Victorian Novel Discourses: Julia Kavanagh's *Rachel Gray*

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Abstract
Many Victorian novels have been shunted to the margin of literary history, as they were written by neglected women writers. The great interest in women's history produces nowadays an increased concern for researching these relatively obscure novels. One of them is Julia Kavanagh's Rachel Gray. *This paper is intended to show how the handling of Genettian narrative discourse categories helps the reader reach the major themes of* Rachel Gray *and how it is useful in finding out where the novel is situated on the trail between the classical concept of the novel and the modern one. Analyzing* Rachel Gray *according to Gérard Genette's grid, one can notice that his structuralist categorization of narrative discourse is very useful to disclose the novel's preoccupation with family issues. Furthermore, it contributes to determining that* Rachel Gray, *even if a realist novel, is inspired from the previous Romantic Movement and announces the subsequent arrival of modernist fiction.*

Keywords: Victorian novel, Realism, Gérard Genette's narrative discourse, father-daughter relationship, romantic and modernist influences

Even if esteemed by her contemporaries, popular and internationally-acclaimed during her lifetime, Julia Kanavagh is little known by the modern reader. This is not surprising, as many women writers of the nineteenth century share the same portion. Conversely, there is a great concern for their works nowadays. Eileen Fauset states that: "Critical enquiry into neglected women writers is a consequence of comparatively recent interest in women's history and the subsequent cultural perspectives which have marginalized many writers into relative obscurity" (2009: 4). As a result, "after one hundred years since she was reprinted, Kavanagh's works have now been reissued" (Fauset 2009: 8). One of them, researched from different standpoints by present-day scholars, is *Rachel Gray* (1856). For instance, Sally Mitchell points out this novel's strong social criticism (1988/2011: 421). Lynn Mae Alexander considers it "the culmination of the seamstress novel" assimilating it with Gaskell's *Ruth* (2003: 152). Joseph A. Kestner adds one more dimension of "the faceless proletariat" displayed in *Rachel Gray*, that of the failed shopkeeper. Moreover, the professor states that "Kavanagh does not focus on the working existence of her seamstress but rather on the other elements of her life: her relationship with her stepmother, her unloving father, a

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distressed neighbor" (Kestner 1985: 189).

Rachel Gray is a novel whose eponymous heroine is a twenty-six year old dress-maker living with her stepmother "[i]n one of the many little suburbs which cling to the outskirts of London, [on] a silent and grass-grown street…" (Kavanagh 1856: 1). The novelist focuses on one street only, thus she "differs from writers like Dickens on London or Gaskell on Manchester, who conceive of the entire city as impinging on the characters' lives" (Kestner 1985: 190). This introductory part continues with the description of some houses found on this street and, especially of Rachel Gray's dwelling, whose interior is also presented together with the portraits of Mrs. Gray and her step-daughter. The introductory "descriptive pause"- Genette's term - prevents the narrative thread of the story from advancing, thus inducing an absence of story duration. Genette's elaboration on the subject seems to suit the narrative development in this novel too: this is an "extratemporal descriptive canon […] where the narrator, […] in his own name and solely for the information of his reader, [describes] a scene that at this point in the story no one, strictly speaking, is looking at" (Genette 1980: 100). There is an explicit indication proving the existence of this narrative movement in the novel: "They had opened to light in the dingy parlour within, and which *we will now enter*" (Kavanagh 5, emphasis added).

It should be noticed that the beginning of the novel is written in the present tense, creating the impression of a relative contemporaneity of the narrating and the story. Nonetheless, there is no simultaneity of narrating time and story time, explicitly acknowledged by the implied author: "The solitary exception to which we have alluded, exists, or rather existed, for though we speak in the present, we write in the past by some years, in one of the smallest houses in the street" (Kavanagh 4). Similarly, at full length, in the last three pages, the past tense employed to narrate events is replaced by the present tense. This final convergence is introduced by the sentence: "And now, reader, one last picture before we part," which begins as follows: "It is evening, as you know, and three are sitting in the little parlour of Rachel Gray" (Kavanagh 334). The temporal gap of the narrative at the beginning of the novel, consisting of a number of years, differs from the final one, which cannot be determined on the account of an ellipsis "And thus quiet and happy years had passed away, and nothing had arrested their monotonous flow" (Kavanagh 331).

