

The Significance of Narrator's Intervention

In Lu Xun's Short Stories

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{ Abstract }

In the narrative text, the narrator can intervene the story or text itself in different ways. The narratorial intervention normally goes through the narratorial comments on the characters, events and even text itself. It can be simply ornamental, or fulfill a rhetorical purpose; and it can function as an essential part of the dramatic structure of the narrative. This article analyzes different interventions of the narrator in Lu Xun's short stories.

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Narrators can intervene into the story in zero as well as internal and external focalization, though they do so more frequent in narratives with zero focalization. Narrative intervention is less frequent in modern than in traditional fiction, but it still exists. The question is not whether the narratorial intervention is allowed, but whether it suits the story.

Narratorial interventions normally appear as comments on characters, events, and even the text itself, and they go beyond the identification, description, or recounting of events. In the commentary, the narrator explains the meaning or significance of a narrative element, makes value judgments, refers to worlds transcending the characters' world, or comments on their own narration (Prince 14). In a chapter in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* on narrators' commentary, Booth includes: providing of facts, picture, or summary; molding beliefs; relating particulars to the established norms; heightening the significance of events; generalizing the significance of the whole work; manipulating mood; and commenting directly on the work itself (169-210). Chatman distinguishes two kinds of intervention: commentary on story and commentary on discourse respectively. Of the former he distinguishes three aspects, interpretation, judgment, and generalization:

“Interpretation” can be seen as the broadest category of overt commentary. In one sense, it includes the others: if an interpretation proper is any explanation, a judgment is an explanation whose basis is moral evaluation, while a generalization is one that compares an event or existent in the story with real ones in the nonfictional universe (237).

In “The True Story of Ah Q” we find commentary both on the story and on the discourse. The commentary on discourse belongs to what Genette calls the narrator's “directing function”: they are to some extent metalinguistic, marking the

articulations, connections, interrelationships of the discourse, in short, its internal organization (255). Such a commentary was very common in traditional Chinese fiction, much it became conventional. In the Introduction to "The True Story of Ah Q," the narrator says that he has been meaning to write the true story of Ah Q for several years, but with some trepidation:

And yet no sooner had I taken up my pen than I became conscious of tremendous difficulties in writing this far-from-immortal work. The first was the question of what to call it. Confucius said, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true"; and this axiom should be most scrupulously observed. There are many types of biography: official biographies, autobiographies, unauthorized biographies, legends, supplementary biographies, family histories, sketches... but unfortunately none of these suited my purpose. (*LXQJ* 1: 487; *Works* 1: 102).

The narrator then explains why all these do not suit his purpose. Finally, he decides to use for his title the last two words of a stock narrative phrase: "Enough of this digression, and back to the *true story*." Here, through the choice of his story's title, the narrator deals with his writing of it. At this moment, the protagonist, Ah Q, has not yet come to the stage, while the highly "self-conscious" narrator tells the reader about his tremendous difficulties in writing. This "self-conscious" narration undercuts the fabric of the fiction (Chatman 248) and foregrounds the discursive comments. The narrator stresses in this special way that he is writing a story. This increases the distance between the narrator and the protagonist. Like a puppeteer, the narrator can freely pull the strings of his figure.

Comments on discourse and story are not isolated from each other. Some comments on discourse are simple, straightforward and relatively harmonious with

the story (Chatman 248). In the quoted comments on discourse, Ah Q is not a legendary figure, has no achievements and the narrator is not Ah Q. At the beginning of the story, the narrator says that “an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man” (*LXQJ* 1: 487; *Works* 1: 102), but then he admits that he is writing a “far-from-immortal work.” From the contrast between “immortal” and “far-from-immortal,” readers can easily infer what kind of character they will face. The narrator’s tone toward his character is disdainful and mocking, which undoubtedly will influence the reader’s reception of the character. The narrator then combines his comments on discourse and story. Talking about biographies of this type, the narrator says they should start something like this: “So-and-so, whose other name was so-and-so, was a native of such-and-such a place” (*LXQJ* 1: 488; *Works* 1: 103). But he does not know what Ah Q’s surname is. He then says: “Once, he seemed to be named Zhao, but the next day there was some confusion about the matter again” (*LXQJ* 1: 488; *Works* 1: 103), because Mr. Zhao does not allow such a wretch to have the surname Zhao. The discourse comments effect the story and directly touch its content.

