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## ***THE PORTRAIT AS MEANS OF HIDING THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NARRATIVE SELF***

**Keywords:** *portrait; perspective; model; narrative; visual.*

**Abstract:** *Based on the aesthetic and iconic relationship between literature and painting, the portrait may represent one of the core elements that are able to connect these two arts. In visual arts, it is already known that the portrait assumes the functions of the mask, revealing or hiding the true features of a real person and, at the same time, reflecting the author's perspective. In these terms, regarding the portrait means regarding it as a view or as a consequence of a relation between a viewing subject and a viewed object. In literature, a narrative portrait is based on the positions and perspectives of the narrator, the characters and, sometimes, of other entities that belong to the fictional world. Far from being static, the narrative portrait is a result of all the points of view that focalizes upon it. The study intends to analyze the interchangeable relationship between the narrative and the visual portrait whose function may go from hiding the true narrative self of the model, as in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to replacing it, as in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Oval Portrait*.*

### **General Reflections upon the Narrative Portrait**

Passing from the theory of painting to the theory of literature, the *portrait* as concept has undergone several semantic mutations and notional adaptations which were not entirely clarified by definitions. Being kept within the sphere of marginal categories, the literary portrait acquired blurred and imprecise outlines. Although in folk tales and epic literature the *literary portrait* embodies the status of an image which translates the act of representation, it may be approximated only by an analysis of the created object. So far, in the field of literature, the term *portrait* has been used many times fulfilling different functions: for designating specific types of articles or studies, as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's *Portraits littéraires* (1844), *Portraits des femmes* (1844), *Portraits contemporains* (1852-1855), *Derniers portraits littéraires* (1852) or Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's *Portraits intimes du XVIII-e siècle* (1857) and Walter Horatio Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887); for describing distinct historical figures as Jean Cocteau's *Portraits-souvenir* (1935); for suggesting a fragmentary perspective of a series of essays as Henry James's *Partial Portraits* (1888); for representing fictional characters as in Nikolai Gogol's *Arabeski* (1835), Nathalie Sarraute's *Portraits d'un inconnu* (1948) and so on. Even though all these aspects extend the meaning of the term *portrait*, they are simple typological possibilities of an elementary structure defining the concept of *portrait*. At the same time, these aspects may become the basis for further development of the *portrait* as a

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literary form having an autonomous system equivalent to tales, short stories, novels and anti-novels, implying an internal organization based on a proper structure, function, significance and aesthetic effect.

In a more precise approach, the *literary portrait* represents a theoretical concept which designates a descriptive procedure mainly used in narratives. According to this perspective, the *portrait* tends to be regarded as an element<sup>1</sup> of a system, the literary work. Being engaged in the epic construction, the *portrait* loses its autonomous character but reveals itself as one important manner of humanizing a character within a narrative<sup>2</sup>. In its old sense of *figure*, the *portrait* implies an expression that may be translated by another one which leads to the Formalist solution of considering the *portrait* a *technical device* too. Within the system of the literary work, the *portrait* is subordinated to a higher literary instance – the character. According to Tomashevsky's point of view, the character functions as an ordering element meant to gather and group the literary motives. Besides this function, the character may also be identified using other literary devices such as the individual name(s), direct and indirect characterisation, the *mask(s)* providing information concerning the appearance of the character, the manner of speaking for suggesting the attitude, the temper and even the experiences of the character (Tomashevsky 276-7). Placed within the series of literary devices with complementary values, the *portrait*, in its integrative relationship with the character, develops an epic function<sup>3</sup>, subordinating, in its turn, other literary devices like *expression*<sup>4</sup> or *mask*<sup>5</sup>. The main purpose of this function is to stabilize the image of the *portrait* in order to individualize the character. Although the *portrait* as a static figure seems more a prosthesis of the character, it still stands for a strategic centre of the epic construction. Being more than a visual effect and using its specific devices, the *portrait* may also develop the function of dating and localizing the epic event, mainly because the *literary portrait* is not a mere description of human appearance, behaviour, features and particularities.

