

A Study of the Narrative Structures in Daniel Glattauer's *Love Virtually*

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Abstract

Narratology as a literary theory has been developing and evolving over the years with its focus on the structure of narratives and not on the content. The advance in technology has brought about a comparatively new field in narratology called digital narratology. Taking into consideration the interests of the present generation in cyberspace, writers have ventured into using this medium as a setting for their works. Daniel Glattauer, an Austrian writer, has authored an absorbing novel titled *Love Virtually* which is set in the virtual world. He brilliantly takes the novel forward solely through the exchange of e-mails through the characters involved. This paper is an attempt to study the narrative structures of this novel. A study has been done with its focus on the category of epistolary novel, story-plot distinction, kind of narrators narrating, different narratives involved, the narrative devices used and the manner in which Glattauer concludes the novel.

Keywords: Narratology, Epistolary novel, Story-Plot, Narrator, Narrative, Proleptic-Analeptic, Open-ended

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Narratology is the anglicized term of the French word 'narratologie' which was coined by Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian-French academician. Narratology finds its origin in structuralism but over the years it gained independence and developed into a separate branch of literary theory. Narratology is the study of narratives or as Meister who quotes Trodov maintains, it is the "science of narrative" (www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/). Though recent, its lineage can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Vladimir Propp, the Russian formalist, who studied a hundred Russian fairy tales, is considered the pioneer of modern narratology.

Peter Barry defines narratology as "the study of how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of story-telling" (214). Narratology focuses not on the 'content', but on 'who' tells the tale and 'how' it is told. The advent in technology brought two worlds- the actual and the virtual world, simultaneously into existence. This found its way into literature and the digital narratives that use tools based on computer to narrate the story, came into being. Digital narratives are defined by Daniel Meadows as "short, personal multimedia tales told from the heart." (franklinds.wikispaces.com/file/view/dst_script_writing.pdf)

Daniel Glattauer, an Austrian author, is best known for his novels, *Love Virtually* and its sequel *Every Seventh Wave*. *Love Virtually* was initially written in German and owing to its success was translated into English by Katharina Bielenberg and Jamie Bulloch. It is an epistolary novel and is set in the virtual world. Glattauer's preamble to the novel is worth noting, "Have you ever just clicked with someone?". *Love Virtually* move forward solely through the exchange of e-mails and that makes this novel unique. Beautifully written, the novel begins with Emmi sending an e-mail to Leo by chance. Thus begins a relationship between them which deepens as the novel proceeds.

Many novels have been beautifully narrated through the exchange of letters. Three kinds of epistolary novels have been identified- a monologic novel which contains the letters of just one character, a dialogic novel with a narrative that constitutes the letters of two characters and a polylogic novel with letters by three or more characters in a novel. The letters are replaced by e-mails in novels set in the virtual world.

Love Virtually is an engaging epistolary novel. The major part of the novel is dialogic as the exchange of emails is just between Emmi and Leo:

Re:

Dear Emmi Rothner,

We don't know each other in the slightest but I'd like to thank you for your warm and highly original round-robin e-mail! One thing you should know: I just adore round robin e-mails.

Rgds,

Leo Leike

*Eighteen minutes later***Re:**

...If you think of a more original way of wishing people a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year than "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year", please do share it with me. Until then: Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

E. Rothner

*Six minutes later***Re:**

I wish you a pleasant Christmas break and the forthcoming year will rank as one of your top eighty...

Leo Leike

*Three minutes later***Re:**

I'm impressed!

Best,

E.R. (2-3)

But as the novels proceeds, with the intervention of Emmi's husband into the illusionary world created by Emmi and Leo, the novel turns into a polylogic epistolary novel.

The distinction between 'story' and 'plot' is pivotal as far as narratology is concerned. The story is the sequence of events as they occur in the novel. It should have a beginning and should be chronological with nothing being left out in between. On the other hand plot is the sequence of events as they are presented to the readers. It need not be chronological and it can begin even in the middle of a string of events and provide flashbacks or flash forwards as necessary.

The 'story' of *Love Virtually* cannot be demarcated entirely from its 'plot' as the novel proceeds solely through the exchange of e-mails, but a distinction can be seen between the two. Bernhard Rothner was a piano teacher in the Academy of Music, a happily married man with two children, Fiona and her little brother Jonas. A car accident took his wife's life leaving him to cope up and fend for their children. Emmi, a lively and gorgeous young web designer who is also his student, stepped into their lives. The children ran straight to her and Mr. Rothner who was fourteen years her senior, fell head over heels in love with her. Two years later they got married.

Emma who is now thirty four and 'happily married' (as she insists every now and then) for eight years, accidently meets Mr. Leo Leike who is a communications consultant and a university assistant in language psychology, in the virtual world. Emmi had intended to send a mail to 'Like Magazine' requesting them to cancel her subscription but the mail wound up in Leo's inbox due to a typo. Leo rectified her error but nine months later the same accident

recurred. From there commenced their virtual relationship. They even carried out a recognition game just to try to identify the other person .

