

# Narrative approaches to lyric poetry: On Kim Sowöl's *The Azaleas*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper aims at illustrating how narrative theories can apply to the analysis of lyric poetry with an example from Korean literature: *The Azaleas* by Kim Sowöl. This poem in seven-and-five-syllable meter as well as with its thematic aspect that is concerned with lamentation or broken heart is considered the most representative of the folkloric tradition in the history of Korean lyric poetry. Based on Hühn's work on "Transgeneric narratology", I proposed here to analyze the so-called *mental story* of this poem from a narratological point of view that covers, among many others, the following three topics: i) text and norm; ii) story and discourse; iii) thematic and narrative. First, reading a poetic text inevitably leads us to the poetic tradition serving as an interpretative norm, whether it is explicit or implicit. So the image of scattering flowers in this poem, for instance, cannot be fully understood without reference to the Buddhist tradition in which it is interpreted in terms of charity or mercy. Second, the mental story relative to this symbolic act is doubly mediated – put in narrative terms, by a voice that speaks on the one hand and, on the other by eyes that see - so as to manifest itself in the form of a poetic discourse. Third, the narrative strategy at work in this poem, here considered in Greimas' terms, pinpoints the ironic aspect of its thematic: so the story of parting in appearance turns out to be a love returning in the end.

**Keywords:** lyric poetry, narratology, mental story, norm, story, discourse

## 1. Telling a "mental story"

Poets don't tell stories. They only express mental states: their feeling, perception, recollection and imagination. As a consequence, narrative theory, mainly focusing on narrative fictions such as novels, short stories, narrative poems is not applicable to lyric poetry. Although this might be true in general, it's not always the case. In his paper on "Transgeneric Narratology: Application to Lyric poetry", Hühn, drawing upon "the universality and ubiquity of the practice of narration" in human society, argues that, "since lyric poems generally feature the same fundamental constituents as narrative fiction (...), narratological categories may profitably be applied to the analysis of lyric poetry." (2004:140).

The poem under scrutiny in the following pages, one of the best well known poems in Korea, entitled *The Azaleas*, is primarily concerned with what Hühn called a "mental story." (2004:152). A speaking subject in this poem, a narrator, so to speak, creates a possible world in which her mental story unfolds. Note that it's not a matter of what already happened in the past, nor what would probably happen in the future, but a matter of what actually is happening in a certain kind of mental state of the poet, more precisely in her imagination. The purpose of my paper is to illustrate to what extent narrative theory is applicable for analyzing and discussing the following mental story:

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If you go away,  
Sick of the sight of me,  
I'll let you go without a word.

But I'll also gather by the armful  
The azaleas flaming in *Yaksan, Yongbyon*  
And scatter them in your path

Tread gently  
And lightly  
As you pass.

If you go away,  
Sick of the sight of me  
I will weep no tears, though I die without you.

(In *Fugitive Dreams* 1998) <sup>2</sup>



Along with, for instance, *Gasiri* and *Sekyung beylkok*, dating back to the Goryeo period, the above poem forms part of the longstanding tradition of Korean literature. With regard to narrative theory, I'd like to discuss both descriptive and interpretative approaches to the narrative text, ranging from narrative semiotics to narratology. The reason for this is simple and clear: to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur's famous formula, the more one describes, the better one interprets. In what follows, I'm largely concerned, in relation to the above poem, with three topics: i) text and norm; ii) story and discourse; iii) thematic and narrative. The question here is not about any theoretical discussions or debates on these pairs of concepts in the field of narratology, but how to come up with a comprehensive account of the poem in

<sup>2</sup> An audio file of Korean pop singer Maya singing the poem can be obtained at <http://www.semiotics.ca/issues/azaleas.mp3>

question, starting with Hühn's critical remark that "narratological categories may profitably be applied to the analysis of lyric poetry."

