

**Narrative and Characterization Techniques in  
Sue Monk Kidd's Novel *The Secret Life Of Bees*  
(An Analysis with Narratological Approach)**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This research analyzes narrative techniques in Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) by using Barry's version (2002) of Genette's Narratology theory (1980). The purpose of the research is to identify how the story is narrated and how the narrative constructs the main character as evidenced in the novel. By applying the theory, this research attempts to gain insights into how the narrative is presented to the reader in the form of first person mode. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method. This research finds that the story *The Secret Life of Bees* is narrated through six narrative categorizations: narrative level, narrative time, narrative voice, focalization, narrative of words, and narrative mode. Moreover, the narrative constructs the main character through four methods of characterizations: physical description, dialogue and actions, thoughts and feelings, and what other characters' say about the main character. This research implies that the story *The Secret Life of Bees* is well organized. The use of first person narrative and the presence of child character who is also the narrator have made the story interesting and easy to follow. Furthermore, the development of the main character also plays a crucial role in giving the clue to the story's meaning and successfully covers the major theme of the story.

**Keywords:** *Narrative techniques, Barry's Version (2002) of Genette's narratology theory (1980), Narrative Categorizations, Characterization, Methods of Characterization*

## INTRODUCTION

Narrative involves an action or an event to be told. People in general often associate narrative with literary types, like novels, short stories, fairy tales, sagas or folk tales. As a widespread activity which is closely related to the acts of telling and re-telling, narrative can have numerous variety of structures that produce different kinds of effects and responses. In specific, narrative can be found in a text, such as literary text. In relation to this, Thwaites, Davis, and Mules (1994:114), state that narrative structure complements texts in three ways: it depicts the sequences of events or ideas in a story by foregrounding their movement through the passing of time, emphasizes a network of social meanings by transforming events into actions performed by characters, and offers the kinds of pleasure and enjoyment to the readers.

The study of narrative is commonly called narratology. According to Barry (2002: 145), narratology is not the reading and interpretation of individual stories, but rather the attempt to study the

structure of narration or the way stories are told. Of many different narratology theories, Barry believes that Genette's theory of narratology (1980) is considered as one of the most valuable theories, because the work has as its focus, not the story itself, but rather the process of telling the story itself (Barry, 2002: 151). Concerning to Genette's theory, Barry provides six basic questions which possibly cover the main areas discussed by Genette. First, how is the story 'packaged'? this question deals with the analysis of narrative level. According to Barry (2002), narratives can be divided into primary and secondary narratives. The primary narrative refers to the narrative that comes first in the story, but it does not mean the main narrative of the story. The secondary narrative, in fact, is usually the main story, although it comes after and is embedded into the primary narrative.

The second question proposed by Barry is: how is time handled in the story? This question deals with the analysis of narrative time in order to understand how time reference determines the order of events in the

story. For instance, a writer often uses flashback technique to relate an event which happened in the past and flash forward technique to present the future events.

Barry's third question is: who is telling the story? This question deals with the analysis of narrative voice. According to Abbott (2008: 70), "voice in narration is a question of who it is we "hear" doing the narrating." There are two possible types of narrators which emerge in the story, one is the kind of narrator who is not identified as neither a character nor the author's voice in the story. The other one is a narrator who is identified as a character and takes part in telling the events of the story.

The fourth question is: how is the narrative focalised? This question deals with the analysis of focalization or viewpoint from which a narrative is presented. There are three types of focalization as suggested by Genette (1980: 10), those are zero, internal, and external focalization. Zero focalization is often called as a classical narration. It is used to describe a narrative in which the narrator is the one who knows

everything because the narrator has an access to enter the minds and emotions of more than one character in the story. The term internal focalization refers to a narrative which is focused on the consciousness of a single character and it only tells what the character 'thinks' and 'experiences', whereas the external focalization refers to a narrative in which everything is narrated from the viewpoint of a narrator who is completely located outside of the story and focuses on what the characters 'say' and 'do'.

The fifth question is: how are speech and thought represented? This question deals with Genette's idea of narrative of words. Genette (1980) introduces three modes of speech representation in narrative, such as narratized, transposed, and mimetic speech. Considering that Genette's terms are too general, Barry (2002) provides another options which hopefully can be a useful indicator for analyzing the representation of character's speech and thought in narrative by introducing the terms, such as 'direct and tagged', 'direct

and untagged’, ‘direct and selectively tagged’, and ‘tagged indirect speech’.

