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Formalist and Narratological Techniques in *The Final Solution*

When examining the practice of literary criticism and the different modes that it encompasses, one tends to find a great deal of overlap between different eras and theories. Though separate theories may incorporate similar features of literary criticism, each one involves unique nuances that point to different purposes in the narratives they describe. Although Narratology and Formalism feature different theorists, came into existence at varying times and highlight a range of ideas, some of their fundamental concepts line up, such as distributive and integrative units from Narratology and the similar models of metonymy and metaphor that are based in Formalism.

Distributive and metonymic units are similar because of their contributions to the fabula, or the events of a story in spatial order of the text. The fabula as a representation of time is the linear progression that time takes as an audience member reads it in the story. Generally in a fabula, events jump back and forth in time but this kind of time is simply how they occur spatially through the pages of the text. Distributive units work as catalytic events that propel a story forward. If one were to draw a timeline of a particular narrative, all of the distributive units would line up along the timeline as sequences of action that occur. For example, in Fleming’s “Goldfinger,” a distributive unit could be placed on the timeline when Bond decides to spend the night in Mexico because this decision opens up a series of events that become the story. Metonymy functions in a similar way as distributive units in order to move the story along. Metonymy uses the effect of association, or substituting one attribute for another. This occurs in a fabula when one metonymic unit that catalyzes an event replaces another. One event after another create continuity in the story as it moves along the timeline. These are the completely necessary, nucleus attributes of a story. If a distributive unit or metonymic event are deleted or altered in a story, this shifts an entire series of events if not the whole narrative. For example, in “Goldfinger,” if Bond had chosen to take another flight as he was contemplating, the story would have taken a significant turn and he would have never met DuPont or agreed to work for him. The distributive units and metonymic processes are the bare bones of a story; they lay out the information being presented in the plot but do not provide the reader with any deeper comprehension about the setting, personalities of characters, or deeper themes in the book without additional components.

After drawing the timeline that works along the fabula of a narrative, details must be added to give a story meaning and significance. Adding onto the timeline composed of contiguous events, one could draw a vertical axis that includes the integrative units and metaphorical language of a story; these concepts enhance the events created by distributive and metonymic processes. This addition would make a graph on which the horizontal axis lay the distributive and metonymic and on the vertical axis lay the integrative and metaphoric. The functions of integrative units can be deduced by their visual lineup on the graph. They do not move forward, instead they come out of the distributive and function to give them significance and distinctive meanings. These descriptions can function to give a reader more insight into a particular character, setting, or thematic idea that the author is trying to convey. To draw again from “Goldfinger,” Fleming’s description of Bond’s reaction when he finds out that his flight is cancelled is integrative. He dramatically comes to the conclusion that because he is so frustrated with this turn of events, he needs to get drunk because he has not been drunk in quite some time. This is illuminating about Bond because it could show that he takes his job seriously enough that he does not have time to drink and generally does not get intoxicated while he is working. It also shows that he is easily angered; a flight cancellation will frustrate him to the point of deciding to get very drunk. Integrative modules deepen events’ nuanced meaning and specific, semantic clarification in reference to deeper concepts laced throughout a story. Certain actions that Bond takes in “Goldfinger” would not make sense if the reader was not aware of some of his particular personality traits, as is the case with characters in all narratives. The use of metaphors in a story adds to the vertical axis drawn from the event timeline because metaphors contribute the answer to how an event occurs rather than just what occurs. Metaphors are defined as procedures that designate the description of one object, person or idea with the description of another. Metaphorical language does this through different techniques, such as utilization of roughened and impeded language, creating images through descriptions, distorting a common view of some attribute, and defamiliarizing a concept.

Michael Chabon’s novel, *The Final Solution,* demonstrates the theory of Narratology through his use of distributive and integrative language and in a similar way demonstrates Formalism through both metonymic and metaphorical language.

