

Narrative Techniques in Chekhov's Short Story Enemies

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the use of narrative techniques in Anton Chekhov's short story, *Enemies*, including types of focalizations and narrators and shifts within them, and explores how he employs these techniques to reveal the tragedy of human nature in his short story. To this end, Genette's three types of focalizations—zero, internal, and external focalizations—and Hu Yamin's one pair of narrator types—the objective and interventionist narrator—are both discussed to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis. The essay argues that while Chekhov primarily employs external focalization, he also uses zero and internal focalization at certain points in the story, and both narrator types mentioned above are present in the story. What's more, shifting focalizations and narrators can create suspense, improve readability, and enhance the story's thematic effect.

Keywords: Enemies; Narrative techniques; Focalization; Narrator; Short story

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1. Introduction

Since ancient times, literature has been written from a single point of view, and once the narrator is identified, he or she does not change. However, Chekhov, the greatest Russian realist writer of the 19th century, often used multiple points of view and narrators in his works, and he also shifted between different points of view and narrators. It can be said that his creative technique was at the forefront of literary trends of the time. This is the case with his short story *Enemies*. This essay is about to analyze *Enemies* in terms of both narrative point of view and narrator, based on the theories proposed by Genette and Hu Yamin, and explore the functions of these techniques.

2. Types of Focalizations

Given that former works on the choice (or not) of a restrictive "point of view" suffered from a confusion between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? and the very different question who is the narrator? —or, more simply, the question who sees? and the question who speaks? — Gerard Genette took up the term focalization, which corresponded to Brooks and Warren's expression, "focus of narration," to clarify it. Moreover, in his monograph *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Genette distinguished between three types of focalizations: zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization.

Zero focalization is a traditional omniscient perspective in which the narrator has complete knowledge of the story being told and can observe it from any angle, moving freely from one character to another. It can sometimes overlook the complex lives of groups of people and at other times, peer into the secret consciousness of various characters. Examples of this non-focalized perspective can be found in classic novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Story of the Stone* in which the actions and thoughts of various characters can be captured deftly by the omniscient narrator.

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In Internal focalization, everything is strictly presented according to the feelings and consciousness of one or several characters. It relies entirely on the senses and perceptions of one or a few characters to describe what they see and hear, and to report their possible psychological activities based on external information. For other characters, the narrative only speculates their thoughts and emotions based on the limited information available, like an outsider looking in. Kong Yiji, a Chinese short story written by Lu Xun, is an example of internal focalization, where the story was narrated from the perspective of a single character, in this case a waiter. At the end of the story, in the waiter's view, he could only guess that Kong Yiji might have died.

External focalization, on the other hand, involves a strict external presentation of events, focusing only on the characters' actions and the setting, without delving into their thoughts or making any comments. The use of this type of focalization is commonly found in detective novels, where the narrator intentionally withholds information to create a captivating and intriguing plot. Instead of revealing all the information at once, the narrator gradually unveils the clues in a step-by-step manner, keeping readers on edge. For example, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the narrator solely focuses on the suspects' actions, while keeping their motives concealed. The primary aim of using an external focalization perspective is to generate suspense and arouse readers' curiosity, leading to a satisfying reading experience where all uncertainties are ultimately resolved in the end.

3. Focalizations in Enemies

In Chekhov's short story *Enemies*, he not only employed a variety of focalization techniques, with external focalization being the primary technique, along with some instances of zero focalization and internal focalization, but also shifted between them. At the beginning of the story, while Dr. Kirilov was in the midst of the loss of his son, a rich man, whose name is Abogin, came to Dr. Kirilov and asked him to save his dying wife. Here the narrator describes the situation in Dr. Kirilov's household, including a description of his wife's inner world:

Dr.'s wife sank on her knees by the dead child's bedside and was overwhelmed by the first rush of despair.

