ROLE OF THE NARRATOR IN AN ADVENTURE COMIC BOOK

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1. 'TWIXT SPEECH AND WRITING

Comic books provide an interesting, yet largely untapped set of texts.[1] The verbal material in an adventure comic book is sufficient to be meaningfully analyzed, yet small enough to be handled thoroughly. Comic books bridge the chasm that separates speech and writing.

On the speech side of the bridge is the <u>visual material</u> within each panel. Indeed, the absence of an immediate contextual envelop is a primary factor distinguishing writing from speech. In comic books, however, each illustration supplies a visual context through which the reader easily enters the instantial world. She/He sees characters operating within their world, characters who in turn see and react with other characters.

The <u>speech</u> <u>balloons</u> stand midway on the bridge, simulating actual speech. Writing's nearest analogue is material within quotation marks. Yet, the verbal material within the balloons exhibits few actual speech characteristics that discourse analysts observe, characteristics such as fillers, restarts, shifts, post-completions, recurrences, reusages, and the like (Beaugrande, 1982: 240-253).

The <u>narrator</u> <u>blocks</u> rest on the writing side of the bridge. They have no analogue in speech, but they do supply textual cohesion and provide underpinning for the reader's perception of discoursal coherence.

All comic books possess visuals; otherwise, they

would not be comic books. Almost all comics have speech
balloons. (Ferd'nand, however, has only visuals.) But not
all comic books have narrator blocks. For instance, Dennis,
the Menace (Vol. 1, No. 11, September 1982) needs no am-
plification of events or situations, beyond that provided
by the visuals and the balloons. Adventure heroes, on
the other hand, carry out their missions in strange worlds.
Their real-world readers often need insights and comment-
ary to understand the reasons for the characters' actions,
and to perceive the import of unusual situations and
events. Conan, the Barbarian, No. 135, June 1982, "The
Forest of the Night," (henceforth, simply Conan, the
Barbarian) is a representative adventure comic book.

2. SURVEY OF THE TEXT

Conan, the Barbarian, is an ongoing adventure story.
Each issue presents the hero with a problem that he must
overcome and solve. (Occasionally, as with the November
and December 1982 issues, a single adventure spans two
issues.) The plot outline is given in Figure 1 (next
page). There are seven major divisions or episodes; these
are indicated by roman numerals. Each episode contains
one or more scenes, shown by capital letters.

The introductory episode plugs into the previous
issue, and situates Conan in a foreboding forest. In
episode two, Conan meets Merya, the mysterious woman in
the plot. He is immediately seduced by her. Allusions are
made to the god of darkness, Arawn, who is Merya's lord,
and whom Conan must overpower later in the adventure.

Episodes three, four, and five constitute the body
of the adventure, containing by far the largest portion
of visual and verbal material. A wild nightmare dominates
episode three. As a result, Conan realizes he is cursed,
and must purge himself of the spell. In episode four, he
seeks out and finds Merya. In a flashback, she tells her
tale of woe, and enlists Conan as her salvation from
Arawn. Arawn, the god of darkness/hell/death, seizes
Merya in episode five. Conan gives chase, and vanquishes
the god in the climactic battle scene, scene F.

Merya is saved from Arawn's clutches, but she must
die in episode six. (After all, were Conan to marry and
settle down, the series would pretty well terminate.)
In episode seven, the conclusion, Conan safely returns to
the garrison and dines with his friend, Cleon.

EPISODES (roman numerals) and SCENES (capital letters) of
Conan, the Barbarian, "The Forest of the Night," No. 135,
June, 1982

   I. INTRODUCTION
      A. Setting; transition from previous adventure
      B. Initial premonitions; stag kill for meal

  II. CONAN - MERYA INITIAL MEETING EPISODE
      A. Seduction scene
      B. Bewitched forest disappears

 III. NIGHTMARE EPISODE
      A. Conan's return to the garrison; Cleon's wagering
      B. Barkeep's warning
      C. Dream fight: owl and stag
      D. Deer head omen
      E. Conan's leaving the garrison; Cleon's wagering

