



The Dangers of Being Relaxed in a Fictional World: A Study of Subject Positioning, Focalisation and Point of View in Two Novels

Sharon Dean

Reading can be a dangerous activity. If readers get too comfortable with a character - remaining in one place too long, relaxed and content in a fictional world - it's highly likely the ideologies of the text have got a hold on them. Of course, that's not always a bad thing - ideologies are systems of belief by which we make sense of the world, and social life would be impossible without them. What is dangerous, however, is the acceptance of ideologies in an uncritical or unreflective manner. As literary theorist John Stephens writes in his book *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, readers must become aware of how ideologies operate in fiction so they may be more empowered to 'identify equivalent ideological apparatuses in their experiences in the actual world' (Stephens 1992, p.11).

The most important concepts for young readers to grasp about literary fictions, according to Stephens, are those of focalisation and narrative point of view - since it is through these that 'subject positions are constructed and ideological assumptions inscribed' (Stephens 1992, p.81). For the purposes of this discussion, the term 'point of view' will encompass not only the perspective from which



things are seen, but also the style and structure of the telling, and the assumptions and values that pervade the two literary texts under examination. An analysis of how point of view and focalisation construct subject positions in Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody* and Sue Gough's *A Long Way to Tipperary*, will indicate the extent to which the ideological impact of each text varies according to its possible interpretative subject positions.

A Long Way to Tipperary is an historical novel that asks - and occasionally demands - to be read in a particular way. In recognition of this, the book's implied reader (i.e. the kind of person who would be competent to read it in the way it invites being read) can easily be defined as a literate young

adult with a willingness to enter into the spirit of adventure. Presenting the story in an uncomplicated, specified rather than abstract, style, the third-person omniscient narrator of *Tipperary* makes no impossible demands on the reader's ability to construct meaning from words. Definitions are provided for uncommon terms, while the main character regularly delivers strings of clichés and adjectives which spare the young reader recourse to a thesaurus. In fact, everything that needs to be known for the purposes of the story is clearly explained by the reliable narrator - 'reliable' in the sense that the reader is supposed to take the rendering of the story and commentary on it as an authoritative account of fictional truth (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, p.100).

Privy to the emotions, motivations and secret desires of every character in the book - and also to past, present and future events (even those occurring simultaneously) - the narrative voice is suspiciously similar to that of the story's main protagonist, Mrs Featherstonhaugh-Beauchamp (pronounced 'Fanshaw-Beecham'!) - a woman with a 'strange facility for prediction, prognostication, prophecy, clairvoyance, divination, soothsaying, premonition,

futurology and tipping the odds' (Gough 1992, p.40). The text offers many clues to fuel such a suspicion: both narrator and protagonist share a passion for theatre (as evidenced by Mrs FB's vocation and the narrator's dramatic presentation of 'the great train escape' in theatrical terms: '... back at the ticket office Scene Two was unfolding' (Gough 1992, p.35), and the fact that both share common moral ground and many character traits. The tone used by the narrator whenever good triumphs over evil, for instance, parallels Mrs FB's instinct for 'righting injustices', as exemplified when she reimburses Miss Allsop for wages owed (the grand sum of one pound, seventeen and sixpence), with a 'splendid ruby ring' worth at least a thousand pounds sterling (Gough 1992, p.38).

Thus, whether 'hearing' the story in the narrator's voice or as focalised through Mrs FB, the reader is continually kept in his or her place by a powerful and knowing authoritative voice. This is one of the obvious means by which the text 'inculcates' - to borrow one of Stephens's favourite terms - its ideologies upon young readers. Indeed, the narrator expresses no doubt in the reader's willingness to accept as 'natural' many of the beliefs

(most politically correct, some sexist) which pervade the text and colour its point of view. Examples of *Tipperary's* more explicit assumptions are: 'security and material comfort should always be sacrificed in the quest for adventure', 'big men do (and should!) cry', 'smoking is bad for you', 'when a man and woman fall in love they should marry', 'racism is wrong', 'women are more patient and prudent than men'. With the story's main character (and minor characters as well) constantly reinforcing the narrator's set of ideologies, it becomes more and more difficult for the reader to 'read against the grain' of the narrative.

