

**When the reader becomes a child:
Narratological issues in *Daughters
of the House* by Michèle Roberts**

JOANNA MORAWSKA

*Received 24.01.2017,
received in revised form 15.11.2017,
accepted 23.11.2017.*

Abstract

Employing the theoretical framework derived from Gérard Genette's narratology, with a special focus on the category of a focalized narrator, the article investigates narratological strategies employed in Michèle Roberts's novel *Daughters of the House* in order to demonstrate how employing a particular form of narration influences the reader's perception and understanding of the novel. In *Daughters of the House*, the narrative is focalized by adolescent characters, which makes the reader assume a childlike perspective and identify with the children characters. Tracing the motif of childhood also on the level of structure and plot, the article aims to prove that for the proper understanding of the narrative, the reader has to become a child themselves.

Key words

child, focalization, focalized narrator, narratology, Gérard Genette, Michèle Roberts

**Kiedy czytelnik staje się dzieckiem:
Kwestie narratologiczne w powieści
Michèle Roberts *Daughters of the House***

Abstrakt

Na podstawie teoretycznych ustaleń narratologii Gérarda Genette'a, zwłaszcza kategorii narratora-fokalizatora, artykuł bada strategie narratologiczne zastosowane w powieści Michèle Roberts *Daughters of the House*, aby ustalić, jak wprowadzenie danej formy narracji wpływa na postrzeganie i rozumienie powieści przez czytelnika. Narracja w powieści Roberts fokalizowana jest przez dorastające bohaterki, co sprawia, że czytelnik przyjmuje dziecięcy punkt widzenia i identyfikuje się z młodymi bohaterami. Badając motyw dzieciństwa także na poziomie struktury tekstu oraz fabuły, artykuł dowodzi, że dla prawidłowego odczytania powieści czytelnik sam musi stać się dzieckiem.

Słowa kluczowe

dziecko, fokalizacja, narrator-fokalizator, narratologia, Gérard Genette, Michèle Roberts

1. Introduction

Michèle Roberts (born in 1949) is considered to be one of the most significant contemporary British authors of her generation. Being an extremely prolific writer, she has written numerous texts in different – sometimes overlapping – genres, including thirteen novels, short stories, essays, poetry, plays and a memoir, as well as various texts in collaboration with other artists. She is often identified with women's writing, although she herself is against being pigeon-holed solely on the basis of her gender. As she states in an interview:

I'm quite happy to say I'm a woman writer, though I don't believe in some kind of essentialist notion that by virtue of being a woman you automatically write differently to a man. I feel that denies writerly strategies, writerly sophistication and writerly choices, because there's a certain kind of good, old-fashioned, omniscient narrator that someone of either gender could write. (Newman 2004)

She has become the voice of the unvoiced and she herself admits to be "interested in trying to find and invent voices and stories of people who haven't been seen as important" (Newman 2004).

Roberts was born into a family of French and English origins which has undoubtedly influenced her writing. She frequently touches upon the issues of identity, as her dual British-French nationality has strongly affected her sense of belonging:

That was the second impetus to my becoming a writer: living in a double culture, and feeling that I lived torn apart, or split, and didn't know where I belonged. (Newman 2004)

The sense of not belonging is reflected in the novel with which this article is concerned: one of the characters is locked in a struggle of fitting in to either of two societies while she is considered a stranger by both.

This article focuses on the theme of childhood as essential for *Daughters of the House*. The motif of childhood is present in Michèle Roberts's writing as she believes this period of life to be decisive for a person's future. She says:

When you're young, you're very open to the world, you're vulnerable, you're soft-shelled. I think your childhood stamps you, wounds you, shapes you. (Newman 2004)

It is especially prominent in *Daughters of the House*, first published in 1992, which is widely acclaimed to be one of her most

brilliant novels. It touches upon the theme of childhood in a number of ways. Firstly and perhaps most explicitly on the plot level, which is concerned with a story of two women – Thérèse and Léonie Martin – who revisit their childhood in search of memories which became dissolved throughout the years. The reader is taken back in time to witness the two girls' search for identity as they strive to come to terms with unsettling experiences during their childhood and puberty. Those adolescent experiences leave a mark on the relationship between the two women and their relationships with other people. The two characters are strongly juxtaposed in the narrative concerning their childhood as they are driven into a constant struggle for dominance and adults' approval.¹ Thérèse is the saintly one. In their childhood plays, she would always assume the role of a holy nun or a tortured martyr who refused to reject their faith under threat. She is a little chaste French girl who would later become an enclosed contemplative in a convent. It was her mother's childhood dream to join her sister in a Carmelite convent – a dream which she had to give up because of something that had happened during the Second World War. The other girl, Léonie, is Thérèse's half-French and half-English cousin (though this relationship is called into question later in the novel). Léonie's Englishness stands for everything that is wrong with her: bad manners, dull cuisine, rather laid-back approach towards religion. She belongs neither in England, nor in France, as both nations despise her as a foreigner. Her identity is put into question on numerous occasions throughout the novel; however, in her adult life she finds a way to fit in, contrary to Thérèse who, as a nun, has become foreign to the outer world.²

The motif of childhood can be found not only on the level of the plot, but, more importantly, on the level of narration. In

¹ See Sarah Falcus, *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories* (2007: 90-91) for a thorough description of the relationship between the girls.

