narrative potential of experience, as well as its perception as such.

Storyness is a crucial component of framing within "Elizabeth Stock's One Story," both in the cognitive sense of activating frames in the minds of the characters and readers and in the literary sense of framing as a structural device. The title raises intriguing questions: who is Elizabeth Stock, what is her one story, does she have only one story (and if so, why)? Story is the key word, identifying the fundamental content and structure of what follows. It also evokes a series of expectations in the reader's mind. We expect to read about "something happening to someone." We expect that "something" to be of significance, an event or experience "worthy" of the time and energy expended both in writing and reading about it. We also have expectations about the form in which the story will be presented to us. These expectations go from the obvious traditional format of a title indicating the subject matter, the content of which is then "chunked" into paragraphs, to less immediately apparent considerations of character and plot development in a given setting which lead to some kind of "message" or "theme." This "message" is the culmination of our perception of what is important and worthwhile in the story; no matter what aspect we perceive as salient, whether it be aesthetic, philosophical, or other, it is this which justifies the story's existence in the reader's mind. This, of course, could easily lead to a discussion about the (un)importance of what is often called "author's intention" in determining "meaning" (or "the meaning," from a traditional

standpoint), an issue which will not be addressed in the present analysis. Suffice it to say that primordial among the reader's expectations is the idea that a story must be meaningful, whether that meaning is perceived as "discovered" or "constructed". This expectation functions in two fundamental manners: it not only frames further expectations of what we read, but also prompts us to make meaning from the elements we find.

The explosion of reader-response approaches to literature, especially in the last two decades, provide ample testimony to the crucial role the reader plays in the construction of meaning in a literary text. Without going into reader-response theories in any depth at this point, which is neither necessary nor desirable for the purposes of this analysis, it is nonetheless helpful to emphasize some essential premises of those theories. In "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," Jane Tompkins (1980) affirms that, in spite of their multiple differences, reader-response theories ultimately share "a way of conceiving texts and readers that reorganizes the distinctions between them. Reading and writing join hands, change places, and finally become distinguishable only as two names for the same activity"(x). In "The Reader in History," Tompkins concludes that the fundamental significance of reader-response theories lies in their "insistence that language is constitutive of reality rather than merely reflective of it..." (1980: 226), an assertion which "re-politicizes" language, in a manner not unlike its Aristotelian conception, as discourse and thus as ineluctably related to power. In *Protocols of Reading*, Robert Scholes (1989) describes reading as dialectical, a constructive activity of bringing texts together, or as Barthes explains it, "rewriting the text of the work within the text of our lives" (qtd. in Scholes 10). Scholes concurs with Tompkins when he affirms that to be textual is necessarily to be both intertextual and political: "We are always connected, woven together, textualized–and therefore politicized. This is why there can be no ethics of reading that is free of political concerns" (154). This reopens issues of status, not only those of the author, the text, and the reader, but also, as Ferguson affirms, of genre, and in the case of Chopin's story, of the subjects of the enunciation and the utterance as well. The question of status, both of the story and of the storyteller, is immediately activated in the introductory narrative frame of "Elizabeth Stock's One Story." The narrator of this frame, which constitutes only the first two paragraphs, blatantly appropriates the role of critic and judge when he "reports" on the origins of Stock's story:

> In Stonelift, the village where Elizabeth Stock was born and raised, ...they say she was much given over to scribbling. I was permitted to examine her desk, which was quite filled with scraps and bits of writing in bad prose and impossible verse. In the whole conglomerate mass, I discovered but the following pages which bore any semblance to a connected or consecutive narration (Chopin 1969: 586).

