



## Narrative Strategies for Imaging Childhood in Some Novels of Katherine Paterson

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### Abstract

This paper explores various narrative strategies Katherine Paterson uses to 'image childhood' in *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Preacher's Boy*. It will analyse how aspects such as focalisation, metaphor, and narrative structure itself are crucial to presenting a credible image of childhood. Katherine Paterson's strength lies in her portrayal of memorable childhood characters: '... it seems to me,' she writes, 'that what we remember most about strong realistic fiction is character ...' (2001b, p.37). Paterson's own ideology mainly works itself out through her characters and what they stand for. She does not avoid difficult circumstances or emotions, tackling problems of abjection, dispossession, loneliness, and jealousy 'head on', but in a way that is certainly palatable for the younger reader: both adults and children can be equally moved, affected, and challenged by the power of her stories. Paterson retains a childhood intensity and compelling urgency of storying, and childhood is alive for her in memory and present existence because it is essential to her natural procedures for articulating the self or subject in time.

### Introduction

Katherine Paterson's overall narrative design in her novels is to tell stories of diverse experiences of childhood, through what is represented as the voice of the child. The shifts in planes of narration present sophisticated narrative perspectives. Metaphor becomes an integral part of the narrative strategy. The author's ideology is often filtered through the voice of the child.

*Bridge to Terabithia*, *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Preacher's Boy* all feature protagonists who have inner struggles which are, in the main, focalised through the individuals themselves, often through free direct discourse. This not only gives the reader an evolving picture of deep spiritual journeys, but also captures images of the innocence of childhood. The distinctive feature of these narratives is not the narrator's objective view but the character's subjective perception (Nikolajeva 2003, p.25). It is the

*child's voice* that is heard, a voice that often grapples with concepts of guilt and forgiveness (which are part of Christian ideology), as well as the notion of subjectivity or discovering who the real self is. However, each text explores these ideas using different contexts, different historical periods, and with different complications in the plots.

### Narrative strategies

The subjective perception of characters in Paterson's fiction can be made visible by switching from one plane of narration to another (Hasan 1985) and by frequent blurring of planes of narration through shifts in focalisation (Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Bal 1999). Paterson makes limited use of these strategies in her early novels, but develops them more fully as her career unfolds. Her early 1970s Japanese trilogy – *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, *Of Nightingales That Weep*, and *The Master Puppeteer* – displays a mixing of third person omniscient narration with character focalisation, as was characteristic of the era. In *Terabithia* (1977), by contrast, the shifting between omniscient narration and character focalisation is much more pervasive so that the inner voice of the child protagonist, Jess, is given prominence, although Paterson is still following the, by then, conventional practice of limiting character focalisation to one character. In *Lyddie* (1991), the blending of voices, appropriately described by means of Bakhtin's (1996) idea of heteroglossia, is foregrounded as personal and social issues coalesce.

Seymour Chatman uses some useful terms which help to describe shifts in focalisation, and which are closely akin to Ruqaiya Hasan's notion of planes of narration. In *Coming to Terms* (1990, pp.139-60), Chatman elaborates two concepts, *slant* and *filter*. Slant implies the shift between the narrator's and narratee's point of view, resulting in an unreliable narrator, as evidenced in *Jacob Have I Loved*. Here, Paterson uses the narrative device called *anachrony*, or a disturbance of temporal order in narrative theory. This occurs when there is a considerable gap between the actual time of the story and the time when the story is narrated. *Flashback* or *retrospection (analepsis)* is used by Louise to tell of her life as a young person growing up on Rass Island. Her narration takes place as she, now an adult, is returning to her childhood home. The outer narrative frame is in the future tense as she expresses her intentions in the prologue: 'As soon as the snow melts, I will go to Rass ...'; 'The ferry will be almost there ...' (*Jacob*, p.1). The narrator in narrative theory exists outside the narrative at the time of the narration and is thus extradiegetic. Accordingly, there is a discrepancy between the naïve perspective of the young person (point of view) and the experience of the adult (narrative voice). Maria Nikolajeva (2003, pp.20-21) does not see this as a problem for the younger person, but notes it as 'unreliable'.

