

*Vertentes e Interfaces I: Estudos Literários e Comparados***“A CHRISTMAS MEMORY” AND THE NARRATIVE OF EMOTION***Rafael Campos Oliven**

ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyze important narratological aspects in the construction of “A Christmas Memory”, by Truman Capote. The main objective is to demonstrate how emotion is a key element in the formation and development of the two main characters in the short story and to examine the themes and motifs that underlie it. As a theoretical reference, H. Porter Abbott's article “Story, plot and narration” and David Herman's “Introduction”, both from the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, among others, as well as contemporary theories concerning narrative, character and focalization, are used. Language in itself is also examined as a means of conveying different shades of emotion and feelings.

KEYWORDS: Emotion; English Literature; Focalization; Narratology.

Narration, focalization and character

Writing about a passage from *Wuthering Heights*, H. Porter Abbott points out, in the beginning of his article “Story, plot and narration” that the story's narration is the process of telling it and that:

This distinction between story and narration is also important. It is an implicit acknowledgement that a story is understood as having a separate existence from its narration. As such, it can be told in different ways by different narrators. Were Hindley or Cathy our narrator at this point, the narration of this story would be different, with different words, different emotional inflections, different perspectives and different details. (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 39)

According to Mieke Bal narratology is, in general terms, a study that can offer a systematic of a narrative text such as, for example, a novel or a short story. As such, it takes into account the question of how time is organized and how the events are ordered in the text. Focalization, in turn, deals with events such as they are presented through the point of view of the narrator or a character and the relation of the elements presented and the view through which they are presented.

* Doutor em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

Focusing on some contemporary theories regarding the difference between story and narrative, David Herman states, in his “Introduction” to the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, that:

Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people – and of what it was like for them to experience what happened – in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change – a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, “scientific” modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. (HERMAN, 2012, p. 3)

It is in this context, therefore, and taking into consideration the distinctions above mentioned, that Jahn states, in her article “Focalization”, about the two branches of narratology that,

If narratology – the structural theory and analysis of narrative texts – were to be divided into just two major parts, then *narration* and *focalization* would be very suitable candidates. *Narration* is the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience; *focalization* is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter. Contrary to the standard courtroom injunction to tell “the *whole* truth,” no-one can in fact tell all. Practical reasons require speakers and writers to restrict information to the “right amount” – not too little, not too much, and if possible only what’s relevant. (JAHN, 2012, p. 94)

It is important to highlight that not everything that involves a story is fiction. Thus, “to say that Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Marxism and psychoanalysis involve stories is not to suggest that they are merely fictive. Rather, it is to register the fact that there are few aspects of life which are not bound up with strategies and effects of narrative”. (BENNETT, 2009, p. 55)

As for the construction and the role of the characters in a story, Margolin argues that in general terms a character “designates any entity, individual or collective – normally human or human-like – introduced in a work of narrative fiction”. (MARGOLIN, 2012, p. 66) According to him, characters “thus exist within storyworlds, and play a role, no matter how minor, in one or more of the states of affairs or events told about in the narrative. Character can be succinctly defined as storyworld participant”. (MARGOLIN, 2012, p. 6) He also states that characters can be defined by personal names, such as *Don Quixote*, definite descriptions such as *the knight of mournful countenance* or personal pronouns such as I, she or he. Another author goes further by suggesting that “characters are the life of literature: they are the objects of our curiosity and fascination, affection and dislike, admiration and condemnation. Indeed, so intense is our relationship with literary characters that they often cease to be simply ‘objects’. (BENNETT, 2009, p.63)

I believe all those considerations and literary theories will help us better understand the construction of the characters, the narrative and the plot of the story here analyzed, as well as its main themes and underlying motifs, thereby guiding our investigation.

The plot and the construction of the characters

"A Christmas Memory", by Truman Capote, is a short story that centers on the relationship between two distant cousins – a seven-year-old boy known as Buddy and a sexagenarian woman whose name is unknown – who live together in a house with other relatives. The story is narrated by a first person narrator, the boy, who is now an adult and was called Buddy by the woman at the time. They share a strong friendship and, despite their age difference, have many things in common, including their love for food and outdoor activities.

The language used in the story is colloquial, presents a varied and rich vocabulary and contains detailed descriptions of events as they unfold. The style is therefore by no means pompous or purposefully elegant which, I believe, would not appeal to our emotions and deepest feelings. As the story approaches the end, it gradually becomes more touching and moving.