Discourse comments can use different devices. Some of them, especially in self-conscious narration, are different from the convention of the narrative text. They are seemingly bent on destroying, not merely playing with, the narrative text. One such discourse commentary is to add footnotes to the text -- a technique that Lu Xun uses in two stories. There are two footnotes in “The Lamp that Was Kept Alight,” and two in “The Divorce.” The most remarkable one appears in the following situation:

The boat was very quiet, with no sound but the splash of water against the bow. Zhuang Musan reached for his pipe and filled it.

A fat man sitting opposite, next to Basan, rummaged in his girdle for a flint and struck a light, which he held to Zhuang Musan's pipe.

"*Dui, dui*," said Zhuang Musan, nodding to him (*LXQJ* 2: 145; *Works* 1: 273, slightly modified).

"*Dui, dui*," the author explains in a note, is a clipped form of *duibuqi, duibuqi* [Sorry to bother you--lit., I can't face you] or a contraction of *dezui, dezui* [I've troubled you--lit., I'm the one to blame]: Unknown" (*LXQJ* 2: 145).¹ In the first three notes the author explains some words, whose meaning seems unclear or ambiguous. However, this one does not give the exact meaning for the Musan's words; on the contrary, it says that their meaning is "unknown." Musan's response is ambiguous, even on a very simple matter, namely that the fat man shows his respect and kindness for him. It shows that he is absent-minded at the moment. Before this, Basan had very tactfully persuaded Musan and Aigu, by saying "there's really no point in Aigu going back there" (*LXQJ* 2: 145; *Works* 1: 273). Aigu strongly objected to this. Basan is convinced and keeps his mouth shut. Hearing their talking, Musan is probably lost in thought, and his response to the fat man is ambiguous "*dui, dui*." The note of "*dui, dui*," the narrator's intrusion into the discourse, is relevant to the story, its rhetorical function cannot be ignored.²

¹ All four notes were omitted in Yangs' translation; while William Lyell keeps them all. My translation relies on Lyell's text (379)

² Some readers overlook the special function of this note. Lu Xun's "The Divorce" was included in *Reference Material on the History of Modern Chinese Literature (vol. 1)*, but this note was cut out (p.26). This is an obvious misunderstanding. In *The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun* published by the Zhejiang Literary and Art (1992), Shidai Literary and Art (1999) and Henan People's Publishing House (1999), the original four notes of the author in "The Divorce" and "The Lamp that Was Kept Alight" were all cut out.

Lu Xun's stories also contain commentaries that lie between discourse and story, form and content. These, often placed in brackets, are commentaries on discourse that are closely related to the story. They are the narrator's commentary on interpretations of the story. Their function, according to Booth, is "to tell the reader about facts that he could not easily learn otherwise" (169). Let us see the following two paragraphs in "My Old Home":

Our family had only one "busy-monther" servant. (In our district we divide servants into three categories: those who work all the year for one family are called "year-longs"; those who are hired by the day are called "short-timers"; and those who farm their own land and only work for one family at New Year, during festivals or when rents are being collected are called "busy-monther") (*LXQJ* 1: 477-78; *Works* 1: 92, slightly modified).

After making this discovery, Mrs. Yang is very pleased with herself, and flies off taking the dog-crazer with her. (The dog-crazer is used by poultry keepers in our part. It is a wooden cage inside which food is put, so that hens can stretch their necks in to eat but dogs can only stand around "crazed" with frustration.) (*LXQJ* 1: 484; *Works* 1: 100, slightly modified).

The narrator makes the commentaries of interpretation on the "busy-monther" and the "dog-crazer" respectively. Chinese readers would have no problem in guessing the meaning of "busy-monther." Yet the narrator not only explains the exact meaning of the word, but also gives some supplementary information. This is both interesting and useful, because readers can infer from it that the narrator's family could not afford a "year-long" servant. As for the "dog-crazer," even most Chinese readers will not understand its meaning without explanation. This commentary

shows that Mrs. Yang is greedy and ridiculous: she takes a worthless thing with her.

The narrator's intervention in traditional narratives often has no close relation to the contents of story. But in Lu Xun's stories the comments fuse with the context and seem apt. In "Storm in a Teacup," the narrator comments when Old Mrs. Ninepounder and her granddaughter Sixpounder come to the stage and Old Mrs. Ninepounder says for the first time her pet phrase "Each generation is worse than the last":

It was the somewhat unusual custom in this village for mothers to weigh their children at birth and to call them the number of pounds they happened to weigh. Since Old Mrs. Ninepounder's celebration of her fiftieth birthday she had gradually become a fault-finder, for ever complaining that in her young days the summer had not been so hot nor the beans so tough as now. In a word, there was something wrong with the present-day world. Why else had Sixpounder weighed three pounds less than her great-grandfather and one pound less than her father, Sevenpounder? Surely this was irrefutable evidence. So she reiterated emphatically, "Yes, indeed. Each generation is worse than the last" (*LXQJ* 1: 468; *Works* 1: 80).

