Focalization without (Too Much) Fuss: Using Narratology to Teach Thérèse Desqueyroux

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FEW PROFESSORS of modern foreign languages and
literature have been specifically trained to teach litera­
ture. Although we have written theses and papers
on literature throughout our careers, our “teacher
training” has most often been solely in the area of lan­
guage. What we generally do when it is finally our turn
to teach the twentieth-century introductory course is
to fall back on our own experience. We choose texts
that we have already studied—or perhaps taught as
graduate students. We flesh out our undergraduate
reading notes with graduate seminar notes or old ex­
posés, and we model our teaching styles on those of
former professors who have had a significant impact
on us. While critical theoretical literature may be in­
teresting to us in our research, it seldom seems ap­
propriate to pass along to undergraduate students.

And given the enormous increase in scholarly publi­
cation, we ourselves are often hard-pressed to digest
the current critical feast before us.

Those professors who have completed graduate
studies within the past decade are perhaps fortunate
eough to possess copious reading notes on poststruc­
turalist and deconstructionist theory that can be
adapted to the introductory literature course, but for
others the mere process of keeping up with recent the­
ory is a difficult task. Since my graduate school years
fell somewhere during the twilight of New Criticism
and the dawning of structuralism, for the past fifteen
years I seem to have been waging a constant battle
to keep up with the latest in structuralist, poststruc­
turalist, and deconstructionist literary theory. Add to
these linguistics, semiology, Marxism, psychoanalysis,
and feminism, and it is easy to understand why profes­
sors of modern languages (and literatures!) often find
themselves overwhelmed when it comes to using the­
ory in the foreign literature classroom. However, a ma­
jor goal of the foreign literature class even at the
introductory level should be to move beyond the mere
content-oriented teaching of literature, beyond the
paraphrase of what authors say, toward a tentative app­
raisal of what authors do in their texts and an app­
preciation of how they do it. We all feel an obligation
to do our best to encourage students to become more
proficient in their chosen foreign language, just as we
feel a corresponding duty to introduce them to a
variety of literary texts from different historical periods;
but we should also feel a responsibility to give some
grounding in critical theory—not as an entity apart
from the study of literature but as an integral part of
the process of learning to read, of learning to read crit­
ically.

Two preliminary questions arise from my title: first,
why Therese Desqueyroux in the foreign literature class­
room and, second, why narratology? In answer to the
first question, let me simply say that in practical terms
Thérèse Desqueyroux is still, sixty years after publica­
tion, a wonderfully readable novel. It has a challeng­
ing but not impossible level of language, a plot
structure that is simple but that lends itself easily to
critical analysis, characters who are consistently puz­
zling and interesting and who engage our intellects
as well as our emotions, and a thematic organization
around topics that students love to discuss—love, sex,
m華riage, hypocrisy, guilt, family, and religion. It also
happens to be one of the few twentieth-century novels
of manageable length for an introductory course.

Why narratology instead of speech-act analysis or
a psychoanalytical approach or even deconstruction?
Narratology offers a technique of criticism that is
peculiarly well suited to students at this level—students
who have grown up with television, who are often
movie freaks or even comic book aficionados, who are
often more highly attuned to the visual rather than

The author is Associate Professor of French at the University of
Alberta. The article is based on a paper presented at the MLA
the verbal aspects of art. It seems to me that many elements of narratology are readily accessible to these students—who can make an almost instantaneous connection between their previous experience of art (in movies, on television, or in the comics) and the act of reading, of putting their "eye/1's into the novelistic text.

Mieke Bal, in the preface to the English translation of her book *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen*, argues that the use of a method of analysis that every participant in a discussion can master helps students overcome the feeling of intimidation that a brilliant but unexpectedly structured interpretation by a teacher often engenders (ix). Narratology offers the professor of literature a means by which to help students progress from describing what an author says to analyzing what an author does; allowing both students and professor to share a critical theoretical vocabulary provides a crucial step toward constructing critical readers in the foreign literature classroom.

Mieke Bal, Gérard Genette, Gerald Prince, Tzvetan Todorov, Boris Uspensky, and many others have written about various aspects of narratology; but I want to concentrate here on focalization—which is, of course, only one of the elements of narratological theory that can be used with great facility and success in the foreign literature classroom. With *Thérèse Desqueyroux* as my model text, I shall consider the process and types of focalization as well as the roles of both the focalizer and the focalized object.