## 2. Outside the text, but still inside the norm

In my opinion, summing up a poem is useless. Let me just "retell" it. The lover is likely to leave. However, the imminence of parting is not factual, but merely presumed by the speaking subject, who seems to have been anxious about the sincerity of her lover, and therefore lost confidence in him. To our surprise, the way she is dealing with this feeling of anxiety and lack of confidence is quite the opposite of what is generally understood to be done in such a painful situation as this. She is determined in her plan: to let him go without a word, without weeping. This determination opens and closes the poem. But that's not the whole story.

She has an event in mind for her lover's parting. Notice that she is curiously quite willing, not only to let him go, but also to hold a kind of symbolic ceremony by scattering flowers in his path. To make sense of this unusual performance as a way of bidding adieu to a lover who is leaving, I think we need to go outside the text, and bring into play an extra-textual element, i.e. what cognitive psychologists called a scheme. It is by virtue of this interpretative device that readers can come to grips with the question of meaning when they read such ambiguous literary texts. In his paper quoted above, Hühn gives a cognitive account of this relationship that exists between readers and the text:

The underlying premise of such an approach consists in the notion that it is only through the paradigmatic reference to extra-textual contexts and to world knowledge, i.e. to cognitive schemata already familiar and meaningful, that readers can make sense of texts. (2004:143).

Briefly, scheme can be regarded as a kind of knowledge existing in the form of norm in a given community, by reference to which people make sense of their different symbolic activities. In narrative theory, it particularly serves as an interpretative norm to make sense of literary praxis. As far as the literary tradition is concerned, it would not be excessive to say that this norm is being ceaselessly woven from one text to the next, i.e. from what is called in postmodern literary criticism, intertextuality. That's why we sometimes need to go outside the textual boundary in our reading process, while still staying inside the interpretative norm thus intertextually woven.

The scheme we are expected to refer to in the context of this poem is based on a Buddhist tradition dating back to the Silla period in Korean history, according to which a monk called *Wolmingsa* both composed and sang a song *Dosol*, scattering flowers and, in this way touched Buddha so deeply that he was finally able to fix the supernatural phenomenon of two suns in the sky. In this literary, as well as religious tradition, scattering flowers in one's path is interpreted and understood in terms of charity.

The poet of *The azaleas* is thus willing to bless the lover who is about to leave her, in addition to accepting as a fact this otherwise miserable situation. We still need to go on to call upon world knowledge to be able to answer questions: why the azaleas are here in question, which region actually *Yaksan*, *Yongbyon* denotes or what it connotes, if any. The azaleas, very common in Korea, play the role of giving a folkloric flavor, on the imagery level, to the poem, thus featuring its Koreaness, so to speak, together with the rhymes that repeat at the endings with the special acoustic consequences. These unfortunately disappear from the English version.

Further, *Yaksan, Yongbyon*, situated in the northern part of Korean peninsular, is well known for its azaleas. In the light of this diverse encyclopedic knowledge we come to understand what the unfamiliar image of scattering flowers in this poem precisely stands for, in the context of Korean literary tradition.

However, the question still remains of how to interpret the ironic reaction of the poet to her lover's departure. It is not sufficient to say that she is willing to sacrifice herself for her lover's sake. What is at stake here is not only to make sense of the unfamiliar act, but to interpret the meaning of this unfamiliarity so as to make sense of her poetic reaction to her imminent painful experience. In order to do this, I propose to get back inside the text, and to look at the narrative strategy at work in her imagination.

### 3. Story and discourse

In his book entitled *Fictions of discourse: Reading narrative theory*, O'Neil calls our attention to "the ostentatious conflict between story and discourse," in saying that "narrative discourse is always potentially subversive both of the story it ostensibly reconstructs and of its own telling of that story". (1994:7). Narrative is thus defined not only in terms of "essentially divided endeavor"(p.3), but also more essentially in terms of "ostentatious conflict", between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. A story, namely "the narrative content" potentially can be told over and over again - for instance, translation is a different way of telling the same story - and in the process of this retelling, it inevitably presents itself in such different ways as to be subversive of itself in its final stage. The subversion of story by the discourse can be considered, for instance, in relation to what Hühn called "sequentiality" on the one hand, and on the other, "mediacy". (2004: 139). In short, if the former is concerned with "the temporal organization and concatenation of individual elements into some kind of coherence," the latter is concerned with "the presentation (and interpretation) of this sequence from a particular perspective." (*ibid.*). Let's take a closer look at these two narrative strategies with regard to the poem in question.