Distributive and integrative units are two of the most fundamental concepts to the mode of Narratology. Roland Barthes, in his essay “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” elucidates the distinctions between the two and explains how they depend on each other to create narrative. Barthes defines distributive (also referred to as cardinal) units as having a dynamic function in the story. That is, they create or open sequences of action in the story and contribute to its contiguity; they move the events along. According to Barthes, “In order to classify a function as cardinal, all we need verify is that the action to which it refers opens (or maintains or closes) an alternative directly affecting the continuation of the story, in other words, that it either initiates or resolves an uncertainty” (Barthes 248). An important component of distributive units is that they can be considered nuclei of a narrative. If distributive units are changed, the entire fabula changes.

In *The Final Solution*, an example of a distributive unit would be when the old man decides to work the case, “’Very well,’ the old man chuckled… ‘I believe I can spare a few hours. Therefore I will assist you’” (Chabon 27-28). This could be the most important functional/ distributive unit in the story because if the old man had decided not to work the case or if someone else, such as one of the other police officers, had taken it on, the story would have followed an entirely different line of events. There are an infinite number of directions it could have gone, but most likely it would have either followed the old man through a different series of events or it would have followed someone else solving the mystery.

Integrative units, on the other hand, function more indexically. They do not necessarily move the story forward—although they can—as much as they point to a deeper concept within the story. An integrative unit can be used to describe a particular personality trait about a character, setting, or scenario that is present in the narrative; “indices refer to a signified, not to an operation” (Barthes 247). An integrative unit implicitly conveys semantic meaning about a part of the story. Therefore, the audience is required in varying degrees to decode the unit. In *The Final Solution*, when the old man is first at the crime scene, Chabon offers a description of what the police had found in the victim’s car. He creates a list of the victim’s personal belongings, including “an ordnance survey map of Sussex, a length of clear runner milking hose, bits of valve and pipe,” (Chabon 30). Taking out this information from the story would not drastically change the narrative as it would with a distributive unit, but the lengthy list that Chabon provides gives the reader a more in-depth look into the character of the victim. When combined in this description, seemingly irrelevant objects create a depiction of the person. In the same paragraph, Chabon describes the old man thoroughly searching the car for forty minutes even though the police had already combed through it once.

Not only is this passage significant into building the character traits of the old man, it also demonstrates Barthes’ notion of a detail’s significance only showing through what it connotes. Chabon used the number forty specifically to describe the number of minutes the old man spent searching the car. The number forty is not particularly relevant to the story in itself, but the larger idea it implies gives the reader more insight into the events and personality of the old man. Forty is more pertinent in the fact that it is almost an hour; it emphasizes how exhaustively the old man searched the car.

Later in the same scene, Chabon describes how the old man “handled the grisly bit of evidence without hesitation or qualm” (Chabon 31). This passage goes into greater detail about his expression because it shows the old man’s background and history of dealing with murders. The narration indicates that the old man used to be an important detective, but small details like this one illustrate how his background affects his character. The heavily connoted phrasing demonstrates some of his specific character traits though it does not move the story forward much. Integrative units can be authenticating in relating the story’s settings, such as in Chabon’s description of when Mrs. Panicker first sees the old man, “They took in the features and furnishings of the platform, the texts of the posted notices, the discarded end of a cigar, a starling’s ragged nest in the rafters of the overhanging roof” (Chabon 43). These everyday observations by the woman were not essential to the story but they gave it a real-world quality by bringing up objects that people notice and which shape their perceptions of locations. While one does not generally see the end of a cigar in 21st century America, this description points to another location in a different time period. Due to the older time period and location in England, the cigar end can potentially be compared to a cigarette butt that one might see in an urban setting. This seemingly insignificant description of an object contributes to the narrative’s authenticity because it depicts something people see in the city and connects them to the diegetic world.

