

Fabula, sjužet and defamiliarization in George Orwell's 1984

This note discusses how close reading can be used to show how the Russian Formalist concepts of fabula, sjužet and defamiliarization can be applied to a short extract from *1984* (Orwell, 1989, p. 3). Close reading, initially proposed in 1927 by Ridding and Graves for poetry criticism (Baldick, 2015a) involves a detailed examination of the text including the effects of vocabulary, syntax, structure, phonetics, literary devices and so on, to the exclusion of external factors such as the author's intentions, biography or historical context.

Fabula denotes the material of the story in a text. Essentially this is the sequence of events in the story, in their true order (Buchanan 2018). Sjužet (i.e., plot) on the other hand are the events as they are narrated to the reader, showing cause and effect and the relationship between incidents (Baldick 2015b). The techniques of partial revelation, non-linear time, unreliable narration and limited point of view are all narrative aspects associated with a sjužet which increases the engagement of a reader.

The description of the clocks striking thirteen in *1984*'s first sentence immediately undermines the reader's sense of normality. This is an effective piece of defamiliarization, in which an everyday object (the clock) behaves in a highly unusual way (striking thirteen). The sense of dislocation for the reader is enhanced because it is 'the clocks' rather than 'the clock' suggesting that the whole of this world is abnormal. (This book was written in 1949, so an alternative possibility is that Orwell meant military 24-hour clocks. These might be familiar to the readers at the time because of WW2 – but military clocks do not strike hours and the opening is set in a domestic flat, not a military site, so this possibility seems unlikely). The world is further defamiliarized by the use of unexplained posters captioned 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU' and 'INGSOC'. In the pre-television late 1940s readers would be very familiar with propaganda and instructional posts but the terms 'Big Brother' and 'Ingsoc' would be unfamiliar and potentially sinister, particularly as Orwell suggests while they are normal and commonplace in this fictional world Orwell gives no indication of their purpose or impact.

In the sjužet, the reader sees the narrative event sequence as Smith arrives home, climbs the stairs, enters his flat, and looks out of the window. Orwell gives a sensory description of Smith and the environment ('skin roughened by soap and blunt razor blades', 'smell of boiled cabbage', 'the fruity voice' that cannot be silenced) but Orwell comments on the larger environment (the broken lift, the frailness of Smith, the economy drive for Hate Week, the general cold, the black and white posters) suggesting a world of decay that is

without compassion. The sense of decay is emphasised by the ulcer on Smith's leg. This apparently is a society that does not care much for the individual (again an observation based on knowledge drawn from outside the text rather like the pre-television comment above – something not normally allowed in the text-focused close reading rules of New Criticism). All of these larger concerns will be seen to be aspects of the fabula, as the reader gradually discovers the historical events that have created this world. Some critics simply define the *sjuzet* as a defamiliarized version of the fabula (e.g., Shklovsky, 2008).

(549 words)

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1984, George Orwell : Opening page

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU**, the caption beneath it ran.

Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. He moved over to the window: a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls which were the uniform of the party. His hair was very fair, his face naturally sanguine, his skin roughened by coarse soap and blunt razor blades and the cold of the winter that had just ended.

Outside, even through the shut window-pane, the world looked cold. Down in the street little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The blackmoustachio'd face gazed down from every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU**, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully in the wind, alternately covering and uncovering the single word **INGSOC**. In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between the roofs, hovered for an instant like a bluebottle, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was the police patrol, snooping

into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.