In contrast with the precise geographical location in which the story unfolds, there is no definite evidence about the temporal setting in the introductory part of the novel. However, there is a hint regarding the time of the story later in the novel, when the characters discuss the Chartists and the tenth of April. Historical records reveal that April 10, 1848 is known for the organization of a mass meeting by a new Chartist Convention which turned out to be a crucial twist for Chartist movement (Goodway 1982: 74, 79), and the period is

acknowledged as a complicated one for Julia Kavanagh, because of her tensioned relationship with her father. According to Michael Forsyth, there is a strong biographical inference in the novel: "It is difficult to avoid the likelihood that much of the background, and a significant plot element, of *Rachel Gray* has its origins in the circumstances, some years earlier, of Kavanagh herself. That significant plot element is the relationship between Rachel Gray and her father Thomas" (1999: 142). Indeed, Kavanagh was abandoned by her father and lived afterwards only with her blind mother whom she supported from her writings, experiencing meantime difficult moments as regards her detached parent (Fauset 2009: 11-13).

Undoubtedly, the relationship between Rachel and Thomas Gray is what holds the novel together. The major conflict between them is based on unshared love on the part of the father, which determines Rachel to have a special attitude towards God. The struggle is displayed in the narrative through the heroine's inner voice: "'Oh! my father, my father!'" she cried within her heart, "why must I stand here in darkness looking at you? Why cannot I go in to you, like other daughters to their father? Why do you not love your child?" (Kavanagh 27). The implied author considers necessary to shed light on the previous life of the heroine in order to disclose when and why the conflict appeared. In this respect, a great number of analepses are used, having an important role in the novel and serving as a foundation for the considered father-daughter relationship. Without them the reader would not be able to understand what caused this familial distance and many questions would thus be raised. From one of these retrospections, the reader finds out about the nature of Rachel's relationship with her parents:

> Rachel Gray was the daughter of the grey-headed carpenter by a first wife; soon after whose death he had married again. Mrs. Gray was his second wife, and the mother of his youngest daughter. She was kind in her way, but that was at the best a harsh one. Rachel was a timid, retiring child, plain, awkward, and sallow, with nothing to attract the eye, and little to please the fancy. Mrs. Gray did not use her ill certainly, but neither did she give her any great share in her affections. And why and how should a step-mother have loved Rachel when her own father did not? When almost from her birth she had been to him as though she did not exist – as a being who, uncalled for and unwanted, had come athwart his life. Never had he, to her knowledge, taken her in his arms, or on his knee; never had he kissed or caressed her; never addressed to her one word of fondness, or even of common kindness. Neither, it is true, had he ill-used nor ill-treated her; he felt no unnatural aversion for his own flesh and blood, nothing beyond a deep and incurable indifference (Kavanagh 28-29).

This analepsis is partial, that is, it covers only a part of the time that passed by and, as a result, a gap is created between it and the first narrative (Genette 1980: 62). Yet, the attitude of both her stepmother and her father towards Rachel remains the same during their lives. Nonetheless, the emphasis is laid on Rachel's

desire to improve these faulty family connections. On the one hand, she has to cope with her domestic sufferings introduced analeptically again in a single sentence: "For all this time, and especially since the death of her sister, she suffered keenly from home troubles, from a little domestic persecution, painful, pertinacious, and irritating" (Kavanagh 52). From there on, the narrative continues with an explanation for these complicated circumstances:

> Mrs. Gray vaguely felt that her daughter was not like other girls, and not knowing that she was in reality very far beyond most; feeling, too, that Rachel was wholly unlike herself, and jealously resenting the fact, she teased her unceasingly, and did her best to interrupt the fits of meditation, which she did not scruple to term "moping." When her mind was most haunted with some fine thought, Rachel had to talk to her step-mother, to listen to her, and to take care not to reply at random; if she failed in any of these obligations, half-an-hour's lecture was the least penalty she could expect (Kavanagh 52-53).

As it is obvious in this excerpt, such occurrences were numerous. So, frequency – Genette's term – at work in the novel points out to the burden Rachel has to bear. Thus, every time her mother scolded her, she submitted to her will, often giving no answer or just smiling. In this way, the heroine always manages to prevent Mrs. Gray's wrath or to put an end to the tensions between them.

