

English Narrative Poetry

English Narrative Poetry:

A Babel of Voices

By

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For Yasemin and Erhan

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INTRODUCTION

NARRATOLOGY AND VOICE

Poetry, by definition, is voice. In the case of poetry, the trope of voice would include the world of sound, as well as silence, in which the poem exists. Voices in poetry explore the ways through which individuals articulate themselves as subjects. The present study, devoted to voice, explores narrative poems ranging from Renaissance to contemporary. Actually, Chaucer would have been the obvious choice as a starting point in such a project. However, the narrative voices Chaucer creates in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the individual prologues to the tales, not to mention those in *The Legend of Good Women* and *The House of Fame* would require a book to themselves and restrict me to the Middle Ages while my aim was to explore how poets in different periods of English Literature have manipulated voice in their verse narratives. Hence, I chose to start with the Renaissance and to explore the different ways of focalization through voice in narrative poetry up to our own day. But to do this, a discussion is necessary as to the nature of narrative and its components. The question of narrative/narration/narrator/voice has a long history going back to Plato and Aristotle. In our own day, scholars have taken the question further and opened up the new field of narratology. So I want to begin with 'what is narrative' and 'what are the topics under discussion in the framework of narratology'.

We make sense of the world we live in through narrative. Stories help us come to terms with the events we encounter, be they comic or tragic. The fact of the birth of a baby would convey the exact progression and timing of the delivery, but it would take a story to communicate what it meant for the mother to generate a new human being inside her. If we need to make a distinction between the terms story and narrative, it would be simple, yet not wrong, to say that 'narrative' is commonly the 'telling of a story'.

Even though the word narrative is closely connected to art, it is also an activity that we all engage in throughout our lives. It exists in all human discourse. Therefore, it is not surprising that theoreticians have been interested in stories and the ways in which they are used to shape our

worlds. Frederic Jameson describes the process of narrative as “the central function or instance of the human mind.”¹ Nelson Goodman, on the other hand, puts forward the term “*Ways of Worldmaking*” in his influential 1978 study. Each one of us “worldmakes” using the stories that are already in the world. So we become narrators of our own narrative. The act of narrating narratives is universal since every one of us is involved in it. We live in a “storyworld”, the world evoked by narrative, a mental representation of the stories we hear or experience.²

Roland Barthes has underlined the universal and omnipresent characteristic of narrative in his famous article ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances –as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s Saint Ursula), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.³

Barthes underlines the fact that narrative is ever present in all genres, but he does not include poetry on his list. He must have had particularly the lyric poem in mind which is traditionally thought to rely upon image or feeling rather than a story. A close scrutiny, however, would reveal that even the lyric poem lends itself to narrative. Narrative poetry, moreover, depends on the telling of a story and should find its place in the list above.

Although the universality of narrative has been well established, the same thing cannot be said for a definition of narrative– Barthes, Jameson

¹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 13.

² Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978.

³ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives.” in *Image Music Text*. trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 79.

and Goodman notwithstanding. A good starting point could be an etymological analysis of the word ‘narrative’ itself. Hayden White says that the word narrative has its roots in ancient Sanskrit *gna* (know) and Latin *gnarus* (knowing, acquainted with) as well as *narro* (relate, tell) both of which grew out of *gna*. The root fits perfectly with the positioning of narrative by human beings.⁴ It allows us to know and to tell, ultimately helping us shape reality and make sense of our world.

Attempts at the definition of narrative start at the simplest level. It could be “the representation of an event or a series of events.”⁵ It could also be “somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something.”⁶ Another example is from *A Dictionary of Narratology*: “The recounting ... of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES.”⁷ The list of definitions is quite extensive, which goes to prove that there is no single definition for consensus. For instance, while Prince thinks it is necessary to have a narrator to narrate the story, Abbott does not regard the narrator as necessary. For him representation is sufficient. Each scholar seems to adapt the term to his/her needs. Hence, the term is not static but constantly evolving with each study.

There seems to be a need to be as flexible as possible when we are trying to understand what constitutes a narrative. One of the least prescriptive definitions within this context belongs to Marie-Laure Ryan and deserves to be quoted in length. She writes:

Narrative must be about a world populated by individual existents. This world must be situated in time and space and undergo significant transformations. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans. The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. The occurrence of at least

⁴ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 215.

⁵ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12.

