

Author's "Ego" in "The Ballad of the Reading Gaol"

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Abstract

Oscar Wilde's poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" contains various narrative perspectives which convey the author's and the protagonist's points of view. In this work the roles of the author and the narrator are not differentiated, they are integrated in the subject of consciousness who manifests his "ego" in different modes: as the participant of the events, as their observer, as the transmitter of the main and secondary characters' experiences and feelings, etc.

The actualization of the existing standpoints becomes possible by means of pragmatic analysis of the text, and at the same time is, naturally, closely connected with the reader's knowledge of the author's background. By revealing the narrator's meanings, the contextual implications, and by finding out the spacial characteristics of the text, an attempt is made at discovering the author's subjectivity to a hopefully full extent.

Key words: subject of consciousness, narrator, point of view, first-person narration, third-person perspective.

Introduction

The problem of the author's personality is a critical issue not only in literary criticism, but also in linguistics. The way the narrator presents the world of the literary work is closely connected with the question of narrative modes and to a great extent determines its structure and dynamics. The situation becomes still more interesting when the concepts of "narrator" and "author" coincide, as is the case under consideration.

In the present article we will try to reveal the author's point of view within Part One of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" having in mind that this poem is a profound investigation of one's self in a situation of loss of freedom. Both in this poem and in "De Profundis", Oscar Wilde goes through his recreation of Dante's *Inferno*, describing the acceptance and rejection of sin, and looking at the world through his own subjectivity.

About the Poem

"The Ballad of Reading Gaol" was written by Oscar Wilde in exile in France, after his release from Reading Gaol in 1897. Wilde had been incarcerated in Reading, after being convicted of homosexual offences in 1895 and sentenced to two years' hard labour in prison. During his imprisonment, on 7 July 1896, a hanging took place. The 30-year-old Charles Thomas Wooldridge, who had been a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, was convicted of cutting the throat of his wife, Laura Ellen, earlier that year at Clewer, near Windsor. Wilde, it is sometimes said, made use of the proletarian ballad form, and suggested it be published in *Reynold's Magazine*, because, as he said, "it circulates widely among the criminal classes – to which I now belong – for once I will be read by my peers – a new experience for me" (Kiberd 2000:336).

The finished poem was published by Leonard Smithers in 1898 under the name “C.3.3”, which stood for “cell block C, landing 3, cell 3”. This ensured that Wilde’s name – by then notorious – did not appear on the poem’s front cover. It was not commonly known, until the 7th printing in June 1899, that “C.3.3.” was actually Wilde. It was a commercial success, going through seven editions in less than two years, only after which “Oscar Wilde” was added to the title page, though many in literary circles had known Wilde to be the author.

The poem has a dedication, which from the very start gives the protagonist a definite background:

*“In Memoriam
C.T.W.
Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards”.
Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,
July 7th, 1896*

Point of View and Space in Fiction

A composition device, according to Yu. Lotman, becomes meaningfully distinctive, if it is incorporated into an opposition with a contrasting system. The point of view develops into an explicit element of the literary structure if there is a possibility of its change within the framework of the narrative (or of a projection of the text upon another text, from a different point of view) (Lotman 1998:181).

Yu. Lotman also argues that a work of fiction reveals the interrelation between the individual and the world, and thus is of a subject-object character. For example, in the literary tradition of classicism the subject-object relations expressed in the text characteristically converged in a single focus. The focus was removed from the author’s personality, combining with the notion of truth, and the literary text developed from this angle. Such fixed and definite relations corresponded to the perception of eternity, the universality and stability of truth. In romantic poetry the literary points of view also converged in one fixed centre, but this centre (or, in other words, the subject of the poetical text) coincided with the individuality of the author and became the counterpart of the poet’s personality.

However, as Yu. Lotman remarks, another textual structure is possible: in this text the points of view do not meet in one centre, rather they construct a dispersed subject, containing distinct centres, the relations between which create additional meanings. Instead of a single focal point, there is an area including different points of view (Lotman 1998:182).