The narration starts on a winter morning in late November and dwells mostly on Buddy and his best friend's preparations leading to their last Christmas together. The exact date in which the story happens is not clear, but we can infer that it takes place around the late 1920's in America during Prohibition since at a certain time they must obtain whiskey for the preparation of their Christmas cakes at a seedy place that belongs to an Indian called Mr. Haha Jones. In addition, we know that Buddy's friend was a child at the end of the 19th century since he says that he is called Buddy "in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child". (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 1)

It is important to realize that Buddy's words inform us how he sees his best friend and give us a hint about her personality. We also see, at some point further in the narrative, that she describes herself as being "too old. Old and funny." (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 6) and is corrected by him as being "Not funny. Fun. More fun than anybody". (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 6)

The question of age is an important issue here. Since Buddy sees her as a child and she sees herself as being too old, whom should the reader rely? Or is it just the way the author found to, at the same time, draw our attention to the different ways people perceive the same things and the relativity of age? Either way, this story is, among other things, a reflection on age. The fact that Buddy is only seven and that the woman is around sixty shows us that

extremes can come close and also contrasts the connection between a still innocent pre-pubertal body in formation and the body at the beginning of ageing.

Childhood memories are important narratives in literature because they evoke an informative period in everybody's life. It is important to notice that the homodiegetic narrator of the story speaks about the past using the present tense. This not only suggests that his memories are very present in his mind, but also that he is an adult trying to come to terms with his childhood. It is also possible to interpret that he misses those moments and would like to go back in time. The fact that the narrative is in the present tense makes his account of the story more poignant, as if it were unfolding in front of the reader.

The focalizer¹ in the short story is mostly the boy and the focalized object is his friend. However, at times Buddy is also the object of focalization, while his friend is the focalizer in a few passages. Nevertheless, we mostly have the view of innocence, though manipulated by the author and through the narrator, who is now an adult putting himself in the position of a child.

On the other hand, the view of the woman, despite being described as “still a child” (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 1) and a sprightly person who is “like a bantam hen” (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 1), represents at the same time old age and wisdom. This becomes more ponderous especially towards the end when she starts musing about death which appears, through her words, as something we cannot truly grasp. Therefore, we have a projection into the future that corresponds to an inorganic state, i.e., that lacks any sense of a real experience or could simply be conceived as an opportunity for a person to rest in peace after the grievances and joys of life. In this sense, we could consider life as an isthmus which separates this world and the after world. We can therefore think of ourselves, in this context, as being situated in an intermediary position between before life or biological death and beyond life or psychological death.

The image and evocation of the kite, a childhood toy, appears more toward the end of the story and corresponds to Buddy's last words: “As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven”. (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 11) With the development of the story, we know that Buddy, who is the narrator and whose focalization is predominant

¹ Focalization is a term first coined by Gérard Genette (1972). It was reformulated by Mieke Bal to refer to the perspective through which events are presented by the narrator or a character. It analyses the point of view of the focalizer and what is being focalized and draws a distinction between the perceiving agent and the perceived object. (cf. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997, pp. 142-156.)

in the story, is going to be severed from his best friend. We discover eventually that he will have to attend a military school chosen by those “who Know Best”. (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 10) This quote, delivered by Buddy, refers to his adult relatives who make most of the decisions in the house. The irony behind it is that, although they think they know best and consider themselves wiser than Buddy and his best friend, they are not always the most sensible people in the house. Therefore, here and in other passages of the story, the kite symbolizes both freedom and separation. The fact that nobody is free from dying is exemplified by Buddy's best friend's ultimate fate at the end. It is as if we were only allowed snippets of freedom in our lives, no more than that.

Conversely, food, which is the fuel for our everyday activities, and is present all throughout the story, can also mean more. Besides the friends' mutual empathy and affinities, it is food and their love for it that brings them together. Evidently, without food, people die, but also it is clear that food implies sharing and socializing and may impart subjective well-being to people's lives. Thus, it stands for both life and union. As long as there is food around, life is granted its share of happiness. This is nowhere more evident in the story than in Buddy's friend's favorite exclamation, after waking up: “Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!”

Let's return to the plot and its concept. Abbott refers to the Russian Formalist “*sjuzhet*” with “its analytical attention to the ways in which the plot re-arranges, expands, contracts, or repeats events of the story. By such temporary delays, concealments and confusions, plot enriches the experience of what would otherwise be just a story” (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 43) Bearing this in mind, the following statement is enlightening: “If in Ricoeur's terms the stress is on plot as the artful *construction* of the story, in these terms the emphasis is on plot as the artful *disclosure* of the story” (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 43).

Although Buddy ties in the events of his story, there is little plot in “A Christmas Memory” in the sense of the uncovering of a character's real motivations or the disclosure of behavior patterns as one would find in the play *Macbeth*, for example. No real enigmas, no whodunits, except for the expectation of how the story will end. Nevertheless, Buddy is an enthusiastic and motivated narrator who catches the reader's attention by other means. His story is moving inasmuch as it is simple, innocent and pro-life. Besides, language too plays a crucial role there: not only is the story gripping, the way it is being told captivates us, especially in a subliminal way, through the richness of its semantic layers.

