Starring in the Intimate Space: picture book narratives and Performance Semiotics

Author: Elisabeth Parsons
Published: October 2004

Abstract (E): This article examines the impact of narratological pragmatics as applicable to both theatre and children picture book performances. The premise is interdisciplinary in that it negotiates points of intersection between performance semiotics and theoretical approaches to Children's Literature. Employing a comparative case study of Samuel Beckett's Happy Days and John Burningham's picture book Aldo, the research assesses the narratological outcomes of intersecting semiotic codes in relation to these specific texts.

Abstract (F): Cet article analyse l'impact de la pragmatique narratologique dans deux types de performance : le théâtre et le livre illustré pour enfants. Sa prémisse est interdisciplinaire dans la mesure où il cherche à dégager des points d'intersection entre la sémiotique de la performance et les approches théoriques de la littérature pour enfants. Au moyen de l'analyse comparée de deux cas précis, la pièce O les beaux jours de Beckett et le livre pour enfants Aldo de John Burningham, cette étude évalue les effets narratologiques de l'intersection de codes sémiotiques dans ces deux textes.

keywords: theatre semiotics, narratology, children's books, performance

Article

It is possible to renegotiate theatrical narratology by way of the following interdisciplinary proposition: that reading children's picture books through the lens of performance semiotics provides a new framework for examining the diverse operations of narratology inherent in both picture book and theatre performances. Adults perform picture books for children within the intimate space of personal relationships and therein construct narratives that employ an almost identical combination of varied signs as those analysed in theatre semiotics. This interrelationship arises because picture books operate as scripts and sites for performance by forming a visual and spatial backdrop, providing textual narratives, scripting dialogues, and incorporating scores for an interplay of speech, gesture and the production of abstract sounds. Theatre dynamics will here be re-examined in the microcosmic mirror which picture book performances hold up to larger and more complex theatre productions.

Equally, to reverse the direction of this interdisciplinarity, theories of narrative regularly deployed in the field of Children's Literature are able to cross-pollinate theatre-centered discourses in order to collide these traditionally separate spheres of cultural production. Numerous analytical benefits result. Firstly, the interplay of these theoretical positions is particularly pertinent to the study of narratology, a broadly ranging term that has moved beyond Todorov's original structuralist premise so as to encompass the evolution of story tropes across numerous spaces for performance. Secondly, theoretical underpinnings in the field of Children's Literature research draw on principles of narrative which adults seldom entirely relinquish in their approach to stories. In childhood we learn the ways in which stories rest on models of causality, retributive circumstances, and
closures which reward and punish certain characters and behaviors. The residues of these modes of cognition necessarily still operate in audience responses to theatre, even when they have been overlaid by adult perspectives including a range of moral and aesthetic positions.

Thus analysing the performance of picture books opens the way for alternative interpretative strategies pertinent to the constructions of narrative-meaning in theatrical contexts. For example, the reading situations in which an adult performs a text for a child proposes much about the way texts are able to manipulate actor/audience relationships by placing words and noises in the mouth, and gestures in the body, of a loved or trusted adult. The text, then, has the authority of a script for the performer. The enacting of a picture book, like acting in a play, necessarily entails a partial transformation of the adult reader/actor. This process of semiotic shifting involves a make-believe similar to children's role-playing games. Erika Fischer-Lichte explains this process in terms of performance: The audience thus takes the actors external appearance as a sign which can be allocated the meaning of character X's specific identity (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 64). In picture books, this identity can incorporate multiple characters, an omniscient narrative voice, or various combinations of these subjectivities. For theatre, this points to audience processing of characterization codes including: the actors physical attributes and their individual fame, costume semiotics, vocally produced accents or dialects, and the relationships between actors as they are positioned on, and shifted around, the stage.

Interpreting the complex combinations of codes in performance environments requires audiences to navigate multiple semiotic narratives in active and participatory ways. This is particularly true of the often highly simplistic texts of picture books that require visual codes to be directly employed in the narratological structure (the pictures often give information unstated by the text), as well as in contemporary experimental theatre in which audiences meld diverse visual and verbal codes in order to reach an overall, coherent meaning attributable to the performance. Such audience participation is aligned with Marco de Marinis' claim for theatrical performances: that coherence is viewed less and less often as a quality immanent within texts, and increasingly understood as an element which the receiver assigns to texts (De Marinis 1993:59). Kier Elam extends this position by arguing for the existence of a semiotic as opposed to logical theory of possible worlds of performance (Elam 1980: 101). It is these worlds of performance which will be read as narratological, and then decoded according to locations, populations and cultural contexts in the following case study.

