

The Unreliable Narratee: A New Category for Analyzing Epistemic Gaps in Narratives and their Political Implications

This paper proposes a new narratological category which I term the ‘unreliable narratee’; a fictive interlocutor who rejects or ignores the contents of a narrative out of dubious motives. As I will demonstrate, the concerns to analytically capture ignorance in narratives through such a category are relevant to the analysis of race, class, and gendered injustice in narratives. Drawing on Miranda Fricker’s theory of ‘Epistemic Injustice’ (2007), where a speaker sustains a credibility deficit due to prejudices of the hearer, I will conceptualize the ‘unreliable narratee’ as a fictive interlocutor or implied reader who deliberately challenges, denies or ignores the truth claims of a narrative out of personal discomfort, the rejection of responsibility, or prejudiced bias. To illustrate my proposed category, I will draw on a reading of the novella “Er lässt die Hand küssen” (He kisses your hand) (1886) by the Austro-Hungarian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830–1916), in which a noble countess as the narratee rejects learning about the uncomfortable truth of her privilege as being based on the biopolitical exploitation of ethnic and lower-class “Others.” In closing, I will reflect on how the category of the unreliable narratee could be of wider narratological use.

1. Introduction

On first glance, it does not seem complicated how unreliable narration might be relevant for a discussion of the inner limits of narrative. Unreliable narration creates gaps in narratives that are epistemic in nature – as such, unreliable narration is a liminal technique that plays with the boundary between the narrated and what Wolf Schmid (2023) has recently theorized as the “non-narrated”. It constitutes a “withholding of relevant diegetic information” (11) on the part of the narrator, be it unconsciously, as in the case, for example, of “mad” narrators, or in a deliberately deceptive way (16; Shen 2014, 899f.). In either case, unreliable narration creates an epistemic gap in a narrative text through destabilizing the ontological status of elements in the fictional world. The inner limitations that are thus set to a narrative by unreliable narration might be relative or substantial: while Seymour Chatman (1978, 233) has noted early on that unreliable narration is usually deliberately encoded into a text by the author, with textual cues by which the implied reader is able to detect a narrator’s unreliability, a lot of literary texts also play with a form of meta-unreliability in which the (un-)reliability of a narrator can ultimately never be clearly determined. Moreover, readers might identify that a specific narrator is unreliable, but they might nevertheless not be able to recover the epistemic losses that this unreliability has created in a narrative. As constructivist and cognitivist narratologists have pointed out, lastly, whether readers evaluate a narrative as unreliable or not may also be context-dependent and historically contingent (Shen 2014, 901–905). All in all, unreliable narration therefore constitutes one way in which narratives contain inner epistemic limits.

These introductory remarks should so far be very uncontroversial. What this paper intends to do, however, is to examine two areas that have received less scholarly attention when it comes to the relation between unreliable narration and inner limitations of narrative. Firstly, this concerns

the question of reliability in the context of narrating forms of racial, gendered or social injustice – as Dan Shen (2014, 906) notes in her survey article in the *Handbook of Narratology*, the “relation between unreliable narration and gender, class or racial issues” warrants further investigation.¹ Such further investigations, as is the second part of my argument in this paper, should also crucially extend to the yet unexplored side of the narratee of fictional texts. As an analytical category for this undertaking, I am developing the new concept of an unreliable narratee in this article,² as a useful narratological term for thinking about and conceptualizing epistemic gaps in narratives that deal with ethnic, colonialist, or other forms of injustice. Lastly, the paper will discuss potential generalizations of the idea of an unreliable narratee.

2. Unreliable Narration and Epistemic Injustice

For narratives that have been refracted by socio-historical divisions of race, gender, class, and other identity categories, postcolonial theory has highlighted significant epistemic challenges. If, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985, 253) postulates, “no perspective” even “critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self,” she points to a fundamental inner limit of a significant share of narratives produced in the wake of European colonialism. Since there is no possibility of grasping “authentic” Others, and since “retrieving” and then “representing” them might be ethically dubious as a form of epistemological fixation (Ahmed 2000, 8), the central tenets of postcolonial theory challenge the very notion of narrative reliability itself. Spivak’s notion fundamentally questions the extent of ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ of even empathetic perspectives, if not uttered from marginalized intersectional positionalities themselves. Narrative (un-)reliability therefore becomes a central category for thinking about the inner limits of narratives that have been refracted by binary ideologies of identity/alterity, socio-historical processes of difference-making, but also for efforts of reconciliation and seeking “similarity” (Bhatti / Kimmich, 2018). However, as I seek to demonstrate in the following case study, unreliable narration can also function as a key technique through which authors can make visible forms of racial, gendered, and social injustice, and it can also act as a self-reflexive, meta-textual device to highlight the epistemic and ethical limits of narrative representation.