It is evident that only an omniscient zero focalization can achieve this level of insight into the wife's thoughts and feelings. In the next scene, an unexpected visitor made an entrance, and the focalization shifted to external focalization:

It was dark in the entry and nothing could be distinguished in the man who came in but medium height, a white scarf, and a large, extremely pale face, so pale that its entrance seemed to make the passage lighter.

This ambiguous description was presented from Dr. Kirilov's point of view. The main plot that followed was primarily focused on external focalization, vividly depicting the sudden and intense verbal conflict between Dr. Kirilov and Abogin. Toward the end of the story, the focalization returned to the omniscient zero point of view, revealing Dr.'s boundless indignation:

Time will pass and Kirilov's sorrow will pass, but that conviction, unjust and unworthy of the human heart, will not pass, but will remain in doctor's mind to the grave.

4. Shifting Focalizations in Enemies

Lubbock held the view that "the observer's point of view should be consistent; that is to say, the writer should describe his characters, their actions and environment, from one position only." He emphasizes the importance for a novelist to be "consistent on some plan, to follow the principle he has adopted". However, in *Enemies*, the focalizations are shifted several times, which can be considered a violation of his principle. Nevertheless, this breach of consistency expands the potential for narrative artistry.

The shift from the omniscient zero focalization to the external focalization in the story serves primarily to create suspense. For example, when the two arrived at Abogin's luxurious residence, Abogin immediately left to search for his wife, leaving Dr. Kirilov alone in his opulent living room. After Abogin left, the focalization shifted to Dr. Kirilov, by whom the majority of the rest of the story was told. From the point of view of Dr. Kirilov, when Abogin reappeared, he clearly sensed something strange:

The look of sleekness and refined elegance had disappeared -- his face, his hands, his attitude were contorted by a revolting expression of something between horror and agonizing physical pain. His nose, his lips, his moustache, all his features were moving and seemed trying to tear themselves from his face, his eyes looked as though they were laughing with agony....

Since the description of Abogin is narrated from Dr. Kirilov's perspective, whose "restriction of field" makes it difficult for readers to immediately unravel the mystery of the change in Abogin's demeanor before and after. As a result, readers are compelled to follow the Dr. Kirilov's eyes, step by step, in observing the development of the plot. By using this technique, Chekhov successfully arouse readers' curiosity, gripping their attention, and adding a significant dramatic color to the entire story.

5. Type of Narrators

The narrator in a narrative text refers to the "agent of the narrative act" or the "voice or speaker," which, along with the focalization, constitutes the narration. In *Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative*, Prince listed four types of narrators: the interventionist narrator, the self-conscious narrator, the reliable narrator, and the distant narrator. According to Prince, the interventionist narrator "manifests a greater degree of subjectivity and self-involvement than does the neutral, objective, or distant narrator"; the self-conscious narrator "makes readers conscious of the constructedness of the narrative and of the narrator's role in that construction"⁴ (1982, p. 49); the reliable narrator "provides readers with a sense of stability and coherence"⁴; the distant narrator "conveys a sense of impersonality, or at least a degree of detachment, toward the events recounted"⁴.

However, he did not provide clear criteria for his classification, and there was some overlap between the types. In light of this, Hu Yamin divided narrator types into four pairs respectively based on narrative relationship, narrative level, narrative behavior, and narrative attitude. This essay will select one pair of her narrator types, namely, the interventionist and the objective narrators, divided by the narrator's attitude towards the story, to analyze narrators in *Enemies*.

