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# GENDER, LINGUISTIC AND FEMINIETIC NARRATOLOGY IN POSTMODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

The analysis presented here considers this in light of the potential relationship(s) between gender and narrativity. Particular reference is made to the fiction by contemporary author Michèle Roberts. Perhaps most fundamentally, we might question the very premises upon which the enterprise of feminist narratology seems to be based: that is, consider the limitations imposed by asking questions about gender difference. Recent theorizing in feminist linguistics has drawn attention to the problems with a binary model of gender difference . I argue that while there are superficial parallels between the characteristics of *écriture féminine* and the stylistic features in her work that relate to the perception of narrativity, it is not possible to propose a definitive correlation between gender and narrative form. Feminist narratology is a burgeoning field in the study of language and literature. This article revisits one aspect of such research: that focused on the global narrative profile, often referred to as plot structure. Instead, by taking a deliberately integrative stance and drawing upon recent questions raised in feminist linguistics, a series of critical re-evaluations may be put forward that suggest there is further work yet to be done in developing feminist narratology.

**Keywords:** Modern Narratology; linguistics; Feminist Narratology; Gender

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article critically re-examines some of the research in this area and, by taking an integrative stance, begins to raise questions about new ways in which feminist narratology might be taken forward. In recent decades, both narratology and feminist studies have become established as highly influential fields of study. One area that combines insights from both is the development of feminist narratology. The case study used to explore these issues is an analysis of the possible relationship(s) between gender and narrativity in a short piece by contemporary feminist author Michèle Roberts.

## 2. FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

Since Susan Lanser's (1986) seminal paper, research that has sought to bring together the study of narrative form and feminist perspectives has expanded in many exciting directions. As Richardson comments,

Feminism, arguably the most significant intellectual Force of the second half of the twentieth century, has (as should be expected) utterly and fruitfully transformed narrative theory and analysis in many ways. Virtually every component or agent in the narrative transaction has been subjected to sustained examination, including space, closure, character, narration, reader response, linearity and narrative sequence, and even the phenomenon of narrative itself.(2000: 168)

A brief survey of work that might come under the heading 'feminist narratology' indicates the breadth and richness of the field. To a certain extent, this reflects feminist narratology's position within the 'narrative of narrative Theory'<sup>1</sup>, characterized as a move from 'coherence to complexity' (Currie, 1998:2) and well documented in summaries such as Prince (1996) and Kreiswirth(2000). In line with this, such studies exemplify the application of narrative theory to a continuously increasing range of text types and across discipline boundaries, while embracing a variety of feminisms (Mezei, 1996: 6).The diversity of feminist narratology should not be regarded as ad hoc. Instead, different strands of research within this field might be identified, clustered around particular disciplinary preoccupations. One such strand is the work on narrative and gender that is focused on literary texts. This might not be strictly regarded as narratological as its emphases concentrate on interpretive concerns rather than formal features . Closely linked with this are the literary narrative studies derived from psychoanalytic theory which explore issues of plot dynamics in relation to concepts of desire (Winnett, 1990; Anderson, 1995; Wallace, 2000). Another distinctive strand might

be characterized as 'post-classical' narratology, where, following Lanser's imperative to rewrite narratology, a number of critics have re-evaluated classical models of narrative theory by considering them in relation to gender in a number of different ways. One final area is the research that takes a more specifically linguistic stance and examines non-literary narratives. This includes many sociolinguistically informed studies such as Georgakopoulou (1995), Coates (1996), Meinhof (1997) and Page (2002); and media-based studies such as Clark (1992) and Caldas-Coulthard (1996). Feminist approaches to narrative span terrain that differs in terms of research perspectives and paradigms, moving from areas more focused on literary theory to those that utilize frameworks more commonly found in linguistic studies. Despite the breadth of this field, it appears that there is further work yet to be done where concepts 'continue to be debated and refined' (Richardson, 2000: 168). One reason for this is articulated by Mills (1998) when she argues that feminist text analysis (of which the study of narrative might be considered a part) has need to reflect the 'critical rethinking' that has taken place in feminist theory and feminist linguistic analysis (p. 235). Implicit in Mills's statement is the division between 'text analysis' and 'linguistic analysis'. As a general observation, this separation seems to characterize feminist narratology too, for there is surprisingly little cross-referencing amongst the more text-based as opposed to linguistically oriented studies surveyed earlier. In line with the increasing necessity for a more holistic approach that has been called for by researchers working in various disciplines (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998: 493; Herman, 2001: 12; Prince, 2001), the analysis and discussion offered here aim to move towards such integration.

