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“The Tale”

A Self-conscious Fictional Artifice*

This paper presents a narratological reading of Joseph Conrad’s last short story, “The Tale.” Its aims are twofold. First, relying on Gérard Genette’s narrative theory, it argues that “The Tale” is a text that thematises its own fictionality. Secondly, the present study is understood as a critical test of Genette’s system, a test that should highlight some of its fortes and deficiencies. In accordance with the method used here, the analysis focuses on the intricate web of tales observable in the text, the main character’s act of narration, the problem of ambiguity and interpretation, as well as how the general theme of narration runs through “The Tale.” One manifestation of the latter is that the seven tales within the text all have slightly different implications, which seem to be carried already by the generic title of the short story. Drawing on the *OED* definitions of the word ‘tale,’ I suggest that all of these implications interact in the text to foreground the problem of narration and interpretation, of telling and listening, of objectivity and subjectivity.

1 Introduction

While “The Tale” (1917) may not be Joseph Conrad’s finest short story, it undoubtedly ranks among his most perplexing ones. The fact alone that for late Conrad, it is also exceptionally sophisticated in execution, does not suffice to account for the attention it has received in literary criticism. Indeed, “The Tale,” with a length of around 6,700 words only, has been a favourite for more than two decades with Conradians exploring the writer’s short fiction. There are various reasons for this, most notably a high level of ambiguity and openness. Also, it is Conrad’s last short story,

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and the only one dealing explicitly with the First World War.¹ Critics have read it as a psychocultural text, have placed it in the context of Modernism and modern wars. However, given the story's narrative complexity, it is little wonder that narratological approaches predominate.² The approach adopted in this paper belongs to the latter category as well – more specifically, Gérard Genette's narrative theory will serve as the basis of analysis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I simply wish to offer yet another narratological reading of the story, (mis)interpreting and extending earlier criticism. The aims of this essay are twofold. First and foremost, as indicated by the argumentative and possibly provocative title, "The Tale" is seen here as a text that thematises its own fictionality and deals with the problem of narration and interpretation, of telling and listening, as well as with the impossibility of tales being completely objective and credible.³ This is what I will argue for throughout this paper, drawing on Genette as a means of showing *how* the text succeeds in shaping the thematics through the use of certain narrative devices. Thus, it is my declared wish to combine structuralist textual analysis with interpretation, in the hope that both can contribute to supporting as well as questioning some of the implications of the other. Secondly, then, the present study is also thought of as a critical test of Genette's system, a test that should highlight some of its fortes and deficiencies, revealing how this specific narrative theory can add to the understanding of "The Tale."

2 Method

Before setting about the in-depth analysis and interpretation of the text, it seems necessary to comment more extensively on the method to be used here. The idea of making use of Genette's theoretical framework in an analysis of Conrad's works and indeed of this very short story is not new. Admittedly, I was a little disappointed to learn this since I had already decided on my approach and feared that it would thus

1. Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore, *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 364.

2. Knowles and Moore, p. 364.

3. The idea of interpreting "The Tale" in this vein came to me when I was reading Keith Carabine's introduction to *Joseph Conrad: Selected Short Stories* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997), pp. xxiii–xxiv. Carabine notes that "as its generic title spotlights, ['The Tale'] is a self-conscious artifice" (xxiii). Yet, since none of the detailed studies I was able to consult treat the story exactly in this way, and because Carabine's brief, introductory remarks could only serve as a hint, it seemed worthwhile to follow and develop this thread, using, as I had long before decided upon, Genette's system of narrative analysis.

be very difficult to discover new aspects of the narrative. It is, however, not at all surprising that Conrad studies and narratology should cooperate productively. The significance of narrative technique in Conrad, a writer whose association with Modernism is inseparable from his experimenting with the various possibilities of presenting a narrative, is hardly disputable. The decision on the critic's part to adopt Genette's and not any other theory of narrative need not confound us either since his is still the most comprehensive one. Genette's contribution to narratology is immense, therefore we can safely say that no one interested in this field of study can afford unfamiliarity with his influential works.⁴ Indeed, several studies following Genette's approach were written on individual Conrad texts.⁵ For the present discussion, the most important ones are obviously those that deal with "The Tale," which is, as was mentioned above, a story that lends itself especially well to a narratological reading due to its form as well as content. Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn both explore the Chinese-box structure of "The Tale," and they both acknowledge the importance of Genette to their own analyses.⁶ However, as I noticed with some astonishment, they are reluctant to use the Genettean terminology and to explore the

4. These are "Discours du récit," *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) and *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983). The English translations I will refer to throughout this paper are Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1995) and Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1990).

5. From among those whose subject is not "The Tale," the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* refers to the following (p. 238): Mary Sullivan, "Conrad's Paralipses in the Narration of *Lord Jim*," *Conradiana* 10 (1978) 123–140; Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), p. 295 – he adopts Genette's analepsis and prolepsis in a discussion of time in *Lord Jim*; Linda M. Shires supplements Watt's discussion in "The 'Privileged' Reader and Narrative Methodology in *Lord Jim*," *Conradiana* 17 (1985) 19–30; Allan H. Simmons applies Genette's concept of focalization in "'Conflicting Impulses': Focalization and the Presentation of Culture in *Almayer's Folly*," *Conradiana* 29 (1997) 163–172.

6. The relevant studies, which I will refer to in this essay, are the following: Jakob Lothe, *Conrad's Narrative Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (1990. London: Arnold, 1992). It has to be mentioned that obviously Lothe and Hawthorn examine other Conrad works as well, but they both give a detailed reading of "The Tale" in an entire chapter each. Unfortunately, two other examples of a narratological approach to this short story were not available in the libraries of Hungary; these are: the relevant chapter in William W. Bonney, *Thorns & Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1980) and Vivienne Rundle, "'The Tale' and the Ethics of Interpretation," *The Conradian* 17/1 (1992) 17–36.

possibilities inherent in his system. All I can do is to make conjectures about the causes of this reluctance. First of all, Genette's terms can indeed seem opaque and even frightening to those who are not familiar with them, probably because a number of these are derived from Greek roots – and the general reader of a study on Conrad may very well be unaware of important publications in the field of narrative theory. This is precisely the reason why the present study contains a glossary of the Genettean terms that are used here. Moreover, clinging to Genette's approach may result in an analysis that some (or many) would consider too technical and 'dry.' Yet, this does not necessarily have to be the case. By combining structuralist textual analysis with interpretative comments an equilibrium can be achieved between scholarly precision on the one hand and critical enthusiasm and inventiveness on the other. Also, I share Genette's conviction that it is not always possible and desirable to force a coherent reading at all costs.⁷ Thus, I do not claim that Conrad's last short story is exclusively a tale about tales, but here I would like to read it as such while integrating some other aspects as well.

As regards the problem of terminology, one may have serious doubts as to whether studies devoted to Conrad's narrative technique can sacrifice precision on the altar of better intelligibility. It seems a paradoxical method to draw on Genette and at the same time use some of the very terms he discarded because of their theoretical invalidity. Is it, for instance, justified that Lothe continues to commit the pre-Genettean sin of distinguishing between 'authorial' and 'personal' narrators, or that he uses the expression nonfocalized narrative synonymously with 'authorial narrative'?⁸ To conclude the methodological discussion, I still have to motivate the decision to apply Genette's system. The general benefits of familiarity with this specific narrative theory for analysts of fiction are brought to the point by Jonathan Culler's foreword to *Narrative Discourse*:

As the most thorough attempt we have to identify, name, and illustrate the basic constituents and techniques of narrative, it [*Narrative Discourse*] will prove indispensable to students of fiction, who not only will find in it terms

7. In the afterword to *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (p. 155), Genette reacts to criticism he received for his rejection of a synthesis of the categories of tense, mood and voice – a rejection he "justified as a refusal to unify Proust's work artificially. I still feel as much repugnance toward those impositions of 'coherence' that interpretative criticism carries off so glibly."