  IV. CONAN - MERYA SECOND MEETING EPISODE
      A. Conan finds Merya; Merya's explanation
      B. Flashback: Merya's story
      C. Merya's revelation; Conan as her savior
      D. Stag attacks Conan; steed bears Merya away

   V. CONAN VS. ARAWN EPISODE
      A. Conan tracks Merya
      B. Arawn's altar draws Merya
      C. Conan battles Arawn's beasts
      D. Conan's initial attack on Arawn
      E. Conan battles illusory serpent
      F. Conan's climactic battle against Arawn

  VI. MERYA'S DEATH EPISODE
      A. Merya's death and burial

 VII. CONCLUSION
      A. Conan's return to the garrison; meal from Cleon's
          wagering

Figure 1

The narrative structure presented in Figure 1 forms the basis for the first column of Table 1 (on the following page).

The 135 picture panels present the visual orienta- tion for <u>Conan</u>, <u>the</u> <u>Barbarian</u>. Table 1, column 2, shows the number of panels for each episode and scene. For example, episode I contains six panels; the first scene, A, has only a single panel, while the second scene, B, has five panels. The third column of Table 1 indicates the percentage of the entire adventure that each episode occupies. The six panels of episode I constitute 4% of the visual text. Note that the three central episodes -- III, IV, and V -- contain 109 of the 135 panels, or 80% of the entire comic book.

The speech balloons and the narrator blocks carry the text's verbal material. There are a total of 263 utterances or verbal chunks, roughly a ratio of two utterances for each panel. For the purposes of this analysis, I define an <u>utterance</u> as follows:

> A balloon or block of linguistic text within a single panel, visually or graphically se- parated from other balloons or blocks within the same panel.

Thus, when Merya says,

> "Conan! For every step you take --"
>   V D 19 (4) - U2 [2]

followed in the succeeding panel by,

> " -- you move farther away!"
>   V D 19 (5) - U1

I count two utterances, even though the two chunks com-

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[2]Utterances are identified as follows (using the present utterance as an example):
       V ..... episode V
       D ..... scene D
       19 ..... 19th page of the original comic book text
       (4) ..... fourth panel on that page
       U2 ..... second utterance within that panel

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE	NUMBER OF PANELS (EPISODES AND SCENES)	PERCENTAGE OF EPISODE PANELS TO ENTIRE NARRATIVE	NUMBER OF UTTERANCES (EPISODES AND SCENES)	PERCENTAGE OF EPISODE UTTERANCES TO ENTIRE NARRATIVE	PERCENTAGE OF NARRATOR BLOCK UTTERANCES (EPISODES AND SCENES)
I	6	4%	11	4%	100%
A	1		2		100%
B	5		9		100%
II	13	10%	25	10%	20%
A	9		16		19%
B	4		9		22%
III	39	29%	80	30%	25%
A	6		17		6%
B	5		10		10%
C	13		22		50%
D	8		14		43%
E	7		17		6%
IV	29	21%	53	20%	32%
A	7		15		27%
B	8		11		0%
C	5		11		9%
D	9		16		75%
V	41	30%	77	29%	25%
A	4		9		44%
B	3		4		75%
C	4		8		25%
D	5		9		11%
E	7		12		42%
F	18		35		11%
VI A	4	3%	9	3%	22%
VII A	3	2%	8	3%	25%
TOTAL	135	99%	263	99%	29%

TABLE   1

Note: Percentages rounded off to nearest whole
number; totals may not be 100%.

prise a single complex surface sentence. And when Conan
earlier says,

> "With these trees gone, I see I've veered north,
> into the foothills. The garrison's not a day's
> walk away!"   II B 4 (6) - U1

I count a single utterance, though it obviously contains
two complete surface sentences.

Table 1, column 4, indicates the number of utterances
for each episode and scene. Table 1, column 5, shows the
percentage of the entire verbal text of 263 utterances
that each episode contains. Notice the general congruence
of percentage figures in columns 3 and 5.