Although he attributes the derogatory description of Stock's literary production to the townspeople, evident in the use of the word "scribbling," it is eminently clear that he shares their opinion. "Scraps" and "bits" suggest an insignificance appropriate to "scribbling," and the unmitigated judgment of her writing as "bad" and "impossible" seems to substantiate its collective dismissal as a "conglomerate mass." This is reinforced further by his claim that "but" the following pages bear "any semblance," that is, even a remotely recognizable similarity, to "a narration." It appears that he either equates narration with story, which seems unlikely because of his stipulation of "connected or consecutive," or, more probably, he does not

even dignify her "pages" as a "story" at all. The reader is left to wonder who is responsible for the title of the story, why this narrator was interested in going through Elizabeth Stock's desk, and especially why he feels compelled to preface his findings with an explanation, or indeed, to make them public at all, given his reaction to them.

The narrator's undermining of Elizabeth begins more subtly in the very first paragraph. Although the introductory information is presented as "reporting" to lend it credibility as being factual, it incorporates value judgments both explicitly and implicitly. The first seven words begin the evaluation of her social value: "Elizabeth Stock, an unmarried woman of thirty-eight...". Clearly her marital status is considered to be an important element of her identity, and the fact that she is described as "unmarried" rather than "single" is a judgement of it, emphasizing what she is not over what she is and giving the reader the impression that she has somehow failed to live up to social expectations or, even worse, is personally deficient or reprehensible in some unknown way. The narrator reports that there were "no unusually pathetic features attending her death," which again suggests that her death was indeed pathetic, but not extraordinarily so, which somehow transforms even the unnoteworthy event of her death by consumption into lacking or defective in its very ordinariness. The hint of personal failure is enhanced by the final statement that once placed in the incurable ward, "all courage seemed to leave her." According to this "report" of her death, her dying was as ignominious as her life, not to mention her attempts at writing. Once again, the reader can only wonder why her story is being made public. Interestingly, that unknown usurps the more logical questions about the credibility of the harsh judgments made about her and the motivation and credentials of the person making those judgments.

Elizabeth Stock herself, however, seems to concur in those negative judgments of her writing, if not her life. Her story begins with a personal disclaimer: "Since I was a girl I always felt as if I would like to write stories. I never had that ambition to shine or make a name..." (Chopin 1969: 586). She proscrastinates and apologizes for herself and her content before even beginning her story, making it clear that she has no more reason to expect to be successful in this field than in any other; for example, she talks about feeling "as if" she "would like" to write stories even as she initiates the telling of this "one story." Her first problem, according to what she writes, is that it takes considerable "time and labor...to acquire a literary style". The second problem is that she "never could think of a plot." Her requirements for a story are high; it must be "original, entertaining, full of action and Goodness knows what all" (587). In her mind, that means it cannot be "something that some one else had thought about before me," which necessarily restricts her to events from her own life which are unknown to others. This explains why she never actually tries to write a story until she has both the time–while in the hospital before her death–and the inspiration–the story of "how I lost my position"–to do so.

Her personal judgment of her failure as a writer is based on her own criteria for what constitutes a "good" story and is indicative of her sense of self-worth in general. Her self-evaluation as a writer is confirmed by Uncle William, whose opinion seems to carry great weight with her even though she gives no explanation for it to be taken so seriously, although at one point she says that while her would-be boyfriend Vance has "got no intellect," she "believe[s] in [her] soul Uncle William's got more." As Stock tells her story, though, it becomes apparent that personal judgment on just about everything and everyone which make up their small

town is just one more component of village life. These judgments are expressed explicitly and implicitly. For example, Stock says that it "Often seems like the village was most too small; so small that people were bound to look into each other's lives" (Chopin 1969: 587). She describes Nathan Brightman's mansion as "palatial" to the point where "Looks like Stonelift wouldn't be anything without that," and Brightman himself as a man who is "away a good part of the time...but he's done a lot for this community." Inevitably, like in the early frame to her story, descriptive details always involve personal judgment; there is no such thing as "objective" description, just as "telling" can never be "simply" a recital of "facts."

