The narrative voice is an important element in the use of realist and non-realist...

Design, Architecture

It is not always easy to categorise literary forms into a particular genre or style of writing. Therefore to classify the realist novel, which became the foremost form of writing in the early nineteenth century, we can perhaps best describe it as a body of prose that is interested and concerned with everyday life. This of course leads us to assume, as readers of twenty-first century novels, that a non-realist novel would therefore offer the reader an escape into an alternative world where settings and events are far from what would be expected in everyday life. Two examples of this that would immediately spring to mind nowadays would be perhaps the science fiction or horror genres. However, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, novelists thought of their works as realist if they were simply not recognised as ‘ romantic’ writings, which had been the dominant literary form for centuries, ‘…realism meant writing fiction based on observation of the world of ordinary men and women in society, using the simplest language to reach the widest audience. It also meant avoiding ‘ the torments of soul of young men with too much imagination’, tortured phraseology and ideas’ and ‘ romantic psychology’ (The Realist Novel, p. 26.

). A realist novel can also then be categorised as having a certain ‘ voice’ and narrative structure. If, as a reader, we are to connect with the characters and believe in the realistic world that the author has created, then certain narrative techniques and language are to be expected. This being said, there are of course novels that cleverly combine both literary forms; offering the reader the chance to connect with the characters in a recognisable setting or family group but also creating an atmosphere or sequence of events that would not be expected in real life.

One such sub-genre as this is the Gothic novel. The Old English Baron: A Gothick Story, written by Clara Reeve in 1778 '...was, in fact, one of the first examples of a sub-genre of the novel, Gothic, that tried to combine the ' real' and the ' fabulous'. (The Realist Novel, p. 8.). Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1764), considered as the first fitting example of the Gothic novel, is where the term originates from, being derived from the '...Gothic or medieval architecture of the gloomy castles...' (The Realist Novel, p. 28.

) he favoured in his work. Frankenstein, a Gothic novel written by Mary Shelley in 1818, is a perfect example of how the realist novel can be combined with the non-realist. The narrative voice that Shelley employs is also a combination as she creates an unusual blend of literary styles within the book. The novel is essentially a series of letters written by Captain Robert Walton. They are all written to his sister, Margaret Saville, as he shares his travelling experiences and innermost thoughts with her.

Once Walton has met Frankenstein though, and Frankenstein divulges the story of himself and the creature to Walton, it becomes easy for the reader to forget that it is still Walton's letters to his sister that we are essentially reading as it feels more like a direct autobiography from Frankenstein himself. This happens again, when we are immersed in the creature's world. We are taken so deep into the creature's thoughts and feelings that we forget that what we are reading is third-hand information. In reality it is Walton's letter to his sister, wherein Frankenstein dictates to Walton what the creature has told him, even though we read it as if it is first person narrative directly from the creature himself. The epistolary style is taken

further by Shelley where, within Frankenstein's dictation to Walton for his letters to his sister, there are also letters between Frankenstein and his family. Using this narrative technique of first person, brings the reader to a closer observation of the characters and allows the reader to experience a link with them, feeling sympathy, empathy, pity or hatred towards them as we experience their lives along with them. It is through this intimate first person narrative that the reader perhaps can take on the role of Walton's sister as we read his affectionate letters to her, ' I love you very tenderly. Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again.

(Frankenstein, p. 11.) This beginning seems to position us at a safe distance from the story itself, but shortly afterwards we then realise we have become Walton as he listens to and records Frankenstein's story who says, ' I do not know that the relation of my misfortunes will be useful to you, yet, if you are inclined, listen to my tale. ' (Frankenstein, p. 17.) Frankenstein's tale, told with a first person narrative, leads us to forget that we are reading Walton's letter and brings us far closer inside the circle.

Finally we take on the role of Frankenstein himself as he dictates the creature's tale, ' Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate, as you shall judge that I deserve, But hear me. ' (Frankenstein, p. 78.).

Through the creatures eyes, we are at last placed at the very centre of the story. The Gothic theme is strong right from the start of Frankenstein's telling of his story. We soon learn of his overriding desire to discover the

cause of life and this brings him to also study death, corruption and decay, '…forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses. (Frankenstein, p. 34.). The language used here by Shelley is romantic and dramatic, creating a dark atmosphere and yet painting Frankenstein as light-hearted and …'dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it illustrated.

' (Frankenstein, p. 34.). It is during Frankenstein's realisation that he thinks he can reanimate life that we see how blinkered and narrow minded he can be. '…this discovery was so great and overwhelming, that all the steps by which I had progressively led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result. ' (Frankenstein, p. 34. and '…but I doubted not that I should ultimately succeed.

' (Frankenstein, p. 35.).

Yet when he does ' ultimately succeed', he runs from his laboratory and cannot bear the responsibility for the creature he has created. Shelley, in giving us Frankenstein as the hero of the Gothic story with its non-realist romantic and dramatic prose and science fiction roots, has given us a broken hero. This helps to ground the reader in the realist aspect of the story. Frankenstein suffers with his nerves, loves and misses his family and constantly worries for their safety.

There is friendship and love and even a wedding which all make for a realistic feel. And yet for all that Frankenstein does suffer; the illness brought on by the success of his experiment, the murders of his brother and closest friend, even the death of his wife, it is difficult to remain sympathetic when

he so adamantly refuses to feel even a small amount of pity for the creature that he created. When we are eventually within the creature’s story, he tells Frankenstein of his struggle to find a safe place to live, to learn how to communicate and live alongside other people. Shelley’s prose here gives the creature an almost poetic nature, ‘ My senses were gratified and refreshed by a thousand scents of delight, and a thousand sights of beauty. ’ (Frankenstein, p. 92.

). We are lulled into a sense of security as the creature comes across as gentle and kind and it seems it is only through his constant non-acceptance that results in his murderous and cruel nature. The Gothic tone of the novel rolls away for a while and presents us with an easy ride as we come to understand the journey that the creature has taken. It contains clear echoes of eighteenth century texts that presented ’savages’ as noble.

’ (The Realist Novel, p. 81.).

The story within a story comes full circle when finally, as Frankenstein’s body lays in a cabin on Walton’s ship, the creature appears. Shelley has seemingly brought all the elements of the story together as the ‘ son’ mourns the death of his ‘ father’ and Walton looks on as the creature confesses that he shall also go to his death. Yet there is no comforting conclusion. What happens to Frankenstein’s body? Where is he buried? Does the creature throw himself on his ’funeral pile triumphantly, and exalt in the agony of the torturing flames. ’? (Frankenstein, p. 191.

) Does Walton successfully navigate himself back to England and his sister Margaret? It is perhaps the unreliability of the first person narrative used by Shelley that intensifies this feeling, there is no trustworthy omniscient narrator here. The fantastical scenery and passionate language '… increasingly takes on the intensity and unreality of dream…' (The Realist Novel p. 118.), and it is with a dream-like ending that we are left questioning.

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