

## D5

### STYLE VARIATION IN NARRATIVE

This reading, by Mick Short, examines the use of graphological deviation as an indicator of viewpoint in Irvine Welsh's novel, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. After providing an interpretative summary of its plot line (see unit A5), Short explores the narrative structure of Welsh's novel which, unusually, comprises three interwoven 'levels' of narration, all produced by the same narrator. Although graphological deviation is normally seen as the preserve of stylistic experimentation in poetry, Short's analysis, which is orientated principally towards the opening of the novel, demonstrates how prose fiction can draw on this level of language for stylistic effect. Short also develops in a theoretically more rigorous way some of the terms, such as *viewpoint*, *focaliser* and *reflector*, which have been used across this strand.

The work of Irvine Welsh featured in unit C2 where a passage from *Trainspotting* formed the principal focus of attention. This Scottish writer is renowned, indeed infamous, for his grimly realistic portrayals of criminal counter-cultures and of the social consequences of violence and drug addiction. With its sociolinguistic code the lower status urban vernacular of Edinburgh, and its frequent mixing of levels and structures of language, Welsh's work is challenging, often disturbing and at times unsuitable, as it were, for the stylistically faint-hearted. Nevertheless, and as Short's analysis demonstrates, the writing of this novelist pays many useful dividends in stylistic terms.

#### **Graphological deviation, style variation and point of view in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* by Irvine Welsh**

A dark rectangular box with the name 'Mick Short' written in white text, centered within the box.

**Mick Short** (reprinted from *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap* 15, 3/4, 1999, p. 305–23).

#### ***Introduction***

In this article I want to provide an account of Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995), based mainly on a representative stylistic analysis of the opening of the novel. I have chosen to concentrate on this rather bizarre and disturbing novel because, in spite of its horrific qualities, I think it has considerable intrinsic artistic merit (something which I hope my analysis will begin to show). [...]

[B]elow I will give an interpretative summary of the novel, to which I will then link a stylistic commentary of its opening. But for those who have not already read the novel, it will be helpful to experience how the novel begins [see Figure D5.1] without such explanation (I have numbered the sentences for ease of reference).

(1) It.was.me.and.Jamieson.

(2) Just us.

(3) On this journey, this crazy high-speed journey through this strange land in this strange vehicle.

(4) Just me and Sandy Jamieson.

(5) But they were trying to disturb me, trying to wake me; the way they always did. (6) They willnae let this sleeping dog lie. (7) They always interfere. (8) When the cunts start this shite it makes things get aw distorted and I have to try to go deeper.

(9) DEEPER. (10) Things get dis up - - - - (12) - We're just going to take your temperature, Roy. (13) Have you got the bedpan, Nurse Norton? (14) Number Twos now Roy, time for Number Twos.

(11) I lose control when they interfere - - - and (15) —Yes, he's looking brighter this morning, isn't he, Nurse Devine? (16) You're brighter this morning, Roy lovey.

(17) Aye right ye are, take your fuckin hand oot me fuckin erse.

(18) DEEPER

(19) DEEPER -----  
----- (20) Sandy Jamieson is my best friend down here. (21) A former professional sportsman and an experienced hunter of man-eating beasts. (22) I enlisted Jamieson's aid in a quest I have been engaged in for as long as I can remember. (23) However, as my memory is practically non-existent, this could have been a few days ago or since the beginning of time itself. (24) For some reason, I am driven to eradicate the scavenger-predator bird known as the Marabou Stork. (25) I wish to drive this evil and ugly creature from the African continent. (26) In particular, I have this persistent vision of one large blighter, a hideous and revolting specimen, which I know somehow must perish by my own hand.

Figure D5.1 Extract from *Marabou Stork Nightmares*: Irvine Welsh (1995:3–4)

lying in hospital in a coma, caused, as we discover towards the end of the novel (on p. 255 of a novel which ends on p. 264), by a failed suicide attempt. He had tried to kill himself – while watching a video of his favourite football team (the Edinburgh side, Hibernian FC, or ‘Hibs’) – using the pain-killer, paracetamol, and a plastic bag over the head, as recommended in a book he had read called *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*.