Elizabeth describes herself as "thirty-eight years old and unmarried, and not afraid or ashamed to say it.". This rather aggressive self-affirmation ironically tends to have the effect of casting doubt upon a positive self-image instead of confirming it; it also contrasts with her attempts to mitigate possible deficiencies in more nebulous areas of personal conduct. She identifies herself as "postmistress of this village of Stonelift...up to a few months ago," a position she says she has lost "mostly through my own negligence, I'll admit that." Although she stops short of specifying the connection between the loss of her job and her own responsibility for it, she nevertheless inserts a clear plea for sympathy to her situation, a rather transparent attempt to manipulate the reader in her favor, when she claims to be a victim of human nature, of her gender, of her job, of her context, and of others' carelessness:

> But I leave it to any one–to any woman especially, if it ain't human nature in a little place where everybody knows every one else, for the postmistress to glance at a postal card once in a while. She could hardly help it. And besides, seems like if a person had anything very particular and private to tell, they'd put it under a sealed envelope (Chopin 1969: 587).

It is not until the above has been stated that she conscientiously initiates the telling of "the" story, that is, the story of how events and circumstances transpired (or conspired) to make her lose her job. At this point, Elizabeth's own ambivalent self-image of guilty and innocent creates considerable ambiguity in the reader, complicated by the double message of the frame story.

Elizabeth's tendency to present who she is in terms of what she does is consistent with her preoccupation with plot. Following the tradition of classic U.S. mentality, she values action over state of being, and thus confirms her self-worth through her work. This corresponds to her refusal to perceive the long, loose preamble to "the story" as part of the story itself, since "nothing really happens," so to speak, in the introductory remarks. The reader, however, is in a singular position which both blurs the parameters of "the" story and forces him/her to consider the larger context as not only pertaining to the story being told, but also constituting a fundamental component of it. This is the case not only because it physically pertains to the text Elizabeth wrote, but also because it soon becomes clear that the plot development would not "make sense" without this contextual information. An interesting repercussion of this is that Elizabeth's story quite clearly slips beyond her control and into the hands of the reader who must form a coherent whole from the textual parts. The introductory information provided by Elizabeth activates frames of judgment, of guilt and blame, especially in terms of absoluteness versus contingency, which lead the reader to see the story not so much as Elizabeth presents it–"how" she lost her job, but rather as a story of underlying issues of "why" she lost

her job, with the concomitant shift from an emphasis on plot to an emphasis on character and narrative perspective.

In spite of Elizabeth's rather puerile insistence on plot, ironically, she never actually states "how" she lost her job, although the essential elements are there for the reader to put together. This opens space for a crucial question: is Elizabeth herself truly unaware of "what really happened," a reading which would tend to explain the naivete of her narration and the condescension of the frame story narrator, or is her incomplete account deliberate, a manifestation of her resignation to forces beyond her personal control? Her version of cause and effect is very straightforward and clear: in her account, she read a postcard addressed to Brightman informing him of an urgent meeting to be held the next morning in St. Louis, crucial to the point where "[Brightman's] own interest demands [his] presence," so she took it upon herself to personally inform him of it because the mail had arrived late and he would not have time to make the meeting if he did not receive his mail until the next day. Soon after, she received notice from the U.S. government that she had lost her job because of "incompetence and negligence in office, through certain accusations of...reading postal cards and permitting people to help themselves to their own mail" (Chopin 1969: 590). The crucial connection is that both accusations are related to Nathan Brightman. Elizabeth asserts that allowing people to take their own mail "[n]ever happened except with Nathan Brightman always reaching over and saying: 'Don't disturb yourself, Miss Elizabeth', when [she]'d be sorting out letters and he could reach his mail in the box just as well as not" (Chopin 1969: 590). The reading of the postcard on the fateful March night before the meeting is obviously related to Brightman as well. Even so, the simple connection of those facts to Brightman does not explain why he officially complained about her to the government. Elizabeth provides the missing link as she ruminates about the situation while in the hospital two months after having lost her job:

> ...a young man named Collins, got the position. He's the son of some wealthy, influential St. Louis man; a kind of delicate, poetical-natured young fellow that can't get along in business, and they used their influence to get him the position when it was vacant. They thinks [sic] it's the very place for him. I reckon 'tis (Chopin 1969: 590).