The text of Doherty's *Dear Nobody*, on the other hand, works against the notion of a knowing and controlling narrative voice by providing separate accounts of particular events; readers are forced to reconcile contradictions between differing viewpoints for themselves. As the ultimate narrator of the text, 17-year-old Chris is responsible for introducing the story and arranging segments of text - namely, letters by Helen as well as those by minor characters, together with his first-person retrospective accounts of events - into a particular narrative sequence. And because he is one of the main characters in

the text - featuring on extradiegetic, diegetic and hypodiegetic levels (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, p.91) - 'Chris of the present' often focalises the narration through 'Chris of the past'. Thus, although the construction of point of view within the text may seem complicated, in the context of this discussion it simply indicates the wide range of subject positions from which the reader may choose.

The ideal implied readers for *Dear Nobody* are young adults willing to acknowledge the possibility of teenage pregnancy and to accede to Helen's acceptance of her changed circumstances after some process of adjustment. Encouraged to select from a range of possible interpretative subject positions from within the text, they may choose to align themselves with Helen, with any of the minor characters, or with Chris' past or present character. At times readers may even identify with Chris and Helen's unborn baby, 'little Nobody', because the foetus evokes sympathy as 'a tiny thing, clinging on' (Doherty 1993, p.89), or feelings of relief and joy when Helen promises the book's most vulnerable character, 'I won't let go of you now' (Doherty 1993, p.93). Indeed, as Helen's narratee, 'Nobody' fulfils a role integral to the novel's

construction of point of view. Whenever the reader identifies with the foetal narratee, he or she is positioned within the text to accept the pro-life/anti-abortion ideologies of the implied author, 'the idea of the author that is carried away by the real reader from his or her reading of the book' (Wall 1991, p.7).

Other characters are also strategically positioned within the text to influence readers against abortion. In the hours following Helen's 'desperate attempt to get rid of a pregnancy' (Doherty 1993, p.73), Chris' Aunt Jill tells the teenage couple something she's never told anyone else: almost fifteen years ago she herself had a pregnancy terminated, unbeknownst to her ex-husband, her sister, her mother. 'I felt absolutely alone after that,' she tells the expectant pair. '... I didn't have the right to cry. I drove my sadness down so deep that I thought it would never surface again.' (Doherty 1993, p.75)

But Jill's influence is offset, at least to a small degree, by the views of other adult characters. Helen's father, for instance, frequently gives voice to the possibility that Helen may be 'throwing her life away' if she has the baby. With all his heart, Mr Garton urges his daughter to accept the full offer

she receives from the Royal Northern College of Music to study Composition. Whenever Helen asks her father for advice, his answer is inevitably the same: 'I want you to do music' (Doherty 1993, p.122). Thus, after comparing Jill's secret regret with Mr Garton's spoken fears, the reader is left to weigh one possibility against another. Does a baby have the power to ruin its mother's chances of a potentially brilliant career? Need a woman be condemned to a life of guilt and sorrow if she has an abortion? It may be impossible for the reader to formulate definite conclusions.

Ideologies pertaining to marriage also feature explicitly in the text. Helen's grandfather - always gentle, kind, good-humoured - serves as an almost definitive guide on the subject. As a little girl, Helen used to 'save up all [her] sadnesses to tell him'. She writes in a letter to 'Nobody': 'When I'd finished telling [the sadnesses] I felt better. It was just the fact that he spared the time to listen, I think; took me seriously, even when I was only a few years old' (Doherty 1993, p.45). Thus, Helen's 'Grandad', functioning as the trustworthy mentor outside the teenager's immediate family, is established as a reliable voice on pertinent issues. As to whether Helen and Chris

should wed now that they're expecting a baby, the old man's advice to his granddaughter is difficult to the reader to misinterpret: 'People will get wed. They think it's going to open up the world for them. But it doesn't, you see. It closes all the doors.' (Doherty 1993, p.147). Thus, in the space of four brief sentences, the reader is positioned within the text to reject marriage as a necessary ritual for Helen and Chris, and as an extension of that, as a necessary undertaking for anyone in the actual world expecting a baby out of wedlock.

