

## A Book Review on *Narratology* by Mieke Bal

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**Introduction:** Mieke Bal (Maria Gertrudis) is a well known Dutch theorist, artist, literary critic, filmmaker and video artist. She occupied numerous academic positions throughout her life and in the recent times, she is a Professor of Theory and Literature in the Amsterdam University. Her book, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, was printed many times and was translated into English by Christine Van Boheemen. The first edition was printed and published in Canada, Toronto in 1980 and in 1999 the second edition was released with new forward. In her book, Bal gives a deep insight to the basic elements of the narrative from a structural standpoint. In a very systematic way, she lies down the bases of the narrative constructions with a lucid attention to the shared constituents. Naming these constituents of the narrative go accurately with the function. In fact, this book has three main sections with introduction and afterword. The first section is tackling the text in terms of *Wording*, while the second section is shedding light on the *Aspects* of the story, as far as the third section is concerned, it deals with the *Elements* of the fabula in addition to the afterword that gives hints on "the use of narratology for cultural analysis". Under the umbrella term of structuralism, Bal gives sound to her model in this book. Besides, semantics was not absent from Bal's discussions over the role of the constituents and their functions in the narrative. Thus, her model sounds more plausible and developed.

**Key Words:** Mieke Bal, Literature, Narrative, Structuralism, Narratology.

### A Book Review of "*Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*"

By Mieke Bal

Mieke Bal illustrates the bases of the narrative in details to enable the reader to reach a comprehensive understanding of how the constituents of a narrative work. In the introduction, narratology is defined as "theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that tell a story" (p. 3). Thus, it is a tool that supports the process of analyzing the narratives. On the same level, she defines the narrative as being "a cultural phenomenon, partaking of cultural process" (p. 9). She, therefore, gives an enough room to the role of culture in the process of constructing the narrative. As a matter of fact, culture is the main store where the fabulas come from.

Defining the main elements of the narrative paves the way to a better understanding of how these elements constitute the general frame of the narrative. She, firstly, differentiates between the fabula and the story. She defines a story as "a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. [while] A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (p. 5). Actually a third term is also put forward which is the narrative *text* that is a "series of sentences". She argues that this distinguishing is essential for a textual analysis. This led her to draw another distinguishing among the *Event*, *Actors* and *To Act*. According to her view, "*Event* is the transition from one state to another state. *Actors* are agents that perform actions. *To act* is defined here as to cause or to experience an event" (p. 5). In fabula there is an actor, while in the story there is a character. As far as the narrative text is concerned, a narrator is the main option (p. 8-9). Her endeavor throughout laying her model is to make the analysis of the narrative discussable.

The first section deals with text and wordings in which the use of language in the story is brought into view. Bal illustrates that the use of wording in the story-telling is varied from the narrator position throughout the non narrative comments. By saying narrator, she does not mean the implied author. Narrator can be a character within the frame of the fabula or external outside the fabula. She emphasizes that it is necessary to differentiate between the narrator and the author. Because it is important to the story addressee to comprehend how the language functions within the world of the narrative (p. 24). In fact, the word narrative is not necessarily an attribute for all the sentences in the text for example the comments that deliver

"ideological statements". There are also embedded ideologies that run deep in the narrative text. To find the ideology that is embedded in the text, the reader has to analyze the relationship among the three parts of the story; the *argumentative*, the *descriptive*, and the *narrative*. The argumentative part is "any statement that refers to something of general knowledge outside the fabula" (p. 33). The descriptive part is the preferred position of focalization. It is "a textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects" (p. 36). The narrative part is "a linguistic act the emotive phrase forms part of the text" (p. 44). It is the same on the part of the fabula level in which there are primary fabula and embedded fabula. Bal clarifies the relation between these two types of the fabula by saying that "there are two possibilities. The embedded story can explain the primary story, or it may resemble the primary story" (p. 53).

The second section deals with the main aspects of the story. What Bal means by the term 'aspect' is the feature that differentiates the story structure from the fabula (p. 78). When the medium is used, the product is the narrative text and the product of the ordering is the story, while the product of imagination is a fabula. Thus, the story is sandwiched between the narrative text and the fabula. Some changes can be occurred in the sequence of the events on the story level in order to create some emphasis or to draw the attention to a certain thing that may yield different interpretations by the readers.

For Bal, the job of the narratology is to understand, but not to evaluate the quality of the narrative (p. 83). She adds a new aspect of story in her model which is the "Rhythm" that is a prominent and "elusive" aspect (p. 99). To clarify it more, there are many studies which try to measure the amount of time that is taken to cover an event in the fabula and the amount of time that is taken to cover the same event in the story. For example, the period of childhood can be elapsed very quickly, while the event that depicts the first meeting with the beloved person may last longer since it is described in details (p. 100-101). Bal clarifies this issue further by naming two situations as "the summarized presentation" and "the extensive presentation" of the event in the story by which both of these situations are connected with each other. In effect, the summary is a good tool to shed the light on the background of the events in a "crisis-fabula", whereas the extensive presentation is suitable with the "developing fabula" (p. 105). Of course, this is neither similar to the aspect of pausing where there is no time has passed when it resumed, nor to the aspect of frequency (iteration) which is defined as "the numerical relationship between the events in the fabula and those in the story" (p. 111). It is when the same event is repeated few times in different stylistic variations so as to explore all the perspectives of the event like that in Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury*.