8. It is true that Lothe himself is aware of the problems these simplifications involve (see *Conrad's Narrative Method*, pp. 11 and 13). The more paradoxical, however, his method appears to be.

to describe what they have perceived in novels but will also be alerted to the existence of fictional devices which they had previously failed to notice and whose implications they had never been able to consider. Every reader of Genette will find that he becomes a more acute and perceptive analyst of fiction than before.⁹

In addition, I hope to be able to demonstrate that working within Genette's theoretical framework has not insignificant advantages for our present discussion of "The Tale." Notably, Genette's system should help us shed light on the status of the various tales in the story, and prove very useful in determining what the functions of the commanding officer as narrator are and how he manipulates his narrative according to his own taste.

3 Discussion of "The Tale"

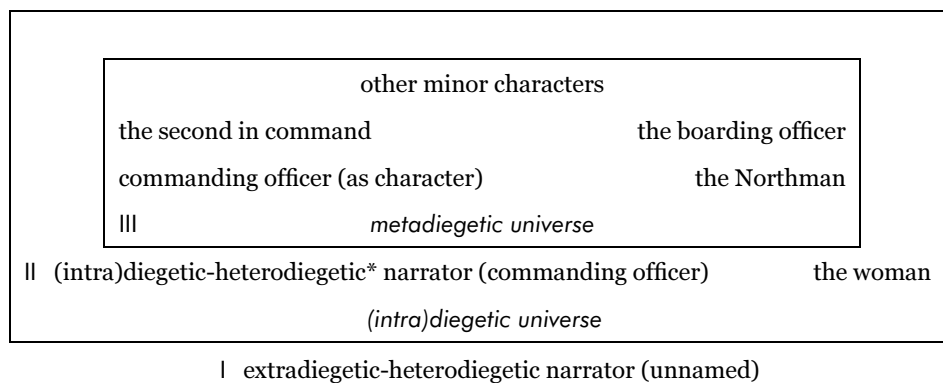
3.1 Tales within "The Tale"

The title of this subsection may at first sight seem to involve a clumsy repetition of the word 'tale,' yet the repetition is not only necessary but also suggestive. It is necessary because to replace 'tale' with a set theoretical term such as 'narrative' would run counter to our adopted theoretical framework and blur the very distinction to be made here between the status of the different tales. On the other hand, the repetition is suggestive because it is only made possible by the generic title of the short story which bears thematic importance as well. This question will be examined later, but now we should turn our attention to the tales. The Genettean category of voice allows us to describe the narrating acts and the corresponding narrative levels in "The Tale." The unnamed frame narrator who speaks first and introduces the reader to the narrative setting is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic – he (or she?) does not inhabit the diegetic universe in any form, not even as a character. However, this is not enough to explain why he never uses the first person singular pronoun to refer to himself. The fact that he does not also means that he never designates himself as narrator and keeps a distance to the events told, which will require further comment at a later stage of this essay. Lothe's use of 'authorial' instead of our 'extradiegetic-

9. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 7. Culler is also right to make clear that *Narrative Discourse* does not merely attest to a "Gallic delight in the adventures of thought" but is also a "broadly based theoretical study" (p. 8).

heterodiegetic' attribute is thus especially misleading since 'authorial' may be associated with a narrator who sometimes interrupts his narrative with 'author's intrusions,' and narrators who do so often refer to themselves, which they can only do in the first person singular. The commanding officer in his function as narrator in the second degree, together with the woman who is his listener, is part of the diegesis: in Genette's terms, he is (intra)diegetic. His act of narrating opens up a further narrative level, a metadiegetic universe in which all the characters of the commander's tale are situated – most notably he himself as protagonist. Nonetheless, because he does not admit until the end that he *is* the commanding officer, he has to be described formally as a heterodiegetic narrator. If he were completely honest, he would feel obliged to use the first person to designate himself as a character in his tale; we know he does not, which is a narrative trick whose implications will be dealt with later in detail. As opposed to the extra- and heterodiegetic narrator, however, he often refers to himself as 'I' in his function *as narrator*. Again, we can see clearly that the presence of the first person singular can be indicative of "two very different situations."¹⁰

The following chart should help illuminate and offer a visual overview of the narrating acts and narrative levels in "The Tale":



As we can see, the other attribute used to characterise the intradiegetic narrator, 'heterodiegetic,' is marked with an asterisk – this is to indicate that, as was mentioned above, it is only from a formal aspect that the term applies to him. But for the narrative trick the commanding officer uses, he would not only be a homodiegetic but also an autodiegetic narrator, one who is the protagonist of his own story. At this

10. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 244.

point, it has to be stressed that the Chinese boxes above cannot represent all the tales in “The Tale.” The reader may have noticed that here the word ‘tale’ is to be used in a very broad and non-technical sense so as to designate far more than the structurally representable narratives.¹¹ Genette’s system allows us, namely, to pinpoint only two ‘full-status’ narrators and two corresponding narratives.¹² Yet, there seem to be several other tales that cannot be called narratives in the Genettean terminology but which will take on thematic importance as well. They all contribute significantly to our perception that “The Tale” is indeed a self-conscious fictional artifice, a story that thematises the problem of narration and interpretation. Lothe criticises Bonney’s equation of four concentric tales in the text: “the all-encompassing authorial narrative, the commander’s story to his mistress . . . the Northman’s story which the commander does not believe” and the “grave murmur in the depth of his [the commanding officer’s] very own self.”¹³ Lothe quite rightly points out that while Bonney is justified in claiming that the first three tales are embedded in one another, that is, are concentric, there is a considerable difference between them and the commanding officer’s inward voice (the “grave murmur”) because the latter is not “manifestly part of the narrative structure.”¹⁴ However, it appears that even the distinction Lothe drew needs further refinement, and that there are still more tales in the story which must not be ignored. Firstly, we have two structurally representable narratives, the intra- and the metadiegetic ones, or what Lothe refers to as the authorial narrative and the commander’s story respectively. Secondly, it is true that the third tale, the Northman’s, is manifestly present as well, yet it most probably cannot be granted the status of a narrative level. Such is the case with the boarding officer’s

11. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson & E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press & Clarendon Press, 1989) enumerates, among others, the following meanings of the word ‘tale’: “3.a. That which one tells; the relation of a series of events; a narrative, statement, information. . . . c. pl. Things told so as to violate confidence or secrecy; reports of private matters not proper to be divulged; idle or mischievous gossip. . . . 4. A story or narrative, true or fictitious, drawn up so as to interest or amuse, or to preserve the history of a fact or incident; a literary composition cast in narrative form. 5.a. A mere story, as opposed to a narrative of fact; a fiction, an idle tale; a falsehood. . . . c. A thing now existing only in story; a mere matter of history or tradition; a thing of the past.”

12. The fact that there are three narrative levels (extra-, intra-, and metadiegetic, all represented with Roman numerals in the chart) is not significant in this context because the extradiegetic level is not a narrative recounted, and thus not a tale, but itself a narrating act that produces the (intra)diegetic narrative.