This paper focuses upon the functional role of the
narrator blocks. Table 1, column 6, shows the percentage
of narrator block utterances to all utterances in each
episode and scene. For example, 25% of the utterances
in episode III are narrator block utterances, ranging
from a low of 6% in scenes A and E (each with one of 17
utterances) to a high of 50% in scene C (11 of 22 utter-
ances). There are eight scenes where nearly half (40%
or more) of the verbal text is carried by narrator blocks.

The narrator's 76 utterances (29% of the total
utterances) is surpassed only by the 86 utterances of
Conan, the hero (33% of the total utterances). My con-
jecture was that the narrator blocks are quite crucial
for comprehending Conan, the Barbarian, as text and
discourse.

3. ROLE OF THE NARRATOR

Figure 2 classifies the functional roles of the
narrator blocks. All but three of the narrator block
utterances are intra-narrative. Let us briefly consider,
then, contextual and extra-narrative functions.

The contextual function serves a preparatory pur-
pose. It establishes for the reader the instantial world
in which the narrative unfolds, tying it in with the
previous issue's story. Consider the initial utterance
of the narrator in this issue:

> "After his recent return to his Cimmerian home-
> land, Conan has drifted west into the area
> known as the border kingdom. There, at least

[FIGURE 2]
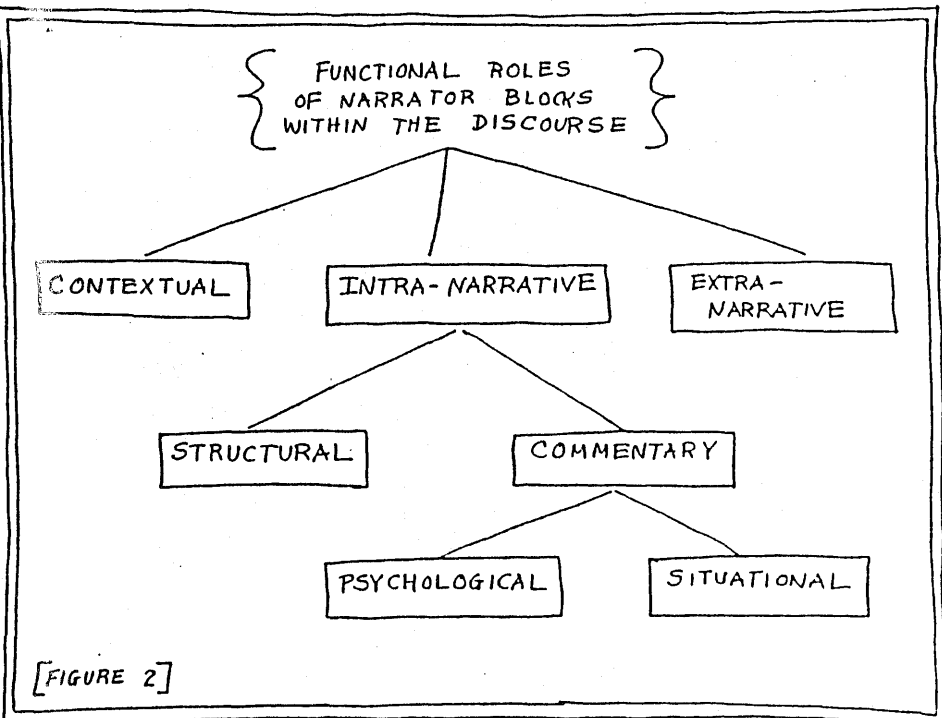
for a little while, he plans to act as a scout
along the frontier."   I A 1 (1) - U1

The <u>extra-narrative</u> role permits the narrator to
inform the reader about some real world situation. In
the final utterance of the text, the reader's interest
is whetted with news of the July issue:

"Next issue: Bruce Jones and John Buccema team
up to bring you -- "River of Death""
                              VII A 23 (8) - U3

The narrator may further supply the reader with foot-
notes. The present issue contains no examples, but in
<u>Conan, the Barbarian</u>, No. 138, September 1982, "Isle of
the Dead," page 3, panel 3, utterance 3, we find:

" *See issue #134, "A Hitch in Time" -- Louise"

The vast number of narrator block utterances serve
an <u>intra-narrative</u> function. The <u>structural</u> function
presents the narrator as story-weaver. The narrator
either provides new settings, participants, or topics in
the structural development of the story, or provides
cohesive connections between segments (episodes, scenes,
panels) signaling structural relationships. For instance,
after Conan's seduction by Merya in II A, scene B of
the same episode begins,

          " -- But when he awakens ..."   II B 4 (3) - U1

And, in III E, where Conan requests a leave of absence
to purge himself of the curse, we find,

          "Minutes later, at the stables .."
                                        III E 11 (6) - U1

The <u>commentary</u> function presents the narrator as
commentator. The narrator offers explanatory comments
which help the reader understand the 'why' and the 'how'
of the characters' actions or of the events in the ad-
venture.

In the <u>psychological</u> role, the omniscient narrator
comments upon or peers into the minds of the characters.
He supplies us with insights into the inner feelings and
workings of the characters' minds, sharing with us a
character's private thoughts. In IV D, Conan has been
knocked unconscious by one of Arawn's stags, and Merya
is forced to mount the steed sent by the dark god. Con-
sider this sequence of three utterances:

          "If only her champion ..."   IV D 16 (5) - U2

          "No. He, too, is still, her vain hopes crushed
          with him."   IV D 16 (6) - U1

          "She knows she has no choice." IV D 16 (6) - U2

In the <u>situational</u> role, the narrator offers com-
ments about a character, a situation, an action, an
event. Where the psychological function probes or com-
ments upon X's thoughts, the situational function tells
us about X. In IV D, the same episode and scene as in
the above example, Conan faces the charging stag, but
this time, as contrasted with the nightmare scuffle in
III C, we are told that he is better prepared:

          "Yet, this time, Conan wields bow and arrow, not

>   sword."   IV D 15 (7) - U1

An obvious problem with defining the term utterance
as I have done is that not all narrator block utterances
fall neatly into only one of the terminal boxes in Fig-
ure 2. Several narrator block utterances spill into two
functional roles. For example, when Conan heads for
his bunk at the end of III B, the narrator tells us,

>   "Cleon's words fall on deaf ears   [situational
>   function -- comment on the action]   , for Conan
>   can only hear the cries of a stag that screamed
>   like a man   [psychological function -- what's
>   going on in Conan's mind] ." III B 7 (1) - U3

And later, in III D, when his companions realize that
a curse has fallen upon Conan, the narrator says,

>   "Silently, they return to their beds   [struc-
>   tural function -- the story-weaver]   as if
>   Conan were no longer among them   [situational
>   function -- the commentator] ."
>   III D 10 (5) - U2

In sum, of the 76 narrator block utterances (out of a
total of 263 utterances), 13 are multi-functional.

4. A READING - FREE RECALL EXERCISE

I then wanted to discover how comprehension would
suffer if the three variables -- visual material, speech
balloons, and narrator blocks -- were manipulated. I set
up five realistic texts:
   [+ visuals, + balloons, + blocks] -- the original, un-
      adulterated comic book;
   [- visuals, + balloons, + blocks] -- verbal text; Fig-
      ure 3 presents the script of the five panels of
      page 7 of the comic book: narrator blocks are pre-
      sented in capital letters, non-linguistic utter-
      ances in capital letters with jagged underlining,
      and speech balloons in normal letters following
      the character speaking. (Figures 3-6, on the follow-
      ing pages, are all identical story material from
      episode III, the nightmare episode.);
   [+ visuals, - balloons, + blocks] -- speech balloons
      removed, Figure 4;
   [+ visuals, + balloons, - blocks] -- narrator blocks
      removed, Figure 5;
   [+ visuals, - balloons, - blocks] -- both speech bal-

page 7, panel 1:

    Conan: I fear ... he speaks the truth.

    Cleon: Conan! Wait!