If the passage above was your first experience of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, you may have found it initially difficult. This is because the events of the story are presented out of chronological sequence, and in an apparently piecemeal and disorganised fashion by an unconscious narrator who is in a vegetative state. At the outset of the novel he is fantasising about himself and an imaginary friend, Sandy Jamieson, who are supposedly in South Africa on an extraordinary ‘quest’ to kill the Marabou Stork. To make matters even more difficult for the reader, there are three distinct ‘levels’ of narration in the novel, through which the I-narrator, Roy Strang, is continually shifting/being shifted by external intervention. The deepest level is the South African fantasy narration concerning his hunt for the Marabou Stork, and the highest is one where the narrator is aware of what is going on around him in the Edinburgh hospital as he drifts towards consciousness (something which is never fully achieved, but which he gets closer to as the novel proceeds). The middle level is a rather jumbled, and sometimes contradictory, account of Roy Strang’s life leading up to his attempted suicide, his resulting vegetative state (which he has been in for two years) and his eventual death at the end of the novel.

It could be argued that the novel has three distinct narrations, where the same narrator tells three stories at the same time, but I prefer to call them three *levels* of narration because (a) they all have the same narrator and the same 'default' narratee (the reader), (b) as the novel proceeds, the narrative levels 'interact' and reflect one another more and more and (c) there is textual evidence (see below) to suggest that we are meant to see the three narrations as a series of connected levels. The top level and the middle level are, in any case, part of the same general fictional world (what Ryan 1991 would call the 'text-actual world'), the top level coinciding with what appears to be the narrator's coding time ('what is happening to the I-narrator in his fictional now') and the middle level being what happened to the I-narrator/what the I-narrator did in his fictional past. The deepest level of narration is distinct from the other two in that it is a fantasy (what Ryan 1991:119 calls a 'fantasy-universe'). But the connections and correspondences between it and the two levels of the text-actual world are so many that they begin to interpenetrate, and become 'explanations of one another', as we will see below.

The movements from one level of narration to another, sometimes forced by external stimuli and sometimes by connections made within the mind of the narrator, are clearly meant to be representative of a mind drifting towards, and away from, consciousness. Our major tasks as readers, then, are (a) to work out when we are in which narrative level, and why, (b) to construct a characterisation and narrative structure for the text which explains how Roy Strang came to be in a coma and (c) to make sense of the connections which become apparent among the different levels of narration, many of which do not become clear until the last few pages of the novel.

For example, on p. 255, when the suicide attempt is being described, the footballer on the video, who is gesticulating at the referee, is called Jimmy Sandison, allowing us to see that Sandy Jamieson, Roy's friend in the Marabou Stork fantasy, is an imaginative metatextual creation derived from the footballer's name, something we have been prepared for by the fact that on occasion the I-narrator 'mis-refers' to Sandy as 'Jimmy' (e.g. p. 169). In Ryan's terms, then, Roy Strang's fantasy universe is clearly prompted by the text-actual world in which he lives. [...]

When Roy is ten, the family emigrates to South Africa [...] [b]ut the dream of a new life for the family in South Africa is not realised. John Strang is jailed for attacking a taxi-driver when drunk, and the rest of the family returns to Edinburgh a year and a half after they had emigrated. For Roy, who [...] has his father's love for nature, and for wild animals in particular, the South African period was a very mixed experience. His uncle, a paedophile, secretly abuses him, forcing him into both oral and anal sex, but at the same time showers him with presents, including wonderful trips to safari parks to see the animals.

As a young man, Roy has a good job working for an insurance company as an IT specialist, but in his spare time he satisfies his now ingrained thirst for violence as a member of a 'casuals' football gang who fight other such gangs. It is this activity which results in his eventual downfall. He and his pals gang-rape a young woman called Kirsty, also forcing her to have anal and oral sex with them. These activities are reminiscent of what Roy's uncle forced him to do in South Africa, and, in his fantasy universe, (a) of what he 'sees' his girlfriend doing with his fantasy friend, Sandy Jamieson, near the beginning of the novel (p. 5) and (b) the various distasteful activities of a businessman in the fantasy called Lochart Dawson, a figure who resembles Roy's uncle Gordon in a number of ways. Ironically, it later transpires that, unbeknown to Roy, Kirsty was romantically attracted to him at the time he raped her.