13. Lothe, pp. 73–74.

14. Lothe, p. 74.

tale (or report) to the commander,¹⁵ as well as with the latter's tale (or lie) to the Northman when he gives him a false course.¹⁶ Nor should I neglect to mention that the commanding officer tells the Northman what he and his crew saw during their voyage (above all, the suspicious object) and the conclusions he has come to about it. Generally, it can be said that the four tales of this second category are not narrative levels, while they are characterised by the condition of being at least partly presented in direct speech, as well as by being specified in their contents. Thirdly and finally, there is the "grave murmur in the depth of his very own self, telling another tale" (73),¹⁷ which the intradiegetic narrator describes as an inward voice the commander (that is, he himself) was hearing while the Northman was speaking to him. This tale is not manifest at all. It is mysterious and vague, its content is not specified, only one sentence refers to it, which is spoken by the intradiegetic narrator in narratized speech, and it is included in the category of tales mainly because he explicitly calls it a "tale" (73). What could be added is that this tale has its antecedents in the suspicions the commander harbours during his voyage, and that it keeps developing or growing within him while he is conversing with the Northman. The tale the commander relates to the latter about the voyage and the suspicious object is, as far as its status is concerned, not far from this inward voice and thus on the borderline between two categories. The reasons why I decided to put it into the second and not the third category are the following: Even if direct speech is used here only as a preparation for the narrative to follow, it is a sign that the tale is *uttered by someone* (77), unlike the inward voice. Furthermore, even if we cannot be absolutely sure that the commander reported to the Northman what he as intradiegetic narrator now tells his narratee (the woman) and us, there is no sound reason to assume that he should have lied about his experiences – these experiences, after all, are the very source of his suspicions, and he does not conceal his dislike for the Northman when speaking

15. This tale is, to complicate things further, only a recounting of the tale the Northman told the boarding officer. However, as there seems to be no reason to doubt the honesty of the latter, we have to assume that his report is a faithful account of what he heard, all the more so as the Northman later tells the commanding officer the same story.

16. Carabine notes that the false information the commanding officer gives to the Northman can be regarded as another tale (see the introduction to *Selected Short Stories*, p. xxiv). It should be added that this tale is most probably not narrative in nature, the commander does not tell what happened but what the Northman should do.

17. Henceforth, all parenthesised references in the main body of the text are to this edition of "The Tale": Joseph Conrad, *Tales of Hearsay* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925).

to him personally. The inward (and hence silent) voice, in contrast, is only heard by the commanding officer, and neither the narratee nor the reader are informed of its content.

Admittedly, the boarding officer's report and the account the commander gives the Northman of his experiences at sea are thematically not as significant as the other tales. They are not directly connected with the problem of interpretation since they do not appear to be of questionable credibility. Yet, they too play a part in making the text the intricate web of tales it is. Everything considered, and probably stretching the definition of the word 'tale' to the extreme, we get a total of seven tales, which certainly is an impressive number in such a short text as this. Given the focus of this study, it seemed necessary and legitimate to devote that much space to determining their status. The functions of the more important ones, as well as their interrelations will be discussed later, but before doing so, I will direct some (hopefully) constructive criticism at Genette's system of narrative analysis on the basis of the conclusions I arrived at above. There is one very important question that inevitably arises when attempting to categorise the tales in "The Tale," and to which there seems to be no answer in either of Genette's two narratological studies: What exactly are the defining qualities of a 'full-status' narrator? Or, phrasing the question differently and more precisely with the help of Genette's terminological arsenal, we have to ask: What are the defining qualities of a narrator whose narrating act produces a narrative that is "*at a diegetic level immediately higher*" than the level at which this act is placed?¹⁸ A satisfactory answer would help us distinguish more clearly between these tales in terms of their status, at least between those belonging to the first and the second category. Indeed, classifying the seven tales mentioned was a challenging task, and the classification is certainly not incontestable. For want of an objective categorisation principle, I have to try to come up with an answer, if only a vague one. As was indicated above, all the tales except for the commander's inward voice are felt to be manifestly part of the narrative structure, but only those that have been called the intra- and the metadiegetic narratives are also regarded as narrative levels. However, this is not much more than a sensation, which originates in the observation that the narrators *in* the metadiegesis (the Northman, the boarding officer and the commanding officer as a character in his own story) talk so little that the reader is always perfectly aware that all they say is presented to us by the intradiegetic narrator. Thus, it would seem that whether or not a new narrative level is produced depends at least in part on quantitative criteria, which are of necessity arbitrary in nature. This

18. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 228.

may be the very reason why Genette does not delve deeper into this problem himself. In one instance, his comments on narrative level are even puzzling. In connection with *Lord Jim*, he talks of narratives in the third degree, that is, meta-metadiegetic narratives which are recounted by the intradiegetic narrator (Marlow).¹⁹ Paradoxically, what Genette seems to be saying is that in *Lord Jim*, there are only two narrators (extra- and intradiegetic), but at the same time narratives at three different levels (intra-, meta-, and meta-metadiegetic). More generally, this amounts to claiming that narratives at different levels may be recounted by one and the same narrator. In “The Tale,” the situation seems to be somewhat similar to that in *Lord Jim*. Nonetheless, our chart above does not contain a meta-metadiegetic universe, for three reasons. First of all, Genette’s remarks on narrative level (in one instance) appear to be paradoxical. Secondly, in *Lord Jim*, the narratives which Genette places at a meta-metadiegetic level are longer than the four tales of our second category in “The Tale” – long enough that one may temporarily forget that it is Marlow who recounts them. As we have seen, this possibility does not hold in “The Tale” because the intradiegetic narrator never really “gives the floor to” the Northman and the boarding officer, and indeed not even to himself in his function as character.²⁰ Finally, our classification may be defended by the argument that roughly the same spatio-temporal criteria apply to all our narrators in the metadiegetic universe as to the characters *in* their tales; that is, to bring it to the point in a non-technical manner, their tales do not guide us into ‘another,’ different world.

3.2 The Commanding Officer as Narrator

In the present subsection, interrelated questions will be examined concerning the commanding officer as (intradiegetic) narrator: the narrating situation in which he tells his tale and his motives for narrating, the techniques he applies to manipulate his narrative, as well as the functions he performs. The short story opens with the description of a gloomy room: a man and a woman remain silent for a moment after what Erdinast-Vulcan describes as a bedroom scene which is “curiously passionless, devoid of erotic suggestion, almost lifeless.”²¹ The woman finally breaks the silence with the somewhat unusual request: “Tell me something” (59). This utterance is the

19. See Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, pp. 94–95.

20. The expression in quotation marks is used more than once by Jane E. Lewin in her translation of Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*.

21. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *The Strange Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad: Writing, Culture, and Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), p. 172.

immediate cause of his act of narrating, yet the air of casualness he assumes is misleading. The fact that it does not take him long to fulfil her wish does not primarily testify to his gentlemanly nature. Much rather, he must have been looking forward to the opportunity to tell not simply ‘a tale’ but the very tale of his guilt which he probably never had the courage to talk about to anyone. For the moment, suffice it to say that given the psychological state of the commanding officer, he could not possibly have made up and related any other tale than this one. Covert references to this in his own discourse will be analysed in subsection 3.4. Since it is likely that the woman asks the man to tell her a story in order simply to pass the time, we may be led to believe that the function of his narrative is what Genette refers to as a distractive one. However, as the tale unfolds, it becomes more and more transparent that the commanding officer’s involvement with the events recounted is too personal. It appears that in reality, his narrative is a confession, even though he does not acknowledge openly until the end that it is one of *his* past crimes. The act of narrating is extremely important psychologically as it helps him ease his guilty conscience. This interpretation no doubt comes close to what Kingsbury seems to suggest by pointing out that the officer “tells the tale, perhaps hoping in that way to achieve the private absolution he has not yet felt. . .”²² Yet, I do not agree with her view that at the beginning, the commander does not even admit to his actions and evades or denies responsibility.²³ Indeed, he does seek understanding, but his narrative is at no point devoid of self-criticism. When he says early in the story that the word duty contains an “infinity of absolution” (61), we should read it as a hint about his awareness that attributing his crime only to duty and necessity is a feeble excuse, and while this excuse might be acceptable from a professional point of view, he cannot suppress the voice of conscience.