Moreover, if we explore the epistemic gaps created by unreliable narration, it seems worthwhile to also include the other, often overlooked side of the equation, namely, that of the narratee, and,

¹ As Shen’s (2014, 897–905) survey article summarizes, most narratological research on unreliability in the last decades has been concerned with devising finer taxonomies of different types of unreliable narration. Another strand aims to bridge the divide between “rhetorical” approaches which see unreliable narration as deliberately encoded textual strategies, and “constructivist” and “cognitivist” approaches which focus more on reader perception of narrative unreliability. Examinations of unreliable narration from the perspective of politically sensitive “contextualist” narratologies, on the other hand, have been rare, see for example Olson (2018).

² In passing and without any conceptual elaboration, Chatman (1978, 260f.) and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002, 105f.) briefly mention that narratees may be unreliable as well, but they limit this possibility to comical effects when a fictive narratee is ironically invoked as a counter-image of the implied reader. Moreover, Rimmon-Kenan posits that texts must always construct the implied reader as reliable (2002, 105f.), a certainty which shall be challenged in the present study.

on a further level, the implied reader. Particularly in this aspect, literary reflections of (post-)colonial power struggles may point to a gap that has been left out by the foundational models of unreliability in narrative theory. According to Wayne Booth's (1991, 300) early model of deliberately encoded unreliability, a "secret communion of the author and reader" exists "behind the narrator's back." In this theory, an author incorporates specific cues in the narrative text which are there for the reader to detect and decipher so that the narrator's voice emerges as unreliable. Crucially, for this model of 'communion' to work, Booth's model implicitly rests on the assumption that the author and addressee share a common normative and ideological outlook: "the author and reader are secretly in collusion, behind the speaker's back, agreeing upon the standard by which he is found wanting" (304).

However, such an implicit assumption bears the question whether there are forms of unreliable narration when this condition is violated. Firstly, this concerns narratives which deliberately take the opposite assumption as their starting point, namely, that similarities and bonds of communion between narrator and addressee do *not* exist, and secondly, and more widely, any narratives in which we as readers cannot plausibly assume a normative or ideological "communion" between author and addressee. This might be particularly relevant where such bonds of communion have been socio-historically fractured by power struggles based on identity categories.³ In such constellations, it seems vital to not only examine the ethical and intersectional position of the author and narrator, but also that of the addressee. Greta Olson (2018), for example, has challenged Booth's model of 'communion' in her reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. She demonstrates how its narrator-protagonist deliberately takes on the paranoid anxieties of a putatively white, male American narratee through unreliable narration in order to "mimic dominant media images of Muslims as untrustworthy, beyond the law" (162). While Hamid's novel ironically integrates the stereotypical assumptions of the narratee into the narrator's voice, the question arises whether narratives can also portray prejudice as a form unreliability *directly* on the side of the addressee. In short, and turning the conventional dynamics of unreliable narration on its head, is there also a form of 'unreliable listening,' a narrative unreliability on the part of an addressee who rejects the account of a narrator out of ethically dubious motives? Moreover, how do works who deliberately reject the notion of a shared ideological communion encode *lack* of understanding, ignorance, and acts of hegemonic silencing as such a form of narrative unreliability?

To flesh out this conceptualization of what I am coining as an unreliable narratee more clearly, I would like to draw on Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice, and specifically, her notion of testimonial injustice. A person sustains testimonial injustice, as Fricker (2007, 27f.) writes, "if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer," that is, if a speaker is not deemed credible not on the basis of what is being said, but on the basis of their social identity, be it on ethnic, class-based, gendered, or other grounds. It is not hard to imagine fictive narratees that create epistemic gaps in narrative texts by essentially not believing the narrator on the grounds of prejudice.⁴ Moreover, as we will see in the following case study, narrative works can deliberately

³ As Olson remarks, Booth's (2018, 157) model of communion implicitly presupposes that author and reader share similar "positions in terms of class, gender, and bio- and geopolitics."

⁴ Fricker's (2007, 28) prime example through which she develops her own theory is, in fact, a literary text, namely Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "racial identity power is exercised in this way by members of the jury as they make their deflated credibility judgements of Tom Robinson, with the result that he is unable to convey to them the knowledge he has of what happened at the Ewells' place."

integrate such forms of ‘unreliable listening’ in order to mount a social critique of acts of testimonial injustice committed from privileged positions of power.

