

Narrative Strategies in Sherwood Anderson's *Death in the Woods*

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Abstract

Sherwood Anderson's Death in the Woods utilizes intricate narrative strategies to explore the themes of isolation and existential reflection. This essay focuses on three key techniques: (1) a complex first-person narrator whose framing creates intimacy yet reveals subjectivity; (2) the narrator's unreliability, stemming from distance and invention, questioning factual truth; and (3) narrative time manipulation, using flashbacks, varied pacing, and repetition. These intertwined techniques help to create a hauntingly ambiguous meditation on life, death, and human relationship.

Key Words

Sherwood Anderson; Narrative strategies; Genette; unreliable narrator.

1. Introduction

Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) was an influential American author known for his modernist approach to literature and his exploration of the human condition. He's called "writer's writer" and have influenced prominent figures like Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. One of his most notable works, *Death in the Woods*, is a poignant short story that delves into themes of loneliness, sacrifice, and the harsh realities of rural life. In this work, Sherwood Anderson utilizes a range of narrative strategies to explore the life and death of the protagonist, employing elements such as a first-person narrator, unreliability of narrator, manipulation of narrative time. These techniques work together to deepen the reader's engagement with the story and illuminate its thematic concerns. Anderson's narrative style and his focus on the inner lives of ordinary people have made *Death in the Woods* a significant contribution to American literature, reflecting his broader concerns with human isolation and the complexity of everyday existence.

2. The Role of the Narrator in *Death in the Woods*

2.1. First Person Narrator

Genette conceptualizes the narrator as a crucial structural element in narrative fiction. The narrator is not just a passive conduit for the story but an active agent who mediates the narrative and shapes the reader's perception of the events and characters. *Death in the Woods* is narrated in the first person by an unnamed male character who reflects on the life of Mrs. Grimes, the protagonist of the narrative who suffers from life and "feeds" all creatures until her death. The narrator "I", as a character in the small town is not a participant in the events but rather a detached observer who recounts the life and death of Mrs. Grimes from a removed perspective. His role is to frame the story within a broader context, providing reflections and interpretations that shape the reader's understanding of Mrs. Grimes's life and death.

The narrator "I" was a boy and is a man now, recalling the events. "SHE was an old woman and lived on a farm near the town in which I lived. All country and small-town people have seen such old women, but no one knows much about them. " and "People drive right down a road and never notice an old woman like that. (Anderson, 249)", leaving them to shoulder the weighty burdens of their life alone. At first, the narrator scarcely remembers them. Every town,

he says, has some old women, not known, never spoken to, a thing alone, who trudge into the town to trade a few eggs or chickens for groceries. Then he recovers her name and the historical details of her birth, marriage and life.

The employment of first-person narration makes the story more close to the audience, "the audience is invited to enter as individual into the process almost identical with that of the narrator... to share directly not only the narrator's responses but his act of discovering and creating those responses" (Lawry, 307). When telling the identity of the woman, the narrator states, "I remember now that she was a bound girl and did not know where her father and mother were. Maybe she did not have any father. You know what I mean" (Anderson, 251). Before the woman died, he shares with the reader that "When you are about so cold you can't get any colder." (Anderson, 256) In telling the finding of the woman's body by the hunter, again he invites the reader to agree with him: "If something change or uncanny has happened in the neighborhood, all you think about is getting away from there as fast as you can" (Anderson, 257). Finally, he tells the reader that "I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again (Anderson, 259)" to make sure that the readers will not misunderstand his meaning of the story told by him. With these invitations, the readers quickly sense this relationship and become emotionally involved with the narrator's struggle to tell his story almost as much as with the story itself. At last, the reader find that the narrator's stance of simple, artless sincerity revealing all is but a guise for artistic purpose and effect.

2.2. Unreliability of the Narrator

The concept of the unreliable narrator, as defined by Wayne C. Booth in his influential work *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, is a fundamental aspect of narrative analysis in literature. According to Booth, a narrator is considered reliable when they speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work, which is to say the implied author's norms, and unreliable when they do not. As unreliability increases, there obviously can come a point at which such transformed information ceases to be useful even in characterization of minds, unless the author retains some method of showing what the facts are from which the speaker's interpretations characteristically diverge. (Booth, 175)

The unreliability of the narrator in *Death in the Woods* is a crucial aspect of how the story is perceived. Although the narrator appears to be knowledgeable and observant, there are elements that suggest a degree of subjectivity and partiality in his recounting.

Unreliable narrators often provide a subjective view of events, colored by their own emotions, prejudices, or mental state. One of the most distinctive features of the narrator in *Death in the Woods* is his tendency to mix factual recounting with personal reflection. Grimes's son and husband, a man named Jake Grimes, are described as "a tough lot". The narrator then illustrates an unsettling encounter from his youth with Jake Grimes, who says nothing but communicates everything through a single defiant glare.