Space in a work of literature is created through the perceiver’s perspective; hence the problems of the subject of consciousness and space are closely interrelated. The classical concepts of literary space (M.Bakhtin, M.Lotman, D.Likhachev, V.Toporov, B.Uspenskiy) define it as follows: space in fiction and real space are different categories – a text can be regarded as a “possible world”, whose structure to some extent replicates the structure of the real world. The spacial characteristics of the text are often described

in terms of “locus” (from Latin *locus*) and “topos” (from Greek *τόπος*), and philologists sometimes distinguish between a closed image of space, “locus”, and an open one, “topos”.

As far as space in a work of fiction is concerned, it is possible to bring out those features which can be detected visually, trying to determine from whose point of view these features are observed. In a first-person text it is obvious that the events, people and objects are perceived and described by the subject of consciousness who, at the same time, is the narrator. However, in a third-person narration there are other, indirect means which can reveal the perceiver’s “ego”. Actually, in this type of narration the linguistic means of indicating the narrator are not as straightforward as the pronoun “I”.

According to Ye. Paducheva, several egocentric words and word combinations, owing to their meaning, presuppose the existence of the subject of speech and/or the subject of consciousness. In a canonical situation of speech (for example, in conversation), we find the explicitly expressed speaker. In a narrative text, where the speaker is sometimes hidden, the narrator can be actualized in an indirect way, by the use of certain linguistic means, some of which are as follows: metatextual elements, predicates of emotional and mental states, indicators of identification, generalizing insertions, words with evaluative meaning (Paducheva 1996:276).

First- and Third-Person Perspectives

The first stanza of the poem is considered by some philologists to be an objective story-telling, an impersonal recount of events:

(1) *He did not wear his scarlet coat,
For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman whom he loved,
And murdered in her bed.*

However, linguistic analysis shows that we can speak about the narrator’s implicit presence. Thus, the existential presupposition of the phrase “his scarlet coat” can mean “[I know that] he had a scarlet coat”. And if we remember the dedication of the poem, we will reconstruct the pragmatic bond between the speaker/narrator and the hearer/reader: the author has previously informed us about Wooldridge’s occupation and now he makes a reference to it.

It is obvious that the colour of the coat has a direct bearing on the fact that Wooldridge was covered with blood and wine. It is known that Wilde made a mistake by using the word “scarlet” because, in fact, the Horse Guards wore blue uniforms. He made the choice of the colour term consciously, in order to construct a dramatic setting for the scene: “I remember once at dinner a friend of his [Wilde’s] who had formerly been in the “Blues”, pointing out that in the open stanza of “The Ballad of the Reading Jail” he had made a mistake in speaking of the “scarlet coat” of the man who was hanged; he was, as

the dedication of the poem says, a private in the “Blues”, and his coat would therefore naturally not be scarlet. ...“Well, what could I do,” said Oscar Wilde plaintively, “I couldn’t very well say, “*He didn’t wear his Azure coat*”, could I?” (Dossick 2013).

The second and third lines are generic statements, and since a generalization requires a subject of consciousness in order to make it, we have another case of reference to the narrator’s “ego”. The rest of the first stanza is written in an objective tone: the use of the indefinite pronoun “they”, which is I-exclusive, implies that the author is detaching himself from the scene. The employment of “they” in this case is opposed to the use of the generic “one”, which later in the text will indicate the narrator’s sympathetic attitude to the sufferings of Wooldridge.

(2) *He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby grey;
A cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay;
But I never saw a man who looked
So wistfully at the day.*

(3) *I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by.*

(4) *I walked, with other souls in pain,
Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
“That fellow’s got to swing.”*

In the first three lines of the second stanza the narrator describes the character objectively, without reference to his own experience. After this the perspective of the text switches to that of I-narration. The line “And his step seemed light and gay”, by means of the verb “seemed”, suggests the existence of the subject of consciousness. The evaluative adjective “shabby (grey)”, conveys subjective evaluation; besides “scarlet” and “grey” symbolize a contrast between passion and miserable prison life, and it is evident that a symbolic representation should be connected with the narrator’s “ego”.