Either an individual portrait or a duplicated or a collective one, the placement of the *portrait* within the literary work depends on the function it exerts upon the character: as an opening element of the narrative, when the initial position favours the introduction of the character providing, at the same time, necessary

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<sup>1</sup> From the traditional treatises of rhetoric, the *portrait* stands for a specific type of description.

<sup>2</sup> Integrated among the figures of thought, the *portrait* presupposes a signified and a significant, in other words, a meaning and a way of presenting it, as well as a distance, a separating space embodying a form which could be assimilated by a *figure*.

<sup>3</sup> The epic function of the *literary portrait* is determined and conditioned by the presence of the character while the character may be developed in the absence of the portrait.

<sup>4</sup> In a literary work, *expression* contains descriptive units similar to those belonging to the portrait but describing temporary features and not stable and permanent features of the character's identity. That is why *expression* is considered a momentary identity of the character and represents a means of reviving the portrait.

<sup>5</sup> The *literary mask* is not similar to the *literary portrait*, but one of its component parts, meaning a false aspect used for identifying a character, sustained by the act of systematically resuming a particular gesture, attitude, word or feature.

information concerning the time and place of the action; as a technical solution, when the medial position is used for adding further information upon the identity of the character; as a closing element, when the final position helps the ending of both the narrative construction and the character's epic development. Most of the times, the *portrait* of a character could be used in all three positions shedding more light upon the development of the character.

Belonging to the epic construction, the *portrait* becomes a connotative element having an individual semantic task. As all the other epic elements, the role of the portrait is not decorative but active, interacting and influencing the other elements for a specific aesthetic effect. The *portrait*, as well as the character, is a fictional product embodied by words according to the perspective of a higher narrative instance, the narrator. Regarding the portrait in terms of narrative perspective means regarding it as the literary representation influenced not only by the position, values and personality of the narrator but also by all the other entities belonging to the same fictional world. Either it belongs to the field of painting in which case it is generated by the painter's focalization based on his/her artistic and mental views or it belongs to the field of literature, the *portrait* is meant to be considered a consequence of the relation between a viewing subject and a viewed object.

### **External and Internal Perspectives upon the Portrait**

The concept of perspective in visual arts mainly refers to the specific manner of representing a scene as perceived from a single fixed view point, with the aim of creating the impression of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface. There are particular methods of deceiving the eye as the convergence of the parallel lines as they are receding from the viewer as well as the modification of the size of the objects depending on whether they are placed near or far from the viewer's eyes. At the same time, the colours lose their intensity acquiring a more bluish tinge. (Carter 840-44) These basic rules of perspective are applied differently by each painter according to his/her vision, temper, attitude generating an infinite number of possibilities for rendering the forms, because, as Degas stated, in the field of drawing and painting, it is not the form itself that counts but the manner of perceiving and understanding it. In the case of portrait, the permanent features that are specific to each person, meaning the model, are meant to establish the visual relationships among all the other elements for obtaining a constant expression. In the process of creating a portrait, the artist emphasizes or diminishes, even hides some features in order to find that particular constant expression that makes the portrait be identical or, at least, similar to its model. The constant expression does not reveal only the physical features but also the attitude, the temper, the character of the model, which turns the act of drawing and painting into an act of creation not only of simple imitation.

The same concept of perspective was used in the field of literary theory too. This time, the narrative text plays the part of the canvas while the painter becomes the narrator. Adapting the theory of perspective from the field of painting to narratology, there are certain adjustments to be made. Since the term perspective

does not refer to well-defined spaces, it was used with reference to the levels of narrating, the narrative instances and their points of view. In a broader acceptance of the concept, perspective may be used in relation both to points from which the action is viewed and to areas that are viewed from those points but there are no references concerning the extension of the vision<sup>6</sup>. That is why, when referring to narrative perspective, it is necessary to indicate the point from which the events are viewed as well as the type of narrator located at this point. (Booth 160-3)

