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# The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry

Studies in English Poetry  
from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Peter Hühn/Jens Kiefer

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Translated by Alastair Matthews



Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines  
of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Hühn, Peter, 1939–

The narratological analysis of lyric poetry : studies in English poetry  
from the 16th to the 20th century / by Peter Hühn, Jens Kiefer ; trans-  
lated by Alastair Matthews.

p. cm. – (Narratologia ; 7)

ISBN 3-11-018407-9 (alk. paper)

I. English poetry – History and criticism – Theory, etc. 2. Lyric  
poetry – History and criticism – Theory, etc. 3. Narration (Rhetor-  
ic) I. Kiefer, Jens, 1971– II. Title. III. Series.

PR502.H74 2005

821'.0409–dc22

2005007069

ISBN 3-11-018407-9

ISSN 1612-8427

*Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek*

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;  
detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

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Cover design: Christopher Schneider, Berlin  
Printed in Germany

## Preface

This book describes a framework for the cross-generic application of narratological concepts and methods to lyric poetry. A series of analyses of individual English poems demonstrates how the theory can be put into practice. The book is the result of work carried out under the leadership of Jörg Schönert and me in Sub-Project P6 (The Theory and Methodology of the Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry: Approaches from the Perspective of English and German Studies) of the Narratology Research Group established at the University of Hamburg by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) on 1 April 2001 (see [www.narrport.uni-hamburg.de](http://www.narrport.uni-hamburg.de)). Jens Kiefer and Malte Stein participated as research assistants, Stefan Schenk-Haupt, Jette Katharina Wulf, and Tonio Kempf as student assistants. I should like to thank them all for their help. Jens Kiefer also prepared several of the studies presented in this book. A companion volume by Jörg Schönert and Malte Stein on the narratological analysis of German lyric poetry will soon be published in this series.

I would like to thank Alastair Matthews for the translation of the entire volume and John Pier for offering valuable advice for improving the clarity of the analyses.

Hamburg

Peter Hühn

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Peter Hühn and Jörg Schönert

## **1 Introduction: The Theory and Methodology of the Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry**

The essays on English lyric poetry presented in this volume are a practical demonstration of how the analytical methods and concepts of narratology can be used to provide detailed descriptions and interpretations of poems.<sup>1</sup> The legitimacy of this approach depends on the premise that narration is an anthropologically universal semiotic practice, independent of culture and period, used to structure experience and produce and communicate meaning, and is as such one of the basic operations at work even in lyric poetry. If this is so, it is reasonable to assume that the well-developed precision and explanatory potential of modern narrative analysis—narratology—can help us conceptually refine and enhance the study of lyric poetry. In order to provide a theoretical foundation for and methodological introduction to the essays on the individual poems, this introduction provides a brief explanation of the structure and terminology of the approach used in the book. We consider (1) the justification for the cross-generic application of narratology to lyric poetry, (2) the status of lyric poetry in genre theory, and, most importantly, (3) the nature and components of the narratological framework behind the analyses. Modelling the role of the dimensions of sequentiality (3.1) and mediacy (3.2) in the narrative process is of particular importance here. This theoretical treatment of how narratology can be applied to lyric poetry is followed (4) by some remarks on the selection of the poems treated in the subsequent essays.

### **1 Narrativity and Lyric Poetry: The Cross-Generic Application of Narratology to the Study of Poems**

The following discussion assumes that narrativity consists of a combination of two dimensions: sequentiality, or the temporal organization and linking of individual incidents to form a coherent succession, and mediacy, mediation being the selection, presentation, and meaningful inter-

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<sup>1</sup> See the theoretical description and justification of this approach in Hühn and Schönert (2002). Cf. also Hühn (2002, 2005).

pretation of such a succession from a particular perspective. These two dimensions underlie the important conceptual opposition between *histoire* and *récit*, *story* and *discourse*, *story* and *text*, and *fabula* and *syuzhet* in most narratological models.<sup>2</sup> However, our two dimensions are not completely identical with this group of terms. The latter make it possible to perform what we might call pragmatic chronological analysis: they distinguish the initial, unmediated happenings from their presentation, which is mediated through narrative, but they do not provide a systematic distinction between any of the constitutive elements of narrativity. In this respect, sequentiality (and within it, eventfulness) has clear priority in the definition of narrativity: different text-types such as description, argument, and explanation necessarily contain the dimension of mediacy, but temporal structure alone is a constitutive element of narrative texts.

