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A New Criticism Approach to Unique Narrative Structures in Jonathan Safran Foer's

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Often times, when we as readers peruse a piece of literature, we take what is being conveyed to us at mere face-value. We read of a woman like Oscar Schelle's grandmother in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, whose writing and dialogue conveys to us a sense of loss, and as readers we think "hmm, this woman is sad, maybe even suicidal; I wonder why?" We do not think past this thought though. Amidst the hilarious circumstances and the even more hilarious characters, we find ourselves side-tracked, forgetting that the structure of a piece might hold something uniformly in common to its central meaning. As readers we fail to look past what the face of the text is telling us. We do not consider how the structure of a piece might come to express a narrator's inner emotions or psyche. We see the flushed left paragraphs in Oscar Schell's grandmother's narrative, the extra spaces between sentences, the emphasis put on certain images via repetition, and think "hmm, that's interesting," but soon enough we have dismissed them. These things prove unimportant to us, a mere a sign of the writer's eccentricity, something put there to confuse, a puzzle meant for greater minds. In truth though, the structure of a piece *is* important! When trying to understand the meaning of a work, understanding the structure of the text is part and parcel to understanding the whole. This rule can no better be applied than to that of Jonathan Safran Foer's highly acclaimed novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

Foer's novel, Extremely loud and Incredibly Close, probes the depths of the human psyche, not only in its dialogue and descriptions, but also in the way it is structured. The story tells of a young boy, Oscar Schell, as well as the people who surround him—his mother, grandmother, estranged grandfather, and a whole cast of others—who after being assailed by untold catastrophe, are struggling to survive through feelings of overwhelming loss and remorse. In truth though, the real interesting aspects of Foer's novel are not always the unique characters and funny incidences he presents his readers. Instead, the real interesting parts are the unique ways in which he chooses to structure his character's narratives: each narrative is structured differently and it is because of this that each narrator proves distinct. Viewing Foer's novel from a strictly Formalist perspective, or more specifically New Criticism, the structure of the novel, especially in the case of its narration, proves difficult to divorce from its overall meaning. The differing ways in which certain narratives in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close are conveyed and structured provide insight into the general personalities and emotions of the narrators.

There are only three main narrators in Foer's novel: Oskar, Oskar's grandmother, and Oskar's grandfather, the Sr. Thomas Schell. Each of these three narrators has their own distinct personality and quirks. Take Oskar for instance. Oscar is a precocious nine-year-old who although rather mature for his age intellectually, still has a lot to learn when it comes to both the people surrounding him and the feelings within him. His emotional immaturity and childishness is continually rearing itself in the form of spiteful jealousy, rage, and confusion over the loss of his father, the Jr. Thomas Schell.

Besides Oscar, there is also Oscar's grandfather, the Sr. Thomas Schell. Oscar's grandfather, like Oscar, is also an individual who *has*, and still *is*, undergoing the effects of psychological trauma. Unlike Oscar though, whose trauma stems from the loss of his father in

the fall of the World Trade Centers, Oscar's grandfather's trauma stems from the loss of his family and friends in the bombing of Dresden, Poland, some sixty years before. The Sr. Thomas Schell is isolated. Continually racked by a sense of immense guilt and worthlessness over choices he made during the bombing of Dresden, immediately proceeding it, and even the years following it (like the leaving of his wife, Oscar's grandmother), Oscar's grandfather does "not know how to live [anymore]," as he writes on page 181. A symbolic gesture of this is his chosen inability to speak: he has lost even the most basic means of human communication.

Like the grandfather, Oscar's grandmother is also facing the effects of trauma wrought by the bombing of Dresden. Oscar's grandmother is a shut-in: only for occasional necessities does she ever go out, instead choosing to confine herself to the seclusion of her apartment, trying to distance and isolate herself from the horrid memories of her past. The grandmother's entire life seems to be an effort to avoid confronting the truth. From entirely blank pages in her narrative and gaping holes between every sentence she writes, too what she describes as "nothing places" in her apartment—places where one can choose to be invisible—she is entirely reluctant to come out of her shell.