    CLEON'S WORDS FALL ON DEAF EARS, FOR CONAN CAN ONLY
    HEAR THE CRIES OF A STAG THAT SCREAMED LIKE A MAN.

page 7, panel 2:

    HIS THOUGHTS KEEP HIM AWAKE INTO THE NIGHT.

    SLOWLY, HE TOO, DRIFTS TO SLEEP --

page 7, panel 3:

    -- A SLEEP ABRUPTLY SHATTERED!

    Owl: SKRAH!

    Conan: Crom! An owl -- smashing shutters built to
        withstand half a legion!

page 7, panel 4:

    Conan: The others still sleep as if bewitched!

    Owl: SKREEE!

    Conan: This is sorcery!

page 7, panel 5:

    Conan: I've fought sorcerous creatures before ... and
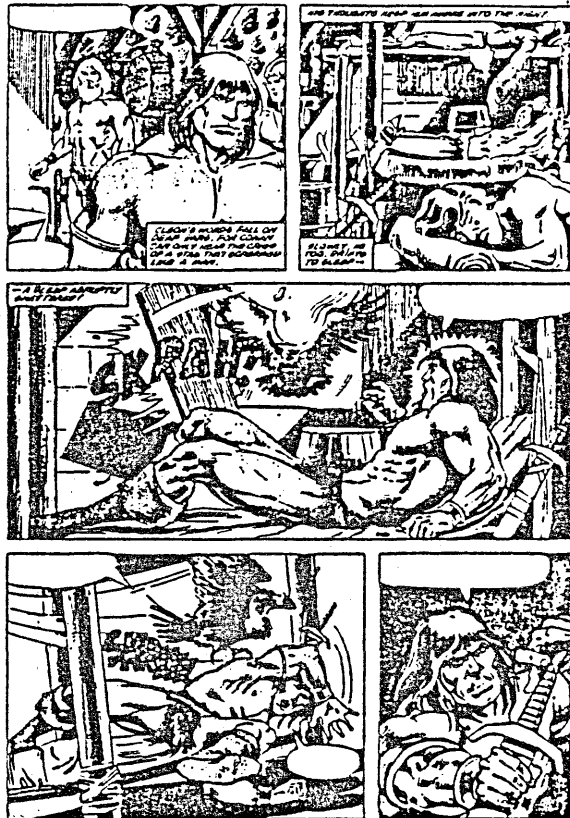   I've learned one lesson well --

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

loons and narrator blocks removed, Figure 6.

I purchased several complete copies of <u>Conan, the
Barbarian</u>, No. 135. I typed out the complete verbal
text or script (as in Figure 3). The Drake University
Educational Media Services made me three complete texts
in the manner of Figures 4-6.

I then enlisted 20 subjects, all Drake University
students. (Actually there were 23 subjects; I needed
some insurance, knowing that some students would sign
up as subjects only to forget about the appointment.)
I had, therefore, at least four subjects for each set
of texts. Each subject read one of the versions. When
she/he had finished and indicated that she/he under-
stood as well as possible, I asked the subject to recall
the story on tape -- as fully and as accurately as pos-
sible. I encouraged subjects to make oral footnotes if
they remembered some detail out of its order. I then
left the room so each subject would feel as much at
ease as possible.

This was an exercise, not an experiment. An experi-
ment implies stringent controls and a resultant body of
quantitatively analyzable data. I, however, wanted to
obtain subjects' free recall protocols, much as Janet
Emig's (1971) protocols. Using Figure 1 as a model or
template of the narrative structure of the text, I
then listened several times to each free recall, noting
down the sequential structuring and the degree of detail.
Naturally (and unfortunately), individual style of recall
is a variable that I could not control. Some free re-
calls were more detailed and more elegant than others.
Two of them were relatively useless.

For ease of reference, subjects and texts are noted
as follows:
O-subjects .... the <u>o</u>riginal, unadulaterated text;
V-subjects .... text with <u>v</u>isual material removed
                (Figure 3);
B-subjects .... text with speech <u>b</u>alloons removed
                (Figure 4);
N-subjects .... text with <u>n</u>arrator blocks removed
                (Figure 5);
BN-subjects .... text with both speech <u>b</u>alloons and
                <u>n</u>arrator blocks removed (Figure 6).