But readers of *Dear Nobody* are not limited to the above selection of subject positions from within the text; they are also encouraged to create reading positions from outside. Much of this 'encouragement' derives from discrepancies arising between Chris's interpretation of events and other sources of information, such as Helen's letters or the remarks of other characters. While it need not be disputed that Helen accompanies Chris on a visit to his mother's home in Carlisle, for example, readers are still left to discern the motivations behind various characters' behaviour on that day for themselves.

Consider Don's exit from the lunch table as an example of

one incident described from two very different perspectives. After reading Helen's account in a letter to 'Nobody' - she assumes Don leaves the table because 'he was probably embarrassed ... thought he'd made a fool of himself, after all that posing about he'd done with his hairy legs' (Doherty 1993, p.107). Then the reader is presented with Chris's account of the incident as focalised through the consciousness of his younger self. Unlike Helen, Chris decides that Don 'was very sensitive, the way he sat back and let my mother do the talking, not trying to butt in or ask questions - just supporting her, I suppose.'. In the light of that interpretation, Chris's next step is to conclude that Don respectfully leaves the room because 'Helen blasted them with a bombshell and the poor bloke just couldn't take it.' (Doherty 1993, p.113).

Because one significance is played against another, neither Chris's narrative voice, nor Helen's, may be deemed entirely reliable. Readers are continually reminded that there is always another way of looking at things. Although likely to identify with Helen when she's writing to Nobody, and Chris when he's recalling past events - if only because first-person narrative tends to create an effect of immediacy and closeness - readers are

regularly forced to stand back and contemplate the narrative from a distance. Instead of coming away from the chapter discussed above with a hard kernel of knowledge as to the motivations behind Don's behaviour, readers of *Dear Nobody* are entrusted to consider the event from the two narrated perspectives, then either accept one of those, or put together a different explanation altogether from the stance of an outsider. Ultimately, they are discouraged from adopting a single subject position in relation to the text.

If Don were to leave a room in *Tipperary's* world without finishing his lunch, however, readers would be left in no doubt as to how the character had been feeling in the lead-up to the event. They would have access to the thoughts going through Don's mind as he walked from the room, and would also be provided with a pre-packaged 'moral of the story' to ensure the appropriate conclusion would be drawn from the incident. As an authorial persona who expresses feelings of amusement, disapproval and tenderness in relation to characters and events, the narrator of *Tipperary* leaves little room for the readers to speculate about possible textual significances. Even a train

chuffs off 'uncaringly' when Mrs FB and her companions are left stranded in thick scrub ten miles from Gympie (Gough 1992, p.40), leaving no doubt as to whose side the narrator is on and where the implied readers are situated as a result!

Even multiple focalisation - a technique usually employed in fiction to deter easy reader identification with one viewpoint - is used in *Tipperary* to keep the readers in a position where they will be most likely to accept the text's ideologies. And that position is best described as being 'in alignment with the narrator's point of view'. For instance, whenever the narrative is focalised through 'good' characters (i.e. those who embody the text's ideologies), the textual point of view is reinforced in an explicit manner. Mr and Mrs Carmody, for example, 'didn't talk much about religion, but they held strong beliefs about loving their neighbours and treating people as equals. They respected the beliefs of other people, especially those of the Aborigines who were free to use the local waterhole on the property.' (Gough 1992, p.96).

Due to the narrator's biases, the text's point of view is also reinforced when the narration is focalised through 'bad' characters (those who fail to

embody the text's ideologies). When the narrative is focalised through Mrs FB's daughter - a nine-year-old who does 'not have quite the strength of character' to confess to her betrayal of another child - the reader is encouraged to accept a particular ideology: selfish behaviour leads to misery. The narrator is eager to surmise that if only Pearl had 'offered the hand of friendship to Anna rather than resenting her', she would not be standing among all the Christmas goodwill and festivity burning with guilt. By focalising the narration through Pearl's consciousness - 'All she could hope for was that nothing would come of it.' (Gough 1992, p.79) - the narrator oppositionally reinforces the text's point of view.