Each of these narratives—that of Oskar, Oskar's grandfather, and Oskar's grandmother—prove uniquely different in the way they choose to deal with life-altering, catastrophic events. Accentuating the personalities and emotions of each is the way in which Foer chooses to structure and convey their narratives. "Each letter possesses an eccentric style, recognizable at a glance," states John Updike, a prominent writer (2). For lack of time though, within this essay, we will only be discussing two of these narrators—Oscar's grandmother, and Oscar's grandfather. As so, now that a short description of each of these two narrators has been provided, let us discuss how these differing narration styles come to enhance the character's personalities

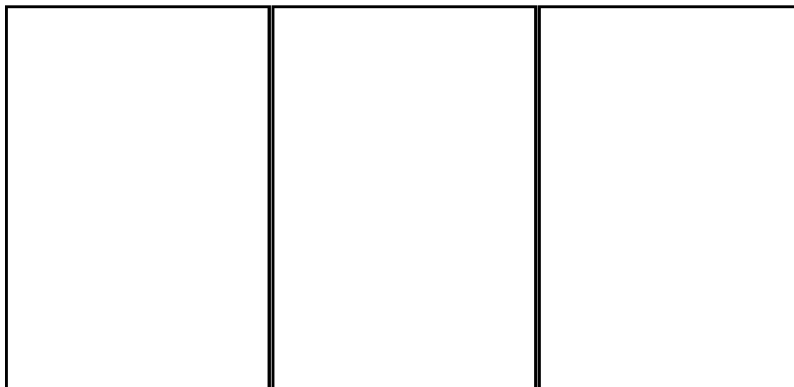
and emotions. Because we ended with a short description of Oskar's grandmother, she is probably the most prominent figure in our minds; let us begin our discussion with her.

The structure of Oscar's grandmother's narrative—the flushed left paragraphs, the extra spaces between sentences, the repetition of certain verbal images and their placement, and of course, the blank pages—all connote a woman who appears to still be deeply effected by a catastrophe that took place some sixty years before. With the use of the flushed left paragraph, Foer is pointing towards not only the traumatized state of the grandmother's mind, but also the paralyzed state of her life: just as the grandmother proves incapable of moving on or transitioning in her day to day life, the paragraphs she writes prove incapable of beginning anew. Usually when authors begin new paragraphs they start with the use of a uniform indentation to show a change in thought process, situation, or subject; to move on; to transition. In the case of the grandmother's narrative though, as has already been stated, this transition proves non-existent. The grandmother's narrative is flushed left, creating the impression of something static, depressingly static. As we can see, trying to separate out the structure of the grandmother's narrative from the actual meaning Foer is attempting to convey proves almost impossible. As Cleanth Brooks, a prominent proponent of New Criticism states, the form of any good literature, must be intertwined with its content so that neither seems independent or unrelated to the other (Norton 1355). In Foer's use of the flushed left paragraph, he is obviously conveying this sense of interrelatedness.

This is not the only structural convention Foer uses to convey the grandmother's inner emotions and mind-set though; extra-spaces between sentences are also used towards this effect. Oscar's grandmother, by the general things she says as well as what others say about her, is obviously a woman who has a difficult time discussing her past. She does not like to talk about

her time in Dresden nor her life with Oscar's grandfather. All in all, she does not like to talk about much, which seems understandable considering the circumstances. Unlike most authors though, Foer does not choose to limit this feeling of reluctance to just words alone; instead, he conveys it in the structure of the grandmother's narration as well. The sentences in the grandmother's narration are separated by extra-spaces for a reason. The extra-spaces create a sense of avoidance. After every sentence the grandmother writes, she pauses, as if to consider what she is going to say, or more importantly, what she is not going to say. The kind of disjointed letter this produces implies a woman who is obviously uncomfortable with discussing her past.

Another structural element Foer uses to convey the grandmother's reluctance to discuss her past comes in the form of the blank page. When Oskar's grandfather asks his grandmother to write the story of her life on an old type writer they keep in a spare room, the grandmother, consciously knowing the type writer has no ribbon, sits down one morning and begins plucking away at the keys. Years later, when the grandmother presents her finished story to the Sr. Thomas Schell, he is astonished to find that all the grandmother has really been doing is punching letters: "I picked up the pages and wondered through them," he writes, "trying to find the one on which she was born, her first love, when she last saw her parents . . . I searched and searched, . . . but this was all I saw:" (120)



(121-23)

The Sr. Thomas Schell is met with is a ream of completely blank pages, three of which Foer includes on pages 121 through 123. Foer includes blank pages in the narrative not only to create a sense of extreme avoidance on the grandmother's part, but also to hint towards other prominent aspects of the woman's character—namely, denial. By refusing to write her life story, the grandmother is in essence denying her past. The blank pages that Foer presents us here, far more than any words could convey, provide a basis from which many different emotions, as well as characteristics of the grandmother, could be derived. It is because of this, that the structure of Foer's work once again proves inseparable from its overall meaning; without the structure we would only be getting half the story.