#### a) Sequentiality

If Rimmon-Kenan excludes lyric poetry at the outset from her study of narrative fiction, that's because unlike the former, the latter "represents a succession of event."(1983:2). "Event" is defined here in terms of "change from one state of affairs to another." (p.15). What is at stake in her definition is not an ontological status of the event, whether factual or fictive, but the concept of transformation that is of the essentially epistemic order. If that is the case, it's not unconvincing to argue that the imaginary scene of bidding adieu to a lover who is leaving is a kind of mental event presupposing a sort of transformation like the one from the state of having a lover to another, losing a lover.

In either a chronological or a rather logical order, we can reconstruct the above story the poet constructed in her poetic text, as follows:

- A: (being) sick of the sight of me
- B: (You) going away
- C: (I) letting (you) go
- D: (I) gathering and scattering the azaleas
- E: (You) treading the azaleas in passing away

The English version of *The azaleas* represents the story in the following order: *BAC D E BAC*, while the original text rather follows the logical order of the story:

*ABC D E ABC*. Given that nothing actually happened - that's why it's better to talk about the logical rather than the chronological order - in this mental story, attributing the *repetitive* function in Genette's terms - i.e. a function of "telling *n* times what occurred once", to quote Rimmon-Kenan's brief and clear explanation (1983:57) - to the repetition of *BAC* or *ABC* in the first and last stanzas seems to hardly make sense here. Opening and closing the poem, it serves rather the esthetic purpose essentially connected to a generic characteristic of lyric poetry in Korean literature. However, it plays the narrative role there to enhance the intensity of the poet's willingness to let her lover go.

The typological intention, as we know, is essential to and inherent in the epistemology of structural narratology. The concept of event makes no exception. According to Rimmon-Kenan drawing on Roland Barthes' structural contribution to the narrative analysis, "events can be classified into two main kinds: those that advance the action by opening an alternative ('kernels') and those that expand, amplify, maintain or delay the former ('catalysts')." (1983:16). The kernel of the story, no doubt, is the departure - i.e. *A* and *B* - of the lover, seeing that only an alternative is opened: to hold him back from leaving or to let him go. The poet opts for the second solution - i.e. *C* - in her mental story. This can be said to be of the poetic order as it is accompanied by a supplementary - i.e. *D* and *E* - event. Scattering flowers as a supplement takes the role of catalyst in this poem inasmuch as it has as consequence to amplify the poet's choice. But this amplification precisely poses a problem, especially with regard to her intention of doing this. The problem can be formulated as follows: is the poet's determination for this solution reliable? Is there any conflict between her saying, and doing, i.e. her *diegesis* and *mimesis*?

### **b) Mediacy**

The transformation of a story into a narrative text is doubly mediated by "a voice that speaks" on the one hand and, on the other by "eyes that see". (O'Neill 1994:85). In narrative terms, the former is concerned with the question relative to the narrator, and the latter, with the question of focalization. Whether to be involved in the story world or not, it is important for both of them, to first, make a distinction between internal and external. An internal narrator, for instance, is a speaker who is carrying out the double mission to act as a character as well as to tell a story, whereas an external narrator only takes the role of a teller outside the tale. Notice that a character, as well as a narrator, can tell a story. Internal character-narrator is a character who is telling *her* or *his* story regardless of *her* or *his* role in it, whether or not she or he is the protagonist, whereas external character-narrator is a character telling a story of *other* people. In view of this typology, the speaker of *the Azaleas* can be classified into the internal character-narrator insofar as she is telling *her* story of being a brokenhearted. As mentioned earlier on, this story is nothing more than her imaginary creation. That is to say, there is only one perspective in this world she created by her own imagination. Put in narrative terms, she holds the role as a character-focalizer in her mental story. Even in the expression "sick of the sight of me", "you" is not the ultimate focalizer because it is ultimately "I" that imagines that "you" are sick of the sight of me. The entire scene in this poem is thus seen by the imaginary eyes of "mine". As O'Neill rightly pointed out, this "character-focalizer's perspective", just as the internal character-narrator, is however so "limited" and "subjective" as to be "questionable". (1994:87).

