

Unreliable Narration and the Historical Variability of Values and Norms: *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a Test Case of a Cultural-Historical Narratology

“The history of unreliable narrators from *Gargantua* to *Lolita* is in fact full of traps for the unsuspecting reader.” This statement by Wayne Booth has certainly proved to be an accurate prediction (239). In fact, such a large number of theories concerning unreliable narrators have been propagated since Booth’s statement in 1961 that to date no one has dared to initiate a historical overview spanning the period from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. But Booth’s statement is also relevant in another respect, because the history of the reception of the individual unreliable narrators is not only a minefield for critics but for the unsuspecting reader as well. Moreover, the various attempts to define Booth’s concept of unreliable narration clearly reveal that the phenomenon also involves a whole series of traps for the narratologist. In the following, I will focus on one of these traps that has hitherto received little attention, namely on the interdependence between narratological analyses of “unreliability” and processes of historical and cultural change.

1. The Importance of the Historical Change of Values and Norms for the Theory and Analysis of Unreliable Narration

The relationship between unreliable narration and the norms established in a text has from the outset been an integral part of Booth’s definition of unreliability: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work [. . .] *unreliable* when he does not” (158-59). Later in Booth’s explanation it becomes clear that the concept of unreliable narration refers to narrators who are “morally and intellectually deficient” (7) and who can be detected as such by readers based on their “mature moral judgment” (307). The significance of unreliable narration is therefore located at the point where narratological and

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ethical categories intersect: a decision as to whether a narrator is to be considered unreliable or not always entails a judgment as to what is considered “normal,” that is, what the reader’s world view and his or her ethical convictions are based on.

The readers’ concept of what it means to be human is of particular importance for judgments about the unreliable narrator because it is their image of humanity that determines which characteristics are considered “plausible” and what they consider a deviation from “normal behavior.” Judgments about character, according to Herbert Grabes, are determined by a complex “referred to by psychologists working on interpersonal perception as ‘implied personality theory’” (26). This implied personality theory is defined not only by individual experience:

[A]lthough our individual experiences undoubtedly exert influence on our “implied personality theory,” this theory is largely determined by culture-bound social stereotypes, pre-fabricated linkings of physical, psychic and mental qualities with each other and with age, gender, social roles, class and so forth.

Personality theories in various cultures can differ significantly. Hence, the variables that determine whether a character is categorized as an unreliable narrator can change over time.

In addition, two further considerations are important. On the one hand, a narrator may be categorized as unreliable because the story has internal inconsistencies or diverges from the reader’s knowledge of the world. Ethical convictions, on the other hand, can also play an important role: “Unreliable narrators are those whose perspective is in contradiction to the value and norm system of the whole text or to that of the reader” (Ansgar Nünning 87). This “value and norm system” encompasses many things, including the reader’s model of the world, which determines what is “natural,” “normal,” or counts as “psycho-logically plausible,” as well as his or her ethical values, which determine, for example, if someone should be categorized as a “sadist.”

We must keep in mind, however, that different readers of one and the same text can “detect” different value systems. Therefore, since the meaning of a given text for the reader cannot be completely determined from within the text itself, the value and norm systems construed during a given reading process are dependent upon the reader and his or her knowledge, attitudes, and norms. This does not mean that the difference between the values of the reader and those of the texts are irrelevant. Yet literary texts are basically open for a variety of readings within the “whole structure of meaning” thus defined (Chatman 75).¹ This is reflected in the divergent statements of countless critics and in past disputes over the “correct” reading of novels; divergent interpretations of *The Vicar of Wakefield* provide a salient example.

The classification of a narrator as reliable or unreliable, therefore, depends in a double sense on the value and norm system of the reader. On the one hand, the knowledge and values of the reader influence his or her reconstruction of the text’s “structure of meaning.” On the other hand, discrepancies between the perceived

overall structure of the text and the reader's own ethical convictions can motivate the reader to interpret certain narrators as unreliable because, for example, they are pederasts (*Lolita*) or are eccentrics addicted to alcohol and pornography (*Money*), or generally deviate from what is usually considered as "normal." The relevance of the system of values and norms adhered to by critics for the constitution of unreliability is clearly reflected in the remarks of William Riggan, which form part of his definition of unreliability: "On the moral plane the narrator's unreliability is most often revealed by [. . .] the unacceptability of [his moral] philosophy in terms of normal moral standards or basic common sense and human decency [. . .]" (36). Moral standards and "common sense" are therefore essential to the narratological analysis of unreliability.