On the other hand, what troubles this character indeed is the relationship with her father. This is easy to notice, as, besides other indirect clues, there is explicit evidence like the following one:

> She was devoted to her step-mother; she had fondly loved her younger sister; but earlier born in her heart than these two loves, deeper, and more solemn, was the love Rachel felt for her father. That instinct of nature, which in him was silent, in her spoke strongly. That share of love which he denied her, she silently added to her own, and united both in one fervent offering (Kavanagh 34-35).

Kavanagh, analeptically again, finds a solution to the extreme concern that continues to tear apart Rachel's heart up to the end of the novel. It is a recall covering the temporal interval from the father's leaving to the day Jane died. This period of time was included in the aforementioned retrospection as well; nonetheless, another aspect is outlined here: Rachel's thinking of her father or her love for him prompts the heroine to visit him many times:

> Free, as are all the children of the poor, she made her way to the street where he lived, and *many a day* walked for weary miles in order to pass by her father's door. But she never crossed the threshold, never spoke to him, never let him know who she was, until the sad day when she bore to him the news of her sister's death (Kavanagh 35-36, emphasis added).

This shows iterative narrative with indefinite specification at work, but with more or less definite determination. Its beginning is set some time after the moment

Rachel finds out that her father returned from America. Conversely, the ending is not clearly indicated in the last clause of the excerpt above, as it appears at first sight. She never spoke to him until that day, but she continued to visit him after that, too. Throughout the entire length of the narrative, four such appointments are reported. During the first one, she only gazes at her father, without having the courage to enter and speak to him. Thenceforth, the narrator is silent about the relationship between Rachel and Thomas Gray to the point when another father-daughter relationship is introduced: that between Richard Jones and Mary. This case is totally different, because the person who loves is the father, while the daughter, being spoiled, does not fully appreciate this affection. An external analepsis reveals the way Mr. Jones took care of Mary after her mother's death one year after giving birth: "His child slept with him, cradled in his arms; he washed, combed, dressed it himself every morning, and made a woman of himself for its sake" (Kavanagh 78).

Being a witness to such enormous paternal love, Rachel often pondered on her own father's reluctance to manifest affection towards her. On the other hand, it "inspired her with involuntary hope" (Kavanagh 105) and gave her boldness to go and speak to her father. So, on their second meeting, the heroine introduces herself and they have a discussion. Unfortunately, it is unsuccessful, as Rachel "sought for something there, not for love, not for fondness, but for the shadow of kindness, for that which might one day become affection – she saw nothing but cold, hard, rooted indifference" (Kavanagh 129). This coldness is extremely painful for her and hard to overcome.

One important thing to notice is that the protagonist does not discuss her feelings or thoughts with anybody. She never tells Mrs. Gray or her apprentices about her longing for her father's love. Consequently, the richest sources providing such information are the author's commentaries and the main character's interior monologue. The reader can notice that throughout the novel there are ten occasions upon which the heroine's sentiments are revealed in this way. Intensely and intently rhetorical is her inner cry: "O! my father, my father", which is reiterated four times in the novel. On the other hand, there is one single occasion when the protagonist confesses her strong desire of being together with her parent. It is their third meeting recorded by the novel, when, after Mrs. Gray's death, Rachel dares to visit her father one more time and ask him to allow her to live with him trying to convince him in the following way: "I am now your only child, […] the only living thing of your blood, not one relative have I in this wide world; and you, father, you too are alone. Let me come to live with you. Pray let me!" (Kavanagh 198). Rachel is ready to do anything just to be with her father: to help him when necessary or to be as quiet as a mouse and not to interfere in his affairs if that is what he wants. Despite this self-sacrifice, Thomas Gray chooses to be alone. He considers himself healthy enough to need no help and refuses to