In its technical sense, the term narrative perspective refers to a narrative method involved in the representation of a story. Organized around the opposition between telling and showing, this method was further developed into several theories<sup>7</sup>. From Lubbock's systematized sequence of the four points of view arranged from telling to showing (the third-person narration with an authorial narrator, the first-person narration, the third-person narration from the point of view of a character and the third-person narration without inside views), and Friedman's typology that underlines a range of eight points of view (the editorial omniscience, the neutral omniscience, the minor character as first-person narrator, the protagonist as first-person narrator, the multiple selective omniscience – the third-person narration from the point of view of several characters in succession, the selective omniscience – the third-person narration from the point of view of one character, the dramatic mode – the third-person narration without inside views and the camera – a more neutral third-person narration without inside views) to Stanzel's typological circle organized around three main criteria, each resulting in a binary opposition (the mode – narrator versus reflector, the perspective – internal versus external and person – identity versus non-identity of the narrator and the characters) the concept of perspective was assimilated to the narrator's or character(s)'s points of view. Later on, the term narrative perspective was replaced by Gérard Genette with narrative focalization and also separated from all those distinctions related to the narrator, also called the *voice* in Genette's terminology. (Genette 185-209) According to this new approach to perspective, there are three types of focalization: *zero focalization* which permits the narrator access to all the conceivable area of the fictional world, *internal focalization*<sup>8</sup> which restricts the access only to the experience of one character and *external focalization* which limits the narration to what an uninvolved observer may notice. Furthermore, the recent approaches to the method of narrative perspective include the parameters that make the distinction among its types. Influenced by the theories elaborated by Uspenskij, Lintvelt or Rimmon-Kenan, Wolf Schmid considers perception, time, space, ideology and language as the five main such parameters. (Schmid 123-35) These parameters proved to be useful when establishing the structure of narrative perspective, which according to Nünning's approach, may be *closed*, when different perspectives are

<sup>6</sup> In the case of an omniscient narration the vision seems unlimited, providing access not only to the characters' feelings and thoughts but also to every conceivable region of the fictional world while, in the case of the camera perspective, the vision is extremely limited, giving information only about what comes under the spot light of the imaginary camera.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional method of narrating a story is based on the opposition between *diegesis* having a prominent narrator and *mimesis* with a narrator that relates the story from the background.

<sup>8</sup> This type of focalization contains other three secondary types: the *fixed focalization* provided by one character, *variable focalization* based on different characters and *multiple focalization* generated by different characters retelling the same event.

organized hierarchically around a main one, *open*, when there is no privileged perspective, or *non-perspectival*, having no individual voice. (Nünning, 213) This overview upon the narrative perspective represents a selection of the main important approaches that became necessary when referring to the narrative portrait embodied by all the points of view belonging to the fictional world. Unlike other textual elements such as plot, character, imagery, the narrative perspective may be regarded rather as a relationship than a concrete entity. (Lanser 13-5) Analyzing the narrative portrait in terms of perspective becomes analyzing it as a view, meaning the result of the relationship between a viewing subject (narrator or/and character(s)) and a viewed object. Such a relationship combines the external and internal perspectives in order to set connections among the narrative instances whose main focus is the *portrait*.

### The Means of Hiding the Narrative Self

Combining the external and internal perspectives may become a useful process when the focalization is on a literary portrait. In fact, inside a fictional world, the perspectives are able to create a real network that relates the points of view generated by all the viewing subjects, such as the narrator and the characters, to the viewed object, which could be the model itself. In a further extension of such a narrative relationship, the focalization provided by those viewing subjects may go deeper transcending the model into the picture of the model. In these cases, there could be indentified not only the literary portrait of the model on the surface of the narrative but also the literary portrait of the picture having the same model on the depth of the same narrative. In other words, the literary portrait contains another portrait<sup>9</sup>, a more visual one, representing its own image but functioning differently. The core element of the two portraits is the narrative self of the model. Based on this, there could be developed an interchangeable relationship between these types of portraits whose function may go from hiding the true narrative self of the model as in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to replacing it, as in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Oval Portrait*. In both cases, the narrative perspectives focus on the visual portrait being positioned as concentric layers, as it could be noticed in figure 1.

