

REALISM AND NARRATORS IN TOBIAS WOLFF'S SHORT STORIES

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Literary minimalism is considered a critical realist reaction to the excesses of postmodernism. It began in the United States in the Eighties and received critical sanction with the 1983 *Granta* issue in which some of the minimalist authors were published and which enjoyed a wide array of critical response.¹ In both positive and negative ways, minimalism has been associated with a smallness of vision and smallness of execution² and with the “reflection of the fragmentary and alienated condition of the twentieth-century self”. It focuses on defining a small literary world.³

Minimalism was a reaction against postmodernism, since after the postmodernist trend a return to nineteenth-century realism was inconceivable. As Stefan Colibaba, one of the most important scholars in the field, points out, “The Minimalists grew up in a world that already had a postmodern sensibility”.⁴ They never regarded literature as a mere recount of contemporary life. They moved away from postmodernism because of their contrasting sensibility and understanding of life.⁵ However, the imprint of postmodernism cannot be totally eliminated. Ann-Marie Karlsson describes minimalism as a subversion of representational realism, a point on which most critics

This study is part of a research project funded by the Regional Ministry of Culture of the Autonomous Government of Castile and Leon (ref. number SA012A10-1).

¹ Myles Weber, “Revisiting Minimalism”, *Northwest Review*, XXXVII/3 (1999), 118-19.

² Ewing Campbell, “How Minimal Is Minimalism?”, in *The Tales We Tell*, eds Barbara Lounsberry *et al.*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, 15.

³ Stefan Colibaba, “Raymond Carver’s Minimalism”, *British and American Studies*, I (1997), 126-27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

agree. Her starting point is Frederick Barthelme's article "On Being Wrong: Convicted Minimalist Spills Bean", published in the *New York Times Book Review*. She observes that minimalist realism suggests the "film-like quality of this fiction".⁶ For Karlsson, "its extreme verisimilitude creates an 'over-realism'". Minimalism is hyper-realistic because of form, content and ideology. The shift from "traditional" realism makes minimalism "partly an experimental avant-garde fiction, which is attempting to find new means of expression beyond traditional realism and postmodern fiction".⁷ Critics generally assume that minimalism is a development of postmodernist fiction and that minimalist writers have acquired postmodernist techniques and have been affected by the postmodern frame of mind.

The minimalist writers' attack on realism has fostered a fiction that presents affinities with hyperrealism or the grotesque and the uncanny. Their assault subverts representational realism without losing sight of verisimilitude. As W.M. Verhoeven argues, minimalism's gimmicks are not "a wilful departure from formal realism and mimetic rendition of truth, but rather an act of discovery – discovery, that is, in the process of composing their stories".⁸

At present there is not a large body of critical writings on late twentieth-century realism. The aim of this essay is to help to fill the void in this field of study. Although I am well aware that this investigation has to be limited in scope and constitutes only a preliminary approach to the much broader research of minimalism, the purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of realism in late twentieth-century American short stories. Centering on three short stories – "The Night in Question", "Sanity" and "The Other Miller" from *The Night in Question*⁹ – this essay focuses on the role of the narrators in Tobias Wolff's short stories and on his use of narrative

⁶ Ann-Marie Karlsson, "The Hyperrealistic Short Story: A Postmodern Twilight Zone", in *Criticism in the Twilight Zone: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Politics*, eds Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad and Lennart Bjök, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1990, 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸ W.M. Verhoeven, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado About Minimalism", in *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism*, eds Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, Amsterdam: Rodopi and New York, 1995, 55.

⁹ Tobias Wolff, *The Night in Question*, New York: Vintage, 1996.

voice, which reveals the minimalist use of narrative strategies. As a minimalist writer, Tobias Wolff is concerned with reducing the literary world to its most concise form. His universe, much like that of Raymond Carver's stories, is stripped of heroism and grandeur.¹⁰

The author's use of narrators is indicative of his conception of the relationship between reality and literature. It is through the narrator's point of view that readers perceive the reality of the literary space created by the short story. Narrative voices are keys to the dynamics of a short fiction's literary world. They represent the author's tools for presenting a realist depiction of society. However, this new type of realism has been strongly influenced by modernist and postmodernist conventions.