In course of time Emmi arranged a date for Leo with her friend Mia. Emmi became miserable when she came to know that they met frequently and that both Leo and Mia did not give the details of their relationship to Emmi. Leo on the other hand made it clear to Mia that he does not want to know what Emmi looks like physically so that she could remain a fantasy for him. Though Mia and Leo liked each other, they did not fall in love and so put an end to their relationship.

Emmi's and Leo's life in the real world went on simultaneously. Emmi and her family went on a trip to Portugal and in the meantime Emmi and Leo decide to take a break from their relationship for two weeks. After the break Emmi proposed that they finally meet each other. After a miserable day Emmi e-mailed Leo and they exchanged their phone numbers to leave a voice message to each other which they did by reading out the e-mail they send prior to this experiment. They fell in love with each other's voices too.

Unexpectedly Leo received an e-mail from Emmi's husband, Mr. Rothner. He had discovered their e-mail exchanges and asks Leo to meet his wife in person and to even have a physical relationship with her. Leo is in the virtual world as of now. Only when she meets him in person can Mr. Rothner fight for his wife. His was a plea to give his wife back to him. Leo slightly distanced himself from Emmi but does not reveal to her about the e-mail. For one last time Leo proposed for a meet up with Emmi. He lets her know about his decision to move to Boston and his resolution to not to send e-mails to Emmi afterwards. Emmi agrees to finally meet with him at his apartment. An excited Emmi gets ready and informs her husband that she is going to meet her friend. Her husband says 'have fun Emmi' instead of Emma. This made her to back out from her decision to meet Leo. Frantically she sends an apology to Leo but Leo never replied thus drawing a veil to their virtual relationship.

As mentioned earlier, since the novel is narrated through e-mails the difference between 'story' and 'plot' is not that distinct in *Love Virtually*. But a 'story' always has a beginning and moves forward chronologically while a plot doesn't. In this novel there is a chronological sequence as far as the relationship of Leo and Emmi is concerned. But the chain of events in Emmi's life, as made known to the readers, is not chronological. This is where the plot comes into prominence. It is Mr. Rothner and not Emmi who gives a detailed description of the car accident and how Emmi became a part of their lives leading to their marriage. This is described only towards the end of the novel through the e-mail that Mr. Rothner sent to Leo.

The role of narrator is of utmost importance in narratology. The story can be presented to the reader by a voice that is not a distinct character in the novel or as a particular character with a name and history of his/her own. The latter falls into two categories- the 'heterodigetic' narrator and the 'homodigetic' narrator. The heterodigetic narrator does not have a role in the story that he/she is narrating while a homodigetic narrator has a role in the story that is being narrated by him/her.

Since *Love Virtually* is narrated through the exchange of emails, both Leo and Emmi are narrators in the novel. They are 'homodigetic' narrators as they are the major characters in the novel. Furthermore the narrators are 'overt' and 'dramatized'. According to Peter Barry

an ‘overt’ and ‘dramatized’ narrator must “have witnessed, learned and participated in the events they narrate” (226). Both the narrators in the novel actively participate in the events presented by them. In other words the whole novel revolves around the actions that they narrate.

An author can present the novel in the form of a ‘frame’ narrative which has ‘embedded’ narratives. The primary narrative is the one that comes first and is not necessarily the main narrative. Embedded within that is the secondary narrative. In *Love Virtually* the frame narrative is the primary narrative which is the narrative of the relationship between Emmi and Leo. This is the narrative that comes first and is also the main narrative.

Embedded within the main narrative are the personal lives of Leo and Emmi. Marlene, his ex-girlfriend is introduced by Leo in the novel. Their relationship had extended for five years. It was never a smooth relationship. They separated many times but reconciled every now and then claiming that they cannot live without each other. Every time they reconciled they started over from scratch which both of them loved to do. Finally they depart forever and Leo narrates, “she (Marlene) got together with a pilot, from Spain. But it’s all over now. She says there is only one man for her and that is me. That’s a lie, you know she can’t have me anymore. It really hurts when you split up”. (109)

Emmi’s personal life also forms an embedded narrative. Though Emmi is involved with Leo in the virtual world, she is married and has two children named Fiona and Jonas. She is reluctant to talk about her family life with Leo. She always said “Leo, please don’t force me to open my family album”(35). It is her husband Bernhard Rothner who finally narrated their life story to Leo without Emmi knowing. Rothner was Emmi’s piano teacher at the Academy of music. It was music that brought them close together. Rothner also described his miserable life before he met Emmi, “A car accident destroyed our family-our three-year-old was traumatized, the elder one badly injured. I suffered permanent injuries and the children’s mother, my wife Johanna, died. Without the piano I would have fallen apart”.(229)