The historical variability of values and norms, therefore, centrally affects the evaluation of unreliable narration. Since the criteria for judging what counts as "common sense," "normal," or "good" differ from epoch to epoch as well as from culture to culture, critics from different times and cultures will evaluate the unreliability of narrators differently. Because there is no eternal, all-inclusive standard for what is considered "natural" or "good," we cannot determine who is and who is not an unreliable narrator without taking the cultural context into consideration. Previous narratological studies on unreliable narration are insufficiently aware of this point because they are conceptualized ahistorically, implying that the respective frame of reference for the evaluation of unreliable narration is universally valid. In particular, when we study texts from earlier periods or from other cultures, ahistorical narratological methodologies may prove to be inadequate.

2. Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* and the Question of the Unreliability of Narrators

In what follows I will propose that the concept of unreliable narration must take the given cultural context into consideration and that an ahistorical interpretation cannot do justice to the complexity of the issue. In order to validate my thesis, I will look at the changing reception of the narrator of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, who in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was accepted as "reliable," but later was considered to be unreliable by a majority of critics. As an illustration of my thesis, I could equally well use other novels whose reception followed similar lines. As far as empirical evidence of the changing evaluation of the (un)reliability of specific narrators is concerned, one might also discuss the narrator of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* whose reliability was accepted at face value for more than a century, but who was later accused of cunning and duplicity and considered unreliable by critics like James Newcomer, Stanley Solomon, Duane Edwards, and Robert Tracy. For reasons of space, I will, however, concentrate on the history of the reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. As I have argued above, the unreliability of the narrator cannot be discussed independently of the historical context. This is clearly illustrated by Oliver Goldsmith's popular novel and the history of its

reception. In 1808 Edward Mangin noted that “the characters in this work will be intelligible, and appear natural, as long as the English language is understood” (Rousseau 58-59). However, despite the fact that the novel has fascinated readers for over two hundred years, the characters have only been considered “natural” until the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, many of the characters’ attitudes are nowadays considered unintentionally humorous. This holds true in particular for the first-person narrator of the novel, Dr. Primrose, the eponymous Vicar of Wakefield.

Based on the arguments concerning (un)reliability introduced above, there are two possible reasons for this fundamental change in the critical evaluation of the novel: different reconstructions of the “structure of meaning” of the text, and divergences between this structure of meaning and the readers’ value system. The first reason for a changed evaluation, therefore, lies in the reconstruction of the text’s structure. If one reads the novel as a coherent whole that does not display any fundamental inconsistencies, then Primrose is a reliable narrator. If, however, the reader feels that there are significant discrepancies between Primrose’s values and those values manifest in the text as a whole, then the narrator will be considered unreliable. In this reading Primrose becomes the target of the text’s irony; for instance, his unreliability is linked to his inability to properly evaluate the events that occur around him. The second reason for a changed critical evaluation of the novel is closely tied to the evaluation of the character of the vicar. If Primrose’s views correspond with the reader’s vision of humanity and he is considered a “natural” and “good” character, the narrator will be interpreted as reliable. If, on the other hand, he is considered an egotistical know-it-all who becomes the butt of the joke in his own story, then his reliability will be called into question.

The history of the reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield* reveals that readers and critics in different times have come to diametrically opposed conclusions about Primrose. From the late eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century the novel was read as a consistent, coherent whole. In the 1960s interpretation shifted and this began to be seen as a major misinterpretation of the novel. Critics started to point out a whole range of inconsistencies between Primrose’s sentimental values and the norms implicit in the structure of the text, interpreting the vicar as a self-satisfied hypocrite whose naïveté is exposed in very subtle ways.

I will first discuss the values and norms reflected in the early criticism of the novel which stressed the reliability and virtue of the narrator. My analysis of the later reception of Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield* will then serve as an example of the significance of the historical and cultural context for the interpretation of unreliable narration. Finally, I will conclude with a general discussion of the importance of a historical approach to values and norms for a number of other aspects of literary criticism.

