

THE NARRATORS IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE MOONSTONE*

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A general critical platitude about the novel, from the modernist period onwards, has been that one of its most noticeable characteristics has been the disappearance of the omniscient third person narrator, so common in the nineteenth-century novel'. The previous century did see a few writers experimenting with narrative techniques, for example, Emily Bronte in Wuthering Heights, Dickens too explored the ironic gap in the first person narrative structure of an older Pip writing about his younger self, and also used a dual narrative structure in Bleak House. By and by large, nineteenth-century novelists were intrusive omniscient presences in their stories, directing the reader's emotional and moral responses. It is therefore surprising that in The Moonstone, published in 1868, Wilkie Collins anticipates the modernist pre-occupation with narrative techniques and the subsequent development of the later form of the novel. In The Moonstone, the author does not appear at all in his own person or voice, but instead dramatises several very different first person narrators. It is thus presented without authorial comment or explicit evaluation of events and characters. Collins has chosen an objective, impersonal and dramatic mode of narration.

The initial first person narrator proper, Gabriel Betteredge, records a conversation with Franklin Blake, which describes the narrative method employed in the novel, and is thus worth quoting, Franklin says:

We have certain events to relate and we have certain persons concerned in those events who are capable of relating them. Starting from those plain facts, the idea is that we should all write the story of the Moonstone in turn as far as our own personal experience extends, and no further. We must begin by showing how the Diamond first fell into the hands of my uncle Herncastle, when he was serving in India fifty years since. This prefatory narrative I have already got by me in the form of an old family paper, which relates the necessary particulars on the authority of an eye witness. The next thing to do is to tell how the Diamond found its way to my aunt's house in Yorkshire two years since, and how it came to be lost a little more than twelve hours afterwards. Nobody knows as much as you Betteredge, about what went on in the house at the time. So you must take the pen in hand, and start the story (p. 8)2.

Thus each narrator will relate the part he or she played in the disappearance of the Moonstone and its aftermath. The narrators do not share their creator's total knowledge; whereas Collins presumably knows from the beginning how everything will turn out, his narrators have limited knowledge. The novel sets out to confuse the reader; an obvious way of doing this is to use narrators who have only partial knowledge and are themselves mystified.

Collins skilfully uses his narrators to tell the reader all he or she needs to know, whilst simultaneously making them appear to be acting only in their own characters and roles. An example of this is found in Betteredge's narrative when he writes:

My daughter Penelope has just looked over my shoulder to see what I have done so far. She remarks that it is beautifully written, and every word of it true. But she points out one objection. She says what I've done so far isn't in the least what I was wanted to do. I am asked to tell the story of the Diamond, and instead of that, I have been telling the story of my own self (p. 13).

Therefore he concludes, he must make another attempt at his narrative. These abortive efforts are very true to a non-literary man, and also serve to fill in the background and give Betteredge a context. This necessary information has to be indirectly communicated, since Collins has effaced himself from the text.

Betteredge writes the longest sustained narrative in The Moonstone. In doing so, he reveals his character and gains the reader's affection. His narrative introduces us to an uneducated but literate style of writing which is conversational in tone and studded with parentheses. It is soon apparent that Betteredge is not capable of setting down events in a purely orderly fashion.

Betteredge also has a tendency to moralise, interrupting his story to do so. It is part of the worldly wisdom he has gained in a lifetime of service and it is not ungenerous. His sententiousness is not entirely negative and fault finding as is that of the bigoted Miss Clack.

There is variety in the self-consciousness of the narrators. They vary from those who are intensely aware of themselves as narrators and observers, to those who never discuss their writing or seem even to be aware that they are creating a "literary" work.

Betteredge is an example of the highly self-conscious narrator. This makes his account realistically awkward at times, when he finds it difficult to order events. As a self-conscious narrator Betteredge also directly addresses the reader: "Pay attention to it, or you will be abroad, when we get deeper into the story" (p. 32). By this device Collins is able to emphasise details essential to an understanding of the story, but again without directly alerting the reader to his own person or voice.

As Betteredge's narrative continues he creates the illusion of a growing intimacy with his readers: "What did I want? I didn't tell him, but I'll tell you, in confidence. I wanted a whiff of my pipe, and a turn at Robinson Crusoe" (p. 39). From time to time Betteredge moves from the particulars he is detailing to make a generalisation based in his own experience: "your tears come easy, when you're young, and beginning the world. Your tears come easy, when you're old and leaving it," (p. 177). This balanced antithesis shows why the other characters so often depend on his judgement, despite certain eccentricities.

Another self-conscious narrator is Miss Clack. There is a shift in perspective from an old male servant to the middle-aged spinster, Miss Clack. Religion is the mainspring of her life: she is priggish, self-righteous and repeatedly obtrudes her judgements on the reader. In her, Collins satirises bigoted religion. She is financially insecure but feels class solidarity with the rulers of Victorian society, eager to retain religion as a dominant force in the status quo, while falling far short of its ideals herself.

She is also a self-conscious narrator: "Everything shall be put neatly, and everything shall be put in its place. These lines are written by a poor weak woman who will be cruel enough to expect more?" (p. 218). It is soon evident that this humility is entirely false.