A basic principle in constructing critical readers is to help students grasp the fundamental distinction between narration and focalization. As Genette and others demonstrate, most studies of point of view (or narrative perspective) tend to blur the distinction between two related but different questions—the question of who speaks (who narrates) and the question of who sees (who focalizes). Bal reminds us that when at all sophisticated in matters of tone, students may ask, "Is this serious—or is he being ironic?" but their subsequent reading of the novel is often accomplished with a view to either discovering or disproving the "monstrosity" of the "creature" who is Thérèse. If one builds on this initial curiosity by orienting the reading through an examination of the focalization process as distinct from the process of narration, it is often easier to see why—and how—Thérèse's partisans are almost always in the majority.

Focalizations also come in different types, with slight variations in typologies according to the particular critic. The brief summary of focalization types that follows derives from Bal (reworking Genette) and Rimmon-Kenan (reworking Uspensky). In general, types of focalization are related to two criteria—position relative to the story and degree of persistence. If we consider position relative to the story, focalization may be either external or internal. Since the vantage point of external focalization brings itself close to the narrating agent, its vehicle is often called the narrator-focalizer. External focalization is most commonly found in third-person narratives, but it can also occur in first-person narratives 'either when the temporal and psychological distance between narrator and character is minimal (as in Camus's *L'étranger*) or when the perception through which the story is rendered is that of the narrating self rather than that of the experiencing narratives are focalized not only by someone (the focalizer, the vehicle of focalization) but also on someone or something. Focalization has thus both subject and object. The subject (the focalizer) is the agent whose perception orients the presentation; the object (the focalized) is what the focalizer perceives.

When teaching *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, I often find the students' interest caught by Mauriac's statement in the preface: "Beaucoup s'étonneront que j'aie pu imaginer une créature plus odieuse encore que tous mes autres héros." Many will feel surprise that I could have imagined a creature even more odious than any of my other characters' (6). If at all sophisticated in matters of tone, students may ask, "Is this serious—or is he being ironic?" but their subsequent reading of the novel is often accomplished with a view to either discovering or disproving the "monstrosity" of the "creature" who is Thérèse. If one builds on this initial curiosity by orienting the reading through an examination of the focalization process as distinct from the process of narration, it is often easier to see why—and how—Thérèse's partisans are almost always in the majority.

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1. In principle, focalization and narration are distinct activities.
2. In so-called "third person centre of consciousness" (James's *The Ambassadors*, Joyce's *Portrait*), the centre of consciousness (or "reflector") is the focalizer, while the user of the third person is the narrator.
3. Focalization and narration are also separate in first-person retrospective narratives.
4. As far as focalization is concerned, there is no difference between third-person centre of consciousness and first-person retrospective narration. In both, the focalizer is a character within the represented world. The only difference between the two is the identity of the narrator.
5. However, focalization and narration may sometimes be combined . . .
self" (Rimmon-Kenan 74). Internal focalization, by contrast, is located inside the represented events, and its vehicle generally takes the form of a character-focalizer. It can also become (as in many of the novels of Robbe-Grillet) simply an unpersonified textual stance. Both Barthes and Genette have suggested that a test for distinguishing between external and internal focalization is to attempt to "rewrite" the given passage in the first person (Barthes 20; Genette 210). If this is feasible, the passage is internally focalized; if not, then the focalization is external.

Students can easily apply this test to the opening pages of *Thérèse Desqueyroux*:

L’avocat ouvrit une porte. Thérèse Desqueyroux, dans ce couloir dérobé du palais de justice, sentit sur sa face la brume et, profondément, l’aspira. Elle avait peur d’être attendue, hésitait à sortir. Un homme, dont le col était relevé, se déta­cha d’un platane; elle reconnut son père. L’avocat cria: "Non-lieu" et, se retournant vers Thérèse: "Vous pouvez sortir: il n’y a personne."

Elle descendit des marches mouillées. Oui, la petite place semblait déserte. Son père ne l’embrassa pas, ne lui donna pas même un regard; il interrogeait l’avocat Duros qui répondait à mi-voix, comme s’ils eussent été épiais. Elle entendait confusément leurs propos. . . .

The lawyer opened a door. Thérèse Desqueyroux, in that out-of-the-way corridor of the courthouse, felt the fog on her face and breathed in deeply. She was afraid that someone might be there waiting for her and held back. A man with his collar turned up moved out from the shadow of a plane tree. She recognized her father.

"Case dismissed," called the lawyer and then, turning to Thérèse: "You can come out. There’s no one here."