3. Popular Values Inherent in the Culture of Sensibility

Clifford Geertz has demonstrated that concepts of what we consider “real,”

“normal,” or “good” vary across cultures. I will start by outlining those values that were predominant in the eighteenth century and can be considered fundamental to the contemporary reception of Goldsmith’s novel. An understanding of the values of the culture of sensibility is essential to comprehend the early reception of the novel. In addition, the Protestant context was basic to readers’ positive evaluation of *Primrose*, since English Enlightenment culture had not yet rejected religious belief when the novel was published (see Gregory).²

The popularity of sentimentality was based on the new eighteenth-century vision of what it meant to be “human.” Much greater emphasis was placed on feeling than in the previous century. Refined emotions were increasingly held to be characteristic of humane and cultured behavior and said to define humanity: “Man is distinguished from the brute creation [. . .] by the greater delicacy of his perceptions and feelings” (Kames, vol. 2: 3). Even philosophers such as David Hume considered feelings to be the basis of all moral decisions: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions” (415). Among the feelings considered particularly significant as having great ethical value, sympathy—generous empathy with one’s fellow human beings—and benevolence were held in especially high esteem. Along with the increased emphasis on refined emotions and sincerity went an elevation of the simple, seemingly naive folk to the stage of literature. They were seen as honest and caring people who were neither calculating nor deceitful. The “culture of the heart” apostrophized by many proponents of sensibility was to be cultivated in one’s private circle, and pleasure was sought in private settings of simple country life.

4. The Critical Reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a Paradigm for Historical Change in the Interpretation of Unreliability

The plot of *The Vicar of Wakefield* clearly reflects many of the dominant values of the period. After the generous and charitable vicar has lost the greater part of his fortunes, he moves to the country with his family, where, in addition to his occupation as pastor, he also works a plot of land. Initially, the Primrose family live in an idyllic atmosphere of innocence and delight. In the second half of the novel, however, they are subject to an ever-increasing number of unfortunate strokes of fate, but in the end, the plot finds its resolution in an extremely unlikely happy ending.

Already in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such an accumulation of unfortunate strokes of fate and an unexpected happy ending were not considered very “realistic.” In 1768 Frances Burney noted: “the plot is thin, the incidents very rare” (Rousseau 53). The historian Thomas Babington Macaulay was particularly direct in his entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1856): “The fable is indeed one of the worst that ever was constructed. It wants, not merely that probability which ought to be found in a tale of common English life, but that consistency which ought to be found even in the wildest fiction about witches, giants, and fairies. But

the earlier chapters have all the sweetness of pastoral poetry” (Rousseau 349). The positive conclusion in this quotation is typical. Early critics, despite their overall critical attitude, usually praised the quality of the novel in general which they felt portrayed a “natural” and didactic picture of human life (for example, Rousseau 46, as well as King 153).

Their positive evaluation was not fundamentally altered by the minor factual inconsistencies that several critics pointed out: the vicar, for example, would have had to be over one hundred years old if his father had really died on the battlefield with Lord Falkland as he claims, but this was considered to be “of no moment” (Rousseau 295). These inconsistencies did not change the evaluation of the narrator; rather, they led to the accusation that Goldsmith had not invested enough effort in the construction of his plot. This reading was supported by the often-quoted author’s “advertisement,” in which he admitted that “[t]here are an hundred faults in this thing, and an hundred things might be said to prove them beauties. But it is needless. A book may be amusing with numerous errors” (Rousseau 45).³

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the novel was considered a uniform and accurate portrayal of human nature. As George Lillie Craik explained in 1845, the narrative depended primarily on the characters of the vicar and his family, “and they are one and all admirably brought out. He himself, simple and credulous, but also learned and clear-headed, so guileless and affectionate[. . .] so unselfish and noble-minded” (Rousseau 306). Well into the 1930s, readers praised the exemplary probity of the vicar, characterized by “[p]iety and fortitude, a glowing benevolence” (46). A mark of quality in *The Vicar of Wakefield* was what critics took to be its lifelike characterization of Primrose and his milieu: “It is sketched indeed from common life, and is a strong contrast to [. . .] exaggerated and extraordinary characters” (276).

