

NARRATION IN MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE JOKE*

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ABSTRACT

*Many reviewers and critics have noticeably referred to various techniques of multiple narration and polyphonic composition as major structural devices in *The Joke*. It is believed that Milan Kundera, on one hand uses the technique multiple narration to implement his major themes, and on the other hand, inserts the polyphony of music into the realm of his novel. As a matter of fact, for Kundera the narrative structure of *The Joke* resembles much to that of a musical note. While each note contains uniqueness on its own, it combines and accords with other notes to produce a coherent whole. Kundera gives unity and consistency to his novel through implementing a web of individual yet interconnected narrators/characters that best perform their duties in both narration and presentation. This multi-perspectival narrative style helps the writer to put in the picture the intended themes of the story through a polyphonic narrative.*

Keywords: multiple narrations, polyphony, characterization, Milan Kundera

GENERAL OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

Milan Kundera's debut novel *The Joke* (*Žert*) was written in 1965 in seven parts and was first published in 1967 in Czechoslovakia. Its final revised English edition was prepared by the author himself and Aaron Asher and published by HarperCollins Publishers in 1992. Much of the narrative of *The Joke* consists of flashbacks which date back to early 1950s in Czechoslovakia. The action of the novel centers on the story of Ludvik, the protagonist, who comes from a small town in southern Moravia and who becomes a fervent political activist during his university days in Prague. He tells how the joke of the title – a postcard (Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!) to a naïve yet exasperatingly patriotic girlfriend, named Marketa, whom he was trying to impress – leads to his expulsion from the party and university, army service among the politically unwanted and several years in the mines of Ostrava, where he also experiences a tragic love affair with Lucie. Later Ludvik plans to revenge on Pavel Zemanek, his former party comrade who played a crucial role on his ill-fated life. Ludvik tries to seduce Zemanek's wife, Helena, during her visit to Moravia as a radio reporter. But this turns out to be another joke on Ludvik himself, since he learns that Zemanek himself wants to get rid of Helena. Ludvik succeeds in his revenge plan, on the surface, but this does not make him victorious; the story ends in Helena's suicide attempt and Jaroslav's heart attack.

The Joke has been variously labeled as realistic, political, ideological, and psychological in genre by different reviewers. Justifications for such categorizations seem quite equally available. The author's outstanding style of narration with its four first-person narrators and their internal monologues, as Craig Cravens (2000) suggests, are enough evidence to register this multi-perspectival novel as a psychological one. He believes that "such a narrative method has come to be associated with the type of novel known as the "psychological novel," practitioners of which such as Faulkner, Woolf, Beckett and Joyce, often employ multiple perspectives to assert the subjective nature of experience and thus display human consciousness as isolated, unique and idiosyncratic." However, these techniques of multiple narration, polyphonic composition and fascination with numbers (especially number 7) are what most readers and reviewers have noticeably lingered upon as structural devices in this novel. As Peter Kussi (2003) relates it, "Kundera uses the technique of multiple narrations as a structural way to

question his themes. He asserts that by cross-examining the accounts of the story furnished by four narrators, Kundera the skeptic exposed their “overlapping delusions” and tried to show that each man has his own falsehood.

DISCUSSION

While expanding a discussion on the art of composition, in part four of *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera again elaborates more on his novels’ structure. Here, while from one side he characterizes the similarities of music and novel, the reader, on the other side, becomes more acquainted with terms such as *polyphony* and *unilinear* compositions. He further asserts that “polyphony in music is the simultaneous presentation of two or more voices (melodic lines) that are perfectly bound together but still keep their relative independence” (Kundera, 1986).

As an important principle of composition, *polyphony* plays a vital role in Milan Kundera’s narratives especially in *The Joke*. Structurally, as in music, Kundera brings the “simultaneous presentation of two or more voices (melodic lines)” into the novel’s realm. Here he tries to avoid *unilinear* composition or the continuous narration of the story of Ludvik’s fate, “in favor of a structure, in which a multiplicity of lines meet and enter into a “contrapuntal” relation in which none can be called primary or secondary, subsidiary or dominant, but in which all enjoy the same status, the same relative autonomy, and are all equally necessary to one another and to the harmony and significance of the group” (Ricard, 2003).