She went down the damp steps. Yes, the small square seemed utterly deserted. Her father did not kiss her. He did not even look at her. He addressed a question to Duros, the lawyer, who answered in a low voice as though he were afraid of being overheard. She could hear them speaking but could not make out the words. . . . (7)

While most students have little trouble identifying third-person in this passage, focalization is sometimes a bit more difficult. By using the "rewrite test," however, they do finally conclude that the focalization is internal, with Thérèse as character-focalizer. Throughout the teaching of the novel, students are encouraged to use the same test to help distinguish external from internal focalization. For although Thérèse is usually the internal character-focalizer within the narrative, there are occasions when the focalization shifts. The ability to recognize such shifts in focalization is also a technique that can be carried over as students progress through the course.

Rimmon-Kenan reminds us that just as the focalized er can be external or internal to the represented events, so the focalized can be seen either from without or within. But the two parallel classifications do not necessarily coincide (hence Rimmon-Kenan’s division of focalizers into “external” or “internal” and the focalized into “without” or “within” (75). In external focalization, the external focalizer may perceive an object either from without or from within. If that perception comes from without, the reader is presented with nothing but the outward manifestations of the focalized person or thing. An example of this kind of focalization occurs in chapter 2 in the description of Thérèse seated in the carriage:

Joues creuses, pommettes, lèvres aspirées, et ce large front, magnifique, composent une figure de condamnée—oui, bien que les hommes ne l’aient jamais reconnue coupable—, con­damné à la solitude éternelle. Son charme, que le monde naguère disait irrésistible, tous ces êtres le possèdent dont le visage trahirait un tourment secret, l’élévation d’une plaie intérieure, s’ils ne s’épuisent à donner le change. Au fond de cette calèche cahotante, sur cette route frayée dans l’épaisseur obscure des pins, une jeune femme démasquée caresse doucement avec la main droite sa face de brûlée vive.

With her hollow cheeks and prominent cheekbones, her pursed lips and her broad imperious brow, she looked like a woman condemned—yes, even though her fellow men had not found her guilty—condemned to an eternity of solitude. That charm of hers which everyone used to say was irresistible, was it not the conscious charm of those whose life is spent concealing a secret torment, the searing agony of an inner hurt? In the darkness of that carriage jolting along that road through the dark pine forest sat a young woman now without her mask, whose face as she stroked it absentmindedly with her right hand was the face of one burning at the stake. (19)

If perception comes from within, however, the narrator-focalizer presents the focalized object (person or thing) by penetrating that object’s feelings and thoughts. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, for example, Mauriac’s third-person narrator-focalizer sometimes allows us a momentary entrée into the thoughts of Thérèse’s husband, Bernard. The same within/without dichotomy is present with an internal focalizer who may perceive the object from within—especially, as often happens in *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, when Thérèse herself is both focalizer and focalized—or from without, where her perception may also be confined to the outward manifestations of the focalized.

Moving from position relative to the story to degree of persistence as a means of classifying focalizations, we see that focalization may remain fixed throughout the narrative (consistently external or internal and attached to a single character), alternate
between focalizers (as in *Madame Bovary*), or shift among several (as in many epistolary novels). The distinction between fixed, variable, and multiple focalization applies as well to the focalized.

In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, focalization remains generally fixed on Thérèse as the internal character-focalizer and on her own past life as the focalized object. There are, however, shifts to the occasional external narrator-focalizer or even to different internal character-focalizers—to Bernard as he watches a pale, emaciated Thérèse walk into the salon to confront her in-laws and even to Tante Clara as she peeps through a keyhole to observe Bernard and Thérèse together.

Yet even though the visual aspects of focalization are often those that are most readily accessible to students in an introductory literature course, Rimmon-Kenan, following Uspensky, argues that the purely visual sense of the term is too narrow. He demonstrates that at least three other facets are also relevant in focalization analysis: (1) the perceptual facet (determined by the two coordinates of space and time); (2) the psychological facet (determined by the cognitive and the emotive orientation of the focalizer toward the focalized); and (3) the ideological facet (74-82).

Perception of the focalizer is determined by both space and time. Spatially, the external focalizer has a bird's-eye view, allowing either a panoramic view of the story's events or a simultaneous focalization of things happening in different places. This kind of perception is obviously denied to the internal character-focalizer (or indeed to an unpersonified position internal to the story). In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, since the character-focalizer Thérèse is herself within the story, she can of course have only a limited vision. Although theoretically it is possible within any text to observe a change in spatial focalization from bird's-eye view to one limited observer or a shift from one limited observer to another, in Mauriac's novel we find neither panoramic views nor simultaneous focalization and only a few shifts from one limited observer to another. This particular insistence on limited vision contributes to the general reader empathy generated for the character Thérèse.