John Burninghams picture book Aldo (Burningham 1991) will be examined alongside Samuel Beckett's Happy Days performed at the Public Theatre, New York in 1980, directed by David Heeley (currently available on video through www.BroadwayArchive.com). The comparison unravels common semiotic modes of scripted performances in ways that attend to shared elements between these texts including: the operations of monologue, imagined dimensions of interpersonal relationships, and the depiction of inner disquiet as externally manifest in surreal settings. Both stories involve a protagonist whose life is dominated by the poles of hope and despair; in Aldo she is a child, in Happy Days a woman. These two ends of the age spectrum mark the respective performances in alternative ways but are less antithetical than sympathetic in terms of narratorial features.

Where Beckett gives costume and physical descriptors for the woman who performs Happy Days in ways that shape the most typical performances of the play (and are very literally realized in Irene Worth's performance of Winnie at the
New York Public Theatre), picture books can be understood as complicit with typical reading situations. Such situations commonly entail an adult/older reader who has some level of authority over child listeners, particularly the intellectual authority conferred by the ability to read (which younger children, who are most often the audience for picture books, either lack or are in the process of learning). This disparity confers some of the reader's authority onto the story itself because the words are, as child audiences experience the performance, being spoken by the adult figure and are thus arguably endorsed by them. While this bears some relationship to the fame of the actor inflecting the role/performance, in the case of these two texts there is another dimension to the operation of this human component.

Given that the content of both Happy Days and Aldo manifest and acknowledge the loneliness of existence, this loneliness is simultaneously undermined by the shared performance experience of both the theatre auditorium and the lap and arm-croc (a common stage for picture book performances). Proximity to humanity as a performance factor in these ruminations on loneliness thus both counterbalances and heightens thereby creating performance tension the narratological thrust of these pieces. Because narratology is concerned with how the events of the story are narrated, Gerard Genette's question to the novel, who speaks is refigured by a physical performance entailing the voice of an actual person, and the attendant semiotic baggage of that physical form.

In Happy Days, the female performer is required by the staging notes to be past her physical prime. Her characters lamentations and recollections of the lewd remarks of the man, named either Shower or Cooker (and his female companion), who had appeared some time previous to the setting of the performance, are textual indications of a past that is external to the frame of the performance. But the corporeal presence of this type of woman, embodied by Irene Worth, indicates more than age. Ideological codes depicting culture, gender, race, and class operate through indicators like the stipulated pearls and a low bodice on a well preserved (Beckett, 1970: 9) approximately fifty year old woman. These physical attributes are similarly coded by the picture book performance that hinges on the likelihood of a middleclass household and attentive mother as the most common conditions for reading. Children's Literature theorist Hugo Crago delineates these specific gender and class implications when he refers to the predominance of mothers reading to children as a middle-class phenomenon (Crago 1985: 120) with an attendant powerful positive feedback loop (to use the language of general systems theory): adult enthusiasm for story, adult perception of story (embodied in the way it is read, the emphases that are given) elicits a pattern of response from the child listened in which the child’s perceptions are focused and the child’s enthusiasm is maximized (Crago 1985: 122).

In theatrical performances, the variety of actual manifestations of any picture book or script is infinite, but working within the confines of typical situations here allows the discussion to focus directly on the pragmatics of this human baggage within each text. In Aldo, the first page of the story has an empty, white background with only one fine horizontal line to represent the ground. The protagonist is standing in the centre of the page facing the reader/audience, depicted in the style of a child’s drawing. She is a plain, unprepossessing girl wearing a skirt and knee-high socks with black school sandals (see figure 1.).
The codes that indicate a child's drawing are anti-realist and thus operate metafictively to subtly indicate to child audiences a drawing of a girl rather than a girl. However, by animating the drawing with a real voice (in the performance of the text), the line between realism and anti-mimetic representation blur. The text positioned above her head expresses the narrative problem in one sentence: I spend a lot of time on my own (Burningham 1991: 1). The white, western and middleclass ideological parameters of the character are as evident as when the curtain raises to show Winnie wearing pearls as stipulated by Beckett's directions.

Both narratives examine the relationship these female protagonists have with male counterparts who offer limited emotional support. Each male figure is (at least partially) invented by the desires of the females. Aldo is an imaginary friend rabbit who fulfills the role of concerned adult, while Willie is required to respond and acknowledge Winnie regularly enough to prevent her from descending into what she imagines is a psychic wilderness. Winnie says:

"Ah yes, if only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear. (Pause.) Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God forbid. (Pause.) Days perhaps when you hear nothing. (Pause.) But days too when you answer. (Pause.) So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could not bear to do for any length of time" (Beckett 1966: 18).

Willie's constant presence is thus not an absolute requirement for Winnie's speaking to him, she is often only talking to herself and, as she says shortly after: "Oh I know it does not follow when two are gathered together (faltering) in this way (normal) that because one sees the other the other sees the one, life has taught me that" (Beckett 1966: 23).