² Thérèse's character is actually based on Thérèse of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century Carmelite. For more details see Falcus (2007: 89-90).

this essay, I will strive to demonstrate how employing a focalized narration affects the reader's understanding of the novel. Since the narrative is unveiled through perspective of children characters, the reader follows the plot from this particular vantage point. Moreover, I wish to argue that by introducing anachronistic narrative, Roberts demonstrates how understanding the text requires reverting to a child's perspective. The characters reminisce about their childhood in order to apprehend the meaning of the events that structured their adult selves. Thus, the reader, following the characters on their way to adulthood, needs to assume the perspective of a child to be able to grasp the meaning of the narrative. In my discussion, I will refer to narratological tools introduced by Gérard Genette in an attempt to disentangle and understand the semantic mechanisms of the novel.

2. Structure of the narrative

In the present article, the term "narrative" will be employed in one of the meanings distinguished by Genette. Acknowledging three different meanings he has established, I shall refer to the second one as particularly relevant from the narratological perspective. According to Genette, narrative can refer to "the succession of events, real or fictitious" (Genette 1980: 25). Thus, "analysis of narrative" would mean

the study of totality of actions and situations taken in themselves, without regard to the medium, linguistic or other, through which knowledge of that totality comes to us. (Genette 1980: 25)

Following Genette's definition, I shall now take a closer look at the structure of the narrative in *Daughters of the House*.

Although in comparison to Roberts's previous writing, the considered novel seemingly displays a more realist structure, the apparent realism is fragmented and the narration itself unreliable. Employing such a structure results in providing

the reader only with possible versions of the events recounted (Falcus 2007: 88). More importantly, the perspective the narration assumes is that of its characters, i.e. Thérèse and Léonie. Thus, both Thérèse and Léonie serve as focalizers or “reflector figures” (Stanzel) and the reader follows the narrative through the filter of their thoughts and perceptions (Fludernik 2009: 36). Finding themselves in the vantage point of the characters, the reader’s insight into the narrative does not exceed the knowledge the girls have at their disposal. Consequently, the reader becomes reduced to being a child themselves. In other words, a possible truth which adults choose to share with the children is then passed on to the reader, who, as a result, is reduced to the same position of an inferior.

The opening paragraphs of the narration include a description of a house employing vague, dream-like discourse. Events from the past are recounted in such a way that initially the reader is unable to determine whether they are memories or dreams. Thus, the first chapter refers to the events which happened before the ‘main narrative’ (this concept will be investigated in greater depth later in the article). However, taking into consideration the nature of this narrative segment – the dream-like discourse which does not indicate particular time or space – we shall assume, for the purpose of the present discussion, that the main narrative begins with Thérèse coming back to her home village. Her comeback to Blémont-la-Fontaine (a fictitious village setting of the childhood events) is veiled in secrecy as she does not wish anyone to know she is coming back. Only her cousin Léonie is waiting for her in anticipation as she has some vague idea of why Thérèse might be coming back now. Both women are in their forties and they have not seen each other for twenty years – Thérèse having been an enclosed contemplative with rather limited contact with the outer world, and Léonie – busy with married life in the house where they grew up together. The cousins’ meeting is rather frigid and full of palpable tension. The reader may sense

that there has been some unresolved argument from the past, but at this stage she/he can merely wonder about its reasons. According to Falcus, it is the patriarchal system the characters are set in that antagonizes them and prevents them from retaining the close bond that had once connected them (Falcus 2007: 90-91). The narrative continues through several chapters before the reader finds out the reason of Thérèse's comeback in her own utterance:

I'm writing my autobiography. I thought if I wrote down what happened when we were children it would help me to decide what it is I've got to do. But there's so much I've forgotten. You'll have to help me remember. (Roberts 1993: 23)

The narrative then goes back to the girls' childhood which constitutes a substantial part of the novel. It provides the reader with a broader perspective on the events which evidently had a tremendous impact on the characters' development. At the end of the book, the narrative leaps back to continue the main narrative, thus forming a kind of narratological frame.

