Published on *the living handbook of narratology* (http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de)

Gender and Narrative

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Created: 17. June 2013 Revised: 15. September 2013

1 Definition

The study of gender and narrative explores the (historically contingent) ways in which sex, gender, and/or sexuality might shape both narrative texts themselves and the theories through which readers and scholars approach them. Within this broad inquiry, the field known as “feminist narratology” has explored the implications of sex, gender, and/or sexuality for understanding the “nature, form, and functioning of narrative” (Prince [1987] 2003: 65), and thus also for exploring the full range of elements that constitute narrative texts. Feminist narratology is thus also concerned with the ways in which various narratological concepts, categories, methods and distinctions advance or obscure the exploration of gender and sexuality as signifying aspects of narrative.

2 Explication

Usually pursued under the rubrics of feminist narratology and, increasingly, queer narratology, the study of sex, gender, and sexuality as signifying elements of narrative encompasses a diversity of approaches and inquiries. Indeed, the three modifying terms—sex, gender, sexuality—are themselves subject to multiple definitions. In most academic pursuits today, “sex” stands for the biological designations of male and female (with some scholars including “intersex” as a designation), while “gender” marks social identities, roles, and behaviors as well as qualities of masculinity and femininity that have been associated with a specific sex, and “sexuality” refers to the orientation of desire toward a particular sexed or gendered object. The distinction between “sex” and “gender” has been challenged, however, by postmodern theorists and by biological confirmation that “sex” itself is not a singular entity. The term “gender” is now the most common anchor term, since it avoids binary assumptions about bodily identities and recognizes transgender and “gender-queer” possibilities.

The field of gender and narrative stakes its diverse approaches on the shared belief that sex, gender, and sexuality are significant not only to textual interpretation and reader reception but to textual poetics itself and thus to the shapes, structures,

representational practices, and communicative contexts of narrative texts. In claiming that these key vectors of social positioning carry narratological weight, feminist narratology marked a significant departure of value from classical narrative theory. Indeed, it was the insertion of gender that first challenged the premises of classical narratology from within the field, pioneering what is now known as “postclassical” narratology for its insistence on the significance of historical and social context in the production and reception of narrative and in the shaping of narrative forms and functions.

3 History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 From Universal Laws to Gender Consciousness

Whether we date the inception of narrative poetics to the ancient Greeks, the Russian Formalists, the Anglo-American New Critics or the French structuralists, we can safely say that questions of gender were not among the field’s early distinctions or concerns. These “classical” forms of narrative theory aimed at identifying universal laws, outlining formal typologies, and describing stylistic and structural elements that were understood to recur quite apart from thematic content, actual readerships or, in many cases, cultural codes. Yet some early formulations do remind us that seeming universals may be unwittingly gendered. Propp’s morphology ([1928] 1958) depends on gendered functions even though Propp himself aspired to abstract those functions from content (9). While thirty of Propp’s thirty-one functions of the *dramatis personae* are named in relatively neutral terms, a male hero is implied throughout, and the final function of the wedding—“the hero is married and ascends the throne” (63)—evokes the conventional nature of the folktales themselves. Widespread application of Propp’s functions to other tales and texts reinforced attention to what was in effect a gendered plot.

The interest in narrative poetics during the 1960s and 1970s that led Todorov to coin the term “narratology” (1969: 10), pioneered by Anglo-American theorists such as Frye and Booth and (mostly French) structuralists such as Todorov, Barthes, Bremond, Genette, Greimas, Prince, and Uspenskij, intensified the emphasis on a “science” of narrative committed to eliciting general laws understood to assume the detachability of texts from history, social context, and thematic concerns. Although Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* used Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* as the key text for his exploration of narrative order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, his goal was to void his inquiry of narrative content in order to identify “elements that are universal, or at least transindividual” ([1972] 1980: 23). Thus when Genette acknowledges that he “went regularly to the most *deviant* aspects of

Proustian narrative" (265, emphasis in original), it is not sexual but narrative "deviance" to which he refers. Nor did narrative theorists such as Booth ([1961] 1983) and Chatman (1978) raise the possibility of gender differences between the writers on whose works they relied.

