Case studies in English

1.5 The voices of the text

Case study 1.5
"Tell Them Not to Kill Me!" (in *The burning plane*).
Translated from the Spanish by George D. Schade.

"Tell them not to kill me, Justino! Go on and tell them that. For God's sake! Tell them. Tell them please for God's sake."

"I can't. There's a sergeant there who doesn't want to hear anything about you."

"Make him listen to you. Use your wits and tell him that scaring me has been enough. Tell him please for God's sake."

"But it's not just to scare you. It seems they really mean to kill you. And I don't want to go back there."

"Go on once more. Just once, to see what you can do."

"No. I don't feel like going. Because if I do they'll know I'm your son. If I keep bothering them they'll end up knowing who I am and will decide to shoot me too. Better leave things the way they are now."

"Go on, Justino. Tell them to take a little pity on me. Just tell them that."

Justino clenched his teeth and shook his head saying no.

And he kept on shaking his head for some time.

"Tell the sergeant to let you see the colonel. And tell him how old I am-- How little I'm worth. What will he get out of killing me? Nothing. After all he must have a soul. Tell him to do it for the blessed salvation of his soul."

Justino got up from the pile of stones which he was sitting on and walked to the gate of the corral. Then he turned around to say, "All right, I'll go. But if they decide to shoot me too, who'll take care of my wife and kids?"

"Providence will take care of them, Justino. You go there now and see what you can do for me. That's what matters."

They'd brought him in at dawn. The morning was well along now and he was still there, tied to a post, waiting. He couldn't keep still. He'd tried to sleep for a while to calm down, but he couldn't. He wasn't hungry either. All he wanted was to live. Now that he knew they were really going to kill him, all he could feel was his great desire to stay alive, like a recently resuscitated man.

Who would've thought that old business that happened so long ago and that was buried the way he thought it was would turn up? That business when he had to kill Don Lupe. Not for nothing either, as the Alimas tried to make out, but because he had his reasons. He remembered: Don Lupe Terreros, the owner of the Puerta de Piedra-- and besides that, his compadre-- was the one he, Juvencio Nava, had to kill, because he'd refused to let him pasture his animals, when he was the owner of the Puerta de Piedra and his compadre too.

At first he didn't do anything because he felt compromised. But later, when the drought came, when he saw how his animals were dying off one by one, plagued by hunger, and how his compadre Lupe continued to refuse to let him use his pastures, then was when he began breaking through the fence and driving his herd of skinny animals to the pasture where they could get their fill of grass. And Don Lupe didn't like it and ordered the fence mended, so that he, Juvencio Nava, had to cut open the hole again.

So, during the day the hole was stopped up and at night it was opened again, while the stock stayed there right next to the fence, always waiting-- his stock that before had lived justsmelling the grass without being able to taste it.

And he and Don Lupe argued again and again without coming to any agreement.

Until one day Don Lupe said to him, “Look here, Juvencio, if you let another animal in my pasture, I’ll kill it.”

And he answered him, “Look here, Don Lupe, it’s not my fault that the animals look out for themselves. They’re innocent. You’ll have to pay for it, if you kill them.”

And he killed one of my yearlings.

This happened thirty-five years ago in March, because in April I was already up in the mountains, running away from the summons. […] It’s been that way my whole life. Not just a year or two. My whole life.

And now they’ve come for him when he no longer expected anyone, confident that people had forgotten all about it, believing that he’d spend at least his last days peacefully. “At least,” he thought, “I’ll have some peace in my old age. They’ll leave me alone.”

He’d clung to this hope with all his heart. That’s why it was hard for him to imagine that he’d die like this, suddenly, at this time of life, after having fought so much to ward off death, after having spent his best years running from one place to another because of the alarms, now when his body had become all dried up and leathery from the bad days when he had to be in hiding from everybody.

Hadn’t he even let his wife go off and leave him? The day when he learned his wife had left him, the idea of going out in search of her didn’t even cross his mind. He let her go without trying to find out at all who she went with or where, so he wouldn’t have to go down to the village. He let her go as he’d let everything else go, without putting up a fight. All he had left to take care of was his life, and he’d do that, if nothing else. He couldn’t let them kill him. He couldn’t. Much less now.

Analysis

The excerpt chosen to show how different voices can appear in a text is the beginning of a short story by Mexican writer Juan Rulfo, one of the most important Latin American authors of the 20th century. The story recounts the tale of Juvencio Nava, a poor peasant who commits a murder several years before the time mentioned in the narrative. It happens during a period when Nava’s animals have begun to starve because the drought-stricken fields to which he has access no longer provide enough food. On the neighbouring farm owned by Guadalupe Terreros—Nava’s *compadre* (the godfather of one of his children) — there is enough grass to feed livestock. However, the owner strictly forbids Nava’s animals from entering his property, threatening to kill them if his will is not respected : “Look here, Juvencio, if you let another animal in my pasture, I’ll kill it.” (lines 48-49).