### 3. LITERARY APPROACHES: NARRATIVITY AND PLOTS

The specific area that is revisited here is feminist approaches to plot structure. A recurrent trend in this area is to identify differences in narrative form on the basis of gender. Perhaps the most striking example of this is Peter Brooks's opposition of the 'male plot of ambition' and the 'female plot of endurance' (1984: 39). Like stereotypes of women's writing, 'female' plots may be characterized as nonlinear, repetitive, resistant to closure, structured around multiple endpoints or stasis. These are set in juxtaposition with the 'normative' patterns of the action-centred, teleologically focused progression of the so-called 'male plot'. Closely associated with the question of what constitutes plot as a concept and subsequently defines a typology of possible variants is the matter of narrativity. This is an issue that remains central to questions about the very status of narrative itself, as Prince's interrogative list demonstrates (2000). However, McHale's (2001) discussion of this topic indicates that what precisely constitutes 'narrativity' is open to challenge. 'Is narrativity a matter of kind or degree?' he asks (p. 165). Herman (1997) distinguishes between *narrativehood* as that which concerns the criterial factors necessary to classify a text as a narrative (a matter of kind) and *narrativity* as a scalar notion related to 'factors that allow narrative sequences to be more or less readily processed as narratives' (p. 1048). The perception of narrativity may be understood as a complex relationship between linguistic features 'in' the text, such as the marking of narrative coherence through chronology, characterization and evaluation often combined as culturally recognizable patterns of organization (summarized in Prince, 1999); and extra-linguistic factors 'outside' the text, such as the reader's world knowledge that may be shaped by specific cultural contexts in various ways (Herman, 1997; Hoey, 2001). Thus any given text may be considered as having weaker or stronger narrativity than another. What is striking about this in relation to feminist analyses of plot types is that there seems to be a correlation between degrees of narrativity and the stereotypical gendering of plot where the 'male' and 'female' plots exhibit strong and weak narrativity respectively. Why this parallel should occur is an important question. One possible response is to note that the patterns of organization that trigger high narrativity have strong similarities with profiles such as Labov's (1972) narrative outline. As is now well recognized, these classical models might be re-evaluated in terms of potential gender bias in the corpora from which the pattern is derived. Thus it could be argued that our sense of what constitutes a 'well-formed' narrative (i.e. high narrativity) is conditioned by a body of stories told by male speakers about stereotypically masculine experiences (in the case of Labov's 1972 study, fight narratives told by young, male adolescents).<sup>2</sup> More generally, Hoey's approach to textual organization foregrounds the cultural situation of each pattern (2001). Given that gender may be understood as socially constructed as opposed to biologically determined, it might also be possible that cultural values of gender have some relationship with patterns of organization used in telling stories. For example, in certain situations it might be that the ability to solve problems or achieve goals is restricted to privileging one gender above another, as in stereotypically represented heroes and heroines where it is only the male characters who are allowed to follow quest-like progressions. Of course, this would be limited to specific genres and cultural contexts,<sup>3</sup> but nonetheless the possible correlation between gender and predictable patterns remains a factor that may also contribute to the alignment of high narrativity with 'male plots' and the relegation of 'female plots' to weak narrativity. However, while I have initially transposed the models of 'male' and 'female' plots onto a polarity of strong and weak narrativity, this binary pairing deserves much closer and more critical re-examination. The following analysis of some contemporary fiction provides a further test-case for exploring the relationship between narrativity and gender.