Louise, then, is free to tell her story as she wishes, with all the omission of facts, wrong judgements, and memory lapses which will add to or detract from making her

the unloved twin. She deliberately constructs her character as an object in relation to her sister, her parents, her grandmother, and all the other agents in the narrative. The danger of this is, of course, that the reader will be inclined to share her point of view, unless they can detach themselves from the imposed subject position. This process will involve an evaluation of 'the characters' behaviour, opinions and self-esteem' (Nikolajeva 2003, p.22). In a *slanted* narrative, then, clues are given to the younger reader that the narrator may be, consciously or unconsciously, omitting, transforming, or adding details to the narrated events. In this way, the author can manipulate the point of view in a text. This is exactly what Paterson does – the focalised voice here reflects the ideological stance of the author.

*Filter* involves a shift between the character's and the narratee's point of view. The result is a contradiction between what readers know about characters, and what characters know about themselves (Nikolajeva 2003, p.22). When the narrative focuses more on the protagonists and their perception of events than on the events themselves, it is said to be *filtered* (Chatman 1990, pp.150-51). To some extent, the narrator and narratee are communicating over the protagonist's head, since the narratee (and so, the reader) is allowed to make inferences beyond the protagonist's grasp.

In the third person narrative, *Bridge to Terabithia*, filter, which is the shift of point of view between the protagonist and the narratee (and hence, the reader), can make us see what the protagonist him or herself cannot see. The shifts in focalisation and planes of narration provide a covert means for filtering the author's ideology through the eyes of the child. The narratives are about the pains of growing up: they involve difficult journeys, and often emotional and spiritual ones.

#### *The inner struggle revealed*

Paterson, herself, speaks eloquently about the idea of the lost Eden, which brings the Biblical dimension into prominence. In fact, nature becomes a key metaphor in her novels as she sees in it the creative power of God (2001b, p.179). Paterson sees 'the outcast child searching for a place to stand' (p.179). In each of her novels, the quest is to find that place. This is especially so in *Terabithia* which is, metaphorically, a return to Eden, which, in turn, is 'a metaphor for the universe in perfect harmony' (p.179).

A brief examination will now take place of Jess's inner struggle in *Terabithia* and how this is realised through the focalising voice:

Of course he was going to run. He had gotten up early every day all summer to run. He figured if he worked at it – and Lord, had he worked – he could be the fastest runner in the fifth grade when school opened up. He had to be the fastest – not one of the fastest or next to the fastest, but the fastest. The very best. (pp.9-10)

Jess's goal is clear here. It is entirely egocentric and, although it is ostensibly written in the third person on the objective plane, it sounds like the voice of the child. The thoughts and feelings are focused with no other considerations or responsibilities

apart from gratification for self. The language also gives the impression that it is the voice of the child. Words and phrases, like 'figured', 'and Lord', 'but *the* fastest. The very best,' give the impression of free indirect discourse. If not for the third person pronouns, it would be projection space where the *actual* thoughts of the character are expressed; thus, the reader is hearing the character's subjective perception.

This pattern is given prominence throughout the text. The only sister in the family who seems to bring Jess any joy is May Belle. It is May Belle who brings him news of the people moving next door into the old Perkins' property. It is ironical, of course, that Jess takes little notice of this event and even dismisses it with the comment, 'But they wouldn't last' (p.16). The girl who moves in next door, Leslie Burke, will, in fact, change Jess's life forever. The other character in the novel who has a substantial influence on his life is his music teacher, Miss Edmunds. In the following passage, the voice the reader hears is the child's voice reflecting a child's perception, not that of an adult narrator:

Miss Edmunds was one of his secrets. He was in love with her. Not the kind of silly stuff Ellie and Brenda giggled about on the telephone. This was too real and too deep to talk about, even to think about very much. Her long swishy black hair and blue, blue eyes. She could play the guitar like a regular recording star, and she had this soft floaty voice that made Jess squish inside. Lord, she was gorgeous. And she liked him too. (p.20)

Once again, the language is that of the child: 'silly stuff', 'giggled about'. Character focalisation here is signalled by the proximal deictic 'this', and by the fragment in which the teacher is visualised ('Her long swishy black hair ...'), and by the switch into free direct discourse in, 'Lord, she was gorgeous'. Jess values Miss Edmunds' praise of his 'pictures' – the words she uses are 'unusually talented' (p.20) – and the child's interpretation of this gives him tremendous encouragement and hope: '[t]hat meant [...] the best [...] a genuine kind of best. [...] He was rich, very rich, but no one could know about it for now except this fellow outlaw, Julia Edmunds [...] [S]he was beyond such stupid behaviour. It couldn't touch her' (pp.20-22). Julia Edmunds achieves almost Goddess status for Jess, who sees her as a 'beautiful wild creature' (p.21). The rest of Jess's week is boring compared to music with Miss Edmunds on Friday afternoons.