Lyric texts in the narrower sense of the term (i.e. not just obviously narrative poems such as ballads, romances, and verse stories) have the same three fundamental narratological aspects (sequentiality, mediacy, and articulation) as prose narratives such as novels and novellas. They involve a temporal sequence of happenings (which are usually mental or psychological, but can be external, for example social in nature), and they also create coherence and relevance by relating these happenings from a particular perspective (the act of mediation). Finally, they require an act of expression with which the mediation finds form in a linguistic text.

The objective of applying the constructs of narratology to poetry is primarily a practical one: narrative theory is a sophisticated framework with which we may be able to refine, extend, and elucidate the methodology of the analysis of lyric poetry, which is notoriously lacking in theoretical foundations—perhaps to the extent of opening the way to the development of a theory of the lyric.<sup>3</sup> We have no desire to conflate lyric poetry with the narrative genres as if it were no different from them. In fact, the cross-generic approach is designed to capture the ways of combining processes, experiences, perceptions, and so on that are characteristic of lyric poetry and distinguish it from other genres.

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<sup>2</sup> On these oppositions, cf. Genette (1980), Chatman (1978), Rimmon-Kenan (2002), and Tomashevsky (1965). Cf. Pier (2003) on the background and issues behind this opposition.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the fundamental criticism of the state of lyric theory in Warning (1997), Müller-Zettelmann (2000), and Schönert (2004).



## 2 The Distinctiveness of Lyric Poetry: The Status of the Lyric in Genre Theory

Experience to date has shown that it is futile to attempt to proceed as with the epic and the drama and define the lyric systematically in the context of the three traditional literary genres.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it will be proposed that the place of the lyric relative to the epic and dramatic genres should be defined in terms of text theory.<sup>5</sup> If we define narration as a communicative act in which chains of happenings are provided with a meaningful structure by a complex of mediating entities (particularly the narrating entity), lyric and dramatic texts can be reconstructed as reduced forms in which the range of particular possible levels of mediation varies in each case.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this way, lyric texts in the narrower sense (i.e. not just narrative poetry) are distinguished by a characteristic variability in the extent to which they use the theoretically available levels and sources of mediation. They can instantiate the two fundamental constituents of the narrative process equally well (the arrangement of happenings into a temporal sequence on the one hand and the assembly of mediating entities and the manipulation of modes of mediation on the other). However, in a manner analogous to the speech of characters in dramatic texts, they are able to make it seem as if mediacy is replaced by the performative immediacy of speech. The result is that the voice of the speaker alone is heard as it emanates from experience and speech that are apparently simultaneous, analogous to the performative flow of the speech of characters in dramatic texts.

## 3 Modelling the Narrative Process: The Narratological Framework

A slightly modified form of Genette's approach provides the basis for the treatment of mediacy in the descriptive approach to the analysis of lyric poetry suggested here. In the case of the study of mediation, on the other hand, no such widely recognized analytical framework has yet been elaborated. The approach in this book draws on cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics (from which it borrows the concepts of schema, script, and frame) and combines them with models of schema-deviation and the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Warning (1997:17f.).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Titzmann (2003) and Schönert (2004).

<sup>6</sup> See Schönert (2004:313f.) on the following.

violation of expectations that can be developed on the basis of Lotman's theory of the *syuzhet* (which provides the concepts of the boundary crossing and the event) and Bruner's concept of canonicity and breach (1991). The modelling of sequentiality is of particular importance for the refinement and further development of the analysis of lyric poetry, for the methods of traditional interpretation do not provide a satisfactory framework for use in this area. To avoid misunderstandings, it should be explicitly stated that potentially familiar terms may need to be redefined. With this in mind, we now propose a number of definitions, which are complicated as little as possible by terms with multiple meanings.