There are few units that are uniquely distributive or integrative; most are some combination of the two. Barthes refers to this crossover, “…to drink a whiskey (in the hall of an airport) is an action that can pass off as a catalysis to the (cardinal) notion of waiting, but it is also, and at the same time, an index to a certain atmosphere (modernity, relaxation, reminiscence, etc.)…” (Barthes 250). These units create action but also signal a deeper concept. This combination of events occurring with a deep conceptual significance occurs in Chabon when Linus is up on the roof looking for Bruno and falls off into Mr. Kalb’s arms, “Though he winced and groaned, the grin did not leave his face for a moment” (Chabon 37). This event marks a significant point in time in the novel because Bruno has just been stolen and no one knows who did it. These facets of the scene are distributive, while the specific descriptions of Mr. Kalb’s reaction are integrative. His expression is conspicuous because, as the reader finds out in the end, he is the person who stole Bruno in order to get the military secrets out of him. With this description, Chabon is subtly drawing a picture of Kalb’s demeanor through his inconspicuous actions; these understated descriptions implicitly arouse suspicion in the reader as they parallel the role of a detective as the book goes along, trying to solve the mystery. A unit that functions both to create action and to signal semantic meanings is more frequent in a text than a unit that stands by itself as either distributive or integrative. A narrative depends on both types of components to tell the story. While distributive and cardinal events move the story along and create action that would drastically alter the story if they were changed, integrative and indexical descriptions create the intangible elements that give the story meaning. As Barthes says, “a function has a meaning only insofar as it takes its place in the general line of action of an actant; and this action in turn receives its ultimate meaning from the fact that it is being told, that is, entrusted to a discourse which possesses its own code” (Barthes 243). The two facets of narrative depend on each other; one could not exist without the other.

In the Formalist line of criticism, two features of narrative exist which are similar but distinct to distributive and integrative units. Distributive and metonymic units exist more in non-poetic language and lie on the horizontal axis because they signify continuity, as Jakobson explicates, “one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity,” in his essay “Two Aspects of Language” (Jakobson 129). These elements function in a straightforward manner in the temporal space of the story. Metaphoric elements exist in poetic, or literary, language, on the same axis as integrative functions; that is, they are both on the vertical axis because they represent substitution or comparison, or, as Jakobson clarifies, metaphoric language is “intended either as a substitute for or as a complement to the stimulus” (Jakobson 129). As mentioned earlier, metaphoric units deepen and expand understanding of metonymic events.

Functions of metaphoric language in stories can be explained by their effect of depicting concepts visually. This is the main element that separates literary language from simple expository language; metaphors create a picture in the mind’s eye by comparing or substituting a familiar idea to an image that may give the idea a new meaning to the reader. Jakobson explores this substitution, “in *War and Peace* the synecdoches “hair on the upper lip “ and “bare shoulders” are used by the same writer to stand for the female characters to whom these features belong” (Jakobson 130).

These techniques which are unique to poetic, or literary, language are intended to create a comparison in the mind of the audience that would not otherwise have been made, in order to enhance the visual comprehension of the passage. For example, Chabon utilizes metaphoric language when the focalizer is Mrs. Panicker describing Linus. She says, “He seemed less a boy to her than the shadow of a boy, stealing through the house, the village, the world. He had mouseholes everywhere…” (Chabon 39). The narrator could have simply described Linus with the simple adjectives of absent or quiet but chose instead to force the reader to literally picture him as a shadow, a figure shrouded in darkness. This substitution of him being a shadow rather than a boy enhances the characterization of Linus so much because while the words absent or quiet conjure inferences of Linus being shy or hiding in his room or being introverted, the concept of a shadow brings to mind more of a mysterious personage, which is what Linus is. He came to live with Mrs. Panicker after running from the Holocaust and is fixated on his parrot that he carries around everywhere on his shoulder. These are two unique circumstances that are not only foreign to a 21st century audience but also to the other characters surrounding him in the story; many of them clearly do not know what to make of Linus. Just as only the silhouette of a shadow can be made out, so is the understanding of Linus’s character to the participants in the story and the readers. Linguistic choices like this are intended to create the most significant impact on the reader.