The main themes of the story

Just as food and the kite are the bound motifs of the story, friendship, reliance and compassion play an important role in the story and construction of the characters. The fact that Buddy was not in a regular family situation was soothed by the presence of his sexagenarian friend. She could also find in him someone to rely on and a means of support, especially since she is not respected by the other relatives. Hence, once more childhood and old age strike a chord with each other, leaving aside the more practical and pragmatic view of adulthood. In place of resentment, idealism reigns here, seen through the eyes of a child and an elderly woman who is not embittered but rather unstable and emotional.

Truman Capote's art is made very clear in his construction of the moments within the story, which are so vivid you can picture them visually, as if they were part of a movie. It is interesting to notice that there are no ambivalent feelings between Buddy and his friend, their feelings for each other are unselfish from the beginning to the end. One can see that love for life and love in itself unites them. On the other hand, Buddy and his best friend do not get on very well with their extended family. Their relatives do not seem to understand them and their motivations at all and are always trying to control their actions and lives.

Throughout most of the story, Buddy and his friend are occupied preparing and buying the ingredients to prepare thirty Christmas cakes for their friends and people who have struck their fancy, – such as President Roosevelt, a Reverend, Baptist missionaries and others – and looking for a tree for Christmas. Hence, we must also remember that this story is a celebration of Christmas as well, which for many people corresponds to a moment of reflection near the New Year and a time to take in-depth stock of the year that has passed. It also symbolizes the birth of the baby Jesus and an opportunity to give and receive presents and, most importantly, exchange dialogues as a present and intimate moment with those we love.

Our focus on some aspects of the narrative in the story offers important insights into Capote's style. All the events in this story are interconnected and some of them are turning points, also called constituent events. There is a moment when the narrative starts changing direction, i.e., its focus, as different events and the future are being projected. We know that Buddy and his friend exchange kites as Christmas presents. They also have a pet in common, a little orange and white rat terrier called Queenie. Before they unreel their kites and have them swim into the wind, we are informed that “The wind is blowing, and nothing will do till we've run to a Pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where, a winter hence, Queenie will be buried, too).” (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 10) This utterance is followed by:

...we sprawl in the grass and peel Satsumas and watch our kites cavort. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already

won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest. (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 10)

The hint of death in "Queenie will be buried, too" (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 10) is contrasted with the joy of life referred to above, just as the feeling of union is overshadowed in the story by separation, thus presenting two sides of the same coin. It's remarkable that when Buddy's friend dies, he knows it first through his emotions and an extra sensorial intuition rather than through a rational means:

And when that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 11)

Thus, this is a story of juxtapositions. Reason and emotion contrast and complement each other as much as life and death, union and separation, happiness and sadness. The world of Buddy and his friend is one of emotion, compassion and reliance on each other. The world of the adults, however, is one of reason and pure logic. When the woman shares two inches of whiskey with Buddy two very angry relatives enter their room and exclaim:

A child of seven! whiskey on his breath! are you out of your mind? feeding a child of seven! must be loony! road to ruination! remember Cousin Kate? Uncle Charlie? Uncle Charlie's brother-in-law? shame! scandal! humiliation! kneel, pray, beg the Lord! (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 6)

The woman's reaction to being reprimanded by two adults, "potent with eyes that scold, tongues that scald" (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 6) is to cry. Buddy's reaction to his friend's crying is to comfort her "Don't cry,' I say, sitting at the bottom of her bed and shivering despite my flannel nightgown that smells of last winter's cough syrup, 'Don't cry,' I beg, teasing her toes, tickling her feet, 'you're too old for that.'" (CAPOTE, 2000, p. 6) Once again, emotion overcomes reason, compassion surmounts aloofness.

Memory is clearly also a central issue of the story since, as we are informed by the narrator, events take place more than twenty years before they are being narrated. Therefore, we know that the author has created a twenty to thirty-year-old narrator who is reporting part of his life story in the course of a few years. His version of it relies on his memory of past events which, like all memory, is a reconstruction of facts or, rather, a construction based on cutouts from reality. In this way, his memory is represented as seen through the eyes of a child and it is important to bear in mind that children usually see things in a different dimension. A room, for instance, might seem bigger than it actually is, certain traits of personality in other people may be felt more deeply and also important events tend to be more memorable. Thus, his account of the story is naive, full of life and for the most part

enthusiastic – it touches us because we identify it with the way we saw things when we were children.

