

James Hamby

## **Increasing Knowledge through Multiple Perspectives**

### **Alexandra Valint Discusses Victorian Multinarrator Novels**

Alexandra Valint: *Narrative Bonds. Multiple Narrators in the Victorian Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press 2021 (= Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series). 219 pp. USD 79.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1463-3

### **Victorian Versus Postmodern Multinarrator Novels**

Because literature has for so long been experienced by many readers through the lens of postmodernism, any story told through multiple narrators tends to bring up questions of accuracy. Readers may safely presume that at least one of the narrators is lying or somehow mistaken, that things did not really occur the way they have been narrated, and that the truth of what really happened is perhaps unknowable. In *Narrative Bonds. Multiple Narrators in the Victorian Novel*, however, Alexandra Valint explores how the use of multiple narrators in nineteenth-century literature was used by authors very differently. Instead of calling into question the veracity of what happened, these narrators' differing voices instead ascertained events. While motivations, perceptions, and interpretations may differ amongst these narrators, the reported facts remain consistent.

Valint argues that this represents a conceptual difference between Victorian and postmodern novels. Discrepancies between multiple postmodern narrators reflect the twentieth and twenty-first century belief that truth is unknowable, whereas the facts that are held in accord amongst two or more narrators in Victorian novels underscore the optimistic belief of the nineteenth century that true knowledge is attainable by accumulating information, data, and experience. As Valint says, it is often the case that "the multinarrator structure offers the fantasy that the characters who hold different worldviews can still see the world in the same way" (p. 2). Valint demonstrates this concept admirably in her discussion of Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* (1880). Yet this harmony of narration may also have negative outcomes, for, as Valint explains, "just as a group can become a thoughtless mob, narrative collaboration can threaten the autonomy and identity of individual narrators" (p. 2). Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) best exemplifies this idea, as the individuals who comprise the Crew of Light subsume their own identities to complete their narration, much as Dracula's victims lose their own identities to his will (p. 180). Though the Victorian multinarrator novel does not question the nature of reality in the way that the postmodern

multinarrator novel does, it nevertheless employs sophisticated narrative form that gives structure and meaning to its story.

Valint's study begins with an introduction and a first chapter that lay the groundwork for the book by examining key terms and making general observations about Victorian multinarrator novels. Each subsequent chapter then focuses on either an individual novel or a group of novels. Chapter two discusses *Bleak House* (1852–1853), chapter three examines *Treasure Island* (1881–1882), chapter 4 looks at three novels by Wilkie Collins – *The Woman in White* (1859), *The Moonstone* (1868), and *The Legacy of Cain* (1889), chapter five explores *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and chapter six contrasts Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897). In each chapter, Valint ably demonstrates the numerous ways in which authors use multiple narrators to create richly varied texts.

### ***Bleak House and Treasure Island***

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* has garnered much critical attention over the years for its use of two narrators who toggle back and forth to tell the story. In chapter two of *Narrative Bonds*, Valint argues that the “back-and-forth” structure of the narrative “binds two narrators together through consistent interweaving” and that the “harmonious relationship” between the narrators “embodies the story's endorsement of sympathy and cooperation” (p. 47). Valint offers this “back-and-forth” structure as a particular strategy of multiperspectival narration that highlights both the differences and the similarities between the narrators. Many commentators have viewed the two narrators in opposition to one another, highlighting their differences as third-person versus first-person narrators, or as (presumably) male versus female, or as reason versus emotion. Valint, however, convincingly makes her case that the two work in tandem by pointing out how they share ethical values (p. 52), come to similar evaluations of characters, and even use sarcasm equally (p. 54). Dickens's use of these two narrators gives this panoramic novel with its huge cast of characters two different perspectives that reinforce one another. Moreover, Valint argues, *Bleak House* serves as a prime example of how “the Victorian multinarrator novel optimistically highlights how much remains constant across different narrators' narrations” (p. 52).

*Treasure Island* likewise contains two main narrators, but Robert Louis Stevenson utilizes the two narrators in a very different way from Dickens. While *Bleak House* contains two coequal narrators who switch back and forth after reliably equivalent lengths of narration, the two narrators in *Treasure Island* are highly asymmetrical in several ways. Stevenson employs a narrative strategy that Valint, in chapter three of her study, calls the “quick switch” and that she places in opposition to *Bleak House*'s “back-and-forth” (p. 79) between two narrators. While Jim Hawkins is the main narrator of *Treasure Island*, his story is abruptly interrupted for three chapters by Dr. Livesey. Rejecting previous commentators' suggestions that the two points of view are indistinguishable and therefore irrel-

evant, Valint argues that Dr. Livesey's interlude highlights the tension between adulthood and childhood in the novel. More specifically, Valint notes that "[a]dulthood, modelled by Livesey, is marked by cruelty, greed, violence, and lack of emotion. Jim, conversely, depicts himself as an emotional and empathetic child who is skeptical of avarice" (p. 81). Like the narrators of *Bleak House*, the multiple narrators of Stevenson's novel agree on the facts of the story; but, unlike in *Bleak House*, the narrators differ in their interpretations of events, thus creating much of the meaning of the novel.