As Stefan Colibaba remarks:

... minimalist art does not require moral involvement The key precept of minimalism appears to be precisely this requirement that the work be stripped of judgment and invite no judgment; it deletes any visible sign of the work's having an intention upon the reader The minimalist short story writer leaves things unsaid, unexplained because he may choose to convey a view of life in which things felt but left unstated have value.¹¹

An absence of judgment, the refusal to give explanations, and the adoption of an elliptical style are certainly the main features of minimalism, which must be taken into account when analyzing minimalist short stories. Occasionally the author can be judgmental, but more often than not, his opinions are voiced by the narrator. In fact, the narrator acts as the authorized speaker in the narration, and it is through his point of view that readers see the world and come to terms with the final meaning of the story. The minimalist writer's strategy is to leave things unstated. Thus, the narrator may subtly refer to or hint at something that is not openly stated in the story but may have a decisive meaning in its overall structure. The narrator does not act as the author's mask and is not invested with authorial responsibility. Consequently, his role becomes problematic. He holds narratorial authority, but his view of the surrounding world is not comprehensive. His point of view is partial and fragmentary. In

¹⁰ Colibaba, "Raymond Carver's Minimalism", 126-31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

consonance with the nature of the short story, the narrator does not attempt to give a full picture of the world. And he does not assume that existence is meaningful.

Tobias Wolff has reflected on the nature and the origins of fiction. In an interview by J.H.E. Paine he explained:

That distance between the supposition of why you are doing what you are doing and the shadowy reality of it is the loam of fiction. That terrain, that's exactly where fiction writers work.¹²

Wolff seems to place fiction in the uncertain terrain between reality and desire, somewhere between fantasy and reality, very close to Nathaniel Hawthorne's theorization of the neutral ground of fiction. As such, the short story writer must consider both reality and imagination. If the narration gravitates excessively towards one of these poles, it is bound to lose some of its features. If too realistic, it can give the impression of being a documentary; if too fantastic, it can miss the sense of reality. In the latter case the "as-if-real" function that became prominent in late Romanticism in Herman Melville's short stories does not play a role anymore. The narrative contract between the writer and the reader is thus maintained with the illusion of reality that is created in the story. In this interview Wolff insists on the liminal nature of short fiction:

I think the besetting vice of most writers is a programmatic intention, making a story like an algebra equation with a solution at the end. Chekhov gives another model of conclusiveness – that conclusiveness inhabits the whole body of the story, not just the ending. That every good story expresses inevitability in all its parts, and yet is not foreclosed, shut down, at the last word. A good story somehow continues in a shimmer of possibility.¹³

The reader must supplement what the narrator silences. His omissions indicate or hint at some aspects of the story that the reader must solve for himself. This lack of resolution obliges the reader to seek the missing links and forces him to provide the story's ending.

¹² J.H.E. Paine, "Tobias Wolff", *Les Cahiers de la nouvelle – Journal of the Short Story in English*, XLI (Autumn 2003), 369.

¹³ Jack Livings, "Tobias Wolff, The Art of Fiction No. 183", *The Paris Review*, CLXXI (Fall 2004), 16.

Thus the narrator must carefully balance what he says and what he omits.

In his Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories* (1994), Wolff declares his interest in stories that are not postmodern – that is, stories that are not “concerned with exploring [their] own fictional nature and indifferent if not hostile to the short story’s traditional interests in character and dramatic development and social context”. He expresses his preference for

... stories about people who led lives neither admirable nor depraved, but so convincing in their portrayal that the reader has to acknowledge kinship.

That sense of kinship is what makes stories important to us. The pleasure we take in cleverness and technical virtuosity soon exhausts itself in the absence of any recognizable human landscape. We need to feel ourselves acted upon by a story, outraged, exposed, in danger of heartbreak and change. Those are the stories that endure in our memories, to the point where they take on the nature of memory itself.¹⁴

Wolff is more concerned with the meaning and moral of the story than with its technical aspects, and it is no wonder that he has been classified as a moral writer.¹⁵ In Brian Hanley’s opinion, “Tobias Wolff sees his fiction as ‘inquisitive’ rather than didactic”.¹⁶ For Wolff the short story is not a matter of abstract philosophy embodied in an array of virtuous narrative techniques. Fiction must have recognizable characters and a plot that deals with human experience. Wolff is interested in short stories that have a moral purpose and that deal with human experience lived by common people under normal circumstances. Based on these interests, Wolff writes a type of fiction that may be relevant to the contemporary reader who has to face the challenges of modern society. He believes that the artistic experience of the short story can have a transformative power: “I think we are changed by the experience of beauty, by the experience of a profound

¹⁴ Tobias Wolff, Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Short Stories*, New York: Vintage, 1994, xiii.

¹⁵ Paine, “Tobias Wolff”, 372-73.

