Character focalisation and its function in the story of Susanna

The characters in a story can function as vehicles that carry the message(s) that the implied author intends to convey to the implied readers as they read the story. Characterisation is, as it were, the artistry the implied author uses to shift the intended reader’s worldview. Whilst there have been many insightful scholarly contributions on Susanna, the use of character focalisation and its possible function have never been explored. It remains open for investigation. This article examines the way in which characters are focalised in Susanna and how their role contributes to the implied reader’s ability to grasp the possible intended message of the story. The article concludes that focalisation offers a useful interpretive angle from which Susanna can be studied.

Contribution: The article proves that characterisation and the narrator’s role in the story are not a literary decoration to the text but a well-intended process that aims at inviting participation and decision-making from the implied reader.

Keywords: Susanna; characterisation; focalisation; function; analysis.

Introduction and problem statement

Susanna is one of the three additions to Daniel found, amongst other places, in the Septuagint (LXX), where it constitutes Chapter 13 of the Greek Daniel (Hobyane 2020:1; see also De Bruyn 2015:594). De Bruyn (2016:222; see also Charles [1913] 2004:638, 643–644; Collins 1993:426–438) says, ‘There is general consensus amongst scholars that Susanna can be categorised as a Midrash, written in the Hellenistic period and incorporated into the Greek Daniel somewhere between 100 BCE and 80 BCE or even 70 BCE.’ Although Susanna has been studied by various scholars using various approaches (Jordaan & Chang 2018:1), this article contends that the study of character focalisation and its possible function is still unexplored in Susanna. Therefore, following Jordaan and Chang’s (2018:1; see also Hobyane 2020:1) observation, this article falls into the category of studies taking modern literary points of view to examine narrative texts.

The primary goal of this article is to investigate the way in which the narrator in Susanna focalises the characters in the story as arranged by the implied author. The study of character focalisation explores how the narrator selects information (regarding characters, space, and time) to influence the intended reader of the story. The way in which characters are presented (e.g. how much or little the narrator knows about the character, space and time of action, etc.) is arguably not neutral in its rhetorical intent but intentional. It directs the impact that the narrator desires the story to have on the reader. As such, studying focalisation can be a useful form of literary analysis.

Methodology

Specific attention to focalisation here serves as an analytical tool during a literary analysis of Susanna. This method of narrative criticism offers an opportunity to explore the way the implied author selects narrative information (as transmitted by characters in the story) in his or her quest to invite the reader to do something about what they have read in the text. Genette (1988:34; 1989:129-140) says, ‘In this study, Susanna (italicised) refers to the book of Susanna, while Susanna (non-italicised) refers to its female protagonist or character.

The other two additions are The Prayer of Azariah (part of Daniel 3) and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel 14). This exploration of the performative nature of the forensic dialogue is based on the Theodotion version 1 from the LXX, edited by Ziegler (1999).

Note: Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).
see also Tolmie 1991:276) simply describes focalisation as ‘a selection of narrative information’ supplied to the implied reader.3

Types of focalisation

According to Tolmie (1991:278; see also Bal 1977:37), focalisation can be either external or internal to the story. Tolmie (1991:278) further elucidates that external focalisation implies that the locus of focalisation is outside the represented events. Tolmie (1991) opines that:

[[Internal focalisation keeps the locus of focalisation inside the represented events, that is, the narrator focaliser has an ability to read the mind, thoughts and perhaps attitude of a character.4 (p. 278)

Facets of focalisation

Rimmon-Kenan (1983:77–82; see also Tolmie 1991:278) distinguishes the following three facets of focalisation:

• **Perceptual facet:** The perceptual facet of focalisation refers to the contribution of space and time in the narrative. The focaliser’s position in space may vary from a panoramic view to that of a limited observer (Tolmie 1991:278). In terms of time, the focaliser may have at his disposal all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present and future) or it may only be limited to the present and past experiences of the characters (Tolmie 1991:278). The story of Susanna is a fertile ground to explore these dimensions of the narrative.

• **Psychological facet:** Tolmie (1991:278) explains that ‘the psychological facet concerns the cognitive and emotive components of focalisation’. The cognitive component refers to the contrast between the focaliser’s restricted and unrestricted knowledge. The emotive component examines the contrast between objective and neutral versus subjective and involved focalisation (Tolmie 1991:278).

• **Ideological facet:** This facet of focalisation refers to the way in which the characters and events of the story are evaluated (Tolmie 1991:278). The ideological facet may be presented from a single dominant perspective, or there may be a plurality of ideological positions competing to become the dominant perspective (Tolmie 1991:278; see also Lotman 1975:339–52).