When applying narratological constructs to lyric poetry, we begin by making the fundamental distinction between the level of happenings and the level of presentation—between incidents, which we take as the primary, basic material, and the way in which they are mediated in the text.<sup>7</sup> We assume that plots (or stories, as we shall call them) are not objectively present in (factual or fictional) reality and do not exist before a (human) agent constructs them on the basis of the incidents. Thus, the level of happenings is defined as the chronologically (and only chronologically) ordered set of existents and incidents relevant to the text. The meaningful connections between them are established on the level of presentation and are thus the work of the mediating and sending entities (the abstract author, the speaker/narrator, and speaking characters) and are also affected by focalization (as we shall see in detail below). The relationship between happenings and presentation is one of mutual dependency. The text (of a poem) requires the presence of happenings, but these happenings only come into being through the words of the text. This relationship can be described in two ways, analytically or genetically. We should also mention the level of the fictional narrative act (or the poetic utterance) which converts the happenings into the form of their textual presentation.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> This distinction corresponds approximately to the difference between *histoire* and *récit* in Genette (1980) and story and discourse in Chatman (1978). In the terminology we propose, however, happenings are the chronologically ordered set of incidents, as in Martinez and Scheffel (1999), whereas it is clear that Genette and Chatman—and many other narratologists, including Bal (1985), Rimmon-Kenan (2002), and Tomashevsky (1965)—assume the presence of meaningful connections (usually referred to as logical or causal connections) on this level. The term 'happenings' in our framework, then, is not identical to Chatman's 'happenings' (1978), which are one of his subtypes of event, the other being actions.

<sup>8</sup> This level is equivalent to Genette's concept of *narration*.

textual presentation is the only level directly accessible to the analyst: from it, both the happenings and the narrative act are to be reconstructed.

### 3.1 Sequentiality

We introduce the concepts of existent and incident to make possible a detailed description of the level of happenings.<sup>9</sup> An existent is a static element or something/someone related to an action (e.g. a character and its traits, location, and so on), while an incident involves something dynamic (e.g. a change in properties or conditions, an occurrence, an action, and so on). Arranged in chronological order, the set of all existents and incidents constitutes the happenings that occur within the narrative world. In lyric poetry, happenings are frequently composed of mental or psychological processes.

The level of presentation is produced by drawing a complex combination of syntagmatic and paradigmatic connections between the incidents. These connections are made (or presented as being made) from particular perspectives by particular mediating entities (see below). Incidents and existents are bound into meaningfully coherent sequences by means of selection, linking, and interpretation. We can turn to the methods of cognitive psychology and linguistics for help in elucidating these operations in more detail. On this basis, we make the fundamental assumption that meaningful sequences come into being only with the help of reference to contexts and world knowledge. Authors and readers, that is to say, can grasp or understand texts only by referring to pre-existent meaningful structures, to familiar cognitive schemata that already have a meaning.<sup>10</sup> The concept of world knowledge covers culture-specific paradigms drawn both from general experience (extratextual references to, for example, phenomena such as sea travel, growing old, or sexual love) and from literature and the other arts (intertextual references to literary models such as, for example, the medieval knight's quest or Petrarchan love). The narratological analysis of sequences in poems, then, attempts to reconstruct the schemata, acquired through reading or experience, that can be as-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the distinction between existents and events in Chatman (1978). Chatman's term 'event' is replaced by 'incident' in our framework because our use of 'event' is associated with Lotman's concept of the boundary crossing and Bruner's idea of canonicity and breach (1991).

<sup>10</sup> Culler (1975:139–60), Schank and Abelson (1977), Bruner (1990, 1991), and Turner (1996).

sumed to be (or have been) known to the author and contemporary readers and are relevant to the texts and thus help provide their meaning.<sup>11</sup> Cognitive schemata can also have a predominantly intratextual basis, for particular patterns can be created for a particular text and then (again with reference to pre-existent extra- or intertextual models) be developed in a text-specific manner. An example of this is provided by the development of life as a chain of illusory triumphs over illusion in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

We can distinguish between two types of cognitive schema: frames and scripts. Frames provide thematic or situational contexts or frames of reference for the reading of a poem. Examples are death in Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar' and sexual love in Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'. Scripts, on the other hand, embody model sequences—they refer to natural processes or developments, to conventional courses of action or stereotypical procedures, usually in close connection with the relevant frame. Death as the crossing of a boundary between one world and another and the formal ritual of unfulfilled courtly love might be identified as the scripts of the Tennyson and Marvell poems respectively. Identifying the frame allows a reader to draw together, coherently and in a primarily static sense, the situationally and/or thematically significant elements and parts of a poem. Referring to one or more scripts, on the other hand, allows the dynamic (i.e. specifically narrative) dimension of the text to be modelled. The conventions of brevity and situational abstraction in the mediation of the happenings in lyric poetry means that most frames and scripts are indicated only in passing, requiring a greater effort of reconstruction on the part of the reader than is the case in novels or short stories.