Juvencio Nava responds with a vague but firm threat: “You’ll have to pay for it, if you kill them.” (line 51). Unmoved, Don Lupe kills one of his *compadre*’s animals when he sees that Juvencio has ignored his warning. Juvencio reacts immediately: he kills Don Lupe and, as a consequence, must spend the rest of his life “running away from the summons.” (line 55). Juvencio hopes that, with time, his story will be forgotten. Many years pass, and one day, just as Juvencio thinks he is no longer in danger, soldiers arrive with an order from a sergeant. They inform him that he is condemned to death and take him prisoner. In the second part of the story, the reader learns that the sergeant who gave the order for his capture is none other than the son of Guadalupe Terreros, who had been very young when his father died and who is now determined to see that Juvencio Nava is punished.

The excerpt presents the dialogue that opens the story, when Juvencio Nava begs his son Justino to go and plead for mercy from those who are about to execute him. This fragment illustrates the subtle interplay Juan Rulfo creates between different voices in a third-person narrative. Although a form of dialogism is sometimes perceptible (for example, in the resonance of religious discourse when Juvencio asks

the sergeant to spare him for the blessed salvation of his soul (“for God's sake”, lines 2 and 5), the fundamental polyphonic technique in this text is the use of direct speech, indirect speech, free indirect speech, and narrativized speech.

This is a third-person narrative. A story told by someone who is not involved in the events being recounted generally implies an external point of view — that is, a perspective different from that of the characters involved in the events (who are, in the past, Juvencio Nava and Guadalupe Terreros, and in the present, Juvencio, Justino, the soldiers, and the sergeant). Rulfo’s story begins without any introduction. The reader must gradually piece together, from what is being read, what is happening and what has happened in the past.

Opening the story with a dialogue in direct speech allows the reader immediate access to what the protagonist and his son are feeling. Juvencio Nava is desperate because he is a prisoner and knows he is going to die. He therefore asks his son to intercede and plead for mercy. Justino is afraid, because asking for mercy means addressing people who hold great power—people whose reactions can be excessive and unjust. The entity from whom clemency must be requested is expressed in the third person plural, as indicated by the title and the first sentence of the story (“Tell them not to kill me”). This third person plural refers both to concrete individuals (the sergeant and his soldiers) and to an impersonal dimension (a common value of the third person plural in Spanish, similar to the French “on”). The third person in “tell them” thus refers to an entity Juvencio perceives as superior, abstract, and unreachable—an entity that includes the soldiers and the sergeant, but also the sergeant’s superiors and all representatives of the institutions. It is the world of the powerful and the decision-makers, a part of society that is completely alien to Juvencio’s world.

The repetitions (of “tell them,” for example), the short sentences (ranging from one to five words), the familiar syntax and vocabulary (“Use your wits,” “how old I am”), and the use of diminutives (“a little pity”) heighten the dramatic force of the direct speech. But since the chosen genre is narrative fiction and not drama, the third-person narrator takes over the story after this dialogue between Juvencio and Justino and recounts what happened a little earlier (“They’d brought him in at dawn”, line 24). The introduction of the adverb “now” in the following sentence (“The morning was well along now and he was still there”, lines 24-25) shows that the story is being narrated from the present and that the point of view is Juvencio’s. Although the literal quoting of the character’s words is abandoned and the story is told in the third person, Juvencio’s perspective remains central through the use of free indirect speech. The narration follows Juvencio’s thoughts. It is not a neutral third person, but a perspective deeply coloured by the subjectivity of a character. Introductory verbs (such as “he thought that” or “he felt that”), which could clarify the adopted point of view, are omitted, and it is the rhythm of the old peasant’s thoughts that comes to the forefront :

> He wasn’t hungry either. All he wanted was to live. Now that he knew they were really going to kill him, all he could feel was his great desire to stay alive, like a recently resuscitated man.
> Who would’ve thought that old business that happened so long ago and that was buried the way he thought it was would turn up? That business when he had to kill Don Lupe. Not for nothing either, as the Alimas tried to make out, but because he had his reasons. (lines 26-32)

The thread of the narration is driven by Juvencio’s thoughts. There is distance not only between the narrated events and the story’s narrator, but also between those events and Juvencio’s present. Additional markers of the protagonist’s perspective can be found in the phrase “he had to kill Don Lupe” (which frames the murder as an obligation stemming from a law of respect for life and the innocence of animals—a law

Juvencio sees as higher than the one now justifying his death sentence) and in the distancing from the viewpoint of the “Alimas,” who tried to make the murder seem gratuitous (“for nothing”) while ignoring Juvencio’s “reasons.” The reference to the voice of the people of Alima occurs through indirect discourse introduced by a verb (“tried to make out”). This introductory verb is embedded in the free indirect discourse that follows the flow of Juvencio’s thoughts.