In Jess's first encounter with Leslie (p.25) irony is used, as Jess has no idea that they will ever become friends and will develop not just an ordinary kind of friendship but a friendship with spiritual dimensions. Instead, he feels sorry for May Belle because Leslie Burke is really too old to be her friend. Of course, the reader only realises the irony of the scene much later when the relationship between Leslie and Jess begins to blossom.

#### *Solipsism*

Miss Edmunds invites Jess to the National Gallery in Washington. However, the innocence and selfishness of childhood are emphasised as Jess feels guilty about not

suggesting an invitation for Leslie as well:

It didn't occur to him until the car was past Millsburg that he might have asked Miss Edmunds if Leslie could have come, too. When he thought about it, he couldn't suppress a secret pleasure at being alone in this small cosy car with Miss Edmunds. (p.112)

The National Gallery is another Terabithia for Jess because it is like another 'sacred place' for him:

Entering the gallery was like stepping inside the pine grove – the huge vaulted marble, the cool splash of the fountain, and the green growing all around [...] It was all Jess could do not to grab them and tell them how to behave in so obviously a sacred place. (pp.113-14)

The richness of Paterson's description reflects Jess's mood. His spirits are lifted until he comes across 'a three-dimensional nightmare version of some of his own drawings' (p.115) which foregrounds death: 'Indians disguised in buffalo skins scaring a herd of buffalo into stampeding over a cliff to their death ...' (p.115). Once out into the sunshine his spirits have revived again: 'This one perfect day of his life was worth anything he had to pay' (p.115). The naivety of Jess's thoughts reverberates on the next page as Brenda blurts out to Jess on his return home: 'Your girl friend's dead, and Momma thought you was dead, too' (p.117).

Jess goes through the various stages of grieving. At first, denial and guilt are foregrounded, and his actions of the previous day come back to haunt him:

It would have been fun to have Leslie along. *I'm really sorry, Leslie.* He took off his jacket and sneakers, and crawled under the covers. *I was dumb not to think of asking.* [...]

His stomach felt suddenly cold. It had something to do with the buffalo, with falling, with death. With the reason he had not remembered to ask if Leslie could go with them to Washington today. (p.120-21)

This is the image of childhood, the focalising childhood voice, projection space (Halliday & Mathiessen 2004, p.465), free direct speech ('I'm really sorry, Leslie', and 'I was dumb not to think of asking'), and free indirect speech – the grey area between the objective and subjective planes of narration that allows the reader into the protagonist's thoughts. When the Burkes are visited, it is Jess's immaturity, inexperience, and insecurities that the reader experiences. For example, when Leslie's father, Bill, tries to comfort him, Jess's feelings suddenly turn to anger: '*You think it's so great to die and make everyone cry and carry on. Well, it ain't!*' (p.127). Thus, possessiveness takes over as the funeral arrangements are discussed: 'Turned to ashes. He would never see her again [...] How could they dare? Leslie belonged to him. More to him than anyone in the world. [...] all they could do was cry. Not for Leslie. They were crying for themselves' (p.128).

### Childness

Jess thinks that he is the only one who cared for Leslie. This is the *childness* (Hollindale 1997, p.47) in the focalising voice. Again it surfaces when he sees the fatal frayed rope for the first time since Leslie's accident: 'Above from the crab apple tree the frayed end of the rope swung gently. *I am now the fastest runner in the fifth grade.* He screamed something without words and flung the papers and paints into the dirty brown water' (p.129). The shift to projection space and free direct speech with the first person is the child's perspective and, indeed, it is a limited one. Jess's father comforts him in a move that is one almost of reconciliation. He guides Jess through an understanding of the difficult Christian concept of non-believers going to hell when they die.

Jess honours Leslie in Terabithia by making a wreath and offering an appropriate incantation: 'Father, into Thy hands I commend her spirit.' He knew Leslie would have liked those words. They had the ring of the sacred grove in them' (p.134). Jess has come through an experience that has changed his life; he is no longer the innocent child but one who can now see the world and his part in it with a more mature attitude:

He was suddenly ashamed that he'd thought he might be regarded with respect by the other kids. Trying to profit for himself from Leslie's death. I wanted to be the best – the fastest runner in the school – and now I am. Lord, he made himself sick. (p.137)

### The child's voice as first person narrator

It may just be coincidence that the only two novels of Paterson in first person narrative, *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Preacher's Boy*, have strong overt rather than covert Christian ethics and themes. Both novels have an intense personal focus as the stories of children with strong personal dilemmas unfold.