The gang is arrested, but at their trial they are all acquitted through the adversarial skills of an experienced lawyer who, at the same time is clearly very unsympathetic to the young men. Roy's initial account of the rape depicts him as an unwilling participant, something which later appears not to be true, but which helps to suggest his growing sense of guilt. [...]

In the last few pages of the novel, Kirsty secretly visits Roy in hospital. Her experience of the rape and the humiliation of the trial make her want to take systematic revenge on those who raped her. She has already killed one of the gang, and now she proceeds to kill Roy by stabbing him with a pair of scissors, after first removing his eyelids, and then cutting of his genitalia and stuffing them into his mouth. This process parallels both her own rape and the other events referred to above, in the text-actual world and Roy's fantasy universe, which I have already said are reminiscent of that rape.

And what of the Marabou Stork? As the novel proceeds, the leader of the Marabou Storks which Roy is hunting in his fantasy universe accrues more and more connections with Roy himself in his remembered text-actual world. In that world, he sees Marabou Storks for the first time, with his father, when his uncle Gordon, who has already systematically abused Roy sexually, takes the family to the Kruger National Park. Roy sees the Storks destroy and eat some pink flamingos, and that night he has

his 'first Marabou Stork nightmare' (p. 74). As a young boy, then, he is a victim, the equivalent of the flamingos, and uncle Gordon is the oppressor, the equivalent of the Marabou Stork. But when Roy describes Kirsty immediately after the rape (p. 190), he does so in terms which resembles the damaged flamingos, and by extension he has also changed status from flamingo to Marabou Stork. After the rape he has more nightmares in which he clearly associates Kirsty with the flamingos, and himself and his friends with the Storks (pp. 221, 233). Roy's pursuit of his personal Marabou Stork in his fantasy universe thus appears to be a subconscious attempt to come to terms with, and defeat, his own evil. But he never destroys the Stork, never really catches up with it. And indeed, at the moment of his death, when his fantasy universe and the text-actual world finally coincide on the last page of the novel (p. 264), he clearly sees himself as the Marabou Stork: 'Captain Beaky, they used to call me at school ... I spread my large black wings ...' This coincidence of narrative levels means that he dies at the same time in both his fantasy universe and the text-actual world. This is indicated by the fact that people and objects from the fantasy universe and the text-actual world are now represented as if they are in the same textual world. He is both stabbed by Kirsty in the Edinburgh hospital and shot by his erstwhile fantasy friend in 'South Africa', and his nurse can do nothing to help:

I can move my lidless eyes, I can see my cock dangling from my mouth and I can see the scissors sticking out from my neck. ... Patricia runs to get help but she's too late because Jamieson's facing me and he's pointing the gun and I hear it going off and it's all just one big

## Z.

The novel thus ends with a final marked graphological device using a letter which is conventionally associated with sleep, and hence, by extension, death. However, the normal comfortable associations for sleep are minimised here as a consequence of the fact that in the previous twenty-three pages (i.e. from p. 241 onwards) grapho-logically marked forms of this letter have systematically been associated with the 'Z' of the posters in the Zero Tolerance campaign against rape and sexual oppression. In real life, this campaign has had a considerable impact in Edinburgh in recent years and, in the fictional world of the novel, Roy's exposure to the posters is partly responsible for his increasing feelings of guilt. Whether, as the blurb on the back cover of the paperback suggests, these feelings of guilt and Kirsty's final treatment of him amount to a final 'redemption' is, however, not so clear. [...]

### ***A stylistic commentary on the opening passage in relation to the rest of the novel***

It will be apparent from the discussion above that *Marabou Stork Nightmares* has an extremely distasteful subject matter, which could deter some from reading it. But it is also an extremely interesting novel. In particular, it is sophisticated narratologically, and this complex narratological structuring has well-worked-out interpretative consequences. This narratological innovation is, in turn, signalled/controlled through considerable linguistic invention, which we can now explore through a detailed examination of the novel's opening.

