

THE NARRATOR'S MOTIVES CONCERNING JULIANA'S LETTERS IN HENRY JAMES'S THE ASPERN PAPERS

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ABSTRACT

This study questions how the narrative voice of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* shapes the reader's understanding of the narrator's motives concerning Juliana's letters received from Jeffrey Aspern. This is qualitative analytical research in which 'unreliable narrator' theory was used to analyze and discuss the data from primary and secondary resources. This paper also links Booth's idea to Schneider's critics about unreliable narrator theory. Although *The Aspern Papers*' narrator is unreliable due to his unpredictable and unstable actions, the researcher argues that *The Aspern Papers*' narrator who also becomes the main character of the story wants to possess Juliana's letters for his benefits. Should he get the letters, he would be able to "sell" Aspern's life to the public, and thus he could get financial profit or personal profit for his career as a journalist, a writer, or a publisher.

Keywords: unreliable narrator, motive, Henry James, Aspern papers

ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini mendiskusikan bagaimana sudut pandang penceritaan *The Aspern Papers* karya Henry James melahirkan pemahaman pembaca terhadap motif narator terhadap surat-surat Juliana yang diterima dari Jeffrey Aspern. Ini adalah penelitian kualitatif analisis dimana teori 'unreliable narrator' digunakan untuk menganalisis dan mendiskusikan objek utama dan sumber lain. Tulisan ini juga mengaitkan pendapat Booth terhadap konsep unreliable narrator. Meskipun narator *The Aspern Papers* tidak bisa dipercaya karena tindakannya yang tidak bisa diprediksi dan tidak stabil, peneliti berpendapat bahwa narator *The Aspern Papers* yang juga merupakan tokoh utama cerita menginginkan surat-surat Juliana untuk kepentingan pribadinya. Jika ia mendapatkan surat-surat tersebut, maka ia dapat menjual kehidupan Aspern kepada publik, sehingga ia bisa mendapatkan keuntungan finansial atau pribadi untuk karirnya baik sebagai seorang wartawan, penulis, ataupun penerbit.*

Kata Kunci: narator yang tidak dipercaya, motif, Henry James, makalah Aspern

INTRODUCTION

Every story was created by someone namely the author and every story are also told by someone namely the narrator. Narrator, according to Walsh, can create significant effects for readers' understanding of literary work (Walsh, 1997). However, the author is not the narrator. Henry James, an American author, wrote *The Aspern Papers*, but he does not narrate the story; it is the narrator who also becomes the characters of the story that narrates the story. In other words, James used the first person-points of view in its narrative technique.

Henry James lived from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. Yet, he remains popular until today, not just because of his works, but also because of his life. Even his private life recently became the subject or materials of fiction by other authors (Hannah, 2007). As an author, James has a great contribution to literature. His writing varies from play, short story, novel, to novels; and *The Aspern Papers* is his great novella, published in 1888 in the first place.

Subsequently, since its first publication, *The Aspern Papers* has been revised several times, and to a greater extent, it also has been adapted into films, plays, and operas since 1947 and played in some countries. Recently in 2018, another film adaptation of *The Aspern Papers* was released. It, indeed, proves the popularity of the work until nowadays. However, this research focuses on written work or novella published in 2009 as the main research object.

In a few words, *The Aspern Papers* is the story about a journalist, whose name is unrevealed, who looks for the precious letters from a poet named Jeffrey Aspern to a girl named Juliana. The journalist is extremely obsessed with those papers and does anything to have them. Interestingly, the journalist also becomes the narrator of the story. In other words, the story is told from the first-person narrator.

However it is fun but also unsettling to read the Aspern Documents. Readers would probably appreciate the tragic suspense at the opening Chapter in which the narrator appears to be a heroic character in criminal detective fiction, unveiling the mystery of Jeffrey Aspern. But the way the narrator tells the story and the narrator himself irritated me as a lecturer as it goes on reading. It is unexpected and irritant. He is fascinating and puzzling. Russell also responds that we are asked to think about the same question when pursuing the narrator's hunt for papers and letters written by Jeffrey Aspern, the great late poet (Russel, 2015).

Therefore, this research examined how the narrative voice of *The Aspern Papers* shapes the reader's understanding of the narrator's motives concerning Juliana's letters. The researcher used Booth's theory of unreliable narrator as well as various related critical analysis from some scholars explained below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narrative voice means from which perspective or which point-of-view the story is being told. There are many theories about this, such as 'external' and 'internal' viewpoint (Barry, 2009). The other idea comes from Sylvan Barnet and his friends in *An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (2008). They

divided the narrative voice into two main types: participant or first-person point of view, and non-participant or third-person point of view.