<u>Names</u>. As noted previously, the four principal
characters are Conan, the hero; Merya, the woman; Arawn,
the god of darkness; and Cleon, Conan's friend. B- and

BN-subjects used only Conan's name, referring to the
other characters as 'the beautiful lady,' 'some kind
of evil guy,' 'big mean Viking guy.' On the other hand,
V- and N-subjects employed names, although not always
correctly: 'Creon,' 'Myra,' 'Arnus.' Inexplicably,
O-subjects, like B- and BN-subjects, generally omitted
characters' names. They also seemed to prefer to use
referring phrases, such as 'this one witch,' 'the king
of death.'

    Detail. As could be surmised, detail was most ser-
iously lacking with B- and BN-subjects. Detail was
fullest with O- and N-subjects. Certain episodes, such
as III, the nightmare episode, elicited detailed recall
especially from O- and N-subjects. The Conan vs. Arawn
episode, V, on the other hand, seemed to thwart detail-
ed recall. Only N-subjects used any detail here. Perhaps
the many, rapidly unfolding scenes of this episode
bombarded the reader with too much ongoing action.
Scenes A through E were either omitted, or conflated
and skimmed over. Only scene F, the actual climactic
battle (18 panels) received any significant detail.

    Inferences. B- and BN-subjects often conjectured
about events and actions. Lacking speech balloons,
these guesses were often faulty. For example, one sub-
ject stated, 'the girl steals the horse Conan had and
leads all the animals away (IV D). Actually, Merya is
compelled to mount the steed which Arawn had sent;
Arawn's animals of the forest accompany her.

    Uncorrected ordering problems, and back-tracking.
V-, N-, and BN-subjects experienced some difficulty in
recalling events in their correct sequence. For example,
two V-subjects mis-ordered the first three scenes in
episode IV as A, C, and then B. One BN-subject mis-
ordered scene C of episode V between scenes E and F.
Perhaps narrator blocks do aid in keeping the story
sequentially on track. Back-tracking occurs when a
subject recognizes an ordering problem and seeks to
correct it. Most back-tracking occurred with N-subjects,
although there was a moderate amount with O- and BN-
subjects. One N-subject, completing the recall of
episode III, suddenly remembered details of scenes A
and D of that episode. Another N-subject, while recall-
ing V C, remembered that an owl had tried to kill Conan
in his nightmare in III C. Some BN-subjects felt com-
pelled to provide rather lengthy commentaries, as
addenda, after finishing the narrative recall. They
apparently were trying to work out to their own satis-

faction the many loose ends that resulted from being deprived of all verbal material.

　　Omissions. All subjects, except BN-subjects, omitted many scenes of episode V. This is a visually action packed episode. Possibly, these BN-subjects, deprived of all verbal material, were applying extra effort to the visuals in an attempt to understand the story. V-subjects omitted the most of episode V. As could be guessed, N- and BN-subjects floundered in recalling episode I, the initial episode; here narrator blocks make up 100% of the verbal material. B- and BN-subjects generally omitted IV C; over 90% of the verbal material in this scene is carried in speech balloons, and there is very little visual activity. IV B, the only scene in the entire narrative which has no narrator blocks, was omitted by only two B-subjects. Almost all subjects recognized that Merya was relating something of her past history.

　　In sum, the ability of subjects to recall the story line of the narrative is not especially threatened by being deprived of the narrator blocks. My original hunch -- that the narrator blocks are crucial for comprehension -- seems incorrect. In hindsight, this should not have been surprising. Youngsters are attracted to comic books. These young readers get the gist of the adventure; they can tell the good guys from the bad guys. They rely primarily on the visual material. What the narrator blocks apparently do, then, is to smooth the transition from one segment of the narrative to another, and to furnish the reader with insights -- psychological and situational commentary -- into the why and the how of the story's actions and events.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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