Isotopies are an additional way in which meaningful connections can be made. They are equivalences that exist between words or phrases on the level of the signified and create semantic coherence by placing a certain recurring seme in a dominant position (e.g. unpreparedness or immaturity in the first stanza of Donne's 'The Good Morrow').<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. in particular Herman (2002:85–113) and Semino (1995), and in general Barthes (1994), Culler (1975), and Eco (1979).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Greimas (1966). Greimas's original definition of seme and isotopy was originally a narrow one. He himself, together with Courtés (1979), Rastier (1972), and Eco (1979) extended it beyond simple features (e.g. *human* or *sexual*) to cover more complex semiotic phenomena, including categories of theme, situation, and figurative language, that create coherence through repetition.

We introduce the concept of the event to refer to the decisive turning point in the sequence structure of a poem. It is the central component of a poem's narrative organization and determines its tellability.<sup>13</sup> Eventfulness in our sense is defined as deviation from the expected continuation of the sequence pattern activated by the text.<sup>14</sup> An event also occurs if an expected continuation or change does not occur. Sequences can deviate more or less strongly from the expectations raised by the standard pattern; thus, they can be more or less eventful, and eventfulness is measured along a sliding scale rather than being either present or absent.<sup>15</sup> The level of deviation in any particular case is a product of the interpretation of the sequence structure in the context of cultural and historical parameters.

Events are generally linked to entities, participants in the action who cause or bring with them an occurrence of decisive importance. Two basic types of event can be distinguished depending on whether the entity is associated with happenings or the presentation. If the event is linked with a character in the narrated story (i.e. on the level of the happenings), such as the protagonist, we are dealing with an event in the happenings. If the decisive change in attitude or behaviour involves the speaker or narrator behind the performatively presented narrative act or act of articulation (in the sense of the story of the narrator), we are dealing with a presentation event.<sup>16</sup> We also note two special kinds of event. A mediation event is an exceptional, borderline variant of the presentation event. It is found when the decisive change is brought about, not by a change in individual attitude, but by what is primarily a textual and rhetorical restructuring of the form of presentation—a change in the manner of mediation. The modification or replacement of schemata (frames and/or scripts) are two examples of such a change. As a result, the context of mediation events moves from the figure of the speaker to the level of the abstract author/composing subject (see below). The (ideal) reader is the context for reception events. Here, the decisive change in attitude does not take place in the narrator or in a character, but is meant to occur in the reader as a result of the reading experience: this might involve gaining insight or adopting a new ideological position, for example.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Pratt (1977) and Prince (1987).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lotman's (1977) strong concept of the event as a boundary crossing, Bruner's canonicity and breach approach (1991:11–13), and Wolf's idea of the narreme (2002:44–51).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schmid (2003).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Schmid (1982:93) on the concept of the story of the narrator (*Erzählgeschichte*).

The story (known as the plot in some alternative frameworks) is the most complex and wide-ranging (macro)structure on the level of presentation.<sup>17</sup> A story is the result of the selection, weighting, and correlation of meaningful sequences. It is typically linked to a participant in the action and structured accordingly. Events provide the central points around which the course of a story is orientated, and the meaningful relationships between them are established by that story. In lyric poetry, stories tend to differ from those of novels in that they are concerned primarily with internal phenomena such as perceptions, thoughts, ideas, feelings, memories, desires, attitudes, and products of the imagination that the speaker or protagonist ascribes to him- or herself as a story in a monological process of mental reflection, defining his or her individual identity by means of that story.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Mediacy

There is one further prerequisite for the complete description of the structure of narrative sequentiality: we must specify the forms and entities that mediate the happenings on the level of presentation. Here, two basic aspects of mediacy must be distinguished: modes of mediation and mediating entities. With respect to the mode of mediation, we can differentiate between two kinds or facets of perspective. First, voice involves direct linguistic expression whose deictic (pronominal, temporal, spatial, and modal) orientation is provided by the speaking subject. Second, focalization is the perceptual, psychological, cognitive, and/or ideological perspective from which incidents and existents are presented and through which they are filtered, by which they are formed, and, in some cases, from which they are interpreted or evaluated.<sup>19</sup> Care must be taken to keep voice and focalization separate from one another, but this does not exclude the possibility that the same figure can be the source of both.

When dealing with mediating entities, four levels (of communication) embedded in one another can be distinguished.<sup>20</sup> They are the levels of (1)

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the concept of the plot in Brooks (1984).

