

Cassandra: an analysis of the novel using Genette's theory of literary analysis cr...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Cassandra is a novel told about the survivors of the Trojan War. It is the story of a young woman named Cassandra, and her struggles during the post-war era. There are many different ways to analyze literature, but one of the leading literary analysts, Gerard Genette, has provided an extremely useful method for analyzing novels like *Cassandra* by Christa Wolf. Because *Cassandra* does not have a coherent or cohesive timeline, and rather jumps about in time with little warning, special types of literary analyses must be applied to the text to truly dig into the meaning of the multifaceted text.

Helen is the most famous woman of the Trojan War, as her existence and her beauty is ostensibly the cause of the war in the first place; however, few people remember that Cassandra herself was one of the most beautiful women of the day. According to Greek myth, Cassandra was pursued by the god Apollo and gifted with the gift of foresight; however, she ultimately rejected his advances (Wolf). Wolf chose Cassandra's character because she is deeply ingrained in mythical and cultural history, but also because she is a deeply independent and stubborn female character. Because the story is told from Cassandra's point-of-view-- in the first person omniscient-- the reader is immersed in Cassandra's thought process. Similarly, the reader is immersed in the pain and the conflict that Cassandra feels throughout the novel.

Cassandra's narrative throughout the novel is internally focalized; although outside events are happening, the focus of the novel is truly on the feelings and the introspection of the protagonist, Cassandra. At the beginning of the novel-- but ostensibly the end of her life-- Cassandra's inner monologue strays into the intricacies of her life: " So far, everything that has befallen me has struck an answering chord. This is the secret that encircles and holds me

together; I have never been able to talk of it with anyone. Only here, in the uttermost rim of my life, can I name it to myself: There is something of everyone in me, so I have belonged completely to no one, and I have even understood their hatred of me" (Wolf 4). Thus, Cassandra notes that her existence seems ephemeral and undefined; Genette notes that when the narrator is distinct and unnamed but known intimately to the reader and a character in the story, the narrator can be classified as a homodiegetic narrator. The homodiegetic narrator is intensely and intricately immersed in the text, integral to the forward movement of the storyline; Genette (Barry 153) notes that narrators like those in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* fill this role. Likewise, Cassandra fills the role of the homodiegetic narrator; she is intimately involved in both the storyline and the reader's experience in the story.

It should be noted that while Cassandra is a retelling of an extremely old myth, it does not follow conventional mythical standards. Genette (Barry 150) notes that a traditional narrator is one that is removed from the text, and traditional narratives-- like those normal for mythical stories and folktales-- are generally linear (Barry 154). However, the storyline of Cassandra can be defined as analeptic, meaning that the chronology of the story is twisted. Cassandra moves back and forth in time, unbound by the linear nature of human experience; she is following an emotional thread of existence and experience rather than the traditional linear method of storytelling. This method of storytelling, which relies heavily on the feelings and the emotional responses to experiences that Cassandra experiences, is important when considering the feminist nature of the novel.

Cassandra is often considered a feminist novel because of the themes of independence and strength that the main character embodies throughout the text. Christa Wolf intentionally chose to tell the story of the fall of Troy through the eyes of the woman who knew that Troy would fall-- indeed, the woman who saw the fall of Troy due to a god-given gift-- and was not believed by the men in her life. By framing the story in such a way that Cassandra tells of her experiences as her life is due to end, the reader inherently understands and trusts the narrator. Cassandra has, at the moment of her death, nothing more to lose by telling the truth; for this reason, she is seen as a reliable and sympathetic narrator. The way Wolf uses the method of zero localization to truly embed the reader in the head of the narrator makes her all the more sympathetic and believable as well. Cassandra, as a character, is hated and disbelieved in the original story of the Trojan War. As a character, she is portrayed as conniving and untrustworthy; this is the view of the character that the reader is meant to have when he or she begins to read Cassandra. However, shortly after the novel begins, it is difficult not to begin to see the Trojan War through her eyes, and difficult to continue to consider her an unsympathetic character. "I am testing for pain," Cassandra says, when she is considering her station after the Trojan War, "I am probing my memory in the same way a doctor probes a limb to see if it has atrophied" (Wolf 6). She is often characterized in fiction as a witch or as having witch-like powers; however, in the novel, it is noted that she cannot help the visions that she has (Schapira). Through the framing and the zero localization, Cassandra turns from a hated character into a highly sympathetic one.

Much of the speech given in the text is indirect, although there is direct speech as well; this indirect reporting of speech just adds to the feeling that the narrator is reporting the events that happened in her life as she remembers them. Because she cannot remember the exact moments or the exact things that were said to her, she must report them as she can remember them; she seems to remember her feelings and thoughts much more accurately than she remembers the things that people said to her. In the text, Cassandra reflects heavily on her mistakes: " We swiftly varied our mistaken judgements to avoid seeing the sinister reality behind the glorious facade. One example enraged me while I was still capable of feeling enraged" (Wolf 37). She is linked to events by her feelings regarding these events, rather than by a specific factual memory of the event itself.

Cassandra is a highly successful feminist novel, written in a time when feminist novels were not highly looked upon by the literary community; however, Wolf manages to draw upon her own experiences in post-war Germany to create and frame a novel that is both interesting and strong in the literary sense. Although the framing of the novel is unusual, the reader is never lost in the chronology of the text, because the emotional thread of the novel is very easy to follow. Although it is a slightly unorthodox method for framing the novel, the emotional ties and thread of the story make up for the lack of coherent timeline within the text. Overall, the text is fragmented and twisted, but the author uses care to ensure that the narrator, mood, and framing of the story provide the reader with adequate information to keep them engaged.

Works cited

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