Though Valint's observations of the two main narrators of *Treasure Island* are astute, she misses an opportunity to observe that the novel features some minor narrators. In several places Jim repeats the stories that other sailors, such as Ben Gunn, have told him either verbatim or almost verbatim. It would be interesting to see Valint's thoughts on these embedded narratives. Additionally, there is some correspondence in the text, particularly a letter from Squire Trelawney early in the novel that relates the important passage where he hires sailors and acquires the *Hispanola* for the voyage. In the letter, Trelawney reveals himself to be unreliable in many ways. This would seem to be a rich opportunity for Valint to examine in this study.

## Disability Aesthetics and Gothic Collaboration

Chapter four discusses three novels by Wilkie Collins, drawing on Tobin Sieber's concept of "disability aesthetics" (p. 104) and building on the idea that disease and disability are fertile grounds for producing narrative. After establishing the many ways in which a character's disability may alter their narration, Valint focuses on how these differing points of view – which are often limited, thus reflecting the limitations imposed on disabled bodies – coalesce into a complete story. For example, Laura's faulty memory in *The Woman in White* hinders her ability to relate events, but the gaps in her story are filled in by other narrators, particularly Walter (p. 112). This creates a "patchwork multinarrator structure" (p. 117) that illuminates how "the novel's structure relies on the reality of individual limitation and, thereby, on the need for interdependence and collaboration" (p. 112).

The following chapter returns to a stronger emphasis on multinarrator structures. In her discussion of *Wuthering Heights*, Valint observes that "the gothic genre has long used multiple narrators" and that "the gothic novel often uses multiple narrators to stage the gothicization of the narrative itself" (p. 143). Valint here focuses on the transgression of narrative boundaries – the ways in which the multiple narrators of *Wuthering Heights* switch off almost randomly and in odd places, sometimes even leaving the reader confused as to who the narrator is (p. 147). Valint states that "[b]oundaries – either unnaturally crossed or imposed – are central to many theories of the gothic" (p. 144). Heathcliff's desire

to be buried with Catherine so that their remains can mingle and decay together thus reflects the narrative structure of the novel.

### ***Dracula and The Beetle***

*Dracula* is perhaps the most celebrated of all Victorian multinarrator novels and it has garnered much critical attention through the years. As mentioned above, the narrative structure utilized by the Crew of Light displays their unity but also the way in which they lose their individual identities. Interestingly, Valint pairs her discussion of *Dracula* in the last chapter of *Narrative Bonds* with that of a lesser-known work: Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. Marsh's novel was likewise published in 1897, and it also focuses a horrific undead monster, an "Egyptian human-insect shapeshifter" (p. 170). Valint notes that both novels "feature a reverse colonization plot [...] with fin-de-siècle anxieties, particularly related to gender, sexuality, and imperialism" (p. 169). Unlike *Dracula* with its ever-revolving cast of narrators, most of whom narrate multiple sections, *The Beetle* uses what Valint refers to as a "nonreturning structure" where each character "narrates only once" (p. 172). Additionally, while all the Crew of Light play a role in collecting and editing their texts, only one character in *The Beetle* has this responsibility. Valint argues that these differences "are integral to how *Dracula* centers on an effective monster-slaying group while *The Beetle* centers on solitary horror and the inability of a group to truly come together to fight the monster" (p. 173). In this case, the multiple perspectives not only support each other's veracity, but amplify the horror that each narrator felt.

### **Conclusion**

Valint's study is a valuable piece of scholarship for the study of multinarrative novels in the nineteenth century, and both Victorianists and narratologists can benefit from it. Valint successfully makes her argument that different uses of multinarrator structures add different layers of meaning to novels. Victorian multinarrator novels, she convincingly argues, remain dedicated to realism and the idea that facts can be verified by differing perspectives, as opposed to post-modern novels that utilize multinarration to call objective reality into question. Most importantly, this work shows that multinarrator stories can be used by authors in more ways than just challenging different versions of the same story. Victorian multinarrative novels raised issues of community, collaboration, reliability, power dynamics, and more, and Valint's book is an excellent study on how form shapes content.

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