That both male characters exist, (in Willie's case in terms of the role he must play for Winnie) in the protagonist's imagination is underscored by the emptied and surreal settings of these performances. A woman half buried in a grass-covered mound devoid of all other inhabitants (bar the male counterpart) is
echoed by the strange clouded and coloured landscapes visited in *Aldo* (figures 2. and 3.). These seem to be, as Winnie's lines suggest, emblematic of psychic desolation.

figure 2. *Aldo* p.17
The imagined male character in both texts is accessible in ways that align the audience with the female protagonists. That Aldo never actually speaks (and Willie seldom does) is part of this construction and shifts both men back from the frame of performance considerably. But Aldo's visually constructed presence and Willie's actual stage presence, puts these characters on a visual (if not textual) par with the protagonist. Willie and Aldo are, however, both ostensibly powerless against the socially/culturally produced causes of distress in the lives of their female counterparts.

The performances also share a dependence on the logic of everyday props that are indicative of banal cultural norms. Beckett's requirement for specific objects in Winnie's bag which serve the purpose of filling her day involve, in most instances, domestic items like the toothbrush, hairbrush and lipstick. The counterpart for the protagonist in Aldo is equally representative of consumerist western culture (some years later, and for a protagonist some years younger): Of course I watch television (next page) and I have lots of toys and books and things (Burningham 1991: 2,3) The implication of this description, combined with uninviting illustrations, is that this girls life, like Winnie's, lacks meaningful fulfillment that male counterparts go some way to filling. At this point the pragmatics inflect the narrative directly through a requirement for audience self-reflexivity. The narrative depends on the audience being complicit with these indicators of normal life. The toothbrush and hairbrush, in Winnie's case, are emblematic of this normality, while the books the protagonist in Aldo refers to are mirrored by the book, Aldo, being held in front of the child audience for the duration of the performance.

Both texts position this tedious and lonely existence in the performance present
against remembrances of an awful event with other characters. For Winnie this is the incident with Shower or Cooker discussed above. In _Aldo_ the sentence: _Aldo_ is my friend only, and he's a secret. I know he will always come to me when things get really bad. Like when they were horrid to me the other day (Burningham, 1991: 9), is followed by a page devoid of textual content in which there is an illustration of two girls pushing the protagonist in the toilets. A similar silence accompanies a page in which the child's parents are fighting, another real world problem _Aldo_ is unable to solve. The line-drawn profiles indicate the father and mother shouting at each other, and the entire page is monochromatically shaded with an uncomfortable reddish pink like that of faces flushed in anger (figure 4.).

And here is the critical pivot for reading the text as a performance: the silence accompanying this illustration of a terrible event is emblematic of the child protagonist's sense of disconnection from her parents. But this sense is challenged for the child audience by the typical reading situation, a parent reading the story to a child. The intimacy of this situation underscores, heightens and simultaneously cushions the representation of the events within the text. There is thus a fissure built into the simulacra of this bleak realism, one that depends on the performance to circumvent and simultaneously inscribe emotional responses as part of the narrative trajectory.

The equivalent silence in _Happy Days_ is the repeated failure of Willie to respond to Winnie's desire for conversation and companionship. This silence is, nevertheless, challenged by the audience who are positioned to hear what Willie may or may not bear witness to. The audience, by listening to Winnie (as she hopes Willie is listening) becomes responsible for protecting Winnie from the psychic wilderness she fears is the result of speaking into silence. But the conventions of theatre performance require the audience to remain silent they cannot (typically) respond. They must behave like Willie in failing to reply in a way that implicates them both in Winnie's suffering and Willie's cruelty or inability, depending on how this gesture is interpreted. The implications are also
political. Audiences are required to assess their complicity with Willie as contributing to social isolation, just as disconnection in Aldo is reassessed via the performance which mediates between loneliness and physical closeness.

In the Beckett, the isolation of the characters, their dislocation from any normal or recognizable world, is equally disavowed by the characterisation tropes required by the performance. Namely, the middleclass woman, with a tedious and unfulfilling life, is placed within the context of the theatre, a place of entertainment as dependent on middleclass values for its existence as the play is dependent on middleclass inertia for its critique. The interplays between performance situations then become what Marie-Laure Ryan posits in her article On Defining Narrative Media (issue six of Image & Narrative) as the grammatical domain of pragmatics. Ryan suggests that such operations principally come to the fore via the study of narrative as performance.