So, the question of reliability can be raised with regard to the poet's subjective world. However, as soon as formulated, this question is to be faced with an obstacle that is of the epistemological order. Hühn puts it as follows: "lyric poetry spoken by first-person speakers presents a subjective view anyway, to which criteria of veracity or falsity do not apply." (2004:148). But this obstacle, as Hühn added right after the critical remark, cannot prevent us from acknowledging the necessity for "a more differentiated analysis of the conditions and manifestations of subjectivity" and thus "raising the question of (un-)reliability with lyric poems." (*ibid.*).

This question prompts us to reread *the Azaleas* from the *irony* point of view that calls into question the notorious relationship between what the speaker says, and what the text means, denotation and connotation, or in narrative terms the narrator and the implied author. The question of whether or not what the speaker says is reliable cannot be answered before answering the question of what is the "text intent", to use Chatman's terms. (1990:86). In order to get access to the *intention* of the poet, what first and foremost, we are expected to do here is to bring to light the *intent* of the text she produced by telling her mental story. This finally leads us to the thematic analysis in relation to the narrative one.

#### 4. Thematic and narrative

What is this mental story about? It begins with the conditional clause: "If you go away". What is at stake here is, in a nutshell, the *mental distance* that starts to be felt or perceived between *you* and *I*. Along with this reading hypothesis, I'm proposing to take account of two semantic features for the following thematic analysis that is largely based on Text Semantics by François Rastier(1997): /attachment/ that can be paraphrased in terms of *close to, near, etc*; /detachment/ that can be paraphrased in terms of *far away, distant, remote* etc. First, note that the relationship between the two is not of the contradictory order. That is to say, the negation of the former is not equivalent to the affirmation of the latter. From the logical point of view, there should be, in total, four semantic features: /attachment/, /non-attachment/, /detachment/, /non-detachment/.

With the help of this conceptual apparatus, we can come up with a comprehensive semantic description of the lexical units, whether a word or a phrase in this poem. 'Go away' and 'sick of the sight of' can be classified under the heading of /detachment/. The reason why *you* go away is that *you* are already far away from *me*, at least, in *your* heart. So /detachment/ is the salient feature in these expressions. 'Let you go' can be conceived of as an act of /non-attachment/. Notice that it's not because *I* dislike *you* that *I* decided to let *you* go. Nor am *I* fatally attached to *you*. 'Without a word', 'weep no tears' and 'though I die without you' here intensify the feature of /non-attachment/. 'Gather', 'scatter', 'the azaleas' are there to feature the /non-detachment/ while 'by the armful' and 'Yaksan, Yongbyon' intensify to a degree this feature. Gathering and scattering flowers can hardly be interpreted here in terms of /detachment/. This performance, however, falls short of the meaning of /attachment/ since the poet is not keeping her lover from parting. 'Tread' and 'pass' in the third stanza can be classified, together with the intensifiers 'gently' and 'lightly', into the category of /non-detachment/ with the consequence to neutralize the activation of the feature /detachment/ on her lover's part. Here is the table on the above description.

