

Narrative with External Focalization in Lu Xun's Short Stories

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Abstract Lu Xun wrote 25 short stories collected in his *Call to Arms* and *Wandering* respectively. The majority of his stories use fully or partially internal focalization. There are only two pieces wrote in 1925 “A Public Example” and “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” that use external focalization. In his writing, he appears to draw on some strong points in Western fiction and also to inherit some achievements from traditional Chinese fiction. Although these two pieces are small in number, their significance is considerable. These outstanding examples show a unique artistic style and they have an important influence on the creation of later Chinese fiction.

Key words narrative; external focalization; Lu Xun; “A Public Example;” “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight”

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In the third book of Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates points out a distinction between two ways of rendering speech: *diegesis* and *mimesis*. The characteristic feature of *diegesis* is that “the poet himself is the speaker and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking” (638). In *mimesis*, on the other hand, the poet tries to create the illusion that it is not he who speaks. In Anglo-

American criticism this contrast of diegesis and mimesis is often reproduced as “telling and showing” or “summary and scene” (Rimmon-Kenan 106-07).

Percy Lubbock regards “showing” as a superior technique to “telling”: “The art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself” (62). Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* criticizes this opinion. He argues that the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one: “though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear” (20). Booth adds: “Whether an impersonal novelist hides behind a single narrator or observer, the multiple points of view of *Ulysses* or *As I Lay Dying*, or the objective surfaces of *The Awkward Age* or Compton-Burnett’s *Parents and Children*, the author’s voice is never really silenced” (60). *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is, to a great extent, a defense of “telling.” Today, most critics have no preference: “each has its advantages and disadvantages, and their relative success or failure depends on their functionality in the given work” (Rimmon-Kenan 107-08).

Although one cannot generally decide whether showing or telling is ultimately better, many post-Flaubert authors have illustrated a partiality towards showing. In China too, one can see signs of this literary trend in the development of the nation’s literature. “Telling” is more linked to traditional narratives, those with zero focalization, while “showing” is more associated with external focalization. Narrators with external focalization differ from narrators with zero focalization, who frequently engage in commentary. In zero focalization, a narrator says less than what characters know. Like outsiders unwilling to show their face, such narrators only describe speeches and activities, never entering the consciousness of the characters and making no subjective judgments or psychological analyses. In traditional narratives of zero focalization, the external agent can still see and know everything in every character’s heart. In such narratives, the narrator-focalizer has no limitation. In narratives with external focalization, however, the narrator-focalizer’s field of vision is limited, for he focalizes and narrates only what appears to the characters. Such narratives can give the reader more opportunity to participate in creating the text. Since the textual space of external focalization leaves more of the story unspecified, readers get a greater role in filling the text in. They can endow the narrative with their own individual meanings, in accordance with their differing experiences and expectations. As John Neubauer says:

It is appropriate and legitimate to shift our attention away from those data of the text which were important to the author to those which we now discover

to be of interest. [...] There are, in fact, good reasons for advocating as many perspectives and interpretations on a text as possible (440).