<sup>18</sup> On the narrative constitution of individual identity, cf. for example Cavarero (2000), Eakin (1999), Kerby (1991), Ricœur (1990), and Worthington (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Genette (1980), Kahlitz (1988), Lanser (1981), Nünning (1990), and Uspensky (1973).

<sup>20</sup> Initial approaches to making distinctions of this kind in lyric poetry can be found in Bernhart (1993), Burdorf (1997), Hühn (1995, 1998), and Schönert (1999).

the empirical author/producer of a text, (2) the abstract author/composing subject, (3) the speaker/narrator, and (4) a protagonist/character. Like the speaker, a protagonist or character can have a voice.

The empirical author is considered in the analytical process only in so far as it is necessary to ensure that the frames and scripts we identify and the meanings we associate with words would also have been historically plausible when the author wrote the poem in question.

The abstract author/composing subject is responsible for the system of values, norms, and meaning implied by the formal, stylistic, rhetorical, and tropic structure of the text. This structure is an attitude or stance that should be treated as a construct, not as belonging to an individualized person.<sup>21</sup> This is the level where we can see what is (necessarily) excluded from the words of the speaker/narrator by his or her particular personal perspective, the level where we may find out about underlying motivations or problems, for example.<sup>22</sup> This level can therefore be described more precisely as one of second-order observation, a source of perspective superordinate to speaker and focalizer and established, so to speak, behind their backs.<sup>23</sup> It can also be described as a special form of perspective. (For example, the metaphorical language in Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils' shows—behind the speaker's back—how he longs for company in his isolated situation and has a spontaneous experience in which he suddenly projects this desire onto nature as a feeling of found company, then claiming to have received the feeling from nature without knowing it before drawing his poetic inspiration from the experience.)

Making a precise distinction between the abstract author and the speaker is always dependent on interpretation, and more precisely on what we attribute to whom. We must decide what mental features and level of self-awareness we attribute to the narrator (in some cases also to the narrated I) and the abstract author respectively. We must also be able to recognize cases in which making this distinction is deliberately impeded (e.g. in Shakespeare's Sonnets 71 and 138). The question of the reliability of the speaker/narrator can be formulated in terms of the relationship between him or her and the abstract author: contradictions between the words of the speaker and the composition of the text (i.e. the abstract author) point to the unreliability of the former. Just as in the narrators of

<sup>21</sup> On the justification for conceiving of the entity of the abstract author in this way, which has met with considerable criticism, cf. for example Chatman (1990).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Easthope (1983) and Hühn (1998).

<sup>23</sup> Luhmann (1990, 1995).

narrative literature, the phenomenon of unreliability and non-omniscience can be found in the speaker of lyric poetry, although this has been the subject of little or no previous work.

#### 4 The Choice of Texts and Arrangement of the Analyses

The potential of this narratological approach to the analysis of lyric poetry is explored in a total of eighteen English lyric poems stretching from the sixteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. In order to make the analyses comparable despite the fact that they cover different authors and periods, all the texts were required to have a particular thematic feature in common: the speaker must be clearly self-reflexive or clearly make him- or herself a theme of the poem. This decision does not reflect a subjectivist understanding of the lyric genre: instead, it was motivated by the observation that a distinctly self-reflexive speaker is found in a large proportion of the English lyric poems from all periods in representative anthologies.<sup>24</sup> The poems selected can be considered part of the established canon of the English lyric, for the majority of them (or at least of those prior to modernism) are found in the main anthologies in common use.<sup>25</sup> The individual selections were made with a view to covering the most well-known authors and as many periods and styles as possible.

The primary aim of the essays that follow is to demonstrate the methods and benefits of the narratological approach when it is put into practice. The concepts and terms they use are employed in the context of the system described here. They are intended as models of how the approach described in this introduction should be put into practice, and not to provide comprehensive interpretations on the basis of a detailed discussion of previous assessments; references to secondary literature have therefore been restricted to selected representative works. A second purpose of the analyses and of the concluding chapter is to use our narratological approach to illustrate the distinctive features of the narrative structures found in lyric poetry.

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<sup>24</sup> To demonstrate the prominence of poems with a first-person perspective or a self-reflexive speaker in three common anthologies, we point out that they comprise 88% of John Hayward's *Penguin Book of English Verse* (1956), 76% of Christopher Ricks's *Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999), and 74% of Paul Keegan's *New Penguin Book of English Verse* (2000).

<sup>25</sup> See for example the three anthologies listed in n. 24.



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