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Theory and Text: Frames of narrative techniques employed in

Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex*

Abstract

Jeffrey Kent Eugenides, the American born novelist, short story writer and essayist who has won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2003 emerged as a post modern icon among the contemporary writers. His most discussed work, *Middlesex*(2006) unfolds the family saga of Cal Stephanides, who is born as intersex and the work occupies a significant position in the literary canon of intersex literature. The book mirrors the conflicts and problems faced by the protagonist Cal during his puberty and finally his exile to San Francisco. Through this paper I extend a deep reading of *Middlesex* with special reference to the narratological devices introduced by recent narratologists Gerald Prince, Gerald Genette and Monica Fludernik. This study tries to frame the structural elements of the novel under the principles *voice, tense and mode* introduced by Genette. It also examines the role and functions of the narrator, voice and naratee in the novel in a narratological perspective. The paper aims to find out the relevance of the handling and treatment of time sequences and the peculiar chronological order of the novel. Here, I also focus on the method of narration adopted and its significance with the thematical and narratological aspect

Introduction

The narrative patterns of *Middlesex* conceive a significant function, both thematically and theoretically, in shaping the novel as a quest for identity and Cal Stephanides' mutated gene. Eugenides deliberately put Cal as Omniscient and first person to narrate the events in his life. Also his handling of time and narrative method offers a post modern frame work to the novel. The role and functions of a narrator and how far he could recite the narrative in theoretical terms and devices holds the first and foremost component in a narratological study. It also discusses the treatment time in which the events are presented and the observation of narrator

on the episodes of the story. *Middlesex*, being a post modern epic fiction employed complicated narrative patterns in the use of terms and style. These narrative patterns cannot be framed into a single form or style but a combination of many. The narrator, time, focalization and other devices employed in the novel have decisive functions and roles in a narratological framework.

Narrated by Cal Stephanides, – the bearer of a mutated gene – narrates the story of Stephanides family's immigration to America and their assimilation with the new land. Book One chronicles the life of Lefty Stephanides and Desdemona Stephanides in 1922 whose parents are victims of the ongoing Greco Turkish war. Lefty and Desdemona are siblings who make their living through cocoon business and later they marry and flee to America following the great Fire in Smyrna. . Book two tells how they adjust with their Greek traits in the American soil. Book Three recounts childhood and growth of Calliope as a girl which goes in parallel with the emerging tension build between the races in Detroit. Book four turns to be a beatnik story where we see Calliope as Cal Stephanides, who receives a male identity as Cal Stephanides and wander over there.

The Polemics in narration

The narrator is the first and foremost important figure in a text who either makes his appearance visible to the readers or sometimes not. It is through the perspective of the narrator that the readers see the events that moves the story forward. The role of narrator has constantly been an area of study and thought in narratological discipline. To a certain extent, it is the narrator who decides the suitable theoretical framework to a particular literary text. Furthermore there are certain roles and functions to a narrator. The narrator's importance and functions are theoretically discussed by Monica Fludernik as:

A narrator has a narrative function: it is s/he, technically speaking, who presents the fictional world. Secondly, the narrator comments or expounds/he explains why events occur, ascribes them to political or social circumstances and conditions, indicates what it is that motivates the character and so on....It is important that such comments and explanations refer to the story world□Thirdly, the narrator often functions as a kind of philosopher or moralist who articulates universally valid propositions, especially in the case of sentences in the so-called gnomic present. (Fludernik.27)

The first person narrative situation is determined upon the fact that one of the characters in the story also functions as the narrator. In this respect often it stimulates autobiography but in fiction, most first person narratives are pseudo-autobiographies. An interesting aspect of the

fictional first person narrative is that the focus can be either on the so-called narrating self or the experiencing self. For instance, when the events and actions are reported from the perspective of a now older and experienced narrator, his narrating often indulges in retrospection, evaluation and concentrate on the actions as it takes place. Here the focus is on the narrator as protagonist, the experiencing self which enables him to move on equilibrium of evaluation and experience. In the twentieth century, however, first-person narratives increasingly concentrated on the experiencing self which are entirely located in the experience of the protagonists with an emphasis is on the protagonist's consciousness.

