

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

**CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication**

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## **SOCIAL CRITIQUE AND NARRATIVE DESIGN IN “ETTA MAE JOHNSON” BY GLORIA NAYLOR**

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*Abstract: My analysis of Gloria Naylor’s story depicting the second memorable female character in the short-story cycle *The Women of Brewster Place* offers a rhetorical reading of the text, establishing a link between technique and ethics.*

*Keywords: aesthetics vs ethics, the rhetorical approach to narrative, progression, heterodiegetic narration, focalization*

“Etta Mae Johnson” is the second story in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor's short-story cycle, published in 1982. The book, as a whole, addresses the plight of African-American women in the 1960s, by depicting a range of characters (mainly women) who have all ended up living in an isolated, impoverished urban tenement neighborhood called the Brewster Place, situated on the outskirts of an unnamed American city. In the volume’s prologue (“Dawn”) the narrator anticipated the readers’ subsequent encounter with “hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased” (5) women, representatives of the third generation of the Brewster children who “came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason” (4). This category delineation serves as guidance for interpretation and limits the audience’s range of expectations. These elements are also reinforced by the epigraph of the volume – Langston Hughes’ poem “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?”

Similarly to the previous parts of the cycle (the prologue and the short story “Mattie Michael”), Gloria Naylor employs the narrative technique of a heterodiegetic narrator reporting

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and commenting on the story world. To maintain the audience's familiarization with the fictional world of the Brewster Place, Naylor uses Mattie Michael (the protagonist of the first story in the cycle) as a hostess to the next African-American woman of the volume.

As far as the story-discourse (progression) of "Etta Mae Johnson" is concerned, the audience's interests in the narrative is generated, sustained, and developed in two ways: an initial relief of tension of unequal knowledge between the narrator/writer and the audience, followed by the introduction and resolution of one major instability. Everything up to the introduction of this instability (almost in the middle of the text) serves to disclose information about the protagonist and her life history, information that is necessary for the authorial audience's understanding of why she will act the way she does in the focused narrative of related events. The movement of this tale is one stratagem serving the purpose of demonstrating how people end up living in Brewster Place for good. This time (as opposed to "Mattie Michael") it was important to set up an instability in the story to show why a high-flying, defiant woman of easy virtue, who has come to Brewster Place on a visit, surrenders and stays put. In other words, having established the overarching thematic background in the first half of the text, Naylor designs the trajectory of the main action around the mimetic interest in Etta and her capitulation.

The story refers to events that unfold over the course of less than 24 hours, depicting Etta's arrival in Brewster Place one hot summer afternoon, followed by the description of the evening and night events of the same day – this is all it takes for Etta's portrayal to be complete and her defeat to be accomplished. A dialogue and the device of associative memory enables Naylor to furnish information about the major events of Etta's life up to her coming to Brewster Place

The story begins with half a page of italic font in order to introduce information regarding a key moment in Etta Mae Johnson's youth: her seeing and listening to Billie Holiday (a plump yellow woman with white gardenias pinned to the side of her head, the real-life singer's trademark) sing the song "I Love My Man", which the young southern girl immediately

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resonated with. The song lyrics are quoted immediately after a free space and with them the text progresses in roman, regular font to relate the focused events of this narrative.

Etta Mae Johnson, a short middle-aged woman, comes to visit her friend Mattie Michaels in Brewster and she does so in a calculated way – driving a freshly-cleaned apple-green Cadillac and wearing a ten-minute old dress, white sandals and oversized sunglasses (one of her long practiced facades in order to hide the traces of a several-day journey by car). It is only in Mattie's presence that Etta feels safe and gives up her “carefully erected decoys” (58), as the two women have a relationship built on trust, common childhood memories and shared laughter, which has offered them refuge in front of life's repeated deceptions and heartbreaks.