3. The Unreliable Narratee in Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach’s “Er lasst die Hand küssen” (1886)

My example to illustrate this theoretical conception of an unreliable narratee shall be the novella “Er lasst die Hand küssen” (1886) by the Austro-Hungarian writer Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830–1916). Although not from a (post-)colonial context, this Central European novella stems from the age of the rise of ethno-centric nationalism in the multiethnic Habsburg Empire, whose discursive regimes of inner-European difference-making and alterity (for example against allegedly ‘oriental’ Eastern European Jews, see Annus et al. 2016, 89) to some extent mirrored the exclusionary discourses of European colonialism overseas.⁵ I do by no means intend to suggest that Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach is a postcolonial author, but in line with the theme of the 2025 ENN Conference (“The Limits of Narrative”), her fiction is a great example of testing out the inner limits of narrative self-critique from an intersectionally privileged position. Raised as a Baroness in the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian region of Moravia which is now in the East of the Czech Republic, Marie Ebner-Eschenbach grew up with speaking mainly Czech and French, and only chose German as her literary language in her early twenties (Ebner-Eschenbach 1989, 65). Later, she became a strong opponent of the intensifying ethno-cultural nationalism in late nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary and its divisive rhetoric, which drove German-speakers and Czech-speakers in her homeland further apart from each other (Höhne 2017, 58–61; Křen 2000, 169–224).

A lot of her works are highly self-reflexive texts, in which Ebner addresses the epistemic limitations of writing about the plights of the agrarian Czech-speaking population of her homeland from an empathetic, but fundamentally more privileged position. The negotiation of these concerns can be seen in the novella “Er lasst die Hand küssen” which translates as “He kisses your hand” and was a common devout greeting formula in the Austrian Empire. As one her most formally complex works, “Er lasst die Hand küssen” raises poetological and political questions about the limits of representing others, or better, those being Othered, that are as topical today as they were at the time of the emergence of nationalist ideologies in Central Europe. At the same time, in the form of a refined double-edged critique, this text also provides a sort of metatextual justification for a socially and politically engaged literature against all odds, through the means of what I conceptualize as an unreliable narratee.

“Er lasst die Hand küssen” consists of a frame narrative in which a count tells a countess the story of “einer kleinen Übereilung” [“a small, hastened decision”]⁶ (Ebner-Eschenbach 1956, 154) of his grandmother. This expression turns out to be a drastic euphemism, as the ironic count unfolds his intradiegetic, enclosed narrative. Set at a time “in denen wir noch das jus gladii ausübten” [“when we still exercised the jus gladii”] (156), the action of the enclosed narrative seems

⁵ See the essential volumes by Müller-Funk et al. (2002) and Feichtinger et al. (2003) which have inspired a whole research field of Habsburg Studies in critical engagement with the paradigms of Postcolonial Theory.

⁶ All translations my own.

to take place before the introduction of a uniform penal law in the Austrian Empire during the 1770s and 80s (Ingrao 2019, 225), when the biopolitical power over subjects lay in the hands of feudal elites.

“Er lasst die Hand küssen” emerges as a tale of the blatant abuse of precisely that power. After catching sight of the labourer Mischka at the harvest festivities (Ebner-Eschenbach 1956, 156), the count’s grandmother, motivated by unacknowledged erotic desire, orders her serf to work in her castle gardens. After learning that Mischka has a partner and child, whom the countess mistakes for siblings at first, she seeks to control Mischka and embarks on a spiral of decisions that ultimately lead to the separation of the family and the death of its members and Mischka. To highlight the blatant injustice of Mischka’s treatment by his grandmother, the count lets his tale converge into a drastic, but effective pun at the end: Mischka’s alleged obedience to the grandmother’s orders, which her messenger Fritz always reports with the same eponymous formula, turns out to having been an empty, devout phrase from the mouth of the servile Fritz himself. When Mischka is beaten to death before the message of his pardoning reaches him, Fritz contradictorily reports: “Er laßt die Hand küssen, er ist schon tot” [“He kisses your hand, he is already dead”] (178).

This narrative constellation enables Ebner-Eschenbach to raise critical questions about the ethics and poetics of the empathetic representation of disenfranchised Others, most crucially through the text’s framing device. If the fiction of German Poetic Realism often uses framing devices to create an effect of heightened authenticity by isolating the unfolding intradiegetic action from the interference of the text’s overarching narrator, Ebner-Eschenbach uses the framing device in “Er lasst die Hand küssen” as a self-reflexive metatextual device to question this very idea of narrative authenticity. Secondary literature has already remarked that the narrative frame of the novella critically interrogates the claims of texts “to reflect reality, especially the reality of those [...] who have been the speechless and the powerless” (Worley 1996, 49f.). Most prominently, this happens through the countess as the narratee in the frame narrative who constantly challenges the narrative reliability of the count with frequent interjections. Just to quote a particularly striking instance, there is a passage in the text when the count claims to know the feelings of Mischka with a sense of near-embodiment, which his interlocutor vehemently rejects:

“Der Mischka [...] schämte sich in seine Haut hinein ...” “Es ist doch stark, daß Sie jetzt gar in der Haut Mischkas stecken wollen!” fuhr die Gräfin höhnisch auf. “Bis über die Ohren!” entgegnete der Graf.

