

DISGUISES

ELIZABETH QUIRÓS GARCÍA

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad de Costa Rica

The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen -- it's not gasps and blood and falling about -- that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man falling to reappear, that's all -- now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back -- an exit... a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death.

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

As in a battlefield, writers use strategies to entangle their readers in a certain kind of mental atmosphere desired. There is an object of communication and there is a sender and a receiver of it. As “naïve” readers, people do not look at a text at a configurational level but remain at a verbatim one, accepting the narrator as the speaker of the “official

truth” of the text. As Susanne Hunter Brown states in her article “Discourse Analysis and the Short Story,” “verbatim recall is based on item-specific processing” while the configurational level is a “relational processing” (221). People live within these two spheres of knowledge and they are the ones who decide, according to their social and intellectual background. In Alice Walker’s short story “To Hell with Dying,” the reader is presented a story that, if read ingenuously, manifests only but pain and sorrow for a woman that dearly loved a man since her childhood. However, if seen under a different lens, the reader can recognize that through the narrative strategies of exploitation of primacy effect, the use of frames, and the employment of a particular vocabulary, Walker’s “To Hell with Dying” sets up the reader and gives a shift to the text regarding meaning and text construction.

Titles and first lines are significant in the first approach to a text. Brown asserts, quoting Perry, “at the beginning of

a text there are no dictates from earlier stages in the text; there are as yet no expectations other than cultural ones as to what is to be expected of texts in general or of a particular kind of text” (231). Following this statement, people who start reading a text are basically looking for cultural “clues” that will help them understand the text. However, I totally disagree with the last part of his assertion for, when reading a title and first lines of a text, readers do not just look forward to “what is to be expected of texts in general of a particular kind of text.” It is true that if a person is told, as a reader, that the text s/he is to read is a novel, s/he will probably approach it in the traditional way a novel is approached. Nevertheless, people should not deny the influence primacy effect has on the reading of a text. In Walker’s short story, the title is attractive to readers. It may be because it embraces two words that most people relate with the unknown. Usually, people are curious about the topics of the salvation of the soul after death and this title presents a “viable answer” to their supernatural fears. Moreover, the first letter of the story starts with a huge capital “M” that wakes and shakes most people’s memories of childhood fairy tales. So, the reader faces “hell,” “dying,” and perhaps a fairy tale “for adults,” and having these characteristics, it may have the “moral teaching” most tales have. Furthermore, the complete title “To Hell with Dying” portrays the idea of the possibility of ignoring and forgetting death. With this title and one letter, the reader is already expecting something else than what is “expected of texts in general.” Primacy effect as a narrative strategy in Walker’s text

achieves its importance for it sets the reader up regarding what to expect of the text and also because it disappoints the reader because death is not outside reality and cannot be overlooked or avoided. As a child, the narrator ignores that “death was final when it did come” (40), and even as a young adult, “at twenty-four,” she could not “believe that [she] had failed? that Mr. Sweet was really gone? He had never gone before” (42). Likewise, the reader’s first expectations of the oblivion of death – if seen under this light – are led to disappointment, for death will always be present in every human being’s life.

Ian Reid, in his article “Destabilizing Frames for Story,” defines frames as Jacques Derrida does. For him, as Reid quotes, “framing occurs, but there is no frame” (229). And as Reid himself explains, “frames, in other words, are in the eye of the beholder” (229). Consequently, as readers, people are the ones that inscribe their schemata in the texts they read. This assertion leads to M.H. Abrams’ idea of understanding a text and its language “as a medium of decidable meanings” (271), as expressed in his work *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Terms*. As a reader of Walker’s short story, I have found two basic types of frames: an intertextual frame and an extratextual one. Reid defines an intertextual frame as a frame that involves “more than just passing allusions or traces of ‘influence;’ intertextuality comprises devices by which a text signals how its very structure of meanings depends on both its similarity to and its difference from certain other texts or text types” (304). The intertextual frame to which the story alludes is to the Biblical story of Lazarus.

