

“I Never Pretended to Be a Congenital Novelist”: On the Poetics of Aldous Huxley Through the Prism of Genettian Narratology

Introduction: Huxley as a novelist

The novel-writing of Aldous Huxley is usually regarded as an emanation of both the almost encyclopedic knowledge of the writer and his intellectual, ideological, and philosophical searches, which often take on a *quasi*-essayistic form—hence his longer prose works (especially the first four of them¹) are considered as the *novels of ideas* (cf. e.g. Hoffman 1946: 129–137; Meckier 1966: 284–294; Bowering 1968: 5–18; Bedford 1975: 200–210; Firchow 2002: 187–208; LeMahieu 2015: 177–191; Hejwowski & Moroz 2019: 15–65). As Huxley’s protagonist himself noted in his diary in *Point Counter Point*:

Novel of ideas. The character of each personage must be implied, as far as possible, in the ideas of which he is the mouthpiece. In so far as theories are rationalisations of sentiments, instincts, dispositions of soul, this is feasible. The chief defect of the novel of ideas is that you must write about people who have ideas to express—which excludes all but about 01 percent of the human race. Hence the real, the congenital novelists don’t write such books. But then I never pretended to be a congenital novelist (1947: 409–410).

It seems that the far-reaching “essayisation” characterising Huxley’s works, combined with the limitation of plot, narrative, conflict, the depth of the novel and the characters themselves (LeMahieu 2015: 177)—which is *in genere* characteristic of the novels of ideas—forms the basis of popular optics, in which he is considered not so much a prose writer *par excellence*, but rather an essayist (Hoffman 1946: 135). However, despite the partial formal simplifications enforced by the imperative of the polyphony of ideas,² Huxley’s workshop remains that of a congenital novelist, as well as his poetics does, which is reflected, i.a., by the narrative variations present in some of his works that are close to modernism³ and postmodernism.

Analytical categories

The core and foundation of the narratological analysis carried out in the spirit of the Genettian tradition⁴ is to determine the narrative perspective, i.e. focalisation (*focalisation*)

¹ I.e. *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925), and *Point Counter Point* (1928).

² I refer here to the concept constructed by Mikhail Bakhtin (cf. 1994: 13–44).

³ Peter Firchow, i.a., classifies Huxley as a “reluctant modernist” (2002a: 143–158; 2002b: 159–178).

⁴ Nevertheless, inasmuch as the limitations of Genette’s theory are being noticed (cf. Bal 1991; 2017: xvii, xx, 150–153), the analytical paradigm postulated by him is not implemented here strictly or without any exceptions.

(Genette 1972: 206–211), and the ontological status of the narrator at the level of diegesis (*diégèse*)⁵—his diegetic level (Genette 1972: 90–105, 243–259; 1988: 84–85). Complementarily, within the framework of this study, the selected secondary properties of individual narrators of Huxley’s novels will be similarly considered—the kind of the narrative mode,⁶ the location of the characters-reflectors,⁷ and also the presence of metafictional or metanarrative comments,⁸ as well as of unreliable narrators⁹ will be examined. A summary of the final results of the analysis, together with general conclusions, is presented at the end of the paper.

***Point Counter Point* (1928)**

The most popular of Huxley’s first four long prose attempts is undoubtedly *Point Counter Point* (see Bowering, 77–97; cf. Allen 1977: 373–377; Watt 1977: 509–517; Atkins 1980: 69–80), which can be characterised as a *metanovel* (Lowenkron 1976: 343–355) of ideas, which should be understood in the sense that it is not only a prominent example of the novel of ideas *par excellence*, but also its content, i.e., the above excerpt from the notebook of Philip Quarles, partly *porte-parole* of the author, refers to such a novel as a literary phenomenon, thus manifesting, as a work, a kind of *self-awareness*.

...

Regardless of its insufficiencies, our choice of the Genettian optics is intentional since it still remains a significant, analytically fruitful, and classic narrative theory (cf. Bal 2017: xii, xvii).

⁵ Considered here as a space-time world defined by a narrative.

⁶ Generally, one can distinguish two categories of narrative modes: a positive narrative mode, i.e. one in which narrators offer “opinions and judgments (often ironic) on the story,” and a negative narrative mode, i.e. one in which “disembodied narrator tries to ‘make sense’ of characters and events” and in which “distancing and ‘bewilderment’” is “common” (Gavins 2013: 64; Simpson 1993: 75).

⁷ I.e. those characters, through whose perceptions, feelings, and thoughts the author shows the presented world (see Markiewicz 1994: 225–235). The Jamesian reflector as a kind of narrative instance remains almost identical with the Chatmanian filter (cf. James 1972: 247; Chatman 1990: 143).

⁸ Metafictional comments reveal the fictionality of the narrative and the work itself, while metanarrative comments remain discreet in the sense that they “do not undercut the fabric of the fiction,” referring to the act of narration, its components, or “those elements by which a narrative is constituted and communicated” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan 2005: 304–305).

⁹ I.e. a narrator whose credibility for one reason or another can or even should be questioned (Booth 2010: 339–376). The unreliability of such narrators is the result of both “misrepresenting or underreporting facts and events” and “misreading or misinterpreting or misevaluating [them]” (Gavins 2013: 82).