Besides the use of the flushed left paragraph, extra spaces between sentences, and blank pages though, Foer also utilizes a fourth structural convention to convey the grandmother's traumatized state. On pages 230 through 232, Foer uses repetition and paragraph structure to convey the psychological shock the grandmother undergoes upon witnessing live photos of the World Trade Centers as they fall. "The same pictures over and over," writes the grandmother, fixated on a scene of chaotic despair (230). In the short excerpt that follows, taken directly from this description, we can visually see the events replaying in the grandmother's mind:

Planes going into buildings.

Bodies falling.

People waving shirts out of high windows.

Planes going into buildings.

Bodies falling.

Planes going into buildings.

People covered in gray dust.

Bodies falling.

Buildings falling.

Planes going into buildings, [etc.] (230)

In what seems an incredibly horrid vision, the description—in the way it is structured as well as its repetition—conveys a person who is obviously unable to tear their eyes, or mind, away from the terrible catastrophe unfolding before them. This is the effect Foer wants to convey with his choice of narrative structure. If the author had provided us with a simple list of these events, something along the lines of—“planes going into buildings, bodies falling, people waving shirts out of high buildings, and people covered in gray dust,”—the same message of shock would not have come across. The grandmother’s reaction to these events and their images is essential. A simple list would not have conveyed her traumatized state. In Oscar’s grandmother’s mind, there is no end to this picture show. The images play over and over and over, like a broken record. With his use of repetition, as well as structure, Foer succeeds in showing us this.

The grandmother’s narrative is not the only case in which structural techniques come to enhance and display the personalities and emotions of the narrators in Foer’s novel though. Structural techniques can also be witnessed in the narrative of the grandfather. The Sr. Thomas Schell, as has already been mentioned, is an individual, who like the grandmother, has suffered severe trauma as a result of the bombing of Dresden. Unlike the grandmother though, the way in which Foer chooses to structure the narrative of the grandfather proves entirely different. By use of unconventional punctuation and paragraphing, unique typography, and odd conversational forms, Foer succeeds in conveying a man who has completely devalued his own life. Like the grandmother, the grandfather’s narrative suggests a person who has an incredibly difficult time discussing his past and who in the end, at least orally, does not wish to.

For starters, the Sr. Thomas Schell is mute. Throughout his entire narrative, he does not utter a single word. Instead, Foer chooses to convey the characters words in the form of writing alone, which inevitably leads us as readers to wonder why the grandfather has chosen a life of silence. The effect Foer is trying to create here is that of an individual who has completely devalued his own life. Through choosing to make the structure of the grandfather's narrative solely based on written words alone (and not speech), Foer succeeds in portraying a man, who for a variety of reasons—trauma, guilt, feelings of inferiority, etc.—feels that his opinion, as well as his life, holds very little, if any, real-life significance. The last word that Thomas spoke, the word “I,” only affirms this claim: “I” stands as a symbol for self-assertion and because Thomas has lost its usage, orally, he can no longer assert himself (257). This aspect of the grandfather's character can be witnessed in many of the structural conventions of which Foer chooses to utilize in his novel.

One of these structural conventions, the daybook of which Thomas uses to communicate without speaking, is a definite sign of his under-confidence and emptiness. In these portions of the novel, Foer uses one line phrases, one per. page, like “I want two rolls,” or “I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got,” to convey the day to day interactions of the grandfather (19, 21). In essence, the daybook serves as a representation of the old man's life. On page eighteen, the grandfather states, “I would take the book to bed with me and read through the pages of my life.” Unfortunately though, the events of the grandfather's life prove scant at best. The sentences “I want two rolls,” or “I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got,” are transposed against a completely blank background, sending a message of emptiness and sterility to readers (19, 21). The Sr. Thomas Schell's life, as depicted on these pages, is like a large, almost empty box, completely devoid of anything substantial but for the fact of an incredibly small, almost unrecognizable item

at its bottom. Foer chooses to structure the narrative this way because this is the kind of message he wants to send. Even the phrases “Start spreading the news . . .” or “The regular, please,” prove insignificant to readers. With the use of this convention, Foer is successful in conveying to his readers a set of emotions—that of emptiness, worthlessness, and under confidence—that otherwise might have taken hundreds of pages to express.

