

Perspective Criticism and Preaching: Merging Character and Congregation

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Abstract: *This article suggests one possible way that perspective criticism, an emerging methodology within biblical studies, can inform homiletics. Perspective criticism provides the homiletician with an understanding of why it is that listeners might either condone or condemn a character in the sermon. This being the case, the preacher can use the planes to either have the congregation merge with a particular character or be distanced from a particular character.*

Undoubtedly, one's faith tradition shapes how one reads Scripture. When it comes to the reading of biblical narratives, one's faith tradition can influence the character in the story with which one most readily identifies. For example, if Luke 15:11-32 is the text for the sermon, some denominations have been conditioned to identify with the older brother while others will tend to identify with the younger brother.¹ Yet there may be times in the life of the church that a congregation needs to identify with a new character in the story. How can the sermon function to help the congregation move toward seeing itself as a different character in the narrative? This study seeks to show how perspective criticism, an emerging methodology in biblical studies, can inform the sermon in such situations.²

Wayne Booth's evaluation of the novel *Emma* resulted in literary critics examining how it is that authors are able to get readers to make favorable judgments about a character when, by typical standards, the readers should condemn the character's actions.³ Following Booth, the work of Boris Uspensky has arguably been the most influential.⁴ Uspensky proposed that point of view can be understood as functioning on five planes: ideological, phraseological, spatial, temporal, and psychological.

The ideological plane addresses whose point of view the author assumes when the author evaluates the world being described. The phraseological plane explains how a particular phrasing may represent a shift in point of view. This plane explores the speech patterns of characters and how a given character might tend to address another character in the story world.

The spatial plane and temporal plane are combined into one chapter.⁵ The spatial plane examines the spatial location of the narrator within the story. The narrator may be very close to the story, narrating intricate details, or the narrator may be far away from that which is being narrated. The temporal plane concerns where the narrator is in relation to time. In many stories, the narration is given in past tense. Finally, the psychological plane provides insight into the character's inner world, such as what the character felt or saw.

¹ David Fleer, "Preaching as Conformity to Scripture's Language: The Case of the Elder Brother and the Party," *Restoration Quarterly* 43 (2001): 253-266.

² The term perspective criticism derives from Gary Yamasaki's recent work. Gary Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism: Point of View and Evaluative Guidance in Biblical Narrative* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁴ Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Several other studies have been important to the development of point of view analysis within literary criticism. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Paul Simpson, *Language, Ideology, and Point of View* (London: Routledge, 1993); Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵ Uspensky, *Poetics*, 57-76. Because these two planes are combined into one chapter, it is not uncommon for scholars to refer to Uspensky's work as consisting of four planes.

In addition to these five planes, the informational plane developed by Steinberg has been used by biblical scholars.⁶ Yamasaki has explored the implications of the informational plane to biblical exegesis.⁷ The informational plane examines the amount of information available to a character within the story versus the amount of information available to the reader.

Perspective criticism suggests that the narrator's use of the aforementioned planes influences the reader's judgment of a character. A character's function as either a protagonist or antagonist is directly tied to the point of view supplied by the narrator to the reader. Certain techniques can be used by narrators to either merge the reader with a character, thus resulting in the reader making a positive judgment about a character, or distance the reader from a character, resulting in the reader making a negative judgment about a character.

As early as the 1970s, biblical scholars began realizing that the planes could aid in the interpretation of biblical narratives.⁸ Biblical scholars are just beginning to realize the potential implications that perspective criticism holds for the interpretation of biblical narratives.⁹ The field of homiletics, however, has not yet fully explored how perspective criticism can inform the sermon.