The narratological landscape was soon challenged from within and without, however, in response to a broader shift in literary studies that questioned the abstraction of formal elements from cultural contingencies. New, identity-conscious inquiries into narrative practice were spurred by the emergence of political movements of the 1960s and their academic institutionalization in women's studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies. Perhaps the earliest internal reconfiguration of narratology appeared with Bal (1977), whose emphasis on works by women may not be unrelated to her integration of form, content, and context. In that same year, Showalter (1977) took all formalisms to task for "evad[ing] the issue of sexual identity entirely, or dismiss[ing] it as irrelevant and subjective" and thus "desexing" women writers (8). Along with the major epistemological challenges to structuralism's fixities wrought by deconstruction, such identitarian challenges converged to open the intellectual space for rethinking even the newest contributions to narrative poetics.

Several interventions of the early 1980s addressed this "desexed" poetics that feminists saw as masking an androcentric view. Nancy K. Miller (1981) exposed current notions of plot and plausibility as male-centered constructs masquerading as universal norms and argued that "the implausible twists" common to many women's novels revealed "the stakes of difference within the theoretical indifference of literature itself" (44). Arguing that point of view was necessarily a matter of ideology as well as technique, Lanser (1981) aimed explicitly to forge a descriptive poetics of point of view that would accommodate both women's writings and feminist concerns. Through a psychoanalytic lens, de Lauretis (1984) exposed the gendered Oedipal structure both of narrative desire and of narratological language in conventional understandings of narrativity and plot. Brewer (1984), Homans (1984), and DuPlessis (1985) likewise challenged conventional thinking about plot by exploring what they saw as the different dynamics of women's narratives.

3.1 Feminist Challenges to Narratology "Proper"

The tipping point in the study of gender and narrative occurred in 1986 through the simultaneous publication of Warhol's "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator" (1986) and Lanser's "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (1986) that called for a gender-conscious narrative poetics. Warhol posited a distinction between "distancing" and "engaging" narrators and argued that the engaging narrator had been

undertheorized and devalued because of its association with women writers and "sentimental" novels. Associating the "distancing" narrator with masculine cultural traits and the "engaging" narrator with feminine markers, while also showing that both men and women practice each strategy, Warhol criticized the dismissal of "engaging" practices as parcel to a gendered devaluation of direct engagement with the reader around issues of public concern. Taking on a broader set of narratological issues, Lanser asked "whether feminist criticism, and particularly the study of narratives by women, might benefit from the methods and insights of narratology and whether narratology, in turn, might be altered by the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts" (342). She argued that narratology could help to offset an overly mimetic approach to narrative by feminist readers and that, conversely, feminist studies could demonstrate the utility of narratology for non-narratologists. To those compatible ends, Lanser proposed a range of interventions toward creating a more supple, rhetorically invested and gender-aware narrative poetics.

Neither of these essays escaped critique. Warhol's piece stirred sufficient dissent to warrant responses in subsequent issues of *PMLA* that challenged her gendering of distancing and engagement. More provocatively, Diengott (1988) rejected Lanser's coupling of terms entirely, arguing that "there is no need, indeed no possibility" of a feminist narratology because "feminism has nothing to do with narratology" (49–50). Lanser (1988) challenged Diengott's understanding of narrative poetics as separable from content and context and even from the specific textual instance. Feminist narratology has also faced criticisms from feminist theorists who find narratology esoteric, elitist, and politically unconcerned. In response, Bal argued that rejecting formal analysis is foolhardy, since "political and ideological criticism cannot but be based on insights into the way texts produce those political effects" ([1985] 2009: 13).

As Nünning concluded, however, "though Lanser and other feminist narratologists have incurred the displeasure of those to whom this sounds suspiciously like an ideological balkanization of narratology, the new approaches have raised pertinent new questions which have proved to be of greater concern to a larger number of critics than the systematic taxonomies, typologies and models so dear to the hearts of narratologists" (2000: 354). Indeed, by the turn of the new century, the study of gender had become a standard pursuit within both narrative theory in the broad sense and narratology "proper." Simply defined by Warhol, feminist narratology at this stage consisted in "the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender" (quoted in Mezei ed. 1996: 6), though as Warhol (1999) recognized, feminist narratologists were also likely to "mess up" (354) the neat binaries and categories of structuralist narratology in its questioning

of “either/or” reasoning (340).