The base time of *The Joke* covers three days in the mid-1960s in Czechoslovakia. The story introduces four distinct carefully selected narrators, one female and three males amongst which Ludvik Jahn is the chief one. It is through these interwoven first-person narratives that we receive the same events and characters treated from several points of view. Each voice is stylistically distinct; together, they make up a lucid and satisfying whole. As Kundera himself explains: “Ludvik’s monologue take up 2/3 of the book; the monologues of the other three together take up 1/3 (Jaroslav 1/6, Kostka 1/9, Helena 1/18). That mathematical structure determines what I would call the *lighting of the characters*. Ludvik stands in full light, illuminated from inside (by his own monologue) and from outside (the other monologues all sketch his portrait). Jaroslav fills a sixth of the book with his monologue and his self-portrait is corrected from the outside by Ludvik’s monologue. And so on. Each character is lighted at a different intensity and in a different way. Lucie, who is one of the most important characters, has no monologue of her own; she is lighted only from the outside by Ludvik’s and Kostka’s. The absence of interior lighting gives her a mysterious, elusive quality. She stands, so to speak, behind glass; she cannot be touched” (Kundera, 1986). Lucie remains the mysterious woman, the soul and engine of the novel, even though she disappears for most of the novel. Milan Kundera doesn’t give Lucie the role of a narrator. Instead, every other part of the story including characters’ lives in the past, takes the shape of a retrospective narrative, which together with that three-day action of the story are all conveyed to the readers through the intermingled monologues of only four of characters: Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka.

This variety of narrators has magnified the beauties of the novel from an aesthetic point of view, though inciting some questions as well. “The fundamental problem of the narrative structure of *The Joke* consists in the selection of the narrators” (Dolezel, 1999). He further adds, “Why were these characters and not any of the others entrusted with the function of narrating? The selection of narrators was not fortuitous but determined, I believe, by the structure and type of Kundera’s novel. Typologically, *The Joke* can be designated an *ideological novel* (novel of ideas), i.e. a novel dominated in its structure by the plane of ideas. The narrators of *The Joke* are representatives of various systems of “false” ideologies-myths; their narrative monologues are authentic accounts of the social conditions and of the individual directions of the destruction of myths” (Dolezel, 1999).

Following the technique of shifting perspectives, then different portions of *The Joke* are presented in different narrative modes and/or perspectives in order to produce a *heterogeneous* text, which includes “formally differentiated *narrative segments*” (Dolezel, 1999). Each narrative segment in *The Joke* is presented through shifting points of view and the alternation of narrative forms which then make the novel a multi-perspective one. In this technique readers are not confined to a single constant perspective of one narrator in the story. On the other hand, the moment readers come to know Ludvik,

Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka, they begin to experience both objective and subjective narrative forms with a lively rhythm and of course with a wide range of interpretations and meanings for the narrated events.

A great part of the accomplishment of *The Joke*, as a multi-perspective novel, goes to the practice of both *cyclic structure* and *linear structure* (Dolezel, 1999) in its narrative design. As a good example of cyclic structure we may refer to the descriptions given about the first encounter of Helena and Ludvik and their relationship through Ludvik's point of view in section 2 of part five and Helena's point of view in section 3 of part two. Besides this distinctive structural design in the narration, critics have analyzed narrative techniques of the novel in terms of two other levels of evaluation. At one level, two experiential centers of *narrating* and *experiencing selves* throughout the first-person narrations in the text are distinguished: "[...] the experiencing self narrates as one undergoing events. It has no temporal distance from the events related and hence no perspective different from that of the other characters of the story. At this pole of the first-person mode, characters and events occupy the reader's attention almost completely. The narrating self, on the other hand, narrates from a later point in time and in most respects resemble a third-person narrator. It has the advantage of retrospectivity and may, if it chooses, anticipate or even suppress its acquired knowledge. It may also draw attention to itself at the moment of narration. The reader divides his attention between these two spatio-temporal realms and the narrational center of gravity oscillates between them" (Cravens, 2000).

At another level, the special features in the organization and style of the narrative monologues uttered by particular characters are reminded: "[...] the specific features of the particular narrative monologues reflect various stages of the myth-destroying process which the narrators have reached. Specifically, the structure and texture of the narrative monologue depends on the balance of two functions of narrator, namely the *representational* and the *interpretative* function. We assume that the balance of representation and interpretation, different in the particular narrative monologues of *The Joke*, reflects the narrator's stage in the myth-destroying process" (Dolezel, 1999).

According to Dolezel's appraisal, then, in Helena's narrative interpretation dominates over representation, in Kostka's narrative it is the same status but "Jaroslav's monologue is built on a parallelism of representation and interpretation. It presents narrated events on two parallel and disjointed levels, that of folkloristic myth and that of *everyday life*." And rightly enough, Ludvik's monologue plays a vital role in the narrative symposium of *The Joke*: "His monologue dominates the narrative structure of the novel not only because it introduces the most important episodes of the action, but also because it presents the most profound and most conscious destruction of the myth. Mythological interpretation is replaced by critical analysis; a perfect harmony between the narrator's representational "responsibility" and his interpretative function is thus achieved" (Dolezel, 1999).