Point of View and Preaching

Most discussions of point of view and preaching can trace their lineage back to David Buttrick's *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*.¹⁰ Noting that point of view shapes "congregational consciousness,"¹¹ Buttrick discusses five categories of which the preacher should be aware. First, Buttrick identifies stance. This is defined as the location from which one speaks. Buttrick considers one's location in space as well as one's location in time. Second, orientation is explained as the aim of one's consciousness. Essentially, for Buttrick, this appears to be the location of the congregation's focus in the sermon, whether it be Jerusalem, one's self, or others. Third, Buttrick discusses distance. Distance can be created spatially, temporally, or emotionally. Fourth, there is focal field. Using the illustration of a camera, focal field is explained as how near or far an image is located. Fifth, Buttrick names lens depth. This is defined as the degree of the self which is involved in the telling. "See the children" is a very different statement from "O God, we feel utterly helpless."¹² Finally, Buttrick speaks of focal depth. This is "how far we may be seeing into things and people."¹³

Buttrick also observes that perspective is more than angles. Perspective is also attitudinal. This may manifest itself in the social attitudes of the preacher and congregation. Buttrick's most influential assertion was that the same point of view should be held within a move.¹⁴ Various points of view should not be expressed within one move, but rather a move in the sermon should be expressive of a single point of view.

⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 129–152.

⁷ Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism*, 54–68.

⁸ For a historical overview of point of view analysis within biblical scholarship see Gary Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2007), 68–110.

⁹ The website <http://perspectivecriticism.com/> is devoted to advancing perspective criticism.

¹⁰ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 57–65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

Buttrick's understanding of point of view can be found in more recent homiletical works.¹⁵ While his understanding of the attitudinal element and the need for a single move to contain a single point of view are helpful, his six categories seem to overlap. For example, stance is described as being spatial and temporal, yet "Distance is a peculiar category that is spatial, temporal, and perhaps even emotional."¹⁶

Much has been written on "point of view" and preaching.¹⁷ However, these homiletical discussions rarely address point of view in the same vein as Booth, Uspensky, and Yamasaki. Usually, these discussions focus on the located nature of the preacher and congregation. Will the preacher tell the story from a first-person point of view or a third-person point of view? Is the point of view of female listeners different from male listeners? Will Caucasian members come to the sermon with a different point of view than African-American members? While these issues have been helpful in homiletical discussions, they should not be confused with the issues with which perspective criticism is concerned.

Perspective criticism provides the reader with a means by which to make judgments about a character. Even if a narrator does not make explicit statements evaluating a character's actions, the readers "may be receiving guidance in a less obvious fashion through the way in which *point of view* is being used in the passage."¹⁸ It is my contention that even if a preacher does not make explicit statements about the actions of a character in a biblical narrative, perspective criticism is a methodology which provides the preacher with an understanding of how to give implicit clues which will inform the judgments that a congregation makes about a given biblical character.

This being the case, perspective criticism provides a way of understanding how the sermon can function to either merge the congregation with a character or distance the congregation from a character.¹⁹ Thus, it is possible to use point of view crafting to have the congregation merge with a character, and then, use a different point of view strategy to have the congregation become distanced from the character. It might be helpful for the preacher to first identify the point of view character in the text, and then identify the character with whom the congregation needs to identify.

¹⁵ Mary Alice Mulligan, "Teaching Disciples to Preach in the Service of Word and Table," in *Preaching at the Double Feast: Homiletics for Eucharistic Worship* (ed. Michael Monshau: Collegeview, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 81–85; Kenton C. Anderson, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 81; Michael Brothers, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 143–144.

¹⁶ Buttrick, *Homiletic*, 59.

¹⁷ For a study that is representative of how the term "point of view" is usually used in homiletics, see Robert R. Howard, "Gender and Point of View in the Imagery of Preaching," *Homiletic* 24 (1999): 1–12. Howard shows awareness of point of view discussions within literary criticism. He does reference the work of Booth and Uspensky in literary theory. However, Howard's aim is not so much an examination of how these theories can influence homiletics, but rather how an understanding of point of view can reveal that "whole areas of theological knowledge exist which may be seen only from a distinctively women's point of view. If this is true, images from that point of view may reveal them to the church's previously unseeing eyes" (8).

¹⁸ Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism*, 1.

¹⁹ For a survey of how the term "distance" has been understood within homiletics see Brother's recent work *Distance in Preaching*. I am using the term to explain a congregation's tendency to either condemn or condone a character. If the congregation is established as being near to a character, they will be more likely to identify with the character's actions. The opposite is true if the congregation is distanced from a character.

From Text to Sermon

The text used to provide an example will be Luke 10:25-37. Within this parable, a clear point of view character does not emerge. Rather, the crafting of this story leads the reader to view these events from the point of view of an objective bystander. This bystander witnesses a man being stripped and beaten by robbers. The bystander then observes a priest and Levite who successively pass by on the other side of the road before the man is aided by a Samaritan.

