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Zigzag Narration, Intrusion of Second-Person Narration and Free Direct/Indirect Style: An Analysis of the Prominent Narrative Features of Selma Lagerlöf's *The Story of a Country House*

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The Story of a Country House is one of the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf's short stories collected in her work *From a Swedish Homestead*. One of the crucial features in the story's narrative is its telling of certain events and immediate retelling of part of that events by adopting another perspective, resulting in the overlapping of the narration of events that occur either in parallel with each other in the same time period in the story or in sequential time periods that happen to have significance on one another, thus the zigzag narration. We can see that the zigzag rendering of narration that does not follow the linear time order not only highlights the importance of the time period overlapped, but also leaves room for the introduction of different perspectives of various characters, if the introduction of a different perspective and voice is not the only purpose of shifting back the narrative time. We readers are thus granted access to more than one individual's mindset to come to terms with the experiences partially shared by these characters to form a fuller picture of the whole situation.

Keywords: Lagerlöf, zigzag narration, free indirect style, second-person narration

The Story of a Country House[1] (*En herrgårdssägen* 1899) is one of the Swedish novelist Selma Lagerlöf's novellas. The narrative style of this novella is worth probing into as it incorporates at least three distinct features that make it a telling example of Lagerlöf's literary craftsmanship. One of the crucial features in the story's narrative is its telling of certain events and immediate retelling of part of that events by adopting another perspective, resulting in the overlapping of the narration of events that occur either in parallel with each other in the same time period in the story or in sequential time periods that happen to have significance on one another, thus the zigzag narration. The other two features are the intrusion of second-person narration in between third-person narrations as well as the employment of free direct/indirect style that is not yet prevalent in 19th century Scandinavian literature.

Previous scholarship on Selma Lagerlöf tends to focus on her role as a representative writer of the New Romanticism (nyromanticisme) or on the manifestation of modernity in the ethical aspect of her writings. By the end of 1890, Selma Lagerlöf stood out with Verner von Heidenstam, Erik Karlfeldt, and Gustaf Froding to have been acclaimed as "the Great Four" of Swedish letters. Bonnie St. Andrews (1986) pointed out that the Great Four "determined to balance innovation with tradition" and "realism with romance" as led by von

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[1] Also translated as "Tales of a Manor".

Heidenstam's exuberant "avowal of other gods than those of realism and utility and social pathos" (p. 58). According to him, both the Swedish writers and those of the Irish renaissance movement reinstated and honored the history and legends and mores of their cultures (Andrews, 1986). That places Lagerlöf at once a New Romantic writer and a writer whose works embody the cultural and ethical aspects of Scandinavian modernity. New Romanticism and *fin de siècle* were the two main trends of late 19th century Scandinavian literature. One of the crucial traits of the New Romantic literary works is the conscious employment of traditional folklore elements of a particular area which Alrik Gustafson terms as "provincial mysticism" (1940, p. 186). Though Lagerlöf's works deal with ethical issues which could sometimes be didactic, the way she treats it makes the supposedly black-and-white ethical stances in the traditional romantic tales modern in a way that stresses "ethical dilemmas" confronting her contemporary individuals. This gives her New Romantic style a hinge of modernity which her "narrative simplicity" is in turn able to transcend itself, as Andrews states as follows,

> … [a]s with some Existential heroes of more recent time, procrastination sometimes poses as deliberation; negation of individual effectiveness sometimes excuses inaction.
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> This moral tension in Lagerlöf's writings proclaims her modernity; yet as a composer of highly didactic sagas, Lagerlöf confronts ethical issues unflinchingly. The simplicity of her style… should not be considered simple-minded, however. As Tillyard stipulates, the narrative simplicity which characterizes the saga, is a technique demanding precision and control…. (1986, p. 62)

As for previous scholarship that addresses Lagerlöf's narrative style, the ones concerning her use of repetitive and parallel narrating methods and that of the intrusion of second-person narration as well as of free direct/indirect style are either too formalistic or too limited. Brita Green (1994) generalized in the analysis of Lagerlöf's "Narrative Fabric" the patterns in her novellas as "repetition and parallelism" but does not go deeper than the linguistic and symbolic levels when it comes to quoting from the text. The study quotes certain phrases that appear repetitively in the text (e.g., the student's claim that he would be driven mad from time to time) as well as certain symbols, such as the image of Ingrid's eyes in the text that happen to be situated in various contexts here and there. Though definitive in terming the narrative methods "repetition and parallelism", the actual analysis falls short of providing adequate examples. As for previous analyses of the intrusion of second-person narration and the use of free direct/indirect style in Lagerlöf's works, Helena Forsås-Scott (1994) stated as follows in the study of the textual strategy of Lagerlöf's "Astrid",

> … the statements of the narrator merge almost imperceptibly with the free indirect discourse of the characters, a favourite device of Lagerlöf's which strikingly blurs the boundaries between the thoughts and utterances of individual characters and the seemingly more authoritative contributions of the narrator… The narrator's fondness for strings of rhetorical questions, usually without any concluding confirmation, set out the course of events in terms of minimal reliability, leaving us, effectively, with little more than a series of assumptions. (p. 66)