accept his daughter's offer. At first sight, this second discussion between Rachel and her parent is just as fruitless as the first one. However, it represents the only piece of dialogue within which the heroine externalizes her feelings towards her parent. This discussion along with that connected to Mary's last days are the two longest and most detailed dialogues in which Rachel was involved. In reporting these crucial events which mark the turning points of the two father-daughter relationship stories, the narrative speed is slowed down towards giving the "scenes" the necessary narrative poignancy. So, this particular game with narrative time is meant to emphasize the intensity of the truly important events of the novel in order to get the reader's sympathy. Consequently, the attention is drawn more to these slowdowns rather than to the multitude of narrative accelerations. In this respect, it is worth observing that the construction of the narrative discourse follows the principle according to which "the strong periods of the action coincid[e] with the most intense moments of the narrative while the weak periods [are] summed up with large strokes and as if from a great distance" (Genette 109). In other words, the detailed scene corresponds to dramatic content which alternates with short summary standing for insignificant parts of the narrative. Of course, in *Rachel Gray* there are no such examples when a couple of hours are reported on hundreds of pages as in modern novels. However, in comparison with the overall speed of the narrative and with explicit ellipses covering long periods of time as "nine months" (Kavanagh 204) or "years had passed away" (Kavanagh 331), scenes like the aforementioned ones can be considered the climactic moments of the story.

The events referring to Mary's last days are described at length, as this occurrence represents the end of one story of relationships between father and daughter. The narrator proleptically discloses Richard Jones's sufferings: "But it was not to be; he had but tasted the cup of his sorrows; to the dregs was he to drink it; the earthly idol on which he had set his heart was to be snatched from him; he was to waken one day to the bitter knowledge: 'there is no hope!'" (Kavanagh 293). Ambition and love dwell together in his heart and are displayed in the novel as strongly interrelated. Moreover, the failure of his business coincides with his daughter's death. This is an indication of the fact that the Victorian society, and consequently novelists of the thirties, forties, and fifties, were interested as much in family problems as in "[t]he consequences of the commercial spirit on private lives" (Kestner 1985: 200).

Rachel Gray is also characterized with reference to her occupation. Nonetheless, being created as a model to follow, she is not portrayed as worried about the financial problems or about some other material things. The heroine is concerned only with the spiritual dimension of her life. She has to cope with her harsh stepmother and oppressive Mrs. Brown. The trials are numerous, yet every time she struggles to submit, being thus triumphant. The events in which the

heroine is involved and the way in which she acts reveal her nature, her personality. Iterative narrative has a significant role in emphasizing the perfection of Rachel's character. By contrast, the traits referring to physical aspect, even if repeated throughout the novel, make the reader keep in mind that the external appearance remains the same. Hence, the emphasis is not on the physical development of the protagonist, as Victorianism claimed, but on her inner world, a characteristic common for both previous and subsequent literary trends. Rachel's main task is to accurately control her thoughts and feelings. A good example of how watchful she is in this respect can be the situation when Mrs. Brown, who lived in Rachel's house, is absent for a few weeks and the heroine feels a "positive relief". She is discontent with herself on that account: "Internally, Rachel accused herself of ingratitude because she felt glad. "It's very wrong of me, I know," she remorsefully thought, […]" (Kavanagh 195). Her apparently inexplicable love for an indifferent father and the courage to try again and again to win his affection reinforce the idea inferred from the above that Rachel Gray is an idealized character (feature which proliferated in the Romantic Movement). Therefore, it is not surprising that, when the protagonist visits her father for the fourth time and finds him motionless in a chair, she brings him to her house, even if she understands that, from that moment on, the desire of her heart can never be fulfilled. This is the turning point of the story, when it seems that the protagonist has no possibility to resolve the conflict. Indeed, the subsequent events show that there is no hope for Rachel to have a father to love her completely, even if one day Thomas Gray utters her name and she considers this to be an expression of his affection.

Therefore, this novel deals with two stories referring to father-daughter relationships. Beginning with the moment when the narrative is interrupted to introduce the analepsis revealing Mr. Jones's past, the plot is divided into two lines of narration till Mary's death, which represents the end of one of these stories. There is only one line of narration from this event forward. This last section of the novel is truly significant, as Rachel is the connecting element, acting as a devoted daughter to both Thomas Gray and Richard Jones. Moreover, within it, one can find the answer to the question from the complication, which represents the resolution of the conflict. Since the heroine "ha[s] set [her] heart on human love" (Kavanagh 336), she is deprived of a true father. Perhaps, it does not provide a desirable disentanglement of things, but, Rachel finally accepts the idea that she will never have a completely loving father on earth. It is the same for Richard Jones. He loses his daughter, because she is an idol for him. Therefore, these two stories, which are at first sight in contrast, still have much in common. Paternal love is the essential ingredient joining them. Too much love is as bad as the absence of love.