Lu Xun wrote only two pieces that are externally focalized, but these outstanding examples show a unique artistic style. “A Public Example” has a simple, even incomplete plot. It describes merely a few moments of a scene: on a hot summer day in a street in the west city of the model region, many onlookers gather to look at “a public example.” More than ten characters appear on the scene in an extremely brief space. These characters are both opposite and complementary to each other, and can be divided into two distinct groups. The first consists of “a man in a blue cotton gown and white sleeveless jerkin,” who is to be the public example and “a scrawny policeman with a sallow face in a yellow uniform.” (*LXQJ 2: 68-69; Wandering 63-64*). They are linked by a rope that is held by the policeman and tied around the arm of the man at the other end. The other group is composed of onlookers in a semi-circle, who gather as soon as the policeman and the man appear on the scene. This is the focalized object of an external narrator-focalizer, who only shows the scene that happens in front of him, providing no explanation or contextualization. Many things remain unclear. What has the man done wrong? Nobody knows. There are some Chinese characters written on the man’s jerkin, and his crime should be evident from this. However, when Baldy, standing almost directly opposite the man, stoops to study the characters and finally reads out: “*Weng, du, beng, ba, er...*,” the words are meaningless. A rough fellow, who looks like a workman, asks Baldy in a low, diffident voice: “Hey, what has he done wrong?...” (*LXQJ 2: 69; Wandering 65*), Baldy gives no answer, simply glares at him till he lowers his eyes. So, flustered as if he himself had committed some crime, he slowly backs out and leaves. Why do the men, women, and children gather suddenly under the blazing sun? Nobody knows. The readers are informed only that “a semi-circle of onlookers gathered. After they were joined by an old bald-head, the little space left was promptly occupied by a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose” (*LXQJ 2: 69; Wandering 64*). When the rough fellow leaves, his place is taken by a tall fellow with an umbrella. When a man with a stiff straw hat who seems to be a student withdraws, his place is taken by the oval face of a sweaty head caked with dust. What do the roped man and the policeman think? Nobody knows. We are told only that the prisoner’s “new straw hat, its brim turned down, covered his eyes” (*LXQJ 2: 69; Wandering 64*). Apparently he does not like to be looked upon. When Fat Boy looks up he meets the prisoner’s eyes. They seem to be fixed on his head. He hastily lowers his eyes to look at the white jerkin. The

policeman's face is also expressionless.

We do not even know the names of the characters, only nicknames or descriptions drawn from their physical features, dress, or actions. The prisoner, for example, is called "White Jerkin." Among the onlookers, there is "Baldy," "Fat Boy," "a bare-chested fat fellow with a red nose," "one lean fellow even gaping like a dead perch," "an even rounder fat face, like that of a Maitreya Buddha," "a tall fellow with an umbrella," an "Amah holding a child," "a feline face," "Oval Face" and "Longfellow." The onlookers want to linger on. To look at the prisoner becomes their only interest, making them forget everything else. Both the prisoner and the onlookers have blank expressions. The former shows neither panic nor fear, nor shame; the latter seem to feel neither sympathy and pity, nor anger and hatred. All the characters, without exception, are stupefied. Only when another interesting matter happens do they break up in a hubbub. A rickshaw man falls, and the onlookers higgledy-piggledy all make their way over, looking at the new matter until the rickshaw man rises to his feet, rubbing his knees. At this point "Five or six people had gathered round, grinning, to watch" (*LXQJ* 2: 72; *Wandering* 67). The reader is given no clues. Although the activities of all characters are clear, the absence of narrative directive forces readers to guess at the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. What they really are we do not know. The text implicitly makes an appeal to the readers' experience to fill in the spaces left often.

The entire story, in fact, heightens the social atmosphere through the portrayal of the onlookers. The author does not lay stress here on the depiction of a single character. Rather, one realizes the thing that truly makes them a collective: there are all eager onlookers and careless spectators. This feature does not shed light on their inner world, but readers can glimpse at their thoughts and feelings through the actions and surroundings.

Relating Lu Xun's experiences to his work, we find that the idea of apathetic spectators was deep, perhaps even foundational, in his thoughts as a writer. When Lu Xun was studying in Japan, he often discussed with his friend Xu Shouchang what the greatest deficiencies in the Chinese character were. Their answer was, "lack of love and honesty" (*The Lu Xun I Knew* 59). In Lu Xun's view, this often showed in the apathy of the masses, in the tendency to look on the misfortunes of people and become a mere cold passive spectator. When Lu Xun studied at the Sendai Medical College in Japan, a slide shown in a lecture radically changed his outlook. It was "a news-reel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound and the rest standing around him. They were all sturdy fellows who appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the bound man was a spy working for the

Russians, to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning, while the others had come to enjoy the spectacle” (*LXQJ* 1: 416; *Works* 1: 35, slightly modified). This slide convinced Lu Xun that literature was more desperately needed by his people than medicine:

The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement. (*LXQJ* 1: 417; *Works* 1: 35)

Scenes of spectatorship appear frequently in Lu Xun’s stories. About one year before writing “A Public Example,” he said in his speech: “What Happens After Nora Leaves Home”:

The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes they are watching a comedy. Before the mutton shops in Beijing a few people often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment. (*LXQJ* 1: 163; *Works* 2: 91)

Thus Lu Xun seriously criticized this passive spectatorship. The spectator, who adopts an indifferent attitude towards anything and everything, is not only negative, but also of ill will. The stupid and attentive gaping, “with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep” is indicative of this.

Although Lu Xun is angry about spectatorship, “A Public Example” is quite calm and objectively detached. The author’s voice is hidden quite well behind the external focalization, and his reliable narrator/spokesman does not make any direct comments or criticisms. It is exactly the author’s silence and refraining from intervention through the narrator, leaving his characters “to work out their own fates upon the stages” (Booth, *Rhetoric* 7), that allows the story to achieve its aesthetic luminosity. In high summer, the dogs’ tongues are lolling out, even the crows on the trees are panting for breath, but the onlookers do not mind at all to look at the public example. Their bodies exude perspiration, but their hearts

are deadly still, their concentrated expressions are just like the men who “gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep.” Seeing this scene, the reader cannot but be jolted. This effect is like the one we find in Hemingway's fiction, which skillfully uses the technique of external focalization: “The success of many so-called hard-boiled detective and adventure stories written under the influence of Hemingway depends largely on the fear we feel as soon as we see danger as if through our own eyes” (Booth, *Rhetoric* 277). The calm exposition of the story, the ingenious camouflage of the authorial voice, and the keynote of strict narrative sobriety, add up to give Lu Xun's story its special power.

Genette thinks that the strictly textual mimetic factors come down to two sets of data: the quantity of narrative information (how developed or detailed a narrative is) and the absence (or minimal presence) of the narrator:

“Showing” can be only a *way of telling*, and this way consists of both *saying about it* as much as one can, and *saying this “much”* as little as possible [*en dire le plus possible, et ce plus, le dire le moins possible*]: speaking, Plato says, “as if the poet were someone else” — in other words, making one forget that it is the narrator telling. Whence these two cardinal precepts of *showing*: the Jamesian dominance of *scene* (detailed narrative) and the (pseudo-)Flaubertian transparency of the narrator.[...] *mimesis* being defined by a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer, *diegesis* by the opposite relationship. (*Discourse* 166)

Although the reader cannot see the inner world of the characters, their appearance, action, and surrounding are shown in detail; the reader gets enough information to make independent inferences. Naturally, the quantity of information is in inverse ratio to the speed of narrative: the slower the narrative speed is, the more information the reader must digest. The narrative speed in “A Public Example” is quite slow. The time between the prisoner's and the policeman's appearance and the crowd's dispersal is probably less than thirty minutes.

If “A Public Example” embodies more of scene, then “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” leans towards an embodiment of “the (pseudo-)Flaubertian transparency of the narrator.” In this kinds of narrative, the narrator is nearly invisible, giving rise to a sort of “absolute imitation” (Genette, *Discourse* 169). Hemingway's “The Killers” and “Hills Like White Elephants” are canonic forms of this type.