Thomas’ feelings of worthlessness (i.e. his feelings of guilt, under confidence, emptiness, etc.) cannot be confined to this structural convention alone though; it can also be witnessed in Foer’s use of the numerical dialogue/biography as well. Beginning half-way down the page on page 269 and running to the bottom of 271, Foer utilizes numbers as a kind of code for which the Sr. Thomas Schell chooses to communicate his life: “I broke my life down into [numbers]” writes Schell (269). “For love I pressed ‘5, 6, 8, 3,’ for death, ‘3, 3, 2, 8, 4,’ . . . What, I wondered, is the sum of my life?” (269). Continuing for more than two pages after, we as readers are informed of Thomas’ life: “‘6, 9, 6, 2, 6, 3, 4, 7, 3, 5, 4, 3, 2, 5, 8, 6, 2, 6....’” (269-71). Putting aside the fact that this kind of analyzation of one’s life seems incredibly inane, the way in which Thomas is choosing to sum up his life, once again, says a lot about his personality and character. When most people choose to sum up their lives, the first thing that comes to mind is usually *not* a random stream of numbers. By choosing to structure the grandfather’s life in what essentially can be deemed an extended barcode though, Foer successfully conveys the feelings of impersonality and hollowness of which the Sr. Thomas Schell must obviously view his own existence. Like the grandfather’s daybook, the numbers come to reaffirm the man’s feelings of worthlessness. He is apparently so ashamed of his life—feels such guilt—that the only way to talk about it is through a medium: the written word or the punched out number.

Worthlessness is not the only aspect of Thomas' character which we can see reflected in Foer's choice of structure though; desperateness, in the author's choice of paragraphing and punctuation, can also be seen. The structure of the grandfather's narrative is like that of a student who sits down to write an essay under oppressive time constraints and in the process, forgets the use of any kind of grammar, punctuation, or organizational rules. "The Sr. Thomas Schell writes in one big paragraph" and wherever there should be a period, Foer has instead replaced it with a comma (Updike 2). The effect this creates is that of a fast-paced, rambling, and all together desperate sounding letter. Because there are no periods, the grandfather's narrative has an adrenaline-like feel to it, one that appears to mimic the general rapidity of which events are unfolding. "An ape approached me, it was the ape I had shot before, I'd thought I'd killed it, it walked up to me slowly, its hands covering its ears, What did it want from me, I screamed, 'What do you want from me?'" writes Schell on page 213. With the use of commas, we get the sense as readers that we are right there with Schell. We feel his desperate confusion as he slaughters a zoo full of animals. If all of these commas were replaced with periods though, we would not receive this same feeling. Instead, the narrative would sound slowly and decisively conceived, a notion which is altogether the opposite of desperation.

As we can see, separating the structure of Foer's novel from its overall meaning appears altogether impossible. The conveyance of the grandmother's and grandfather's personalities and emotions are dependent on the way in which they are written. Without the use of the flushed left paragraphs, the extra spaces between sentences, the repetition of images, and the blank pages, Oscar's grandmother would not come across as the traumatized shut-in we have all come to know. Likewise, without the use of unconventional punctuation and paragraphing, unique typography, and odd conversational forms, the grandfather would not come across as an

extremely guilt-laden and under confident individual. Understanding the reasoning behind the choices writers make in the structure of their works is imperative to understanding the whole. For the most part, that is what this paper, with the aid of Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, has attempted to prove. Face-value reading will never get anyone anywhere. One might as well just go back to reading Spot books where the story line is conveniently printed over colorful illustrations and easy to read diagrams: at least there, discovering the meaning behind the author's choice of structure will not prove any great challenge. For those of us who wish not to rehash our kindergarten days though, the best way to go about reading a text is with a critical eye and an attention to structure.

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