The second coordinate of the perceptual facet of focalization is that of time. If we are dealing with external focalization, it is panchronic for an unpersonified focalizer (as in Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie*) but retrospective for a character focalizing his or her own past (as in the entire episode in chapter 7 of *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, which is narrated in the first person and recounts Thérèse's first meeting with Jean Azevedo). Internal focalization, however, is logically synchronous with the information regulated by the focalizer. Thus an internal focalizer is limited to the "present" of the characters while the external focalizer has access to all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present, and future).

Within the psychological facet of focalization, it is the focalizer's mind and emotions that take on importance. The external or narrator-focalizer, within the cognitive component, has of necessity unrestricted knowledge about the represented world—and if this focalizer does not pass on total knowledge to the reader it is simply for rhetorical effect. The knowledge of the internal focalizer, however, is necessarily restricted; as part of the represented world, an internal focalizer cannot know everything about it. This particular aspect of focalization does much to explain why students who read *Thérèse Desqueyroux* often have trouble with the characters of Bernard and Jean. Save for two or three occurrences of external-narrator focalization, we have only Thérèse's knowledge of the two men; thus if we read naively, they may appear to be but caricatures. Even the character-focalizer Thérèse realizes the limits of her knowledge as she thinks of her husband, then smiles at "cette caricature de Bernard qu'elle dessine en esprit" 'this caricature of Bernard that she has conjured up in her mind' (32). In its emotive aspect, the difference between external and internal focalization gives us the difference between "objective" (or neutral or uninvolved) focalization and "subjective" (or colored or involved) focalization. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, for example, the long passage that opens chapter 3 (the description of Argelouse) is externally focalized:

*Argelouse is réellement une extrémité de la terre; un de ces lieux au-delà desquels il est impossible d'avancer, ce qu'on appelle ici un quartier: quelques métairies sans église, ni mairie, ni cimetière, disséminées autour d'un champ de seigle, à dix kilomètres du bourg de Saint-Clair, auquel les relève une seule route défoncée. Ce chemin plein d'ornières et de trous se mue, au-delà d'Argelouse, en sentiers sablonneux; et jusqu'à l'Océan il n'y a plus rien que quatre-vingt kilomètres de marécages, de lagunes, de pins grêles, de landes où à la fin de l'hiver les brebis ont la couleur de la cendre.*

Argelouse is, literally, at the end of the earth, a place beyond which it is impossible to go, the sort of settlement that in this part of the world is called a "quartier." Just a few farms with no church, town hall, or cemetery, scattered around a field of rye and joined by a single ill-kept road to the market town of St. Clair six miles away. This road with its ruts and potholes fades away beyond Argelouse into a number of sandy tracks. From there, right on to the coast, is nothing but marshland—fifty miles of it. Brackish ponds, young pine trees, and stretches of heath where the sheep at winter's end are the color of dead ash. (29)
But in chapter 8, internally focalized by Thérèse as she recalls the months of her pregnancy, the same place description takes on an entirely different color:

Jusqu’à la fin de décembre, il fallut vivre dans ces ténèbres. Comme si ce n’était pas assez des pins innombrables, la pluie ininterrompue multipliant autour de la sombre maison ses millions de barreaux mouvants. Lorsque l’unique route de Saint-Clair menaçait de devenir impraticable, je fus ramenée au bourg, dans la maison à peine moins ténébreuse que celle d’Argelouse. Les vieux platanes de la Place disparaient encore leurs feuilles au vent pluvieux.

Until the end of December one had to live in this darkness. As and if there weren’t enough pines already, the never-ending rain surrounded the gloomy house with its myriad moving bars. When it seemed likely that the only road to St. Clair would soon be impassable, I was taken into town to a house scarcely less gloomy and dark than the one in Argelouse. The old plane-trees on the square were fighting with the rainy wind in an effort to keep their last few leaves.