However, whether it is interpretation or representation, and whether it is narrating or experiencing, we can still clearly observe "the doubling or multiplication of narrative voices" which provides "the material of polyphonic composition" (Ricard, 2003). Accordingly this polyphonic composition manifests itself in the presence of four points of view and, as the author decides, four first-person narrators in the novel. Unlike some other novels using the same technique, here the author doesn't stay with the same narrator for the whole story – even if it is Ludvik Jahn as the protagonist. In this way we come to know characters who gain their own voice and their own role as narrators while presenting their life story to the readers. On one hand their presentations and comprehensions of the events vary (just to assert the idea of individual existence of each narrator and also to show the relativity of their viewpoints), and on the other hand, in a complementary design, these individual voices come together to "to combine into a chord" in the same way as Ludvik comments on the Ride of the Kings, and to complete and elucidate other narrators' accounts. Thus Ludvik's status as a narrator becomes important only as far as quantitative or dramatic measures of the action of the story are concerned. Ludvik narrates the bulk of the story since it is his own, but the "voices" in the novel are still equal (Ricard, 2003).

As it is quite competently employed by Milan Kundera, Ludvik makes a distinction between his experiencing and narrating selves while at the same time he shifts between past-tense narrations/experiences and present-tense philosophical digressions. Ludvik's tone is more tangible

during these digressions; his tone seems to be detached and unemotional but this doesn't mean that he is not familiar with emotions like hate, resentment or revenge; whenever possible the writer reminds the readers about these sensations, which are shown in two related dimensions. Once Ludvik Jahn is facing and experiencing the cruelties done to him by the Communist Party and ruining his life for fifteen years or at another time-span, when he remembers and narrates those cruelties and injustices done to him, readers come to know the substance of those deep-seated emotions. At another occasion we can see Ludvik's feelings through the eyes of a character foil like Kostka.

But I tell you again for the last time: Look deep into your soul! The deepest motive for your good deeds is not love, but hatred! Hatred towards those who once hurt you, towards those who raised their hands against you in that hall! Your soul knows no God, and therefore knows no forgiveness. You long for retribution. You identify those who hurt you then with those who hurt others now, and you take your revenge on them. Yes, revenge! You are full of hatred even when you help people" (Kundera, 1992).

Not surprising, we can contemplate more on the previous lines as the nearest to Ludvik's personality since in the very beginning of the book even he himself appreciates Kostka because of his disagreements with Ludvik: "(I must say that it was our differences that endeared Kostka to me and made me enjoy our arguments; I used them as a touchstone of who I was and what I thought.)" Ludvik's meditative, self-critical style in narrating becomes his trademark. He has a critical distance on events, and "relates his disasters in a quiet, even tone devoid of self-pity. The experiencing self in his autobiographical narrative is disciplined by an overarching intelligence that keeps directing the storytelling toward the pole of analysis" (Banerjee, 1992). But after years of political commotions, mental and physical tortures and through his social encounters, now he shows more experienced; at least he becomes convinced that "everything in life that happens to me has a sense beyond itself, *means* something." Ludvik's investigative mind is considered a precious gift given by Kundera to this character: "It is much to Kundera's credit that he does not depict his hero, a dissident intellectual like himself, as a man with all the answers. Ludvik himself realizes he is doing everything possible to prevent time from healing his wounds, but hate has crowded out all other emotions from his life. His awareness of the inadequacy of this position reaches a crescendo in the last scene, when he sees his childhood friend in the throes of a heart attack (Berman, 1970).

Helena enters in the second part of the novel as another narrator. Her narration gives the readers a sort of background for Ludvik's mission and foreshadows future events at the climax of the story, as Fred Misurella puts it. In Helena's narration there is no difference in narrated time and time of narration while she gives the readers a sense of stream-of-consciousness monologue. She has made a utopia out of Communism for herself; with no firm conviction of life, she is portrayed as a befuddled, shallow woman who stays infatuated with Communist sloganeering. Through her fragmented enjambling narration, we come to know about past events like her meeting with and faltering marriage to Pavel Zemanek. She remembers Pavel's shocking statement during an argument: "*we didn't marry for love, we married out of Party discipline,*" (Kundera, 1992); nonetheless, with such idealistic thoughts and feelings of her it takes time to cope with the harsh reality. Helena feels a great gap inside her soul; she tries to be strong as she consoles herself with a line from Czechoslovak journalist Fucik: "*Let sadness never be linked with my name.*" She doesn't want her "life to split down the middle," instead she wants "it to remain whole from beginning to end." However she can't find real love; she uses the Communist Party ideas and power to compensate for all the emptiness felt inside her life. And her naivety doesn't let her know about Ludvik's satanic mission.