"Two or three other men were there, but no one spoke to him. He sat for a few minutes and then got up and went away. When he was leaving he turned around and stared at the men. There was a look of defiance in his eyes. "Well, I have tried to be friendly. You don't want to talk to me. It has been so wherever I have gone in this town. If, some day, one of your fine horses turns up missing, well, then what?" He did not say anything actually. "I'd like to bust one of you on the jaw," was about what his eyes said. I remember how the look in his eyes made me shiver. (Anderson, 250)"

The narrator presents an imagined dialogue that paints Jake as a bitter grumpy man, this is seen as the first instance of the narrator's manipulation of fact, one of his first creative liberties in recounting the Grimes family's history. Such blending of fact and fiction underscores the

narrator's role as storyteller, highlighting the limited and ultimately subjective nature of his understanding.

The narrator's depiction of Mrs. Grimes's life is also imbued with a sense of sympathy and pity, which colors the reader's perception of her character. "She was a slight thing, and when she had been married for three or four years, and after the two children were born, her shoulders became stooped (Anderson, 251)". Her husband and son even order "the old woman about like a servant (Anderson, 254)", "they leave everything at home for her to manage and she had no money (Anderson, 251)". When talking about the four Grimes dogs, the "tall gaunt fellows", the narrator says, "such men as Jake Grimes and his son always keep just such dogs (Anderson, 254)", suggesting that such villains like the husband and son only deserve such gaunt and greedy dogs. His reflections on her hardships and struggles are interspersed with his own interpretations, suggesting that his portrayal of Mrs. Grimes is shaped by his emotional responses.

The narrator's recollections are not always entirely coherent or comprehensive. The whole story is recounted by the narrator years after the incident, as he grapples with the details of the retelling in contrast to his brother's version: "I did not think he got the point. He was too young and so was I (Anderson, 257)." The fragmented nature of his storytelling reflects the complexity of Mrs. Grimes's life and the limitations of the narrator's understanding. At times, his observations are tinged with uncertainty or ambiguity, highlighting the inherent challenges in fully grasping another person's experiences. When the narrator describes the details of how the old couple got married, he says, "I wonder how I know all this, It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy" (Anderson, 251). It suggests that he creates his own fiction to fill in the gaps in the old woman's story about which he had no knowledge.

Another example is the narrator's description of the death scene of the old woman. The narrator perceives Mrs. Grimes' corpse as "so white and lovely, so like marble" (Anderson, 258), that scene fascinates and troubles him for a long time. He was also very young when he witnessed her death. "The whole thing, the story of the old woman's death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off" (Anderson, 259). Even now he is an adult, he still couldn't find all the facts to join the story thus he invents some parts using his personal imagination and experiences. All those uncertainty contributes to the overall sense of the unreliability, as the narrator's account may not capture the complete truth of the events.

3. Narrative Time in *Death in the Woods*

3.1. Order

Gérard Genette's concepts of narrative time—order, duration (speed of events), and frequency of events—offer a rich framework for analyzing narrative structures. Order refers to the sequence in which events are presented in the narrative relative to their chronological occurrence. Deviations from strict chronological order within the discourse is called "anachronies" by Genette (1980) - and these he divided into two types, depending on whether the discourse was jumping forward or backwards in relation to the story's time. There are two types of anachrony based on Genette (1980):

- a. Analepsis (flashback): The narrator recounts after the fact an event that took place earlier than the present point in the main story.
- b. Prolepsis (flashforward/ foreshadowing): The narrator anticipates events that will occur after the main story ends.

In *Death in the Woods*, Anderson manipulates the order of events to enhance thematic depth and create a richer emotional impact.

Anderson's narrative is not strictly linear. This short story consists of five parts, in the first part, the story opens with the narrator recounting a vivid, seemingly disconnected anecdote about a woman. Referring to the woman as "nothing special" (Anderson, 249), the narrator explains that she is known only as Grimes, her husband Jake's last name. He feels compelled for some reason to tell her story now, though many years have passed since her death and since he last thought of her at all. The first part establishes a sense of mystery and foreboding. Then Anderson uses flashbacks frequently to fill in details about Mrs. Grimes's past. This approach allows him to juxtapose the immediate, visceral experience of death with a more contemplative exploration of the woman's past. The narrator's retrospective view creates a layered understanding of the woman's life, making the narrative more complex and poignant.