In general, the settings around the narrator are quite explicit in stanzas (2) to (4), and we can now envisage the locus of the scene. The poetic lines might be paraphrased by means of the following propositions. The prisoners can see only a little piece of the sky above: “the little tent of blue” and “the sky above my head”. The part of the sky that they

can see is confined by the high prison walls: it may be inferred that the walls are high because the prisoners can see only the sky, while the landscape is not to be seen. The prisoners go round in circles, one after another: “a voice behind me...” (A. Stokes notes that the prisoners walked in what was according to the prison rules, clockwise). Though all the prisoners look at the sky sadly, Wooldridge watches the sky even more wistfully (he is the one to part with life very soon). Another thing connected with “drifting” and “sails” is the theme of freedom (symbolized by the implied image of the sea) which is contrasted to the closed space of the prison. We can find an excellent illustration to this dramatic scene in V. van Gogh’s famous work “The Prison Courtyard”, in which not only the whole atmosphere is close to the tone of the poem but so are the details of the setting.

Naturally, a poem is not a technical description, but it is our belief that even if we take into account the “poetic abstraction” of the text, we can see that Wilde puts into his imagery – and therefore into the philosophy of the poem – all he wants to convey, the whole message of the work. Hence, a pragmatic “deciphering” of the image does not “kill” poetry, it adds meanings. The phrase “with sails of silver” again makes reference to the narrator, this time, specifically, to the artist’s self, because stylistic devices (metaphor, alliteration, etc.) reveal a poet, who on perceiving the situation transforms his impressions into complex verbal images.

*(5) Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,
And the sky above my head became
Like a casque of scorching steel;
And, though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel.*

The exclamation “Dear Christ!” indicates a diegetic narrator, that is, an actual participant of the situation, and shows his feelings at the time of watching the man in the prison courtyard. We can imagine the narrator by locating him in terms of specific dimensions. Thus, the “up” dimension is the sky, while his surrounding space is confined by the prison walls. “Scorching steel”, in addition, has the connotation of punishment, and the “casque above his head” suggests a closed coffin. Apparently, through this imagery Wilde suggests that the forthcoming execution is being vividly visualized by both the protagonist and the narrator. Hence, we can speak about a convergence of points of view.

*(6) I only knew what hunted thought
Quickened his step, and why
He looked upon the garish day
With such a wistful eye;
The man had killed the thing he loved
And so he had to die.*

Here again the point of view is subjective: the mental predicate “knew”, the evaluative adjectives “garish”, and “wistful” set the focus inside the subject of consciousness. The modal verb “had to”, however, shifts the point of view towards law, penalty, and “so” indicates the inevitability of punishment. Accordingly, there is an opposition between the subjective depiction of the protagonist’s sufferings, as well as of the narrator’s feeling of empathy, on the one hand and reference to brutal, inevitable justice, on the other hand.

Generic Statements

The next stanzas are generalizations:

(7) *Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

(8) *Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.*

(9) *Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die.*

As mentioned, a generalization has a definite source – the subject of consciousness, who must by all means be the subject of speech as well. The subjectivity of the writer’s reflections, and of his images becomes obvious if we consider the oppositions in these two stanzas. Some of them are lexical (“a coward” vs “a brave man”, “young” vs “old”, reversive antonyms “sell” vs “buy”), others are contextual (“a bitter look” vs “a flattering word”, “a kiss” vs “a sword”, “the hands of Lust” vs “the hands of Gold”, “with many tears” vs “without a sigh”). If we take into consideration the events in Wilde’s biography, we can see that many of these lines have a direct bearing on his own life.