### 4. Narrativity and gender in the fiction

The fiction of contemporary author Michèle Roberts is the focus for the analysis and discussion of these issues. Her work is of particular interest for two reasons. First, it is rich in gender-related themes and imagery, including identity, sexuality, religion and the mother-daughter relationship. Second, it contains examples of interesting experimentation with narrative form, which, as Roberts herself comments, is closely related to the content of her novels (1994: 171). As such, it might be expected that her narratives provide interesting points of connection between the two areas. This is not to claim that Roberts is representative of all feminist women writers, or that there is an unequivocal relationship between form and meaning. Rather, her work provides an

appropriate example that might form the starting point for exploring issues of gender and narrativity. The primary object of study here is *Une Glossaire/A Glossary* (henceforth *Une Glossaire*) found at the close of the collection of short stories, *During Mother's Absence* (1993).

*Une Glossaire* is striking as a short story because, as the title suggests, it is structured around sections following an alphabetical list where a French term is then glossed with an English interpretation. Like conventional glossaries, this text is placed at the close of the volume of short stories, but unlike its conventional equivalents it contains substantial passages of continuous prose that may be read without reference to the rest of the anthology and is not just a supplementary list. Indeed, following Toolan (2001: 8–9), we may debate whether or not *Une Glossaire* should be classed as a narrative at all and this has important consequences for the way readers might then interpret it. Even if we conclude that the narrativehood of *Une Glossaire* can be established as positive, the very act of challenging its status suggests that its degree of narrativity is also questionable. A range of narratological features may be listed that either weaken or strengthen the narrativity of this text. Perhaps most obviously, the structuring framework of the glossary itself weakens the degree of perceived narrativity. Glossaries would normally be classified as a text type identified by Hoey (2001) as a 'discourse colony'. His definition of this genre is based on an analogy with the natural world where mainstream texts are like people and colony texts like beehives or anthills. As he writes, the crucial organizational feature of colony texts is that the 'component parts do not derive their meaning from the sequence in which they are placed' (2001: 74–5). Typical examples of colonies include texts as diverse as dictionaries, address books, examination papers and shopping lists. As Hoey's description suggests, this genre can be understood as diametrically opposed to mainstream discourse such as narrative.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the schemas and world knowledge evoked by the structural similarities and labeling of *Une Glossaire* as a glossary, the patterns of organization do not correspond to anything that might suggest high narrativity.

In addition to this, we might suggest that it is not just the embellishment of the entries that make this colony unusual. Rather, there are specific features that activate what Porter Abbott (2000) terms the 'narrative motor', which then causes us to interpret the text as a story as opposed to some other text type. The first of these is the references to time and transition found in many (although not all) of the entries, which may be used by the reader to construct a linear chronology into which the various memories of the narrator may be slotted. This allusion to temporality is perhaps the most fundamental property that allows the text to be processed as narrative, being as Ricoeur (2000) puts it, the 'ultimate referent' for narrativity. However, the very form of the temporal markers in *Une Glossaire* is interesting and suggestive of weak narrativity. There are relatively few dates that anchor the chronology to a specific time span (1979 and 1986 on p.132, 1967 on p. 161). Instead the transition of time is described through the biological and social changes in the individuals remembered. Many of these relate to the development of womanhood in the narrator, for example in the entry headed *Cinema* the narrator says,

After the age of ten, after the onset of menstruation, breasts, frizzy hair and spots, I appear less on film . . . All through my childhood and adolescence I draw obsessively: pictures of lovely naked women. I still do; but now they are allowed to have big swinging breasts, curving thighs, genitals, furry triangles of hair. (p. 153)

Similar transition is described in terms of the physical decline of various family members, the ultimate mortality of the beloved aunt, grandmother and grandfather; for example, 'Grandmère suffers increasingly from heart disease ...this plump, capable, white-haired person suddenly becomes a chronic invalid, her head poking forward and down, her belly swelling, her whole body thickening' (p. 161). Alongside these physical markers of time are references to familial and religious festivals that mark rites of passage, described in entries. As such, the temporality appears to be rooted in human experience rather than abstract, and to be cyclical rather than purely linear in character. Further stylistic features such as the use of present tense, the absence of temporal references from many of the entries and the deliberate evocation of 'timelessness', particularly in relation to food ('these timeless meals' [p. 147]), might also be interpreted as weakening the chronology and hence narrativity of this text.