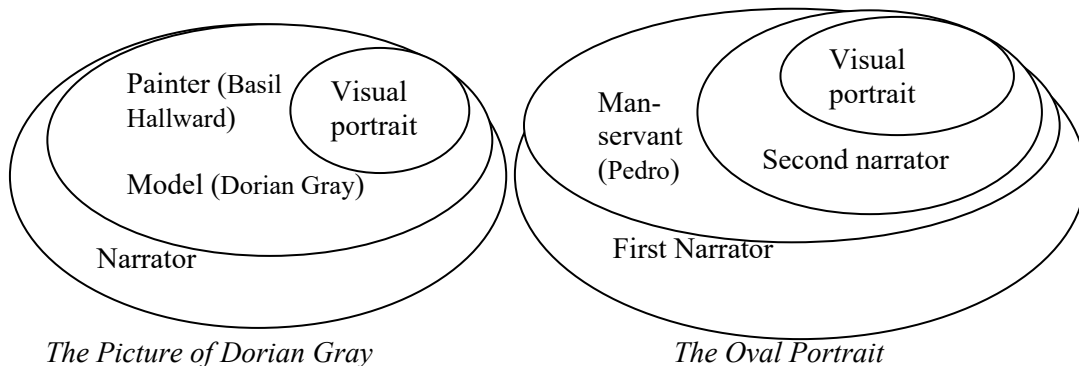


Figure 1

In each of the two fictional worlds, the disposition of the perspectives given by the narrative instances goes from first layer which is represented by the main

<sup>9</sup> This second portrait is not an expression and nor a mask, because it does not describe temporary features and neither gives a false aspect of the model.

narrator to the last layer embodied by the visual portrait. Poe's text, *The Oval Portrait*, is, in fact, a framed narrative in the sense of having a text placed within another text, in this case, the book's account of the portrait contained within the wounded narrator's own narrative, explaining, at the same time, the presence of two narrators. (Scheick 6) It is already known that narratives feature characters as well as a narrator, or several narrators as in framed narratives, whose perspective is defined, in similarly terms as that of the character(s), as a set of psychological idiosyncrasies, attitudes, norms and values, a set of mental properties and also a world model.<sup>10</sup> (Nünning 213-4) Thus, the visual portrait<sup>11</sup>, or the picture, is also a narrative product resulted in the process of narrative focalization articulated by the plurality and diversity of the perspectives. The portrait from Poe's narrative represents the oval of a young girl's face and the features of her face include the oval of her eyes. According to the second narrator's point of view, the very last touch that the painter gave the portrait was one tint upon the eye; and, within the eye lies the whole secret of the young lady's "light", or, in other terms, her spirit that flickered up as the flame within the socked lamp. (Poe 249) Progressing gradually through the concentric layer of perspectives that focalizes the visual portrait, the narrator focuses on the young lady's life-likeness of expression implicitly localized in her eye. Too little is known about the character's internal narrative self. Most of the information comes from the portrait as the external representation of the same narrative self. In the case of the other text Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the visual portrait represents Basil Hallward's work. This time the internal narrative self of the character is revealed within the portrait. The narrative perspective that focalizes upon the visual portrait highlights the external representation of internal narrative self. It is Dorian who views his portrait and for him, scrutinizing it is primarily a self-conscious act<sup>12</sup>. At the beginning, although there was no significant physical change of the portrait, the changed expression of the face became more apparent to the character's mind, for him it was something not visible yet, but present. (Li 565) As time passed, Dorian developed the habit of looking into the portrait to see if there have been any changes to his face and these changes may account for the altered expression in the portrait, providing a persuasive cause for that impression. The direction of the character's perspective is from the mirror to the portrait, meaning

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<sup>10</sup> Nünning's point of view is based on Pfister's theory of perspective in drama. According to Pfister, the perspective of a character is built up on the psychological disposition, ideology and the awareness of what the other characters are up to which makes the same event to be viewed and judged in different ways as the combinations of these three factors differs from one character to another. (Pfister 57-58)

<sup>11</sup> The term *visual* in the set-phrase *visual portrait* was used only to state the difference from the narrative portrait. In both cases, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Oval Portrait*, the visual portrait is represented by a painting whose existence and description are based on the narrative perspectives generated by the narrators and characters.

