

Narrative Retaliation and Reminiscence Analysed through the Lens of Gerard Genette's Narrative Discourse in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*

Ms. Deepthi Rajamanikkam¹, Dr. R. Nivedhita²

¹JRF, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

²Assistant Professor, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

Abstract

This paper analyses the narrative and temporal distortions present in Elena Ferrante's seminal novel, *My Brilliant Friend*. Set amidst the backdrop of post-war 1950s Naples, the novel is a female bildungsroman based on the obsessive and tumultuous friendship and relationship that both central protagonists, Lila and Elena, experience from childhood, through the formative years of their adolescence till adulthood. Recounted from the perspective of Lenu, the novel offers a glimpse into both their lives and displays the inner turmoil and external challenges that both the girls face growing up amidst the violent, and socio-political upheavals of that era. This paper employs Gerard Genette's framework of Narrative Discourse as a critical theoretical gap by examining the novel through the three main categories of Order, Duration and Frequency. These narrative strategies such as order disrupt childhood memories to maintain control over narration, duration summarises individual memories that are compressed to short instances for Elena, and time expands when Elena is with Lila. While violent descriptions of the narrative background are employed as reiterative frequencies. Ferrante uses these structural distortions to present a biased retelling of a childhood not just to collect neutral and nostalgic memories, but as a narrative strategy for Elena to capture the mysterious Lila through her words and to gain control over the narrative of their lives and of her recollection.

Keywords: Narrative Time, Elena Ferrante, Temporality, Narrative Discourse

Introduction

The expository scene in *My Brilliant Friend* begins with a phone call, Elena - the narrator, receives from Rino, who informs her about his mother's disappearance. Lila, the central protagonist, with whom Elena has had an intense friendship, has disappeared without a trace. She was "expanding the concept of trace out of all proportion. She wanted not only to disappear herself, now, at the age of sixty-six, but also to eliminate the entire life that she had left behind" (Ferrante 23).

Writing in the 2000s, Elena Greco begins her narrative, recounting the complicated, complex, and intensely tumultuous friendship she had with her childhood friend Lila, in 1950s post-war Naples, Italy. Elena recounts her childhood with Lila Cerullo not because she fondly

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remembers it but as an act of psychological possession and control as Lila is actively trying to erase every instance of physical existence and disappear from their lives. Elena's narrative and narration thus becomes a means of linguistic warfare and reclamation against Lila's disappearance. Time and its preservation become motivating premises for Elena to start writing. Elena's narrative is neither a neutral nor a passive memoir, but is an unstable, temporal battleground where her intentions are to capture and contain their lives into a temporal, linear, narrative order. But her records are saturated with biases and omissions that reflect a deeper story. One of intense, subtle rivalries, obsessions and detachments and distances and faithful attachments.

Gerard Genette's influential work on Narrative Discourse, provides a framework to examine the textual friction and resulting psychological and temporal consequences this novel generates. Genette puts forth the idea that a text is defined by the tension between *histoire* (the actual chronological events of the text) and *recit* (the narrative timeline designed by the author). *Histoire* and *recit* are also known as story time and narrative or discourse time respectively. Elena's narrative structuring of her childhood is fractured. It loops backwards, abruptly fast forwards or is stagnant. Genette's narrative categories of Order, Duration, and Frequency are employed to analyse these temporal distortions.

While most existing scholarship focuses on the psychologically synergetic friendship between Elena and Lila, this paper attempts to inspect how Elena's manipulation of time through narration expose her ongoing insecurities and anxious attachment to Lila. Her temporal distortions of their childhood, with persistent prolepses, unpredictable changes in narrative duration and the repeated frequencies of their violent childhood, are attempts to contain and control the narrative of their lives and that of Lila.

Literature Review

Academic scholarship has mostly revolved around the deeply passionate, chaotic and turbulent relationship between the two girls analysed through a psychoanalytic lens. A commonly researched aspect is the concept of "dissolving margins" or *smarginatura*, a feeling that Lila experiences occasionally throughout the novel. Experts refer to this as blurring the boundaries of presence where the psychological aspects of the self bleed into the physical world. Other scholarship centres on the both characters constructed in opposition to each other. They both function as broken halves of a shared consciousness and constantly navigate and negotiate a psychological state of mind.

On the other hand, other criticisms of the novel include a socio-political analysis of post-war Italy and the systematic violence and gendered discrimination alongside class wars based on financial, cultural and linguistic dichotomies that erupted in that era. Elena's education is a ticket to a better lifestyle and upward mobility; she is still tormented by the linguistic and social background of her life while Lila never leaves the limits of Naples spending her life there.

This research paper addresses the theoretical gap of the narrative apparatus through which Elena examines her past through the diction and memory of her adult self. By applying Gerard Genette's structural narratology and his categories of order, duration and frequency, narrative discrepancies can be measured and scrutinised. Rather than being analysed as a linear

recollection of a shared childhood, the narrative itself becomes a tool for settling scores, revealing anxious dependencies, unspoken rivalries and deep-seated obsession which colour and distort the narrative revealing the psychological states of the characters. Genette's theory also helps establish that Elena's narration is not neutral but is biased and authoritative. A tool that she employs to control and capture her life and Lila's into the limits of the text.