Smith's Bible Dictionary states that this story is about a young man and "the facts of his death and resurrection" (349). The narrator, whose name is never given, along with her siblings when children and alone as an adult, attempts to do a "reviving" (40) through kissing "him all over his wrinkled brown face" and tickling "him so that he would laugh all down his stomach" (35). He would die and would be reached from death, like Lazarus. The name Lazarus means "whom God helps." The narrator has no name, like God Himself, and besides she directly helps Mr. Sweet, "the only person over whom [she] had power" (40). For Reid, intertextuality "can be thought of as sign system in the senses that it generates meanings in a particular set of ways" (305). Through this intertextual analysis, the reader may go back to his/her cultural-religious heritage of the Western hemisphere, shifting from a male god figure that helps a man – Lazarus – and his sisters – Martha and Mary – to a female god figure who was finishing "[her] doctorate in Massachusetts" (41) helping a "diabetic and alcoholic guitar player" (35) married to "Miss Mary" (36). However, at the end of the story there is no way to avoid death and when she "opened [her] eyed, sure that [she] had reached him in time, his were closed" (42). Through this intertextuality, the narrator sets up the reader, then disappoints him for at the end there is death; nevertheless, at the end s/he is taken back to the same cultural-religious schema where, after experiencing life, there is death.

When discussing extratextual frames, Reid states that "these frames always carry and ideological freight, albeit inconspicuously and unwittingly.

Foremost among them is likely to be a set of assumptions based on the perceived status of the author and the supposed nature of his writings" (307). Besides the "ideological freight" a text may have, people will usually relate a writer's work to his/her most known works and as Alice Walker is a writer whose work *The Color Purple* is widely known, most readers will relate her to texts that revolve around black women, particularly marginal black women. The short story being discussed fulfills the reader's expectations for even though the narrator is never said to be black, the reader considers this as a fact through the different hints displayed in the text. When she was a little girl her "bushy hair had gotten in his nose" (39); besides, Mr. Sweet "liked to play Sweet Georgia Brown, and that was what he called [her] sometimes" (37). Therefore, one can conclude that she is not Caucasian. The extratextual frame of "To Hell with Dying" breaks with the reader's traditional conception of who is the object and who is the subject in the text. These frames answer some of the expectations of the reader; however, they are not totally fulfilled for the reader does not expect the black woman to be the subject in the text making the male character be an object.

Walker's use of language as a narrative strategy hides an unreliable narrator; this, due to the fact that the knowledge the reader gains about Mr. Sweet is totally subjective for the narrator is the only one in charge of stating it. She describes him as a "diabetic and an alcoholic and a guitar player [who] lived down the road from [them] in a neglected cotton farm" (35). Moreover, "he was constantly on the verge of being drunk" (36); he is a sick

person, who probably needed help and this help was given by the narrator and her family. They were the good neighbors who always knew how to “manage him to well” (38). The narrator states, after his death, that Mr. Sweet Little, “the man on the high old-fashioned bed with the quilt coverlet and the glowing white hair had been [her] first love” (42). The picture presented to the reader is that of love and concern, on the part of the narrator, towards Mr. Sweet. However, her description of his physical appearance seems more like a caricature of the traditional idea of an old black man. For her, he “was tall, thinnish man with thick kinky hair going dead white. He was dark brown, his eyes were squinty and sort of bluish” (36) and the narrator saw Mr. Sweet’s “deaths” as a “dallying” (38). Additionally, the narrator seems to be very compassionate towards the man; nonetheless, through vocabulary use, she portrays a different kind of attitude towards the dying man. The reader never gets to know how he and other people, other than the narrator and her family, perceived him(self). Walker’s use of language shakes the surface structure of this short story to open up to a new kind of reading.

It is through narrative strategies that the reader of a text may come to understand that his/her reading of the world as a text influences and shapes his/her reading of literary text. Primacy effect, as a narrative strategy, discloses a reader’s perception of language and cultural background, as does the intertextual frame. The extratextual framing ascribed to a work is also of significance for the reader’s apprehension of his/her surroundings. People communicate through language, besides other means, and it is through language that

a text is built, as is their conception of a literary text. Language may reveal hidden disguises presented in texts but are the disguises themselves hidden, or do they hide something significant?

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