The second feature that contributes to the narrativity of *Une Glossaire* is the pervasive references to a cast of characters. While not criterial to narrativehood in the same manner as temporal succession, the construction of characters is an important means of narrative coherence. As Longacre puts it, 'You must keep track of who does what to whom or the story falls flat on its face' (1974: 362). In *Une Glossaire*, these references to individuals exist both within and between entries and form a network of cohesive identity chains that, like cohesion more generally, 'encourage a hearer or reader to interpret the combined utterances as belonging together in some way' (Hoey, 1991: 10). In addition to this agent orientation, we might also include the spatial and geographical references to setting, which in some cases become elided with the identity of particular characters. For example, the narrator says,

I think my grandmother is the house. The storehouse of food and plenty. The cupboards stocked with sheets and tablecloths, tea and dinner services, boxes of silver cutlery and black-handled knives brought out for best occasions. She is still there. (p. 161)

These references to character or setting are greater in number than those of temporality, for while many entries are a-chronological, agent orientation or setting appears in all. As such, this might be taken as the primary means by which narrative

coherence is facilitated and the desire to read the text as an organic unity set against the non-narrative dynamic of reading the colony entries in isolation. These features of high narrativity are found in greater and lesser extent in the various glossary entries. Those containing a dense concentration of narrativity might be thought of as core entries that establish narrative coherence, while those that are weak are like satellites that are only loosely tied to the reconstructed narrative frame. This distinction between core and satellite entries once more destabilizes the degree of narrativity where movement towards a narrative pattern in the core entries is interrupted by the satellites. Overall then, even while there are crucial stylistic features in *Une Glossaire* that suggest we are in the presence of narrativity (McHale, 2001), the disruption of these features in various ways weakens or subverts this narrativity significantly. The question then remains whether or not this weak narrativity is associated with gender.

## 5. GENDERING NARRATIVE FORMS

From a theoretical literary perspective, the binary opposition of female and male narratives correlated with weak and strong narrativity bears some interesting resemblance to certain feminist descriptions of women's writing, especially the psychoanalytically influenced work of some French feminists. While there are individual points of difference in the arguments of these theorists, both **Cixous and Kristeva** describe women's distinctive relationship to language as derived from their psychoanalytical development and critically related to the body. Cixous(1989) writes:

Woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves, including the one of laughing off the word 'silence' that has to be said. (p. 113)