3.2 The Post-classical Turn: The Emergence of Feminist Narratolog*ies*

Warhol’s *Gendered Interventions* (1989), Lanser’s *Fictions of Authority* (1992), and Mezei’s edited collection *Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (1996) all pushed the study of gender and narrative into further prominence and encouraged new work in the field. This trend helped to usher in the “postclassical” phase of narratology, an umbrella term coined by Herman (1997) to designate a range of theories that “move toward integration and synthesis” not only by “expos[ing] the limits” but also by “exploit[ing] the possibilities of the older, structuralist models” in “rethink[ing] their conceptual underpinnings” (Herman 1999: 3). Most common among these postclassical approaches are the cognitive, the postmodern, and the contextual, the latter pioneered by a feminist poetics that “refuses to separate questions about narrative grammar from questions about the contexts in which narratives are designed and interpreted” (11). By 2000, Richardson (2000) could claim that feminist criticism had “utterly and fruitfully transformed narrative theory and analysis” by subjecting “virtually every component of or agent in the narrative transaction” to “sustained examination” (168). As Sommer (2007) has noted, feminist narratology remains the “most established strand” of the contextual turn (61).

At this juncture, then, feminism and narratology form a visible intersection on the literary map with a thick and varied scholarly and methodological dossier not always identified as “feminist narratology.” Bauer (1988) has fruitfully deployed Bakhtin’s concepts of both carnival and the dialogic (Shepherd → Dialogism [1]) to think about the dynamics of discourse and power in American women’s writing. Keen (2007) brings a feminist perspective to her exploration of narrative empathy (Keen → Narrative Empathy [2]), calling for greater attention to women readers of popular fiction. Dannenberg (2009), which offers new understandings of plot that synthesize cognitive, ontological, and spatial approaches, also quietly focuses on deep history of writing by and about women. Rather than advancing a monolithic feminist narratology, these projects collectively yield a range of gender-conscious interventions in narrative thought that are not necessarily compatible with one another but each of which recognizes the legitimacy and indeed necessity of addressing gender in tandem with narrative inquiry.

However, the postclassical “turn” also exposed the limitations of Lanser’s approach and, to a lesser extent, of Warhol’s, limitations that have become more evident in the wake of separate transformations in feminist and narratological thought. As

Page has noted, Lanser (1992) rests on a “binary model of gender that emphasize[s] difference” and tends “to construct the category ‘women’ as if it were a universal group” (2006: 46–7). This same binarism arguably informs the essays in Mezei (1996) and continues in Case (1999), which advances the work initiated by Lanser and Warhol by exploring “feminine” strategies and male interventions that forge textual struggles over narrative authority. Moreover, all of these books and most work on feminist narratology of the 1980s and 1990s rests on a canon of English, American, and French writers that dates primarily to the 19th and 20th centuries. Page addresses this limitation by focusing variously on plot patterns in medieval Japanese and English texts, on media narratives about Hillary Rodham Clinton and Cherie Booth/Blair, and on children’s storytelling in New Zealand. Using engaging strategies of her own, Warhol (2003) takes up the question of the embodied and gendered reader by exploring affective responses to serial narratives from soap operas to detective novels. Thus Page and Warhol join several other scholars—Friedman (1998), most notably—who have been “re-mapping” feminist narrative thought along a multiplicity of theoretical and geographical routes in what Alber & Fludernik (2010) describes as a “phase of diversification” (5) for narratologies in general.

3.3 Re-Mapping: Toward an Intersectional Approach

In a provocative essay exposing a methodological faultline between classical and contextual narratologies, Sommer (2007) argues that while a top-down imposition of narrative categories of the kind practiced by classical narratologists may be valid for projects attempting to describe all narrative possibilities, this approach is *in*valid for fields such as “postcolonial or intercultural narratologies” that are concerned with “specific features of specific texts embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts” (70). These contextual projects, Sommer claims, must therefore work inductively to build an inclusive corpus of texts from which to theorize. While of course no narrative poetics is entirely separable from individual instances, feminist narratology has been approached in both ways: some feminist narratologists work to develop fully universalist theories, whereas others argue for a more culturally specific poetics that describes the contours of particular bodies of texts. While the former group is more likely to favor deductive methodologies and the latter inductive ones, the more central difference concerns the extent to which it is possible to develop any narrative poetics that could account for all texts.