The first-person point of view means that the story is told by one of its characters. Yet, sometimes a first-person narrator who narrates a story focuses on another character — ‘the narrator still says “I” (thus the point of view is the first-person), but the reader feels that the story is not chiefly about this “I” but is about some other figure’ (Barnet, 2008). That is reflected in James’s *The Aspern Papers* in which the story is narrated by the narrator whose name is never revealed until the end of the story, but the story is not mainly about him but about Juliana, Miss Tina, and possibly the documents he obsessed over.

Furthermore, the way in which the narrator tells the story from the first-person perspective has a crucial effect on the response of the readers. What the narrator says can be reliable if the readers can logically accept it, or it can be unreliable if the narrator ‘have an ax to grind, perhaps because they are not perceptive enough to grasp the full implications of what they report, or perhaps because they are mentally impaired, even insane’ (Barnet, 2008).

Wayne C. Booth firstly used the ‘unreliable narrator’ term in 1961 in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. He used this theory in examining the credibility of the first-person narrators in fiction, in which he used James’s *The Aspern Papers* as the object. The unreliable narrator then becomes very popular until nowadays — scholars use this theory to examine either classic or modern literature. It also can be used to look at the second and third-person narrators. Even, it becomes a tool that examines the context of film and television.

However, Booth’s influential theory of unreliable narrator also provokes disagreement from other scholars. Daniel J. Schneider is one of them. He indicates that Booth’s concept of the unreliable narrator is ‘based on unsound assumptions concerning the means by which meaning is established in fiction’ (Schneider, 1976). Furthermore, Schneider argues that fiction must be examined closely and intensively because ‘the way in which [readers] read fiction affects everything we are likely to say about stories and novels’ (Schneider, 1976). This Schneider research is indeed highly impactful to this research.

Finally, it is also important to mention other previous studies of *The Aspern Papers* that contribute meaningful to the discussion of this paper. They are (Brown, 1991) who discusses how Henry James’s revision to his work creates the narrative spaces from his original idea — the original taken from James’s notebooks; (Scholl, 2013) that studies the ‘secret paternity and questions the mysterious letter; (Miller,

2015) who analyses the historical narratives of *The Aspern Papers* applying the speech act theory; (Hewish, 2016) that examines the 'cryptic relations' between among the characters, including the narrator and Miss Tina; and other books and articles acknowledged in the bibliography.

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to determine the main research problem, close reading is essential and becomes "primary methodologies" in most of the literary studies (Smith, 2016). During this study, the researcher read *The Aspern Papers* at least two times. The first reading helped the researcher to understand the story's intrinsic elements: characters and their characterization, settings, plots, and most importantly, the conflicts. All the way through this first reading, it was noteworthy jotting down some problems and interesting topics before going on with one final matter. The researcher, then, looked for an appropriate theory to examine the topic and found that Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is the most suitable one. Interestingly, he also discussed the unreliable narrator of *The Aspern Papers* in his book. Besides that, other related studies to Henry James's works from reliable resources were highly impactful to this research — those helped me create more elaborative and detailed ideas and arguments. The second reading, which was a more intense reading, was used to notice and mark the important quotations in *The Aspern Papers* related to the analysis. Indeed, some critical annotations to those quotations were also helpful. Finally, the researcher came up to the analytical step, which was a descriptive qualitative method: analyzing, describing, elaborating, and discussing the data from both main and secondary resources by applying the narrative theory, specifically the unreliable narrator theory (Booth, 1961).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

One issue arouses an argument from scholars: what actually is the notion discussed in *The Aspern Papers*? Wayne C. Booth identifies two different possibilities for the purpose of the story: the narrator's thoroughness and utter resentment of the manuscripts and the recuperating of the visited history' (Booth, 1961). The second subject evokes a difference of opinion from Daniel J. Schneider; he goes on to argue that Booth may make another over on it. For Schneider, the real subject is simply 'life and liberty versus death and enslavement' (Schneider, 1976) (Schneider, 1976). On the one hand, the researcher agrees with Schneider that the topic is not the Visible Past, in reality this is beyond the meaning of the tale. This

second object, however, Booth points to be focused on the preface of the New York Edition (1907-9) that is not yet available in the initial text (1888). Somehow reading the preface can make the reader more puzzled as James seems to talk about another problem and complexity that is still related but not part of the text. According to Gerard Genette, the preface is simply a paratext, and, he argues, a paratext, does not always come into play, but simply "surrounds it and extends it, precisely to present it to the reader (Genette & Maclean, 1991). However the researcher argues that the preface should also be highly considered in reading and examining the novel because it certainly can be about the subject of the novel at once as long the preface was written by the author.