<sup>12</sup> Needless to mention that the character's viewing these changes may point to a form of awareness that could be neither simply bodily nor simply metaphysical. As a form of subjectivity, the act of self-consciousness depends on sensorial feelings as well as on reflexive evaluation as performative agents of cognition.

from the factual evidence to an artistic work whose evolution is far from being rationally explained. In revealing a different expression of the character, the portrait forces Dorian to give up his reliance on an empirical episteme in order to become aware of the way the visible, as a material presence, can work with the invisible, which may be accessed but not sufficiently verified. (567) Both portraits are representations of the internal narrative self of the character pictured on these canvas, in other words, external representations that facilitate the backward act of recomposing the narrative self. While in *The Oval Portrait* the image of the young lady helps the reconstruction of her as a character, although there are only very few aspects recovered, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait reveals completely the internal narrative self and, even more than that, turns it back to the very beginning stage as it can be noticed in figure 2.

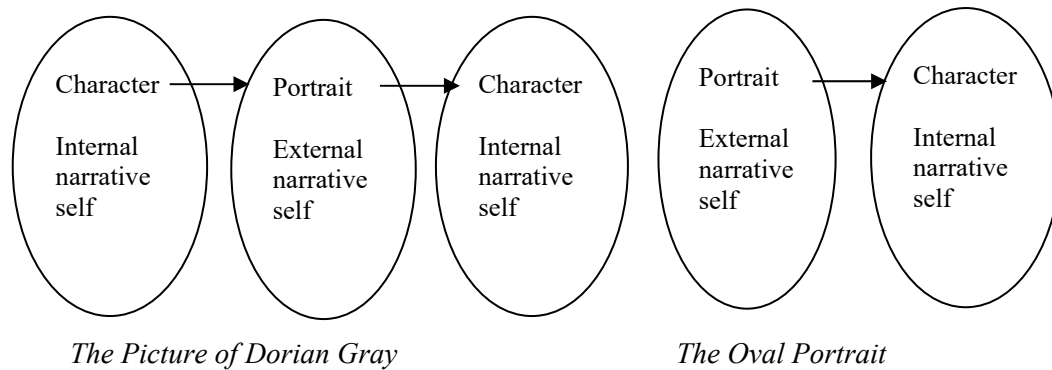


Figure 2

Hiding the narrative self becomes possible when introducing either physical layers, as in *The Oval Portrait*, or psychological ones, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The disposition of these layers is concentric.

In the first case, the fictive space is geometrically shaped in that it suggests the series of the layers. First of all, there is the turret into which the narrator retreated from the outside world, then there is the narrative frame in turn that encircles the gloss of the portrait provided by the *catalogue raisonne* found by the narrator's bedside relating to the next layer, the arabesque frame that encircles the portrait, to the center of the picture which is the eye of the character. This geometric structure of the narrative intimates a contraction from the circumference to the center through all the circular layers. Each movement encompasses the motion of the narrator's attention from the turret, to the gloss of the catalogue, to the frame of the painting, to the face in the portrait, to the flame-like eye of the young lady. (Scheick 7) All the perspectives aim toward the center of all the concentric layers which, in its turn, seems to spring from another progression, for the young lady wastes away and dies so that the true life of the artistic masterpiece may emerge. Such a focalization, from circumference to the center, reveals the importance of the narrative self, even if hidden under all those layers. The artist's words, "This is indeed *Life* itself", refer to the complete process of art, embodied in the narrator's analytical or in the painter's creative imagination. (Poe 249)

