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## PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

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**ABSTRACT.** *The author of this article underlines that studying narrative discourse in the English literature and its psycholinguistic aspects it's very useful to admit at once that such kind of discourse plays a great role in all kinds of genre of art literature. In a case we have a deal with graphic novels it's more suitable to show and to underline psycholinguistic peculiarities or aspects of narrative discourse.*

*It was underlined that the important part of comic book narration was also the point of view: who was watching and what was the object of this gaze; if a character was looking at something and in the next panel we were shown this object of this gaze, the reader was positioned as this character. This type of positioning is essential in comic book narration, as it has the possibility of affecting the meanings linked with the reading of the comic.*

*Analyzing «Watchmen», the author of this article proposed such psycholinguistic aspects of narrative discourse, as: visual emphasis; focalization of information; metanarrative presentation of the text; contrasting visual linkings; actualization of narrative potential.*

**Key words:** *narrative discourse, visual emphasis, focalization of information, metanarrative presentation of the text, contrasting visual linkings, actualization of narrative potential.*

## Introduction

Studying narrative discourse in the English literature and its psycholinguistic aspects we have to admit at once that such kind of discourse plays a great role in all kinds of genre of art literature. But in a case we have a deal with graphic novels it's more suitable to show and to underline psycholinguistic peculiarities or aspects of narrative discourse. It's because apart from this significant contribution to the superhero discourse, the comic book is also striking in its multiplicity of narrative levels; often the text and the pictures tell completely separate stories, and still neither can definitely be read as being more dominant than the other. The unique form of the graphic novel that combines the textual and the visual narratives in a longer narrative piece poses interesting challenges when it comes to narratological study, for even the simplest questions of narration and focalization become complicated in the sense that the imagery always narrates «more» than what the traditional view of the focalizer is capable of. Thus the layers of narration are significantly more complex, and the question of how to study these becomes crucial.

Therefore, a narratological method suitable for the study of comics must take into account the both forms that define comics: both the content and the artwork contained in the panels. In addition to this, textual elements contained within the comic book need to be taken into account, as a part of a carefully constructed interplay between words and images. So, the material for our research will be twelve-part graphic novel «Watchmen» (1986) by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons.

Set in an alternative American history where Nixon is still president, superheroes are real and pirate comics have consequently substituted the superhero comics of our world, «Watchmen» shows us a dark and violent world on the brink of a nuclear war, each of the twelve chapters taking us metaphorically one minute closer to midnight – and doomsday. As in many of the graphic novels of the late 1980s, the city of New York offers an urban setting, a place with little or no hope, a city where traditional authority figures are incapable of dealing with civic problems or criminal activity. The «watchmen», though never explicitly named so, are the so-called superheroes, already outlawed in 1977 by the fictionally transformed «Keene Act», and are now either retired or choosing the life of outlaw vigilantes, still hiding their true identities behind masks. As one of their kin is

brutally murdered, they slowly begin to discover a much larger plot, designed by Adrian Veidt (previously superhero Ozymandias) to unite mankind by very questionable methods. Apart from the powerful visual narration, «Watchmen» relies on many textual devices unusual to graphic novels to narrate the story, ranging from personal diaries to scientific articles and newspaper clippings, which all weave new layers and meanings to the already complex narration. Also, each of the twelve chapters ends with a short epigraph, a quotation ranging from rock lyrics to nineteenth-century poetry. Each epigraph underlines the theme of the chapter and can therefore be seen as affecting the cognitive schemas and interpretations the reader develops of given chapters (McCloud, 1993).

It's important for our research that this thesis sets out to identify and analyze the various narrative structures and elements found in «Watchmen», beginning with the textual and visual aspects. How do the narratological elements function in the text, how can they be identified, how should they be interpreted? How does a form such as comics affect the narrative and the meanings within, both political and ethical? The text consists of several types of textual narration, from the basic verbal narration in speech balloons to newspaper clippings and quotations from various fictitious literary sources, and all of these contribute to the narration of the graphic novel. The «superhero» characters in the comic are essential as well, both as focalizers and as means to deconstruct the traditional stereotype of a superhero as a genetic representation of the *ubermensch*. The various aspects of visual narration will be analyzed through theories from art history to basic comic book analysis of the single panel. This thesis will not set out to systematically cover the entire contents of «Watchmen», for the graphic novel is extensively wide and could be studied from various other points of view, such as the political perspective it offers of the Cold War-era America, or the way it chooses to depict its female heroines in a genre that is overtly masculine.

In addition, this thesis will not take part in the debate on the academic credibility of studying comics. As it often happens in the established scientific community the academics entering the field of science fiction (and by implication, comics), have traditionally felt their major task was to legitimate their object of study to the larger academic situation. This approach has been unfruitful in the long run, and has focused on the definition rather than description of

the genre. The need to «prove oneself» in the face of the academic world is still with us, especially in the parallel literary genres, but it is not the aim of this thesis to validate comics as «art» or anything related to that discussion. As far as we know there exists no previous academic research on «Watchmen», and the studies on the narratological aspects of graphic novels in general published so far are quite limited.