Thus the biological experiences of the woman's body are metaphorically transferred onto linguistic forms, including the fluidity and resistance of closure described in the quotation from Cixous. Extending this to the level of global narrative organization, these models of female desire and bodily experiences have been correlated with the alternative plot structures explored by Winnett (1990) and Anderson (1995), which are similarly associated with repetition, the challenging of boundaries and the absence of **closure**. Superficially, the textual features of *Une Glossaire* that are associated with weak narrativity may be aligned with these descriptions of women's writing. Roberts herself seems to hint at the connection between language, the body and the mother/child relationship. For example, in the entry *Français* the narrator describes her native tongue as 'My mother's tongue. My mother-tongue, that I take in along with her milk... My tongue lapping at pleasure' (p. 157). The implied fluidity of this description is perhaps mirrored by the non-linear flow of the text, organized around the headings expressed in the language of the 'mother tongue' and deliberately marked as feminine by Roberts's alteration of the grammatical gender of '*glossaire*'.<sup>5</sup> The importance of the female body in marking temporal progression, along with the cyclical references to temporality, might similarly be aligned with the feminist theory of lyric timelessness described by Wallace (2000: 177) that is 'connected to women's bodies and feminine desire' and articulated in the writings of Kristeva. From a rather different stance, the use of agent orientation and spatial reference as the primary means of creating narrative coherence might be seen as a feminist move too. The significance of space is articulated prominently in the opening entry of *Une Glossaire*, where the narrator chooses not to create a history but instead to 'write a sort of *geography*. To reclaim the past' (p. 133, emphasis added). As Homans (1994) notes, this spatializing move towards image rather than linearity is found in many texts bywomen. In particular, the allusions to a house as a structuring metaphor might in Cosslett's terms (1996) seem like a gesture towards matrilinealism where the **patriarchal** dynasty of narrative forms is challenged by alternative kinship structures, placing *Daughters of the House*<sup>6</sup> at the centre of this narrative form. However, I would argue that there are fundamental and far-reaching problems with this overly simplistic mapping of narrative form and feminism. From another standpoint, we might argue that the degree of narrativity is not really to do with gender at all. Rather, the weak and anachronous temporality and privileging of agent orientation as a mode of narrative coherence are simply appropriate to the telling of a story that celebrates human relationships in order to avoid the narrative-like changes that lead to death. The going beyond boundaries and the cyclical and arbitrary ordering which defeats the 'death drive' of the (male) plot dynamics have less to do with a feminist emancipation of a narrative form and more to do with the specific content of this text, which if it reached its final conclusion would express the point of final (mortal) absence that the narrator states she wishes to avoid. Indeed, the mapping of narrative form and gender per se might be seen as problematic for a whole range of reasons. Some of these have begun to be articulated in studies of literary narratives but have been voiced more prominently in recent work in the field of feminist linguistics. It is here that an interdisciplinary perspective on the possible relationships between gender, interpretation and narrative form is most crucial as a form of re-evaluation. As Porter Abbott (2000: 260) writes, 'sometimes the shock of leaping borders and suddenly seeing your old familiar terms from a new disciplinary perspective can be salutary precisely because the differences of field are so great'. First, the view inherent in the psychologically derived feminist theory that the structure as well as content is gendered (Homans, 1994: 9) should be challenged. Considering work from feminist linguistics, there is ample evidence that to gender a linguistic form of any kind is misguided. Georgakopoulou restates this important point, saying 'language and gender research has shown that isolating certain linguistic forms and trying to map them with "male" or "female" as correlations between devices and social meaning is, as a rule, a futile exercise' (1995: 461). In commonsense terms alone, the application of this principle to literary narratives would seem to bear out the same conclusion. If it were weak narrativity itself that was 'feminine' and used by female writers alone, then this poses a problem for the wealth of avant-garde and experimental writing composed by male writers and conventional narratives written by women. Extending the argument to

the association of gender, desire and narrative form, we might reiterate Wallace's point that 'narrative desire does not have to be **erotic** (2000:185). In terms of the text discussed in detail here, we might question whether the desire **to avoid silence and closure** (the death drive, in psychoanalytic terms) is really gendered at all. Does the desire for the loved ones of a family and to preserve the past *have* to be gendered? Rather than focus on structure alone, Cameron points out that it is crucial to analyse the use of linguistic form in relation to content (1998: 280–2). The same point might be made in relation to the study of literary texts too. While I have argued that form alone is not intrinsically gendered, this does not mean that women writers cannot use weak narrativity in their texts for feminist ends. At a somewhat simplistic level, it would seem more convincing to argue that if narrative form has anything to do with gender, then this is more prominent when the performance of that story is closely related to gender issues. However, it should be noted that I am not suggesting that the form is itself meaningful, but rather that it helps carry the potential meaning(s) interpreted by the reader, which in this case has gendered implications. So while narrative form is not gendered, it may in some cases be part of a vehicle that supports the interpretation of gender in a given text, which may be written by an author of either biological sex. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1998) argue forcefully, research that attempts to consider the relationship between language and gender needs to be locally grounded and avoid abstraction. Again, this observation might be usefully applied to the study of literary narratives, for the possible influences of context, of both production and reception, should be considered. It is salutary to note that while one strand of feminist narratology has challenged the apparent universalizing of principles derived from limited corpora, the psychoanalytical application of feminist narratology has been open to the same critique (Homans, 1994: 9). As such, any investigation of narrative form needs to bear in mind the potential influence of contextual factors that include not only beliefs and practices to do with gender but also ethnicity, class, historical period and numerous interconnected others.