The narrator's comments on the odd names of Ninepounder and Sixpounder make readers understand the background of their names. This not only satisfies the reader's curiosity, but provides the opportunity for Old Mrs. Ninepounder to use her pet phrase about gradual decline. Relating that Sixpounder weighed three pounds less than her great-grandfather and one pound less than her father, the narrator ironically remarks: "Surely this was irrefutable evidence." The commentary is ironic, because a single example is never "irrefutable." When Mrs.

Sevenpounder refutes Old Mrs. Ninepounder later on, we know that the “evidence” is definitely not “irrefutable” but doubtful. Old Mrs. Ninepounder still repeats her pet phrase, raising doubts about her judgment. These comments by the narrator are not only in perfect harmony with the story, they also mock at characters such as Old Mrs. Ninepounder, who obstinately adhere to past practices. In real life, she is definitely not unique. In Chinese, the name “Old Mrs. Ninepounder” has taken a specific meaning, referring to persons who stick to old ways.

Comments of judgment are explanations whose basis is moral evaluation; the narrator judges the values, norms, and beliefs of characters. Comments of judgment may be scattered in the text. Narrators frequently judge the character’s moral norms through adjectives. Examples are not difficult to find in Lu Xun’s stories. For example, “Our boss was a grim-faced man, nor were the customers much pleasanter, which made the atmosphere a gloomy one” (*LXQJ* 1: 438; *Works* 1: 53). “This Mr. N is rather irascible. He often loses his temper for no reason and makes tactless remarks” (*LXQJ* 1: 461; *Call to Arms* 39). In some stories, the narrator repeats his judgment on the same character several times in order to produce a special effect. In “Tomorrow,” for example, Fourth Shan’s Wife tries everything for her boy: she had drawn lots at the temple; she had made her vow; and she had given the boy his medicine. If he still does not get better, she will have to take him to Mr. Ho Xiaoxian. “But maybe Bao’er’s only bad at night; when the sun comes out tomorrow his fever may go and he may breathe more easily again. A lot of illnesses are like that” (*LXQJ* 1: 451; *Works* 1: 69). To counter her trusting to luck, the narrator comments: “Fourth Shan’s Wife was a simple woman, who did not know what a fearful word ‘but’ is. Thanks to this ‘but,’ many bad things turn out well, many good things turn out badly.” The remark, “Fourth Shan’s Wife was a simple woman,” appears five times in the story. The first time already hints that her simplicity may not be effective. However, the narrator makes clear that Fourth

Shan's Wife is not only "simple." He remarks, for example, that "she might be a simple woman, but she had a will of her own" (*LXQJ* 1: 451; *Works* 1: 69). The repetition of the judgment also increases the distance between the narrator and his character, and keeps the narrator's authority and objectivity. He can tell a sad story in a calm tone.

In "The True Story of Ah Q," the reader can find many comments. At the opening of Chapter Four, entitled "The Tragedy of Love," the comment of judgment is not directly related to the events, but the narrator links it to the protagonist:

There are said to be some victors who take no pleasure in a victory unless their opponents are as fierce as tigers or eagles: in the case of foes as timid as sheep or chickens they find their triumph empty. There are other victors who, having carried all before them, with the enemy slain or surrendered, utterly cowed, realize that now no foe, no rival, no friend is left--none but themselves, supreme, lonely, lost, and forlorn. Then they find their triumph a tragedy. But not so our hero: he was always exultant. This may be a proof of the moral supremacy of China over the rest of the world (*LXQJ* 1: 498; *Works* 1: 117).

Unlike those victors who feel empty, lonely, lost, and forlorn even in victory, Ah Q, an unimportant person, as shown by his previous actions, is always exultant. The narrator speaks of "our" Ah Q, which has a special meaning. It makes people aware that Ah Qs are living with "us" and among "us." When the narrator adds that Ah Q's permanently "exultant" state may be "a proof of the moral supremacy of China over the rest of the world," this can only be understood as a generalizing irony.