This thesis will for the most part refer to Alan Moore as the single «author» of «Watchmen», and Dave Gibbons will be credited only when discussing the visual details and illustration. The reason for this is that Alan Moore concentrates on writing scripts while various talented artists illustrate his work in their own distinctive styles. This question of authorship related to graphic novels should not be overlooked as unproblematic; already in 1985 Will Eisner confronted this problem in his book «Comics and Sequential Art»: indeed, who is the «creator» of a comic page which was written by one person, penciled by another and inked, lettered (and perhaps colored or backgrounded) by still others?

One reason why this thesis chooses to represent Moore as «the author» is because Moore is well-known for his scriptwriting, which involves extremely detailed information addressed to the illustrator concerning aspects such as panel division, overall mood and even the amount of words per panel. This is an essential dilemma when discussing the question of word and image – which of them is dominant? As numerous scientists have claimed throughout the ages, verbal language is «the native tongue of the narrative» and has to be regarded as such. Yet it is possible to admit that there are meanings which are better expressed through non-verbal means, and these meanings should not be declared a priori irrelevant to the narrative experience. In order to stay fair to the art form of comics, one must always acknowledge the primacy of writing, even though the preferred way being that the writer is also the illustrator. This is a question that brings forth several more, as such divisions as author/reader and script/text are far from simple and unproblematic. Crucial here is to realize that whether a combination of text and image or script and illustration, the result is always a dynamic process between the two components. In this thesis, Alan Moore will be credited overall authorship for this detailed scriptwriting, but also for the sake of simplicity.

Seymour Chatman divided the narrative text into two components, which will be referred to here as story (what happens?) and narrative (how it happens?). The story is further divided into events and existents, which are composed of subcategories such as actions, happenings, characters and setting (Chatman, 1978: 19). «Watchmen» also can be divided into story and narration, the story being the abstract plot of superheroes uncovering a plot to kill millions of people, and the narrative is the arrangement of the events of the plot in a given medium (here comics) that actualizes the story (Chatman, 1978: 37). The narrative structure in «Watchmen» plays with temporal levels and concepts, showing the reader events and actions from the past, present and sometimes even the future, many of them almost simultaneously by the way of juxtaposing panels from separate temporal levels. A past act can be shown to the reader in connection to the present action, thus giving both events new contexts and new meanings by associating them with each other.

The important part of comic book narration is also the point of view: who is watching and what is the object of this gaze; if a character is looking at something and in the next panel we are shown this object of this gaze, the reader is positioned as this character. This type of positioning is essential in comic book narration, as it has the possibility of affecting the meanings linked with the reading of the comic. The power of the gaze is thus an important aspect, and well used in «Watchmen»: the entire novel begins with the murder of Edward Blake (as known as the superhero Comedian), and what the reader sees is the entire act of the murder through the eyes of the murderer, the panels shaded with menacing pink. This application of focalization, seeing the murder through the eyes of the killer, typically requires that the reader identifies it with a certain character that it defines and grounds the character that experiences this focalized event. But in this case, the reader is deliberately left without this information and encouraged to create his/her own concepts of the murderer through the dialogue of the two detectives investigating the death, which alternates with the scene-to-scene panel transitions of the violent act that has taken place previously:

*«Somebody really had it in for this guy. I mean, how did he go outta window?» «Maybe he tripped against it.»*

*«Forget it. That's strong glass, man. You trip against it, even a big guy like that, it don't break. I think you'd have to be thrown»* (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 3).

In this dialogue the first and last sentences are illustrated by the images of the murder, while others show the detectives on the scene afterwards; the reader will see that indeed, the other detective is right – the Comedian was a big man, and he was thrown. The bolded passages appear as such in the original text, and the use of such bolding of words is generally interpreted as an emphasis on those particular words, which intensifies their meaning. This type of visual emphasis is just one of the many ways comics can visually affect the meanings related to the text.

The concept of «focalization» was introduced to narratology by Gerard Genette. Focalization as a term is more abstract than point of view, involving not only the one who sees but also the one who speaks (Genette, 1980: 189). However, as this division refers to traditional written literature, the word «see» receives a whole new meaning in relation to comic book focalization, where the focalizer has no need to verbalize his surroundings or the atmosphere because they are immediately available to the reader in visual form. As Scott McCloud points out, «in comics the imagining is done for the reader» (McCloud, 1993: 122). Therefore, the term focalization is not in itself sufficient in the study of comic book narration, and the further formulation of the concept by myself, done after the thorough analysis of presented sources combined with my personal experience as a writer and a scriptwriter, will be used in this thesis instead, especially in the context of cognitive narratology and when discussing the reliability of the narrator.