Primrose was evidently considered a well-educated, benevolent, upright, and Christian character both by his contemporaries and by critics in the nineteenth century. As late as the early twentieth century, the “moral dignity” of the vicar was emphasized (Black 88). The following rhetorical question is typical of the *Vicar*’s early reception: “[W]ho can help being delighted with the good Vicar for his sincerity, his hospitality, his fervent and overflowing affections [. . .]?” (Rousseau 47)

Nevertheless, readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not blind to the vicar’s negative traits; his didacticizing often seems embarrassing; moreover, he is unable to see through evildoers. These facts, however, are then linked with Goldsmith’s intention not to idealize Primrose excessively (see Rousseau 60). On the whole, critics praised the novel on the basis of its “moral tendency; particularly for the exemplary manner in which it recommends and enforces the great obligations of universal BENEVOLENCE” (44).

Two hundred years after the publication of the novel, however, there are numerous critics who interpret Primrose in ways that the readers in Goldsmith’s era could hardly have imagined—the vicar as a hypocrite, a man who rides his

own principles, as well as a pompous and conceited fool whom no one can take seriously. Primrose is considered a typical unreliable narrator whom Goldsmith obviously conceived as the butt of authorial irony. Since the 1960s, critics have increasingly read the novel as antisentimental, based on their ironic interpretation of the vicar. The first extensive reading of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a satire was published by Robert Hopkins in 1969. It was based on Ronald Paulson's earlier insight that Primrose is "both an ironist and the object of dramatic irony" (271)—a form of first-person narration that Horst Meller later characterized as a "narrative strategy that is a stroke of genius" on Goldsmith's part (211).

In simplified form, the history of the reception of the novel can be divided into three periods: In the first phase, which extends from its publication up to the middle of the twentieth century, it was read as a novel of sensibility. In the 1960s and 70s the readings that interpret the novel as satire predominated.⁴ The third phase, from the 1980s through the 1990s, is characterized by contradictory and ambivalent evaluations.⁵ In what follows I will not attempt to survey all the interpretations of the novel; rather, I will provide a plausible reading of the novel as a satire, a reading that essentially contradicts the conclusions in the contemporary interpretations discussed previously.

Studies that consider Primrose as an unreliable narrator base their analyses on the inconsistencies in the text, judging that significant elements of the novel should lead readers to take a critical attitude toward Primrose and therefore enable them to see through his hypocrisy and dishonesty. The aspects highlighted in this connection are for instance the fact that the vicar does not recognize the moral weaknesses of his own family and is never able to discern those who are dishonest. Since the plot for these critics is completely unconvincing, they also attribute the happy ending to Goldsmith's satiric intention of producing a parody of superficial eighteenth-century popular romances (Hopkins 200-24, Jaarsma 333-35).

In addition to the plot, contrasting relationships between the vicar and the other characters are cited. Burchell, who turns out to be the family's real savior but whom, significantly, Primrose considers a scoundrel, is seen as the actual hero by these critics (see Jaarsma 339). This evaluation of Burchell contradicts the interpretation of Goldsmith's contemporaries, but the new reading is, for instance, supported by the fact that it is Burchell who saves Sophia from drowning while her father is momentarily overcome by shock.

Furthermore, critics support their reading of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as satire by noting that other characters remind the vicar of his upright principles when he himself is about to act against them. Therefore, according to Hopkins (193), as modern readers it strikes us as especially humorous that during his fit of anger at the news of his daughter's defloration, the vicar must be reminded of his own religious principles by his son Moses (Goldsmith 96-97). All these interpretations of the inconsistencies in the novel ultimately depend on what critics considered to be "natural": are such short-term expressions of despair "normal" and do they

perhaps even serve to underline the subsequent humble actions of the vicar? Or are they meant to be unintentionally comic, a form of self-exposure? Is it not, after all, rather funny to see Primrose when in dire straits hearing his own maxims addressed to him from the mouth of other characters?

The historical variability of evaluations is even more clearly instantiated by the different interpretations of irony. The following passage, in the style of the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility, describes the vicar's feelings on his way home to his "peaceful mansion" after his long journey: "As a bird had been frightened from its nest, my affections outwent my haste, and hovered round my little fire-side" (Goldsmith 143). Even in the early twentieth century William Black, after citing the above passage, posed this rhetorical question: "[W]hat more perfect description of the stillness of night was ever given?" (94) The same passage, however, has also been interpreted as a "deadpan parody of stilted style" (Hopkins 211) that clearly betokens Goldsmith's ironic intentions.