When discussing commentaries that “manipulate mood,” Booth claims that a different element enters when an author intrudes to address the reader’s moods and emotions directly. Thus, he thinks it is reasonable “for the frequent insistence that indispensable commentary be spoken by a character in the story” (201). In Lu Xun’s stories, the comments by narrating characters sometimes come from unreliable narrators. In such cases, the comments arouse questions: the narrator-character’s judgment and evaluation may be problematic or they may defend his own actions. When Xianglin’s Wife in “The New Year Sacrifice,” makes detailed inquiries about whether dead people turn into ghosts, whether hell exists, and whether all members of a family will meet again after death, the narrator “I” finally says “I’m not sure” and walks off quickly. After that, he comments on what he said and did:

“I’m not sure” is a most useful phrase.

Bold inexperienced youngsters often take it upon themselves to solve problems or choose doctors for other people, and if by any chance things turn out badly they may well be held to blame; but by concluding their advice with this evasive expression they achieve blissful immunity from reproach. The necessity for such a phrase was brought home to me still more forcibly now, since it was indispensable even in speaking with a beggar woman (*LXQJ* 2: 8; *Works* 1: 172).

The narrator comforts himself for what he said in a relaxed tone. He calms down, but his scholarly conscience also diminishes. Readers will take a poor view of him since he shirks moral responsibility by extricating himself from an awkward predicament.

Another narrator's comment of judgment is to be found in "Regret for the Past," when Juansheng's life becomes more and more difficult and he is about to forsake his common-law wife Zijun. Reflecting on his life during the last half year he comments:

As I sat there alone thinking over the past, I realized that during the last half year, for love--blind love--I had neglected all the other important things in life. First and foremost, livelihood. A man must make a living before there can be any place for love. There must be a way out for those who struggle, and I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings, although I was much weaker than before.... (*LXQJ* 2: 121; *Works* 1: 261)

The narrator's judgment holds true for life: "A man must make a living before there can be any place for love." However, the applicability of narrative judgments "depends upon how they suit the fictional context, not their truth in an absolute sense" (Chatman 244). In this context, Juansheng's comment is unsuitable, because it becomes his pretext. Zijun loves him, but the narrator regards her love as "blind" and he attributes all his problems to this "blind love." This is grossly unfair to Zijun. The narrator's comments raise suspicion about his intention and they make Zijun more attractive.

In commentaries of generalization that compare something in the story with elements in the nonfictional universe, we frequently find "general truths," that is, philosophical observations that reach beyond the world of the fictional work into the real universe" (Chatman 237, 243). Like "general truths," the commentary of generalization says something that everybody knows. In Lu Xun's stories, the narrator sometimes states something which people know very well, or he uses sayings handed down for a long time, in order to explain and summarize the

character's action or the event's occurrence. When Ah Q, looking different from before, tosses unto the counter a handful of silver and copper to order wine, the narrator remarks: "The ancients say, 'A scholar who has been away three days must be looked at with new eyes.' So the waiter, tavern-keeper, customers and passers-by all quite naturally expressed a kind of suspicion mingled with respect" (*LXQJ* 1: 508; *Works* 1: 129-30). When Ah Q first wins at gambling but finally loses everything, the narrator says by way of introduction: "the truth of the proverb 'Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise' was shown when Ah Q was unfortunate enough to win and almost suffered in the end" (*LXQJ* 1: 493; *Works* 1: 111). The sayings "A scholar who has been away three days must be looked at with new eyes," and "Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise" are familiar to Chinese readers. They are "general truths" that do not provide new information in this context. With these commonplace sayings, the narrator makes the reader have a strong impression. Of course, the "general truth" may have different meaning in different contexts. Its narrative use may or may not be ironic. The original meaning of "Misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise" is that a loss may turn out to be a gain, but the narrator could use this commentary to say that a gain may turn out to be a loss. Here, the proverb is ironically as in many other contexts that Lu Xun often takes an ironic a critical attitude with respect to "ancient wisdom."

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敘述者干預在魯迅小說中的意義

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〔摘要〕

在敘事作品中，敘述者可以種種方式對於其所講述的故事以及文本本身進行干預。這種干預一般通過敘述者對於人物、事件甚至文本本身進行評論的方式來進行。它既可以僅僅是裝飾性的，以達到某種修辭目的，也可以作為敘事文戲劇性結構的基本部分而起作用。本文論述了魯迅小說中所出現的種種敘述者干預。其巧妙的運用不僅使敘述者干預與敘事文融為一體，而且達到了獨特的修辭目的，具有不可替代的作用。

關鍵詞：魯迅小說、敘述者、干預、意義

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