The sixth question is: is the basic narrative mode ‘mimetic’ or ‘diegetic’? This question deals with Genette’s ideas of narrative mode. The terms mimesis and diegesis are often paraphrased as ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. Barry (2002: 151) says that:

Mimesis can be regarded as ‘slow telling’, in which what is done and said is staged for the readers, creating the illusion that they are seeing and hearing things for themselves. By contrast, diegesis means ‘telling’ or ‘relating’, in which the narrator just says what happens, without trying to show it as it happens.

However, in reality, many writers often use the two modes in tandem for strategic reasons. This is because an entirely mimetic novel will tend to be a very long story and an entirely diegetic novel will tend to be a summary of a story. Therefore, a combination of the two modes is needed in order to create a good story.

Furthermore, this research also applies the characterization analysis to reveal the way the narrative constructs the personality of the main

character in the novel. Character is one of the essential elements in a story. Characters’ traits and roles are shaped based on how they are described and how they act in a story. Characters may perform various functions in a story. Different types of characters perform different roles in a narrative process.

Forster (1927) states that based on the personality they possess, characters in a novel are either relatively flat (simple) or round (complex). Flat characters are often static in which they do not grow emotionally from beginning to the end of the story. Round characters, however, are much harder to understand and describe because they have multiple personality traits.

Another way of classifying characters in the story is by looking through the roles they play. Altenbernd and Lewis (1966: 59) state that according to their roles in the story, characters can be classified into protagonist and antagonist. Protagonist is the central character in the story which can be directly identified by the readers and often claimed as a good character (the hero

or heroine). By contrast, antagonist is the villain (the anti-hero) or the character who is blocking the hero's way.

Characters can be regarded as people in narratives. Although sometimes characters may not always be people, they may be animals, robots or other imagery creatures, the writer gives them human ability and psychological traits. Thus, we can consider them as people but in a different form. Characters are created by writer for different purposes to build a story. In the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, the writer creates the main character, Lily Melissa Owens, to generate the theme of the story. As the central figure who depicts every single event of the story entirely from her own perspective, Lily's traits are the most interesting elements to be analyzed, because through her traits we can understand the writer's intention in making the story.

The way the writer creates and develops characters in a story is often defined as characterization. Generally, characters in a story are created within certain traits or qualities that make them unique and

different from other characters. Myers-Shaffer (2002: 175) argues that "the basis of characterization is the revelation of the character's identifying traits, the mental and ethical (including moral) traits (qualities or characteristics) of the individual." Therefore, good characterization is that one which can give vivid images to the readers.

Practically, both characters and characterization are the crucial elements in making a story interesting. Characters help the writer and the readers connect each other within a story. In relation to this, Werlock (2010) explains that there are two major methods of characterization, which are 'direct' (telling) and 'indirect' (showing). In direct presentation, the writer makes direct statements about the character's personality and simply tells what kind of person the character is, whereas, in indirect presentation, the writer shows us what the character is like by describing the character's physical appearance, showing what the character says (words) and does (actions), revealing the character's inner thoughts and feelings, and

showing the relationship between the character and the other characters.

In conducting the research, the writer employs a descriptive qualitative method. Therefore, the data of the research are in the form of words, clauses, comments and dialogues of the main characters which are collected by reading the novel thoroughly, then selecting the parts which serve as textual evidence.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research aims to investigate how narrative makes meaning of a story. More specifically the following research questions have guided the inquiry: (1) how is the story narrated in the novel?, and (2) how does the narrative construct the main character? Thus, by applying Barry's version of Genette's narratology theory and methods of characterizations, this research attempts to analyze the way the story is narrated in the novel and the way the narrative constructs the main character.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Narrative categories and how the story is narrated**

This part focuses on the elaboration and analysis which best answer the first research question: how is the story narrated as evidenced in the novel? Based on the analysis of narrating techniques employed by the writer, the research finds that there are six techniques used in the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*: narrative level, narrative time, narrative voice, focalization, narrative of words, and narrative mode.

#### *a. Narrative level*

Based on the analysis, *The Secret Life of Bees* consists of one primary narrative and several embedded narratives. The use of embedded narratives in the novel successfully increases the complexity of the story. Barry (2002: 153) believes that "stories are not always presented 'straight'. Often writers make use of 'frame narratives' (also called 'primary narratives'), which contain within them 'embedded narratives' (also called 'secondary narratives')." In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Kidd as

the writer has a unique way in presenting her story. Kidd develops the use of embedded narratives fully in the form of dialogues between characters. There are five embedded narratives found in the story, those are; the story of Beatrix, Our Lady of Chains statue, August's younger sisters, the story of Big Mama, and Aristaeus. Thus, the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* can be said as complex narrative text in a sense that it contains more than one embedded narratives.