The "rhetorical questions" here are typical of the second-person narrations in *The Story of a Country House*. In this novella, the intended effect of second-person narration is not limited to leaving the readers with suspense, and the use of free direct/indirect style is not only a blurring-of-boundary device for various voices either from the narrator or from the characters. Though this essay will mainly deal with the issue of the zigzag narrative method in the novella as a compensation for the insufficiency of previous "repetition and parallelism" discussions of Lagerlöf's narrative style, it will also briefly address both the author's use of intruding second-person narration as more than placing several "rhetorical questions" for causing the effect of suspense

as well as her use of free direct/indirect style as more than blurring the boundary among various voices manifested in this work, with the hope that the discussion of this novella could partly shed some light on the overall discussion of Lagerlöf's narrative craftsmanship.

Zigzag Narration

In *The Story of a Country House*, there are some zigzag narrative moments in terms of the narration of events that occur either in parallel during overlapping time periods or in sequential time periods that happen to have significance on one another.

The most distinctive zigzag narrative moment comes in Chapter Three. After describing Ingrid's situation in Rågglanda and her sinking into a sleeping death when she dreams of an angel talking to her about the rescue of her student, the narrative in Chapter Four goes back to the point when the man from Dalarna walks to the churchyard, passes the churchgoers' horses, curtsies to them, and starts playing his violin upon Ingrid's grave. The two threads of events come to a joint when the sound of Gunnar's violin is heard as the angel's voice in Ingrid's dream that eventually makes her want to raise herself up as described in one thread of events, "she felt her heart begin to beat, the blood rushed through her vein, the stiffness of death was loosened in her body" (1901, p. 31); in the other thread, "her heart began to beat, her blood to flow, and she awoke" (p. 39). The playing of the violin which is mistaken by Ingrid to be the angel's voice can be regarded as the first joint (J1) of the two threads of narrations, with the first thread continuing until the end of Chapter Three depicting Ingrid's conversation with the angel and the second thread meanders back for further description about Gunnar Hede's walking to the churchyard. We are not sure how long it takes while Ingrid is talking with the angel in her dream, but we can assume that it happens during Gunnar Hede's playing of the violin, which is time-consuming.

After the two threads go separate ways, one continues with the subsequent events that Ingrid, after her first awakening, hits her head on the lid of the coffin and goes back to her sleeping death, and the other with those of Gunnar that, after hearing the bump, opens the coffin, waits till Ingrid comes out, and eventually speaks to her. During this time, the second joint (J2) appears which, for the first thread, is the bumping of Ingrid's head, and for the second, the knock heard by Gunnar Hede. The time depicted in the first thread temporarily stagnates with the description that Ingrid falls back to her semi-unconsciousness upon hitting her head against the lid, as the narration moves back to the second thread where the narrative time goes on with the depiction of Gunnar Hede's actions. At that time, he is unable to play the violin so well after being distracted by the sound of the knock, and that is when his attention is redirected to the coffin. He unscrews it, and the handkerchief covering the face of Ingrid falls which makes Ingrid awake again.

The third joint (J3) of the two threads appears at the same time, connecting the second thread of the narrative wherein the handkerchief falls due to Gunnar Hede's taking the lid off Ingrid's coffin to the first thread in which Ingrid is reawakened by the "fresh air" and "light" due to the removal of the handkerchief. The two threads diverge again from there. The first continues with Ingrid's semi-awareness of her own vision of how well she used to be treated by her mother and her little brother until she prepares to lay herself "down in her coffin again" (p. 43); then, the narration goes back to J3 to pick up the second thread recounting Gunnar Hede's reaction after he unscrews the lid, as he "stood and waited for the thing that moved in the coffin to go away" (p. 43). The two threads eventually join again and continue as Gunnar Hede, out of his motivation to be able to play his violin well again, speaks to Ingrid, "Now, I think it is time you got up" (p. 44). Then, the narration goes on for a large part with the combined one thread from there.

Yet, another major zigzag moment of narration comes when Mrs. Blomgren "was nearly running away when she heard a window in one of the rooms quickly opened" (p. 120); after continuing with what happens next, the narration later moves back to what "was happening" in the room before the window opened. Though it seems that this part of the narration employs only the perspective of the third-person narrator and that of Mrs. Blomgren's, we may still have the lingering sense of the perspective being Ingrid's when we read "Mr. and Mrs. Blomgren sat on a seat outside the inn, looking more unhappy [sic.] than one would have thought was possible. They are not far from crying" (p. 119). From its context, it could be from what Ingrid sees as she approaches the two, and "They are not far from crying" could be Ingrid's observation. Then, the narration continues with the third-person narrator's perspective until it shifts to Mrs. Blomgren's when we read the following, "Mrs. Blomgren, who had nothing else to do but kiss her hands in all directions, had time to observe everything. It was astonishing how radiant Ingrid suddenly looked…" (p. 121). While we are presented with the perspectives moving between the third-person's to Mrs. Blomgren's in this section, we are provided with a more stable third-person perspective in the next section. It goes back to describe Gunnar Hede's getting angry after returning to his home before hearing the blind man playing the violin outside his window, which takes him back to an episode from the past and leads him to re-enact the scene of borrowing another blind man's violin to play. Interestingly, it is during Gunnar Hede's playing of the violin that the narrative follows a linear order in recounting his experiences leading to his present situation, probably using the voice of the violin and the perspective of Gunnar Hede's. We can see that the zigzag rendering of narration that does not follow the linear time order not only highlights the importance of the time period overlapped in different narrative threads, but also leaves room for the introduction of various voices and perspectives of either the narrator's or the characters'.