⁶ Herman D., Phelan J., Rabinowitz, P. J., Richardson, B., Warhol, R. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 3.

⁷ Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 58.

some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world. The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient.⁸

Such a definition aims to include, rather than exclude which makes it useful for the purposes of this study. I also think that the definition proposed by Onega and Landa establishes a broad enough space: “A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal or causal way.”⁹ We could also remove causality and temporality from the above quotation and expand the limits of the word ‘event’ since we will be dealing with poetry.

These examples indicate what constitutes a narrative suitable for the study of the narratological point of view is not clear at all. Each scholar seems to produce and employ his/her own understanding of the term. Likewise, within the context of the present study, I will be using the term ‘narrative’ as an umbrella term, embracing character, action or event, representation, and narrator. The ‘representation’ of a story, that is how a specific story is told through the voice of a narrator, will be the major focus.

Narratology, the methodological and systematic study of narratives is a twentieth-century phenomenon. It has its roots in Russian formalism of 1915, a movement which attempted to explore the devices that distinguish literary language from ordinary language. The main aim of the Russian Formalists was to formulate a “scientific” description of literature, particularly poetry, with its special use of language. According to the Formalists, the content of a literary work was of secondary importance. Another movement which has been instrumental in the formation of narratology is French structuralism of the 1950s. French structuralists, too, argued for the possibility of approaching literature scientifically and systematically. They also posited that no text can be understood in isolation. Each text is connected literally to other texts and media, and therefore ought to be explored with reference to them.

Taking its cue from these two movements, narratology asserts itself as a systematic investigation and exploration of texts and discourse. One of the earliest performers of narratology was Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale*. First published in 1928, it was translated into English in 1958. In this work Propp investigates fairy tales in terms of character and plot functions. He goes on to assert that certain functions of the plot such as an act of villainy and the punishment of that villainy

⁸ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 8.

⁹ José Angel Garcia Landa and Susana Onega eds. *Narratology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 3.

remain unchanged even though the characters and details of the action might vary. Propp's work can be regarded as one of the earlier studies that aim to "structuralize" the study of narratives by formulating functions.

The term 'la narratologie', with its overt claims to being a science, was first coined by the Bulgarian-French literary critic Tzvetan Todorov. The aim was to establish specific methods in order to create "the science of narrative". He writes: "We wish to write a theory of narration here. ... As a result, this book does not so much belong to literary studies as to a discipline that does not yet exist, let us say narratology, the science of narrative."¹⁰

The structuralist division between the surface text and its underlying elements or rather 'structures' has led Gerard Genette to claim that the narrative text has three levels. In his influential study *Narrative Discourse* published in 1972 in French, he describes the surface level as 'narration', a word which remains the same in English translation. Narration refers to the concrete and obvious way in which the story is told. Words, the length of sentences or utterances, and narrators all exist at this level. The underlying elements below the surface are called 'récit' in French, a word that has been translated as 'narrative' into English. Narrative in Genette's sense should be thought of more as an organizational structure such as chronology and perspective. At the deepest level, Genette places 'histoire', translated as 'story', the chronological sequence of events.

These definitions and distinctions are clearly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's argument that a sign is a combination of a signifier and a signified. Another stepping stone has been the introduction of the terms 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. Syuzhet is an employment of narrative and fabula is the chronological order of the events contained in the story. It is important to note that these terms have been used and reused by critics in their own work. Although not identical, the terms "histoire", "récit", "narration" by Genette are similar to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's "story", "text", "narration", which are in turn similar to Mieke Bal's "fabula", "story", "text". It is inevitable that the reader may get quite lost in his/her search for a conclusive definition of terms for narratology. While we try to grasp their meanings, they remain constantly elusive. There is still no clear criteria as to how a text could be approached while assessing its narrativity. This ambiguity could be seen as an obstacle, but the unclaimed space would also provide new ways of tackling texts.

¹⁰ Quoted in Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 41.

