SOLVING TEXTUAL INCONSISTENCIES: A CASE STUDY OF COHERENCE IN THE SHORT STORY "CLAP HANDS, HERE COMES CHARLIE" BY BERYL BAINBRIDGE

CZU: 801.82:821.111-4

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7620584

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The present article deals with the concept of coherence as a pragmatically determined quality of text production and reception. It presents the analysis of coherence manifestation in the short story "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie" by B. Bainbridge focusing on the structural and discoursal elements that preclude the unity of the narrative. It considers the peculiarities of the etic opening, the interference of the main line and subsidiary lines of the narrative, and the dramatic irony and their impact on the linear development of the narrative. In addition, the manifestations of different forms of discourse which function as markers of distinct narratorial or character viewpoints are commented on with a view to determining the reader's degree of interpretative cooperation in completing the blanks and solving the indeterminacies.

Keywords: *coherence, narrative strategies, mimetic discourse, narrative perspective, discontinuity.*

In narratology, coherence has been treated as a complex phenomenon "because it occurs along so many literary axes" (Rabinowitz, 1987 p.142). Peter J. Rabinowitz, in *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, regards coherence as a "unity", "basic pattern" or "overarching meaning" (*Ibidem*, p.141), "as a quality of the vision of the poet or of the world he or she describes" (*Ibidem,* p.142). In a more restricted way, the term is used by Seymour Chatman to refer to the consistency of reference (Chatman, 1978, p.142). As a text linguistic notion, coherence denotes the properties in the structure and design of a text that determine readers to deem the identified textual parts as all contributing to a whole and making sense, not just being a jumble of sentences (Toolan, 2013).

Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang U. Dressler include coherence in the list of seven standards of textuality and define it as a "continuity of senses", "the mutual access and relevance within a configuration of concepts and relations" (Beaugrande, Dressler, 2002). The configuration underlying a text is the textual world, which may or may not correspond with the conventional version of the "real world". Interpreting textual worlds requires the meaning of expressions in the surface text and common sense knowledge based on the participants' expectations and experience regarding the represented events and situations (*Ibidem).* Neither text linguistic factors in textual coherence, i.e. rules of anaphora, norms of paragraphing and paragraph structure, sequencing of segments and the way the relations between them are signaled, nor common sense knowledge applied in contexts are sufficient guides in tracking coherence, as there are narratives that go beyond common sense and exhibit complex textual patternings.

Narratologists acknowledge the status of coherence as both a textual property and an activity on the part of the reader. Therefore, coherence is a pragmatically determined quality, requiring close attention to the specific sense made of the text in the cultural context. As M. Toolan posits, "Judgments of coherence are very much based on the addressees' evaluation of what is relevant and informative in the discoursal circumstances of the individual text under analysis" (Toolan, 2013).

Coherence is considered an important feature of narrative because all formalist and structuralist models of story and discourse that offer any kind of morphology or grammar of narratives

are based on elements judged as essential to text coherence, such as temporal, causal, thematic coherence, topic maintenance and topic-furtherance backed up by repetition. The addressee's competence, their cultural background are essential in tracking narrative coherence. Readers who are knowledgeable about the ensemble of codes and narrative techniques used in the text by the author are able to complete the blanks or solve the indeterminacies, thus restoring the unity of the text. There are degrees of coherence, varying from the minimal to the maximal (*Ibidem*). In the case of narratives, there are generic norms that guide coherence, such as the presence of a story or plot, the development of an inter-related event sequence, the focus on one or a few characters undergoing change, and the presence of a situation of stability developing a disequilibrium, following which a renewed but altered equilibrium emerges (closure).

Among challenges to coherence in literary texts, Michael Toolan includes free indirect discourse, which comprises two centers of orientation ascribed to two different narrative entities – character and narrator, bearers of distinct points of view; metaphor where readers fail to detect it, hyperbole, irony, sarcasm, unreliability which leads to ambiguity, etc.; "texts" comprising randomly connected sentences, with equally random sequencing of unrelated words within those sentences which thwart any ability of the reader to construct the meaning behind the text; plot twists which involve discontinuity of character, time, place, and event-sequencing caused by a sudden tragedy or comedy; repetitive telling, anachrony (*Ibidem*).