The novel opens with what in the 20th century has become a fairly standard *in medias res* device, presenting what must be new information to the reader as if it were given information, to draw the reader into seeing events from the narrator's viewpoint and with his ideological assumptions. However, the technique is taken to quite an extreme here. In the first four sentences we are not told who the narrating 'I' is, who Sandy Jamieson is, where the characters are, or what exactly they are doing. And in spite of the repeated use of the quasi-deictic natural spoken narrative use of 'this' in sentence (3), we do not know what journey they are on, or why it is crazy, which land they are in, or why it is strange, and what vehicle they are in, and why that vehicle is strange. These matters become a bit more clear in sentences (20)–(26), but Africa is not narrowed to South Africa until p. 13 of the novel, when it can be deduced from a small child offering sexual services 'for rand.' We are thus made to struggle hard for coherence. The issue of the identity of the vehicle mentioned in (3) is even more problematic. It is referred to as a jeep on p. 2, and this assumption holds for a while, but by p. 8 it has apparently become some sort of aircraft, probably a helicopter. It is this sort of changing and contradictory characterisation which leads the reader to assume that we are being presented with some sort of fantasy universe.

In addition to the oddities of the given-new structure, the first few sentences of the text are characterised by syntactic and graphological oddity. Sentences (2)–(4) are minor sentences grammatically and are also separated from one another by line-spaces. Sentence (1) is grammatically complete, and has the standard narrative past tense, which leads us to assume this tense as a background default for the next three minor sentences. But sentence (1) is also very deviant orthographically, full stops separating the words instead of spaces. Indeed, this oddity caused a problem for me when I numbered the sentences for ease of presentation. Should what I have labelled as sentence (1) really be represented as five separate sentences? I decided not to do this because the first five words form a grammatically normal English sentence and only the sentence-initial word and the final word, a proper name, begin with upper case letters.

These features need explanation, although it would be impossible for a reader to find a satisfactory one from the first few sentences alone. In content terms, they are, of course, sentences describing the narrator's fantasy universe which I outlined above, and once we have deduced that the narrator must be in a coma, we can relate the minor sentence construction, the stops among the words in the first sentence and the line spaces among the other sentences as indicative of a mind having some difficulty in getting going at the beginning of the narration: they thus represent mental disjunctions, which, like the deviant given-new information structure, can be put down to a mind struggling to cope.

#### GRAPHOLOGICAL DEVIATION AND STYLE VARIATION

In spite of the minor sentence syntax, the first four sentences would appear to be reasonably characterised as Standard English. However, there is a switch in sentences (6)–(8), within the first orthographically normal paragraph, to the representation of a non-standard Scots dialect. Later on in the novel, when we know where the narrator comes from, we will be able to characterise this dialect as working class Edinburgh Scots. The orthographic indicators of a Scots dialect are 'willnae' for 'won't', 'shite' for 'shit' and 'aw' for 'all' [see C2 – P.S.]. This indication of a pronunciation change also corresponds with the introduction of a rude scatological vocabulary ('shite', 'cunts').

This marked style shift also needs explanation, of course. What appears to happen is that the real Roy Strang, as yet un-named, begins to appear in these sentences, where, note, the tense has also changed from past to present. When Roy 'speaks' in his fantasy narration, however, he uses a Standard English which is at the same time marked as belonging to a kind of upper class between-the-wars RAF Biggles-speak, which is parodic of what might be called the 'English of Empire'. The only clear indicators of this style in the passage quoted in 1 above are the narrator's reference to his friend by last name only, and the word 'blighter' in sentence (26). But in the following page of text the word 'blighter' appears again, along with 'Wizard!' (meaning 'great!'), 'Yuk!', 'yukky' and 'a cunning but somewhat morally deficient native fellow'. This pattern of 'Biggles-speak' for the fantasy universe narration and Edinburgh Scots for the text-actual world narrations is used consistently throughout the novel and helps to contrast brutal reality with a wish-world (see Ryan 1991:117–18) which the narrator appears to be struggling towards but does not properly achieve mentally, let alone physically.

