

# Narrative Analysis in Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*

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## Abstract:

Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* belongs to the genre of gothic literature. Even though it primarily belongs to the gothic genre, it can also be viewed and interpreted from the lens of various other genres. Narratology deals with the study of narratives and narrative structures. The text contains several aspects of Narrative structures from the beginning till the end of the plot. The present paper analyses the narrative techniques like multiple narrators, embedded narrative structure, multiple narrators, multiple narratives, time shifts, and flashback technique in *The Historian*.

**Key Words:** Suspense, Plot, narration, narrator, experience, encounter, description, present, past, Narratology.

## Introduction

*The Historian* has several connections to narrative techniques. The plot in the novel has several traits that are evident to the ideas and functions of Narratology. The paper attempts a narratological study in Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*.

The plot of *The Historian* is different from other gothic novels, everyone will be interested in gothic stories, though it scares the readers, gothic novel will interest the readers most. When compared with different other genres, it is the gothic genre which will create the realistic atmosphere around the readers. Kostova's *The Historian* is her debut novel which was published in the year 2005. It revolves around the character's quest for Dracula. The plot of *The Historian* connects the history and folklore of Vlad Tepes and his fictional equivalent Count Dracula. Kostova's interest over Dracula made her to write this novel. She has spent nearly ten years to write this novel. *The Historian* is the combination of Post modern historical novel, Epistolary novel, Gothic novel, Adventurous novel, and Travelogue. It has become a huge success and it is placed under New York's best selling list and it has been translated into 44 different languages.

The *Historian* is divided into three parts, the first part begins in Paris, with the narrator and it moves on with the experience of Professor Rossi with Dracula and the second part is the experience of Paul and Helen with Dracula and the third part is the narrator's experience of encountering Dracula. The novel employs narrative structures to tell this tale; it includes many plot twists and turns along the way.

The narrative style of every gothic novel remains the same over centuries, but Kostova has changed it, the story has multiple narrators, Paul and the unnamed narrator, whose name is not revealed till the end of the novel. The story revolves around a book that has Count Dracula on its front cover, the narrator finds that book in the library which is owned by her father in their house, when she asks her father about that he starts telling of his experience with the book in his youth, he starts with saying how and where he found this book, then Paul said that he took that book to his Professor named Rossi, his professor told that he even had the same experience of encountering this book then he says his experience and his adventures of going to Istanbul to know more about this book. The story goes this way and atlast .Dracula is killed by Helen, who turns out to be the mother of the narrator.

### **Application of Narrative techniques:**

Narratology is the study of narratives and narrative structures coined by Tzvetan Todorov in the year 1969 to design “a systematic study of narrative firmly anchored in the tradition of the Russian and Czech formalism of the early twentieth century and French Structuralism and semiotics of the sixties”. Gerald Genette defines it as the study of forms and the functioning of narratives.

Technique is the means through which the novelists tell the story. The skill of the writer depends on the employment of narrative styles in the story. Likewise, the narrative style that has been exhibited by Kostova in her novel proves her interest on her writings and her intelligence. This paper analyses Back Story, Flashback Technique, Embedded Narrative Technique in *The Historian*.

The narrator in the beginning provides a back story for the audience. Back Story is a set of events that is told in the beginning of the novel. It is often used by the writers in order to provide information regarding the past. Back Story may open up through direct narration or flashback. Eleanor Henderson in her article suggests that

Novelists of course, can afford to spend a greater proportion of their pages in back story since they are under less pressure to make each word matter. Furthermore, the grander scale of the novel, the necessary architecture of plot and subplot, often require a more detailed attention to the events of the past. (Henderson)

Back Story in *The Historian* gives an information regarding the life style of the narrator and it also provides an information that the narrator doesn't have mother and she lives with her father, even he doesn't stay at home most of the time, he often goes for a business trip to various nations. So, the narrator stays with her maid named Mrs. Clay and also she spends most of the time in the library.

The narrative begins with the present day, and the plot moves on to the past, the plot actually alters between past and present. Paul, the father of the narrator shares his experience that he has encountered in his youth with Count Dracula in the form of flashback. While Paul was narrating the story, he tells about his Professor Rossi, one who devoted his whole life to his profession, Prof. Rossi tells about his experience of encountering Dracula in his youth. "I found it in my desk when I was a graduate student." A shiver went over me" (Kostova 18).