Another aspect of metaphorical language discussed in Formalist theory and demonstrated in *The Final Solution* is roughened and impeded language. Roughened and impeded language is utilized to necessitate a second glance from the reader in order to fully comprehend it. This type of language is difficult to understand initially but ultimately rewarding when the reader has a more enhanced understanding of the text on a deeper level. This is another technique of defamiliarization, the idea that making a concept seem new or out of the ordinary creates deeper resonance with the reader. The Formalist theory places a great deal of emphasis on the difference between literary and non-literary language and this is one of the significant attributes that distinguish the two. People are used to seeing the world in the same ways that they have every day for their whole lives. In Chabon’s novel, when Mrs. Panicker is startled by the old man as she sees the “hunger in his eyes” (Chabon 43), the audience is forced to contemplate the different meanings behind why the old man would have hungry eyes. He seems to embody a passion for finding out the truth with his past as a famous detective and the interest he still has in finding Shane’s murderer even at his old age. His hunger, therefore, could be in reference to him seeking the truth and it could be startling to Mrs. Panicker because it is so intense. Someone’s passion is not generally described as a hunger; therefore, this description forces the reader to do a double take—whether literally or figuratively—in order to make sense of its deeper meaning. Shklovsky alludes to the fact that reading is always subjective; every person who reads a book internalizes it in a slightly different way. Themes in the story take on different meanings and significances and this roughened language creates more room for subjectivity because of the heavily connoted phrasing that it entails. Hunger in the eyes could hold a different meaning than passion, it could be taken more as anger or violence and therefor have a more disturbing effect for someone who has had close encounters with angry or violent people. This description of the old man could portray him in a different light for one particular reader than for another. This is where metaphorical language breaks off significantly from metonymic language, where everything is easier to interpret. Another example Chabon utilizes of roughened and impeded language to create a perception of a character is Mrs. Panicker’s observation of Mr. Kalb’s “pale feet poking naked from the turn-ups of his fine gray pinstripe trousers,” which shocked her (Chabon 40). The intentional word choices of pale, poking, and naked suggest some sort of violation, although in this instance Mr. Kalb is doing nothing wrong; he is simply sitting by a stream with Linus, a boy that Mrs. Panicker is very protective of, barefoot. This description places in a subconscious hint about Kalb. The way he is described has negative, unsettling associations and while this may not register with the reader presently, it slowly builds up a characterization about him by drawing out the language used to describe him.

Another way to categorize metaphors through literary language is by Mukarovsky in “Standard Language and Poetic Language.” He explicates literary language as a “violation of the norm of the standard,” or “the background against which is reflected the esthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work” (Mukarovsky 18). Mukarovsky explains the idea of using rhetorical language choices that one would not normally use to describe an object, person, place or idea, and a reader would be surprised to see used in reference to that particular concept. In Chabon’s novel, Mrs. Panicker finds Bruno’s singing eerie because it has a “sweetness that froze the heart” (Chabon 41). The fact that his sweetness is compared to being cold violates what a person would normally associate with these terms and creates questions in reference to it. When objects freeze they harden, but sweetness is often associated with melting, as in the romantic notion of someone’s heart melting. This view is inconsistent with traditional views and makes the reader wonder how the narrator is actually trying to portray the bird. When someone hears music that is described as sweet it usually has a calming or encouraging effect but Mrs. Panicker’s off-putting reaction to the bird’s singing and its effect of freezing one’s heart would suggest that it is in some way menacing. Again, this word choice brings to center the subjectivity present in reading every narrative.

Mukarovsky’s recognition of metaphorical language’s violation of the standard norm also becomes apparent through a “characteristic feature of poetic language its ‘uncommonness,’ that is, its distortedness” (Mukarovsky 27). Describing something in an abnormal way creates different implications surrounding it. When the old man observes “The four human beings sharing the room with him” (Chabon 53) his perceptions are seen differently because of him calling them human beings instead of people. Rarely in everyday conversation would a person refer to someone as a human being. This word choice creates an interpretation of the old man seeing his companions less personally and more anatomically and scientifically. He therefore becomes less associated with them and more of an objective outsider. This way of describing people is more uncommon but still correct and makes specific statements about the old man as a character.

Distributive and integrative units of the Narratological theory complement each other just as metonymic and metaphoric language of Functionalism do. As the early theories of Formalism, shown through writings of Victor Schklovsky, depict how metonymy and metaphor influenced different levels of narratives, so do the narratological models of distributive and integrative functions. Though each concept exists in many different forms and can be analyzed through a wide scope of lenses, each is present in every story in making them literary narratives. Chabon utilizes these narrative components in *The Final Solution* to create dynamic catalytic events and to give these events deeper significance that is slightly different but just as impactful to every audience of his book.