Very important in the progression of the story is the fact that it is on her arrival when, for the first time, Etta, who has been to the neighborhood times before, gets to see the blocking wall of the Brewster Place and to realize that the blind alley is feeding into a dead end. Later, a conversation with Mattie reveals Etta's motive for her current trip to Brewster Place. The audience learns that Etta Mae Johnson has comes to the gray, cold and decaying Brewster, to visit her close friend Mattie, after having robbed her lover, a respectable married man, the son-in-law of a certain county sheriff. A word of endearment Mattie uses makes Etta recall her youth back in Rock Vale, Tennessee, which occasions major insights into her life so far, disclosing information about Etta's course of life. All her life, while unrealistically chasing the mirage of lasting love and good times around the country, Etta has been living the life of an easy woman. Considering herself too good to have a regular job, she has always been on the prowl for “business opportunities”, i.e. “promising rising black stars” (60) to live with and support her, and when one burnt out, she would move on to the next.

When Mattie suggests it was time for Etta to settle down by finding a life partner among the widowers in her church, Etta accepts to accompany her friend to church the same evening. This is the moment the instability of this text is introduced – will Etta land a convenient marital deal among the Canaan Baptist Church men? Once there, Etta realizes she has been yearning for conventional stability and respectability and succumbs to a mood of regret as she enviously

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watches the “deacons' wives and the Ladies' Auxiliary sealed in the foremost pews” (65). The guest speaker for the night is Reverend Moreland T. Woods, a self-confident magnetic orator. Etta is immediately attracted to him despite having met his type before, in “poolrooms, nightclubs, grimy second-floor insurance offices, numbers dens, and on a dozen street corners. But here was a different sort of power. The jungle sharpened instincts of a man like that could move her up to the front of the church, ahead of deacons' wives and Ladies' Auxiliary, off of Brewster Place for good” (66).

But what Woods offers her is no more than a night out culminating with a disappointing one-night stand, and Etta having bitterly failed again returns defeated to the despondent Brewster Place. What prevents her constant need for flight to manifest this time again is Mattie, who despite resenting Etta's decision to go out with the reverend has stayed up all night, listening to Etta's old records of beloved Billie Holiday, in order to catch her falling friend and console her after an evening of emptiness.

The last paragraphs achieve both closure and completeness. The instability has been completely resolved, the audience having understood that with this episode of a dismally failed pursuit of another promising black star, Etta's days of glory as a high-flying seductress are over. Closure is achieved by describing her wearily making for Mattie's apartment where Mattie is waiting up for her to offer “love and comfort”. Completeness - by implying that Etta too will live in Brewster Place for the rest of her life: the street “crouched there in the thin predawn light [appeared to Etta] like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival” (73). The ending causes the authorial audience to view the place as the ultimate station on the character's journey to her demise.

By the end of the story, our knowledge of Etta's universe is complete: we know the kind of world we are reading about, we have come to understand why she ends up living in Brewster Place, we have seen Etta's personality in action, and we have grasped Etta's major attributes. The entire character construction proves Etta is not as introspective, alert, realistic, sensitive or moral as Lucielia or Mattie in the same book and that her moral issues are fairly hard to be

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digested by the rest of the community. She is also unwilling to grow and evolve, her transformation over the course of the narrated events is very limited, if it occurs at all. Maybe there is a minor move toward some clear-sightedness. However, in her way and despite major moral issues, she is “hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased” (5), all of which in a male-dominated world lead to her eventual resignation and surrender, i.e. exactly what the narrator anticipated in “Dawn.” The central issues of the whole volume have been confirmed for the second time: a complex woman defeated by life circumstances. A useful device in this story, serving both characterization and progression, is the insertion of a number of verses of Billie Holiday’s songs that fulfill several purposes: character depiction, anticipation, prophesy, emphasis and conclusion. There are exactly twenty instances of song lyrics which guide readers’ expectations and understanding of the character step by step.

In this story once again Naylor's treatment of the protagonist is directed toward emphasizing the character’s thematic dimension, the progression giving importance to the thematic sphere in the story as a whole. Etta is the second female representative (to be depicted) of this dead-end street and thus of a dead-end destiny. Her destiny identifies Etta as the individual female who after a lifetime of playing men according to her will, accepts defeat at the hand of these men.