In part three, the narrator first describes the old woman's way home on that snowy night, then interjects the egregious behavior of old woman's son and her son's girlfriend. Grimes's son brings his out-of-town girlfriend to the family's farm, and they drunkenly order the old woman around "like a servant". A strange interjection in the middle of Grimes's death scene, this passage highlights the narrator's nonlinear state of mind and willingness to derail the narrative for additional context. The shift from the discovery of the body to the detailed recounting of the woman's hardships highlights the contrast between the finality of death and the continuous struggle of life. This order of presentation aligns with Genette's notion of narrative time by emphasizing how the sequence of events affects the reader's perception of the characters and their motivations.

3.2. Duration

Duration refers to the relationship between the time span of the events depicted in the story and the time taken to narrate them. Genette describes four distinct modes for the mapping of story-time to discourse-time (1980, 94), to which Prince (1982) added a fifth "stretch" (1982, 56). In the following, these five modes, which are the components of duration, will be explained in more details:

- a. Ellipsis: The discourse says absolutely nothing about some part of the event-story,
- b. Summary: Some part of the event-story is summarized in the discourse, creating acceleration. Summaries can be of variable length.
- c. Scene: Narrative (discourse) time corresponds to the story's time. There is a consistent match between ST and NT.
- d. Pause: The event-story is interrupted to make room for narratorial discourse. Passing of ST temporarily suspended to allow for description of a static setting or for a digression. Static descriptions fall into this category. The descriptions of landscapes, state of mind, or sociocultural backgrounds are instances of this category.
- e. Stretch: It takes longer to describe an action than actually elapsed while it was happening. (Fludernik, 2006)

These five components of duration can be used to varying degrees and they can also be combined. Anderson's manipulation of duration in *Death in the Woods* is integral to the story's impact.

Anderson frequently uses ellipsis and summary to condense time and focus on significant events. The narrative often skips over long periods of the woman's life, summarizing these intervals to highlight key moments. The story compresses the years of the woman's marriage and her subsequent decline into brief passages, using summary to convey the weight of these experiences without dwelling on minutiae. After long years of mistreatment, the old woman accepts it with enduring silence, "She didn't mind much; she was used to it." "Whatever happened she never said anything. That was her way of getting alone. She had managed that way when she was a young girl at the German's and ever since she had married Jake" (Anderson,

254). Anderson summarizes the woman's long years of toil and hardship, providing a sweeping overview rather than a detailed day-by-day account. This approach allows the reader to grasp the cumulative effects of her struggles and their ultimate impact on her final moments.

Anderson also expands certain moments to amplify their emotional resonance. The detailed depiction of the woman's last moments in the woods, for example, is given considerable narrative space, creating a sense of foreboding and tragedy. This stretching of time in these critical moments enhances the dramatic tension and underscores the story's themes of loneliness and despair.

"With the bag on her back she went painfully along across an open field, wading in the deep snow, and got into the woods"(Anderson, 254), she then rests under a tree, falls asleep and eventually dies. "Then after a time the weather cleared. Then moon even came out"(Anderson, 254). The death scene is described in details, extending from part 2 to part 5. This expansion of narrative time contrasts with the brevity of other life events, emphasizing the significance of her death.

3.3. Frequency

Frequency concerns how often events are narrated relative to their occurrence. "A system of relationships is established between these capacities for 'repetition' on the part of both the narrated events (of the story) and the narrative statements (of the text) -a system of relationships that we can a priori reduce to four virtual types, simply from the multiplication of the two possibilities given on both sides: the event repeated or not, the statement repeated or not" (Genette, 1980: 114). Anderson strategically repeats certain events or motifs to underscore their significance.

The narrator describes Mrs. Grimes's existence as an unending cycle of "feeding", a metaphor for the relentless self-sacrifice women often endure to meet the needs of men. Her days were filled with feeding "horses, cows, pigs, dogs, and men" (Anderson, 253) , illustrating the universal reliance on her nurturing yet receiving no care in return. The old woman's deeds of feeding is repeated many times, and the most striking example is the narrator's summary:

"The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did, She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old, and when she died. She fed animal life in cows, in chickens, in pigs, in horses, in dogs, in men. Her daughter had died in childhood and with her one son she had no articulate relations. On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life.

She died in the clearing in the woods and even after her death continued feeding animal life "(Anderson, 259).

The repeated references to the woman's struggles and the harshness of her environment reinforce the story's central themes. The recurrence of her experiences with poverty and hardship throughout the narrative highlights the relentless nature of her suffering.

4. Conclusion

In *Death in the Woods*, Sherwood Anderson's narrative strategies—particularly the use of a first-person narrator, the employment of unreliability, the manipulation of narrative time—create a rich and multifaceted story. These techniques work in tandem to present a complex portrayal of Mrs. Grimes's life and death, inviting readers to engage with the text on a deeper level and reflect on the themes of suffering, mortality, and human experience. Through these narrative strategies, Anderson crafts a story that is both intimate and thought-provoking, revealing the intricate dynamics between narrative perspective and thematic exploration.

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