For the purposes of this article, I am primarily concerned with a congregation that has historically identified itself as the Good Samaritan yet needs to become aware that perhaps they have become more like the priest or Levite, simply leaving the marginalized on the side of the road. Therefore, the sermon will function to align the audience with the priest, yet eventually condemn his actions. One possible way that this can be achieved is by creating what Uspensky calls “nonconcurrence” between the planes.²⁰ It is possible that some of the planes can be used to merge the audience with a character, while others can be used to distance the audience from a character.

In the sermon below, the principles of perspective criticism will be applied in such a way that the priest is established as the point of view character. Having merged the congregation with the priest, the congregation will then be distanced from the priest. The sermon will contain extensive footnotes, explaining how perspective criticism is informing the sermon.

The Sermon

A priest²¹ walks²² on the road. The smell of sacrificial animals still lingers on his hands.²³ As he walks along, he gets a waft of another familiar scent. It’s something he’s quite acquainted with: blood. As the priest finds the trail of the red substance and follows it with his eyes, it doesn’t lead back to an animal on an altar but rather to a man in a ditch.²⁴ The priest looks up and sees the one from whom the blood is flowing.²⁵ As the priest walks nearer to the man he can hear a faint whimper, loud enough to be indicative of pain yet not quite loud enough to clearly decipher. He feels that he should stop and do something, but he reasons that it’s not really his responsibility.²⁶ Whatever his reasoning may be, he walks by on the other side of the road.²⁷

²⁰ Uspensky, *Poetics*, 101.

²¹ The ordering of the entrance of characters can shape how a character is perceived. Since my aim is to establish the priest as the point of view character, I have introduced the priest prior to introducing the man who fell into the hands of robbers.

²² The present tense has greater power to merge the reader/listener with a character. The past tense can have the inadvertent effect of creating an initial distance between a character and reader. Although perhaps not as important as the other planes, the temporal plane can be used to establish the point of view character. See Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism*, 69–90.

²³ The spatial plane is here being used. I have drawn the reader/listener close enough to the priest to be able to smell what the priest can smell.

²⁴ If extensive characterization is given of the man, it could function to pull the reader/listener away from the priest. Therefore, I have not provided detailed description of the man.

²⁵ By noting that the priest has seen the man, I have used the psychological plane to establish an inside view. To say that the priest “looks” at the man does not necessarily function to merge the reader/listener with the priest. In order to fully merge with the character, the audience needs to know what is seen. Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism*, 42–48. See also J. P. Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 140–143; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 62–63.

²⁶ The priest has further been established as the point of view character by noting what he hears, feels, and reasons. As Yamasaki suggests, “a cluster of well-paced inside views can make a strong contribution toward the establishing

The priest walked²⁸ on the road. And he kept walking. As he turned away from the man,²⁹ sounds of the man's pain filled the awkward silence created by neglect.³⁰ The man had a story to tell. It was a story about the twists and turns of life that sometimes result in being on the side of the road.³¹ But the priest didn't give him the opportunity. Rather than listen to this story, the priest continued to walk along the twists and turns of the path in front of him.³²

How often do we turn away? Perhaps we can think of times that we have "turned down" someone, but to turn down entails involvement. That is, you've heard the story but decided to not enter the story. Perhaps we are not as guilty of turning down as we are of simply turning away. We turn away and continue to walk along the path that we prefer—a path of solitude rather than solidarity, a path of self-reliance rather than self-emptying, and a path of selfishness rather than selflessness. It's a choice between egotism and altruism. Which will we choose?

As the priest rounded the corner,³³ red mud gave way to black dirt.³⁴ No longer having to avoid the man's inconvenient stream of red, the path became predictable. As the priest continued walking away, the path became safe for him once again. His gait became normal. There was no need to step around puddles of blood. There was no need for him to walk cautiously, avoiding potential defilement.

Too often, those on the side of the road become nothing more than a sight in the rearview mirror. Yet we continue to speed away because "objects in mirror are closer than they appear." We long for a path more familiar—one that is replete with privileged, pretty people. On the familiar path, we don't have to worry about bloodstains on our shoes or the defilement of our holy garments.

