

The Aran Islands: The Art of Story-telling

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Abstract:

J. M. Synge's short story 'The Aran Islands' has first-person narration. The narrator is one of the characters involved in the action of the story directly or indirectly. The narrator makes use of the technique of dramatic monologue in which a single character speaks to a silent listener. The crucial part of the story is that the narrator gives the objective account of the incidents happening in the house on the particular night. The objective narration does not influence readers to form an opinion about the husband and the wife when he first saw them. He calls them a dead man and a woman. This technique of the story-telling assists the narrator to introduce the elements of suspense and surprise. The narrator employs dialect and colloquial expressions to render a flavour of a regional variety of the language. The story is loaded with the odd expressions which deviate from the Standard English. The point of view of the narrator does not result in perspectives on, evaluations of, events and characters, especially characters.

Key words: Point of view, dramatic monologue, objectivity, colloquial expression, deviation

Point of view is a prominent concern in fiction. Sometimes, the writer chooses to tell the story from the point of view of someone who is involved in the action and plays an active role in the action. Point of view is understood to be the position and outlook of the narrator in relation to the scene or the event he describes. It refers to the way a story is told, the mode of its narration. Broadly speaking, there are two major modes of narration: third person and first-person narration. Second-person narration is less popular as a mode of narration.

J. M. Synge's short story 'The Aran Islands' has utilized the technique of the first-person narration. The pronouns 'I', 'me' and 'my' stamp the narrative technique employed by the author. The story ends with 'That is my story' which substantiates the subjective point of view of the narrator. In this technique, the narrator is one of the characters involved in the action of the story directly or indirectly.

The narrator of this story is a stranger who steps in the action due to his vulnerable state of affairs on his journey. He is an impersonal narrator and tries to be objective in narration. He offers details of incidents and facts happening in the story. When once he was travelling on foot from Galway to Dublin, he had to take shelter of a house against the road due to heavy rain. The story recounts what happened in the house on the particular night. The narrator makes use of the technique of a dramatic monologue in which a single character speaks to a silent listener. The story has a silent listener to whom the narrator refers to at one point in the text. The speaker shares his experience about how he got shelter in the house and was received warmly by the lady. She offered him a cup of tea and bread. He also tells us how she requested him to wait upon her 'dead' husband for a while. Eventually, he was left alone in the house with the dead man. At this point of time, the narrator says, "I was smoking it (cigar) with my hand on the back of my chair – the way you are yourself this minute, God bless you!" It clearly shows the presence of an assumed listener who is silent and does not speak in the story.

The short story is presented from the narrator's point of view and not from the point of view of the wife or the husband. The crucial part of the story is that the narrator gives the objective account of the incidents happening in the house on that particular night. He does not comment on the characters and actions at any point. When he peeps through the window, he sees the husband and wife for the first time. He only unfolds their positions in the house without stating his impression about their appearance, attitude or expression. He does not colour other characters by his perception. "I saw a dead man laid on a table, and candles lighted, and a woman watching him." This is unusual for the first-person narration. The objective narration does not influence readers to form an opinion about the husband and the wife when he first saw them. He calls them a dead man and a woman. This manifests the narrator's centre of attention on the

narration itself and the description of the incidents. To serve this purpose, he makes use of direct speeches (DS) as uttered by the characters themselves. For instance, when he gets encountered with the woman of the house for the first time, he greets her and gets a reply from the woman as “Good evening, ma’am” says I. “Good evening kindly, stranger,” says she. “Come in out of the rain.”