Around the 1980s the field of narratology began to search for new ways of approaching texts through narrative theory and methodology. Other disciplines like history and psychology were included in its scope. From then on the field would be referred to as postclassical narratology. One of the main aims of postclassical narratology is to widen the scope of the ways in which texts can be studied. This change can be thought of as a way of opening up the analysis of a text to external influences. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik are two important names in postclassical narratology, and they posit that “postclassical narratology proposes the extensions of the classical model that open the fairly focused and restricted realm of narratology to methodological, thematic, and contextual influences from outside”¹¹ This meant opening up to fields such as linguistic theories, psychoanalytical approaches, as well as more marginalized perspectives such as the feminist, queer, ethnic and postcolonial. Another example would be Ryan’s book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* which deals with narrativity of computer-generated texts.¹² Postclassical narratology is also an attempt to extend the field beyond the boundaries of fiction, the novel in particular, towards drama, film, painting... Although lyric poetry is briefly referred to, poetry has never been regarded as friendly terrain for narratology. Nevertheless, postclassical narratology could be seen as moving towards cultural studies with a fresh perspective on classical narratology.

In the third book of *The Republic*, Plato deduces three fundamental styles of narration: single voice (or narrative), mimetic voice, and a combination of the two. The third one is the stance of Homer, he says, as Homer speaks at times through his own person while at other times he speaks through another person. The words of the narrator himself and the indirect speech employed by him are referred to as ‘diegesis’, whereas the direct speech of the characters talking for themselves is ‘mimesis’.

This age-old distinction between ‘mimesis’ and ‘diegesis’ requires further thought within the context of narrative strategies. As a first step, we must assume that there is an identifiable distinction between real events and their narrative representations. In its simplest sense, mimesis evokes reality by staging it. Although it is obviously a very important strategy employed in the theater, mimetic representation can also be seen

¹¹ Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik. eds. *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 2.

¹² Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

in other forms of narrative through the use of conversations quoted verbatim.

Diegesis summarizes events and conversations. Here, the voice of the narrator is clearly audible. The existence of a narrator between the event and its narration, however, prevents an untainted representation. The use of “s/he said” would imply the existence and, ultimately, the intervention of the narrator. The events are not directly available to the audience and are forever tainted by the character of the narrator. Instead of showing, or directly reporting, an event or situation, he relates it through his own lens.¹³ It cannot be disputed that if there is a narrator, the reliability of the narrator is inevitably in dispute. The first point every scholar seems to agree upon is that the narrator should not be confused with the actual author. Barthes emphasizes this point when he says: “The (material) author of a narrative is in no way to be confused with the narrator of that narrative.”¹⁴ These remarks should be accompanied by a caveat, with reference to autobiographical prose and poetry. In these cases, although there would be a narrative distance between the material author and the narrator, Barthes’s words “in no way” should be read with caution.

It would not be correct to regard mimesis and diegesis as binary opposites. Rather, they could be seen as the two ends of a line with degrees of mimetic and diegetic. They may overlap in texts, one foregrounding the other.

The dichotomy of mimesis and diegesis is explored in Aristotle’s *Poetics* as well. One of the most important presences in Aristotle is an agent who creates an alternative world through imitation. This agent could be an author or a narrator as Aristotle does not make a clear distinction between the two terms. Homer can exist in the text as the poet himself, or through one of his creations. Either way, he will be present in all his creations. The words of the characters will be mediated through his physical person and/or his literary persona.

As mentioned before, terms can overlap at times. At this point, I find Abbott’s distinction between story and narrative useful as it sheds light on the question of the narrator:

Narrative discourse is infinitely malleable. It can expand and contract, leap backward and forward, but as we take in information from the discourse we sort it out in our minds, reconstructing an order of events that we call the story. The story can take a day, a minute, a lifetime, or eons. It can be

¹³ Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 14.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, 282.

true or false, historical or fictional. But insofar as it is a story, it has its own unique duration and order of events that proceed chronologically from the earliest to the latest. The order of events and the length of time they are understood to take in the story are often quite different from the time and order of events in the narrative discourse.¹⁵

Hence, once we establish that the story can be delivered in more ways than one, the role of the narrator through whose voice the story is mediated becomes a crucial factor.

G rard Genette explains how the existence of a narrator and his degree of presence inform and change the story. According to him, the text becomes diegetic as result of the narrator's involvement.