In order to convey this message to the reader, the narrative discourse

abounds in what Genette calls pauses. Some of them are commentaries, which allow the foregrounding of the implied author, meditations written in the present, first person plural or third person singular, concerning various aspects of life, such as love, poverty, wealth, suffering:

> Reader, if you think that we mean to cast a stone at the great shop, you are mistaken. We deal not with pitiless political economy, with its laws, with their workings. The great shop must prosper; 'tis in the nature of things; and the little shop must perish—'tis in their nature too (Kavanagh 272-273); For the past is our realm, free to all, high or low, who wish to dwell in it. There we may set aside the bitterness and the sorrow; there we may choose none but the pleasing visions, the bright, sunny spots where it is sweet to linger. The Future, fair as Hope may make it, is a dream, we claim it in vain. The Present, harsh or delightful, must be endured, yet it flies from us before we can say "it is gone." But the Past is ours to call up at our will. It is vivid and distinct as truth. In good and in evil, it is irrevocable; the divine seal has been set upon it for evermore (Kavanagh 10-11); The rich man has his intellect, and its pleasures; he has his books, his studies, his club, his lectures, his excursions; he has foreign lands, splendid cities, galleries, museums, ancient and modern art: the poor man has his child, solitary delight of his hard tasked life, only solace of his cheerless home (Kavanagh 75).

Others, recorded in the past, third person singular, reveal, through the narrator's voice, the heroine's nature, thoughts and feelings which are much involved with the love for her earthly father:

> Her mind recovered its habitual tone; old thoughts, old feelings, laid by during the hour of trial and sickness, but never forsaken, returned to her now, and time, as it passed on, matured a great thought in her heart. "Who knows," she often asked herself, in her waking dreams, "who knows if the hour is not come at last? My father cannot always turn his face from me. Love me at once he cannot; but why should he not with time?" Yet it was not at once that Rachel acted on these thoughts (Kavanagh 195-196).

These intrusions into Rachel's soul are instruments effectively building reader sympathy and creating textual cohesion.

In assuming this, one can remark that *Rachel Gray* is forwarded along two narrative levels. Predominant is the intradiegetic level, but there are numerous shifts to the extradiegetic level, indicated by pauses/ (implied author's) commentaries on the novel as such written in the present. Some examples will be useful: "And now, if she moves through this story, thinking much and doing little, you know why" (Kavanagh 55); "We are not called upon to enter into the history of his struggles" (Kavanagh 83); "We must apologize for using italics, but without their aid we never could convey to our readers a proper idea of the awful solemnity with which Mrs. Gray emphasized her address" (Kavanagh 71-72). It is also worth emphasizing that these two levels are still separate. Therefore, no

metalepsis – violation of the narrative levels – occurs in here, as it commonly happens in modern novels (Genette 235).

The use of external focalization allows the possibility of emphasizing specific ideas and themes to satisfy the needs/ expectations of the Victorian middle-class readership. Despite the shifts from third-person sections of narrative to first-person ones, the narrator, that also functions as an external focalizer, is heterodiegetic, depicting the characters from an external standpoint, knowing and saying less than the characters know: "Whether Mrs. Gray understood him [Milton] in all his beauty and sublimity, we know not, but at least, she read him, seriously, conscientiously – and many a fine lady cannot say as much" (Kavanagh 96); "How he [Richard Jones] felt we know not, and cannot tell: none have a right to describe that grief save they who have passed through it; we dare not unveil the father's heart: we deal but with the external aspect of things, and sad and bitter enough it was" (Kavanagh 293). The objective narrator, which is specific for many "serious" nineteenth-century novels (Genette 190) and represents an important feature of Realism, is not the only type encountered in *Rachel Gray*. It is subjectivity that marks the description of the protagonist, whose feelings and thoughts, which are imperceptible to other characters, are revealed to the reader. The latter is strongly manipulated by this device, along with the aforementioned ones, which are also used by the novelist to satisfy the demands of Victorian popular taste.

Concluding remarks

Read in Genettian terms, Julia Kavanagh's *Rachel Gray*, seems to be a novel of great value, as it deals with the entire range of themes which preoccupied the Victorian society, such as family issues and the disreputable conditions of the lower-middle-class life. Furthermore, it bears witness to the status of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel which is not purely realistic, but preserves certain features from the previous literary trend and contains specific seeds that will develop within the subsequent modernist literary movement.

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