In addition to the plot, the constellation of characters, and the supposed ironic intent, critics particularly emphasize the discrepancy between Primrose's principles and his actions, which purportedly prove his unreliability. As a farmer he is "comically inept" (211) and, although he constantly praises Christian humility, he is in fact quite proud. At the beginning of the novel, for example, he openly reports that he regularly donated his income as vicar to the needy, which, in Richard Jaarsma's opinion, clearly documents the unchristian pride of the vicar, who "calmly and without blushing" (336) reports on these activities. In addition, Primrose seems to be quite snobbish for a man of the cloth. According to Hopkins, this is reflected in the following passage: "We had an *elegant* house, situated in a *fine* country, and a *good* neighbourhood. The year was spent in [. . .] visiting our *rich* neighbours, and relieving such as were poor" (Goldsmith 18; qtd. Hopkins 185, emphasis added). Nevertheless, Hopkins points to a problem inherent in such an interpretation, a problem that applies to many of the passages just cited and meant to support Primrose's unreliability: the use of such adjectives uttered by a gentleman of the eighteenth century is, according to contemporary standards, "natural" and "normal."⁶ Recent German scholarship and interpretation of the vicar likewise follow this critical line of thought. Meller, for example, characterizes Primrose as a shortsighted, stodgy, conceited, naïve know-it-all (210-11). This echoes Boris Ford, who attests to the "unbearable smugness" of the first-person narrator (378). Similarly, in a much-read anthology of eighteenth-century English texts, Walter Pache had emphasized Primrose's smugness and characterized him as a "first-person narrator who is simultaneously arrogant and naïve" (279).

According to a number of critics, Primrose's integrity is compromised precisely by his infringements of the standards of sympathy which he himself prizes and extolls and which constitute the foundation of his respectability. Such interventions are unjustified to the extent that, in the period when the novel was written, this behavior was considered "normal" or even morally "good." For instance, the

accusation that Primrose chose his wife in accordance with practical considerations and that he is “a fortune-hunter” intent upon the economic benefits of an advantageous marriage for his children (Hopkins 207) is untenable if viewed from the perspective of contemporary standards; this attitude simply reflects the prevalent custom of the times. Primrose, in fact, proves that he takes nonmaterial values into consideration when he supports Burchell’s wooing of Sophia at a time when he has not yet heard of his wealth.

There are, moreover, other factors that underline the necessity of taking into consideration cultural contingencies in the process of evaluating a novel’s system of values. In the past, for example, the long sermon given by the vicar in prison was considered exemplary (see Gwynn 185), but today many critics find it intolerable.⁷ According to Hopkins, this sermon reveals Primrose’s materialism and its ironic intent is recognizable in the frequent use of the “metaphors of commerce—‘distribution,’ ‘dealings,’ ‘repaid,’ and ‘balance’” (219). This interpretation reveals more about Hopkins’s values than it does about the vicar’s, because his “metaphors of commerce” by contemporary standards were by no means clearly “materialistic.” Of seven definitions given in the *OED* for the use of the word “commerce” in the eighteenth century, only two refer to “commerce” in our sense of the word; the other five refer to human forms of exchange such as the exchange of ideas or letters; the second subpoint in the second entry even lists “converse with God.” Hopkins’s modern interpretation of the vicar therefore reflects the contemporary predominance of concepts of capitalism more than it does the materialism of the vicar.

These critical responses reflect the fact that Primrose’s character and behavior do not match the worldviews of these critics: by present standards the vicar can no longer be considered either a “model” personality or a figure of perfectly “normal” attitudes and conduct. This is also evident in modern interpretations of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a satire of the sentimental novel, or in statements such as this one ridiculing “the belief in the innate goodness and innocence of man that had replaced more *sober doctrines* on the nature of man” (Jaarsma 332, emphasis added).