¹⁶ Brian Hanley, “Modernity’s ‘Mr. Rambler’: Tobias Wolff’s Exploration of Vanity and Self-Deception in *The Night in Question*”, *Papers on Language and Literature*, XXXIX/2 (Spring 2003), 147.

emotion so artistically formed that it becomes an experience of the generosity of life.”¹⁷

In order to make his fiction credible, Wolf resorts to a series of narrative techniques, among which narrative voice and point of view hold a prominent role. Narrators create the standpoint from which the story is told, providing selected information about themselves, the story and the characters, and establishing the emotional distance between the reader and the characters. The narrator shares with the reader his emotional relationship with the characters of the story. Wolff’s basic strategy is to resort to a narrator who is independent of the action of the story and who recounts a moment in the characters’ lives. As the story progresses, one of the characters takes on the role of the narrator and carries on with the story. This is the case of short stories such as “Sanity”, “The Other Miller” and “The Night in Question”, which illustrate this narratorial frame.

“Sanity” is the story of an unnamed insane man in the hospital who is visited by his daughter April, accompanied by his second wife, Claire. The reader is offered a glimpse into the difficult relationship between his daughter by his first marriage and her stepmother. After their visit, while waiting to take the bus, the two women reminisce about particular moments of their past. Both remember April’s initial rejection of her stepmother and ponder on their subsequent mutual understanding and cooperation. There is little action in the story. Wolff prefers to render the events of the story through the subjectivity of his characters. He creates a narratorial frame in which he alternates the characters’ point of view with the narrator’s.

The story is elliptically told by a third-person narrator who does not play any active role in the story. However, the narrator provides the reader with all the information on the two women’s life. As soon as the reader becomes familiar with the characters and their lives, the narrator’s report is dropped. His account is replaced by a dialogue between Claire and April, followed by Claire’s remembrance of her life with her first husband. Claire’s story will be expanded in turn by the anonymous narrator. It is important to note that the shift in the voice is not abrupt: first there is a transition from the third-person narrator to the dialogue between the two characters, and then there is a second, fluent transition towards Claire’s own account of her first marriage. The last intervention of the third-person narrator is not

¹⁷ Paine, “Tobias Wolff”, 380.

innocent. This time the narrator knows more about Claire's thoughts and feelings, and gives more information about them. The narrator comments on Claire's relationship with her first husband and on April's love affair with a young man, who is regarded with suspicion by her stepmother. Given their mutual distrust, April cannot communicate with her stepmother. At the end of the story, the third-person narrator experiences an emotional transformation and gives up his initial detachment for an involvement with his character's innermost feelings.

The last shift from Claire's free indirect style to the narrator's account parallels the latter's increasing involvement in the story. The transition from the direct style to a free indirect style turns the narrator into the character's spokesman. Although this seems to be a minimal change in narrative style, the effect is very powerful in terms of the narrator's emotional involvement, since he seems to be closer to the characters and the readers. His emotional involvement is greater at the end of the story than at the beginning. Moreover, the use of the free indirect style allows Wolff a closure that is not complete. The narrator does not have the last word; instead he opens up a wide range of interpretive possibilities. Wolff himself corroborates his conscious purpose in resorting to this literary strategy: "One of the things that I am at home with in Chekhov is the degree to which he trusts his reader to travel beyond the given, to collaborate with him in the making of his stories."¹⁸

"The Other Miller" is an interesting example of the importance the narrator's voice holds for Wolff in the construction of short stories. Miller is a soldier who, upon receiving a letter announcing his mother's death, is given leave to go home for bereavement. Yet in the same battalion there is another soldier who bears the same name and has the same initials. The irony of the story consists in the fact that Miller thinks that the first sergeant has by mistake handed him the letter that was intended for "the other Miller".

Miller does not say anything about the confusion he believes the sergeant made when he gave him the letter; instead, he ponders on his mother. They had been on bad terms since she married Miller's high school biology teacher. Disappointed, Miller decided to join the army, knowing his mother would disapprove of his decision. During the first

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

months she used to send him letters on a weekly basis, which she would receive back unopened. In the end she gave up any kind of communication with her son. When Miller arrives home he realizes that the first sergeant did not make any mistake in handing him the letter. His mother had actually died, and he was able to arrive in time for her funeral.

Wolff's story is told in the present tense, a strategy that gives the impression that the story is located in a timeless present, which confers a certain air of detachment and impersonality. The narratorial voice and the narrative tense create an atmosphere of estrangement that adequately render Miller's situation. At first the story seems to belong to the genre of the fantastic tale of the *Doppelgänger*. But as the story unfolds the reader is aware that there is no fantasy in the story. In fact, the main concern of the story is Miller's rejection of reality.