Moreover, the narrator employs the dialect and colloquial expressions to render a flavour of a regional variety of the language. The colloquial expressions, such as, ‘hard rain’ instead of ‘heavy rain’ and ‘any sort of’ instead of ‘some sort of’ are foregrounded in order to contribute in delineating the simple and rustic life of people. The story is loaded with the odd expressions which deviate from the Standard English. For instance, the word ‘afear’d’ issued for ‘afraid’ by the husband and the wife. When the woman notices that the guest is thirsty, she says, “But it’s thirsty you’ll be, stranger” instead of “you must be thirsty” etc. This deviation from the Standard English imprints the life of common people and their colloquial use of language. It also ascertains their simplicity and straightforwardness. They believe the stranger with pleasure and treat him courteously. Their behaviour leads us to be of the opinion that they are simple and unambiguous. However, the irony occurs when the story unfolds that the husband and the wife do not believe each other. Towards the end of the story, we become cognizant of their conspiracy against each other with the support of the stranger in their plots. The discovery and recognition of their nature upraise a doubt about the conceived opinion of simplicity. The speaker falls prey to the impression they shed on him. He is caught in a trap where he doesn’t understand what he should do or to whom he should believe. After the warm welcome by the woman, the narrator immediately becomes ready to be alone with the dead body of her husband. Nevertheless, when the dead body comes to life and tells the account of his wife’s unfaithfulness, the narrator counts on his account and agrees to be the part of his plan.

The wife seems to be unfaithful to her husband and is so shameless that she escorts her lover to make love immediately after her husband’s death. “In half an hour his wife came back and a young man along with her... we saw them lying together with her head on his arm.” This flagrant bearing of the wife certifies her as an unethical and devious character and validates the husband’s narration. However, his feigning of death to catch his wife red-handed in the course of wrongdoing attests him as shrewd and cunning. On the part of the narrator, it seems that by being the part of intrigues of both, he wants to remain indifferent from their plans. His only concern is the safety of his life on that stormy and horrific night. “I was frightened when I saw him, but it was raining hard, and I said to myself, if he was dead he couldn’t hurt me.” This demonstrates the narrator’s rational nature because instead of falling prey to superstitions regarding the dead man, he prefers to be with it.

Throughout the story, the speaker does not paint the images of the husband and the wife negatively. He sticks to what has happened between them on that night without colouring their characters with his perspective. However, the exception to this we find where he passes a negative comment about the husband at one point. He narrates, “She went into the bedroom, but the devil a bit of her came back.” Here, he calls the husband ‘devil’ which may assist us to form a negative image of the husband from the point of view of narrator. However, the word ‘devil’ might have employed metaphorically as the husband is pretending his death. Earlier the narrator has assumed the husband as a dead person. But when the wife goes out, the husband opens his eyes and narrates the truth regarding unfaithfulness of his wife. At that point of time, the narrator is the stranger yet, plays the role of confidence to the husband. In this context, the word ‘devil’ becomes comic or funny comment. Keeping in view this, we understand that the point of view of the narrator does not influence the readers in order to form any perception about the characters and the events happening in the story. His personal opinions, likes and dislikes do not interfere in manipulating the readers’ comprehension. The narrator is neutral and does not pass any judgment on the characters and the events. This technique of the story-telling assists the narrator to introduce the elements of suspense and surprise. He achieves success in surprising or shocking the listeners/readers by creating an atmosphere of awe and wonder. The art of story-telling allows the narrator to remain calm and cold at the time of narration to set in motion curiosity among the readers intentionally. The story offers the feel of horror story from the beginning. For instance, he is alone on his journey, it’s a dark stormy night, there are few houses around, he takes shelter at a house, the master of the house is dead, the woman is watching the dead man etc. the narrator consciously avoids the depiction of

the wife as an unfaithful wife. The frame of the mind is to show how the husband and the wife behave strangely.

The impression is created that both are not normal people as the husband goes to such an extreme stage that he feigns to be dead to catch his wife with her lover and the wife brings the lover home to indulge in the act of love making immediately after the death of the husband. However, both treat and handle the guest nicely and amicably. They do not trust each other but paradoxically enough they trust the stranger full heartedly. Both have master plans against each other and they execute their plans strongly and successfully. Towards the end, the husband succeeds and kills (or seriously hurts) the lover. The last line of the story 'This is my story' concludes the narrator's speech.

To sum up, first person narration usually gives us the perception of the speaker/narrator. We see his views, emotions and attitudes to events/persons. It influences readers to form certain opinions, or not to form certain opinions. This is completely missing in this story which indicates the simple, innocent and naïve nature of the narrator. The point of view of the narrator does not result in perspectives on, evaluations of, events and characters, especially characters.



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