Swiftly, Bal shifted the discussion to the differences between actor and character. Actor is an abstract and not necessarily to be a human found in the fabula, while character is specific with human traits and is founded in the story. Bal says that "a character is the effect that occurs when an actor is endowed with distinctive human characteristics" (p. 115). Accordingly, the actor in the fabula is "a structural position", whereas the character represents "a complex semantic unit" (p. 115). She goes further in explaining the characters as "fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people." (p. 115). What is important is that the character "has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological descriptions possible" (p. 115). In short, a character is assembly that is constructed by four principles "repetition, accumulation, relations to other characters, and transformations" (p. 126).

The discussion of place and space goes along with the demarcation between the story and the fabula. With a cute insight, Bal's perceives that the shift from a place to a space involves a transition from the fabula level to the story-telling level. She considers the space as being "sandwiched between that of focalization, of which the representation of space constitutes in a way a specialized case, and that of place, a category of fabula elements" (p. 133). As far as the concept of place is concerned, Bal considers it as being "related to the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions" (p. 133).

Bal's contribution to the development of the structural theory lies basically in her new concept of *Focalization*. She defines it as "the relation between the vision and that which is seen, perceived" (p. 142). By such new term, she detached her theory from the other similar labels like the narrative perspective or the point of view. She justifies it by thinking that *perspective* is the only one which gives the impression of "physical" as well as "psychological" sense. But it gives no hint to "the agent that is performing the action of narration" (p. 143). Bal prefers the new term *focalization* over *perspective* for two main causes: the first is that *perspective* comes to signify for "both the narrator and the vision." This will lead to some ambiguity

that may affect the exact meaning of the word. The second cause is related to usage in the sense that its use in art is not similar to its use in literature. Besides, the term *perspective* has no nominal derivation in order to point out the subject of the action and there is also no verb form that can be derived from it. Therefore, *Focalization* comes to be more suitable by providing more merits and it seems more "technical" (p. 144).

The third section of this book is discussing the elements of the fabula. Bal states her views directly by announcing that fabulas are trans-cultural as well as trans-historical practices (p. 178). She discusses two main elements of the fabula; the subjects or objects (actors) and the processes (events) in the sense that the first one is fixed while the later is changeable. The term process is used here to give more emphasis and highlight the notions of "development, succession, alteration, and interrelation among the elements" (p. 182). Bal defines the event as a process that cause alteration or "transition from one state to another state" (p. 182). In effect, these two main elements operate only with each other. She also argues that the event is a matter of choice and she adopts Barthes' classification of events in terms of being "functional or non-functional" (p. 184). In fact, events implied confrontation. The relationship between the fabula and the event is that the fabula contains "a series of logically and chronologically related events" (p. 187). Moreover, Bal quoted Bermond's definition of the narrative text to clarify further the relationship between the event and narrative text: "a narrative consists of a language act by which a succession of events having human interest are integrated into the unity of this same act" (Bremond, quoted in Bal, p. 191).

In relation to event, Bal discusses the actor as being either the cause of an event or affected by it. She thinks that it should bound the actors to functional classes (p. 196). Bal criticizes Greimas' model in which the classes of the actors are constructed according to the aim (teleological) and therefore it lies in the domain of the abstraction. But, in Bal's model, the classes of actants (actors) are sharing the same qualities (p. 197). Besides, she gives enough room to the aim which is defined in relation to the actor: "the subject is usually a person or a personified animal (in animal fables), not an object" (p. 197). Actants should also have truth value. What Bal means by the truth value' is "the 'reality' of the actants within the actantial structure" (p. 205). For instance, a spy may be shown as a helper, although her/his reality is exposed to the reader from the beginning. Besides, it is not merely the actants, but also the entire "actantial schemes" can be characterized as being "true or false" (p. 206).

Time is also discussed in relation to events in this model. Bal postulates that since event is defined as process, so it involves "a change" or "a development," and consequently a passing of time is a prerequisite need (p. 208). Certain types of narrative need longer span of time like the autobiographical or the Bildungsroman, and a very long span of time is needed for the travel stories (p. 210). In fact, there is another issue of time that is lying on the next shore which is the ellipsis. It is "elimination causes gaps in the sequence of chronology" (p. 212). A certain amount of time can be skipped over without any hints for the reader. Therefore, "the time span can be contrasted and compared with chronology" (p. 214).

Location is also discussed in relation to event because events must be occurred in someplace which is stated directly or can be deduced by the reader (p. 214). A contrast may occur between indoor and outdoor locations according to the event in which the actant is involved. For example, the house can suggest the sense of protection when the danger is outside. On the contrary to this assimilation, the house can be regarded as a prison whereas the outside refers to freedom (p. 215). Therefore, "oppositions are constructions; it is important not to forget that and 'naturalize' them" (p. 217).

To conclude, Mieke Bal's book serves as a good model to understand the components of the narrative and how these components are functioning within the realm of narratology. Under the banner of structuralism, she launched her model that fill many gaps which weren't covered by the previous models. In fact, her model is more comprehensive and valuable. Many writers and critics appraised her accomplishment like Lawrence R. Schehr who says "the book is an excellent introduction to narratology. It is clearly and concisely written, and it explains the categories of narratology in a straightforward fashion." Likewise, Wallace Martin appraised it by saying that it is "a concise, integrated theory of narrative based on the structuralist tradition."

#### General Facts:

- The first copy was in Dutch entitled "*De Theorie van Ellen en verhalen I*" which means "*Theory of Storytelling and Narrative I*" and it was translated into English by Christine Van Boheemen.

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- Mieke Bal. "Curriculum Vitae, List of Publications, List of Art Works." The Complete C.V. available at [www.miekebal.org](http://www.miekebal.org).