This report, on the other hand, reveals distinct factors in Schneider's chosen theme, free and enslavement, owing to its attention on the relationship between the actor and Juliana as well as Tina. He puts aside the relation between the narrator and the Aspern papers which should be highly conceived. I believe the first theme is more useful since he may cover the whole theme of the compelling investigation of information related to the private life of Aspern through his papers of the narrator.

It's reasonable enough if James' unequivocal description of the topic is apparent not only in the Aspern Papers, but also in several late writings by James from the reader's various interpretations of it as it is actually used by narrators who with the original topic, transmutate one interpretation in another but in a different way" (Booth, 1961). Another cause, Hazel Hutchison explained, is the developments in the language style of James: 'complex syntactic and complicated physics demands great attention and open mind to mature James writing' (Hutchison, 2006). Thus the Aspern Papers are unparalleled because of his illustrative language, for example because he represents his character Aspern with a 'God' and can see literature in the heavens all over the world. And that's where you're hanging in the sky. He is, and that is where he belongs (James, 2009). Likewise, if Ms Tina says that Juliana is 100 and 50 years old, the reader is uncertain whether she is her age, literally, or 'hyperbole' (Korg, 1962).

James introduced complexities to the narrator too. He used the narrator who plays the role as the principal character. But the narrator is mysterious, unnamed and his true identity is unknown. He says little about himself and lets readers explore for themselves. He is like a 'chameleon' variable and unstable here and there depending on his conditions, unique in his name. He introduced himself in the early chapter to Ms. Prest as a writer and a curious researcher, but comes to the house of Ms. Bordereau and sets out as an American pilgrim who loves gardening. Then he confessed himself to himself "in a little way as a critic, commentator, a historian"

(James, 2009). He assures Mrs. Prest, too, that he will do all he can to achieve his goal, even if he can make love for Juliana, the niece, yet again he seems to break his own commitment. When he has an opportunity to marry Ms. Tina to have a letter from Aspern, he does not. It won't say until previous papers are taken down.

Such an unsteady characterization of the narrator involves distinctive narrational voices classified by Booth into three notions: "the self-traitorial of the narrator, evident to every wary reader; his efforts to evocate the past, which had been removed from context, could be undifferentiated from the voice of James; and the moving passages as it were that lie between" (Booth, 1961). The narrator should not be trusted entirely. Since the early story, we ought to have realized his ambition telling the reader: "Hypocrisy, double standing is my only chance. I'm sorry about it but for Jeffrey Aspern's sake, there are no basses I wouldn't commit" (James, 2006). Throughout the story he can become naive or the liar.

But the narrator had to choose between two other equally disadvantageous options: marrying an old woman, although he did not love to get the papers or ignore the proposal for marriage, but he finally lost the precious papers he was obsessed with. He spent a long day in confusion asking what decisions should be taken until he arrived at one decision. I can't marry a ridiculous old provincial woman for a bundle of tattered papers (James, 2006). He didn't think that he needed the Aspern papers, because without them he had enough stuff to write. His plan to leave Venice, he said as well. However, he changed his mind after a few thoughts on the financial issue and the value of the documents. He returned to the house of Ms Tina and found her with sweetness and forgiveness in a different image. He thought of her as a lovely, younger and not ridiculous lady. Ms Tina told him she had destroyed the great papers, and his view of her again was different, saying that she'd become a simple dingy old man" (James, 2006). This means that Ms Tina is never loved by the narrator but rather because she had papers of Aspern. He loved her.

The narrator earns nothing, his effort and money and time commitment are needless. He has something of a shame" (Scholl, 2013). This irony is reflected in the last line: "I can't bore my loss when I look at it (aspern photo) (James, 2006). James revised this closing sentence of the novel from 'It makes my sorry for the missing letters unbearable' in the first edition. I can scarcely bear my loss when I look at it — I am speaking of the precious articles' in the edition in New York. The changes "shed light on the evolving self-absorption and fragile egotism of the narrator," says Ellen Brown (Brown, 1991).