It is moreover impossible to overlook how strongly the characterization of the vicar by contemporary and present-day critics depends upon moral value-judgments. The list of adjectives quoted above, such as “arrogant,” “self-satisfied,” “smug,” as well as “small, petty-minded” (337) clearly reflect value-judgments in comparison to more normative behavior. In a manner similar to the earlier widespread praise of the “loveable” vicar, who is “quite a darling character” according to Burney (Rousseau 53), current comments that label the vicar’s “complacency” as nauseous (Hopkins 207) reflect emotional and moral judgments whose importance should not be underestimated. In this context, one could almost be led to believe that the judgment regarding Primrose’s reliability depended entirely on an emotional evaluation of the vicar. Scholars who approve of the characteristics embodied in the vicar do not question the text’s consistency, whereas critics who reject him as an arrogant know-it-all cite examples that document how the vicar’s attitudes rub

against the grain of the text's overall structure and maintain that the narrator is the butt of the author's irony.

Without reflecting on their own assertions, most critics set up their own standard of "common sense" as well as their own system of norms and values as the general standard for evaluating unreliable narration. One could almost consider it an instance of projection when Jaarsma accuses the vicar of setting down his own values and norms as the absolute standard for judgment: "[Primrose] makes [his own] view of reality the moral and philosophic standard against which he measures all other people, actions, and motives" (335). What is particularly stunning to observe is the conviction with which twentieth-century critics reject the earlier readings of *The Vicar of Wakefield* as a sentimental novel. The critical evaluation in the renowned *Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon* is short and to the point in this matter: well into the twentieth century "[t]he reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield* has been characterized by a romantic misinterpretation emphasizing feeling to the detriment of an ironic reading" (Kluge 607).⁸ Meller states that the novel

over the last one hundred and fifty years has been treated [as a sentimental novel] by critics on both sides of the English Channel who act almost like a group of conspirators [...]. Instead of reading the book [...] as Menippean satire directed against starry-eyed Christian optimism which lacks any understanding of human nature, they read the novel as a novel of sensibility—pushing readers to put aside their sensors for detecting irony, as if they were checking their hat and coat in a theater cloakroom. (204)⁹

Our case study, therefore, clearly demonstrates that the classification of a text as unreliable narration centrally depends on the attitudes and values of the critic and that this standard for evaluating the reliability of the narrator is based on extratextual criteria that are subject to historical change. The moral and anthropological premises that are brought into play in analyzing the text determine the interpretation of the novel's supposed structure of values. The text in itself cannot serve as an absolute standard since it allows for the construction of diametrically opposed value systems. Hence, the reception of the novel, ultimately, comes to depend on standards that are external to the text. The critic's concept of what defines human nature is fundamental to the evaluation of the narrator; what appears to be naïve behavior and unreliable report to one critic constitutes a model of exemplary sympathy for another. Whether such narrative projections can be considered "convincing" depends on what the critic and the reader accept as "common sense."

We can therefore conclude that an ahistorical utilization of the concept of unreliable narration has proved to be rather reductive. A responsible use of the concept of unreliable narration should, therefore, be based on the value systems prevalent at the time in which a text was written, and classifications as unreliable must not be presented as ahistorical evaluations and universalized narratological interpretations.

5. Perspectives and Consequences for Literary Criticism in the

Interpretation of Narrators, Humor, and Irony

The reception of *The Vicar of Wakefield* points, therefore, to a fundamental problem in the narratological handling of unreliable narration: the judgments about the reliability of a narrator are always directly related to a system of values of which the literary critic is frequently not aware but that nevertheless colors the results of the critic's analysis. In those instances where the reception history of a text falls into several chronological phases distinguished by differing attributions of (un)reliability to the narrator, an approach that takes cultural history into consideration is best suited to the analysis of those texts. Such an analysis, focusing on the evaluation of a character's reliability or unreliability, can potentially provide a perspective on the prevalent worldview of a given period. It is evident, for example, that for the two novels mentioned earlier—*Castle Rackrent* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*—the narrator was seen in a very positive light until the middle of the twentieth century. It is only since the Cold War period that critical voices, sometimes even cynical voices, have been raised in the interpretation of the values and intentions of the respective narrators. The ideals represented by Primrose and Thady began to be treated as hypocritical pretension, and the formerly naïve narrators suddenly emerged as egocentric and calculating characters. In looking at the critical reception of Goldsmith's novel, I note that a relatively large number of the German critics have interpreted the narrative as cynical. This impression may reflect my choice of critics—I am myself German and therefore found German contributions less well-known internationally most readily accessible—but it may also reflect the fact that skepticism and doubt about forthright intentions were particularly prevalent in postwar Germany and continued to be so as the postwar disillusionment with Fascist ideology deepened into self-criticism and the nation's former naïve acceptance of National Socialism gave way to a realization of one's collusion in the crimes committed in its name.