Returning to Genette's considerations, we can say that the nature of a written literary narrative imposes the order in which particular narrative sequences are read by means of their linear arrangement, which Genette calls "the pseudo-temporal order" (1980: 34-35). Thus it is crucial to establish the temporal succession of the plot events and its connections to the pseudo-temporal order of the narrative. In order to analyse the temporal order of a narrative, one should

compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story. (Genette 1980: 35)

If we look again at the structure of the novel with Genette's distinction in mind, we will see that the order of the narrative

does not correspond to the order of the story. The narrative begins with Thérèse's comeback which is later interrupted by the narrative of the girls' childhood, and then again, comes back to the "present" time. Thus, childhood occurs later in the narrative but if we follow the chronological order of the story, it obviously takes place earlier in the story. In other words, childhood comes *after* in the narrative but *before* in the story. Genette calls this type of discordance between the ordering of story and narrative *anachrony* (1980: 35-36). The *reach* of the anachrony, i.e. the temporal distance – the time leap between the first events in the narrative and the earliest events in the story – will cover more than twenty years: when the characters are first introduced to the reader, they are in their forties, whereas the analepsis (flashback) concerns the period of their childhood and early adolescence.

Though I have already made the assumption that Thérèse's return to her childhood home constitutes the main plot, in actual fact it is difficult to establish which narrative should be regarded as the main one in *Daughters of the House*. According to Genette,

every anachrony constitutes, with respect to the narrative into which it is inserted [...] a narrative that is temporally second, subordinate to the first in a sort of narrative syntax. (Genette 1980: 48)

Considering the order of the narrative, it would be natural to assume that the narrative which begins with Thérèse's comeback should be regarded as the first and the narrative concerning the girls' childhood as the subordinate one. However, judging on the basis of the *extent* of the anachrony, i.e. a duration of the story it covers (Genette, 1980: 49), it may be argued that it is the anachrony that should be considered the main narrative as it constitutes a very substantial part of the novel. Furthermore, the anachrony performs a crucial role in the text, as it provides the reader with all the contextual

knowledge about the events which prove to determine the future fate of the two protagonists.

The childhood narrative anachrony seems to prove how crucial childhood is for a person's development and her/his future life. In *Daughters of the House* the narrative is ruptured to make room for the analepsis, and so is a person's current life when they reminisce about the past. Although the analepsis occurs in our minds whenever we indulge in memories, the shift is solely temporal just as it is in the novel. Both in the novel and in life, it is necessary to go back in time in order to make sense of the present. Therefore, it could be ventured that the novel might constitute a reflection on human memories.

The childhood narrative is not the only analepsis in *Daughters of the House*. On the contrary, the narrative which covers the years of the girls' early puberty is intertwined with a number of different kinds of analepses. For example, the story of Antoinette (Thérèse's mother) and her encounter with a Nazi soldier during the occupation of France, constitutes an analepsis external to the one concerning the girls' childhood. It is important that Antoinette's story remains out of the girls' reach throughout most of the narrative, though it provides the reader with explanations important for the understanding of the first narrative (Genette 1980: 49-50). This particular analepsis is evoked repeatedly in several places of the narrative, every time bringing the reader closer to the complete outline of the story, which is going to be elaborated on in the next section.

Another argument for the thesis that the novel deals with memory is the web the analepses create – reminiscing about a certain moment can automatically evoke a different memory.

3. Narration

The issue of childhood, which requires further investigation, is the one expressed on the level of narration. So far, we have

established that the structure of the novel is built on anachrony which consists of analepses. However, it is crucial to illustrate how these analepses are evoked in the text.

In the novel, we are presented with a third person narrator who alternately assumes Thérèse's and Léonie's perspectives, which makes them the focalizers of the narrative (as already mentioned). Although the narrator possesses the knowledge of the girls' inner thoughts and feelings, we cannot consider it an omniscient narrator, as it fails to provide the reader with information about events which happen to be crucial for the plot. The narrator appears limited to the level of the girls' awareness. Thus, the plot gradually develops as the reader follows Thérèse and Léonie on their way to adolescence.