[“Mischka was ashamed to his bones ...” “It is quite a thing, that you are now even claiming to be in Mischka’s skin!” said the countess contemptuously. “Up to my ears!” replied the count.] (Ebner-Eschenbach 1956, 162; my translation)

So far, this narrative design fits squarely into present conceptualizations of unreliable narration: the count emerges as a potentially unreliable narrator in the novella who claims to speak for the muted subaltern in the story, Mischka, whose true feelings are irretrievably lost in the epistemic gap which the count’s unreliability creates.

And yet, there is a wider self-critical dynamic at play in “Er lasst die Hand küssen” which hinges on Ebner’s extension of narrative unreliability onto the novella’s fictive narratee. It is in designing the countess as an unreliable narratee and through her reactions to the count’s embedded narrative that Ebner-Eschenbach poignantly attacks an attitude of disengagement, and the genealogical complicity in the violence committed by her own aristocratic class in the enjoyment of their

privileges. This critique is already subtly present in the very first sentence of the novella: “So reden Sie denn in Gottes Namen”, sprach die Gräfin, ‘ich werde Ihnen zuhören, aber glauben nicht ein Wort.” [“So speak then, in god’s name”, said the countess, ‘I will listen to you, but believe I will not a single word.”] (Ebner-Eschenbach 1956, 153). Even before the count has started his narration, and irrespective of its content, the countess already displays a dismissive attitude and does not seem to *want* the story to be true.

This attitude later gains an overtly political dimension. At about two-thirds into the narrative of “Er lässt die Hand küssen,” the nature of the countess’s constant interjections noticeably changes from questioning the reliability of the count to urging him to move on with the story. While Worley (1996, 51) argues that the countess simply “succumbs to the count’s narrative power,” a detailed look at these instances suggests a very different reading. When the count describes Mischka’s mother, he claims:

“Sie, liebe Freundin, kennen sie, wie ich sie kenne.” “Ich soll sie kennen? ... Sie lebt noch?” fragte die Gräfin ungläubig. “Sie lebt, nicht im Urbilde zwar, aber in vielfachen Abbildern. [...]” [...] “Weiter, weiter!” sprach die Gräfin. “Sind Sie bald zu Ende?”

[“You, my dear friend, know her as much as I know her” “I am supposed to know her? ... Is she still alive?” asked the countess in disbelief. “She is alive, not in the original, but in manifold copies.” [...] “Move on, move on!” said the countess. “Are you done soon?”] (Ebner-Eschenbach 1956, 168; my translation)

In the second instance in which the countess urges the count to quickly move on, the latter also ironically suggests that the countess has some experiential or historical knowledge about the abuse of biopolitical power committed by her own class:

“Der Samstag war nämlich zu jener Zeit, deren Sie”, diesem Worte gab der Graf eine besondere, sehr schalkhafte Betonung “sich unmöglich besinnen können, der Tag der Exekutionen. Da wurde die Bank vor das Amtshaus gestellt ...” “Weiter, weiter!” sagte die Gräfin, “halten Sie sich nicht auf mit den unnötigen Details.”

[“The Saturday was at that time, which You”, and the count gave this word an especially ironic tone, “cannot possibly remember, the day of the executions. The bench was put in front of the administrative building...” “Move on, move on”, said the countess, “don’t dwell on the unnecessary details.”] (171; my translation)

A clear, distinguishable pattern emerges: every time the count suggests that the countess in the frame narrative knows the misery of lower-class women very well, and when he reminds his interlocutor of the corporeal punishments that their ancestors were responsible for, she violently dismisses the subject. Utilizing Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice, one could say that the countess in Ebner’s novella exerts a form of epistemic *ignorance*: a deliberate, as Fricker (2016, 170f.; italics in the original) puts it, “*denial* [...] about some uncomfortable truths” and a “conscious [...] resistance to accepting or learning about the sources of [one’s own] social advantage.” Such a denial is, “epistemically culpable” since it involves an “*interested or motivated cognitive bias*” (170, italics in the original) in not wanting to be confronted with social realities and questions about the perpetuation of injustice through that very attitude.