By way of conclusion to this article I would like to present a number of further thoughts regarding the ever-changing cultural history of values as well as their attendant implicit theories of personality. I will refer to a number of textual phenomena, in particular to unreliable narration and irony.¹⁰

A basic problem in evaluating unreliability is the historical variability of the standards of literary criticism. Up to the end of the nineteenth century most literary criticism was based on the concept of mimesis: critics studied the characters' "closeness to life" and the novel's moral content. In later interpretations aesthetic norms were emphasized more strongly. Although criteria such as "closeness to life" and morality hardly play any role in present-day literary criticism and have not become a part of the general definition of unreliable narration, both of these elements are essential to the evaluation of narrative unreliability. After all, it is precisely the divergence from the reader's worldview, image of humanity, and value system that often constitutes the most significant standard by which we are able to determine whether a narrator is reliable or not.

When we as readers evaluate a narrator who contradicts the prevalent worldview, the overall construction of the text seems to play a decisive role. When we feel no discrepancy between the perspective of the narrator and the values entailed by the text, we consider the narrator to be reliable; his or her interpretation of the world is credible even when it does not coincide with our worldview and values. Divergences from the prevalent worldview constitute, for example, the greater part of the plot in Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1992). The 75-year-old first-person narrator Dora Chance is anything but "normal." In this extremely amusing novel, she reports a plethora of more than unlikely occurrences, among them her passionate sexual intercourse with her one-hundred-year-old uncle, Peregrine Hazard—an anecdote that is not particularly convincing considering the age of both characters and the bizarre context of their encounter. Moreover, the narrator often states that she does not trust her own memory. Finally, the formula "once upon a time" is used repeatedly, implying that the text belongs to the fairytale genre, which is not renowned for its realism. Despite these numerous factors that usually signal unreliability, the narrator is not, in my opinion, unreliable. This is due in part to the overall structure of the text, in the context of which neither Dora nor her hardly less eccentric relatives appear "crazy"; oddity seems to be the norm of this fantastic world. On the other hand, the numerous intertextual references to Shakespeare's comedies, in which unlikely coincidences and mix-ups are the norm, also help to naturalize the disparity of norms in this novel.

We can therefore conclude that, in addition to the overall structure of individual texts, the genre of a text also influences the constitution of unreliable narration. The type of values and norms that readers are willing to accept in a text—even when they do not correspond with their own worldview—depends on their specific expectations, and these change from genre to genre. Therefore, in vampire and horror novels, in fairytales and in science fiction, narrators who see ghosts, fight off vampires, or are abducted in UFOs are nevertheless considered reliable storytellers.

The significance of cultural-historical factors that change over time goes well beyond the attribution of unreliability. Since all evaluations of characters are based on readers' implicit worldviews, the interpretation of a character as "psychologically plausible" or "ironically drawn" is also subject to historical change. Even the determination of what counts as real-life experience depends on cultural context. For instance, in the Elizabethan age it was not considered an abnormal (or at least incredible) experience to encounter headless individuals, mermaids, witches, or amazons. In addition to this, the interpretation of a figure's character is also subject to the cultural-historical context. A writer who in a modern novel or drama attests to his predilection for watching executions or talks about the "humorous quirks" of the mentally disabled probably would render himself extremely suspect to a present-day audience; yet in the early eighteenth century such behavior was considered perfectly normal.

Further, every interpretation of a text as "ironic" or "satirical" is also dependent

upon cultural context. Whether something is meant to be taken “seriously” or whether it is to be considered ironic can only be determined in relation to a concrete and specific system of values based on cultural context. From our present-day perspective many things may appear ironic that in their own day were meant seriously, such as the defense of social hierarchy, arguments supporting the fundamental superiority of the upper classes, or the ingenuous confession that one believed in the virtues of “sensibility.” Thus, sentimental scenes in novels or plays of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries often seem humorous to critics today. The judgment that characters, events, or stories are “exaggerated” or that the author had an ironic intention thus ultimately depends on the values of the person who is making the judgment.