The external focalization that emphasizes the words of the character and

seldom allows the narrator to intervene was influenced by behavioral psychology. In order to portray his characters, Lu Xun stresses character speech. He noticed that “Gorky marvels at Balzac’s skill in handling dialogue, for without any description of his characters’ appearance he conjures them up before the reader by their conversation.” He thought that “novelists of this caliber have not yet appeared in China, though there are passages in *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* which enable readers to visualize the characters from their talk” (*LXQJ* 5: 530; *Works* 4: 80). When a writer builds up a character through dialogues, he has a mental picture of the man, which he passes onto his readers till they form a similar picture in their minds: “If you cut all extraneous matter and simply select what is distinctive in each one’s conversation, I am sure others could guess their character from their talk” (*LXQJ* 5: 530; *Works* 4: 80). What kinds of words are then suitable in an externally focalized narrative of words? McHale suggests a progressive scale, ranging from the “purely” diegetic to the “purely” mimetic: 1) Diegetic summary; 2) Less “purely” diegetic summary; 3) Indirect content-paraphrase (or indirect discourse); 4) Indirect discourse, mimetic to some degree; 5) Free indirect discourse; 6) Direct discourse; and 7) Free direct discourse (249-87).

The conspicuous feature of “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” is that the author paid special attention to the words of the characters. Although he uses several forms, direct discourse, which is a “quotation” of a monologue or a dialogue, is most conspicuous. It creates the illusion of “pure” mimesis, although it is always in some way or extent stylized. The heart of “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” is, as the title suggests, a lamp that the “old folk” claim “was lit by Emperor Wu of Liang,¹ and it’s been burning ever since” (*LXQJ* 2: 56; *Wandering* 54). Not even the Long Hairs put it out. This is a lamp that brings benefit to Lucky Light Village. People believe that if it is put out, the end of the village will loom: the village will become a sea and all the people in the village will turn into eels. The “madman” of the village decides, however, to put it out and touches off public indignation. The people of the village do everything to keep it lit.

The lamp has a symbolic flavor. It is a metaphor of tradition. It is by no means easy to do away with traditions that have survived intact for millennia. Therefore, it is not surprising that people who challenge these traditions are regarded as dangerous “madmen” by tradition’s adherents. Lu Xun was a strong opponent to most old traditions. Only three weeks before he wrote “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight,” he said in “More Thought on the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda”: “True, without destruction nothing new can be built;” he praised men like Rousseau, Stirner, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Ibsen, who are, in Brandes’ words, “destroyers of

old tracks.” Lu Xun stated: “Actually they not only destroy but blaze a trail and lead a charge, sweeping aside all the old tracks, whether whole rails or fragments” (*LXQJ* 1: 192; *Works* 2: 114). At the same time, he keenly felt that there are “very few men like this in China, and even when they appear they are likely to be spat at by everyone” (*LXQJ* 1: 192; *Works* 2: 115).

The idea of this article is displayed artistically in the story. The “madman,” who opposes tradition appears infrequently. The bulk of the story portrays the people of the village and their deliberations how to control or get rid of the madman. The narrator-focalizer does not intervene or peek into the characters’ hearts, but shows their cruelty through their words and actions:

“Still no change?” asked Triangle Face, picking up his bowl of tea.

“Still no change, they say,” replied Square Head. “He keeps repeating, ‘Put it out! put it out!’ His eyes are flashing worse than ever. The devil! Don’t think it’s a joke--the fellow’s a menace to our village. Fact is, we ought to find some way to get rid of him!”

“Get rid of him, by all means. He’s nothing but a dirty bastard. When the temple was built his ancestors paid their share, yet now he wants to blow out the temple light! Is that unfilial or isn’t it? Let’s send him to the county court as an unfilial son!” Kuoting ended with a flourish, smashing his fist on the table. (*LXQJ* 2: 56; *Wandering* 53)

The narration consists here almost entirely of character remarks, with just a few introductions and additions by the narrator. It is very similar to some of Hemingway’s short stories with external focalization, for instance “The Killers” (collected in *Men Without Women*), which was published in 1927, just two years after the “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight.” In “The Killer,” the narrator puts in very few appearances and the events are almost entirely depicted through the characters’ conversations, allowing the narrative, as Lubbock said, “to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself.” Yet it includes some things not mentioned in the conversations. What has Andson done, for example? Why do the two fellows kill him? The dialogues won’t tell. We can ask similar questions about Lu Xun’s story. What kind of person is the “madman”? Why does he really want to put the lamp out? We can only guess.