The second case sets the geometry of a psychological structure built on the layers of consciousness. Starting from the position of the external portrait regarded as the objective representation of the narrative self, the focalization reveals the internal image in terms of subjective recognition of the narrative self, as it was noticed by Dorian Gray himself<sup>13</sup>, and then moves further to the self-conscious act of hiding the narrative self<sup>14</sup> till it encompasses the reversed process of revealing the true narrative self, translated as the act of becoming aware of the metaphysical changes. Opposed to the first situation, the case of Dorian Gray besides the process of contraction from the circumference, indicated by the external picture of the character, to the center, suggested by the internal image of the narrative self – hence the character’s consciousness, also includes the reversed process which is the expansion from the same center to the act of relevance of the changed narrative self. In both cases the narrative self is hidden under physical or psychological layers but the narrative perspectives aim to reveal the true nature of it.

The portrait, as a literary device, may become not only a possibility but also a means of hiding the narrative self based on the focalization of the narrative perspectives. Either this means is external and physical as in *The Oval Portrait* or internal and psychological as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is related to the visual portrait, meaning the painting for these two already mentioned cases, only in terms of visual representation of the narratives selves. Each time the narrative self belongs to the character represented in the picture. It could be flat, based on the linear perspectives that focus on it and help the reconstruction of the character backwards, as in Poe’s short story, or it could be complex, having an evolution by its own created by the focalizations generated by the narratives perspectives, including the represented character’s perspective<sup>15</sup>, but also having the character’s separate development as in Wilde’s novel and, in this case, the narrative self is made of two sides with different, if not opposite evolutions: the character’s and the portrait’s.

## Conclusion

Imported from the theory of painting to the field of literary theory, the portrait may be considered as a core element of both artistic domains. Generally speaking, the literary portrait is an image and thus an object resulted in an act of

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<sup>13</sup> “He rubbed his eyes, and come close to the picture, and examined it again. There were no signs of any change when he looked into the actual painting, and yet there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered. It was not a mere fancy of him. The thing was horribly apparent.” (Wilde 90)

<sup>14</sup> Here the focalization shifts from the man to the portrait and that ambivalent aspects which dominate the character’s consciousness render now only one perspective of his true nature: “He would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half fascination of sin, and smiling, with secret pleasure, at the misshapen shadow that had to bear the burden that should have been his own”. (Wilde 173)

<sup>15</sup> This time, all the narrative perspectives that were generated not only by the narrator but also by the other characters and focalized upon the painting are related to the represented character’s own and distinct development of the narrative self.



representation which is meant to sustain the construction of a character. Regarded not only from the structural but also from the functional point of view, the literary portrait may be assumed to a literary figure as well as to a literary procedure. When studied as an element of a system as well as an element with a system of its own, the portrait achieves a position that makes possible the relationship between its own system and that of the epic construction which contains it. Within the narrative the portrait belongs to, it develops a particular relationship with the model in order to identify it as a character. At the same time it is implied in the epic conflict, functioning also as a dynamic factor of the whole epic construction. Its expressive structure springs from the same vocation of language considered as work and, like the literary work, the portrait exists through language, meaning through narrative techniques and devices.

The portrait represents a result of all the narrative perspectives generated by the narrative instances, such as the narrator(s) and the character(s), in other words, a consequence of the relationship between these viewing subjects and the viewed object, the visual portrait. Within the fictional world, the portrait remains visual for the characters but becomes narrative for the readers. This interchangeable relationship between the visual portrait, having a character as a model, and the literary portrait, regarded as the literary image of the same model, both belonging to the same fictional world, makes possible the process of hiding the narrative self of this common model. In such a process, the whole truth about the character that embodied the model is also hidden; but, as many other narrative processes, the process of hiding leads also to the process of revealing the same narrative self, but, this time, changed and enriched. Furthermore, the portrait it is no longer a case of imitation, nor reduplication, nor even a parody. It becomes rather a case of reconstruction of a narrative self based on the focalization of the narrative perspectives that, in the end, may lead to the development of the narrative function of the portrait as a narrative figure; which turns these types of narratives into “iconic fully dramatized, psychological portraits”. (Thompson 108)

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