The historical and cultural change of values and norms therefore needs to be taken into consideration not only in a narratological theory of unreliable narration, but much more generally in literary studies. The interpretation of characters, events, and the question of the ironic intention of a work are all dependent upon culturally specific values as well. Confronting the fact that the value system of the reader ultimately determines his or her interpretation of what is “natural,” “normal,” and “good,” we can at least eliminate one possible trap of interpretation by taking into consideration the values that were current during the period when a specific text was written. Only when the historical variability in the construction of meaning and the values of the period in which the work was written are taken into consideration will a narratological analysis of unreliable narration become valid and meaningful.

Notes

¹ Seymour Chatman also notes that “each reading of a narrative fiction reconstructs its intent and principle of invention,” so that the reader “only” contributes to half of the process of reconstruction (74). Chatman does not discuss precisely how this influences the process of determining the reliability of narratives.

² The following discussion is of necessity very sketchy; for a detailed analysis of the concept of sensibility, see Barker-Benfield, Dwyer, Mullan, and Vera Nünning (“Die Kultur,” “A Revolution”).

³ According to Susan Sniader Lanser, this kind of advertisement is a part of an “extrafictional voice” (124), which in this case argues against an interpretation of the novel as unreliable narration.

⁴ Richard Jaarsma had already given a coherent, albeit very short, interpretation of the novel as satire in the late 1960s. For further interpretations of the novel as satire see Kirk 91-92, 107-8, and Quintana, who reads the novel as “ironic vision” and “close to parody” (100). For a survey of the revisionist readings of the novel as satire see Hopkins (168-72) as well as Wood (“*The Vicar*,” *Oliver*).

⁵ For recent studies that disagree with this satiric reading, see Battestin, Fischer,

and Hilliard. For an older [1954], ambivalent interpretation, see Walter Allen: "Dr Primrose was meant to be a figure of satire, almost a butt" (82). Nevertheless, Allen does not feel that Goldsmith pulled it off: "[W]hat he achieved was something different from what he intended." In 1997, returning to the traditional view, David Allen Murray again provided a reading of the text as a novel of sensibility, in which the Vicar develops from an unreliable narrator to a reliable narrator as well as a character who has to be taken seriously.

⁶ According to Hopkins, the reader can only recognize the vicar's words as snobbishness after he has gained a more thorough familiarity with Primrose.

⁷ For a positive modern reading see Murray (333, 336).

⁸ "Die Wirkungsgeschichte des *Vicar of Wakefield* ist bis ins 20. Jahrhundert hinein durch eine romantische Fehlinterpretation unter Betonung des Gefühls auf Kosten der Ironie bestimmt." Hopkins, following Ernest Baker (81), also refers to the dominant interpretation of the novel into the 1960s as a "conspiracy among critics to ignore the irony which was assuredly Goldsmith's intention" (qtd. *True* 169).

⁹ "[...] über anderthalb Jahrhunderte hinweg von Literaturkritikern beiderseits des Ärmelkanals fast wie von einer Verschwörergemeinschaft behandelt. Statt das Buch als Persiflage auf das Melodrama und die *comédie larmoyante* zu lesen, als menippeische Satire gegen einen christlich-blauäugigen Optimismus, dem es an Menschenkenntnis mangelt, las man es als einen empfindsamen Roman, bei dessen Lektüre der Leser sein Sensorium für Ironie am besten beiseite tun musste, so wie man Hut und Mantel an der Theatergarderobe abliefern." Contemporary as well as past interpretations of the protagonist are notable not only for their frequency of moral judgments but also for their call for the universal applicability of their own reading. Even critics who are familiar with earlier interpretations of the novel time and again emphasize that their own reading is obvious and holds true universally. See Kirk (108) as well as Kluge (607).

¹⁰ The basic variability of interpretations of unreliable narration not only refers to historical change, but also includes individual divergences. Despite the culture-bound nature and stereotyping tendencies of implied personality theories, different readers can have various viewpoints simultaneously. In his old age, for example, Goethe had a high regard for *The Vicar of Wakefield* because of its "irony." See the diary entry of 20 Dec. 1829: "Wirkungen von Sterne und Goldsmith" (qtd. in Meller 230). Contemporary interpretations of Primrose diverge from the prevalent interpretations of the two earlier phases but they are by no means consistent. Categories such as ethnicity, social class, age, and gender, as well as the reader's knowledge of the literary and cultural-historical context probably play a role in the interpretation of unreliability.

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