Apart from a potentially unreliable intradiegetic narrator, “Er lässt die Hand küssen” therefore features what I would like to coin as an *unreliable narratee* in the countess. The definition of the unreliable narratee following from this interpretation presents itself as the following: *an unreliable narratee is a fictive interlocutor or implied reader who deliberately challenges, denies or ignores the truth claims of a narrative out of dubious motives*, such as personal discomfort, the rejection of responsibility, or the execution of testimonial injustice. An unreliable narratee also creates epistemic gaps in the narrative

in the form of denial or ignorance, in the case of Ebner's novella this concerns the truth status of the events in the *histoire* of the embedded narrative presented by her interlocutor, the count. The result, a form of meta-unreliability emerging from potential unreliability of both narrator and narratee, makes the socially critical potential of the text all the more effective. For the other, less explored half of Ebner's self-reflexive critique which is enabled by designing a fictive interlocutor as an unreliable narratee, it is ultimately irrelevant how reliable or unreliable the count's narration is. His tale functions as an exemplary story about the aristocratic abuse of power against disenfranchised Others out of egoistic motives, and his fictive unreliable narratee functions as an object of critique in her epistemic ignorance and avoidance of the subject at hand.

In this way, "Er lässt die Hand küssen" features both a poetological and a class-focused aristocratic self-critique, a double-edged critique of the intersectionally privileged aristocratic position from which Ebner-Eschenbach wrote herself. Via the unreliability of the count as a narrator, she negotiates questions about the limits of empathetic representation of lower-class Others, and therefore of her own literary and aesthetic project of advocacy for the mostly Czech-speaking populace of her homeland. Ultimately, the novella provides no solution for the ethics and dilemmata of representation, and the epistemic gaps created by unreliability cannot be bridged in the text. With the equally self-reflexive countess as an exemplary unreliable narratee, however, Ebner-Eschenbach highlights that disengagement, the shying away from difficult questions of responsibility, and the lack of acknowledgement of one's own implicatedness in ethnic and class-based violence is no alternative either.

4. Directions Towards a Generalized Concept of the Unreliable Narratee

The example this initial paper has provided for conceptualizing the category of the unreliable narratee is very straightforward and contained: in Ebner's novella, we have a clearly defined frame narrative in which two clearly defined literary characters act as the narrator and narratee for the intradiegetic narrative. I would nevertheless argue that the category of the unreliable narratee harbors wider potential for capturing the epistemic gaps that narratively designed or implied listeners create through ignorance or prejudice, and for identifying the textual strategies by which narratives make such forms of violence manifest. This not only pertains to a clearly fleshed out fictional narratee, but also the implied reader. Coming back to Olson's (2018) re-reading of narrative unreliability in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, she remarks: "unreliability needs to be understood as a rhetorical strategy that can be used to uncover and trouble the position of sociocultural and representational privilege from which the reader may begin her engagement with a fictional narrative." (27). While Olson's study centers more around the cultural biases behind how actual readers ascribe a narrator's unreliability, my proposed category of the unreliable narratee aims to provide a useful tool for capturing the epistemic gaps and biases constructed *within* the text by a fictive narratee or the image of the implied reader which the text creates.

It is not hard to imagine a whole body of texts, for example in a postcolonial context, that have essentially been written against the ignorance or prejudice of a biased narratee or implied reader in mind, as a form of oppositional "writing against," and the category of the unreliable narratee would allow for an exploration of how this ignorance and prejudice of a hegemonic position of

privilege is concretely encoded into narratives. If we extend Spivak's central dictum for postcolonial criticism, it is not only about who is 'speaking for,' it is also about who is not 'listening to.' Apart from this central concern of my paper, the category of the unreliable narratee could be generally applied to any cases in which epistemic gaps are created in a narrative because a fictive interlocutor deliberately or out of other reasons denies or ignores the truth claims of a narrative out of self-interested and questionable motives, or how such ignorance is narratively encoded for a text's image of its implied reader. These extensions of the concept of the unreliable narratee, however, remain to be tested by future research⁷ and more extensive examples from a broader corpus of narratives.

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⁷ The question to which degree Booth's notion of 'communion' is truly violated in narratives with an unreliable narratee, for example, certainly requires more theoretical elaboration and case studies, as it will depend on the diegetic level on which we might encounter 'unreliable listening.' For narratives with clearly fleshed-out intrafictive unreliable narratees, for example, one could plausibly argue that the "collusion" between author and reader (Booth 1991, 304) remains in place, through textual cues through which a reader detects that not the narrator, but the narratee's listening is unreliable.

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