One may wonder why the intradiegetic narrator’s tale should be a confession from the outset when he postpones the all-important revelation of his identity with the commanding officer until the very end. There are two points to be made in connection with this objection. First of all and strictly speaking, we have to distinguish between two entities: the commander *as narrator* and the commander *as character* in his own story. The German terms *erzählendes Ich* (the narrating I) and *erzähltes Ich* (the narrated I),²⁴ which are well-established in narratology, could be used to

22. Celia M. Kingsbury, “‘Infinities of Absolution’: Reason, Rumor, and Duty in Joseph Conrad’s ‘The Tale,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44 (1998) 715–729, p. 728.

23. Kingsbury, p. 723.

24. These terms were coined by Leo Spitzer. See how Genette integrates and applies them in *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 252–254.

designate the first and the second entity respectively. The narrating I, as in most traditional narratives in autobiographical form, is critical of the narrated I's conduct, even if the latter is disguised here under the generic name "a Commanding Officer" (61). Secondly, it is not at all difficult to guess why the man chooses to tell his tale as if he were talking about someone else. Speaking in one's own defence is less convincing, it is much easier and much more comfortable for a narrator to evoke sympathy for a third person because the relative distance from the events told makes him appear more objective in the listener's eyes. Lothe points out that the commanding officer's refusal to refer to himself in the first person singular provides an example of ellipsis, which is supplemented by two distancing devices: "the commander's use of the conventional fairy-tale opening 'once upon a time' and his claim that the actors of his story had no proper names."²⁵ Yet, provided that we stick to Genette's terminology, what we have here comes closer to a paralipsis than to an ellipsis: the intradiegetic narrator (consciously) neglects to mention that he is identical with the commander in his tale, simply sidestepping a very important element without breaking the narrative continuity – the result is similar to a heterodiegetic autobiography. Paralipsis, then, is a narrative trick for which 'lie' would be too strong a word. The man's use of the indefinite personal pronouns *one* and *you* is another device to exert influence on the narratee's interpretation of his tale. In an iterative passage, he starts talking in general about the commander's duties at sea: "He used to be sent out with her [his ship] along certain coasts to see – what he could see. Just that. And sometimes he had some preliminary information to help him, and sometimes he had not" (63). The passage then passes over into the present tense, thus becoming an even more general description of the difficulties and anxieties experienced by sailors during what is almost certainly the First World War. It is in this context that the indefinite personal pronouns *one* and *you* are used: "Then *you* begin to believe. Henceforth *you* go out for the work to see what *you* can see, and *you* keep on at it with the conviction that some day *you* will die from something *you* have not seen. *One* envies the soldiers at the end of the day. . . . *One* does, really" (64; my italics). By using the pronoun *you*, the intradiegetic narrator includes the narratee in the group of people who, in the given situation, (would) feel and behave as he describes – a group that he probably means to include every human being. In this way, he attempts to foster understanding for his immoral conduct in advance, stressing that the war situation inevitably creates a feeling of uncertainty and mistrust in everyone, especially at sea. *One* has a similar effect, but the emphasis here is on the speaker

25. Lothe, p. 77.

himself: he is also one of those who envy the soldiers. At this point, it is worth calling to mind that Genette associates the use of the present tense not only with atemporality but also with “a touch of homodiegeticity.”²⁶ In other words, the commander’s generalisations in the present tense also suggest his involvement in the events recounted.

That the intradiegetic narrator does not admit openly until the end that he is the commanding officer of his tale is indisputable. However, it is not that obvious when and how the reader and the narratee can guess his identity. Lothe is right to point out, as I have done implicitly, that there are unmistakable signs which indicate that the commander’s central dilemma “is a real one”; also, he very aptly says that this is “one of the pivots on which the dramatic tension and suspense of the story depend.”²⁷ He continues to argue that “the changing pronominal references to the commander seem to imply, even on a first reading, that the narrating ‘I’ and the ‘he’ whose story is to be related are in fact identical.”²⁸ Yet, in the paragraphs he talks of, and, in fact, in the whole text until the very end, it appears a difficult task to detect changing pronominal references to the commanding officer as character in the tale:

“Yes. What else could you expect from sending a man made of *our* common, tormented clay on a voyage of discovery? What else could *he* find? What else could you understand or care for, or feel the existence of even? There was comedy in it, and slaughter.”

“Always like the earth,” she murmured.

“Always. And since *I* could find in the universe only what was deeply rooted in the fibres of *my* being there was love in it, too. But *we* won’t talk of that.”

(61–62; *my* italics)

Not all the words italicised in the passage above may be taken to refer to the commander. The possessive adjective *our* can probably be related to a certain group or kind of people, and the personal pronouns *he* and *we* no doubt stand for the man “made of *our* common, tormented clay” and the two characters in the diegesis (the intradiegetic narrator and the narratee) respectively. Only *I* and *my* seem to be worth serious thought: they may indeed be interpreted as implying the identity of the narrator with the commander. Before plunging into such an interpretation, however, it may be helpful to remember that the presence of the first person singular can sim-

26. Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, p. 82.

27. Lothe, p. 76.

28. Lothe, p. 77.

ply mean that the narrator designates himself as such. As was hinted at above, all of the intradiegetic narrator's uses of *I* before the revelation of his identity with the commanding officer will be treated here as references to himself as narrator, not as character in the metadiegesis. The expression "in the fibres of *my* being" in the quoted passage above induces Schwarz to go even further than Lothe by claiming that it is "transparently clear that the woman realises, as we do, that the speaker is the officer."²⁹ Two remarks have to be made concerning this judgment. Firstly, it is true that the careful reader recognises – especially on a second reading – the signs implying that the intradiegetic narrator *is* the commander of his tale. Nonetheless, using Coleridge's well-known phrase, we can say that such a reader is not exempt from "that willing suspension of disbelief" either. Narrators enjoy something like the benefit of the doubt: narratees and readers want to, and indeed have to, believe them by convention. Secondly, if the narrating situation were "transparently clear," the story would lose some of "the dramatic tension and suspense" which Lothe rightly sees in it. I will come back to quotations from "The Tale" such as the above in subsection 3.4, where they will be examined in a different light.

The last question to be addressed in this subsection is what functions the commanding officer as narrator performs. Relying on Genette's terminology, we can attribute at least three different functions to him: the narrative function, the testimonial function and the function of communication. That he takes on the narrative function is self-evident since this is what makes him a narrator. The two others are more important thematically, and they have already been touched upon. To say that the commander performs a testimonial function is essentially a repetition of the idea expressed above that his narrative is a confession. Whether or not the reader guesses that intradiegetic narrator and commanding officer are the two selves of the same person, the final revelation throws light on the testimonial aspect of the narrating:

He abandoned all pretence.

"Yes, *I* gave that course to him. It seemed to me a supreme test. *I* believe – no, *I* don't believe. *I* don't know. At the time *I* was certain. They all went down; and *I* don't know whether *I* have done stern retribution – or murder; whether *I* have added to the corpses that litter the bed of the unreadable sea the bodies of men completely innocent or basely guilty. *I* don't know. *I* shall never know."
(80; my italics)

29. Daniel R. Schwarz, *Conrad: The Later Fiction* (1982. London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 103.