To reconsider this point in terms of Children’s Literature theory, John Stephens argues that: identification with focalizers [is the means by which] at least for the duration of the reading time, the readers own selfhood is effaced and the reader internalizes the perceptions and attitudes of the focalizer and is thus reconstituted as a subject within the text (Stephens 1992: 68). His contention refers to children reading privately and, in alignment with Ryan’s claim, this dynamic must shift considerably to accommodate the picture book performance (and nature of any theatrical event) wherein both the audience and the performer(s) are immersed in the textually constructed environment together. This deconstructs narratological focalization considerably.

In Aldo the physical and relational codes embedded in the performer are displaced by the child audience examining the picture of the child protagonist while simultaneously hearing the first person I as spoken by the adult reader. The slippage works in numerous ways: the child protagonist absorbs some of the authority of the adult voice who speaks under the guise of a pictorial identity. At the same time, the adult reader occupies the position of the child, that is, the adult reader must play a child, and thus become like the child listener. This repositions the narrative in relation to empathy and equivalence beyond the separations of sympathy.

Beckett’s agenda is somewhat different. His narrative invites both this kind of recognition of shared experiences, but is simultaneously a mockery and critique of the values and lifestyle that produce such ennui. As such, these logics of identification are principally both stabilizing and destabilizing. For members of the same class who make up the typical audience at the theatre, self and other are sitting uncomfortably close to each other in the auditorium. The audience is not alone (as Winnie essentially is with her ineffectual husband). Neither is the child listening to Aldo, especially because the silence scripted into the spaces between turning pages arguably positions the adult reader to explain to the child the visual representation of fraught human relationships, in effect to counteract the silence of the text and to shift the operations of focalization by way of the performance and its agendas. This must necessarily be read as improvisatory space that, despite the alterations possible in every performance, is nonetheless powerfully inflecting the narrative production of the script/picture book.

The psychologically disturbing elements built into both performances fears centered around loneliness and disjunction between people in western culture are thus reconfigured by the actors/performances. Manfred Jahn sees the need for a genre-conscious narratorial framework (Jahn 2001: 674) to employ narratology effectively, but, apparent here is that consciousness of genre differences does not dislodge the interdisciplinary premise that indicates shared semiotic functions in
narratological constructions of meaning across picture books and stage performances.

In the same article Jahn examines slippages between authors and narrators, proposing that if fiction is to be derived from an underlying concept a big if then why must it be reducible to pretence and not say, make-believe, fabrication, imitation, simulation, or impersonation? (Jahn 2001: 665). This slippage he names can be seen as continuing its trajectory to incorporate the actor of the performance, particularly, in these two texts, with regard to simulation - given the mimetic operations described above. As Stephens argues:

"Picture books are produced for an audience beginning to grapple with self-other interactions, and this is a major theme and significance of the mode.[Child] Audiences may observe, and as subjects experiment with, efforts to effect co-operation between self and other, or the temporary adoption of assumed roles." (Stephens 1992: 199)

This adoption of roles is modeled by adult readers, and commonly (as in the case of *Aldo*) visually made accessible to children as empathetic subjects by the use of illustrations of child protagonists and characters.

Adults reading picture books are regularly required to speak the voices of children, demonstrating a strange mimesis that jars against their authority and alternative (adult/child) subjectivity. This extends upon the freedoms of childhood games of make-believe referred to by Jahn above. Making believe or suspending disbelief are cognitive processes that underpin picture books and theatre works as audiences are engaged in assessment of self and other within the proximities of the performance situation, the tangible presence of the actor. Similarly, willing suspensions of disbelief heighten adult pleasure in theatre performances because they allow a psychological engagement with the narratorial meaning (for example, in these texts, this engagement is produced by the pathos of the events). Human investment, both by the actor and the audience, is then arguably crucial to narratological shape.

Theorizing this investment has particular implications for the aesthetics of indeterminacy, especially in the form of textual invitations including those that require readers to participate in meaning construction. Texts delineate the cues and parameters within which meaning construction must function. These semiotics can then be seen to intersect with narratology across the shared territory of visual/aural codes of signification, the coherence/incoherence between visual and verbal messages, intertextual references, and the culturally coded assumptions and representations dealt by the performance.

By way of a conclusion that must necessarily stall the ruminations just as they have begun to take shape, such pragmatic factors have a political dynamic assessable at the juncture of each performances relationship to the dominant cultural discourse. That is, by examining how performances are aligned or opposed to this dominance. Such analysis is now directly inflected by the conditions of the postmodern performance stage and picture book, specifically by the play of metafiction referred to above. The actors provide visual and aural evidence of the texts constructed nature. For adults, recognizing that the actors are not really the characters is child's play, for child audiences of picture books, the knowledge that their parents (or the reader of the book who is known to them) isn't really the I they are annunciating, make this metafictiveness utterly pervasive in the operations of the narrative. Precisely how this can be assessed is, however, a question for another paper.
References