Miller's emotional coldness is well reflected by the third-person narrator who tells the story. The narrator observes the events from a distanced and probably superior standpoint. At the end of the story, when Miller goes back home, there is a covert change in the narratorial strategy: the reader becomes gradually aware that the story is now being told not by the third-person narrator, but by Miller himself, who records his own thoughts:

You could be going along just fine and then one day, through no fault of your own, something could get loose in your bloodstream and knock out part of your brain. Leave you like that. And if it didn't happen now, all at once, it was sure to happen slowly later on. That was the end you were bound for.¹⁹

This narratorial shift does not last long. In the following paragraph, a new turn of the narratorial voice brings the third-person narrator back. This brief lapse has been sufficient enough to provide a direct glimpse into Miller's thoughts. Miller's psychological detachment makes the narratorial voice problematic. If Miller had accepted from the beginning that the letter was directed to him and not to the other Miller, and that the news of the death referred to his own mother and not to his companion's mother, there would have been no need for Wolff to introduce two narrative voices, Miller's and the narrator's.

¹⁹ Wolff, *Night in Question*, 99.

To the reader's great surprise (and this is also the climax of the story), it turns out that the narrator's voice and Miller's voice are one and the same. The use of these two different narrative voices corresponds to Wolff's intention to stage by means of narrative technique the psychological processes of a mind close to schizophrenia.

The variations in the narrative voice imply, firstly, an alienation from the persona and, secondly, a lack of emotional involvement. Both narrative voices, third- and second-person, indicate that the narrator does not participate in the story, yet the great irony of the story is that the narrator turns out to be Miller himself, and the former detachment translates into the latter's mental estrangement and inner dissociation.

Wolff's third story, "The Night in Question", presents a more complex narrative strategy, which relies heavily on shifts in narrative voices. It is composed of two interrelated stories. The first is the story of Frances and Frank, two siblings, whose lives were ruined by their father, and the second is the story of Mike Bollingen, a friend of Frank's, whom Frank turns into the hero of an extremely sad life. In this first narration the past returns obsessively. Frank's father, a violent and arbitrary man, used to physically abuse his son, while his daughter, Frances, actively protected him against their father's aggressive behavior. Subdued by his father's personality, Frank used to repeat his father's story about a father's decision to sacrifice the life of his own son in order to save a trainload of strangers. Frances pressures her brother to reject this unloving moral. She makes him say he would choose to save a person he cares for instead an anonymous crowd, which is an indirect reference to what she has done over the years for her brother.

The story of Frances and Frank's childhood is told by an external anonymous narrator who is not directly involved in the recounted events, whereas Mike Bollingen's story is told by Frank. Since Frank acts as narrator, there are certain differences between the frame story and Mike's. Although both stories are told by an external narrator, in the first there is little moral and sentimental involvement: Frank and Frances' lives are narrated in free indirect speech reflecting Frances' thoughts. In Mike's story, however, the narrator is not involved in the story. The narrator's emotional involvement emerges not from his narrative point of view but from the narrator's biased selection of events. Frank highlights those details he believes to be more effective

in causing pity in the reader. In the end, the narrator's emotional involvement is a matter of selection and presentation of events. The narrator singles out some events of Mike's life and discards others. Even his sister Frances objects to his subjective selection. In this case, the narrator, though external to the story, is not objective, since he tends to sentimentalize Mike's life.

The reader perceives the different degree of narrative involvement in both stories. The reader tends to have more trust in Frances and Frank's story, which, although retold by an anonymous narrator, seems to be more reliable because it is more objective. The anonymous external narrator makes use of free indirect speech, creating the impression that he is close to the characters and that he is privy to their thoughts. Conversely, in Mike's story, the reader knows the narrator, and this seems to favor his credibility as storyteller. However, the narrator's overt emotional involvement prevents the reader from knowing the protagonist's real thoughts. Consequently, the reader is suspicious of the narrator's account.

In conclusion, the narrators of these three stories play a fundamental role in Wolff's narrative strategies. The narrative voice opens or closes the narrative focus, which in turn has a bearing on the selected events and the dynamics of point of view. The narrators' reliability depends on the union of narrative voice and point of view. Realism is based on the narrators' reliability, which in turn is sustained by a narrative voice that must be as unobtrusive and impersonal as possible. Wolff's stories resort mainly to impersonal narrative voices.

In cases where the narrator is too involved in the events he is narrating, his reliability and the realist genre are compromised. Wolff's subtle manipulations of point of view and narratorial voice create a realistic short story, which encompasses both the external reality of events and the subjective internal reality of the characters' innermost thoughts. Wolff's new realism is no longer the plain realism of the nineteenth century, but a more nuanced mode filtered by modern and postmodern aesthetics.