So far I have studiously avoided discussion of sentence (5), which begins the paragraph I have been discussing. Its tense is consistent with that of the first four sentences, and there are no orthographic indications of Edinburgh Scots. But it is orthographically connected to the Edinburgh Scots narration, and the unanchored, given-information use of 'they' also coheres better with the 'they' of sentences (6)–(7) and 'the cunts' of (8) than with sentences (1)–(4). Indeed, in the fantasy universe narration, sentences (1)–(2) appear to rule out the possibility of reference to individuals other than the narrator and Jamieson. Sentence (5) thus appears to be a transition sentence which moves the reader from one level of narration to the next. It also indicates something which is true throughout the novel, namely that it is not possible to associate particular tenses exactly with particular levels of narration. Although the text-actual world in the narrator's 'coding-time fictional present' is usually accorded the present tense, and the fantasy universe narration and the narration of the text-actual world in the narrator's past are mainly in the past tense, there are 'janus-faced' sentences like (5) from time to time, and there are also some other textually strategic tense shifts within the default tense for a particular narrative level.

#### GRAPHOLOGICAL DEVIATION AND VISUALLY SYMBOLIC EFFECTS

The narrator's response to what he sees as interference by the as yet non-specific outsiders is to 'try to go deeper'. This phraseology is then used as the trigger for the first of a series of 'graphology-symbolic' representations which can be found throughout the novel, and which provide textual evidence for the notion, which I introduced above, that the different narrations are best seen as levels of the same narration. As I said, the narrator represents the unfolding of his fantasy universe as the deepest level of narration, and that of his presently experienced coding time as the highest. In the opening to the novel which I am concentrating on, there is no clear representative of the middle level, the narrator's past in the text-actual world (although, interestingly, the narratorially ambivalent sentence (5) could be seen as relating to this middle level as well as to the other two). A clear characterisation of this middle level in relation to the other two can be seen on pp. 48–9, for example.

The first 'graphology-symbolic' movement between the narratorial levels of the novel (sentences (9)–(19) of the passage) is complex, as a result of the fact that it contains an upward movement embedded inside a downward one. Elsewhere, in more simple cases, when the narrator moves down a level, this is usually represented symbolically by the word 'DEEPER' in capitals repeated on three successive lines. A series of dashes of varying length occur after the final 'DEEPER', apparently representing the size of the mental pause between the effort to go deeper and the resumption of the

lower (in this case fantasy universe) narration. Sometimes, as here, the instances of 'DEEPER' are directly under one another. On other occasions they are 'raked' rightwards down across the page as in:  
DEEPER

DEEPER

DEEPER

Although the normal representation involves a three-fold repetition of the word, larger or smaller repetitive sequences sometimes occur, appearing to indicate the amount of effort needed to move between levels. For example, the narrator needs a sequence of nine raked repetitions of 'DEEPER' on p. 40 to stop thinking about the attractive Nurse Devine (a play on 'divine') and get back to his fantasy.

Not surprisingly, when the narrator moves upwards between narrative levels, the words go up the page, sometimes vertically, as in the passage we are discussing, and sometimes raked from left to right. In the passage under discussion the reader needs to go down five lines from the uncompleted word 'dis' to 'I lose control ...' in order to read up and then down again through the block of nurse-talk on the right-hand side of the page. Note also here the effect of sentence (10) ending in the middle of a word as Roy struggles unsuccessfully to stay in his fantasy universe. In context it would appear that the uncompleted word is 'disturbed' or 'disrupted', and so 'dis' is itself graphology-symbolic (note the lack of a final hyphen – as in 'din-', which would normally be used in writing to indicate an interrupted item).

A further graphology-symbolic effect that can be seen in (9)–(19) relates to font and type-size. Sentences (12)–(16) are in a different and considerably smaller type face than those surrounding them. These sentences, with their stereotypical euphemisms and friendly vocatives, clearly represent a conversation between two nurses, Nurse Norton and Nurse Devine who also 'interact' with Roy as they care for him. This conversation is important for us in beginning to make sense of the movements among narrative levels in the novel, and we also glean the name of the narrator from their conversation. The change in type size is thus an appropriate foregrounding device for the reader. But it also appears that the particular size (smaller than the surrounding type) can be seen as representative of Roy's viewpoint relation to what they say. They interrupt his fantasy universe thoughts, causing him to rise up through the narrative levels, but at the same time they appear to be less important or less vivid for him than what he 'hears' inside his head. This symbolic use of type size and related features like capitalisation is a feature to be found throughout the novel. For example, on p. 15, when his parents are leaving after a visit, their farewells ('CHEERIO SON! CHEERIO ROY!') are in capitalised small print to represent an increase in volume and pitch variation compared to the rest of their speech (cf. also the exclamation marks). But the fact that even the capitalised words are still in the smaller type size indicates their lack of interest from Roy's perspective.