The strictly textual mimetic factors, it seems to me, come down to those two data already implicit in Plato's comments: the quantity of narrative information (a more developed or more detailed narrative) and the absence (or minimal presence) of the informer –in other words, of the narrator. ... [T]he quantity of information and the presence of the informer are in inverse ratio, mimesis being defined by a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer, diegesis by the opposite relationship.¹⁶

The names and definitions given to the function of the narrator are many and multifold. For the purposes of the study at hand, Genette's definition provides a good starting point. In the very beginning of his influential *Narrative Discourse*, he posits that the word 'narrative' is used to express more concepts than it can hold. Therefore, as pointed out earlier, he proposes the word story (*histoire*) for the signified, or narrative content. In other words, a story is the sum of the events that are recounted. The term discourse/narrative is used to describe the signifier of the events. In other words, it refers to the statement of events. Finally, narration, or narrating, stands for the actual act of narrating performed by a narrator.

Another term that Genette uses is 'mood'. He uses this term with reference to different points of view through which events are recounted. This is an important term as it is used as a version of 'narrator'. He posits that the narrator can tell more or less of what the character tells and can tell it from different perspectives. Thus he maintains that narrative representation has its degrees. Narrative may keep a greater or lesser distance from what it tells and it can reuse and/or regulate the information it represents as it adopts the participant's vision or perspective. Mood,

¹⁵ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 17.

¹⁶ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 166.

therefore, can be thought of as the control the narrator exerts on the narrative information.

Focalization is a term that was first coined by Genette. The term refers to “the relation between that which is focalized—the characters, actions, and objects offered to the reader—and the focalizer, the agent who perceives and who therefore determines what is presented to the reader.”¹⁷ To put it very simply, it is a term to describe the point of view. “It refers specifically to the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative. Frequently, the narrator is our focalizer. Just as we hear her voice, we often see the action through her eyes.”¹⁸

Genette himself has argued that the term focalization is not to be confined to the visual, while Rimmon-Kenan argues that the term still retains visual connotations.¹⁹ Hence, the emphasis should fall on the word ‘view’ in ‘point of view’.

I would like to propose that these terms and categories serve different purposes within the context of each individual text. In the fortieth anniversary of their influential book *The Nature of the Narrative*, Scholes et.al. posit that the oral narrative employs an authoritative and reliable voice, the narrator’s voice who has access to “the secrets of man’s hearts.”²⁰ Referring to Homer and his work, they explain the ways in which Homer the author and Homer the narrator do not have an ironic distance between them. Whatever the voice narrates, the audience adopts the same point of view with him.

This would be the case for oral narratives. However, when we take the leap into written narratives, we encounter a gap between the storyteller and the author. As Chatman states in his book *Story and Discourse*, if there is narration, there must be a teller. If the audience is hearing or reading a story, they know that someone had produced that story prior to their encounter with it. Therefore, it would not be wrong to argue that they accept a priori the existence of a narrative voice who delivers the story to them. In order to make his discussion clearer, Chatman states that there should be a third category in between the author and the narrator and

¹⁷ Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, 70.

¹⁸ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 66.

¹⁹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Methuen/Routledge, 1983)

²⁰ Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of the Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51.

proposes “author-narrator” to talk about the speaker in the text or voice in our case.²¹

Chatman’s implied author also takes Wayne Booth’s ‘implied author’ into consideration. Introducing this term in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth states:

The implied author (the author’s second self’). -Even in the novel in which no narrator is dramatized creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails. This implied author is always distinct from the ‘real man’—whatever we may take him to be—who creates a superior version of himself, a ‘second self’, as he creates his work.²²

There is an important difference between these two versions of the implied author which is the involvement of the reader. Chatman posits that the implied author identified by Booth is not the narrator himself, but rather a representation in the mind of the reader:

He is not the narrator, but rather the principle that invented the narrator, along with everything else in the narrative, that stacked the cards in this particular way, had these things happen to these characters, in these words or images. Unlike the narrator, the implied author can *tell* us nothing. He, or better, *it* has no direct means of communicating. It instructs us silently, through the design of the whole, with all the voices, by all the means it has chosen to let us learn.²³

The implied author addresses an implied reader which is not within the scope of this study, but I would like to briefly mention that this implied reader is not the actual reader who is performing the act of reading a text. It is rather the audience that is presupposed and imagined by the narrative and the narrator-author. There is a very important relationship between the implied author and the implied reader who are both ever-present. In fact, the most valid criticism directed against narratological theory is the exclusion of the reader’s involvement in its analyses of texts.

I would like to end my overview of narratology on a note of caution: There is so much discussion going on about the definitions of narratological

²¹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 148.

²² Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 151.