The priest became a small sight in the distance as he hiked over the hill.³⁵ Surely, he must have had places to go, things to do, and people to see. The man on the side of road did not fit into this prefigured plan.

of a given character as a point-of-view character—perhaps just as strong as any dynamics on the spatial plane." Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism*, 53.

²⁷ Having used the planes to establish the priest as the point of view character, the planes will now be used to distance the congregation from the priest. For the purpose of simplicity, I have chosen only to introduce the priest in this present work. The planes could also be used to speak of the Levite and the Samaritan.

²⁸ I have now placed the word in the past tense to begin to distance the congregation from the priest.

²⁹ This strategy is the result of private correspondence with Gary Yamasaki. The spatial plane is being used to begin to distance the congregation from the priest. Throughout the rest of the sermon, the priest will continue to spatially move away from the congregation, creating a distance on the spatial plane. Yamasaki initiated the idea which gave rise to the following phrases in the sermon: "As the priest rounded the corner" ... "the priest became a small sight in the distance" ... "the priest vanished."

³⁰ If, at this point in the sermon, I were to say that "the priest *heard* sounds of the man's pain" the congregation would continue to merge with the priest. Yamasaki can also be credited with this insight which was gained from private correspondence. The goal is to begin to distance the congregation from the priest, so I have not included any views into the inner workings of the priest.

³¹ This is a move on the informational plane. The congregation is being supplied with more information than the priest.

³² This is a move on the ideological plane for a congregation which would prefer to continue walking along their own path rather than join the path of others. This sentence is used as a transition into the next paragraph. The ideological plane will be used in this manner throughout the remainder of the sermon.

³³ See footnote 30.

³⁴ This is intended to represent that which a bystander can see rather than that which the priest himself can necessarily see.

³⁵ See footnote 30.

Perhaps this is our great problem. Those who are successful in the eyes of the world are often busy people. Their calendars are booked-up for weeks, if not months, in advance. Who has time for the one on the side of the road—especially the one who doesn’t look like we do or think like we do or believe like we do? Such a person just doesn’t quite fit into our world, much less our calendar.

So, the priest vanished.³⁶ In the text for this morning, he vanishes. Now, in our telling of the story, he vanishes. And, may I add, in our memories he vanishes. This parable is never referred to as the Parable of the Bad Priest. He is rarely remembered. Perhaps this is because God does not remember those who profess holiness externally and yet are unwilling to step into the story of another.

The one who is remembered is the Good Samaritan. Repeatedly, our Scriptures remind us that God remembers the one on the side of the road. The Good Samaritan is a God-like character in the story. Seeing that this is the case, the Good Samaritan is acting like Jesus. Luke frequently recounts the occasions when Jesus spent time with those whom society had left in the ditch. Whether it be tightfisted tax-collectors, promiscuous prostitutes, or unregenerate Gentiles, Jesus stopped. He stopped to listen, he stopped to help, and he stopped to heal. Jesus was simply doing what the God of the Israelites would have done, for the prophets frequently proclaim that God is a God of the fatherless and the widow. Today, let us proclaim that our God is the God of “a certain man” on the side of the road, regardless of how he got there.³⁷

Conclusion

Perspective criticism holds great potential for the analysis of biblical narratives. This being the case, homiletics should consider how this methodology can inform the sermon. In this article, I have proposed one such possibility. Perspective criticism allows a means whereby the preacher can begin to understand the process by which listeners make judgments about characters. Characterization can occur in a sermon in such a way that the listener is either merged with or distanced from a character. During different seasons of its life, the church may need to identify with different characters in a biblical narrative. In such seasons, perspective criticism could prove to be a helpful tool.

³⁶ See footnote 30.

³⁷ One of the potential insights that homiletics can gain from perspective criticism pertains to how a narrator can create a situation that is such that an audience can make judgments about a character without the narrator explicitly stating what sort of judgments the audience should make. I have not said, “We need to realize that we have been more like the priest than the Good Samaritan.” Rather, my strategy was to use point of view crafting in order to merge the congregation with the priest, and then distance the congregation from the priest.