
REVIEWS

Michael Kearns. *Rhetorical Narratology. Stages Vol. 16*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. 207p.

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Primarily a descriptive rather than an overtly theoretical text, *Rhetorical Narratology* brings together rhetorical and structuralist approaches to narrative through the medium of speech act theory. There is, therefore, an emphasis on the (situational) context in which a narrative is both produced and consumed, a position that critiques implicitly theories based on the notion that a text is, and should be discussed as, an autonomous whole. Building primarily from Genette's structuralist narratology modified mainly by Lanser's *The Narrative Act* (while inflected also by the work of Booth, Pratt, and Phelan), Kearns asserts the significance of the reader of the text and lays out the various assumptions that influence how a reader will approach a narrative (Kearns focuses on literary narrative), recognize and interact with it, and differentiate it from other speech acts.

Kearns indicates that the impetus for the book was his need for a text for his courses in narrative theory. His work is well organized and lucidly written, not requiring specialized or prior knowledge. The lengthy first chapter, "Introduction to Rhetorical Narratology and Speech-Act Theory," focuses on giving a definition of the discipline (which is now approximately thirty years old) and an overview of the position of various practitioners of narratology, interspersed with discussions as to the relative merits of their terms which he rejects or extends with his qualifications. It also presents the aims and concepts of rhetorical narratology.

In general, narratology aims at uncovering a "grammar" of narrative — its structural elements — to establish codes and rules regardless of specific plots and subject matters. Thereby, narratology has, heretofore, relied upon formalism or structuralism for its tools. Kearns shifts the emphasis to rhetoric, addressing what he thinks is an "imbalance" between text and reader, because he believes narrative is not autonomous — for Kearns, situational contexts and effects on audience are paramount. In order to indicate the relation between text and reader, he proposes, speech act theory is required. Key speech act theory terms such as "principles of relevance," the "cooperative principle," and "markedness" are carefully defined as well as other terms he will make use of in subsequent chapters.

The following two chapters highlight the importance of narrative transmission through the features audience and voice — positions either taken or inferred by a reader. In chapter two, authorial and narrating audience are discussed; in chapter three, actual author, extrafictional author, implied author, narrator, and focalizer. This list of interconnected and shifting positions discussed indicates how methodically Kearns sifts through the narrative experience of the reader and how careful he is not to limit the possibilities he sees in literature by enforcing these codes onto texts. Kearns is aware of the simultaneity and slipperiness of the positions he describes and insists that there are many potential relationships among these positions, even, a couple of times, giving alternate readings from his own. The different roles discussed in these two central chapters are usefully exemplified through Dickens' *Bleak House* and Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, and Kearns uses a variety of other examples, tables, and diagrams to clarify his descriptions of these structures.

Chapter four discusses four narrative structures that have been significant to narratologists: the relation of plot and theme to narrative, gendering narrating voices, temporal structures, and the representation of inner and voiced speech. Chapter five is a script of a possible rhetorical reading of both *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J.M. Coetzee, exemplifying the book's methods through the already-defined concepts. In his reading of *Written on the Body*, Kearns brings the script itself into question, indicating how narratives can trouble already-existing rules, assumptions, and expectations.

Kearns writes *Rhetorical Narratology* for both students and teachers of narrative. In fact, he often cites his own readings or those of his students to ground his descriptions of narrative structures and their effects. He believes that, at best, narratology is subjective and can only give possible readings since, through rhetorical narratology's focus on the reader, it cannot be as prescriptive as other narratological approaches. This is because different readers have different levels of exposure to various types of narrative, they may be more or less willing to accept narratives that challenge their expectations, more or less sensitive to the tensions in the text, etc. However, Kearns believes that all of us are influenced by socially constructed conventions that we (mis)use when reading narratives. Kearns, thereby, approaches his topic pragmatically — to provide useful codes and rules to enable readers to unpack narrative structures and their relations with the text.

What I appreciate about Kearns' work is that, despite a reliance on the current field of work in narratology, there is always a careful indication of rhetorical narratology's departure from other approaches to literary narrative. For example, in his discussion of *Written on the Body* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, chosen be-

cause these texts are superficially similar, Kearns critiques the term “point of view” as not useful in differentiating among their very different rhetorical effects and thus not accurately attentive to narrative functions. He then goes on to define and use the term “narrating voices” to attempt to work through their different effects. While critiquing other terms and approaches, Kearns is still aware of the limitations of the theories he uses and the lacunae of his own text. Early in *Rhetorical Narratology* he presents the drawbacks of speech act theory, especially its necessary pull towards universalism and ethnocentrism in its assumption of the existence of a subject of knowledge: autonomous and persistent — “unmarked” by gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. — “free of attributes that typify one gender, ethnic background, belief system, and so on” (27). Kearns tries to be sensitive in marking the elisions caused by these assumptions. He acknowledges, for example, that there has been a lack of research into the gender differences of readers, how gender affects the use of conventions when reading narratives. Still, in his text, there is a belief in a level field for communication which cannot be taken for granted, a reliance on common scripts that erase differences, and a belief in a certain order of knowledge and a homogenous (literate) culture.

Ultimately, Kearns admits that rhetorical narratology will always be behind narrative possibilities — that narratology is “necessarily conservative.” With that being the inevitable case, there will constantly be a provocative tension between the tools of narratology and narrative itself. ✨