Although Betteredge is limited by his lack of education and narrow experience of a larger world, he is generally a reliable narrator, which Miss Clack is certainly not. It is through her we are given the fullest, though unreliable picture of the character who will turn out to be the villain of the story:

Mr Godfrey followed the announcement of his name -as Mr Godfrey does everything else - exactly at the right time. He was not so close on the servant's heels to startle us. He was not so far behind as to cause us the double inconvenience of a pause and an open door. It is in the completeness of his daily life that the true Christian appears. This dear man was very complete (p. 226).

On reconsidering The Moonstone we perceive the irony of such remarks. They arise from Miss Clack's faulty judgement. She has already condemned Betteredge as "a heathen old man" (p. 218), complained about the spiritual poverty of Franklin and expresses an irrational dislike of Rachel. Miss Clack comments: 'My Christian friends, indeed, indeed, we must not judge others" (p. 230). This is of course the very thing she is doing.

Miss Clack continues to comment on other people, self-consciously, self-righteous but lacking real insight. Collins nicely contrasts Rachel's attitude to Ablewhite with Miss Clack's, without himself voicing an opinion of their comparative merits or reliability. The reader has to be alert as the author is not making his book an easy read.

In the presentation of Miss Clack, however, is well exemplified Collins's skilful use of the first person narrator to tell the reader all he or she needs to know, whilst simultaneously making them act only their own roles and characters. Important conversations between principals have to be made available to the reader, despite the limited narrators. Collins is careful to make the overhearing of such conversations credible; Miss Clack is quite naturally made to witness a crucial conversation between Rachel and Ablewhite.

It occurs in this way: after Lady Verinder has admitted to Miss Clack that she is terminally ill, the latter sees an opportunity for converting the sick woman. To this end, Miss Clack goes to Lady Verinder's house to place there letters with religious quotations. While thus occupied, Miss Clack hears a visitor being admitted to the house. Thinking it is probably the doctor who rejected Miss Clack's earlier pamphlets on his patient's behalf, the spinster does not wish to meet him, perhaps to receive insulting comments.

So "I slipped into the little third room, which I have mentioned as communicating with the back drawing room and dropped the curtains which closed the open doorway" (p. 257). Thus very naturally and in a way true to her character Miss Clack overhears the dialogue which conveys essential information to the reader. Again Collins conveys this information without intruding himself directly into the narrative.

Apart from Gabriel Betteredge and Miss Clack, the narrators are not self conscious. Matthew Ruff is a down-to-earth man whose narrative is brief and to the point. He sums up character in an astute and accurate way. He had always suspected Ablewhite

of being "a smooth-tongued impostor" (p. 308) and this view contrasts with and corrects that given earlier by Miss Clack.

I3ruff also recognises that Rachel differs from ordinary girls and hints at possible explanations of her apparently strange behaviour. He says most girls would discuss something that interests them with a confidante, but by contrast Rachel displays "Self dependence in her character" (p. 303) and keeps her own counsel. In this way I3ruff helps direct the reader's judgement of events and characters, without self consciously setting out to do so as Miss Clack does.

Like I3ruff, Franklin I3lake is presumably accustomed to the chore of writing and takes the task easily. His only trace of self consciousness arises with regard to Betteredge's estimation of his character being shaped by a foreign education. Apart from this, he is anxious merely to record his share in events surrounding the Moonstone's disappearance. He cannot clear up the mystery on his own because of the crucial night he was under the influence of opium. Thus although he strives to be a reliable narrator he is genuinely confused at the evidence which points to him as the thief.

The fourth narrator is Ezra Jennings. This varies the narrative technique, so it does not become monotonous, by making Jennings' contribution to the story take the form of extracts from his diary, the relevant pages of which have been passed on to Franklin by Dr Candy after his colleague's death. Like Lady Verinder, Jennings is fatally ill, but unlike her, he is able to promote the happiness of Rachel and Franklin before he dies.

The novel ends with several short extracts from various sources. The sixth narrative is contributed by Sergeant Cuff. He had worked out who the thief was and now explains the two different aspects to Ablewhite's character: the respectable religious one and the man of fashion who had debts and a mistress. With the death of Ablewhite, the Moonstone is retrieved by the Indians and returned to its true resting place, from which it had been removed many years earlier.

In conclusion, The Moonstone differs from many nineteenth-century novels in its use of several first person narrators dramatised in their own right. They communicate the whole story to the reader without the assistance of an omniscient third person narrator. Collins has anticipated many twentieth-century novelists who have disappeared from their texts. As we have seen, he is a skilful practitioner of this type of narrative and conveys information in a way which seems to arise naturally from the narrators' characters and experiences. It would be interesting to know whether Collins's multifaceted narrative technique gained anything from the protean nature of the varying roles he adopted in real life, particularly as the partner of two women³.

NOTES

1. See Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction University of Chicago Press, London, 1983
2. All page references are to the Oxford World Classics edition of The Moonstone
3. William Clarke, The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins, Sutton Publishing, Pocket Classics 1996