The *authorial narrative situation* refers to that narration in which the narrator no longer belongs to the events told. Here he assumes the role of a historian or a chronicler and float above the things and looks down knowing everything. He is removed from the situation depicted and reports on a world which he doesn't live (possibly the naratee too) or belongs to. It has a privilege to look into the minds of characters. Also this distance provides narrator to give hints on the future or on some underlying facts.

Eugenides set the novel in two or sometimes three voices. The epic events relating the life of his grandparents and parents are narrated in the third person ominous narration. Hence, sometimes Cal is in *authorial narrative situation*. Here he easily moves into the minds of Desdemona, Milton and Tessie and takes all freedom to observe their life as a knowledgeable person, and then present before the readers. 'Desdemona picked the beads up. She began to slip them one by one through her fingers exactly as her father has done... Each bead slipping through her fingers was another resentment recorded and released' (29). He can say why Lefty couldn't marry some other girls or the suppressed feelings of Desdemona over Lefty, the mind of Milton at the time he joined Navy, the fears of Desdemona over the incestuous relation and so on. Obviously, it is this narration which gives a clear framework on the reason behind his quest for identity. Soon, when Cal is born, he begins to narrate events in first person narrative voice with a limited perspective over things. It is interesting that he has structured the events in such a way that it goes on with the comprehension and experience of little Calliope Stephanides, a girl. As she grew older, the narration also develops with the perceiving of things around her. The Detroit riots, the activities in Milton's Zebra Room, her relationship with elder brother Chapter Eleven are presented in such a way that it develop from little Calliope as the narration progresses. Finally it switches to Cal Stephanides, the male identity of Calliope and soon the outlook and attitude of narrator shifts from the frustrated mind of Calliope to a stable minded Cal.

There is a technique in which the alternating first and third person voices are used. Sometimes the narrative switches to third person or to first person. Eugenides would have employed this recent technique deliberately for several reasons. First, it could give a detailed social and psychological view on the situations of characters. For instance, it helped to demonstrate the reason behind the incestuous relationship in two generations, the very central plot of the novel. The conflicts and pressure for Calliope's exile is also accounted in her own detailed version. Secondly, the novel is set in epic conventions where the story starts in the middle of things-*medias res*-in four books. So a conventional way of attaching to one technique is insufficient to present the events without losing its realistic form. Thirdly, narratologically speaking, this feature, an advent of post modernism and Eugenides' experiment with the theme of an intersex person in a fictional world with constant references to myth, history and genetics side by side is quite challenging and it is practically impossible for an omniscient narrator or a first person narrator to go on with the story alone. In this mode, the reflector figure is not given much consideration in those texts where the reflector figure is not being interfered while narrating the story.

Cal assumes the role of an *overt* narrator/dramatized/intrusive narrator who articulates his views and making his presence felt stylistically or on meta-narrative level. An *overt* narrator is the narrator who participates and experience in the events which are being told. Here the protagonist and the narrator are the same person. The 'I' in the novel stands for Cal who can clearly be seen telling the story. A homodiegetic narrator tells his own story with a limited perspective of his own while a heterodiegetic narrator stands for an omniscient narrative persona. Cal narrates his own life events in first person voice and the life of his preceding generations in third person omniscient voice. So he is an overt *homodiegetic* narrator since Cal is narrating his own story but sometimes he moves to heterodiegetic when he narrates the events of Desdemona and Lefty and about his parents

The naratee is the intrafictional addressee or listener of the narrator while he tells the story. He may be a participant in the events which are recounted or may be not. It may even refer to the reader itself if the narrator addresses reader directly. From the very beginning of *Middlesex*, Cal is preparing to unfold his family saga. At times, he directly addresses the readers:

Patient reader, you may have been wondering what happened to my grandmother. You may have noticed that, shortly after she climbed into bed forever, Desdemona began to fade away. But that was intentional. I allowed Desdemona to slip out of my narration because, to be

honest, in the dramatic years of my transformation, she slipped out of my attention most of the time. (521)