As it is commonly practised by the adults, certain issues are scrupulously kept away from the children, as they are considered inappropriate or impossible to handle by a young innocent mind. The Martin family is no exception. At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns about some terrible experience that young Antoinette (Thérèse's mother) went through during the war. However, the incident is not talked about and thus is kept away from the children and, consequently, from the reader:

What terrible experiences? Léonie always wanted to know. But Victorine would never say. Or she'd snap: don't be stupid, the war was terrible for everybody. Except the collaborators. And we all know who *they* are. (Roberts 1993: 27)

Thus, in order to gain any information about the past (and sometimes the present as well), the reader needs to rely on what adults choose to share with the girls. All the family secrets become eventually revealed to the children (and to the reader) through words uttered by the adults. A lot of what is supposed to be kept secret is revealed because of the adults' lack of caution and depreciation of children. In the end, the reader is presented with the whole story through letters which

had actually been addressed to Antoinette's sister, but which were delivered to Thérèse after her mother's death. Thus, again, the reader is somehow eavesdropping on the adults. The fact that the only reliable source of information (which is Antoinette herself) passed away, results in an attempt to tamper with the crucial information and eventually leaves the reader doubtful.

Apart from the focalized narration, another aspect worth mentioning is the issue of the narrator's unreliability which results in the decisive uncertainty as to the past events. Although the notion of unreliability seems to be exclusively reserved for first-person narrators, the dispute has not yet been settled. Wayne C. Booth, who introduced the idea of unreliable narrator, connects the notion with the intention of the implied author, whereas Ansgar Nünning's analysis of unreliable narrator is based on a reader-response framework. On the other hand, Seymour Chatman has introduced a similar notion of *fallibility* in reference to reflector figures. Following Chatman's idea, a reflector character is fallible due to his or her limited view of the events (Fludernik 2009: 27-28).

In the considered novel, the story which is presented to the reader does not necessarily accord with what may really have happened in the past. The narrator's account, filtered as it is through the perspective of children, is distorted because children perceive and understand reality differently than adults. The readers may get confused with what they should consider authentic and what is supplied by the children's imagination because they are limited to the girls' perspective. The author herself stated that:

To me it's important that there are two little girls telling a story about history because I think the idea of a historian being a small girl is not one our culture believes in. (Newman 2004)

The latter idea is reflected in the novel, as the girls' stories are initially treated patronizingly by authoritative voice of adults.

The fact that the adult characters refuse to believe in some of the stories that the girls share with them adds to the uncertainty. At some point both Thérèse and Léonie claim to have witnessed a vision in which a figure of a woman appeared before them. Later they refer to the apparition as “Our Lady”. Although their stories are initially rejected by adults as delusions, eventually Thérèse’s version is appreciated by the bishop and she becomes a local visionary believed to be able to communicate with “Our Lady”. The only person who consistently disbelieves Thérèse’s revelation is Léonie who accuses her cousin of stealing the Lady from her. Unfortunately for Léonie, her description of the Lady does not adhere to the image accepted by the Church:

The red lady. The golden woman in red. She swam up slowly. She developed, like a photograph. She composed herself, a red and gold figure on a red ground. (Roberts 1993: 87)

Thérèse’s version, on the other hand, is in accordance with the Christian tradition of portraying the Mother of God: “She had a long blue dress. Her hair, which was long and fair, was almost entirely covered by her white veil. Her hands were clasped, and she carried a crystal rosary over one arm. Her feet were bare, and there was a golden rose resting on the toes of each one” (Roberts 1993: 95). Thus, the reader is presented with a choice whom to trust and whose story to accept as the true version of what happened. The dispute over “Our Lady” causes a rupture in the girls’ relationship as it remains unresolved until the end of the novel, when the narrative picks up where it initially stopped to make room for the anachrony.

4. Conclusion

Summing up, the reader of Michèle Roberts’s *Daughters of the House* finds themselves in a position of a child for a number of reasons. First of all, s/he is compelled to follow most of the

events of the story through the narrative focalized by two children characters. Moreover, the reader is introduced to these characters as guides whom s/he follows throughout the novel in an attempt to explore and explain the past. Owing to analeptic returns to the past, both the characters and the reader, reevaluate the past events in order to be able to understand the present. The reader's understanding of events is limited similarly to the children's who are compelled to believe in what the adults choose to share with them. What the reader gets from the narrator are only glimpses of truth, which may be distorted not only by the distance of time but also by the minds of children who have their own way of perceiving and interpreting reality. In her/his uncertainty the reader is like a child lost in the hostile and mendacious world of adults.

References

- FalCUS, Sarah (2007). *Michèle Roberts: Myths, Mothers and Memories*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Fludernik, Monika (2009). *An Introduction to Narratology*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Genette, Gérard (1980). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. E. Lewin. Cornell University Press.
- Newman, Jenny (2004). "An Interview with Michèle Roberts". *Contemporary British and Irish Fiction: Novelists in Interview*. London: Arnold. Available at <cercles.com>. Accessed 19.02.2017.
- Roberts, Michèle (1993). *Daughters of the House*. London: Virago Press.

Joanna Morawska
Filologiczne Studia Doktoranckie
Uniwersytet Gdański
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
mor.joanna@gmail.com