The several instances of the first person singular pronoun *I* point to the fact that this passage is very emotional: the transition from *he* to *I* is painful and frightening because as soon as someone else has knowledge of the commander's guilt it moves from the realm of subjectivity into objective reality. He cannot foresee the reaction of the woman, he cannot be certain of having earned her sympathy even though he has constructed his narrative in such a manner as to prepare for the revelation. It is part of this construction that he has so far consciously failed to supply the missing element of the testimony. Only now that his narrative has reached its climax is the commander ready and indeed compelled to "abandon all pretence." It should also be noted that the extradiegetic and the intradiegetic narrator are in complicity with each other in the sense that the former does not give the game away by revealing the identity of the latter with the commander in the metadiegetic universe. Obviously, this was very much in Conrad's interest as well because he must have aimed at keeping the readers in suspense, making them want to know how the short story would end. The third function, that of communication, is especially marked in the intradiegetic narrator's case, and it is in close connection with the idea that "The Tale" is a text that thematises the problem of narration and interpretation. This aspect will be explored in subsection 3.4, but now I again have to refer back to a point already thrown into the discussion earlier, namely that the commanding officer often uses the first person to designate himself as (intradiegetic) narrator. By doing so and by addressing the narratee, he maintains contact with her, and communication is an attempt to make her accept his perspective and interpretation of the tale. Not surprisingly, internal focalization in his narrative is fixed: we see the events mainly through the eyes of his narrated *I*, the commander in the metadiegesis. In addition, there are some passages in external focalization and zero focalization; to the latter category belongs the one in the present tense quoted above, which is also an example of author's intrusions. Yet, communication is also necessitated by the woman's several interruptions of his story – her request for a tale is, as was mentioned, the immediate cause of his act of narrating, but she hardly lets him sink into the world of which he tells.

3.3 The Problem of Ambiguity and Interpretation

It is no novelty to say that "The Tale" is highly ambiguous, yet since ambiguity itself is a constitutive element of the story's thematic and narrative structure, every critic needs to re-examine what it consists of. Ambiguity is present at different levels, and I will start with the frame or (intra)diegetic narrative and the instance that produces it, that is, the unnamed extradiegetic narrator; then, the analysis will proceed to the

centre of the concentric circles or tales. It has already been observed that the extradiegetic narrator never designates himself as such and keeps a distance to the events told. The almost total absence of comment on his part has at least two important consequences. First, it leaves room for ambiguity in the narrative setting and, as Hawthorn correctly points out, in the relationship between the commanding officer and the woman.³⁰ That she has a liaison with him can only be guessed, and the nature of their feelings remains obscure. Erdinast-Vulcan establishes an interesting parallel by saying that the initial bedroom scene is “a visual echo of the drowning which concludes the tale.”³¹ Nevertheless, this too is only one possible interpretation. Secondly, it seems that the extradiegetic narrator’s distanced attitude is a means of appearing objective in the presentation of his narrative. At one point he readily admits the restriction of his information although otherwise his utterances demonstrate his knowledge of the thoughts of both characters:³² “‘No. We won’t,’ she said, in a neutral tone which concealed perfectly her relief – *or her disappointment*” (62; my italics). Thus, he may be regarded as an authoritative voice who is all the more credible as he does not pretend to possess ‘omniscience’ but fulfils the ideological function almost unnoticeably. However, this should not lead the reader to forget that he and the intradiegetic narrator are in complicity with each other. Also, it is worth noting that internal focalization is almost fixed in the frame narrative as well: clearly, the commander’s perspective is adopted, we are let to know mainly his thoughts and perceptions, only rarely the woman’s. Moreover, it was merely for the sake of precision that I allowed for the possibility that the extradiegetic narrator may be a woman as well; yet, the few comments he makes all betray a male view of certain female traits:

These words came with a slight petulance, the hint of a loved woman’s capricious will, which is capricious only because it feels itself to be a law, embarrassing sometimes and always difficult to elude. . . . [T]hat feminine mobility that slips out of an emotion as easily as out of a splendid gown. . . . For there’s nothing more unswerving in the world than a woman’s caprice.

(60)

Without exaggeration, it can be said that an atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust pervade the metadiegetic narrative, and that the given situation is a breeding-

30. Hawthorn, p. 262.

31. Erdinast-Vulcan, p. 180.

32. Cf. Lothe, p. 78.

ground of ambiguity. The wartime setting is undoubtedly one of the principal reasons for this. Kingsbury emphasises that the “peculiar sanity of war” is responsible for transforming the commander, “normally a fair-minded man,” into someone capable of committing the crime he is guilty of.³³ However, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that he is otherwise fair-minded, nor that he carried the seeds of neurosis within himself. The theme of war, in addition, lends further weight to the idea that the credibility of tales is often questionable and that it is sometimes next to impossible to interpret them ‘correctly.’ Lothe argues that above all, “The Tale” dramatises epistemological uncertainty,³⁴ and it is mainly in the interpretation of signs and tales that uncertainty becomes manifest. When the second in command spots an object on the water and tells the commanding officer about it, the meta-diegetic narrative provides the first concrete example of an epistemological dilemma. At first, it is the younger second officer who openly assumes the worst and thus nurtures the commander’s suspicions: “Well, it’s evidence. That’s what this is. Evidence of what we were pretty certain of before. And plain, too” (66). As Schwarz notes, the roles are then reversed and “the man who should be the voice of maturity” expresses his vaguest fears, while the second in command becomes the “moderating influence.”³⁵ Nonetheless, his attempts are bound to fail because the commander is now “in revolt against the murderous stealthiness of methods and the atrocious callousness of complicities” (67). The discovery of another ship in the cove which did not signal its presence only strengthens his conviction that there are neutrals in their vicinity who are replenishing the stores of enemy submarines. What is more, when the boarding officer returns from the Northman’s ship he tells a complicated story of engine troubles which seems too plausible to the commander to be true. He is unwilling to consider evidence to the contrary; in vain does the second officer explain to him that if the object of the Northman were to sneak out unnoticed he could have done so earlier. Instead, the commander makes the serious accusation that this very ship may be the one that has been feeding enemy submarines, and decides to go on board himself in spite of the second in command’s warning that he will not even be able to make a case for reasonable suspicion. By now, however, it is apparent that he is looking frantically for proof of the Northman and his crew’s guilt. In his function as intradiegetic narrator he himself admits that although at that time unaware of it, what he expected to find there was in reality “the atmosphere of gratuitous treach-

33. Kingsbury, pp. 715–716.

34. Lothe, pp. 72–86.

35. Schwarz, p. 101.

ery” (71) – not a very professional attitude for the commander of an English warship. He has already decided that they are guilty, that is, he wants to put only one interpretation on the signs he is faced with. As Hawthorn formulates it very aptly, he is “unwilling to accept incertitude as a condition of living” and “demands to be possessed of a certainty beyond doubt and suspicion.”³⁶

The Northman’s tale and the commander’s inward voice have already been categorised in terms of their status, but at this point they deserve some comment from a different angle. It is evident that the Englishman does not believe the other’s story, yet what is more interesting is that he does not want to believe it. His antipathy for individuals who feign neutrality and at the same time profit from illegal trade with the enemy grows into personal dislike for the Northman. Basically everything the latter says or does is interpreted by the commander as a sign of his wicked intentions or guilty conscience. However, it is also conspicuous – and Hawthorn has drawn attention to it before³⁷ – that the Northman is very inept at dispelling the Englishman’s suspicions, especially when he says that he would “either go crazy from anxiety” or “take to drink” when engaging in illegal trade (79). After all, there is tangible evidence that he *does* drink regularly. The indications the commander finds are contradictory, but as was mentioned, he only takes into account those which strengthen his conviction. While listening to the Northman’s story, which is the same that was told to the boarding officer earlier, he pays more attention to his sceptical inward voice that tells an alternative tale, one that is in accordance with his conspiracy theory. The man who so much detests lies feels himself confronted with one, but the short story’s conclusion rather suggests that the Northman was telling the truth, at least as far as his disorientation is concerned. Paradoxically, the only character in “The Tale” who lies without any doubt is the commanding officer himself. Hawthorn holds that he does so on two occasions: he tells the Northman that he has no suspicions although it seems obvious that he has a lot; secondly, he tells his officers that he let the neutral ship go instead of admitting that in actual fact he ordered the Northman to leave the cove.³⁸ Yet, it should not escape our attention that the third and most unspeakable lie, which led to terrible consequences, is that the commander