Comics as a medium do not directly convert to the idea of focalization, as in comics visuality plays a central role both in the story and in the reading. Chatman himself has divided focalization in comics into different subject-object-position categories that participate in the narration of the comic book. The first two are the visual subject and the verbal subject: what is the reader shown and who is the verbal narrator? Often the character who speaks is also visually present, so the focalization is both visual and verbal. Chatman's third type of subject-position is the psychological subject, the one who experiences and feels, the one that binds the visual and verbal narration to each other (Chatman, 1978: 144–145).

More often in «Watchmen», though, the visual and verbal subjects are in a strong contrast, narrating separate stories which still seem to be commenting on each other. While getting down to

work on the thesis, I have analyzed «Watchmen», which has many metanarratives, narratives that have no direct link to the main story. One example of this is a pirate comic, «The Tales of the Black Freighter», which is read by a black boy Bernie within the comic in Chapters III, V, VIII, X and XI, and which always appears in the comic in relation to the act of the boy's reading. The textual captions of the pirate comic are then combined with the visual narratives of the main story, and vice versa. This parallel inbox plotline, «a story within a story» creates a metanarrative that builds a new context to the events that take place and can thus affect the reader's interpretations of the actions in the main story as it is contrasted with the violent and cynical world of «Watchmen». The black and yellow colouring of the fallout shelter signs predicting nuclear war and consequently death is juxtaposed against captions which come from the pirate comic:

*«I saw that hellbound ship s black sails against the yellow Indie s sky, and knew again the stench of powder, and men's brains, and war»* (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 1).

Nuclear threat and the fear of world war three are both connected with pirates, as the news vendor man simultaneously curses the dark looking future. Some of «Watchmen»-fans have even gone so far as to suggest that the pirate comic in question can be read as an allegory of the type of human character the world of «Watchmen» admires – the survivors. Though this theory is mistaken – after detailed analysis of various story elements it is easy to confirm that «The Tales of the Black Freighter» symmetrically reflect in the internal plotline of the main antagonist, Adrian Veidt, who used his friends bodies to achieve his own goal, and every step forward brings him to his own downfall.

The separate textual narratives in «Watchmen» are often bound together by verbal allusions or the use of similar words in different contexts, very much in the same way as the visual allusions are used in connection to verbal captions, such as the fallout shelter example above. Verbal and visual combine, somewhat ironically, in Chapter II, when Laurie puts out her cigarette with the words:

*«Look, I m putting it out, okay? It's dead. Extinguished»* (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 2).

This line is then followed by the general view of the Comedian's funeral assembly, the pun of course being that the Comedian, too, is «extinguished». This creates an ironical link between two separate

scenes. Similar linkings take place throughout «Watchmen», the word «madness» in one storyline juxtaposed with «insanity» in another (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 3–4), «hell and damnation» with «Hades» (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 19–20) and so forth. The continuous play between different levels of meanings connects the various plotlines and levels of narration by the power of juxtaposition, both in consecutive panels and in the single panels where the captions of one story level are presented in a panel from another level. This type of contrasting visual linkings supporting the visual narrative via the textual narrative is a central type of narration in «Watchmen», and one that is essential to the interpretation of the narrative. It is important to notice that «Watchmen» has no written third-person omniscient narration, but that all captions come from within the story by its various characters or metanarratives. However, the visual narration of the graphic novel is something more than the focalizers and narrators are capable of, and concepts such as an «omniscient narrator» may acquire whole new dimensions in the context of the graphic novel.

In «Watchmen» the most commonly used type of textual narration is dialogue via speech balloons and separate captions in which various characters relate their thoughts by the way of written internal monologue. Sometimes dialogue is also expressed in captions, while the panels show something else so that the dialogue contrasts or supports the visual narrative. The dialogue in the captions is always in quotation marks, whereas the sign of internal monologue is the lack of quotation marks. In Chapter IX, much of the narrative focuses on Laurie's painful memories of her past, which she retells to Jon/Dr. Manhattan on planet Mars. Her act of telling is visualized by these past actions, and her spoken words appear in captions, complete with quotation marks that imply her act of telling of her past to Dr. Manhattan rather than just memorizing them internally, as Dr. Manhattan for example does to his past in Chapter IV. However, at the end of Chapter IX, Laurie's telling becomes infused with dialogue fragments of the scenes of the past, clearly no longer told by her but as if playing on repeat in her head (square brackets indicate captions here):

Dr. Manhattan: *I think you're avoiding something.*

Laurie: *Don't be stupid. There's n-nothing to avoid...*

[ «... his, y'know, his old friends daughter? What do you think I am?» ]



Laurie: *I-I've never had any occasion to avoid the truth...*

[«Only once.»«What do you think I am?»«... old friend's daughter?»«What do you think... »«... his, y'know, his...»]

