



Re-storying the Self: The Role of Narration in Reconstitution

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Abstract

In today's fast-paced world, many lives go unnoticed, not because they choose to be invisible, but because society seldom pauses to truly see them. Yet, behind all these unseen faces resides a tale wanting to be told. Narration thus becomes a vital tool in restoring visibility, empathy, and dignity to these muted lives. This paper examines Anton Chekhov's short story "Misery", which follows Iona, an old sledge driver who has lost his son and longs for human connection to share his grief. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, which posits that identity is constantly modified by the tales people tell about themselves (Ricoeur, 1991), this paper investigates how narration serves as a way of self-formation and reconstruction. While all narration serves to shape and express the self, the act of narrating grief specifically serves as a way to externalise pain, give meaning to loss, and start the process of emotional integration. In "Misery", Iona attempts to emplot his tragedy, giving it coherence through a beginning, middle, and end. But every time he tries, he is either ignored or interrupted by his indifferent passengers. He is unable to reconstruct his identity in the absence of a compassionate listener, making him invisible on a social and existential level. The narrative's cold, indifferent setting underscores this isolation, making it a timeless reflection on the stifling of grief.

Keywords: narrator, grief, identity, reconstruction, emplotment

Introduction

In today's fast-paced world, many lives are overlooked. There are many faces being silently present in loud cities. Not because they choose to be invisible, but because people seldom ever stop to look at them. Yet, behind all these unseen faces resides a tale wanting to be told. In this context, narration becomes a potent tool, illuminating those hidden faces and muted voices. It makes their stories important. Every personal narrative, no matter how quiet or marginalised they may seem, has an inherent value and adds to the larger human experience. Storytelling bridges the gap between incomprehension and comprehension, making the invisible memorable. In this sense, narration serves as a tool to restore visibility, empathy, and dignity in a society that all too frequently fails to take a close

look. This paper focuses on one such unseen face, whose pain went unheard.

A titan of Russian literature, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904), celebrated for his mastery of short stories and modern drama. Known for his nuanced character development, conciseness, and profound psychological insights, he shaped a new literary realism that continues to influence writers globally. He was also a physician, and his medical background greatly influenced his comprehension of human nature, giving his novels a realistic and empathetic feel.

His story "Misery" is a tale of a poor sledge-driver named Iona Potapov, who is mourning the death of his only son. Like every man, he desires to put his sorrow into words, but his patrons are neither willing to listen nor treating him well. Being unable



to express his emotions to anybody and being unable to put a closure to that episode, he turns to his horse. He shares his sorrows with his horse, who seemed unconcerned about his suffering but at least did not stop him from expressing himself.

Material & Methods

To narrate is not just to tell but also to choose what is remembered, how it is framed and why it matters. As Rhodes says, "Narrative refers to the way that human experiences time... the way we mentally organise our sense of past" (2016).

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) offers a compelling lens called 'narrative identity' through which to examine the profound relationship between storytelling and selfhood. According to the theorist, personal identity is not static but constantly moulded throughout time by stories that are told about oneself. Ricoeur distinguishes between two dimensions of identity: *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* "refers to a notion of identity based on sameness" (Crowley, 1-2), which are the consistent traits and characteristics that make that individual identifiable over time, while *ipse* is selfhood, the evolving sense of self as a reflective entity that is shaped by promises, commitments, and moral agency.

According to Ricoeur, narrative serves as a mediator between these two elements, allowing people to combine the consistency of their personalities with the flexibility of their actual experiences. Through the connection of previous memories, present decisions, and future goals, narrative gives our life a chronological framework. As a result, it creates a storyline that advances self-understanding. Through this process, people are actively creating their identities rather than just remembering past occurrences. People can use storytelling to navigate change while preserving a feeling of continuity by using it as a tool for moral reflection and self-interpretation. Self-narratives also influence how people perceive themselves and how they respond to the outside environment. It "is a way we understand ourselves within a given context", according to Trzenbinski (15).

This paper adopts Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity to argue that narration is not only a tool

for communication but a vital mechanism in the formation of personal identity. Crafting and narrating life stories gives one a sense of agency, coherence, and moral direction; thus, narration is essential to understanding and becoming oneself. Ricoeur's insights reaffirm the timeless power of narratives as a foundation for selfhood in a world where identity is becoming more fluid and fragmented.

Findings & Results

Grief is given a form when it is spoken. While all narration serves to shape and express the self, the act of narrating grief specifically serves as a way to externalise pain, give meaning to loss, and start the process of emotional integration. This is ritualised in many cultures, like the Oppari in Tamil culture, which is the "eulogised narration of the deceased... in a melodic oral form" (Kumar, 2). It is not only to commemorate the deceased, but also it is a powerful form of emotional release and narrative. Verbalising grief gives it a form, which in turn is a gesture of identity reconstruction.

In Chekhov's "Misery", the protagonist Iona is trapped in the depths of unsaid anguish following the passing of his son. His frequent attempts to recount his loss are attempts to piece together his broken identity rather than mere appeals for pity. "To whom shall I tell my grief?" Iona asks, speaking into a void (Chekhov, 1). This inquiry shows a desperate attempt to put together a cohesive account of his loss rather than being rhetorical. At the heart of this endeavour is Ricoeur's concept of *emplotment*; the act of configuring disparate events into a structured and meaningful narrative is central to this effort. Iona is attempting to *emplot* his tragedy, giving it a comprehensible beginning, middle, and end. However, his tale is left unfinished each time his story is interrupted by rushed, uninterested passengers. When *emplotment* is lacking, identity is also lacking.