36. Hawthorn, p. 265.

37. Hawthorn, pp. 265–266.

38. Hawthorn, p. 263. He also notes that the commander may have believed that he had no suspicions because he was certain of the Northman’s guilt, but this is a “weak defence against the charge of dishonesty on his part” (p. 263). Indeed, he made the Northman conclude that he did not even suspect him of anything so that he could speak his mind without fear. See pp. 77–78 of “The Tale.”

gave the Northman a false course, saying: “ ‘Steer south-by-east-half-east for about four miles and then you will be clear to haul to the eastward for your port’ ” (79). The Northman could not help following his orders and probably did not even suspect the Englishman of a lie; there was no room for a different interpretation of the latter’s tale which may have saved his life.

Patently, it was the commanding officer who committed the greatest sin: he let the Northman and his whole crew – all of them potentially innocent people – die as their ship ran on a ledge of rock. As narrator he says that this seemed to him “a supreme test” (80) – a test that must appear completely absurd to a sane mind. If the Northman is lying and knows where he is he will get away, at least temporarily. If he tells the truth and is most probably innocent he will die. The commander did not hesitate to put the life of a whole crew at risk in order to bring an end to his epistemological uncertainty, to get to know whether or not the Northman had been lying. Hawthorn points out that “when the commanding officer sets his trap, he is neurotically in the grip of his suspicions, rather than concerned to exercise justice or committed to sincerity and frankness.”³⁹ However, this seems to be the only certainty, with not enough textual evidence to decide what he really believed to be doing or whether he indeed had a neurotic disposition. The scope of the present analysis excludes moral and psychological issues, therefore these observations become only meaningful when contrasted with the commander’s narrative reliability. It is necessary, namely, to make a clear distinction between his lies and what has been termed above as paralipsis. The latter is certainly not dishonest in the same way as a lie which is usually not intended to be unveiled as such at any time; the function of a narrative trick like paralipsis is to mislead the narratee temporarily in order to achieve a certain goal, in this case to facilitate the commander’s task of telling his tale by choosing the moment of revelation well. It may be a failure to take this very distinction seriously that leads some critics to form a rather different judgment about the commanding officer’s conduct as narrator. While Erdinast-Vulcan and Kingsbury argue that he does not accept his responsibility at the beginning of the story but ultimately (and unsuccessfully) seeks absolution for his guilt by telling the narrative, Schwarz even claims that he “never admits that his paranoia *created* the reality he perceived.”⁴⁰ Lothe, on the other hand, takes a view which comes closer to that put forward in this paper, saying that the commander’s “growing awareness of the moral complications of his decision increases rather than reduces his narrative reliabil-

39. Hawthorn, p. 264.

40. See Erdinast-Vulcan, pp. 183-184; Kingsbury, pp. 723, 728; Schwarz, p. 101.

ity.”⁴¹ It seems to me that he should not be reproached for failing to state openly at the outset of his story that he is the protagonist. His tale, just like “The Tale,” is a literary composition: when he started it, he must already have been aware that at its end the woman would discover the painful truth about him. The commander is by no means a completely unreliable narrator, and the inferred author – that is, the idea of the real author produced by the narrative text – is one who shows understanding towards his past and present actions. This is also reflected in the extradiegetic narrator’s as well as the narratee’s sympathetic attitude towards the commanding officer. As regards Hawthorn’s comment that the woman is “morally crazy” to express sympathy only for him and not the crew members who died,⁴² it is worth considering that only he is in her microcosm, all the others are far removed from her by a temporal, spatial and emotional distance. It is only natural that her first reaction is to comfort the man she loves (or at least likes). Also, there appears to be some element of contradiction in Hawthorn’s reading of the text: he holds that the extradiegetic narrator’s statement about the woman at the end of the story – “She knew his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity” (81) – is heavily ironic, while at the same time stressing the ambiguity in “The Tale,” the impossibility of deciding whether the Northman was supplying enemy submarines or whether the commander is insane or not.⁴³ Adding to what seems to me a paradox, Hawthorn himself points out that “the reader is yoked into moral complicity with the main personified narrator” because we also try to reveal truths which the text does not allow us to reveal; thus, he argues, the story “forces us to become aware of the potentiality in us for the same sort of neurotic reaching after certainty that we witness in the commanding officer.”⁴⁴ These are very apt remarks, but the fact remains that there are several conflicting interpretative possibilities, and it is not a serious distortion of the truth to say that this is the only point on which all critics agree. In addition, it looks as though analysts of “The Tale” (including myself) cannot be certain of avoiding paradoxes such as that in Hawthorn’s reading, which lends further justification to regarding this short story as one that thematises the problems inherent in narration and interpretation.

41. Lothe, p. 85.

42. Hawthorn, p. 264.

43. See Hawthorn, p. 263, pp. 266–268. It should be mentioned that Lothe (pp. 85–86) and Schwarz (p. 102) do not read the passage quoted above as ironic. Neither do I; what Hawthorn says about the ambiguity of the story, however, fits in very well with my interpretation of “The Tale.”

44. Hawthorn, pp. 267–268.

3.4 Narration Thematized

The last issue that remains to be examined is at the same time probably the most important one for the purposes of this paper: how the general theme of narration runs through “The Tale.” It is to be demonstrated that this aspect, just like the others already explored, is significant in its own right. However, it would perhaps be better to talk of an integration and culmination of the earlier discussion than of an entirely new aspect. Some manifestations of this general theme have been touched upon, and the goals of this subsection also include highlighting the links between these and the present object of analysis. First of all, some attention should be devoted to the title of the short story because, as was mentioned above, it bears thematic importance. According to Lothe, Conrad uses the commander’s tale – that is, the metadiegetic narrative – as the story’s title which “economically enhances [his] centrality, as the other tales of the text are inseparable from the one he relates.”⁴⁵ Yet, although the commander is undeniably the main character, the generic nature of the title suggests that the reader should also look on it as being representative of tales as such and of those in “The Tale.” The Oxford English Dictionary lists various definitions of the word ‘tale’ (see note 11), of which at least the following three are relevant here: “the relation of a series of events; a narrative, statement, information”; “a story or narrative, true or fictitious, drawn up so as to interest or amuse, or to preserve the history of a fact or incident; a literary composition cast in narrative form”; “a mere story, as opposed to a narrative of fact; a fiction, an idle tale; a falsehood.” The first definition is general and could encompass all the seven tales; the second is noteworthy because the intradiegetic narrator’s tale is seemingly “drawn up so as to interest or amuse,” but in fact it has a different function and is indeed “a literary composition cast in narrative form,” with the accent being on “composition.” This meaning of the word could apply to “The Tale” as a short story too, as well as to the intradiegetic or first narrative. The boarding officer’s report, the account the commander gives the Northman of his experiences at sea and the Northman’s tale could be seen as simply preserving “the history of a fact or incident”; however, the latter’s story *might* be of questionable credibility and hence rather “a fiction, an idle tale; a falsehood.” This third definition may also include the inward voice, but what it undoubtedly serves well to describe is the commanding officer’s lie when he gives the Northman a false course. Since “The Tale” carries all these implications, it would possibly be wrong to maintain that Conrad explicitly uses the commander’s tale as the short story’s title. At this point, the collection containing “The Tale” requires

45. Lothe, p. 73.

consideration as well: *Tales of Hearsay*. Kingsbury argues that the story fits this title in two ways: “the tale itself . . . is one that Conrad heard, one of the exaggerated or apocryphal stories of the kind Fussell, Hemingway, and Wells describe. But hearsay also works within this story in the shape of the rumors that inform the commanding officer’s actions.”⁴⁶ Thus, because of reinforcing our perception that the reliability of information transmitted through narratives is sometimes doubtful, the title of the collection certainly adds an extra dimension to the general theme of narration.