*b. Narrative time*

Although *The Secret Life of Bees* is categorized as a complex narrative text, the readers can still enjoy and follow the story. The main reason is because the story is dominated by the use of flash forward technique, so that the events of the story are mostly narrated in chronological order which makes the readers easy to understand what the story conveys to them.

In addition to this, the story *The Secret Life of Bees* becomes more interesting when Kidd adds flashback technique in her writing. This

technique arouses readers' curiosity and makes them want to read the story more. Therefore, it cannot be denied that flashback and flash forward techniques play a significant role in the development of the story. At one point, flash forward technique helps the narrator to jump forward occasionally to the future events, meanwhile, the flashback keeps readers' curiosity and encourages them to continue their reading until the end of the story.

*c. Narrative voice*

The voice in *The Secret Life of Bees* is identified as the main character who participates in the overall events of the story or in Genette's terms is called as a homodiegetic narrator. The impact of a homodiegetic narrator is the writer's choice of the use of first person pronoun "I" in the story which makes the readers hard to determine the distinction between the voice of the narrator and the voice of the main character.

Since *The Secret Life of Bees* is written in first person, it gives the readers a sense of closeness to the main character, Lily. As the narrator, Lily has the advantage to narrate all

of the details instead of keeping it as secrets. First person narration also catches the readers' attention, so that the readers can feel deeply connected to the narrator who also acts as the main character in the story.

*d. Focalization*

The story *The Secret Life of Bees* is told from a single character's point of view in which the narrator takes a great control in telling the story. According to Genette (1980: 10), this type of viewpoint is commonly called as internal focalization. The impact of the choice of this focalization is that the story is focused on the main character's consciousness and only tells what the main character 'thinks' and 'experiences'. As a result, the narrator has a limited access to know about the other characters' feelings and thoughts.

The major advantage of the use of internal focalization in *The Secret Life of Bees* is that the readers become very intimate with the main character because everything narrated is filtered through Lily's viewpoint. Besides, the focalization also makes the readers feel like they are a part of

the story (due to the use of first person pronoun 'I') and they can also get right into Lily's mind.

Nevertheless, this kind of focalization also has disadvantages in which what is told by the narrator about the other characters may not always be objective and the readers may question whether the narrator can be trusted or not. Therefore, the readers' vision may be restricted into believing only what is conveyed by the narrator.

*e. Narrative of words*

One of the crucial things in the analysis of narrative deals with the analysis of the ways in which the characters' statements and thoughts are presented in a text (Herman and Vervaeck, 2005: 23). Generally, a half of the narration in *The Secret Life of Bees* appears in the form of dialogues. There are three types of speech which were mainly adopted in *The Secret Life of Bees*; those are 'direct, tagged', 'direct, untagged', and 'direct, selectively tagged'.

The 'direct, tagged' speech occurs when the actual words are given (inside the inverted commas)



and then followed by the tagged phrase which indicates the name of the speakers, whereas in the 'direct, untagged' speech, the name of the speakers are not explicitly tagged (Barry, 2002: 154). The use of the 'direct, untagged' speech in the novel creates the impression that the dialogue is fastmoving and it emphasizes more on the information given rather than on the presence of the speakers.

Moreover, in the story the dialogues also appear in another form of speech which is the 'direct, selectively tagged'. The speech is called 'direct, selectively tagged' because the first utterance is tagged but the second one is not. In addition to this, it can be said that the writer's choice of words in *The Secret Life of Bees* is greatly influenced by the presence of a child character, Lily. As the narrator, Lily plays a crucial role in the development of the story because everything is narrated through her personal point of view. Consequently, the words used in the overall events are mostly simple rather than complex ones.

*f. Narrative mode*

The direct presentation of speech and actions also affect the narrative mode used in the novel. In narrating a story, there are two types of modes that can be used by a writer; mimetic ('showing' or 'slow telling') and diegetic ('summarizing') modes. In specific, *The Secret Life of Bees* narration uses mimetic mode to make the story become more real, alive, and vivid. This mode works by dramatizing the narrative through telling the story slowly and the direct speech used gives the readers an illusion as if they are 'seeing' and 'hearing' the events described for themselves (Barry, 2002).

Actually, a longer form of narrative, such as Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* combines both diegetic and mimetic modes. As Herman and Vervaeck (2005: 15) argues that "summaries always have their mimetic aspects, and mimetic representation always has moments of summary as well." In *The Secret Life of Bees*, the writer uses mimetic mode to illustrate both the dialogues and actions of the characters in detail which tends to make the events

longer. However, diegetic mode in the story is also employed by the writer to summarize events and hidden conversation.