He misleads them (readers) and sometimes apologize, “Sorry if I get a little Homeric at times. That’s genetic too” (4). The presence of naratees is often referred as reflector figures in some narratological studies. Naratee also plays several important roles and sometimes even functions as narrator or at other times, the narratee – character of a given account may be at the same time its narrator. In such cases, the narrator addresses the account to no one else than himself. Euginides make use of his reflective figure not only assuming to the readers only but to himself at times. He makes use of invocations as a part of the epic convention. Before starting to narrate his own story, Cal invokes muses to sing on the episodes in his life.

Sing now, O Muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome! Sing how it bloomed two and a half centuries ago on the slopes of Mount Olympus, while the goats bleated and olives dropped, Sing how it passed down through nine generations, gathering invisibly within the polluted pool of Stephanides family. And sing how... (4)

And in the later books also his invocation to muses in order to provide a better output of his oration is used. It can also be seen in a way that, bymuse, he is referring to himself since Calliope is the name of a Greek muse.

While narrating, the narrator used to adopt certain point of view or narrative perspective both psychological and perceptual in order to give a clear account of events. And thus we may describe a given character from outside, as an impartial onlooker would; or we may describe the very same character as he himself would; or we may describe him not only from the outside but also from the inside, as an omniscient being would. Traditional narratologists’ concept of point of view was later restructured by Gerald Genette and Mieke Bal and they introduced the narratological term, focalization. In his *Narrative Discourse*, Gerald Genette discusses on the focalization which means viewpoint or perspective, that is to say the point of view from which the story is being told:

The first term [zero focalization] corresponds to what English-language criticism calls narrative with omniscient narrator and Pouillon ‘vision from behind,’ and which Todorov symbolizes by the formula *Narrator > Character* (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly, *says* more than any of the characters knows). (Genette 188–89)

Eugenides made use of *zero focalization*, a way of presenting the inner feelings, thoughts and emotions of different characters to account their social and psychological aspects. It occurs

“when no systematic conceptual or perceptual constraint governs what may be presented” (Prince 1987). From the different voices of narration Euginides gives an account of the thoughts and inner feelings of the characters. Hence in *Middlesex*, different characters are being focalized at the same time. He could present the unspoken words of Desdemona and Lefty at the same time or Calliope and Cal.

There is at least one narrator in a narrative that may or may not be explicitly designated as ‘I’. In some narratives, where he is not, the ‘I’ may have been deleted without leaving any traces in the narration or the narrative. And in some other cases numerous signs which represent the narrator and signifies his presence in the narrative is evident. *Middlesex* obviously falls under this second category where we feel the presence of Cal Stephanides as the narrator who is enthusiastically and artistically tells his life and family to the naratee. In this novel, the signs of ‘I’ functions more directly and represent the narrator and his spacio-temporal situation. The ‘I’ in *Middlesex* can clearly be located since the narration represents Cal’s persona in complete detailed, his attitude on several episodes and instances towards his life, his knowledge on worlds before his birth and those of the narrated, and his interpretation of the events happened in the family. More than a mere reporter of events, Cal as an ‘I’ figure functions as an indispensable part in the narratology of *Middlesex*. The intrusion and addressing of narrator sustains a direct relation with the readers/naratee and also it when theoretically speaking, it adds as a narratological device in the novel. In a natural narrative two basic levels can be distinguished-the level of communication between speaker and the listener and the level of story itself.