[«What do you think I am?»«... friend's daughter?»]

Laurie: *I-I mean look, here, my life, my mom's life, there's nothing there worth avoiding, it's all just meaningless...*

[«... his y'know his... »«Only once.»«... yknow, his old friend's dau... »]

Laurie: *No.*

[Laurie's inner speech: *No. No not him not... No.*] (Moore & Gibbons, 1987: 23–24).

This rather long scene takes place in four consecutive panels, and they mark a shift in which the increasingly fragmented captions are repeated until a moment of self-realization takes place in the sudden shift in the captions from Laurie's speech to her thoughts as she realizes the man she hates is in fact her father. The panels alter between Laurie's present and images from her past, shown to the reader earlier in the chapter, so the fragments of the past infiltrate her present both textually and visually. This type of verbal transition to inner speech is a rare occasion in the narrative structure of «Watchmen», which uses visual shifts in focalization far more than verbal, and testifies the enormous abilities comics have in narrative potential.

### Conclusions

So, analyzing «Watchmen» we can propose such *psycholinguistic aspects of narrative discourse*:

- visual emphasis;
- focalization of information;
- metanarrative presentation of the text;
- contrasting visual linkings;
- actualization of narrative potential.

Also «Watchmen» as the socio-cultural phenomenon has been studied in the courses of history, economy, politics and sociology, while there have been no psycho-linguistic study on the novel. In other our articles we'll decide to focus mostly on the culturelogical aspects of the novel, and the results of these researches will be discussed and completely described.

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**ПСИХОЛІНГВІСТИЧНІ АСПЕКТИ  
НАРАТИВНОГО ДИСКУРСУ**

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**АНОТАЦІЯ.** Автор даної статті наголошує, що вивчення наративного дискурсу на прикладі англійської літератури, визначення психолінгвістичних аспектів такого дискурсу є вельми актуальною проблемою сучасності, адже такого роду дискурс відіграє неабияку роль у всіх жанрах художньої літератури. У даній статті наративний дискурс буде проаналізовано на прикладі графічних романів, на основі аналізу яких буде визначено психолінгвістичні особливості наративного дискурсу.

В статті було підкреслено, що важливим для окреслення особливостей наративного дискурсу є аналіз матеріалів, представлених у вигляді коміксів, адже людина, яка спостерігає, є лише об'єктом візуалізації, а не її суб'єктом. У випадку, якщо персонаж спостерігає за чимось, то читач буде позиціонуватися як саме цей персонаж. При цьому певний тип позиціонування має важливе значення для оповідання текстового матеріалу, презентованого у формі коміксів, адже саме цей тип позиціонування великою мірою впливає на значення, які створюються читачем твору.

Аналізуючи твір «Нічні охоронці» Алана Мура та Дейва Гіббонса, автором цієї статті було запропоновано такі психолінгвістичні аспекти наративного дискурсу, а саме: візуальна акцентуація, актуалізація інформації, метанаративна презентація тексту, контрастні візуальні словосполучення, актуалізація наративного потенціалу.

**Ключові слова:** наративний дискурс, візуальна акцентуація, актуалізація інформації, метанаративна презентація тексту, контрастні візуальні словосполучення, актуалізація наративного потенціалу.

## ПСИХОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ НАРРАТИВНОГО ДИСКУРСА

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**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Автор данной статьи подчёркивает, что изучение нарративного дискурса на примере английской литературы, определение психолингвистических аспектов такого дискурса является весьма актуальной проблемой современности, ведь такого рода дискурс играет немаловажную роль для всех жанров художественной литературы. В данной статье нарративный дискурс будет проанализирован на примере графических романов, на основе осмысления которых и будут определены психолингвистические особенности повествовательного дискурса.

В статье было подчёркнуто, что достаточно важным для определения особенностей повествовательного дискурса является анализ материалов, представленных в виде комиксов, ведь человек, который наблюдает, является только объектом визуализации, а не её субъектом. В случае, если персонаж наблюдает за чем-то, то читатель будет позиционироваться как этот персонаж. При этом определённый тип позиционирования имеет важное значение для повествования текстового материала, представленного в форме комиксов, ведь именно этот тип позиционирования во многом влияет на значения, которые создаются читателем произведения.

Анализируя произведение «Ночные охранники» Алана Мура и Дэйва Гиббонса, автором этой статьи были предложены следующие психолингвистических аспекты нарративного дискурса, а именно: визуальная акцентуация, актуализация информации, метанарративная презентация текста, контрастные визуальные словосочетания, актуализация нарративного потенциала.

**Ключевые слова:** нарративный дискурс, визуальная акцентуация, актуализация информации, метанарративная презентация текста, контрастные визуальные словосочетания, актуализация нарративного потенциала.

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