The narration of Paul and Rossi provides the internal narrative, which is focussed in the past. The technique that is employed for this kind of narration is frame narrative technique or story within a story. "Stories are not always presented 'straight'. Often writers make use of 'frame narratives' (also called 'Primary narratives'), which contain within them 'embedded narratives' (also called 'secondary narratives')" (Barry 257). The story that is narrated by the unnamed narrator is frame narrative, the primary narration is illustrated in the following passages,

My father did not leave Amsterdam again for several weeks, and during that time I felt that he shadowed me in a new way, I came home from school a little later than usual one day and found Mrs. Clay on the phone with him. She put me on at once. "Where have you been?" my father asked. (Kostova 58)

The story that is narrated by Paul to the narrator is considered as embedded narrative or secondary narration. Actually the story not only has the story of Paul, there are many different stories. Elizabeth Kostova has brilliantly used the technique of narration in her novel. There are many embedded narratives under frame narratives in the story.

*The Historian* has multiple narrators, the primary narrator is the unnamed narrator and the secondary narrators are Paul, Rossi, Hugh James, Turgut Bora, Anton Stoichev, and Helen's mother.

In addition to multiple narrators, the novel also employs various multiple narratives in the form of diaries and letters. Most of the storyline is presented in the form of letters and diaries. Most of the letter's are addressed to "My Dear and Unfortunate Successor" The novel has narrated the life history of three generations. Rossi belongs to the first generation, where almost the complete narration of Rossi's is in the form of letters, One instance of Rossi's letter is illustrated in the following passages:

My dear friend,

I haven't yet seen any place to post my first letter ---- to post it with the confidence, that is, that it will ever reach your hands ---- but I'll go hopefully on here despite that, since a great deal has happened. I spent all day yesterday in Bucarest trying to locate good maps ---- I now have at least some road maps of Wallachia and Transylvania ---- and talking with everyone I could find at the university who might have some interest in the history of Vlad Tepes. No one here seems to want to discuss the subject, and I have the sense of their inwardly, if not outwardly, crossing themselves when I mention Dracula's name. After my experiences in Istanbul, this makes me a little nervous, I confess, but I will press on for now. (Kostova 410)

The time shift between the narrator and Paul's narrative represents a shift between Past and the present. Time Shift is otherwise known as Narrative Shift. Narrative Shift is a shift in perspective while telling a story or any story. The shift may occur by changing a location, change of narrator, or change of time etc... The novel begins with the narration of the narrator around 1970s and Paul narrates the event that has happened around 1950s and Rossi's narration is about 1930s. In the middle of the novel there may be description of Dracula and many characters in the novel has described and told the life history of Count Dracula which has happened around 1400s. There is a break for each time shift, that creates suspense among the readers.

Flashback is another significant narrative technique in the novel, most of the stories in the novel are presented as flashbacks. Flashback technique is which takes the story back in time from the present. It is often used to recall the events that happened before the story's sequence of events to fill in crucial back story. According to Fludernik, "The flashback or analepsis, in which prior happenings are recounted, often as part of something the hero or heroine remembers, sometimes the purpose is to explain unexpected events which have been related" (Fludernik 34). The Historian undergoes much flashbacks. One instance of the flashback is Paul and Helen moves from Istanbul to Budapest to meet Helen's mother. There, she says some of the incidents that occurred in past that turns out to be flashback.

When I was a girl, I lived in the tiny village of P--- in Transylvania, very close to the Arges River. I had many brothers and sisters, most of whom still live in that region. My father always said that we were descended from old and noble families, but my ancestors had fallen on hard times, and I grew up without shoes or warm blankets. It was a poor region, and the only people there who lived well were a few Hungarian families, in their big villas downriver. (Kostova 387)

The above passages are the part of the story told by Helen's mother regarding her youthful days and about how she met Prof. Rossi? and about the birth of Helen and about her move to Budapest from Romania to Helen and Paul. The History has many flashbacks, ofcourse, the novel is almost completely blended with flashbacks.

## Conclusion

Narrative Techniques have been employed by Kostova in her novel *The Historian* in a brilliant way. Kostova's adaptation of narrative techniques proves her intelligence and it may also make other writers to get inspired by Kostova. Thus the present paper proves the significant role played by the narrative techniques in *The Historian*.

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