It is, of course, no coincidence that the urgent telegraph which Elizabeth delivered to Brightman was signed by none other than "Collins." It is also extremely unlikely that the names are the same due to happenstance. Without a doubt, Collins and Brightman conspired to force Elizabeth's demise as postmistress so that the younger Collins, who quite obviously does not follow in his father's energetic, entrepreneurial footsteps, can have respectable, if modest, employment. In other words, Elizabeth was framed.

The convergence of the different types of frames in this story correspond to what Ian Reid (1989) has called intratextual framing, a narrative technique by which "a text will sometimes seem to comment on aspects of its own genre through some little embedded episode, image, or situation that serves as...an inset reading model" (Chopin 1969: 302). In this sense, the introductory frame, with its carefully disguised undermining, constitutes a kind of foreshadowing of the core situation of Elizabeth's story; in both cases, Elizabeth is judged and found wanting by someone in a position of greater status and power. In both cases, a story is told, but significant elements are suggested by insinuation, left to inference, or most lethal of all,

ignored or denied. For example, in spite of the unknown identity of the frame story narrator, the authoritative tone of his narration tends to quell the reader's inclination to question the veracity of what he says, making his narrative manipulation of silence an effective strategy. This narrator "frames" Elizabeth's story in the same way Brightman frames Elizabeth the postmistress, by putting her in a position where she is unable to defend herself and then proceeding to condemn her, in the first case in a personal and literary sense, in the second, as an employee. In all three aspects, Elizabeth is thoroughly discredited and appears to be effectively silenced. The reader's cognitive frames are similarly manipulated by the first narrator to be prepared not only to read about how Elizabeth fails, but also to expect and to affirm that failure.

Another fundamental intratextual device in the story, that is, in Elizabeth's story, is the use of irony. There are multiple instances of verbal irony and significant manifestations of situational irony as well. For example, in narrating how she returned to the post office to get Brightman's mail to take to him, she reflects, "I don't believe anything could of induced me to go if I had known before hand what I was undertaking." The next sentence explains that the weather was atrocious and the journey up the hill both perilous and uncomfortable. The irony resides, of course, in the fact that her ignorance of what awaits her goes beyond the physical consequences of the bad weather to the loss of her job. Even more ironically, the physical consequences themselves are escalated far beyond expectations: as a result of her thorough soaking that cold evening, Elizabeth develops the consumption that eventually causes her death. In another instance of classic irony, Elizabeth berates herself for the satisfaction she felt when she hears the midnight express train thundering by with Brightman on it: "There was a lot of comfort knowing that Mr. Brightman had got aboard that train. Well, we all more or less selfish creatures in this world!" (Chopin 1969: 589). It is certainly ironic that her satisfaction here is more vicarious than personal; however, the greatest irony is in her gentle self-admonition for feeling smug about her accomplishment, since the selfishness to which she naively refers is rampant in Brightman and for all practical purposes nonexistent in herself. An even more powerful instance of irony can be found in her stupefied reaction to the government document dismissing her from her job, which she passes over to Vance to be sure of its content: "Just like when you can't understand a thing because you don't want to" (Chopin 1969: 590). This remark is followed by the "conclusion" to her story, which include her comments on Collins having been given her former job, narrated with either incredible innocence, remarkable obtuseness, serious denial, or amazing subtlety, depending upon the reader's assessment of Elizabeth's character. Both Elizabeth Stock and Kate Chopin employ irony as a strategy to create ambiguity in order to open space for that which is unspoken or unspeakable.

