
FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AS A DEPICTION OF TRAUMA IN ALICE MUNRO'S DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the use of narrative techniques in depicting trauma and fragmented memories in the short story "Dimensions" by Alice Munro. This research aims to reveal how the narrative structure of the short story reflects the traumatic experience of the protagonist, Doree, by using Gérard Genette's narrative theory (1980) as an analytical framework. This research uses the short story "Dimensions" as the material object and is studied with a descriptive qualitative approach. The analysis reveals that Munro employs several narrative techniques—ellipsis, focalization, and analepsis—to depict trauma. Ellipsis conveys the characters' inability to access or fully process certain aspects of their traumatic experiences. The shifting focalization between external and internal perspectives reflects the dissociation and fragmented sense of identity often associated with trauma. Meanwhile, analepsis illustrates how characters continue to relive their past traumas through persistent flashbacks. This research reveals that the narrative structure of "Dimensions" functions not only as a storytelling tool, but also as a direct representation of the characters' own traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Alice Munro, Ellipsis, Focalization, Gérard Genette, Narrative Technique, Trauma

Introduction

Literature is often an effective medium for exploring complex human experiences, including trauma. Alice Munro's short story "Dimensions" tells the story of a woman named Doree who is struggling to deal with the trauma caused by her husband's murder of her three children. This short story, which is part of the short story collection "Too Much Happiness" (2009) and was selected in the 2007 edition of "Best American Short Stories", demonstrates Munro's skill in using unique narrative techniques to depict the complexity of trauma.

The fragmented narrative structure of "Dimensions" reflects the nature of trauma itself. The shifting point of view between first and third person, as well as the sudden jump in time between past and present, resemble the way traumatic memories often appear in the form of non-sequential flashbacks. This narrative style can be used as a representation of a character's traumatic experience in a literary work.

Cathy Caruth, in her article "Trauma: Explorations in Memory" (1995), asserts that the structure of trauma is characterized by interruptions in history or time. Furthermore, Caruth (1995) explains that traumatic events, which occur without being fully experienced and absorbed, can only be revisited through their persistent and intrusive occurrence. This means that traumatic events cannot be remembered or recounted in conventional ways. This opinion is reinforced by Herman (1997), who states that long after the danger has passed, traumatized individuals continue to relive the event as if it continues to occur in the present. In this context, "Dimensions" is an interesting example of how narrative techniques can be used to illustrate the complexity of trauma. Munro not only tells Doree's story, but also invites the reader to feel the disorientation and fragmentation experienced by the main character. Through a fragmented narrative structure, Munro manages to create a reading experience that resembles the process of remembering and reliving trauma, allowing readers to better understand and empathize with Doree's internal struggle.

The use of narrative techniques to depict trauma is not new to literature. Several previous studies have explored how writers use fragmented narratives to represent traumatic experiences. One of the relevant studies is Yang's (2023) research entitled "The Trauma and Fragmentation Narrative in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". Yang (2023) argues that the fragmented narrative technique reflects the nature of trauma, which tends to have fragmented patterns when we try to retell it. In the context of Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved", Yang states that "This multi-perspective narrative is better at recounting the bloody and violent lives of people under slavery" (p. 3). This observation suggests that the use of complex narrative techniques serves not only as a stylistic choice, but also as an effective tool to depict traumatic realities that are difficult to express through conventional linear narratives.

This research will explore how Munro uses fragmented narrative techniques to depict trauma in "Dimensions". By analyzing shifting points of view, time jumps, and other narrative elements, this research will look at how the structure of the story reflects the traumatic experiences of the characters. Specifically, this research will focus on the question: "How does Genette's narrative theory depict the protagonist's fragmented memories in Alice Munro's 'Dimension'?" Using Genette's narrative theory framework, this study aims to analyze in depth how the narrative techniques Munro uses to correlate with the representation of Doree's trauma and fragmented memories.

Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of a published fictional text using the perspective of narrative theory. The main data source of this research is the short story "Dimensions" by Alice Munro. This short story is contained in two publications: "Too Much Happiness" short story collection published in 2009 and "Best American Short Stories" edition in 2007.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved critical and in-depth reading and annotation of the short story "Dimensions". The steps for data collection were as follows: (1) Identifying and systematically coding the instances in which Munro uses narrative devices such as ellipsis, change of focalization, analepsis and others, (2) Analyzing these narrative techniques in relation to the representation of trauma, (3) Extracting direct quotations that exemplify the relationship between fragmented narrative and the depiction of trauma to strengthen the main argument of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will be conducted by integrating Genette's narrative theory with concepts from trauma studies. The steps of analysis include: (1) Categorizing the narrative techniques found based on concepts in Genette's theory, (2) Analyzing how the techniques contribute to the depiction of the character's fragmented memories, (3) Connecting the findings with theories on trauma, and (4) Interpreting the results of the analysis to answer the research question of how Genette's narrative theory depicts the character's fragmented memories in "Dimensions".