As far as narration technique is concerned, a noncharacter (heterodiegetic) narrator reports the elements of the narrative world of “Etta Mae Johnson,” therefore, in the words of James Phelan, such narrator acts as our “lens on the story world” (116) and provides their own slant (angle of reporting and set of attitudes), which ultimately influences how audiences perceive that world (115). However, in this short-story the narrator chooses to offer several other angles of vision (filters) on the story world. More often than not the narration leaves the narrator’s perspective for a character’s (i.e. there is a focalization shift) and then the audience get to hear the voices of the focalizers.

Firstly, Naylor gives Etta a significant voice in the narrative, in fact she reports most of the events of the story progression from Etta’s perspective. In doing this Naylor occupies the

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perspective of a loose-life male-dependent self-indulgent woman, and Naylor asks us to take that perspective seriously and even sympathize with her. In the words of James Phelan (when analyzing *Lolita*): “The ethics of the novel [...] involves performing one of the best functions of art: extending the perceptions and feelings of its dominant audience” (130).

Secondly, occasionally Naylor switches to the perspective of other characters such as Mattie, reverend Woods, and the group of people witnessing Etta’s arrival in Brewster Place. In this way the narrator makes sure that the audience participates in the key moments of the scenes, and that events are perceived through the filters of all directly involved characters’ attitudes so that the audience understand the (ethical) situations from the inside. In the end, by shifting focalization, what Naylor achieves is a balanced view of the course of events, but her ultimate goal with the overall treatment of the topic is to determine the audience to agree that Etta’s behavior is after all worthy of defense. In other words, the narrator manipulates his audience into sympathizing with Etta by objectifying her situation. She signals the audience to see that Etta is an easy woman, with rather selfish desires and designs, but simultaneously Naylor points out how Etta is shamelessly used and discarded by an even more manipulative and selfish character in the predaceous person of Reverend Moreland T. Woods. If Naylor restricted the perspective to that of Etta’s, chances were that she would not have been as successful in exonerating her.

In general Naylor’s heterodiegetic narrator is kind to her female characters - it is the attitude which prevails in the book. Naylor needs more characters as focalisers in the narration, though, as seeing things exclusively as Etta sees them would mean missing the idea that Etta has lived all her life deluding herself into relationships with the wrong kind of men. In order to provide a clear picture of Etta’s failure, Naylor offers a combination of points of view: Etta’s delusional perspective, Mattie’s realistic vision and the reverend’s misogynistic take of events, having us participate in the trajectory of Etta's own emotions and downfall. Naylor’s treatment of Etta (and her character construction as a multidimensional character) does not allow an outburst of serious prejudices towards her. The idea is that Etta is not the only woman living

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like this, placing relationships with men at the center of their lives, expecting them to support them financially and to offer them respectability and an identity in society - it is a matter of the way the class-gender system works to prevent a poor and ambitious woman from having any serious economic opportunity.

The closure is the moment when the narrator's attitude comes through, when she wants us to see the female solidarity. Naylor's final hint is at the kindness these women share with one another in times of joy and sorrow, this is also the first example in the volume of how Mattie Michael's personality binds the women in the community. There is trust, understanding, nurturing, and companionship in her presence.

Naylor's handling of narration technique with everything it involves (discourse, focalization, voice etc.) is meant to gain full control over the effects of the narration on the axis of ethics and evaluation. She controls how Etta comes across. As a result of this focus, our ethical positioning in and conclusion of the story become the following: granted Etta has always been a woman of easy virtue, always on the prowl for a well-positioned partner, but most of the times she became the victim of even more materialistic, selfish and predaceous men, who had no scruples in using women as sex objects for their own egotistic and sexual gratification.

In conclusion, "Etta Mae Johnson" is a short-story which proves that progression and technique have clear consequences for the audience's ethical positioning. The reactions to a story such as Etta's is an ethical one. Etta has been a parasite, an easy woman and felon in many ways throughout her life. Consequently, it is challenging to try to exonerate such a character. And still Naylor in bringing these ethical issues to the foreground pulls it off, offering a logical explanation and transforming a morally questionable subject into articulate art. It is a convincing and complex social critique. In her treatment of Etta, the narrator succeeds in offering a realist perspective on ethically sensitive realities and ends on a note of gentleness and fondness, which accepts total acceptance from the part of the audience. The success is based on the negotiation of the relationship between technique and ethics in this narrative.

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