

INTERVIEW: SUSAN S. LANSER

BEYOND CLASSICAL NARRATOLOGY

by Aleksandra V. Jovanović



Susan S. Lanser is a renowned feminist thinker and professor of English, Women's and Gender Studies, and Comparative Literature at Brandeis University. She taught at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland before joining the Brandeis faculty in 2001. Her scholarly interests encompass 18th- and 19th-century studies, narrative theory, women's and gender studies as well as the literary effects of social practices and issues like racism and power.

"My training is deeply formalist and my perspective is deeply feminist. This uneasy union has led me beyond traditional formalism", is how Lanser

defines her own attitude. In her study “Towards Feminist Narratology” (Style, 1986) Lanser combines formalist-structuralist narratology with feminism in order to explore how feminist studies might benefit from narratology and how the methods of narratology might contribute new insights to the feminist thought. In her analyses of literature she strives to reveal the repressed meaning of literary texts in an attempt to describe the female voice which “covertly express ideas and attitudes proscribed by the dominant culture”.

Professor Lanser’s major publications include: *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton, 1981), *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Cornell, 1992), *Women Critics 1660-1820: An Anthology* (Indiana, 1995). “The Yellow Wallpaper’ and the Politics of Color.” *The Yellow Wallpaper : A Critical Sourcebook*. (Routledge, 2004), “Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Poetics of Narrative Voice.” *Narrative Theory: Critical Perspectives* (Routledge, 2004).

BELLS: In your work you have been dealing with narratology in quite a specific way. You combined formalist and structuralist textual analyses with the broader contextual investigations of speech-act theories. As a result you advocated a new approach towards narratology. What are the main principles of that approach?

The principles of my approach are now effectively institutionalized in what are called “postclassical narratologies”—a set of narratological approaches including feminist narratology that argues for the importance of contextual factors such as gender, race, sexuality, nationality and ethnicity that interact with and within formal elements of narrative to produce textual meaning. We recognize in this way that neither authors nor texts nor readers reside in a historical or ideological vacuum and that our theories about narrative need to recognize social elements that produce narrative and narrative meaning. Rather than relegating these aspects of textuality to the sphere of interpretation, postclassical narratologies insist that they be theorized within any poetics of narrative.

BELLS: In one of your books you claimed: “My training is deeply formalist and my perspective is deeply feminist. This uneasy union has led me beyond traditional formalism.” Do you still

believe that the union between narratology and feminism is uneasy?

Given the new “postclassical” understanding of narratology, the union is no longer “uneasy” for those of us who practice or value feminism as a theoretical approach. However, feminism has not been embraced across the narratological landscape any more than it has been embraced across the full landscape of academic scholarship in general, despite great strides toward that end. Some scholars argue that feminism has indeed lost ground during the past decade, in part because of the false impression that it has already been integrated everywhere and/or that specific attention to women is no longer needed. Some point, for example, to the increased number of women in professions and positions of power in many countries. But I would agree with those who argue that as long as the status, safety, and opportunity available to women and girls remains limited or uneven—as it does in just about every developing and developed country around the world—we are far from having reached a “postfeminist” moment. Feminist narratology is just one of the feminist practices still crucially needed as intellectual interventions designed to further the goals of transformative equality.

BELLS: In what way do scientific and binary approaches to the text alienate the feminine way of interpretation?

I don’t believe that there is a “feminine” interpretive practice, and I do not consider “scientific” approaches to conflict with feminist interpretive goals. As for binary approaches, they often need to be deconstructed because they set up false oppositions. In my first book, *The Narrative Act*, I opted for spectrums rather than binaries. Few narrative practices operate on “either/or” principles. On the other hand, some binaries remain useful. Although there are different ways for a narrator to be “homodiegetic,” for example—i.e., present as a character in the story—the distinction between “homodiegetic” and “heterodiegetic” narrators still seems to me a valuable distinction for feminist as well as for other narratologies.

BELLS: How can a text open up its boundaries to other meanings and messages?

Texts are always open to multiple meanings and messages. The onus rests on the reader, or on an interpretive community (to use the term coined

by Stanley Fish), to recognize the possibilities that a text signals. I do not mean that a text can mean anything or everything. But we would not have a field of literary scholarship if we did not also believe in the openness of texts to new interpretations. New knowledge, new lenses, and new readers can all foster new readings of texts.

BELLS: You have opposed to the Wayne Booth's term of the implied author announcing that "the longstanding debates about the implied author had reached a point of diminishing returns." You have suggested the concept of textual voice instead. Why is it more appropriate to talk about the "textual voice"?

I hoped that the term "textual voice" would allow us to consider the ways in which readers create a sense of authority for the text without evoking the baggage of the implied author. But the term has not really caught on; narrative theorists are still using "implied author" even as we continue to debate the term. I have contributed to this conversation in two essays, "(Im)plying the Author," published in 2001 in the journal *Narrative*, and more recently in a special issue of *Style* devoted to this topic. My piece is called "The Implied Author: An Agnostic Manifesto

BELLS: What does the distinction of private and public narration add to the formalist analysis of the text?

Genette makes a strong distinction among textual levels (extradiegetic, intradiegetic, metadiegetic). While this distinction is sometimes useful, there is a related social distinction that seems to me more significant and that I distinguish as public v. private narration. Public narration is addressed to a narratee who can stand in for the reader; private narration is addressed to another character. Because the social context of narration is dependent on gender, race, and other vectors of identity, in other words, the distinction between private and public forms a meaningful element of narratological analysis. In the history of female narrators, for example, asserting a public voice has been challenging; female narrators of the past were more likely to use the private voice of the letter, the diary, or speech to a character. And public narration aligns the reader to the narratee in a way that is not the case for private narration. In short, the distinction between public and private brings the formal analysis of texts closer to social context and enables questions that intra- and extradiegetic distinctions don't get at.

BELLS: In one of your articles you claimed that coded messages establish a dialogue between the narrator and the narratee, or still broader between the author and reader. Is every reader competent enough to decode the feminine message in a text? Who are the coded messages addressed to?

Certainly not every reader can decode a feminist (NOT FEMININE!) message. The whole point of coding is to be able to communicate with one audience while another is left in the dark. We don't always know to whom coded messages are addressed, but in the instances where we can establish this, they are addressed to those presumed like-minded and therefore safe.

BELLS: How and why did the practice of coding messages in literary texts originate?

I don't know the answer to the "how," but where there are coded messages, I assume there is either unconscious textual production or deliberate intention to exclude some potential readers.

BELLS: What are the strategies of decoding feminist messages?

Recognizing the codes is tantamount to decoding. But first we have to have a hunch that coding is going on. Sometimes a text signals the *possibility* of coding through ellipses, contradictions, or other anomalous practices. There is always the risk that readers will see coding where the author denies its existence. In the world of art, an example would be the assumption of many feminists that Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings are coded representations of female bodies. O'Keeffe vigorously denied this, but that has not stopped some scholars from asserting it. We are often in the realm of speculation when we are looking for "feminist messages."

BELLS: Could this type of analysis be applied to literature in general, that is regardless of the age or the aesthetics of the literary period?

Certainly, but we always risk over-reading or under-reading to the extent that we do not understand the context of the work's production. Sometimes we do not know enough about a text, author, or context to make reliable judgments.

BELLS: Could the analytical apparatus of the feminist narrative, especially the strategies of decoding, be applied to detect other embedded narratives in a literary text, like traces of the Other in general?

Definitely. We have applied decoding strategies to African-American literature and to gay/lesbian “coming out” conversations (in which gay people try to let other people know they are gay, or to find out whether someone else is gay, without risking rejection or exposure themselves).

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