In the lines that follow those we have just quoted, it is interesting to note that Juvencio’s point of view is maintained. However, narrativized discourse is often used when Don Lupe’s arguments are reproduced. This is the case when we read: “he’d refused to let him pasture his animals” (line 34), “Lupe continued to refuse to let him use his pastures” (line 38), or “he and Don Lupe argued again and again without coming to any agreement.” (lines 46-47). In these three instances, instead of quoting the characters’ words (either directly or indirectly), their viewpoints are summarized in order to move the action forward. The verb “argued” refers to a series of verbal exchanges, but instead of textually reproducing the voices of Lupe and Juvencio, the narrator condenses their speech. Don Lupe’s discourse—and at times that of Juvencio—is thus narrativized.

A brief dialogue in direct style, introduced by inverted commas, then marks a change in rhythm. The reader clearly perceives this shift through the layout of the text on the page. This is how the episode of tension between Juvencio Nava and Guadalupe Terreros comes to an end. We read:

> “Look here, Juvencio, if you let another animal in my pasture, I’ll kill it.”
> And he answered him, “Look here, Don Lupe, it’s not my fault that the animals look out for themselves. They’re innocent. You’ll have to pay for it, if you kill them.” (lines 47-5o)

With this direct speech exchange, we reach the climax of the tension between Juvencio and Don Lupe. The typographical space after Juvencio's threat (line 52) confirms that this is a punctuation of the narrative, a pause in the storytelling.

To return to the present and maintain the narrative tension, Juvencio Nava speaks immediately afterward. To do this, he does not use third-person free indirect speech, but direct speech in the first person. If we compare this first-person speech of Juvencio with the aforementioned exchange, we see that Juvencio’s new direct speech is of a different order. It is no longer a matter of quoting words spoken thirty-five years earlier, but of directly introducing what Juvencio thinks in the present:

> And he killed one of my yearlings.
> This happened thirty-five years ago in March, because in April I was already up in the mountains, running away from the summons. […] It’s been that way my whole life. Not just a year or two. My whole life.
> And now they’ve come for him when he no longer expected anyone, confident that people had forgotten all about it, believing that he’d spend at least his last days peacefully. “At least,” he thought, “I’ll have some peace in my old age. They’ll leave me alone.” (lines 53-60)

The introduction of a first-person narrator who speaks after having spent his whole life on the run marks a new break. The goal is to introduce the character’s thoughts as directly as possible. Except for an occasional parenthetical insertion between commas (“he thought”) at the end of the quoted lines, there are almost no verbs introducing the direct speech. Yet the reader has no difficulty understanding that these are the thoughts of the old farmer. Juvencio remembers his past, and even though the narrative could have continued in the first person singular, it is not the

chosen option. Reducing the point of view to Juvencio's first person would indeed mean prioritizing a single character, and in this story by Rulfo (as in many of his other stories), the aim is to give voice to a series of characters—a way of showing the diversity of viewpoints, sensibilities, and reactions. In *"Tell Them Not to Kill Me"*, it is not only Juvencio's voice that is highlighted; later in the story, the voice of the sergeant (one of Guadalupe Terreros's sons) will also be heard.

In the lines that follow this incursion of Juvencio's first-person voice, the narrator resumes speaking and refers to Juvencio in the third person: *"*And now they've come for him when he no longer expected anyone*"* (line 57). The narrative viewpoint from the present is maintained. In this free indirect discourse that unfolds Juvencio's thoughts, there are moments when the introductory verb is made explicit. This is the case in *"*believing that he'd spend at least his last days peacefully*."* (lines 58-59). And it is also the case, as we have already observed, when direct speech is used again to express Juvencio's resignation at the end of a paragraph ("'At least,' he thought, 'I'll have some peace in my old age. They'll leave me alone.'", lines 59-60).

The last two paragraphs of our excerpt show that the narrator resumes speaking without departing from Juvencio's point of view. This is particularly clear when, having returned to free indirect discourse, the narrator conveys the old peasant's thoughts as he remembers his past:

> Hadn't he even let his wife go off and leave him? The day when he learned his wife had left him, the idea of going out in search of her didn't even cross his mind. He let her go without trying to find out at all who she went with or where, so he wouldn't have to go down to the village. He let her go as he'd let everything else go, without putting up a fight. All he had left to take care of was his life, and he'd do that, if nothing else. He couldn't let them kill him. He couldn't. Much less now. (lines 66-71)

The introductory verbs (which in this case could be "to think," "to feel," or "to say to oneself") are omitted here. The syntax reflects the rhythm of the old peasant's thoughts, with its repetitions ("He let her go […]. He let her go…") and his determination to keep fighting nonetheless ("He couldn't let them kill him. He couldn't. Much less now.").

We have seen how direct speech in the first person (within dialogue or marked by quotation marks, often omitting introductory verbs) and **free indirect speech** are interwoven throughout this short story. The other types of discourse (indirect speech with introductory verbs and **narrated speech**) are less frequent, as the story aims to reduce the distance between the reader and the characters, and to make heard the voices of rural Mexico in the decades following the 1910 revolution.