Intrusion of Second-Person Narration in Between Third-Person Narrations

For most part of the story, the narrative vision and voice are that of the third-person narrator's, though sometimes it gives us the impression that a second-person narration takes hold. For example, in Chapter Two there is a paragraph introducing the hardship Gunnar Hede and the goats should go through beginning with the sentence, "Do you know what the Fifty-Mile Forest is like? Not a farmhouse, not a cottage, mile after mile, only forest…And how could he get food for two hundred animals in this way?" (1901, p. 23) It might be easy for us to categorize the latter part of it to be a rhetorical question, but the former part of it is what I call here intruding second-person narration. We readers are directly addressed, though sometimes this "you" can be used interchangeably with "one", as in a sentence in Chapter Three, "But, on the other hand, one could hardly say that she was alive…"[2] On some occasions, we readers' assumptions are taken into consideration, e.g., the violation of our conception of the violin playing is considerately addressed by the narrator as follows, "The strange thing about it was that it was not the man who could play, but it was the violin that could remember some small melodies"[3]; on other occasions, we readers are not only directly addressed, but given directions of what role we should play in the story. We are directed to be both onlooking and participating when we read "You may be sure they had plenty to talk about" when Mr. and Mrs. Blomgren re-unite, as if we are asked to look on and wait before they finish their chatting (p. 116). However, it is not the case when it comes to the following exclamation, "But supposing it was Ingrid's madman!" because, indicated in the context, it is the

[2] In another translation, it is "But you really couldn't say that she lived".
[3] In another translation, it is "You see the excellent part of it was that it wasn't the man who could play […]".

thought of Mr. and Mrs. Blomgren's. The intrusion of second-person narration also asserts itself when we are every now and then reminded of the narrative distance when we read sentences beginning with "But, as previously mentioned…", "The fact was that…", and "As mentioned before…", which give us the meta-narrative impression of the rendering of narration.

Free Direct/Indirect Style

As far as the perspectives of the two main characters' are concerned, there are sections devoted to either character's point of view. For example, it is from Gunnar Hede's perspective that the goats in the snow episode and the episode wherein he plays his violin to dispel the darkness are presented, and it is from Ingrid's perspective that the episode wherein she imagines herself lying in her room with the chandelier (the sun) while actually lying in the coffin, the episode of Mrs. Sorrow, as well as the episodes when she constantly mistakes herself for seeing the contours of her beloved's face are presented. In most parts of the story other than those sections, there are the shifts of perspectives here and there from that of the third-person narrator's to the characters'. The examples are too many to be thoroughly enumerated, but they are mostly in the form of Free Direct Style or Free Indirect Style, with either the vision or the thoughts/voice of Gunnar/Ingrid. Some eye-catching ones include Ingrid's thoughts/voice in Chapter Five in FIS, "Who was that playing? Was that her student? Had he come at last?" (1901, p. 59); and in Chapter Eight in FIS, "She ought to give explanations and orders, but about what? That she could so lose her presence of mind!" (p. 97) …There are places where other characters' voices are presented, such as Mrs. Hede's thoughts/voice in Chapter Six in FIS, "Had she not laughed at him, and did she not think that he looked terrible—the Goat?" (p. 71); Oluf's voice in Chapter Nine in FIS, "If he stood up, he could see her. She would, no doubt, be glad to see him" (p. 112); the peasant's voice in Chapter Nine in FIS when he speaks with the Pastor, "He had gone completely insane now; they had to tie him up. What was the pastor's advice? What should they do with him?" (p. 113); and Mrs. Blomgren's thoughts/voice in Chapter Ten in FDS, "Supposing the madman had heard the music, and supposing he jumped out of the window and came to them?" (p. 120). In addition to contributing to the shift of perspectives that enrich the zigzag narration, such employment of free direct/indirect style embodying the perspectives of various characters embedded in the third-person narrator's perspective indicates the narrator's sympathizing with those characters whom the thoughts/voices belong to from time to time, and thus gives the reader a sense of intimacy with the characters' inner worlds.

We can see that as a representative of the New Romanticism (nyromanticisme) and a contributor to the modernity of Swedish literature, Selma Lagerlöf exhibits a distinct narrative style that is neatly represented in her novella *The Story of a Country House*. The use of free direct/indirect style is more than rhetorical gestures for blurring the boundaries of narrator's and characters' perspectives/voices and neither is that of the intrusion of second-person narration solely for making the targeted audiences' positions flexible. They both contribute to the enrichment of the story's narration which is sometimes zigzag, and all these devices makes Selma Lagerlöf a unique figure of Swedish letters in the 19th century modern Scandinavia.

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