At the heart of this bifurcation, however, sits feminist narratology’s still lopsided corpus, more white than interracial, more Anglo and American than global, more post- than pre-1800, more novelistic and cinematic than pan-generic. This imbalance has underscored the need for *intersectional* approaches that, rather than isolating the presumptive implications of gender, examine narratives within the specificities

of multiple social vectors. Named in 1989 by legal scholar Crenshaw, the theory of intersectionality argues that diverse aspects of identity converge to create the social positions, perceptions, limitations, and opportunities of individuals and groups ([1989] 1991). Thus motherhood, often considered a universal female experience, is recalibrated as conditioned by nationality, age, race, and social class, to name only a few variables. Intersectionality theory maintains that no coherent female or male experience exists even within a single culture let alone across cultures, since cultures are always constituted within, and in turn constitute, aspects of identity, location, individual agency, and discursive realm. Intersectional thinking would thus reject a narratology that assumes gender or sexuality to be predictable or predictive. Rather than adopting a deductive approach by starting with the premise of difference, as was usually the case for feminist narratology in the 1980s, an intersectional narratology works upwards to narratological theory from the careful study of many and diverse textual instances.

Although it is not strictly a narratological project and does not explicitly use intersectional theory, Friedman (1998) helped significantly to shift feminist narrative theory toward intersectional thought and away from its Euro-American emphases by arguing for the primacy of exploring “the role of geopolitical and cultural differences in providing what generates, motivates, and fuels narrative” (134). Advocating a shift from a psychoanalytic to an anthropological paradigm, Friedman lays the ground for a feminist narrative poetics that is spatial as well as temporal. In more recent work (Warhol & Lanser forthcoming), Friedman advances the case for incorporating religion, a frequently ignored aspect of identity, in an intersectional narrative paradigm. Lanser (2010) has called for a vast project of global mapping not only of texts but of narratological scholarship generally in order to see where feminist narratology has placed its empirical emphases and where narrative study remains underexplored. Many other feminist scholars of narrative have now advanced the project of inclusion through their own attention to individual non-Anglo-American texts, to writings by and representations of men as well as to genres other than novel and film. Still, the creation of a holistic narratology that is adequate to these multiple contributions remains to be achieved.

3.4 Queer(ing) Narratology

Although sexuality has entered the narratological conversation more recently and less fully than gender, the dramatic rise of “queer theory” since the 1990s has drawn attention to the implications of sexuality for narrative analysis. The term “queer” has been used in at least three ways within the study of narrative: to designate, respectively, non-heteronormative sexual identities, the dismantling of categories of sexuality and gender, and any practice that transgresses or

deconstructs categories and binaries. In different ways, these approaches pose challenges not only to narratology "proper" but to feminist narratology as well. For example, Lanser's (1995) insistence that non-dramatized heterodiegetic narrators are gendered—and normatively gendered according to the sex of the author—might usefully yield to the argument that heterodiegesis is a freer locus of non-gendered narrative voice.

A primary concern within queer narrative theory—and one that still divides theorists along dystopic and utopic lines—has focused on whether narrative is irrecoverably heteronormative or, conversely, is capable of "queering." Roof (1996) argued for the underlying heteronormativity of narratives that "include" lesbian, gay, or queer characters and of narrative theory itself, with its binary definitions that make defining narrative "always a tautological project where the question of a narrative 'logic' is preempted at the very moment one tries to answer it" (48). In declaring that "there is no there to get" (187), Roof joins such scholars as D. A. Miller (1992), who asks "so long as narrative is wedded to marriage and kin to the family, what *is* left for us to tell?" (46) and Edelman, who exposes "the (il)logic by which narrative produces the crime that it apparently only reports" (1994: 191). More sanguine about narrative's queer potential, Farwell argues that the lesbian subject disrupts the "asymmetrical gender codes" (1996: 17) of traditional narrative and rewrites the dynamics of power, while Lanser (1995), exploring the implications of narratives such as Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* in which the narrator's gender is unknown, suggests that narratological categories be revisited for their queer potential. The implications of queerness for narrativity itself continue to preoccupy scholars of sexuality and narrative, and it is fair to say that the jury is still out concerning the viability of narrative to take a significantly queer turn. The inquiry has expanded as narrative theorists consider heteronormativity in its broadest sense—what Berlant and Warner (1998) describe as a system of "institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations" that privilege heterosexuality even in "contexts that have little visible relation to sexual practice" (547).