Results and Discussion

Fragmented Narrative in Alice Munro's Dimensions

Literary works often depict a realm of reality where events and behaviors of characters unfold, reflecting psychological and emotional experiences (Sabawaly & Momo, 2024). As Whitehead (2004) suggests, trauma narratives often employ fragmented structures, shifting temporalities, and ellipses to reflect the disjointed and repetitive nature of traumatic memory. In Alice Munro's short story Dimensions, the use of complex narrative techniques plays an important role in depicting Doree's fragmented memories and the trauma she experiences. An analysis of the text using Genette's (1980)

theory of narrative reveals several important aspects that contribute to this representation of trauma.

Ellipsis

One of the prominent narrative techniques in this short story is the use of ellipsis. Genette (1980) defines ellipsis as a situation where the narrative says nothing about a particular part of the story ($NT = 0$; $ST = n$). This is evident in the beginning of the story which describes Doree's first meeting with Lloyd:

(1)

"Lloyd was popular with the patients because of his jokes and his sure, strong touch. He was stocky and broad shouldered and authoritative enough to be sometimes taken for a doctor. (Not that he was pleased by that-he held the opinion that a lot of medicine was a fraud and a lot of doctors were jerks.) He had sensitive reddish skin and light hair and bold eyes.

He kissed Doree in the elevator and told her she was a flower in the desert. Then he laughed at himself and said, "How original can you get?" "You're a poet and don't know it," she said, to be kind."

In this section, the narrator omits the details of how Doree first interacts with Lloyd before their first kiss. This ellipsis is indicative of Doree's trauma as this is an early event before the man who traumatized her. As Caruth (1995) states, "Traumatic structures are characterized by interruptions in history or time." Munro's use of ellipsis reflects the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory, where parts of the experience may be erased or inaccessible. Similarly, Herman (1997) emphasizes that trauma narratives often depict missing details and avoid linear storytelling to mimic the disorientation trauma survivors feel.

(2)

"One night her mother died suddenly, of an embolism. Doree's mother had a lot of women friends who would have taken Doree in - she stayed with one of them for a time - but the new friend Lloyd was the one Doree preferred. By her next birthday she was pregnant, then married."

Furthermore, the closeness between Doree and Lloyd also has many ellipsis elements that appear. After Doree's mother died, we are told that Doree was accompanied by Lloyd. Then the story says that she got pregnant and then married. Here many elements are missing and written in a rushed manner.

(3)

Dimitri still in his crib, lying sideways. Barbara Ann on the floor beside her bed, as if she'd gotten out or been pulled out. Sasha by the kitchen door-he had tried to get away. He was the only one with bruises on his throat. The pillow had done it for the others.

This excerpt describes how her lifeless children were found. This supposedly emotional moment, instead of being narrated as such, is narrated very descriptively. Meanwhile, the emotional feeling when the children's bodies were found is not described at all or is ellipsed. This could indicate that when the moment occurred, the feelings generated were still unable to be processed due to the magnitude of the shock felt by the character.

(4)

So when Doree decided that she would go again, after all, she thought it was better not to mention it.

After Lloyd was admitted to a mental institution, Doree visited him several times. Although most of the time she canceled her meetings. But some of the encounters that could have also been central to the story are never shown. This could lead to some

assumptions that these events were not narrated because Doree did not want to be remembered.

(5)

Her daily work was not of the sitting-down kind. She was a chambermaid at the Blue Spruce Inn. She scrubbed bathrooms and stripped and made beds and vacuumed rugs and wiped mirrors. She liked the work-it occupied her thoughts to a certain extent and tired her out so that she could sleep at night.

There is an ellipsis here where Doree's post-traumatic emotional state is not told. All that is seen is her monotonous daily life. It describes how Doree, who is also the narrator, chooses not to talk about the emotional state she feels after the trauma.

Focalization and Shifting Point of View

Another significant narrative technique in "Dimensions" is the dynamic use of focalization. Genette (1980) distinguishes between external and internal focalization, and Munro uses both and plays with their displacement to depict traumatic events that cannot be predicted in response. This technique aligns with Kaplan's (2005) argument that trauma narratives frequently shift perspectives, blurring the boundaries between external observation and internal experience. Mayberry (1994) further notes that Munro's narrative strategies often reflect her characters' perceptions of their positions within relationships, influencing the success or failure of their personal liberation.

(1)

"What he had said, afterwards, to the police-and it was quoted in the newspapers-was "I did it to save them the misery." What misery? "The misery of knowing that their mother had walked out on them," he said."