As with Jesse Aarons in *Terabithia* and Louise Bradshaw in *Jacob Have I Loved*, Robbie's Eden or 'secret garden' (Chaston 2003, p.79) in *Preacher's Boy* is certainly not in the home. Instead, it is an old cabin which he and Willie happen to find by chance:

It's a bit spooky, that tumbledown cabin. But once Willie and me stumbled on it, we knew it was the perfect place for us. We can hide there from the Weston boys and anyone else that aggravates us. Sometimes we read dime novels there that Ma never wants to see the likes of around the manse. Sometimes we talk. Sometimes we just go there to do nothing but get away from stuff at home.

We got a lot to get away from, Willie and me. (*Preacher's Boy*, p.6)

The cabin becomes a place of escape, a place where boys can share their own interests, a place without the tensions of home, and a place of comfort. Louise's place of comfort is 'on the waters around Rass Island where she could dream of her 'Eden': 'Call, I would say, watching dawn break crimson over the Chesapeake Bay, 'I hope I have a sky like this the day I get married' (*Jacob Have I Loved*, p.12).

Robbie's dilemma is that he cannot meet his father's expectations of a preacher's son. He often feels guilty about his attitudes towards his older, yet handicapped brother, and his tendency towards larrikinism and rebelliousness. He is often seen 'outside' his family unit as he creates his own little world of scheming and fun. Robbie develops the idea, largely actuated by the hell-fire and brimstone sermonising of a visiting clergyman, the Reverend Pelham, that being a Christian is no fun at all and is far too constricting. Robbie is young and energetic and loves to enjoy life 'mucking about' with his friends. It is the child's voice of reasoning that the reader hears:

I told Willie in a solemn voice that, as of that very morning, I was a convert to disbelief, and that since life threatened to be short, I was determined, as they say, to make hay while the sun still shone.

'But Robbie,' Willie said, 'if you don't believe in God, how come you believe He's going to make the world end come January?'

I struggled for a logical answer. Willie's one fault is that he takes everything strictly literal. Not much imagination in him, for all his good qualities.

'Wal, Willie,' I started ... 'it's like this. No man knows the day or hour, but you'd be a fool not to take precautions. Wouldn't I be mad if suddenly the end came and I hadn't made the most of my remaining days? Why, Willie, I tell you, I'd just be furious.'

'You think deep, Robbie,' he said, his voice fair dripping with respect.

'Thank you,' I said modestly. 'I reckon I do.' (Preacher's Boy, pp.22-23)

The voices are those of young ten-year-old boys whose immature images of the world and the nature of God are both limited and focused, somewhat egocentric. As the above excerpt shows, they have limited reasoning powers and their understanding of Christian concepts is somewhat skewed. They pick up some of the language of the Christian concept – 'No man knows the day or the hour' – but their conclusions lack the maturity of the adult viewpoint – 'Wouldn't I be mad if suddenly the end came and I hadn't made the most of my remaining days?' The focus is on immediate satisfaction and personal gratification rather than on the essence of the Christian message here, which is making sure there is a right relationship with God through repentance and forgiveness before the end times. But this is Robbie Hewitt!

#### *Humour – still the child's voice*

There is much humour in the book about Robbie's 'dumping of God' but, in many ways, it is used to convey Christian concepts. Robbie and Willie are thinking about their own dreamy motorcars, and Robbie states:

'I just got to have that one satisfaction before the end comes.'

'Too bad you can't pray.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, when I want something impossible, I ask God for it because God can do the

impossible. But you can't pray.'

'Why not? My father's the preacher. I'm a ten times better pray-er than you are.'

'You don't believe in God no more. Remember?'

'Well, I could pray just in case.'

'I don't think it would work. God would know.' (p.34)

The serious underlying Christian ideas here are that nothing is impossible for God to do (Matt. 6:25; Ps. 55:22; Pet. 5:7; Pr. 3:6), and that a belief in God is really necessary if there is an expectation of Him answering prayer. It is Willie who challenges Robbie's understandings of what prayer is. Robbie's voice is confused and there is a belief that just because his father is a preacher, he is a 'ten times better pray-er' than Willie. Of course, bargains cannot be made with God. The main concern of the novel is not to preach the Gospel to the reader – the context just happens to be a Preacher's son in a small town in Vermont at the turn of the twentieth century. The novel is more concerned with exploring the maturation of a young, spirited boy who eventually must take responsibility for his own actions.

