Narrative Criticism

see
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What Is Narrative Criticism?

Focus on finished form of text
Emphasis on unity of text as a whole
Understanding text as an end in itself
Basis on communication models of speech-act theory

Point of View
• One way implied author influences reader’s apprehension of text is by insisting that the reader adopt a point of view consistent with the narrative
• God’s or Satan’s (or thinking “human things”)
• God’s point of view can be expressed reliably through angels, prophets, miracles, dreams, and Scripture
• The creation of a narrative world in which God’s evaluative point of view can be determined and must be accepted as normative is a powerful rhetorical device.
Narrative Criticism

Narration
- First or third person
- How knowledgeable
- How reliable
- How intrusive

- Third person, omniscient narration creates a “God perspective” of the story

Narrative Criticism

Symbolism
- Implies a recognition that something means more than it initially appears to mean
- Archetypal symbols (light/dark)
- Symbols of ancestral vitality (#12)
- Symbols created by implied author (fig tree)
- Symbols of cultural range (fox…)

Luke 13:31-33
31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” 32 He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’ 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

Narrative Criticism

Irony
- Implies that true interpretation is actually contrary to the apparent meaning
- Verbal Irony or Situational (Dramatic) Irony

Narrative Criticism

Symbolism and Irony
- Reader rejects literal meaning in response to internal/external clues.
- Tries out alternative explanations
- Evaluates these in terms of beliefs about author
- Makes a decision based on assumed intentions of author

Narrative Criticism

Narrative Patterns
- Repetition, contrast, comparison, causation, climax, interrogation, inclusio, interchange, chiasm, intercalation
For example:
- Two feeding of the multitude stories
- Mark 5:21-43 – Jairus’ daughter and woman with flow of blood
- Mark 11:13-25 – Fig tree and cleansing of Temple

Narrative Criticism

Events and Plot
Characters
Settings

The author makes decisions about how each of these will be presented.
These decisions do make a difference in how the reader perceives the narrative.
A Narrative Method for Interpreting Mark
*Mark as Story*

Events and Plot
Characters
Setting
Narrator
Rhetoric

These are the elements that are considered when doing Narrative Criticism

Story
• What is said

Discourse
• How the story is told

There’s this guy who dies and...

Story
Discourse (Rhetoric)

• What is said

• How the story is told

• Characters, events, places

• How it affects the hearer
Mark 10:17-22

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."
Mark 10:17-22

21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.
Mark 10:17-22

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In the Gospel of Mark

The rhetorical / persuasive techniques of the narrative creates opportunities for the reader to ‘invest’ in the story. That is, the reader is being persuaded to believe that the story is true.

Mark 4.11

“To you has been given the secret of the dominion of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables;

Who do you now understand the “you” to be? How do you know if you are in or out? What is the appeal of knowing the secret?

In the Gospel of Mark

Point of view of Narrator (Mark) = Point of view of Jesus
= Point of view of Reader

Mark 9.35-37 and 10.13-16

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”
34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

Mark 9.35-37 and 10.13-16

35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”
Mark 9.35-37 and 10.13-16

36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,
37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9.35-37 and 10.13-16

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.
15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

In the Gospel of Mark

REPETITION provides the reader additional perspective that brings the Narrator, Jesus, and the Reader into even closer relationship

Mark 6.34

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.
Mark 6.35-44
When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?”

>>> 5000 men fed

Mark 8.1-10
In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 2 “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. 3 If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way--and some of them have come from a great distance.” 4 His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?”

>>> 4000 people fed

How do these two accounts of the feeding function in the story?

How do these two accounts of a miraculous feeding function in the discourse?

In the Gospel of Mark

The use of NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE brings the Narrator, Jesus, and the Reader into even closer relationship

Mark 14:32-37
32 They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”
33 He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. 34 And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.”
35 And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. 36 He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”
Mark 14:32-37

37 He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?"

In the Gospel of Mark

The use of IRONY and RIDDLES brings the Narrator, Jesus, and the Reader into even closer relationship.

Mark 15:16-18

16 Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. 17 And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. 18 And they began saluting him, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

In the Gospel of Mark

The use of NARRATIVE INFORMATION brings the Narrator, Jesus, and the Reader into even closer relationship.

Mark 15.33-35

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Mark 1.1
1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What do these verses presume about its reader?
How much does the reader know?
For whom was this Gospel written and why?

The Gospel of Mark
… “does not claim to be history. It is not even referentially oriented. Rather, it is pragmatically or rhetorically oriented. It is not ‘about’ its characters; it is ‘about’ its reader. The Gospel writer’s chief concern is not the fate of either Jesus or the Twelve in the story but the fate of the reader outside the story.”
Robert M. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand, page 50

Narrative Criticism
Reader Response Criticism
Let the reader understand…

Is this author trustworthy?