²³ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 148.

terms that I was not surprised to find a book titled *Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory*. The field is still a new one in which there are few areas where a consensus exists.

As stated earlier, although the narratological approach has been widely applied to novels and short stories, poetry has remained out of its area of interest. However, this book, which is intended to explore narrative poetry from the point of view of narrative voice and how voice impacts the narrative as a whole, will make use of certain insights of narratological theory which help us better understand the manipulation of voice by the poet.

My aim, once again, is to explore the “story” in “verse” and the voice(s) that tell(s) it in texts ranging from the Renaissance to contemporary. I have chosen poems that tell a straightforward and complete story, or story within a story. Some of the texts are book-length whereas others are episodes from longer poems that are complete in themselves. I will not be introducing the texts I have analyzed in this introductory section since the chapter headings give readers plenty of clues as to what is to come. Starting from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, followed by Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, my choices include Alexander Pope’s ‘Eloisa to Abelard’, Wordsworth’s ‘The Idiot Boy’ and ‘The Mad Mother’, John Keats’s ‘Lamia’, Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’, Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, H.D.’s *Trilogy*, Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, Jackie Kay’s *The Adoption Papers* and finally Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*.

The narrative poems I discuss in the book offer a wide array of voices—romantic/cynical, personal/impersonal, ironic/straight, fly on the wall/omniscient— which make definitive statements/create ambivalence. Ultimately, I explore the speaking voice(s) that colour(s) our perception of the narrative.

CHAPTER ONE

OVIDIAN EROTICS: *VENUS AND ADONIS AND HERO AND LEANDER*

In the dedication of his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, published around 1593, then twenty-nine-year-old Shakespeare writes that if his audience liked his poem, then he would devote all his idle hours to writing even better poems to please them. *Venus and Adonis* was very popular and before 1640 the narrative poem had sixteen editions. Even though it was widely read and enjoyed during Shakespeare's lifetime, it is a fact that *Venus and Adonis* achieved neither the respect nor the academic appeal of his plays or sonnets. As it was published quite early, it has been assumed that the poem could be considered juvenilia. The characters in the poems are regarded by a number of critics not to be too well developed, compared to Shakespeare's other characters. Richard Wilbur, for instance, thinks, "no depth or intelligent development can be found in the characters or relationship of Venus and Adonis."¹ He goes on to add that character in *Venus and Adonis* is shallow, fixed, yet inconsistent, because "it is the brilliance of the surface which has priority."² Hence, the poem traditionally has been regarded to be of less depth and importance. Even so, the voices employed by the poet in *Venus and Adonis* work as an erotic exercise to titillate the desire of his predominantly male audience as well as an analysis of the human character.

Venus and Adonis reflects the Renaissance fascination with classical myths, as was the case for many texts of the period. The story is not original and is taken from different books of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. These stories were quite popular at the time and they were frequently told and retold. According to the traditional interpretation of the Ovidian story, Narcissus goes to Cupid's palace and from him learns strategies as to how best to seduce a woman. He also gets plenty of advice on the dangers of self-love. On the way back, he drinks from the river of Philautia, or Self-

¹ Richard Wilbur, *William Shakespeare: The Narrative Poems and Poems of Doubtful Authenticity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

Love. When he sees his own reflection on the water, he is so changed that he cannot recognize his own face and falls in love with it. When he cannot see his own reflection anymore, he dies of his grief. Venus, taking pity on him, transforms him into the flower bearing his own name. Shakespeare also takes the story of the characters of Venus and Adonis from *Metamorphosis* that briefly tells how Venus falls deeply and aggressively in love with Adonis after being mistakenly hit by one of her son Cupid's arrows. She cannot protect the young man from being mortally hurt by a boar. Venus transforms one drop of blood from the young boy into an anemone, a flower. A third element that is taken from *Metamorphosis* is the theme of a lusty woman who falls in love with a beautiful youth and tries to ensnare him. This is the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus that Shakespeare uses in his poem. He makes changes to the original characters, though. Ovid's Adonis is not bashful and unresponsive. On the contrary, he returns Venus's love. As Stanley Wells posits: "The English poems written in imitation of Ovid all use their original story as a framework or basis for a greatly extended narrative."³ This is what Shakespeare does, out of a short tale he creates a long narrative poem.