In subsection 3.2, I have already drawn attention to the fact that the utterance “Tell me something” (59) is the immediate cause of the commander’s narrating act. Even though it has been demonstrated that his narrative does not in reality fulfil a distractive function, the woman’s request and his casual and ironic reactions foreground and, indeed, almost parody the construction and artificiality of tales. Let us remember her attempts to set the parameters of the story she would like to hear:

“You used to tell – your – your simple and – and professional – tales very well at one time. Or well enough to interest me. You had a – a sort of art – in the days – the days before the war.”

“Really?” he said, with involuntary gloom. “But now, you see, the war is going on,” he continued. . . .

“It could be a tale not of this world,” she explained.

“You want a tale of the other, the better world?” he asked, with a matter-of-fact surprise. “You must evoke for that task those who have already gone there.”

“No. I don’t mean that. I mean another – some other – world. In the universe – not in heaven.” (60–61)

It is as if she were ordering a dish in a restaurant but describing only some of its ingredients and shifting the burden of the concrete choice onto the cook. The commander bears this burden rather well and does not hesitate long to begin his tale; yet, how reliable and faithful to reality can a narrative be which seems to be constructed in the process of its telling, and which starts with the all too conventional fairy-tale opening “once upon a time” (61)? In general, the answer would be “not very much,” but as was mentioned, the commanding officer did not have to make up this story because it must have been on his mind for a long time. He uses these distancing devices to divert attention from his real motives while the woman, for the moment at least, mistakenly believes to be able to influence the tale. In spite of soon realising

46. Kingsbury, p. 727.

that nothing she says can lead him to change his story, she keeps interrupting him. She does so eight times, with expressions of dissatisfaction, remarks and questions. Because the reader is constantly alerted to her presence, she is plainly not the typical Conradian narratee who, according to Lothe, “tends to preserve a meditative silence.”⁴⁷ Thus, set against the background of the whole Conrad canon, the woman’s interruptions in “The Tale” become even more marked. Lothe is justified in claiming that they are to remind the reader of the frame narrative, just as the “intrusive authorial comment” which comes after the commander has finished his tale:⁴⁸ “The narrator bent forward towards the couch, where no movement betrayed the presence of a living person” (80). However, it seems to me that above that, all these interruptions – including those of the extradiegetic narrator which introduce the narratee’s utterances – serve to spotlight the fact that narration is going on, with all the implications it carries. The narrating act in “The Tale” becomes as important as the actual narrative; by facing and reliving his guilt in the process of telling of it, the commander seeks absolution. Accordingly, I cannot agree with Graver’s view that the conversation between the man and the woman is merely a “byplay.”⁴⁹

The intradiegetic narrator’s reactions to the narratee’s interruptions are worthy of consideration because, as was pointed out above, they can be seen as attempts to make her accept his perspective and interpretation of the tale; furthermore, one can find in them covert references to the fact that he could not possibly have made up and related any other story than this one. On page 11 of the present essay, a portion of dialogue was quoted which offers an example of all this. The man defends his “decision” to tell her a tale of this world and not, as she wishes, of another one by suggesting that he basically cannot help recounting something that is psychologically important to him, something that he “understand[s] or care[s] for, or feel[s] the existence of” (61). Yet, he does not reveal that the tale is specifically about him or his past crimes. By extension, these covert references could also be read as focusing attention on the limitations of a writer in general. Although supposedly authors can write about what they want, in actual fact their works are largely determined by their own experiences, preoccupations, concerns and abilities, or by what is “deeply rooted in the fibres of [their] being[s]” (62). Let me also highlight the remarkable consonance between five utterances at two different levels of the story which all prepare for the

47. Lothe, p. 14.

48. Lothe, pp. 78, 82.

49. Lawrence Graver, *Conrad’s Short Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 195.

act of narrating and accentuate the information that is to follow. The first three of these are spoken by the intradiegetic narrator who addresses the narratee, emphasising his control over the narrative information: “So I’ll just *tell* you that the ship was of a very ornamental sort once. . .” (63); “At night the commanding officer could let his thoughts get away – I won’t *tell* you where” (64); “I may *tell* you at once that the object was not dangerous in itself” (65). The other two utterances are made, respectively, by the Northman and the commander as character in the metadiegesis: “‘I will *tell* you how it was’” (73); “‘And I’ll *tell* you what we have seen and the conclusion I’ve come to about it’” (77; my italics in all the five quotations above). Altogether, the verb ‘tell’ appears eighteen times in the story, of which fifteen are used in the meaning “to make something known in words (to someone).” Moreover, there are ten occurrences of the word ‘tale’ (including the one in the title), six of ‘story,’ five of ‘lie,’ meaning “(to make) an untrue statement,” and two of ‘narrator.’ Lothe has drawn attention to the extensive use of the verbs ‘to see’ and ‘to seem’ in “The Tale,” arguing that they are both closely related to the commander’s epistemological uncertainty.⁵⁰ While I do not attach too great a significance to a formalistic counting of words, it is certainly no coincidence that in such a short text as this, there is a marked presence of words that can be associated with narration or the problems inherent in it.

4 Conclusion

In the introduction, I indicated that the aims of this essay are twofold. Not only have I hoped to make a small contribution to Conrad studies with a perspective on “The Tale” that has so far been insufficiently explored, but also to reveal some of the fortes and deficiencies of the method used here by subjecting it to a critical test. The analysis is thought to have been carried out in accordance with Genette’s “open structuralism”⁵¹ – an openness that, in my interpretation, admits the duality of combining an arguably postmodernist interpretative undertaking with structuralist textual analysis. Even more importantly, my method seems to be justified by a distinctive quality of Conrad’s fiction, which is that in Conrad, thematic aspects are closely connected, not to say inextricably intertwined, with the narrative technique he employs. With its

50. Lothe, pp. 72–86.

51. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette refuses to call the position he takes post-structuralist and, instead, recommends the expression “open structuralism”; however, he does not elucidate the term (p. 151).

several little tales and its generic title, “The Tale” forcefully demonstrates the validity of this statement, perhaps better than any other of Conrad’s short stories. “The Tale” is a prime example of the openness and indeterminacy inherent in much of the writer’s modernist fiction. At this point, it must be noted that Conrad did continue writing after the publication of “The Tale,” and it seems that he did not even plan this one to be the last piece of his short fiction.⁵² Yet, it is very fitting that he should have finished his restless experimentation with the genre of the short story with a text in which he apparently reflects on his own activity as a writer. Indeed, this self-conscious fictional artifice thematises its own (and other tales’) coming-into-being and spotlights both the problems inherent in narration and the power of narrative.