In what follows, the manifestation of coherence in the short story "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie" is analyzed focusing on the structural elements that preclude the linear development of the narrative and on the discoursal means that cause the overlapping or abrupt transitions in narrative perspective that solicit a greater degree of readerly cooperative participation in the process of text comprehension.

The short story "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie", selected for study, is written by Beryl Bainbridge, the distinguished author of *The Birthday Boys* and *Every Man For Himself* who has four times been nominated for the Booker Prize, twice won the Whitbread Prize for Fiction. The action of the story, divided structurally into four parts, is taking place in a noisy, argumentative working-class family, in or near the city of Liverpool, preparing to see a pantomime based on J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan.* The main line of the narrative alternates with Charles Henderson's reflections and reminiscences of the past, in the second and third parts of the text, and overlaps with the theatrical representation of *Peter Pan* on the backdrop of which the tragic death of the protagonist occurs.

The first structural element of the text that challenges the coherence of the story is the *type of incipit*. The narrative starts *in medias res,* with little exposition that introduces the characters and a hint at the conflict, that of receiving tickets for the performance of *Peter Pan* instead of a Christmas cash bonus. This is an etic opening that does not provide a preliminary orientation in the text, with persons and objects from the fictional world treated as given, known, and therefore in no need of being introduced, with referents being withheld for quite long stretches of text (Fludernik, 2009, p.44):

> *Two weeks before Christmas, Angela Bisson gave Mrs Henderson six tickets for the theatre. Mrs Henderson was Angela Bisson's cleaning lady.*
>
> *'I wanted to avoid giving you money,' Angela Bisson told her. 'Anybody can give money* (Bainbridge, 1985).

Since the exposition of earlier events is supplied by flashbacks, mainly in the second part of the story, this technique solicits readers' schemata and additional sense-making skills to link the bits of information and piece out missing links among the story actions and events.

The text's *system of denomination* or *naming conventions* (the specific set of naming strategies used to identify and subsequently refer to its characters) is another element that causes reference discontinuity and, consequently, challenges the furtherness of the topic. The first distinguishing peculiarity of the denomination system in this text, which is also a formal marker of the etic incipit, is *naming with no* or *scarce accompanying explanation*. If in the case of the major characters the

family relations are stated (*Her husband, Charles Henderson, asked her how much Angela Bisson had tipped her for Christmas.*; *Mrs Henderson's son, Alec, said Peter Pan wasn't a pantomime.),* then when referring to the minor characters, no information is provided *('And I doubt,' said Alec, 'if our Moira's kiddies will make head nor tail of it. It's full of nannies and coal fires burning in the nursery.' Moira said little Tracy was terrified of the crocodile but she loved the doggie.).* Only in the subsequent passages of the story is background information supplied in the form of flashbacks, such as in the moment the protagonist Charles Henderson reminisces his happy old days in the terraced house:

> *... People weren't meant to look out of windows and see nothing but sky, particularly if they weren't looking upwards. God knows how Moira's kiddies managed. They were stuck up in the air over Kirby. When Moira and Alec had been little they'd played in the street - Moira on the front step fiddling with her dolly, Alec on one roller-skate scooting in and out of the lamp-posts* (Bainbridge, 1985).

or as additional commentary that reveals more exposition about minor characters:

> *... Moira said nothing, but her mouth drooped at the corners. She was probably thinking about her husband who had run off and left her with two kiddies and a gas bill for twenty-seven quid* (Bainbridge, 1985).

Social deixis is another distinctive element of the naming system that leads to inconsistency in establishing character reference and tracing participants in the story under analysis. As a linguistic indicator of viewpoint, social deixis, i.e. the varying ways of referring to others, expresses, according to M. Short "the idea of closer or more remote social relations" (Short, 2007). The protagonist of the story "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie" by Beryl Bainbridge is referred to throughout the text mainly as *Charles Henderson* or *Charlie*. The first appellation is used in the narrative report of actions and commentaries and marks the narrator's perspective as it conveys his distant, neutral relation to the character. The second manner in which the protagonist is referred to occurs in dialogues and reveals Alec's idiolect, Mr Henderson's son, and expresses a disrespectful attitude towards his father:

> *'Shut up, Charlie,' said Alec. His father hated being called Charlie. '*
> *'Get over, can't you?' cried Alec. 'Stop leaning on me, Charlie.'* (Bainbridge, 1985)

Addressing his father as a rough equal in social terms causes difficulty for the reader in establishing the referent, at least for the first time the name *Charlie* appears in the text. With the narrator's clarification "*His father hated being called Charlie*" and the subsequent development of events that show Alec's mordantly ironic, derisive, and at times dismissive attitude towards everything his father does or says, the reader becomes aware of the underlying reason the son refers to his father in this manner. This appelation does not comply with the norms of behaviour that readers are familiar with and apply for understanding the textual world, thus creating inconsistency in tracking the referent of the proper name. However, a macro-textual perspective assumed by the reader helps to solve the indeterminacies.

Considering the discoursal dimension of the narrative under analysis, a number of elements preclude the linearity of the text and affect the transparency of meaning. In the given short story, the most salient elements affecting the continuity of the plot are the mimetic forms of discourse, i.e. free direct and three indirect types of discourse and the interference of the main and subsidiary storylines.

> *... Had there been anything so exalted as a back door in this hell-hole, going out of it certainly wouldn't improve his health. Not without a parachute. He couldn't even open the window for a breath of air. This high up there was generally a howling gale blowing in from the…. People weren't meant to look out of windows and see nothing but sky, particularly if they weren't looking upwards. God knows how Moira's kiddies managed. They were stuck up in the air over Kirkby* (Bainbridge, 1985).

The quoted excerpt conveys the protagonist's dissatisfaction with his present flat and reveals his nostalgia for the time when he lived in a modest semi-detached house with less comfort than the present apartment, but where he felt freer. His discontent is rendered in free indirect discourse with the narrator's partial withdrawal and the foregrounding of the character's thoughts and feelings. Hence, the authorial narrative situation that prevails in this text shifts to the figural type with Charles Henderson's focalization. His centre of orientation is marked by proximal spatial deixis (*this hell-hole, this high up),* evaluative language (*hell-hole, a howling gale*) and idiolect (*kiddies, stuck up*). In addition to these lexical means, the elliptical sentences (*Not without a parachute,*) and exclamations (*God knows how Moira's kiddies managed*) echo the character's frustration at his inability to adapt to new living conditions in a tower block of flats.

In the following extracts, the transition to the mimetic forms of discourse is even more abrupt, thus creating a discontinuity in the narrative representation and soliciting the reader's close attention and consideration of relevant textual clues.

> *When they passed the end of the street in which they had lived a decade ago, Mrs Henderson swivelled in her seat and remarked how changed it was, oh how changed. All those houses knocked down, and for what?*
>
> *... He didn't actually laugh out loud when Mr Darling complained that nobody coddled him - oh no, why should they, seeing he was only the bread-winner - but he did grunt sardonically* (Bainbridge, 1985).

The first quote starts with Mrs Henderson's free indirect discourse that gradually shifts to her free direct form of discourse presentation. The narratorial presence is only marked by the reporting phrase "*Mrs Henderson ... remarked*". With regret expressed in the following sentence "*All those houses knocked down, and for what?*" uttered by the character, even if no quotation marks are used to delimit her discourse from that of the reporting entity, the narrator effaces completely causing a sudden change in the narrative perspective. In the second quoted example there is a shift to Mr Henderson's focalization which is signalled by his exclamation in free direct style "*oh no, why should they, seeing he was only the bread-winner*" and embedded in the narrator's narrative report of speech acts. In this stretch of discourse the character's voice, even if devoid of punctuation marks that would mark the transition, is noticeable not only by the tone the exclamation implicitly conveys but also by the idiolect, *bread-winner,* the same noun being used by Charles Henderson in a dialogical sequence in the first part of the story *'I'm only the blasted bread-winner.'* As a result, the linearity of the narrative is temporarily broken causing confusion to the reader who has to correctly assign the varying forms of discourse to the emitting sources.