All the above facets of focalisation offer useful entries into the narrative of Susanna. The discussion subsequently turns to an analysis of the story of Susanna using focalisation as an analytical tool.

Character focalisation: An analysis of Susanna

Summary and context of the story

Susanna is a fictional story of 64 verses with a simple structure. According to Kanonge (2010:37), simple stories do not always have to be divided into episodes. The segmentation in Susanna is optional, depending on the nature and objectives of the investigation (Kanonge 2010:37). Hobyane (2020) states that:

[The story of Susanna can generally be divided into four episodes: verses 1–14 (introduction of Joachim and Susanna and their family; narration of Susanna’s beauty and its effect on the two wicked elders), verses 15–27 (the elders’ endeavour to seduce Susanna; the elders accuse Susanna), verses 28–46 (the elders testify against Susanna; Susanna is sentenced to death) and verses 46–64 (Daniel rescues Susanna; the elders are sentenced to death). (p. 1)]

Susanna describes the story of a beautiful Jewish woman (Susanna) who, with Daniel’s help, exposes the wickedness of two appointed elders in the community. The two elders want to have sexual intercourse with her. When they fail, they accuse her and agree to testify against her before the community court, with her death being their goal. The story ends badly for them because Daniel exposes their wickedness and has them killed. The analysis of character focalisation focuses on all the episodes highlighted above.

An analysis of types of focalisation

In determining the type of focalisation in Susanna, it is important to note that Susanna is a narrative. It therefore involves characters, space and time. The reader reading Susanna hears a voice that communicates the interactions between the characters within the spaces and time they are afforded. This voice is the narrator of the story. Considering this, the type of focalisation throughout Susanna is external focalisation. The narrator is external, but of course not excluded from the unfolding of the story. Tolmie (1991:278; see also Bal 1977:37) describes the focaliser as a narrator-focaliser. This means that the narrator is the eyes and ears through which the reader sees and hears what is going on in the story. This affords the narrator the opportunity to provide the reader with information. The reader can track the characters’ movements and interaction in the story. However, the reader’s knowledge of the characters is limited to what the narrator presents about them. The reader’s assessment of characters (whether they are good or bad characters) is dependent on the narrator’s focalisation. It is therefore worth arguing that the narrator-focaliser has some influence on how the reader assesses characters and cannot be overlooked.
The narrator-focaliser in Susanna is not just an onlooker but also displays an ability to penetrate the minds, feelings and thoughts of characters in the story. The narrator is therefore also an internal focalisation. The narrator provides the reader with critical notes (or asides) that help the reader understand why the characters in the text behave the way they do. A few examples can be cited in this regard:

- In verse 9, the elders are internally focalised. The narrator provides notes to the reader about the elders: καὶ διέστρεψαν τὸν ἑαυτῶν νοῦν [They turned away their minds]. The elders do this so that they do not have to remember their duty to administer justice to the community. In this instant, the narrator can access their minds and share the information with the reader. The reader can now understand why the elders are not interested in administering justice to the community.

- In verses 10–11, the narrator reports that the elders lusted for Susanna, but they did not tell each other ὅτι ἦν ἡ καρδία αὐτῆς ἐπιθυμία [because they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire]. The narrator proves to have access to the elders’ feelings (shame) about disclosing their desires and intentions to each other. The reader should take note of this concealment of their feelings of shame.

- In verse 28, the narrator provides yet another critical note regarding the attitude and wicked plot of the elders as they come to the court. The two elders ἠλλὰ ἐκλίναν ἐπὶ τῷ κυρίῳ [looked up to heaven] whilst in verse 35, Susanna cries out, looking up to heaven. The story is not neutral in its rhetorical intent. This is what makes Susanna an appeal story that is. Tambling (1991:1; see also Kanonge 2010:31) aptly says: ‘to persuade, to deceive, to cast the truth in the light most favourable to the narrator, these seem to be some of the functions of a story’.

It can therefore be asserted that the types of focalisation employed in Susanna contribute to the rhetorical dimension of the story. It clearly seeks to present or focalise the story in a way that is favourable to the author’s point of view. Through the dynamics of focalisation, the narrator makes efforts to reach out to the reader; for example, through internal focalisation, the reader is spared from surprises, particularly regarding the behaviour of the elders.