In the novel's opening passage, Roy 'responds' to what the nurses say with his most dialectally marked sentence in the passage ((17) 'Aye right ye are, take your fuckin hand oot me fuckin erse.'). Six of the twelve words are non-standard in some way, and three of them are also taboo words. When Roy uses 'fucking' in his fantasy universe it is spelled normally, but here the spelling indicating a dialect pronunciation omits the final 'g' and does not even signal its omission by the conventional apostrophe. But in spite of the anger of Roy's response, there is no indication that the nurses hear him. There is no indication that those in the hospital hear him anywhere else in the novel either, so we must assume that (17), and sentences like it, must be Direct Thought, not Direct Speech (see Short 1996: Ch. 10).

Elsewhere in the novel, graphological foregrounding devices like capitalisation, ital-icisation, unusual spellings and so on are also often used within this Direct Thought mode to indicate simultaneously Roy's dialect and the strength of his attitude:  
– Awright son!

AW FUCK! *THIR* HERE.

(p. 10)

In this section, although my analysis has not been exhaustive by any means, I hope to have shown that graphological deviation and patterning and style variation are important factors in how viewpoint shifts, and in particular how movements among the levels of narration are controlled in the opening to *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. Indeed, the use of graphological deviation to signal viewpoint occurs in a number of his works, and so can be seen as part of Irvine's overall style. Moreover, the features seen in the opening passage of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are representative of, and also explained by, what happens in the rest of the novel. Perhaps one final point to note is that sentence (23) ('However, as my memory is practically non-existent, this could have been a few days ago or since the beginning of time itself.') is one of a number of clear indications in the novel, both in its direct statement and the accompanying hyperbole, that the narrator is unreliable. This correlates with the extraordinary movements we have seen in the rest of the passage, and with the fact that the narrator does not always

face reality direct in the rest of the novel. For example, as I have already pointed out, he first characterises his role in the rape of Kirsty as less bad than it really is, and nowhere in the novel does he appear to be able to confront his own evil directly, having to resort instead to the symbolic quest to kill the Marabou Stork in his fantasy universe.

[...]

*Marabou Stork Nightmares* is an extraordinary novel. Its extremely distasteful subject-matter and the attitudes of the characters portrayed will be enough to dissuade many from reading it at all. But I hope to have shown that it also has considerable artistic interest in general narratological terms, in its linguistic detail and the inter-relations between this linguistic detail and the larger-scale narratological structuring.

[...]

### ISSUES TO CONSIDER

It is important to reiterate that the scope of Mick Short's article is wide-ranging and that it makes many general points of interest for narrative stylistics. In this respect it ties in directly with the issues covered both in this strand and in strand 7 on point of view.

Some suggestions follow.

#### Activity ★

- ❑ On the basis of Short's analysis, to what extent can you align the various narrative techniques he uncovers in Welsh with the six-part model of narrative proposed in A5? Are all the features he uncovers readily positioned in the model or are further categories or expansions to the model warranted?
- ❑ Graphological effects are more commonly associated with poetry than with prose fiction, although Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, published in the 1760s, is the first novel in English to make extensive use of symbolic graphological representation. If you have read the novel, to what extent are the techniques of analysis developed by Short applicable to Sterne's narrative? What other works of prose fiction do you know of that employ graphological deviation and to what sort of stylistic effect?
- ❑ 'Orientational metaphors' are used to express emotional states through physical direction, as in GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN and so on (see further thread 11). To what extent can the graphologically symbolic patterns in Welsh be considered orientational metaphors? In terms of the narrator's orientation, which narrative level – the higher, middle or lower – is the positive preference? For example, does 'up' necessarily equate with 'good' in the discourse world of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*?