It is now generally accepted that a binary model of gender is reductive and, following the groundbreaking work of Butler (1990), it has been proposed that a performative approach that takes account of the multiple and shifting nature of gender is more helpful in understanding the linguistic behaviour of a given individual in a specific situation. These notions of performativity have yet to make a significant impact on feminist narratology. Indeed, the binary model of gender difference still seems to be influential in many studies such as those summarized at the outset of this article. With this in mind, we might return to the salient questions posed by Bergvall and Bing: Why are questions that strengthen the female–male dichotomy so frequently asked, while those that explore other types of variation evoke much less interest? How much of this apparent dichotomy is imposed by the questions themselves? (1998: 497). In the light of this, the kinds of questions raised and future directions projected in early feminist narratology might now be understood as products of their time and needing re-evaluation. For example, writing about the potential benefits of synthesizing feminist and narratological approaches, Lanser (1986) says: It could, for example, provide a particularly valuable foundation for exploring one of the most complex and troubling questions for feminist criticism: whether there is indeed a 'woman's writing' and/or a female tradition, whether *men and women do write differently*. For given the volatile nature of the question, the precision and abstraction of narratological systems offers the safety for investigation that more impressionistic *theories of difference* do not. (p. 340).

These concerns clearly reflect the model of gender difference influential at the time of Lanser's article. My point is not that such feminist theory has nothing to contribute to narratology, nor that feminist narratology has 'run its course', but rather that feminist theory has now moved on from being rooted in such binary paradigms. In line with this, there is room for explorations in feminist narratology also to develop in multiple directions. The challenge is to reach beyond such binaries and to investigate more widely and rigorously narratives, literary or otherwise, not just in terms of whether they are written, about or read by women and men, but in a variety of other ways that avoid perpetuating stereotypes and false dichotomies.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this article I have presented an analysis of a contemporary text and argued that while the features of weak narrativity might have some superficial parallels with theoretical descriptions of women's language (especially *écriture féminine*), it is not possible to pose a universal, binary model which relates narrative form to gender. I have applied a number of questions and critiques raised in response to recent feminist linguistic research to the study of literary narratives and have suggested the need for further empirically grounded, contextualized studies. The future of feminist narratology will no doubt continue to 'debate and refine' narratological concepts, as the study of gender and narrative both continues to diversify and generates interesting research. As this debate progresses, it is time for feminist narratology to embrace a more integrative stance and to question its questions. In doing so, it might then address a range of topics and theoretical paradigms as yet uncharted in its brief but significant history.

## Notes

1 This refers to the American-French school of narrative theory, a distinction discussed fully by Darby (2001).

2 As one of the reviewers of this article noted, the event-based nature of the masculine Labovian oral narratives of personal experience might in part be due to the nature of the prompt question 'What happened?' used to elicit these stories. However, it is

noteworthy that other narratives of personal experience told in response to similar questions can be highly reflective and less conventionally structured. This is discussed more fully in Page (2002).

3 A good example of this is the relationship between gender and narrative patterns found in Middle English penitential romances, where both social realities and cultural constructions of femininity position the heroine as an object who must exemplify endurance in the face of many trials.

4 This polarization is an oversimplification of the discussion presented by Hoey. In fact, hierarchical arrangements of embedding between discourse types are possible, and there are ways in which colonies and mainstream texts may be read in similar ways.

5 I am grateful to Anne George who pointed out to me this grammatical feature.

6 This is the title of Michèle Roberts's novel that precedes the collection *During Mother's Absence*.

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