Perceptual facet of focalisation in Susanna

The narrator-focaliser’s view of space in Susanna is not limited or fixed. There seems to be an unobstructed view of the proceedings in Joakim’s house and garden. The view goes beyond the physical spaces mentioned in the story to the minds, feelings and thoughts of characters. This is to the advantage of the reader. For the readers to adopt the author’s point of view, they need as much information as possible to understand the story.

Babylon as the primary setting of the story is a critical component of the story. This space is more than meets the eye. Kanonge (2010:96; see also Hobyane 2020:2) points out that Babylon is more than just the setting; it has an ideological connotation. The narrator-focaliser mentions that the wickedness comes from Babylon in the form of the elders who are judges (v. 5). Babylon is a symbol of wickedness in the story, and the reader is duly warned against this space.

The article takes note of heaven as yet another space mentioned in the story. The narrator-focaliser reports, in the first place (v. 9), that the elders have turned their eyes away from heaven (Ἐξέκλιναν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν [for her heart trusted in the Lord]). This note serves to emphasise Susanna’s faith in God whilst sharply contrasting her to the wicked elders as both parties participate in the court proceedings. This contrast is key to the meaning of the story. Comparisons between characters or figures in a story produce meaning by means of a display of their differential relations (Calloud & Genuyt 1982:23; see also Renault 1979:47). Susanna unswervingly6 trusts in God to prove her innocence, whilst the two elders are full of wickedness and are not interested in serving the community with justice.

The role of both the external and internal focalisation in the story is not neutral in its rhetorical intent. This is what makes Susanna the appealing story that it is. Tambling (1991:1; see also Kanonge 2010:31) aptly says: ‘to persuade, to deceive, to cast the truth in the light most favourable to the narrator, these seem to be some of the functions of a story’.

6 Whilst commenting on the importance of the static nature of the hero or heroine in the story, Dietrich and Sundell (1974:75–76) say: ‘Perhaps the chief point of epic characterisation is in the constancy of the hero – what makes him so valuable as a leader of men and founder of nations is that he does not change in the face of great pressure to weaken’.

7 This article acknowledges the insightful works of Nolte and Jordaan (2010), De Bruyn (2014, 2015, 2016), De Wet (2016) on the analysis of space in Susanna.
The narrator does not prove to know more about Babylon and its influence on the elders than what is revealed in this vague utterance. The reader does not get to know when and how wickedness or lawlessness penetrated the circle of elders and judges of Israel. Sadly, the story’s plot is anchored in this vague utterance, because the concept of lawlessness or wickedness becomes an anti-value (with reference to Israel) that the implied author seems to discourage throughout this story.

The second example of restricted knowledge concerns the introduction of Daniel as a character in the story. Hobyane (2020:7–8) points out that the introduction of and intervention by Daniel are both dramatic, surprising and miraculous to the reader, to say the least (see also Jordaan 2008:46). The reader is not warned nor provided with sufficient information about him. Who is he? Where does he come from? How was his upbringing, what was his role in the community and so on? Be that as it may, the story entrusts this barely-known character with significant narrative transformation. The narrator’s knowledge is restricted in this regard. The text does not reveal the narrator as possessing some knowledge about this character. It is therefore argued that the surprise introduction of Daniel adds to the fictitious nature of the story.

From the textual evidence at our disposal, it seems justifiable to suggest that the narrator-focaliser’s cognitive component is restricted.

Regarding the emotive component, it is almost impossible to detect any emotional involvement of the narrator-focaliser with the events narrated. The emotional facet of focalisation in Susanna may be described as ‘neutral’ or ‘uninvolved’. This type of focalisation can be persuasive, because it has the power to invite the reader to soberly enjoy the humorous and fictitious nature of the story as it is.

I ideological facet of focalisation in Susanna

There have been numerous insightful contributions from various scholars on the interpretation and a possible meaning of Susanna. Firstly, the ideological orientation of Susanna, in general, revolves around the matter of the failure of the administration of justice and poor leadership by the appointed elders in the narrated world or community. The story is largely about the fight against injustice and lawlessness in the community, as pointed out in verse 5. The elders, who are supposed to lead the people fairly and with justice, are doing exactly the opposite, until God (through the work of Daniel, vv. 46–64) exposes them. The story is focalised in such a way that the reader can grasp this message with ease. Secondly, with regard to the ideological component, Bremond (1973:131, 1981:67) asserts that the writer makes a
decision to choose whether the end will be a success or a failure for the subject (Bremond 1973:131, 1981:67).