It follows that even though multiple focalisation is employed in *Tipperary*, the extent to which the readers are aligned with the narrator ensures that the 'norms' of the text are presented through a single dominant perspective. In other words, when additional ideologies emerge as focalised through various characters, they are inevitably evaluated from this 'higher' position. Despite the fact that the narrative is regularly focalised through characters from minority groups - such as Anna Wong, David Singh or

Kajabbi - the implied author's attempt to present them as ordinary people in ordinary situations is countered by narrative commentary that labels them as 'Other'. Anna, for example, is described as 'exotic' (Gough 1992, p.52, p.142), Dava is always 'wagging his head from side to side in amazement' (p.95, p.104), and Kajabbi is stereotypically presented as a wise Aborigine with 'ancient powers' (p.144).

Admittedly, the narrative segments identified as *Tipperary's* prologue and epilogue are successfully focalised through the mind of the Aborigine, effectively framing the main body of the text within his point of view. In these sections - and others focalised through Kajabbi - the narrator even manages to establish a different tone of voice by uncharacteristically limiting the use of adjectives. Unfortunately, however, the implied author's efforts to situate the reader within Kajabbi's culture are undermined when Mrs FB, a white woman recently arrived from England, is presented as a necessary consultant to the Aborigine's quest for cultural autonomy (pp.137-8). The reader is implicitly 'reminded' that the aspirations of black Australians inevitably require colonial approval, thus

ensuring the reader's position ultimately remains within a point of view heavily informed by dominant white culture.

Thus, although *Tipperary* presents the values and customs of the past from a viewpoint that by today's standards would be considered ideologically sound - Northern Queensland in 1918 is depicted as multifarious in its mixture of class and ethnic groups and their varied social practices - the novel ultimately fails to provide a genuine range of subject positions for readers from minority groups. Stephens insists that one of the principal aims in constructing subject positions for readers is to 'contribute to the social and personal development of *all* children by effacing notions of racial, class or gender superiority'. And he suggests that if this end cannot be achieved through the use of multiple focalisation, writers of fiction for young readers should seek recourse to another method: the situating of books entirely within the culture of a particular social group, thereby 'representing its experiences of the world and its own perception of that experience' (Stephens 1992, p.51).

Dear Nobody is a novel which effectively employs such a method, constructing a variety of subject positions for readers

from a particular social group: namely, those who find themselves categorised by society as 'young adults'. By presenting the story from the point of view of two teenagers, the novel appeals to readers from the same age group - or to older readers who remember what it was like to be in love for the first time - without subjecting them to the overwhelming dominance of an authoritative point of view. Exploring the options available to Helen and Chris, the text encourages readers to tackle the complexities of modern life from a variety of accessible subject positions. And because readers are empowered to move from one position to another, they are secured sufficient scope in which to imagine how they would react in circumstances similar to those described in the book. More experienced readers may even sample the perspectives of older characters such as Jill, Joan or Mrs Garton.

As in an actual world pragmatic exchange, the reading subject may negotiate meaning with a text or be subjected by it. The evaluation of point of view, focalisation and reader positioning in *Dear Nobody* provides the optimum enabling state for the readers by making unqualified identification with focalisers, thereby restricting its readers to

subject positions which reinforce the assumptions of a dominant cultural group. Working against the notion of a controlling narrative voice, Doherty's novel invites readers to adopt multiple subject positions in relation to the text, empowering them to 'read against the grain' and negotiate meaning. Gough's novel, on the other hand, employs an authoritative narrative voice in order to construct a seemingly objective point of view; the reader of *A Long Way to Tipperary* is consequently in danger of being unknowingly subjected to the ideologies of the text.

References

- Doherty, Berlie (1993) *Dear Nobody*. London, Lions Tracks, Harper Collins.
- Gough, Sue (1992) *A Long Way to Tipperary*. St. Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (1983) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. New York, Methuen.
- Stephens, John (1992) *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. London and New York, Longman.
- Wall, Barbara (1991) *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*. New York, St. Martin's Press.

Acknowledgement

The illustration is from the cover of Sue Gough's *A Long Way to Tipperary*, University of Queensland Press, 1992. The cover design and illustration are by Gregory Rogers.

Biographical Note

Sharon Dean is enrolled in the B.A. honours program at Deakin. She won the Deakin Literary Society Prose Prize in 1990. Sharon lives in northern N.S.W. where she writes theatre reviews for 'The Northern Star' newspaper in Lismore. Sue Gough is one of her favourite writers.