Although Shakespeare borrows well-known stories and employs popular forms of his period, what he does is to take these traditional elements and mould them into a poem that deals with different perspectives on love. The text also explores the meaning of desire, the relationship between the self and the other, the interplay between comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare does this within a tripod of love/ passion/ lust.

Maurice Evans, in his introduction to *The Narrative Poems of Shakespeare*, identifies two distinct Ovidian traditions in Shakespeare's poem. One has its roots in moral allegory from the middle ages. The other was mainly erotic and was interested in the behaviour of human beings. These influential works were *Metamorphosis* and *Amores*, respectively. What Shakespeare tries to do in *Venus and Adonis* is to combine the two traditions without silencing either side.⁴ It is this balance that gives the poem its charge.

Another tradition put to use by Shakespeare is related to the genre of poetry called epyllion, a short narrative in the epic form. Poems like *Venus and Adonis*, as well as Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, can be thought of as diminutive epics, and are referred to as 'minor epics'. It was quite a popular sub-genre at the time and Clark Hulse suggests some reasons for its popularity.

³ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: The Poet and His Plays* (London: Methuen, 1997), 116.

⁴ Maurice Evans, ed. *The Narrative Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 5.

Minor epic is linked most closely to epic in its materials; its characteristic diction, verse forms, and mythological imagery all seek out the marvellous and often the extravagant. Its amorous action is quite literally the minor action of the epic, set in counterpoint to the major themes of public and military virtue. ... And like so many epics, it is a mixed genre, presenting its objects with motifs from drama and lyric, especially the sonnet and pastoral.⁵

According to Hulse, it was common amongst the Renaissance Ovidians to take a single episode from *Metamorphoses* and to build their poem on that particular chosen fragment. Like the epic, they tell the stories of gods, heroes, and royalty using mythological stories and verse forms. The plots and the characters, however, are less intricate. They do not carry heroic characteristics in them. Therefore epyllion is described as a simple narrative with simple characters that deals with an uncomplicated story in a verse text longer than one thousand lines.⁶ Hulse further argues that epyllions attain their unity by “subordinating their different materials and manners to a unified cause, the desired rhetorical address to the audience around which the poem is built.”⁷ I would argue that their unity, as well as movement, is further achieved through the voices that are employed throughout the text. By alternating the focus of the narrative by the perspective of the narrative voice, the poet creates his epyllion.

In her article, Cantalupe draws attention to the general characteristics, which help to define the poem as an erotic comedy with tragic elements. She posits that English poets differ from their Italian counterparts through their use of wit and sophisticated humour. It is this difference, Cantalupe argues, that “permitted the late Ovidians to rescue the amatory-mythological poem from the feeble paraphrases and jejune moralization of their predecessors.”⁸ Turning the Ovidian tradition upside down is what Shakespeare does in *Venus and Adonis*. Marlowe in *Hero and Leander* also employs this strategy of debunking. Although the theme is tragic, Marlowe treats it using elements of comedy.

Shakespeare wrote his poem in 1194 lines, which in turn form 199 stanzas of six lines each. The stanzas are in iambic pentameter, with the

⁵ Clark Hulse, *Metamorphic Verse: The Elizabethan Minor Epic* (Princeton: N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 23.

⁶ Hulse, Clark. “Marlowe’s Poet in *Hero and Leander*.” *College English*. 26.7 (1976): 302.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁸ Eugene B. Cantalupe, “*Hero and Leander*: Marlowe’s Tragicomedy of Love.” *College English*. 24.4 (1963): 295.

rhyme scheme of *ababcc*. This technical form was called a sixain and it was quite popular at the time of the poet in the Elizabethan court.⁹

Shakespeare writes *Venus and Adonis* within tradition using a traditional form and conventional subject matter. But he employs an important twist. The poet uses the conventional elements while simultaneously revisioning the tradition. He switches the roles of the male and female by making Venus, the goddess of love, play the part of the male lover. At first glance, this strategy does not seem to be so radical, since Ovid used female characters that were outgoing, even aggressive in their desire. However, the discrepancy between the voice of Love in the person of Venus and the narrator who focalizes her experience is such that the whole convention is turned upside down with a fresh twist by Shakespeare. This time the tradition has an alternative perspective, as it will be the female voice that pursues the male.

Narrative poetry, by definition, inherently implies a ‘narrator’. The presence of the narrator works as a focalizing principle throughout the text of *Venus and Adonis*. From the very first stanza, the reader is guided by the voice of the narrator.