6. Narrators in *Enemies*

The objective narrator merely serves as a conveyer of the story, playing the role of presenting the story without indicating their subjective attitude and value judgment. Conversely, the interventionist narrator possesses a strong subjective awareness, and can express subjective feelings or evaluations to a greater or lesser extent. In terms of the narrator's attitude toward the story, the vast majority of this short story is an objective description of Dr. Kirilov and Abogin's words and actions from an observer's point of view, allowing them to express themselves through the full range of their activities. There are times, however, when the narrator does reveal some of his opinions and attitudes toward the characters in the story. For example, the narrator has different tendencies in describing the appearance of the two, the descriptions of Dr. Kirilov are on the negative side. He employs words like "unpleasantly harsh" "unfriendly look" "listless, apathetic eyes" and "careless, uncouth manners," while Abogin's are on the positive side, such as "sturdy-looking" "fair man" and "soft features". The same is true when he comments on the two men based on their appearances: Dr. Kirilov is "suggestive of years of poverty, of ill fortune, of weariness with life and with men,"

while Abogin is “a suggestion of something generous, leonine.” Such a stark contrast cannot but be the narrator does this intentionally. Thus, both narrator types are present in the story.

(1) The objective narrator in enemies

It is known that Chekhov, a realist writer, always advocates objectively and calmly reflecting on life. In his letter to his wife, Olga Knipper, he said, “People can cry and moan for their novels, and can suffer together with their protagonists, but I think it should be done in a way that readers cannot tell. The more objective the attitude, the more powerful the impression.” This creative principle is consistent throughout his short stories, including *Enemies*.

Whether it is the opening of the story that describes the grief of Dr. Kirilov's family after losing their child, the positive conflict between Dr. Kirilov and Abogin in the climax, or the explanation of Dr. Kirilov's inner world at the end of the story, they are all narrated with an objective attitude by the narrator. The last sentence of the story seems to reveal the injustice of society through Dr. Kirilov's inner world:

...but that conviction, unjust and unworthy of the human heart, will not pass, but will remain in doctor's mind to the grave.

Nonetheless, it is actually the objective narrator who calmly states Dr. Kirilov's thoughts and feelings, as the narrator temporarily abandons his omniscient perspective and instead ends with Dr. Kirilov's point of view toward the world. Similar examples also appear in the initial description of Dr. Kirilov's impression of Abogin. Words like “unnecessary” and “irrelevant” are employed to make it easier for readers to judge the position of this visitor in Dr. Kirilov's mind. Even the narrator explicitly informs readers that “dumbness is most often the highest expression of happiness or unhappiness” to show how annoying an intruder he is in Dr. Kirilov's mind. Such descriptions might lead readers to believe that the narrator's expressed views are those of the author himself.

However, don't forget that Chekhov is skilled at creating satirical works, and his satire is not limited to one person or one class, but targets society as a whole. Abogin may be hypocritical, yet Dr. Kirilov cannot be said to be selfless. The narrator employs the word “indifference” three times to describe his attitude toward his wife and the uninvited guest, Abogin.

Besides, on two occasions, Dr. Kirilov's behavior of “raised his right foot higher than was necessary” shows his eagerness to escape from reality, whether in front of his wife or a stranger, indicating that Dr. Kirilov is not willing to enter other people's worlds and confront with cruel reality, which also sets the stage for the subsequent emotional outburst of Dr. Kirilov. Examples above starkly illustrate that the narrator does not take sides, but depicts real-life situations vividly and objectively as a bystander, by narrating dialogues and actions between Dr. Kirilov and Abogin.

(2) The interventionist narrator in enemies

If an objective narrator's discourse is susceptible to misleading readers with regards to the author's true intentions, then the intervening narrator serves as a clue left behind by the author to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the text. For instance, when Abogin pleaded with Dr. Kirilov to come to his home and treat his ailing wife, he used a lot of eloquent phrases, such as:

“I fully understand your state...”

“I fully understand your condition, I sympathize with you”

“You are in sorrow, I understand”

In some ways, his tone was much more touching than his words. Abogin tried his best to appeal to Dr. Kirilov's feelings, if not by his words then at least by the sincerity of his tone. Sincere as these words and tone seemed, they came from selfish and cruel heart. Just as the interventionist narrator said:

Abogin was sincere, but it was remarkable that whatever he said his words sounded stilted, soulless, and

inappropriately flowery

Unsurprisingly, Dr. Kirilov remained unmoved. The interventionist narrator provided the necessary explanation for the reason:

As a rule, however fine and deep a phrase may be, it only affects the indifferent, and cannot fully satisfy those who are happy or unhappy; that is why dumbness is most often the highest expression of happiness or unhappiness; lovers understand each other better when they are silent, and a fervent, passionate speech delivered by the grave only touches outsiders, while to the widow and children of the dead man it seems cold and trivial.