The continuous development of the narrative is impeded by the interference of different narrative sequences whose boundaries are not clearly marked. The main storyline that depicts Charles Henderson's introspection parallels the theatrical representation of *Peter Pan* and at times the protagonist's thoughts or even dreams overlap with the characters' dialogues on the stage, therefore, challenging the "logic of hierarchy" (Chatman, 1978, p.53):

> *... Something dramatic was happening on stage. Peter had woken up and was having a disjointed conversation with Tinkerbell, something to do with cough mixture and poison. Tink, you have drunk my medicine… it was poisoned and you drank it to save my life… Tink dear, are you dying?... The tiny star that was Tinkerbell began to flicker.*
>
> *During Acts Two and Three, Charles Henderson dozed. He was aware of loud noises and children screaming in a bloodthirsty fashion. […] He was dreaming he was fishing in the canal for tiddlers and a damn big crocodile crawled up the bank with a clock ticking inside it. Then he heard a drum beating and a voice cried out 'To die will be an awfully big adventure.'* (Bainbridge, 1985)

As a result, the combination of different perspectivised domains accessed by the character-focalizer by alignment to his visual and auditory perception, thought (*Something dramatic was happening on stage. Peter had woken up and was having a disjointed conversation with Tinkerbell…; He was aware of loud noises and children screaming in a bloodthirsty fashion*), or imagination (*He was dreaming he was fishing in the canal for tiddlers)* voiced by the third person narrator causes a sense of discontinuity and challenges the unity of the plot.

The dramatic irony that suddenly closes the narrative on the backdrop of *Peter Pan* production is another stylistic choice that elicits the interpretative cooperation of the reader. As the play *Peter Pan* approaches its ending, Charles Henderson suffers a heart attack and passes away while his family together with the rest of the audience are insistently encouraged to clap in order to revive Tinkerbell's dying flame. His wife, who is also absorbed in the theatrical representation, ignores the protagonist's final calling for help "*'Help me,' he said, using his last breath.'Shut up, Charlie,' shouted Mrs Henderson, and she clapped and clapped until the palms of her hands were stinging.* The climactic episode of the narrative with Charles Henderson's unheeded cry for help and his subsequent death develops without anyone in the story being aware of it. So, the reader's understanding of the events surpasses that of the characters. However, a detailed consideration of the story content allows the reader to detect a number of foreshadowing moments that predict the sudden final tragedy. The first clue related to the health of the protagonist, which turns out to be decisive in the surprising ending, appears in the second part of the story with the narrator's omniscient remark *"His wife's attitude, and the caustic remarks addressed to him earlier by Alec brought on another attack of indigestion.",* almost verbatim reiterated in the fourth part. Gradually, the seriousness of his condition increases throughout part four which coincides with the staging of *Peter Pan* (*During Acts Two and Three, Charles Henderson dozed. … 'To die will be an awfully big adventure.' He woke up then with a start. He had a pain in his arm*"; *During Act Four Charles Henderson asked his wife for a peppermint. His indigestion was fearsome. … His heart was beating so loudly...*), reaching the apotheosic moment at the end of the story (*There was a pain inside him as though somebody had slung a hook through his heart*). It is noteworthy that the explicit allusion to J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan "'To die will be an awfully big adventure.'"* acquires a significant function of a symbolic farewell chant that foreshadows the grotesque outcome.

Having analysed the coherence of the short story "Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie", by Beryl Bainbridge, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. The formal organisation of the narrative under study displays a number of structural features, amongst which the etic incipit, interference of the main storyline with minor events of the narrative that disturb the "logic of hierarchy", and dramatic irony in the abrupt ending. These constituting principles solicit an intense process of inference drawing, and close consideration of foreshadowing clues in order to fill in the gaps, supply the unstated details or link the missing causal links.
2. The combination of diegetic and mimetic forms of discourse within the boundaries of the same paragraph or even sentence is another element of the given narrative that elicit the interpretative cooperation of the reader. The difficulty arises from the fragmented linearity caused by the shift in narrative perspective from the narrator's external viewpoint to the character's emotional, cognitive, and perceptual horizons framed in free indirect and three direct discourse and from the simultaneous presentation of varying perspectivised domains by the internal focalizing agent. Recognizing the character's idiolect, identifying and correctly attributing naming strategies employed in the text as well as delimiting the narrator's verbal content from the character's when the reporting clauses or punctuation marks are missing are significant interpretative processes that help the reader restore the linearity of the narrative.

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