In “The Killer,” the conversational quotes account for eighty to ninety per cent of the text. In the absence of physical description or emotional insight, the reader can only guess. In “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight,” conversation takes

up more than half of the text. As for tone, the narrator of “The Killer” is more deeply buried and embedded in the text, more calm and collected. We can see this not only from the percentage of conversation in the totality of the text, but also through the descriptive words used. When introducing conversations, the narrator of “The Killer” does not endow the characters with emotional coloring, while the narrator of “The Lamp That Was Kept Alight” says things like “Kuoting ended with a *flourish*, smashing his fist on the table;” “Square Head spoke *scornfully*;” “asked Zhuang in *surprise*;” “her *glare* turned into a smile.” “Fourth Master sounded both *stern* and *grieved*, and his voice was trembling” (*LXQJ* 2: 56-64; *Wandering* 53-60, italics added). These illustrative words yield more information, also about the informer.

“A character’s speech, whether in conversation or as a silent activity of the mind, can be indicative of a trait or traits both through its content and through its form” (Rimmon-Kenan 63). Aiming at keeping the flame lit, people of various social circles gather and become a collective unit, forming a mass. As a collective, the people have common traits, but they also retain individual characteristics. For example, Kuoting, who frequently says extreme things like “Get rid of him,” and “he’d be better dead” is truculent; Square Head is pretentious; Triangle Face is dull-witted and stingy; Old Guo, who is too old to speak, is thickheaded. The most noticeable one among them is the squire Fourth Master, whose words have a special style. In the village, Fourth Master holds power over the madman’s life and property. His words are spoken slowly, sometimes sounding both stern and grieved. He has a murderous look but shows some solicitude for the man: “Every day I’ve been hoping for his recovery” (*LXQJ* 2: 64; *Wandering* 61). However, he is ultimately no different from the undisguised advocates of the madman’s execution; he merely has more refined manners and puts prettier clothes on his meanness. He undoubtedly wants to lock up the madman, but he pretends not to think about it. Allegedly merely repeating the words of another, he says: “There’s nothing for it but to lock him up as this gentleman suggests, to keep him out of mischief, lest he disgrace his father. This may be just as well, we owe it to his father” (*LXQJ* 2: 64; *Wandering* 61). The squire exposes himself with his own words.

Although the madman seldom appears in the story, his words clearly show his determination to blow out the lamp. He vaguely longs for a better world, but his words are distinctly crazy: “That lamp has got to be blown out. You see, they should all be put out: Blue Face with his three heads and six arms, Three Eyes, Long Hat, Half Head, Ox Head and Swine Tusk.... Out with the lot of them! When they’re out we shall have no more locusts, no more plague” (*LXQJ* 2: 60;

Wandering 56-57). He is not afraid of the threats and cannot be cheated by the others. When Kuoting says that they will blow out the lamp for him, he can come back in a few days and see for himself, he answers: "Not you! I don't need any of you. I'll do it myself. I'm going to blow it out now!" He is undecieved by the others' attempts. When Square Head says to him that he has always shown himself an intelligent man, and urges him not to engage in folly, he replies that he will just be doing the best he can, and he is going to blow the lamp out. When somebody says to him that he cannot blow out the lamp and should go home, he answers "I'm not going home. I'm going to blow it out." They tell him that he cannot push the door open, that he has no way of opening it, his answer is: "I'll think of some other way then"; he will set the place on fire (*LXQJ* 2: 61; *Wandering* 57-58). At last the people deal with him collectively and lock him up in the west room. He still repeats that he'll set the place on fire. Like the symbolism of the lamp, the symbolism of the madman is uncomplicated. Since the story uses external focalization, we know nothing about the characters' hearts, including the madman's very different inner world, but we get a chance to see through his words. Both the madman and the rest of the village show their individual traits in conversations.

Note

1. *Liang* Dynasty (502-557), one of the dynasties in the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589) in China.

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