Meanwhile, however, queer narratology has turned to a range of texts and topics from queer manifestations in Japanese novels to queer formations in Hollywood cinema. Some of the most exciting new work, which also engages questions of narrativity, has focused on queer temporality, a topic whose broad ramifications for history, scholarship, and politics were featured in a special issue of *GLQ* (2007). Recent work by Rohy (2009), Freeman (2010) and Vincent (2012) also takes up the question of narrative time from the perspective of queer theories and positionalities, variously studying the implications of linear or "straight" time, of pseudo-iterativity and recursivity, of arresting and arrested temporalities, of queer

convergences of time, and of the impasses that accrue when a narrative cannot move toward the heteronormative promise of reproduction that some scholars have argued constitutes the very foundation of narrativity. Others have looked at queer voice and queer characterization although explicit intersections between narratology and queer theory remain, in the early stages, ready for further attention by both queer theorists and narratologists. A volume of essays on feminist and queer narrative theories (Warhol & Lanser forthcoming) should help to further conversation between queer and feminist approaches while providing a fuller foundation for queer(ing) narratology.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

Although the study of gender and narrative has opened up new vistas, many challenges remain. (a) Paramount among these is to forge a genuinely global and intersectional narrative corpus and, through this corpus, a poetics supple enough to address aspects of gender evoked by the range of the world's narrative texts present and past. (b) Given the general neglect of character (Jannidis → Character [3]) in narratology, as opposed to its significance in feminist and queer studies, feminist and queer narratologists might profitably follow up on Woloch's (2003) innovative work by studying the gendered distribution of characters and the intersectional implications of character distribution. (c) Narratology still largely proceeds as though it is women who "have" gender and men who are gender-free; very little work has been accomplished on the gendering of male writers, narrators, and characters according to the same intersectional principles that feminist narratologists have called on with respect to women's works.

(d) Like other identity-based studies of narrative, the study of queer narratives has emphasized mimetic aspects of character and plot; fuller attention to textual form will help to shape a more comprehensive poetics for studying of queer narratives. (e) Questioning both gendered and "gender-neutral" assumptions within narratology itself could yield a productive "queering" of such narrative elements as heterodiegesis, metalepsis, and free indirect discourse as a way to challenge the binaries still prevalent even within postclassical narratologies. (f) Attending to a burgeoning cognitive narratology is perhaps the toughest current challenge for a gendered narrative poetics. While Palmer has argued that a cognitive method creates the very basis for historical and cultural approaches (2010: 7), gender has thus far been a sidebar to cognitive narratology, and some feminist thinkers find its penchant for universal theories of mind to be as problematic as the universal structures proposed by classical narratology.

Finally, (g) a narratology conscious of gender and sexuality can provide new

opportunities for feminist and queer theory and scholarship, particularly if non-literary genres are engaged. Thus, while narratologists might work toward forging a narratology that is more broadly gender-inclusive, scholars of gender and sexuality might forge feminist and queer theories that are more deeply narratological.Extending narratology to such socially invested fields might require addressing some longstanding problems of terminology and relevance that have limited the value of narrative poetics for non-specialists. But such efforts can help to demonstrate the value of narratology for an interdisciplinary community of scholars and readers.

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To cite this entry, we recommend the following bibliographic format:

Lanser, Susan S.: "Gender and Narrative". In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *the living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University. URL = http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/gender-and-narrative
[view date:12 Feb 2019]