Although the reader is presented with two literal versions of who Elizabeth is, by the end of the story it becomes very apparent that just as this is much more than "one story," there are many possible "readings" of Elizabeth, as reader-response theories have emphasized. Elizabeth is cast as the protagonist of the microstories of Elizabeth-the-niece-of-Uncle-William, Elizabeth-the-aunt-of-Danny, and Elizabeth-the-love-of-Vance's-life. She is also a member of the collective "we" which constitutes the townspeople and contrasts so sharply with "the house on the hill," as the villagers call it. As she acknowledges, she is "a person that knew B. from hill's foot" (Chopin 1969: 588), part of the expendable mass exploited by the Brightmans and Collinses of that society. She also has major roles as Elizabeth-the-writer, in both the frame story and her own story, and Elizabeth the postmistress in the main story.

So exactly who is Elizabeth? That is one identity which is never articulated. The missing Elizabeth is the person behind these other identities, the woman who puts others before herself to the degree that she sacrifices both livelihood and life. And while we learn of her frustrations as a writer, we know little about her satisfactions as an individual, her needs and pleasures, her thoughts and feelings, in short, her self. She is effectively muted, neutralized, marginalized, as a writer, as a woman, and as a person.

But the issues of silence and silencing are not so easily dismissed in this short story. The narrator of the frame story claims that at the hospital Elizabeth "lapsed into a silence that remained unbroken till the end" (Chopin 1969: 586). While this may be true at the literal level of meaning–until the end of her life, her silence is most certainly broken at other levels. At the level of "storyness" in a traditional sense, Elizabeth's story comes to a logical conclusion with her pending death. This provides the kind of superficial closure that Susan Lohafer (1989: 249) affirms is closely related to our frame of storyness in establishing a sense of resolution through the progression of feasible, even predictable, developments. In so doing, it satisfies our expectations at what Suzanne Hunter Brown (1989: 242-3) calls the verbatim or local level, the "successive patterning" or "linear relationships" in literary texts. However, when Elizabeth's story is processed holistically, or "configurationally" in Brown's terminology, the reader is denied this immediate sense of closure. The silences of the story(ies) demand consideration as part of the "meaning." This is the point at which "what happens" is transformed into "why," when concerns with plot are subsumed by issues of narrative perspective and character analysis. Elizabeth's story goes beyond the story she herself narrates to include the frame story and is transformed into a story of marginalization in every sense. Just as her identity is reduced to marital status and "literary production" and her writing is then summarily dismissed as "scribbling," her importance as an individual is systematically reduced from useful to negligible to nonentity. However, perhaps the greatest irony of Chopin's entire story lies in the fact that against all these odds, in the face of multiple types of social silencing, Elizabeth speaks. She speaks out against social injustice and gender(ed) discrimination through her story, which is both accusation of and testimony to her marginalization. More significantly, it is a manifestation of voice, of selfhood, of a stubborn refusal to remain silenced.

The fundamental irony of Elizabeth's story is not that her expression of voice is posthumous, but that it is given space through that very hegemonic presence which appears to be denying her. The literal political framing in the plot causes Elizabeth to lose her job, but also provides her with the basic germ of her story and the opportunity to write it. The narrator of the introductory frame attempts to discredit her as a person and as a writer, but paradoxically accomplishes the opposite by making her narrative public. In spite of the initial activation of frames directed towards "reading" Elizabeth's story as a story of failure, the silences of the texts and the reader's need to "make sense of the whole" suggest a very different story. At these three levels of structure, plot, and cognitive processing, the framing devices boomerang and are transformed from strategies aimed at undermining into elements of vindication. Significantly, and not unexpectedly, the "telling" of Elizabeth's story, from whichever narrative perspective, communicates much more than what is articulated; beyond "the" story of who she is and how she lost her job is the larger story of differentiated status, hegemonic marginalization and conflicting valuations. Thus, it ineluctably narrates not only frames Elizabeth's interaction with and perception of the world, but provides its counterpart as well. Ironically,

its very existence gives Elizabeth the advantage of ultimately having the "final" word. Perhaps Elizabeth's "one story" constitutes, to paraphrase a line of Emily Dickinson's poetry which is as familiar as it is appropriate to this situation, not only her personal response to the missiles of Collins, Brightman, and even the U.S. government, but also her very own "postcard to the world."

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