Of course perception of the focalized from without also restricts observation to external manifestations, leaving the emotions to be inferred from them. In contrast, perception of the focalized from within allows the reader to share the inner life of the focalized, either by making the focalizer and focalized identical (as in interior monologue, of which examples abound in Thérèse Desqueyroux) or by granting to the external narrator-focalizer the total knowledge to penetrate into the inner life of the focalized. When the focalized is seen from within, especially by an external focalizer, indicators such as “she thought,” “she felt,” “it seemed to her,” “she knew,” “she recognized”—or, most commonly, with reference to Thérèse, “elle songeait” ‘she songed’—often appear in the text: “‘J’ai été créée,’ pense Thérèse, ‘à l’image de ce pays aride et où rien n’est vivant, hors les oiseaux qui passent, les sangliers nomades’” “I was created in the image of this arid land,” Thérèse thinks, “where there is no living thing save the passing birds and the wild pigs roaming through the forest”’ (124); “Thérèse, à ce moment de sa vie, se sentait détachée de sa fille comme de tout le reste” ‘Thérèse, at that moment in her life, felt as detached from her daughter as she was from everything else’ (109); “Elle ne songeait plus à feindre l’indifférence” ‘It no longer occurred to her to feign indifference’ (125); “Thérèse le savait, elle savait qu’Anne entrainée par sa mère avait en vain cherché dans la foule un visage absent’ ‘Thérèse knew, she knew that Anne, brought there by her mother, had searched the crowd in vain for an absent face’ (67). But when the inner states of the focalized are left to be implied by external behavior (e.g., Thérèse’s constant smoking), modal expressions such as “apparently,” “evidently,” “as if,” or “it seemed” often occur. These “words of estrangement,” to use Uspensky’s term (85–87) underline the speculative status of the vision.

The third facet of focalization is that of ideology. According to Uspensky, this facet (sometimes simply referred to as the “norms of the text”) consists of “a general system of viewing the world conceptually,” in accordance with which the events and characters of the story are evaluated (8). These norms, ordinarily presented through a single dominant perspective (often a narrator-focalizer), are usually taken as authoritative, and all other ideologies in the text are evaluated from this “higher” position. In more complex examples, however, the unitary authoritative external focalizer may give way to a plurality of ideological positions, the interplay among them provoking, according to Bakhtin, a nonunitary or “polyphonic” reading of the text.

The question of ideological focalization in Thérèse Desqueyroux is extremely interesting. The ideology of traditional Catholicism as focalized through Thérèse certainly allows the reader to see—in its stifling hypocrisy—how difficult its norms are to live by; at the same time, Jean Azévédo’s ideological alternative, what one critic has called his ‘potted nietzsche’ (Maucuer 43), also focalized through Thérèse, seems to be equally unsatisfactory as a dominant ideology within the text. Indeed, in Thérèse Desqueyroux the norms of the text as defined by the peculiarity of the novel’s focalization involve a total questioning of ideology as such.

Rimmon-kenan also points out that although focalization is in itself nonverbal (“seeing” as opposed to narration’s “speaking”), like everything else in the text it can only be expressed by language (82). The overall language of Thérèse Desqueyroux is of course that of the narrator, not the focalizer; but focalization certainly colors the novel in such a way as to make it appear as the transposition of the perceptions of a separate agent, Thérèse herself. Both the presence of a focalizer other than the narrator and the shift from one focalizer to another may be signaled by language.

My discussion has centered solely on the concept of focalization and the ways it can help initiate students into the use of theory in the foreign literature classroom. Given the particularities of Thérèse Desqueyroux as a model text, however, I hope it is easy to see how many other aspects of narratological theory may also be of use in the teaching of this novel—such as questions of order, duration, and frequency. By using narratology in the foreign literature classroom, we demonstrate to our students that theory is not merely a tool for advanced scholarly research but also an integral part of the process of becoming competent and critical readers.
Note

1 All the translations in this paper are mine.

Works Cited


Thérèse Desqueyroux (French pronunciation: [teÊ’z dÉ’skÉ’Êu]) is the most famous novel by François Mauriac. The novel is set in the Landes, a sparsely populated area of south-west France covered largely with pine forests. As it opens, a court case is being dismissed. The narrator, the titular Thérèse, has been tried for poisoning her husband Bernard by overdosing him with Fowler's Solution, a medicine containing arsenic. Despite strong evidence against her, including prescriptions she forged, the case Thérèse Desqueyroux Watch. start new discussion reply. Page 1 of 1. Â ok im doing therese desqueyroux for a2 topic and text, but the problem is i haven't read it properly enough to revise it (just read it in lessons in class) - got a mock on it soon and was just wondering if anyone knew any study aids or summaries available ?? 0. reply.