

Unfolding multi-dimensional time in the narrative web

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This paper proposes an interpretation of narrative as a complex web of interrelated elements, of which “field”, “time” and “memory” are essential. Our framework revolves around the exploration of two types of discourse – the scientific and the artistic – that unfold the web of temporal relations within the narrative structure, by means of a variety of figurative connections.

Time is generally perceived as the most characteristic mode of our experience, because it applies to the inner world of impressions, emotions and ideas for which no spatial order is given. Bishop (2000:4) brings to our attention the metaphor of the “field model” coined by Hayles (1987:15), which sums up “the complexities of the physical world in a linguistically accessible way”. In rejecting the classical metaphor of our world as a mechanical system formed of detachable discrete entities, this new scientific model, whose elements are seen as an interactive whole, including the observer, has implications in other areas, such as the structuralist study of narrative and language itself. Thus, narrative is a field in that it represents an interconnected system of events that are multi-directional in terms of cause and effect, whereas language represents a field because it is a system of signs that function as an interactive whole and gain meaning from their differential relationships.

Our choice of the field model that Margaret Atwood adopts in the novel *Cat's Eye* in order to illustrate the way in which temporal relations form a semiotic web in literary discourse is motivated by the fact that this model focuses exactly upon the idea of interconnection. This interconnection is perceived in terms of how past events in the life of a female individual are reflected in the novel's episodic structure. Atwood's narrative is based on the artistic model exemplified by the protagonist, Elaine Risley, and the physical model provided by her brother Stephen, in a movement back and forth between fragmented events. The incipit of the text includes explicit references to scientific theory, particularly to the treatment of time as a dimension: “Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space, you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once.” (Atwood 1990:3)

This fragmented presentation of events is counterbalanced by the unifying elements of the text that operate in a complex web of associations, revealing the relationship between an individual and the experiences of her past. Endowed with a vivid imagination, Elaine perceives time as “having a shape, something you can see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of the other” (Atwood 1990:3), and later on, re-presents time through her paintings.

Therefore, besides the investigation of the scientific language that uses a denotatively accessible form, we shall insist upon the literary language that unfolds the connotative aspects of language. Due to the fact that the paintings that are described in the novel are “verbal objects created through the linguistic description of imaginary paintings” (Bishop, 2000:38), we shall finally view them as a result of the interconnection with the system of the narrative.

References

- Atwood, Margaret (1989/1990): *Cat's Eye*, Virago Press Ltd., London.
 Hayles, Katherine (1984): *The Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.
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