**Table 1. //Mental distance// in *The Azaleas***

Lexical units	/detachment/	/non-attachment/	/non-detachment/	/intensity/
'go away'(2)	+			
'sick of the sight of'(2)	+			+
'let you go'(2)		+		
'without a word'		+		+
'gather'			+	
'by the armful'			+	+
'the azaleas'(2)			+	
'Yaksan, Yongbyon'			+	+
'scatter'			+	
'tread'			+	
'gently'			+	+
'lightly'			+	+
'pass'			+	
'weep no tears'		+		+
'though I die without you'		+		+

It is interesting to note that the semantic feature /attachment/ doesn't appear on the above table. This is actually because the poem begins with the hypothesis that the love is going to be broken up. The /detachment/ is given as a fact at the very outset. At first glance, the attitude of the poet vis-à-vis the departure of her lover can be summed up in terms of /non-attachment/. But it quickly turns to /non-detachment/ through the symbolic performance of scattering flowers. Notice that the position of the poet with regard to the parting is ambiguous, inasmuch as it is characterized here in terms of /non-attachment/ on the one hand and, on the other in terms of /non-detachment/. The semantic feature /non-detachment/ plays a very important role in the development of the narrative to the extent that it is logically supposed to activate the neutralized feature /attachment/ so as to get started again on the narrative trajectory: (/attachment/) -> /non-attachment/ -> /detachment/ -> /non-detachment/ -> (/attachment/). The parentheses here mean that the feature in question is not activated nor neutralized, but merely virtualized in a hypothetical sense.

We can reproduce this process using Greimas's semiotic square that is available for both systematic and dynamic representation of the narrative process, as well as its logical relationship. The position of *You* sticks, throughout the story, to the /detachment/ while the position of *I* comes and goes between /non-attachment/ and /non-detachment/. And this instability has as consequence to cause and deepen the repressed form of conflict between what the speaker says and what the text means.

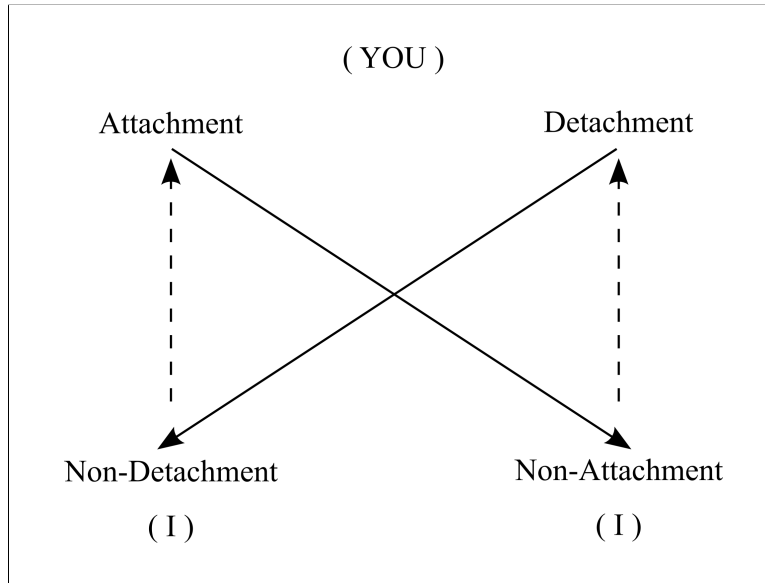


Figure 1. The semiotic square of the mental distance

From the point of view of the logic of story developed by Greimas, the /detachment/ presupposes the /non-attachment/. It is interesting to note that the initial position of the poet, i.e. the /non-attachment/ doesn't evolve into the /detachment/, but shifts this logical phase to finally reach the /non-detachment/. This means that she is hardly conceived of as a subject in a full sense in this narrative trajectory, holding rather a role of helper or sender so her lover can complete his narrative trajectory.



What is this mental story all about? At first glance it is about the parting. The interesting point in this poem, however, is the poet's ambivalent position systematically illustrated above with regard to her lover's departure. In the guise of a conclusion, we can say that the poet, by saying one thing while doing another, attempts to turn the story of parting into a story of love returning.

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