Additionally, during their intense conflict, the interventionist narrator offered the observation that:

I believe that never in their lives, even in delirium, had they uttered so much that was unjust, cruel, and absurd... Unhappiness does not bring people together but draws them apart, and even where one would fancy people should be united by the similarity of their sorrow, far more injustice and cruelty is generated than in comparatively placid surroundings.

It was not until here that the narrator, who had been invisible for a long time, finally emerged and used the first-person pronoun "I" to manifest that he is about to characterize the conflict between Dr. Kirilov and Abogin. Through these timely interventions, readers can avoid being swayed by Dr. Kirilov and Abogin's words and actions, and gain a holistic understanding of the story.

7. Shifting Narrators in Enemies

In the short story *Enemies*, although the story is primarily narrated by an objective narrator, the objective narrator briefly transitions into an intervening narrator during the course of the story, before returning to an objective narrator. Hu Yamin discussed this "violation of the narrator" phenomenon in her book *Narratology*, where she held the view that shifts of the narrator in the creative process can break free from the constraints of the single narrator type and achieve a richer narrative style. Booth went further, arguing that shifts of the narrator is one of the rhetoric and techniques of the work. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, he pointed out that "in rhetoric within the fiction, identifiable devices (with the extreme case being authorial commentary) are openly employed, while in fiction as rhetoric (the "broadest sense of rhetoric") the entire work is viewed as a complete communicative activity." Booth not only expanded the novel's rhetoric to the level of narrative techniques, but also argued that novelists use rhetorical techniques to help readers better understand the novel text, and thereby achieve spiritual communication and resonance between readers and authors.

In *Enemies*, shifts in the narrator enhance the readability of the story. If the story were told solely from the perspective of an objective narrator without any timely judgment or explanation of Dr. Kirilov and Abogin's words and actions, it could easily confuse readers and diminish their interest in reading further. Shifting narrators at appropriate moments can compensate for the limitations of having a single way of narrating. The objective narrator is responsible for calmly recounting events, while the interventionist narrator is responsible for pointing the right way to understand the plot, making the short story's narration more diverse, vivid, and enriching the readers' experience.

Additionally, shifts in the narrator enhance its thematic effect. On one hand, from the description of Dr. Kirilov's house and his appearance, readers can easily infer that he has low standard of living, and that he belongs to the lower class. On the other hand, the appearance and furnishings of Abogin's home indicate his wealthy aristocratic class status. The objective narrator reflects Dr. Kirilov and Abogin's hostility from different social classes with a calm narrative attitude, while the interventionist narrator reveals the selfishness hidden behind the two, pointing out that "enemies" are not just people who are hostile to each other due to the huge gap between the two classes, but also

the selfishness within human nature, which is the short story's theme.

8. Conclusion

Chekhov's short story, *Enemies*, employs a variety of narrative techniques. Various focalizations and narrators, and shifts within them, all play a significant role in helping the readers' understanding of the story. By skillfully shifting focalizations and narrators, confusion and misinterpretation are avoided, and suspense is created, thus improving the readability of the story. These narrative techniques effectively draw readers' attention and guide them through the tragic elements of everyday life, thus enhancing the theme that "enemies" are not just people who are hostile to each other, but also the selfishness within human nature.

As Lu Xun once said, "Few are the tragic heroes who die, but many are the tragedies that occur in the most mundane or seemingly insignificant events." Chekhov possesses a unique ability to perceive tragedy in daily life, and uses this as a continuous source of inspiration for his writing. And *Enemies* stands as one of testaments to his mastery of the art of storytelling.

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