The relationship that Emmi proposes between Leo and her friend Mia constitute another embedded narrative. Mia is a thirty year old sports teacher. The only drawback that Emmi could find in her is that she is a vegetarian. Although initially reluctant, Leo finally gave Mia a call. They agreed to meet on a Sunday afternoon in a café. Emmi soon gets dejected with this arrangement and even more crestfallen as they have distanced her from their relationship. Finally Leo gives into Emmi’s probing and discloses the truth about their relationship. The moment they met they realised that they were not going to fall in love with each other for they were there for Emmi and not them. They felt like puppets in a play organised by Emmi. Right from the onset one thing was clear to Mia, Leo was not meant for her. It was almost as if “I had a sign around my neck saying ‘this belongs to Emmi! Do not touch’” (181).

Authors rarely follow a chronological order while narrating a novel. Sometimes ‘flash backs’ are provided and at times ‘flash forwards’ are used. Flash backs or ‘analeptic’ material provide information or narrate events that had occurred in the past. Likewise flash forward or ‘proleptic’ narrative provides instances on what could occur later on or in the future.

Glattauer engages both analeptic and proleptic devices in his novel, *Love Virtually*. The beginning of the novel portrays the meeting of two strangers in the virtual world through the

exchange of e-mails. As they send one e-mail after the other they move closer to each other and their friendship crosses the boundary of friendship to relationship. After a few e-mails, they abandon narrating about the superficial aspects of their life and move on to a more personal level.

Leo's narration of his relationship with Marlene constitutes the analeptic part of his story. He and Marlene met five years ago and has been in an 'on-off' relationship ever since. The relationship has been demanding and they found each other greatly in love only when they start their relationship from scratch soon after breaking up with each other. They separated soon after Marlene decided to move on after meeting a Spanish pilot.

Emma's husband e-mails Leo soon after he discovers his wife's relationship in the virtual world. His e-mail is analeptic as it is a flashback to relate how Mr. Rothner and Emma met, eight years ago. Emma who was twenty three then and a student of Mr. Rothner, a piano teacher at the Academy of Music, was a great solace for the Rothner family during those days. Two years later they got married.

The e-mail that Mr. Rothner writes to Leo is also proleptic as it anticipates something that is to happen later. His e-mail was a plea to give him back his wife. It hints to the readers that the relation between Leo and Emmi will be brought to an end. Though Leo does not disclose to Emma the fact that her husband e-mailed him, he tells Emmi about his decision to go to Boston from where he wouldn't be e-mailing her. Ultimately though they never meet and Emmi apologizes for cancelling on him in the last moment, Leo never replies to the e-mail and he changes his e-mail address.

Narratives can be open ended, in which the ending might seem ambiguous or leaves quite a few questions on the minds of the readers, or closed where the author gives a definite conclusion to the narrative. The conclusion of *Love Virtually* is noteworthy. Emma does not go to meet Leo and as Emma sends Leo an apology, ten seconds later she gets a reply:

Subject: Delivery Status Notification (Returned)

This is an automatically generated Delivery Status Notification

THIS E-MAIL ADDRESS HAS CHANGED. THE RECIPIENT CAN

NO LONGER RECEIVE MAIL SENT TO THIS ADDRESS. ALL INCOMING MAIL WILL BE DELETED AUTOMATICALLY. FOR ANY QUERIES, PLEASE CONTACT THE SYSTEMS MANAGER. (280)

This clearly states that Leo has changed his e-mail address but this does not prove necessarily that their relationship has come to an end. Soon after Mr. Rothner sends Leo a mail, Leo writes to Emma about his plan to move to Boston. But later after Emma agrees to meet him at his apartment Leo writes:

I think I'll have to talk to you properly about "Boston", Emmi. You've got completely the wrong idea about Boston, or about Boston and me. The whole Boston thing is quite different from how you imagine it. I need to explain that to you. There's so much to understand. Do you understand? (277)

From this e-mail the readers get an impression that "Boston" could stand for something else, a metaphor. It need not necessarily mean Leo is moving to Boston. This could be Leo's way of asking Emmi to move on with her life and reminding himself to move on with his. Moreover Emma has Leo's telephone number as they exchanged it and send to each other a voice message a few days ago. Leo also gives Emmi his address as they were supposed to meet at his apartment. In the last e-mail that Emma writes to Leo she admits that she loves

him. So as soon as she gets the notification that Leo has changed his e-mail address Emma could have contacted him either by calling him or by changing her mind immediately and going to his apartment after all. Glattauer has left the narrative open-ended for the readers to interpret.

Love Virtually is an engaging novel and it keeps the reader engrossed throughout. A study of the novel with its story, plot, narrators, the kinds of narratives and narrative devices used show that it is brilliantly written with its narrative structure deserving attention.

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