Even as the sun with purple-coloured face
Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,
Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase;
Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.
Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him.¹⁰

The very first words to describe young Adonis are “rose-cheeked” which frames our perspective and forms an image of the inexperienced, perhaps a bit feminine, young boy who is only interested in playing manly games, like the hunt. The simile of “the bold-faced suitor” is reserved for Venus when the narrator describes her. The roles are reversed from the very beginning as the traditionally male role of the suitor is accorded to Venus. What is more interesting is the reference to her thoughts as being “sick”. Hence, our perspective, or mood, is framed by the narrative voice as soon as the poem begins.

⁹ Peter Hyland, *An Introduction to Shakespeare's poems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 67.

¹⁰ Hereafter in this chapter, poetry quotations will be given with reference to line numbers.

Shakespeare, William. Evans, Maurice, ed. *The Narrative Poems*. (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 1-6.

In the following stanza, the reader hears the infatuated voice of Venus herself, albeit through the narrator.

‘Thrice fairer than myself,’ thus she began,
 ‘The field’s chief flower, sweet above compare,
 Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
 More white and red than doves or roses are;
 Nature that made thee with herself at strife
 Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.’¹¹

The reader is set in his perspective now. It is clear from these first two stanzas that the poem will rely upon the narrator’s focalization as well as the words of Venus focalized through the narrator’s voice. Since Adonis remains mostly silent, Venus goes on about how beautiful Adonis is, but the narrator changes the perspective when he describes the first “attack” by Venus on the boy. A few words of explanation seem to be necessary here. Even though the identity of the narrator is not clear throughout the poem, the omniscient third person narrative voice guides the reader. Moreover, the critical stance adopted by the narrator creates a sense of the author being male. Hence, I will refer to the narrator as the masculine voice in the text. An example would be the way he immediately counteracts Venus’s words of love by placing her in a position where she looks out of place and funny. The reader senses an authoritative and perhaps patronizing tone in the narrator’s amused description of Venus’s assault. She “plucks” the boy off his horse and places him under her arm, while the “tender boy” is full of protest.¹² Adonis is upset and embarrassed while we read about “the maiden burning of his cheeks” (45), and he is ‘bashful with shame’ (50). Peter Hyland also thinks that the poem employs an unquestionably male narrative voice and that Shakespeare has created a “narrative voice that gives an impression of control, balance and refined knowingness.”¹³

Our narrator colours the scene further for us when he says: “She red and hot as coals of glowing fire / He red for shame, but frosty in desire.”¹⁴ After establishing the reversed roles of the leading characters the narrator assumes another position of superiority not only over the two protagonists but also over his readers. This is clearly in line with the way he guided us from the beginning. Now he urges us to see Venus as hunter and Adonis as

¹¹ Ibid., 7-12.

¹² Ibid. 30, 32.

¹³ Hyland, *An Introduction to Shakespeare’s Poems*, 76.

¹⁴ Shakespeare, 35-36.

prey: “Look how a bird lies tangled in a net, / So fastened in her arms Adonis lies.”¹⁵ A couple of stanzas below again we are forced to “Look how he can, she cannot choose but love.”¹⁶ The imperative will be repeated three more times in order for the narrator to guide our visual perception.¹⁷ It is not enough that he is telling us the story; he wants us to see as well as hear. He actually wants to show it to us like a painting, for emphasis.

At one point in the poem, the reader gets a sense of what the detached author might be trying to do in the poem. We discussed earlier that the author should be thought of separately from the narrator and/or the voice in the text. Here, the narrator’s description of the scene when Venus has captured and imprisoned Adonis shows the ways in which Shakespeare turns the Petrarchan tradition inside out. We read:

Sometime she shakes her head, and then his hand;
 Now gazeth she on him, now on the ground;
 Sometime her arms infold him like a band;
 She would, he will not in her arms be bound;
 And when from thence he struggles to be gone,
 She locks her lily fingers one in one.