Moreover, Brown retains the uncertainty of the use of dash symbol,

whatever kind of "loss" the narrator really implies. In effect, it is not just a precious text, but what he sacrificed in playing games: integrity, ethics, dignity, honesty and compassion" to save the face and prevent the author from learning (Scholl, 2013).

The confusion of the subject and the essence of the oral comments react to the interpretation of the audience regarding the narrator. J. Hillis Miller suggests that the narrator is "homosocial if not directly gay" because he sees Jeffrey as the narrator and Jeffrey's envy to the women (Miller, 2005). I agree with Miller when he assesses the motivations of the narrator, which he does not base on Henry James' biography. While James has never been married and remained unable to give birth to romance (Hutchison, 2012), this does not mean that he presents himself as a narrator.

Therefore this narrator reflects Captain Silsbee, who is an American collector who attempted, along with Aspern and Juliana, to take the precious letters of Shelley and Byron. The rejection of Juliana's niece by the narrator is not the reflection of James, who rejected marriage, but the reflection of Silsbee, who refused to marry Shelley's niece. In comparison, the narrator is over-interpretation when he judges him as being homosexual, since he merely admires Aspern's letters, not admires him in intimate, romantic relationships. If the narrator was suspected by Miller, the narrator would have had to suspect his relatives, John Cumnor, because Jeffrey's documents were both haunted.

The motive for the narrator is pointed out in the early chapter in which he states that he is coming to Venice to find the Aspern papers that he considers 'the bigger boon' (James, 2006). However, I believe that the big boon, for financial gain or for personal benefit for the sake of his lifetime, sounds vague and more political. It would be very useful for his writing if he can catch the details from Juliana's letters. If he is able to publish the writing, it would mark a landmark for his writing career. Writing about Jeffrey Aspern is a fascinating topic to be sold in public, since he was a popular author, he was accepted by the world and his words were enjoyed by many women. The narrator said to Ms Tina, "The letters of Aspern are very important to expose, because they will have such great interest in the public as an incredible contribution to the history of Jeffrey Aspern' (James, 2006).

I wonder why the narrator spends incredibly high sums only on rent – 'a thousand francs a month' for over three months – if nothing is bigger and promising? In publicizing Aspern's story or Aspern's association with Juliana on the basis of the details given, I think it will provide him a boost by selling the paper publicly, covering his expenses and safeguarding his life in Venice.

The narrator, like an author, editor, and/or writer, has spent many years

trying to study the life of Aspern from those in some nations who may have a link to Aspern. He is really excited to chat about Aspern, searching for more fascinating new literary topics. His ambition sometimes causes him to take unethical steps in some way. He sneaked into her room the night following Juliana's critical condition. He opened Juliana's secretary to scan the documents like a thief when he had a chance. This narrator persuades readers that his meaning was not accurate, that his goal was not bad.

The narrator, as seen in his critique of the first New York edition, Henry James purposely depicted immorality, for example 'I could seize her document' so I could pounce on her belongings and sack her drawers,' and I had never said it to Tita Bordereau.' The revisions 'ironically accept the terms of the prospective claim, which demonstrates that the innocence of [narrator] is only partial and his words have been terribly open to errors' There was a mistake (Horne, 1990). The result of these changes reveals the sense of James's narrator's "moral deterioration" which definitely enhances the readers' knowledge of the narrator's bad behavior (Booth, 1961).

It is also worth noting that the narrator is labeled by Juliana as a publisher of his immorality." It is mocking to ridicule the authors, journalist, publisher or anyone relevant to modern media who used to disclose the personal interests of someone's privacy: to reveal a person's life to make a difference. In addition, as a writer who introduced Silsbee into the Aspern Journals, it is also ironic about himself. In fact, James realized that this is improper: 'James understood that as an author, he often lived out the lives of others and he didn't very differ from the reporter and critic in many ways (Hutchison, 2012). He still does it, though.

CONCLUSION

The first-person narrative voice used by Henry James in *The Aspern Papers* has successfully provoked multi-interpretations and various critics from readers and scholars, specifically regarding the motives of the narrator who also becomes the main character of the story. The unreliable narrator is highly ambitious to possess Juliana's letters from Jeffrey Aspern for his own good either as a journalist, a writer, or publisher. If he succeeds to get the precious letters, he would know Aspern's life and Aspern's life is valuable to be sold to the public.

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