This reasoning leads us to consider how the story in “A Christmas Memory” might have sounded different if it had been told by Buddy's friend. If she were to be the narrator, would it still be the same story, or would its different rendering change the way the reader perceives it? This line of thought seems analogous with Saussure's differentiation between the signified and the signifier. As Abbott's illustrates, “Story was first analytically set off from the manner of its rendering in the wake of Saussure's distinction in linguistics between the signified and the signifier.” (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 41)

Final Considerations

A narrative, according to Abbott, “at one and the same time fills and creates gaps” (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 44). Heathcliff, for example, is a permanent gap in the narrative of *Wuthering Heights* according to the author. Nobody knows exactly who he is or his ancestry. As concerns “A Christmas Memory”, we are led to ask ourselves what are the gaps that Buddy's narration of the story creates and fills. The first and most important gap it creates, I believe, has to do with Buddy and his best friend's origins. The reader gets almost no information about where Buddy and his best friend come from. There is neither mention of Buddy's ancestry nor of his friend's provenance. We just know that they are very distant cousins who have lived together for as long as Buddy can remember and that they inhabit the same house with other relatives or, in other words, that they live in an extended family. We also don't know what happened to Buddy in the seven previous years, or much about his best friend's life story, except that she had another friend also named Buddy. It is up to the reader to fill this gap.

What gaps does it fill then? It is at the discretion of the reader to fill the gaps of what happened after the story ends. We know that Buddy goes to a military school and that his friend dies, but what comes next is less troubling than not having more details about Buddy and his best friend's life, at least for the more curious readers. Also, the many Christmases that they spent together are not described in detail, except that one Christmas we read about. Nevertheless, the narrative fills this gap by having us guess more or less what might have happened on the other Christmases since our reference is what is being narrated.

Another way of filling up gaps is to make a film based on a novel or a short story. That is the case of the black and white film “A Christmas Memory” based on Truman Capote's story, produced and directed by Frank Perry in 1966. Starring with a great performance by

Geraldine Page as the woman and Donnie Melvin as Buddy, it demonstrates in more detail what the reader of the story can only visualize through his or her own imagination or may fall short of it.

The scenes in Callahan's Pecan Grove, the preparations leading to Christmas, the strong bond between Buddy and the woman and even the fact that the story takes place during Prohibition are very well represented and become more vivid to someone who has already read it. Being part of the film, the scenes are, after all, a rendering of a director's interpretation of the story projected on a screen which could just as well have been different had the director been another person. Nevertheless, the film is by no means inferior to a reader's imagination, although it is always better to read the story first and see the film later if one wishes to compare one with the other.

As mentioned before, gaps in narrative are a good way of instigating one's imagination inasmuch as they avoid giving the reader everything in bite-sized pieces. While films can provide us with a fluidity of images that may resemble the unfolding of the imagery of a dream, leading us to different kinds of insight and readings, stories, narratives and plots in a book force us to give them a personal interpretation and credibility without which they would lack any real existence other than that of being a written text.

As Abbott puts it at the end of his article: “What I hope to have shown in this brief look at the way story, plot, and narration interact is that narrative is an art of the opening and closing of gaps, and that in those gaps lie whole worlds that the art of narrative invites us either to actualize or leave as possibilities.” (ABBOTT, 2012, p. 50) It is precisely this opening and closing of gaps or shutters in “A Christmas Memory”, added to its deep and intelligent emotional content and identifiable and representative characters, that makes it such an enriching, enticing and absorbing story for readers of all times, leaving a mark on us by making us reflect about it long afterwards.

“A CHRISTMAS MEMORY” E A NARRATIVA DE EMOÇÃO

RESUMO: Este artigo tem por objetivo analisar importantes aspectos narratológicos na construção de “A Christmas Memory”, de Truman Capote. O objetivo principal é demonstrar como a emoção é um elemento chave na formação e desenvolvimento dos dois personagens principais do conto e examinar os temas e motivos que o subjazem. Como referência teórica, os artigos de H. Porter Abbott “Story, plot and narration” e “Introduction” de David Herman são utilizados, ambos do *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, entre outros, assim como teorias contemporâneas sobre narrativa, personagem e focalização. A linguagem ela mesma é examinada como um meio de transmitir diferentes matizes de emoção e sentimentos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Emoção; Focalização; Literatura Inglesa; Narratologia.

REFERENCES

- ABBOTT, H. Porter. "Story, Plot and Narration". In: HERMAN, David (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- BAL, Mieke. *Narratology Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2ed). Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997.
- BENNET, Andrew & ROYLE, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Harlow: Pearson, 2009.
- CAPOTE, Truman. "A Christmas Memory". 2000cyber_explorer, 2000. Source: <http://www.geocities.com/cyber_explorer99/capotechristmas.html>, [Access on 08/04/2003].
- HERMAN, David. "Introduction". In: HERMAN, David (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- HERMAN, David (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- JAHN, Manfred. "Focalization". In: HERMAN, David (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- MARGOLIN, Uri. "Character". In: HERMAN, David (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Recebido em: 05/05/2021.

Aprovado em: 17/06/2021.