It is important to analyze the reliability of a narrator when we consider his roles and functions in narrating a story. He may be more or less reliable; (parts of) his account may be more or less worthy of trust in terms of the narrative itself. A reliable narrator is not necessarily one that I-as a reader- always agree with. Or after all, however honest and trustworthy he may be portrayed as, this ‘I’ may find his values, findings, interpretations or conclusions as stupid. Sometimes the naratee (readers, in most cases) may not always go with the narrator or believe the words of a narrator. Conversely, ‘I’ may find the attitudes and comments of an unreliable narrator very attractive indeed. Cal most frequently refers to his omniscience, which he boastfully equates with certain supernatural knowledge in some instances as: “These scenes ran through my mother’s mind during the interminable Sunday service” (13). Being an authorial narrator at some times, this extraordinary capacity allows the narrator to observe, find and report on many events and on the access on thoughts of many characters. At the

same time, however, he often recognizes a certain limitation of his omniscience in direct addresses to the naratee. Some meta fictional asides are also common in *Middlesex* as: “Of course, a narrator in my position (prefetal at the time) can’t be entirely sure about any of this” (9). Being like Tiresias, he is entitled not only to recount the events in early life of family but also to the use of the grandeur of the mythological figure: “I alone, from the private box of my primordial egg, saw what was going on” (206). This strange combination of ominous comments, literary parody and eventual uncertainty on some of the facts the narrator reports, may gradually makes readers to think on his reliability. And most often, the readers conclude it as his playful unreliability.

Furthermore, the author also uses this playful unreliable condition of the narrator to develop his political critique. On several occasions, Cal states that he is a non-political person. But it confuses the naratee when he reports certain incidents that what he actually meant on “political”. Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, in his study, *Of Self and Country: U.S Politics, Cultural Hybridity, and Ambivalent Identity in Jeffrey Eugenides’s Middlesex* mentions on the reliability of Cal based on his narration of political incidents:

However, playfulness is then left aside and the reports the narrator makes on historical events together with her/his personal opinions on such matters become not simply political but historically revisionist of the Anglo-Saxon ideological narrative that the colonists imposed on the different minorities existing or immigrating to the United States. (Collado Rodriguez 2006).

Cal’s use of the term political is entirely misleading when we realize the nature of the protagonist’s ideological opinions and the selection of the historical events he decides to narrate about.

When a communicative level narrative is framed, it consists of a characterization of the story at the beginning, *the abstract*, and then followed by an explanatory introduction which contains the necessary background information-*orientation*-and the other end provides an overall assessment of the story. These frame elements acts as the switch points that enable both the narrator and the naratee to move from communicative situation to the story proper and back again. At the beginning of *Middlesex*, we see the protagonist as a forty one year old Cal Stephanides and he narrates his own story in the background which gives knowledge on his birth and conflicts on gender. This communicative level is also active during storytelling whenever the narrator addresses explanatory remarks – delayed orientation-or comment to his audience.

Moving to the level of story world, the structuring of the narrative in time is an important factor in the narration of a story. It is often discussed under the headings of narrative *tempo* or *pace*. The sequences of events which feature in the story have to be compared with the order in which these events are represented, in the narrative discourse. Or there happens a discrepancy between the story time and the discourse time. It should be noted that how the reading or viewing time compares with the actual duration of the events described from the relation between discourse time and story time. It is rare for the discourse time to be identical and goes with the story time (*isochronic*). *Middlesex* strongly violates this isochronic story line pattern. The novel starts with a most dramatic and most strange introduction of Cal Stephanides, who reveals the plurality in his gender and the reason behind that, as if he is going to unfold more things behind:

I was born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenager boy, in an emergency room near Peetoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974...My birth certificate lists my name as Calliope Helen Stephanides...My most recent driving license records my first name simply as Cal.(3)

Thus we see Cal in for the first time when he introduces himself to us in 2002 as an adult man of forty one years. Then he suddenly appears in his mother's womb when Desdemona makes her prediction of the gender of the baby inside Tessie with her silver spoon magic. It was in October 1959. Soon we are placed in Greece in 1922 at the time when Greco-Turkish war was at the peak. It depicts the life of Lefty and Desdemona with their cocoon business, the great fire of Smyrna and then their union and exile to America. It is in Book Three that Cal born as Callie that is 1960. Every Chapter of the novel begins with the episode of Cal's life with Julia Kikuchi and soon it shifts to continue the narration where he has stopped in the preceding chapter and hence we see Cal in 2002 in all chapters. So we meet the forty one aged protagonists at first and when the novel ends we see a sixteen year old young boy and his life and the events before and after his life are narrated in between this. But what is interesting is that he consciously reminds on his present life bit by bit in all chapters.