## **2. Methods of Characterization of Lily Melissa Owens**

This part covers the elaboration and analysis which best answer the second research question: how does the narrative construct the main character? According to the analysis, the novel *The Secret Life of Bees* constructs the main character through four methods of characterization, which are physical appearance, dialogue and actions, thoughts and feelings, and what other characters' say about the main character.

In terms of revealing the main character traits, the story uses two major methods of characterization, which are 'direct' (telling) and 'indirect' (showing) methods. The direct presentation of Lily occurs when Lily simply told the readers how she looks like, dresses, and how she feels about her appearance.

Meanwhile, the indirect presentation occurs when the writer shows the readers what kind of person Lily is by showing Lily's dialogue and actions, revealing Lily's private thoughts and feelings, and showing the other characters's comments about Lily. Through the analysis of Lily's dialogues and action, and Lily's private thoughts and feelings, the research finds that Lily is characterized as a brave, stubborn, and curious person although she often feels of being so much alone, unwanted, unpopular, friendless, and motherless. Nevertheless, the other characters' opinion has revealed the other side of Lily's personality which are charming, smart, and lovable.

From the overall traits, Lily's curiosity is the one which is developed significantly in the story. Lily is very curious with everything related to her mother's secret life. Therefore, Lily's curiosity not only suggests the title and the theme of the story but also has made the story become much more interesting. The direct and indirect methods also reveal the development of Lily's personality in the story. Through her

interactions with the other characters, Lily's personality changed gradually from a weak person to someone who gains strength in her independence and she realizes that she is no longer motherless.

### CONCLUSIONS

This research has elaborated its findings which answer the main questions of how the story is narrated in the novel and how the narrative constructs the main character. The previous chapter shows that *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) is narrated through six narrative categorizations, those are narrative level, narrative time, narrative voice, focalization, narrative of words, and narrative mode. In addition to this, the narrative constructs the main character through four methods of characterization; physical description, dialogue and actions, thoughts and feelings, and what other characters' say about the main character.

Based on the findings, *The Secret Life of Bees* can be said as a complex narrative text in a sense that it contains more than one narrative levels. The use of flashback and flash

forward techniques has given a significant contribution to the order of events in the story. The research also finds that *The Secret Life of Bees* is narrated through a single character's point of view or commonly called as internal focalization which makes the narrator able to reveal only her personal thoughts and feelings because she has a limited access to know for certain the other characters' minds.

In constructing the main character, the story *The Secret Life of Bees* uses both the direct ("telling") and indirect ("showing") methods of characterization to reveal Lily Melissa Owen's traits. The direct method occurs when Lily simply tells the readers about her physical look. On the other hand, Lily's traits are also shown through the use of indirect method of characterizations, such as dialogues and actions, thoughts and feelings, and what other characters' say about the main character.

The close analysis of narrative technique and character development in *The Secret Life of Bees* reveals that the story is well organized. The overall events are narrated in a

chronological order by employing both flashback and flash forward techniques. Moreover, the use of direct presentation of speech plays a crucial role to the development of mimetic mode in the novel. By using direct presentation of speech, the mimetic mode can reach its dramatic effects and give the readers a sense of intimacy and closeness.

The presence of a child character also affects the writer's choice of words in the novel. As the main character, Lily, who is a fourteen-year-old girl, takes a great control in narrating every single event of the story through her personal point of view. Therefore, the story mostly consists of simple sentences rather than complex ones. Furthermore, the main character also allows the readers to enter her inner world so that they can be the one who understand her traits the most.

Like a human being, the main character undergoes certain changes as she learn from the problems she has experienced. In the story, Lily faces an internal conflict which leads her to struggle with her own soul whether she can tell her life secrets or

not, and she has a great hole in her heart since the death of her mother which has also left her with so many secrets. Therefore, the development of Lily's traits is the clue to the story's meaning and has successfully covered the major theme of the story.

The analysis of narrative technique in Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* can be a starting point for a future investigation and therefore it is expected to motivate readers to be more critical in reading narrative texts. Thus, readers can get better understanding about how meanings are produced in narratives and other literary texts through some narratological categories.

'In regard with the findings, the researcher suggests that the future research investigate narrative techniques in a comprehensive way. An analysis of narrative technique in films, for example, can be a good topic to be investigated. Therefore, the researcher expects that such research will provide another variation in narratological analysis in order to enhance the study of narrative techniques.

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