As an old school friend of Ludvik, Jaroslav appears as another narrating character at part four of *The Joke*. He is a folk music devotee who leads a traditional Moravian folk band. The cultural relationship between Communist ideology and Czech folk values, musicology (in section four of part four), personal memories of his own life or Ludvik's, and some historical accounts are all conveyed to the readers via Jaroslav's elevated literary style of narration. He uses first-person point of view in his narration and sometimes it becomes difficult to make a borderline between his narrating and experiencing selves, while at the same time "his voice shifts the narrative from bitter irony to a warm tone of deeply felt nostalgia" (Banerjee, 1992). Jaroslav is hopeful that his son Vladimir plays the role of king in the folk ritual known as the Ride of the Kings, as he perceives the meaning of his existence

in it. Unfortunately, Jaroslav is not lucky enough to see Vladimir playing the role of the king. Vladimir, instead, prefers to go to motorcycle races with Koustecky's grandson, "a sign that he and other young Czechs in the story have lost contact with their traditions and lack all memory of (or lack the wish to have a memory of) the past," (Misurella, 1993).

Kostka is the fourth narrator in *The Joke*. He works as a virologist at the local hospital. It was Ludvik who had helped him to secure the job. Kostka is a Christian who accepts the initiation of Communism despite the fact that it is "a movement that inscribed godlessness on its shield," for he saw a support for working-class and oppressed people in Communism; a pledge for worldwide brotherly love. Both Ludvik and Kostka had important university positions, one as a student and the other as a lecturer. Kostka at times expresses his amazement because of the resemblance of their fate. But in fact "yet beneath this outward alliance lies an abyss of inward disagreement," as confesses Kostka. Though Ludvik and Kostka were both expelled out from university because of their independent thinking, their intellectual status proved to be different. Focusing on this difference, Fred Misurella (1993) points out that "While Ludvik's independence lies along cynical, pessimistic lines of reason and doubt (like the laughter of the Devil in *The book of Laughter and Forgetting*), Kostka's is founded on religious, optimistic ones of faith."

However, Kostka lends Ludvik his apartment for his plan of seduction or as he discloses it to Kostka "a beautiful demolition." Kostka mostly sticks to his narrating self and his narration could be viewed as a kind of confession; indeed he speaks like a preacher and gives many biblical quotations. It is in a barbershop recommended by Kostka that Ludvik encounters Lucie, his old love. Both Kostka and Ludvik have met Lucie during their exile. While Ludvik makes a failure out of his love affair with Lucie, just later it is Kostka who succeeds in the same battle.

It is in section twenty of part six that Kostka shows a dire turn of attitudes and manners. Up to this section Kostka claimed to see his destiny in God's hand and tried to see positive side of every event, even his sufferings because of the Party and the fate. Then in a collapsing mood he casts a doubt on everything in this last chapter of part six when he confesses "OH, HOW I DELUDE myself! How stubbornly I try to convince myself I've taken the right path! How I parade the power of my faith before the unbeliever!" (Kundera, 1992).

There is a different style of narration in the final part of the novel. This part contains nineteen sections with a meticulous combination of narrators; the three characters alternate in telling the action as odd chapters are narrated by Ludvik and the even ones are divided between Helena and Jaroslav. The profusion of narrators, however, results in a greater achievement: a cinematic sequence of cuts, setting an escalating pace and pulling the reader into the story. No longer are long-past events merely recounted: things are happening "here and now". All the main characters arrive finally in the same place at the same time. In fact, through the narrators' mingled narrating and experiencing selves we come to know about Helena's suicide attempt with laxatives (which makes a comic scene), Jaroslav's heart attack (which makes a tragic catharsis) and Ludvik's status in the aftermath of his revenge while at same time we see the ritual of the Ride of the Kings is performed. As Fred Misurella (1993) puts it "by means of this canon Kundera renders simultaneous action from several points of view and examines the passions of two parts of Ludvik's life, one before the postcard, the other afterward, hinting at a resolution for the future that in itself raises doubts, at least for Czechoslovakia."

CONCLUSION

The narrative structure of *The Joke* resembles much to that of a musical note for Kundera. While each note contains a definite individuality on its own, it combines and accords with other notes to produce a whole. Kundera gives unity and coherence to his masterpiece through implementing a web of individual yet interrelated narrators/characters that best perform their duties in both narration and presentation. This multi-perspectival narrative style helps the writer to tell the intended themes of the story through a polyphonic narrative, while adds much to the characterization process throughout the novel.

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