Appendix: Glossary of Genette’s Terminology

Page numbers in the glossary refer to either *Narrative Discourse* (abbreviated as *ND*) or *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (abbreviated as *NDR*); the definitions below are largely based on these two works.

analepsis Any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment (*ND*, 40).

author’s intrusions The narrator’s commentarial excursions in the present tense; the term is not Genette’s coinage, it has been used since Blin and Brombert (*ND*, 94n).

autodiegetic Type of narrative where the narrator is the hero of the story he tells; a variety (or the strong degree) of the *homodiegetic* (*ND*, 244–45).

diegesis The universe of the first narrative or (intra)diegetic narrative (*ND*, 228n), *diegetic universe*; more generally, it means the universe in which a story takes place – and not the story itself (*diégèse* in French); unfortunately, this single English word also corresponds to the French term *diégésis*, meaning pure narrative (without dialogue), in contrast to the *mimésis* of dramatic representation (*NDR*, 17–18); in the present study, however, *diegesis* is always used in the same way as *diégèse* is in French.

diegetic Adjective derived from *diegesis* (*diégèse* in French) (*NDR*, 18); see *intra-diegetic*.

diegetic universe See *diegesis* (*diégèse* in French).

distractive Function of the second or *metadiegetic* narrative, with no thematic relation to the *diegesis* (“So tell us a story while we’re waiting for the rain to stop”; *NDR*, 93–94).

52. See Knowles and Moore, pp. 364–365.

ellipsis Elision of a diachronic section, a leap forward in time; the narrative skips over a moment of time so that a nonexistent section of narrative corresponds to some duration of story (*ND*, 43; 51–52; 93).

erzählendes Ich The *narrating I*; one of the two actants of the hero of a narrative in autobiographical form; the narrating I is separated from the *narrated I* (*erzähltes Ich*) by a difference in age and experience that usually authorises the former to treat the latter with a sort of condescending or ironic superiority; the terms *erzählendes Ich* and *erzähltes Ich* are not Genette's but Leo Spitzer's coinage (*ND*, 252).

erzähltes Ich The *narrated I*; one of the two actants of the hero of a narrative in autobiographical form (*ND*, 252); see *erzählendes Ich*.

external focalization Type of *focalization* where the narrator says less than the character knows; typical in "behaviorist" narrative (*ND*, 189); in external focalization, the focus is situated at a point in the diegetic universe chosen by the narrator, outside every character (*NDR*, 75).

extradiegetic Refers to the first narrative level at which the extradiegetic narrator's act of narrating is carried out (*ND*, 228–29); extradiegetic narrators are outside the *diegesis* and thus on an exactly equal footing with the extradiegetic (real) public (*NDR*, 84–85).

focalization A selection of narrative information with respect to what was traditionally called omniscience (*NDR*, 74); point of view that orients the narrative perspective; there are three basic types of focalization: *external*, *internal* and *zero focalization* (or *nonfocalized* narrative; *ND*, 186–189).

function of communication One of the possible functions of the narrator which concerns his orientation towards the narratee, his care in establishing or maintaining with the narratee a contact, indeed, a dialogue (*ND*, 255–59).

heterodiegetic Type of narrative where the narrator is absent from the story he tells (*ND*, 244–45).

heterodiegetic autobiography Narrative where we know or guess that the hero "is" the author, but the type of narrating that has been adopted pretends that the narrator is not the hero (*NDR*, 106–7).

homodiegetic Type of narrative where the narrator is present as a character in the story he tells (*ND*, 244–45).

ideological function One of the possible functions of the narrator which concerns his interventions, direct or indirect, with regard to the story and takes the didactic form of an authorized commentary on the action (*ND*, 255–59).

inferred author Everything the text lets us know about the real author; a certain idea of the author beyond the narrator, produced by the narrative text by various

pinpointed or global signs; not a narrative agent; also called implied author (*NDR*, 135–54).

internal focalization Type of *focalization* where the narrator says only what a given character knows; the focus coincides with a character; internal focalization can be *fixed* (the point of view of one and the same character is adopted throughout), *variable* (there is more than one focal character) or *multiple* (the same event is evoked several times according to the point of view of different characters; *ND*, 189–90; *NDR*, 74–75).

intradiegetic The same as *diegetic*, meaning “in the diegesis”; it refers to the second narrative level, produced by the *extradiegetic* narrator’s act of narrating, and to every event in the world of this first narrative, including the narrating act of the intradiegetic narrator (provided that there is such); thus, intradiegetic universe means the same as *diegetic universe* (*ND*, 228–29).

iterative narrative Type of narrative where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event; narrating one time (or at one time) what happened *n* times (*ND*, 114–17).

metadiegesis Universe of the second or metadiegetic narrative; *metadiegetic universe* (*ND*, 228n).

metadiegetic Refers to the third narrative level, produced by the *intradiegetic* narrator’s act of narrating, and to every event in the world of this second narrative, including the narrating act of the metadiegetic narrator (provided that there is such; *ND*, 228–29).

metadiegetic universe See *metadiegesis*.

meta-metadiegetic Refers to the fourth narrative level, produced by the *metadiegetic* narrator’s act of narrating, and to every event in the world of this third narrative, including the narrating act of the meta-metadiegetic narrator (provided that there is such; *ND*, 228n).

meta-metadiegetic universe Universe of the third or *meta-metadiegetic* narrative; also called meta-metadiegesis (*ND*, 228n).

mood Regulation of narrative information, the two chief modalities of which are *narrative distance* and *focalization* (*ND*, 161–211).

narrated I See *erzähltes Ich*.

narratee The receiver of the narrative; like the narrator, the narratee is one of the elements in the narrating situation, and he or she is necessarily located at the same diegetic level, that is, does not merge a priori with the reader (*ND*, 215n, 259–62).

narrating The producing narrative action and the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place (*ND*, 27).

narrating I See *erzählendes Ich*.

narrative The term refers to the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself; there are first, second, third etc. narratives, all of which are placed at a separate narrative level (*ND*, 27, 228–29).

narrative distance One of the two chief modalities of *mood*, the quantitative modulation (“how much?”) of narrative information; in the narrative of words, it depends on the degree of literalness in the reproduction of speeches; in the narrative of events, it depends on the degree to which certain features are present that generate the mimetic illusion (see *diegesis*; *ND*, 162; *NDR*, 43–46).

narrative function One of the functions of the narrator, that of the actual narrating; this is the only function that no narrator can turn away from without at the same time losing his status as narrator (*ND*, 255–59).

narratized speech The most distant and generally the most reduced type of representation of characters’ speech (uttered or “inner”); discourse taken on by the narrator himself (e.g. “I informed my mother of my decision to marry Albertine”); also called narrated speech (*ND*, 170–71).

nonfocalized Type of *focalization* where the narrator says more than any of the characters knows; nonfocalized narrative is also called narrative with *zero focalization* (*ND*, 189); the focus is placed at a point so indefinite, or so remote, with so panoramic a field that it cannot coincide with any character (*NDR*, 73).

paralipsis A narrative trope; a gap of a less strictly temporal kind, created by the omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover; the narrative sidesteps a given element (*ND*, 51–52).

prolepsis Any narrative manoeuvre that consists in narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later (*ND*, 40).

tense A class of determinations dealing with temporal relations between *narrative* and story (‘story’ here means the signified or narrative content; *ND*, 27, 30–32).

testimonial function One of the possible functions of the narrator, brought about by the narrator’s orientation towards himself; it may take the form of an attestation, as when the narrator indicates the source of his information, or the degree of precision of his own memories, or the feelings which one or another episode awakens in him; also called function of attestation (*ND*, 255–59).

voice A class of determinations dealing with the way in which the *narrating* itself is implicated in the *narrative*; refers to a mode of action in its relations with the subject of the enunciating (*ND*, 31–32).

zero focalization See *nonfocalized*.