(2)

"I didn't say "forgive," she said to Mrs. Sands in her head. I would never say that. I would never do it. But think. Aren't I just as cut off by what happened as he is? Nobody who knew about it would want me around. All I can do is remind people of what nobody can stand to be reminded of."

In these two excerpts, there is a shift in focalization from external to internal. The narrative shifts from third person to first person point of view, revealing that the narrator is actually Doree herself. This shift reflects the fragmented nature of Doree's post-traumatic identity. She seems to see herself from the outside (external focalization) and then suddenly returns to her own mind (internal focalization).

In the first excerpt, a question suddenly arises that is expressed from the first point of view, here Doree enters as the narrator is a form of her strong emotions over Lloyd's answer at that time. Then, for the second quote, Doree again enters as the narrator. There she reveals that she will never be able to forgive Lloyd.

The use of this shifting focalization also illustrates Doree's inability to fully integrate her traumatic experience. As described by Herman (1997), traumatized individuals often continue to relive the traumatic event as if it continues to occur in the present.

Analepsis

Doree's back-and-forth narration between past and present can also be seen as a form of analepsis that illustrates the past trauma that is still remembered today. According to Genette (1980), analepsis refers to flashbacks that disrupt chronological order.

(1) She had not said any of this to Mrs. Sands. Mrs. Sands might have asked-tactfully-who was she afraid of. Herself or him? But she wasn't afraid. When Sasha was one and a half, Barbara Ann was born, and, when Barbara Ann was two, they had Dimitri. They had named Sasha together, and they made a pact after that that he would name the boys and she would name the girls.

The following are examples of analepsis or flashbacks that occur. When the narrative of the story runs in the present, Doree often experiences flashbacks about her children who will eventually be killed by Lloyd. This is a form of trauma response from Doree because she still remembers her past when everything seemed fine. Munro's use

of this technique mirrors what Eakin (1999) describes as the "persistence of trauma in memory," where survivors involuntarily relive distressing experiences. Duncan (2011) observes that Munro's narratives often employ complex, densely layered structures that unsettle readers, effectively conveying the protagonist's fragmented experience of time and memory.

(2)

Dimitri still in his crib, lying sideways. Barbara Ann on the floor beside her bed, as if she'd gotten out or been pulled out. Sasha by the kitchen door-he had tried to get away. He was the only one with bruises on his throat. The pillow had done it for the others. The verdict was that he was insane, he couldn't be tried. He was criminally insane-he had to be put in a secure institution. Doree had run out of the house and was stumbling around the yard, holding her arms tight across her stomach as if she had been sliced open and was trying to keep herself together.

Here, Doree experiences another flashback related to the moment of her son's death. In the middle of the flashback, the narrative moves forward for a moment. Where after the narration tells how her children were killed, it is written that it turns out that Lloyd cannot be tried because he is charged with insanity so he needs to be admitted to a mental institution. The result of this indictment is future knowledge that the narrator mixes up in this past flashback. This shows one form of fragmented narrative as a form of depicting the character's trauma.

(3)

"She could not think of their names, and if she heard a name that sounded like one of theirs she had to pull that out too. Even children's voices, their shrieks and slapping feet as they ran to and from the motel swimming pool, had to be banished..."

In this quote, we can see the analepsis or flashback that happens to Doree every time she hears the children's footsteps or when she hears a name similar to her son's name. This shows the form of trauma experienced by the character Doree because the traumatic experience keeps coming back in her daily life in the present.

(4) "Maggie's hair was pepper-and-salt cropped close to her head. She was tall flat-chested cheerful and opinionated. Lloyd called her the Lezzie. Only behind her back of course"

Here, Doree experiences another flashback to her memories of her best friend when her relationship in her small family was still fine. In this story, most of the flashbacks that are chosen to be told are positive flashbacks. It is as if Doree, who also plays a major role in organizing the narrative of the story, chooses not to remember painful experiences, related to how she was hurt by Lloyd who eventually killed her children.

Conclusion

Alice Munro portrays the fragmented memories in Doree's traumatic experience in "Dimensions" with the use of narrative techniques such as ellipsis, focalization, and analepsis. The ellipsis reflects the inability to access or integrate certain parts of the traumatic experience. An example of ellipsis is when Doree and Lloyd's relationship develops hastily after the death of her mother and it is not explained how they became close. Then there is focalization or a shift in point of view that illustrates the dissociation and fragmentation of identity experienced by Doree. An example of this focalization is when there is a police report narrative in the third person that suddenly changes to Doree's internal thoughts about Lloyd in the first person. The last one is analepsis which reflects the character who still remembers the traumatic events that occurred or flashbacks. An example of analepsis found in the narrative is when Doree remembers the death of her children. The short story "Dimensions" written by Munro well describes the character's trauma experience through the narrative structure of the story. This shows

that narratological analysis can be used to dissect the representation of traumatic experiences in literary works.

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