Multiple Perspectives

(10) *He does not die a death of shame
On a day of dark disgrace,
Nor have a noose about his neck,
Nor a cloth upon his face,
Nor drop feet foremost through the floor
Into an empty space.*

(11) *He does not sit with silent men
Who watch him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,
And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him lest himself should rob
The prison of its prey.*

(12) *He does not wake at dawn to see
Dread figures throng his room,
The shivering Chaplain robed in white,
The Sheriff stern with gloom,
And the Governor all in shiny black,
With the yellow face of Doom.*

(13) *He does not rise in piteous haste
To put on convict-clothes,
While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes
Each new and nerve-twitched pose,
Fingering a watch whose little ticks
Are like horrible hammer-blows.*

(14) *He does not know that sickening thirst
That sands one's throat, before
The hangman with his gardener's gloves
Slips through the padded door,
And binds one with three leathern thongs,
That the throat may thirst no more.*

(15) *He does not bend his head to hear
The Burial Office read,
Nor, while the terror of his soul
Tells him he is not dead,
Cross his own coffin, as he moves
Into the hideous shed.*

(16) *He does not stare upon the air
Through a little roof of glass;
He does not pray with lips of clay
For his agony to pass;
Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek
The kiss of Caiaphas.*

In stanzas (10) to (16) that follow, Wilde describes what happens and is going to happen to Wooldridge, paradoxically, by negating all these happenings. In fact, on the surface he is speaking about a construct, a certain “man” who kills his love but does not have to be executed. Actually, these statements are made from the point of view of the author himself, and if the reader is aware of Wilde’s relations with Alfred Douglas, he will be able to read between the lines. Otherwise, the ideas in these generalizations may be interpreted on a metaphysical level.

A wonderful interplay of perspectives and implications can be found in this part of the poem. If we drop the negatives, we will see: 1. the diegetic narrator’s recounting of what happened and was going to happen to Wooldridge, 2. the narrator’s reflections on what a person sentenced to death usually goes through, 3. the description of the convicted man’s emotions and states of mind, 4. the presentation of other prisoners’, the Chaplain’s, the Sheriff’s, the Governor’s, the Doctor’s, the hangman’s, the Burial Office’s actions and feelings.

The generic pronoun “one” used in stanza (14), owing to its semantics, combines three perspectives: the narrator’s, the protagonist’s and the reader’s points of view. The reader is invited to empathize with the convict and mentally go through the experience and sensations of someone who is being executed.

Conclusion

To sum up, the analysis of the perspectives within the text opens numerous interpretations of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” which would be concealed from the reader if we did not relate the event and its evaluation to a specific subject of consciousness, that is, to the author’s “ego”. The poem abounds in a variety of “voices”, of which even the narrator’s viewpoints are diversified. Other standpoints belong to the protagonist and to the secondary characters, but as we have seen, their points of view are also represented through the narrator’s eyes. So we can conclude that various perspectives in “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” converge in one centre, the narrator’s focus (though they are identifiable as to their source). The result of the interaction of the diversified perspectives with a single focal point is the creation of one of the most highly subjective and insightful works in great literature.

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Հեղինակի «ես»-ը. «Ռեդինգյան բանտի բալլադում»

Օսկար Ուայլդի պոեմը պարունակում է միևնույն նարատիվի շրջանակներում օգտագործված բազմաթիվ դիտակետներ, որոնք պատկանում են հեղինակին, գլխավոր և երկրորդական կերպարներին: Հեղինակի «ես»-ը արտահայտվում է ինչպես արտակա, այնպես էլ ներակա տարբեր եղանակներով: Լեզվական միջոցների գործաբանական վերլուծությունը թույլ է տալիս վերհանել հեղինակի անհատականության մի քանի շերտեր և հնարավորություն է ընձեռում այս գործի բազմաձայնության շրջանակներում մշտապես «լսել» հեղինակի «ես»-ը:

Авторское “я” в “Балладе Редингской тюрьмы”

В поэме О. Уайльда, в пределах единого нарратива, одновременно сосуществуют различные точки зрения: автора, протагониста и второстепенных персонажей. “Я” автора манифестируется в тексте явным образом и имплицитно. Прагматический анализ произведения, цель которого выявить скрытое авторское “я”, одновременно определяя то художественное пространство, в котором оно существует, позволяет в многоголосии текста неизменно “слышать” голос автора.