

**The use of parallel narration to complement
character thought and action**

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Works : The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

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As narration is an integral facet to any good novel, it comes as no surprise that both Yukio Mishima and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have taken the additional step to use a different style of narration in their works. There exists a parallel approach in their narrations, and this parallel approach is visible in the thought and action processes of their protagonists. “Narrative parallelism,” as it is called, is a style of narration where the narration splits into two, each taking distinct paths. As narration occupies a vital part of the audience’s understanding of the characters, it is no coincidence that both authors have chosen this effective style for their works. In this light, narrative parallelism has undeniably served its definite purpose in helping readers know and understand more about each character.

Although there are several similar narrative patterns in both books, we find that each author takes a unique approach when it comes to parallel narration. In the novels to be compared and contrasted, *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, both Mishima and Solzhenitsyn make use of such a parallelism to let readers know precisely what goes on in the minds of their characters. More interestingly, this parallelism is evident not only in the narration, but also in the “thought-action” processes of the characters. Noboru is an unusual character, and the absence of a first-person narrator tends to sometimes leave his thoughts in the dark. However, it is still possible to perceive Noboru’s deep inner feelings, thanks to this parallel approach to narration.

When we read the two novels, we find that the narration often branches out into two – each becoming an essential part of the story. We discover consequently that the story itself is being told to us not as one, but two different tracks. For instance, an action process can be seen when “... Fusako realized that she had felt her heart begin to dance even as they had stood looking up at the ship,” and a thought process, which complements the preceding action, can be seen when Fusako thinks “That’s funny: I’m just as excited as Noboru” (28). A juxtaposition of the narrative patterns of both novels reveals interesting similarities as well as differences in the way this parallelism is initiated, as well as in the way it is broken. Sometimes, parallel narration is obvious when Mishima chooses to italicize character thoughts (61, 77, 137). Occasionally, just as it so happens with parallel lines in geometry, these two narrative parallel tracks are interrupted by

transversals throughout the course of the story. When Ryuji unexpectedly comes across Noburu at the park, there seems to be an unspoken discomfort—the transversal—between the two characters (47). These transversals are thus nothing but *conflicts* that occur at different points in time.

A split narrative is rather advantageous in developing a full understanding of a character. There is one chain of events which flow without interruption — this is the thought-process. Here, there exists a continuous stream of events, ideas and thoughts actively running in the minds of characters. On the other hand, there is the action track, where the exact actions of the characters are narrated with precise detail. Solzhenitsyn, for instance, uses thought-action parallelism when outlining Shukhov's tardy relationship with other characters, namely Caesar (188). Along the same line, Mishima uses parallelism to explore Noburu's convoluted mind, to emphasize his wavering respect for Fusako (141), and to portray Ryuji's self-crafted plans to attain glory (15-18). There is thus a striking similarity in between the two books in how parallel narration is effected to detail characters' thoughts and actions.

A salient feature of parallel narration is that it provides us with two sources to work with. This helps enormously to further our understanding of a character. An understanding of Shukhov, for example, is vital for the understanding of the entire novel. The more information we get about his thoughts, feelings, ideas and actions, the better. This is in contrast to a conventional narrative, where readers are given only one source of information and description. This could prove problematic because readers do not get to form a complete picture of the character in question. There becomes a need to then “guess” what the character could be thinking, or doing, or both. At this point, narration will have lost its scope.

One of the best characterizing features of a parallel approach to narration, and one that has been constantly exploited by both authors is the fact that they make use of its features to enunciate a protagonist's thoughts and actions, rather than the typical function of communicating the plot. What Shukhov does is of shadowed importance, but what Shukhov feels and thinks while he acts is more valuable to readers. Similarly, Noboru's agitated teenage years and his corrupt group of friends have had a negative impact on him: An understanding of these influences on Noboru come

from a knowledge of his thoughts and feelings. When Noburu is in a state of confusion, the split takes effect instantly. “Noboru opened a textbook and skimmed a few pages . . . He was already dripping wet” (79-80). This excerpt is like a continuous film strip racing past us speedily, describing Noboru’s thoughts with crystal-clear specificity, and shortly interrupted every now and then by his actions. When Mishima finds the need—which he does so often—to describe both Noburu’s actions and feelings *simultaneously*, he conveniently splits the narration and his parallelism becomes conspicuous.

Given the above similarities between the narrative patterns in the two books, a look at the various differences, with respect to narration, is in call. Certain prominent differences may be seen in the utilization of this parallel approach. Each author adapts such a parallel approach to his own story, and it is in this adaptation where the differences arise. Major differences are in the process of initiating this parallelism. What tactics do both authors use to bring up such a parallelism in the first place? Conversely, what strategies do both authors employ to dissolve one of the tracks when a parallel approach to narration becomes unfavorable? Differences exist in the methodologies used to carry out these sensitive tasks. Mishima especially does a wonderful job of converging the two parallel paths without disrupting the flow of the story. Such a converging process is carried out so effectively and so transparently that it is almost impossible to recognize until scrutinized with care.

Building the parallel tracks is one task; breaking them is another. Putting an abrupt stop to one of the parallel tracks can have unpredictable consequences on the reader’s understanding of the character. All the strange this may sound, Mishima has proven himself capable of carrying out this sensitive task without the slightest annoyance. One method used by Solzhenitsyn is the “merge” technique, whereby the less useful track is merged with the more serious track. Another fantastic tactic that Mishima uses frequently in his Sailor book, is the “conflict” technique, wherein conflicts within the plot are introduced to smoothen this process. For instance, when Noburu is caught red-handed, secretly spying on his mother, the ensuing narration is that of a single track. The beauty is in the inherent transparency that accompanies it. After the conflict has been resolved, the reader has not the slightest bit of confusion with the resulting single-lane narration. There is thus a strong bond between narration, character and conflict in Mishima’s work.

Solzhenitsyn has his own take at breaking parallel narration. In his novel, it becomes almost obvious to spot the parallelism even before the reader has had an opportunity to understand the protagonist fully. However, here we see a unique form of parallelism. In contrast to Mishima's novel where he takes advantage of conflict to break his narration, Solzhenitsyn accomplishes the same feat by employing external characters or elements. The inclusion of the Moldavian (136) has its own function, one of them being to transparently merge the parallel tracks lucidly without distracting the reader. Parallel narration isn't really broken as frequently by Solzhenitsyn as is done by Mishima: Mishima allows for parallel narration for short durations, and quickly shifts to the next character. This does not need to happen with Shukhov, as he is the only central character present. The personality of a character, as we see, is thus accentuated by the narrative style. "Characterization" as we call it, is highly dependent on narration. Here is a case for similarity in the novels: a large part of our understanding of the characters in the two novels come from the narrative styles used. The better the narration, the more we know about our characters. Although a two-source approach poses its own problems, it is much more bountiful and input-rich, and quickly becomes critical for a thorough understanding of the characters — the protagonists in particular. Narrative parallelism, in essence, works in favor of a novel of this genre, where the theme of confinement is pervasive. We, as readers, need ample input on the characters' decisions, plans, thoughts and doings. This structure of split narration helps in character emphasis and certainly befits a tormented character as Ivan, and a perturbed personality as Noboru. The appropriateness of the use of a paralleled approach to narration cannot be emphasized upon more.

Word Count: 1546

Works Cited

Mishima, Yukio. *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea*. Trans. John Nathan. New York: Vintage, 1965.

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Trans. Max Hayward, Ronald Hingley. New York: Bantam, 1963.