‘Fondling,’ she saith, ‘since I have hemmed thee here
 Within the circuit of this ivory pale,
 I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
 Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale;
 Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
 Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

Within this limit is relief enough,
 Sweet bottom-grass and high delightful plain,
 Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough,
 To shelter thee from tempest and from rain:
 Then be my deer, since I am such a park;
 No dog shall rouse thee, though a thousand bark.’¹⁸

The narrative voice in the first stanza draws the picture of Venus, the embodiment of love in her person, trying to hold on to the object of her love. The only way she can achieve this is by entrapment, as Adonis will not love her back on his own accord. With the guidance of the narrative

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 289, 529, 925.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 223-240.

voice, we produce in our minds the image of Venus as a predatory character. When the focalization is switched to Venus herself, albeit through the narrator's voice, the imagery created makes a big difference. Venus transforms herself into a landscape where Adonis will roam about as her deer (and dear). The image of the deer also immediately brings to mind the deer in Sir Thomas Wyatt's sonnet 'Whoso List to Hunt'. She offers herself in overtly sexual tones. The author employs a reverse Petrarchan tradition. Instead of the male poet sexually objectifying woman, the goddess of Love does it herself, to suit her own needs and desires. She also objectifies herself as garden, park, perhaps even earth mother. The roles are reversed and this time it is the male who becomes the captive deer in the park.

The first voice in the above excerpt was the omniscient narrative voice. The other belonged to Venus trying to possess Adonis. Two separate focalizations can be differentiated in Venus's efforts in trying to captivate the boy. The primary one is the overtly sexual one where she offers her body for sexual pleasure. Another focalization can be traced in the third stanza of the above excerpt where we can find maternal undertones. She offers shelter and protection as if she is the mother of the boy. The bodily geography that is on offer can be thought of as both sexual and maternal.

Of the voices in the poem, Adonis's is the least interesting for the reader. He is young and inexperienced. The sexual advances of Venus towards him do not excite him. In contrast with his descriptions as somewhat effeminate, he is more interested in the hunt. We must concede, however, that he is the boy who says no to the goddess of love. The reader is given a glimpse of his reasons in a rare moment of maturity when he voices his views on love. We read:

'I know not love,' quoth he, 'nor will not know it,
 Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.
 'Tis much to borrow, and I will not owe it.
 My love to love is love but to disgrace it;
 For I have heard it is a life in death,
 That laughs, and weeps, and all but with a breath.¹⁹

The thwarting of Venus's advances towards him is part of the fun of this poem. However, by focalizing Adonis and his reasons for running away from love, the narrative voice adds a twist to the whole story. The reader realizes that the young boy prefers to hunt the boar to the love of a beautiful woman. Not even when Venus manages to get him to assume a

¹⁹ Ibid., 409-414.

sexual position as she faints upon the news of the hunt, (“She sinketh down, still hanging by his neck, / He on her belly falls, she on her back”²⁰) we are told “He will not manage her, although he mount her”, the “hot encounter” will not take place.²¹

Their physical position is funny, but with hindsight, it will appear ironically sad when he is killed as the result of the wound he receives from the boar in his groin. The picture that the narrator’s voice paints for us is quite erotic. This is important in a poem where the main character is focalized with reference to her relationship with Love itself, as she is the goddess of love. Throughout the text, she has tried everything. She says: “Bid me discourse and I will enchant thine ear, / Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green, / Or, like a nymph, with long dishevell’d hair.”²² Whatever she offers, however, will not be enough to seduce the young boy. We read:

But all in vain, good queen, it will not be,
 She hath assayed as much as may be proved:
 Her pleading hath deserved a greater fee;
 She’s Love, she loves, and yet she is not loved.
 ‘Fie, fie’ he says, ‘you crush me; let me go;
 You have no reason to withhold me so.’²³

The rejection of Adonis becomes even more hurtful and adds insult to injury when he declares: “I hate not love, but your device in love.”²⁴

I have discussed how the narrative voice manipulates the focalization of the reader by going backwards and forwards between the narrator and the main characters in the poem. Even though Adonis is also verbal in the poem, the main articulation is delivered through the voice of Venus. These two voices also mirror the way the poem is delivered in two halves. The first half is quite light and even comic at times. The setting resembles the Garden of Eden and the atmosphere reflects that. The second half, on the other hand, is set in opposition to the first with Adonis going to hunt and getting killed as a result. This has been a point that has drawn the attention of critics: “For years critics have been aesthetically troubled by the peculiar combination of comedy and tragedy –one has trouble avoiding either the comic elements in the first half or the eloquent suffering in the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 593-594.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 596, 598.

²² *Ibid.*, 145-147.

²³ *Ibid.*, 607-618.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 789.