Iona's narration is frequently cut off or disregarded, making him more and more invisible on a social and existential level. He is reduced to a sleigh driver, and his identity as a grieving parent is never validated. Chekhov's tale effectively demonstrates how grieving without a listener is equivalent to depriving oneself of narrative, which in turn deprives one of self.



Through tangible coldness, the setting of “Misery” further exacerbates this mental coldness. “Big flakes of wet snow are whirling lazily about the street lamps, which have just been lighted...” (Chekhov, 1). This unbroken winter night mirrors Iona’s inner condition. ‘Cold’ is often used in literature to represent social estrangement, emotional apathy, and the lack of warmth in interpersonal relationships. In this instance, Iona’s unresolved despair is reflected in the unrelenting cold. Iona’s pain is muted, buried behind layers of apathy from others around him, just like the city is covered in snow, which muffles sound and movement. The cold is both psychological and climatic; it symbolises a world devoid of empathy and where pain is unheard.

Interpretation & Discussion

The reconstitution of one’s identity after a rupture is not a passive process; it is an active re-making of the self in the wake of loss. Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity positions this process within the realm of storytelling, where emplotment offers the structure for rearranging disparate experiences into a logical whole. In moments of grief, the self is destabilised. Narration becomes the means by which an individual can gather the scattered pieces of experience and rearrange them into a new, liveable identity. Narrating allows the bereaved person to live with and through the loss by transforming an incident from an unprocessed, raw wound into a part of their life narrative.

In Anton Chekhov’s “Misery”, Iona’s struggle to narrate the death of his son reflects the very heart of this reconstitution process. In an attempt to talk his misery into being, the elderly sledge driver seeks human interaction. This speech is an attempt to give the loss context, to include it in his life experience, to go from the unfathomable chaos of grief to a coherent narrative. But every attempt is cut short. His passengers are blatantly contemptuous, irritated, or uninterested. The emplotment process fails before it even starts in the absence of an audience. Iona is left in a state of identity conflict as a result; to others, he is still only a driver and an unseen service provider rather than ‘a grieving father’.

One of the story’s most profound lines, “He hears abuse addressed to him, he sees people, and

the feeling of loneliness begins little by little to be less heavy on his heart,” highlights the poignancy of his circumstances (Chekhov, 3). Being mistreated at this time gives Iona a peculiar kind of comfort since it serves as a reminder that he is still a member of society. Ironically, the insult is a recognition of his presence. His loneliness is lessened by these small tokens of acknowledgment; otherwise, he is invisible to everyone, “all white like a ghost” (Chekhov, 1). This demonstrates the depth of his loneliness and the need for human connection.

The thematic resonance of “Misery” transcends its late 19th-century Russian setting and finds fresh significance in contemporary situations of emotional estrangement and loneliness. Even today, it is sadly common for an unresponsive environment to silence pain. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless individuals experienced bereavement without the possibility of communal mourning, whether due to physical distancing or the overwhelming collective scale of the crisis. Funerals were delayed, discussions about loss were omitted or redirected, and grieving frequently turned into a lonely task. Similar to Iona, individuals felt compelled to share their suffering, but they had no sympathetic listeners. Many people had a greater sensation of invisibility as a result.

Even outside extraordinary events like a pandemic, the contemporary world carries its own forms of emotional alienation. In digitally saturated societies, communication is often rapid and transactional, leaving little room for the slow, attentive listening that grief demands. Though self-expression is more possible on online platforms, these exchanges are usually superficial. The paradox is that despite being ‘connected’ all the time, one might be invisible in the midst of their worst sorrow. Thus, Chekhov’s portrayal of Iona’s invisibility in front of his passengers strikes a timeless chord as an indictment of how fast-paced, self-absorbed modern life might ignore the silent tragedies that are taking place in individuals around us.

Whether in the streets of Chekhov’s Russia or in the cacophony of the modern, hyper-connected world, the stillness around grief has significant effects on identity. Ricoeur’s model serves as a reminder that narrative serves as a link between the



repaired self of life after loss and the fragmented self of sorrow. Without narration, the possibility of restoration is suppressed, the rupture stays fresh, and the self remains fractured. Chekhov depicts the lack of this bridge in “Misery” by showing Iona as a man caught between his past self as a parent and his current self as a grieving man, unable to move into a cohesive future self, due to the lack of the social framework necessary for that transition.

Conclusion

“Misery” is a silent critique of societal neglect as well as a portrayal of personal sorrow. It challenges its readers to pay attention to the overlooked, to listen when we would otherwise be impatient, and to acknowledge the remarkable effort that goes into telling a narrative. In the end, Iona does express his anguish, but only to his horse, who represents the extreme last choice. That passage is poignant because it flips the ideal: storytelling may heal, but in this instance, it is reduced to a last gesture into emptiness, depriving it of its social and identity-restoring potential. The tragedy is not merely that Iona’s son has died but that his grief dies unheard. This absence of a listener exposes the essential link between storytelling and the reconstitution of selfhood. The story mirrors broader societal patterns of silencing pain, whether in the alienation of modern urban life or the emotional distance fostered by digital interactions. Such contexts make narratology especially relevant to the emerging humanities, where interdisciplinary approaches are vital to understanding how human identity is continually shaped, fractured, and reformed through stories. Further research might extend this approach to cross-cultural mourning narratives or to digital-age storytelling, exploring how emerging forms of narrative expression continue, or fail, to sustain the reconstruction of selfhood.

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