#### *The child's voice as the memory monologue*

Sara Louise's voice in *Jacob Have I Loved* is not as direct or immediate as Robbie's as, some years later, she is recalling her life on Rass Island. Owing to the time lapse, she can be selective in how she tells the story and what she includes and omits. For this reason, Nikolajeva (2003, p.21) states that the narrative can be unreliable (as discussed earlier). The mature adult is trying to recapture the feelings and attitudes of a thirteen-year-old girl. Readers must make up their own minds as to whether it is a story about a susceptible young girl trying to cope with jealousy towards a talented twin, Caroline, who always gets more attention because of her weak physical condition, or about a girl who is treated unjustly, the unloved twin of the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau.

#### *Louise – the abject child*

When Louise's mother and grandmother tell the story of the twins' birth, Louise does not feature in the story at all: only Caroline is mentioned and her difficulties in breathing. No one can really remember what they did with Louise, the healthy twin, whilst they were working on Caroline to help her survive: 'I felt cold all over, as though I was the newborn infant a second time, cast aside and forgotten' (p.21). Louise 'paints' her grandmother as a difficult, old person who resents her and always responds negatively. Louise's mother comes to her rescue when her grandmother states:

'How can I remember? It's been a long time.'

My mother, seeing my distress, said, 'You were a good baby, Louise. You never gave us a minute's worry.' (Jacob Have I Loved, p.21)

Louise's response to her mother's positive comments is only negative and provides a good example of the voice of a child coming through – the voice of the perceived object child:

She meant it to comfort me, but it only distressed me further. Shouldn't I have been at least a minute's worry? Wasn't it all the months of worry that had made Caroline's life so dear to them all? (pp.21-22)

Louise takes every action and every comment and gives it negative connotations ('Shouldn't I have been at least a minute's worry?'). Because she is fit and healthy she takes on the role of a son in the family and even wishes that she could have been a son so as to be of maximum physical help to her father. Caroline's musical ability, especially her gift for singing, always outshines anything Louise does at school.

The child's journey, then, can often be seen in spiritual metaphorical terms with a dark and a light side, the former representing the deep, intense personal struggle within (often sparked off by abjection), whilst the latter represents emergence from the struggle into a more positive, mature future with hope. The protagonists in the group of novels under discussion are all engaged in a personal struggle and all of them find solace during their journey in an 'Eden' which becomes their spiritual haven, a place where they can be themselves and nurture their imagination; it is an escape from the abject state, from familial dislocation, like a 'Terabithia', a spiritual refuge for the mind. It is at these times that the intertextuality with 'Secret Gardens' and the 'Narnia' stories becomes apparent. Paterson gives prominence to childhood fears and tensions, such as that between Robbie and his father; Louise with her parents and sister, Caroline; and Jess Aarons with his father.

Paterson's overall narrative design in these novels, then, is to tell stories of diverse experiences of childhood, through what is represented as the voice of the child: the child is often doing the 'seeing'. The shifts in planes of narration present sophisticated narrative perspectives. The author's ideology is often filtered through the voice of the child. Family and one's place in it become important, together with the roles of fathers in the family structure. In *Preacher's Boy*, *Jacob Have I Loved*, and *Bridge to Terabithia*, the child's relationship with the father, real or imagined, is foregrounded, whilst that with the mother is generally subjugated. The struggle within the protagonist, whether male or female, is to move on, often with the help of their secret garden or 'Eden'.

The power of the imagination is foregrounded in all texts. Protagonists need fantasy, whether it be a 'Terabithia', the dream of a motor car, or the 'Eden' of Chesapeake Bay, to help heal wounds and to help in the process of discovering the self. Paterson's Christian ideology is never far away, whether it be overt or covert. *Jacob Have I Loved* and *Preacher's Boy* have strong Christian ethics and themes, and an intense personal focus as the growth and development of children with deep personal dilemmas unfolds. The reader often hears the child's voice of reasoning which lacks the maturity of the adult viewpoint. In *Preacher's Boy*, in particular, considerable humour emerges because of this immaturity.

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