Order: Prolepsis as a Tool of Control

“Order is the relation between the sequencing of events in the story and their arrangement in the narrative” (Guillemette). Genette presents Order as a distinction between discourse and story. Seymour Chatman in his paper, *Genette's Analysis of Narrative Time Relations* describes further distinctions within Order:

distinguish between a normal sequence, where story and discourse have the same order (A1B2C3D4, where story-order is indicated by numbers and discourse-order by letters), and anachronous sequences (to use Genette's term). An anachrony can be of two sorts: flashback (analepse), where the discourse breaks the story-flow to recall events earlier than what precedes the break (A2B1C3D4), and flash forward (prolepse) where the discourse leaps ahead, taking up events that are subsequent to intermediate events.

The novel's expository scene functions as the starting of Elena's narrative analepse sparked by a phone call from Rino which ventures into a psychological battle of domination: “We'll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write- all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory” (Ferrante 23).

Elena's act of narration acts as an act of retaliatory resistance against Lila's smarginatura or “dissolved margins”. Lila wants to disappear from physical existence, and Elena's trip down memory lane acts as an act of preserving her memory in the present as she recounts in the novel, “the sensation of moving for a few fractions of a second into a person or a thing or a number or a syllable, violating its edges” (Ferrante 91). As both women are in their sixties, the reliability of their memory is questionable. Elena's constructing a picture of their childhood selves in the violent, tempestuous neighbourhood of Naples through her adult lens.

Duration: Anisochronies and the Elasticity of Memory

Chatman's definition of Duration is: “another relation between discourse-time and story-time, namely that between the time that it takes to perceive (read, hear, see) the narrative and the time the events depicted in the story took to occur. Duration consists of four types. They are Summary, Ellipsis, Scene and Pause which are termed as Anisochronies. Of these, Summary refers to when the “discourse-time is shorter than the story time” and Scene denotes how the “discourse-time and story-time are equal”.

Elena's depiction of her own life, especially of her formative years in schools are compressed into paragraphs indicating Genette's idea of Summary while those with Lila take up pages or chapters such as Lila's marriage with Stefano Carraci, indicating important moments in both their lives and become Genette's conception of Scenes. Time moves at a rapid speed when Elena narrates moments from her own life but lengthens when Lila is involved.

Describing her academic progress and development through middle school and high school and Lila drops out of school to work at her father's shoe shop, Elena condenses years of rigorous academic work and activities into a summary of paragraphs. This builds a sense of background stillness and demonstrates how daily routines become normalised. On the other hand, scenes like Lila throwing Elena's doll into the dark cellar of Don Achille, are given macroscopic focus, presenting a pivotal moment that will shift the course of their lives.

A vivid description of Lila's marriage or a heavy betrayal sequence within it when she is seen as a member of the Solara family. These scenes are dragged and then she is immediately transported to a summary of Naples and its daily life. This forces a haunting and unreliable narration of the past.

Frequency: The Iterations of Violence

Genette's employment of Frequency is mostly used to describe violent moments of their childhood, particularly the setting of Naples and the neighbourhood she lived in. Elena begins a chapter in her novel with a striking statement: "I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence" (Ferrante 37). She repeats this sentiment and moments of such violence across the rest of the novel. "His violent moments as a father are small things compared with the widespread violence of the neighbourhood" (83). These constant iterations of violence are a stark portrait of the world the two girls inhabited and how they have been normalised and desensitised to these human eruptions of violence.

This premise of Frequency is juxtaposed with Genette's idea of Singularity where moments or episodes that involve Lila are only narrated once such as Lila's throwing of the doll into Don Achille's cellar, Lila's glamorous and ostentatious wedding with Stefano Caracci.

By ensuring the repeated mentions of the violence of the neighbourhood, the narrator highlights how Lila is an idiosyncratic force who disrupts the normalcy of their neighbourhood and the lives of the community. Elena does not give these violent moments their own individual episodes of narration in the novel. Instead, they are treated as events of normalcy using iterative frequency: "In the neighbourhood terrible things could happen, father and sons often came to blows" (221). This violence is routinely emphasized through grammar to signal how these moments were too many to count and isolate.

This is contrasted vividly with a singular focus on Lila. When Lila threatens Michael Solara, she is framed as a uniquely disruptive force and the narrator becomes enthralled with her even though their lives are saturated with routine violence.

Summation

"Narrative, by its very structure, grapples with temporality: the ordering of events, the relation between past and present, and the possibility of projecting into futures imagined or feared" (Haralambous).

The narrator did not begin her narration with a neutral tone. Her intentions were forthright, "We'll see who wins this time", suggesting a desire to take back power over both their lives, though her reconstructive flashbacks demonstrate her insecure connections with Lila that have

persisted till adulthood. Though her writing appears to suggest a tender and nostalgic reminiscences they reveal intense rivalries the two shared whether over Latin or Greek lessons or on the narrator's eventual freedom from Naples.

Genette's narrative strategies of order, duration and frequency are applied to understand how Elena's narration is in fact a means to capture the elusive Lila on paper even if the latter is determined to wipe out every trace of her existence and disappear altogether. But it is a doomed effort as even though she wants to tame Lila with her words, her narrative omissions and compact chronicles, Lila seems to get the better of her since she also traps herself within the confines of her narration alongside Lila.

Further scope of research could focus on the idea of "dissolving margins" in a linguistic analysis or as textual entrapment, or how the narrator's act of narration creates a sense of erasure of the self. These possible avenues of research offer further investigations into the vast arena of research.

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