Bremond’s assertion leads to a question: did Susanna or Susanna achieve the goal, and how is she perceived by her community and the readers, respectively? In answering this question, it must be indicated that Susanna’s ideological facet is presented as a plurality (two, to be specific, those of Susanna and the elders) of ideological positions in the narrated world. These two ideologies are competing to become the dominant perspective in the end (see also Lotman 1975:339–52; Tolmie 1991:278). The final episode (vv. 46–64) reveals that Susanna’s ideology triumphs over and against that of the elders – the Babylonian influence.

The story is focalised in such a way that it ends in favour of Susanna and the values she represents. Her community’s sense of justice and good leadership are restored for the future (v. 63), whereas the execution of the lawless and corrupt elders (v. 62) underscores the fact that their way of administration and life is not accepted. Therefore, the end of the narrative is a success for Susanna.

Summary of findings

The article investigated the function of character focalisation in Susanna, that is, the way in which the narrator selects information for the reader about the characters and how they function in the story. In Susanna, the focalisation is persuasive, as is evident from an analysis using focalisation as an analytical tool.

Types of focalisation

Susanna contains both external and internal focalisation. The narrator is external to the story and serves as the voice that reports the events. Although the narrator is external to the story, she or he is not entirely excluded from the story but somehow involved. This introduces a measure of internal focalisation. The narrator is involved in that she or he possesses some knowledge about the characters. The narrator can access the minds, feelings and thoughts of characters as the story is narrated. The narrator does this by providing notes or asides to the reader about the characters. This internal focalisation helps the reader to grasp the important dimensions of the story, without which the reader will remain in the dark, not understanding why the elders conduct themselves the way they do. Internal focalisation further persuades the reader to be judgemental of the elders and their wickedness. This seems to be the implied author’s aim in the narrated community. It is persuasive for the reader and makes Susanna an appealing, educative and exciting story.

Perceptual facet of focalisation

The narrator-focaliser’s view is not limited or fixed. The narrator proves to have an unobstructed view of the events in Joakim’s house, garden and court. The fact that the narrator-focaliser can penetrate the thoughts, feelings and minds of characters underscores the fact that she or he is not restricted. The reader is also encouraged to place value on some spaces (e.g. heaven) whilst at the same time being warned against some spaces (e.g. Babylon). As far as the perceptual facet of time is concerned, the narrator-focaliser seems to be restricted to the present, except for Joakim’s family, Susanna’s religious upbringing (v. 13) and the corrupt elders’ appointment as judges in the community (v. 5). The narrator-focaliser only ventures into the future to report Susanna’s fate if she agrees to commit sin with the elders (v. 22).

The fact that the narrator is restricted to the present events is somewhat to the disadvantage of the reader. The reader does not have all the background information about where the story comes from. They are unable to understand the narrated world and events.

Psychological facet of focalisation in Susanna

The narrator’s cognitive focalisation is restricted as his or her knowledge about some key elements of the story is lacking, for example, the details regarding Babylon and its influence on the elders. The narrator’s knowledge about Daniel is also restricted. His introduction and his intervention are both dramatic, surprising and miraculous to the reader. The emotional facet of focalisation may be described as ‘neutral’ or ‘uninvolved’.

Ideological facet of focalisation in Susanna

The ideological orientation of Susanna revolves around the failure of the elders to lead the community in justice and fear of God. Susanna is largely about the fight against the mentioned injustices and lawlessness in the community. The story ends in favour of Susanna when God exposes the elders (through the work of Daniel, vv. 46–64) and they are executed, revealing the author’s ideological stance. Susanna and Daniel are commended for their work, and God is praised for the success.

Conclusion

The analysis of character focalisation in Susanna aids our understanding and interpretation of the narrative. Susanna is about the Jewish diaspora’s struggle against injustices and wickedness; character focalisation here helps the reader understand why characters conduct themselves in a particular way. The narrator, as arranged by the implied author, carefully selects the information necessary for the reader to achieve the purpose of the story. Focalisation is about a selection of information to impact the reader. It was established, for example, that the narrator may prove to know much (and therefore shares much information) about the characters in the story (e.g. the elders’ wickedness and Susanna’s faith in God and her obedience to the Law of Moses). The selection of this information is meant to be educative and warning to the reader to either emulate or walk away from certain actions. In some instances, the
narrator decides not to share much information (e.g. when and how the elders were influenced, who Daniel is and where he comes from). As such, the character focalisation does help us unearth some of the critical dynamics in the narratives and their purposes.

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