Even though it is easy to determine the chronological relation between the narration and the narrated, it often seems rather difficult to determine precisely how long before or after the narrated and the narration occurs. In some narratives the accurate account of date of the narration is given but not the narrated. In another cases like *Middlesex*, both the narration and narrated time are shown. Then the distance between the two can be found out. This temporal distance between the narration and the narrated may vary. This deliberate presence and

absence of temporal distance may function as a device characterizing the narrator or contribute any other thematically significant purposes. The narration may become farther and farther removed in time from the narrated. Sometimes the narration may be quite distant from the narrated in time, then drew nearer to it and then away from it, again and so on. These variations in temporal distance between the narrated and the narration can very much influence the tone of narrative and its development. Similarly, the perspective of a narrator recounting the same events in three or four different temporal occasions may change and this change may modify his narration.

The pace and flow of narration brings the different and distinct faces (and gender too) of the protagonist in a quite complicated but interesting way. This fashion of telling stories have paid particular attention to many narratologists and Genette refers the handling of time in this non-chronological way as *anachrony* that signifies deviations from chronological order of events happening. Many significant narratological theorists, including Genette and Chatman, identify different and distinct possible patterns which help us to move into the structure of a narration. The most common of this technique is *analepsis*, also called *flashback*, in which prior happenings are recounted. But what Eugenides adapted is not merely a flashback of the events happened or a passive narration on his problematical life, but he deliberately presented the narrator in different stages and forms to recite his life for a more faithful and reliable narration. He himself appears as a forty one aged man in every chapter with his Julia Kikuchi sometimes he is omniscient to us, sometimes his voice is heard from the back stage, and other times he is in front of us to narrate the whole story.

Although Eugenides explored this *anachrony* in *Middlesex* to depict the saga in an epic convention, it also enabled him to move and comment on the events freely and directly. Just like his mingling of *authorial narrative situation* and *First person narrative situation* for a detailed unfolding of events, in story world also, he employed this dual structure in his narration. Eugenides gives a semi-*flashback*, not completely, but presents the current affairs in his life in between those without any feeling of intrusion. So the novel is a blend of semi-*analepsis*, and *anisochronous* narrative strategy. These narrative techniques also symbolize the dual structure of the gender of his protagonist. Cal is both male and female, Greek and American and the narration also do not belong to one category itself. It is both authorial and first person, both *analepsis* and *anisochronous*.

When time is handled in anachronically and the discourse time, as opposed to story time, is speeded up, then the form of narration can be identified as *summary*. In such cases, it often

starts with the events of protagonist's life after the climax and then describes his life and childhood in the following chapters. It has discussed in detailed by Gerald Prince:

In other words, when we speak of ellipsis, or summary, or stretch in narrative, we may actually be referring not so much to an exact relationship between narrative length and narrated time but rather to the relationship between the former and what we know or feel it could or should be.(Prince 57)

The chapter division for every novel marks a change of scene or shift of focus to other characters so that the reader could go and adjust with a different strand of the plot and to make their comprehension easier. Eugenides creatively made his divisions on chapters in a metafictional and more ironical way. For instance, the chapter when Cal feels a sort of attraction to the Obscure Object is titled as 'Tiresias in Love'. The Latin 'Ex Ovo Omnia' (everything comes from an egg) is another chapter, in which Tessie conceives Cal, at the end of the chapter. Eugenides says everything without any exception, comes from an egg which he gives a hint on the arrival of protagonist in a more poetic way. It is from this very egg that one acquires certain traits and functions of one's family. Eugenides adapted another narratological tool foreshadowing in this title to give a hint on what Cal is coming to say. The title seems to have deliberately put the full stop before it starts to say anything. "Everything comes out of an egg." (198). It permits the narrator to expound at length on generic, aesthetic and metanarrative matters.

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