

Parallel Narrative Structure in Paul Harding's *Tinkers*

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Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.5p.227

Received: 01/08/2014

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.5p.227>

Accepted: 12/09/2014

Abstract

The present paper explores the implications of parallel narrative structure in Paul Harding's *Tinkers* (2009). Besides primarily recounting the two sets of parallel narratives, *Tinkers* also comprises of seemingly unrelated fragments such as excerpts from clock repair manuals and diaries. The main stories, however, told through three different generations and are presented in the fashion of parallel narratives. They are embedded within a frame narrative that complicates the mimetic and diegetic elements in the novel, which reunite the central characters towards the end of the narrative. This study contends that presentation of the relationship between the two "son-father narratives" within the fictional society and their (in)direct impact on the now-dying central character manifested by the tunneling into consciousness yield to an overall narrative of interconnected fragments that culminate in a unified effect. The study also reveals that the act of interspersing in *Tinkers* produces a scriptable narrative engaging the reader in the central character's recollection and past experiences unfolded along the entire narrative. Accordingly, this paper argues that the fragmented nature of the embedded texts in the narrative does not distort its narrative structure; instead, it improves the readerly involvement by expanding the temporal, perspectival and the spatial features of the storyworld, which add to the narrative qualities of the text.

Keywords: *Tinkers*, Parallel Narratives, Time, Death, Paul Harding

Tinkers (2009), Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize-winning debut novel, primarily highlights the continuity of the past in the present experiencing moments. Parallel narratives in *Tinkers* associated with the central characters (George, George's father and grandfather) are reflected and contemplated in a single narrative of death. This paper argues that the fragmented nature of the embedded texts in *Tinkers* does not distort its narrative structure; instead, it improves the readerly engagement by expanding the temporal, perspectival and the spatial features of the storyworld. The parallel structure in this novel helps the author to intersect the seemingly disconnected narratives through disrupting the spatio-temporal factors in order to unfold the causes of the central character's mental functioning prior to his death moment. Unlike conventional narratives,¹ which suggest *per se* a chronological continuum and strictness in narration,

Tinkers presents a sophisticated narrative structure. Complex stories such as *Tinkers*, do not conform to a "linear and additive model" (O'Neill 367-368) having more than one storyline, and employing interconnected stories within a single frame narrative. *Tinkers* recounts George Washington Crosby's "demise" (Dennison) during eight final days of his life, also unfolding his entire life story within. It is a retrospective narrative told by an omniscient narrator in four parts. Tunnelling through his consciousness and using analepses (flashbacks), the narrative primarily focuses on George's life from his childhood into the last moments of his life embedding in the narration also the life stories of his father, an epileptic, and his grandfather, a Methodist preacher, primarily delineating the similarities among/between them. In Rimmon-Kenan's terms, "thematic function" which deals with "similarity and contrast" (Rimmon-Kenan 93), the parallel narratives in *Tinkers* present the reader with various implications of time, separation and death, bringing together the lost pieces of a puzzle-like life inflicted with the persistent desire for paternal affection.

Parallel narratives in *Tinkers*, therefore, fulfilling an "explicative function" (Rimmon-Kenan 93) provide some answers that help understand the story and fill in the gaps in the storyworld, which marks a "potential enrichment" as O'Neill argues (368). The modern reader, suggests O'Neill, is supposed to decide whether a complex novel can be read as a single narrative in a relatively productive fashion, or various parallel narratives by different yet interconnected agents. As suggested above, *Tinkers*, as a complicated narrative discourse, set out a challenging text that can reveal, in O'Neill's terms, "sophisticated structural complexities." This novella dealing with three generations of fathers" (Timothy P. O'Neill 33) uses parallel narrative accounts as well as some musings, excerpts from clock repair manuals and diaries so as to add both to the poetic nature of main character's consciousness and to the general meaning of the narrative. The

¹ Parallel narratives can be easily identifiable in the conventional texts while (post)modernist texts require a relatively more profound and careful reading.

considerable part of the narrative or the frame narrative, however, passes through George's demising consciousness when his "illness has reached the point at which the sufferer succumbs to hallucinations, reaching back into memory and even pre-memory to marshal emotions and sensory impressions garnered over a lifetime" (Dennison). On the one hand, it represents George's life stories focusing mainly on his childhood memories about and relationship with his father, Howard, as in his deathbed George "finds his thoughts drifting back to the father who abandoned the family when he was 12" (Kirkus Review). And, on the other hand, "In a parallel narrative, Howard, a metaphysical poet, epileptic, and traveling salesman who makes his rounds in rural Maine by wagon and mule, recalls his own minister father and a wife ready to place him in a state-run mental hospital" (Leepe). The frame narrative, to put the same thought in other words, is not only about the now-dying George's relationship with his father, Howard, but also in return it focuses on Howard's life as George's father as well as the preacher's son. The parallel narratives, therefore, represent two fathers' mystical musings and two sons' perceptions concerning the unexpected absence of their fathers about which the sons knew nothing and from the thought of which they could barely get free throughout their lives. In case of George, whose consciousness representation is the central concern of the narrative, the tangled story of his father's absence follows him to his death bed in his seventieth reuniting the father and the son at the end of narrative when George dies.

The two son-father's parallel narratives in *Tinkers* are two narrating instances² recounted mainly by the same third-person narrator. They hardly seem to "intersect" each other; as Patrick O'Neill suggests: "only incidentally or as a component element of a curtain-call closure strategy" (368). However slight or extensive; direct or indirect; verbal or thematic; spatial or temporal, there are intersections between these parallel units, which reveal a crucial factor regarding the whole story. "The points at which these individual storylines intersect with each other, reflect each other, or set each other off," argues O'Neill, "is of course less a function of story than of the narrative discourse that presents it" (O'Neill 368). He claims that parallel structure primarily contributes to the enrichment and elaboration of the narrative discourse, which he suggests can be achieved "not by making the story itself more complex but by complicating and elaborating its discursive presentation (O'Neill 368). Removing any of these narratives from the overall narrative structure could efface or flaw, if not the structural integrity of the other(s), the thematic unity because there is a thematic relationship between the two narratives. This analogy, according to Patrick O'Neill, adds to the "textural richness" of *Tinkers* since:

Parallel narratives, however unrelated their individual concerns may appear to be, nonetheless serve at least by implication both as mutual commentaries and as sources of potential mutual enrichment. A text composed of a number of individual parallel narratives in principle creates a fictional world whose textural richness increases in proportion to the number of individual narratives included. (368)

In this respect, *Tinkers* presents the reader with a text enriched and elaborated as the two parallel narratives differ in chronotope or space-time continuum from the static space in now-dying George's rental bedside as well as the time compression of his fragmented, floating memories of his father and family in his childhood to totally different narrative space and time in the narratives of his father and grandfather. Although George is static physically being increasingly limited to his bed, he travels in time imaginatively. By everything he sees, he is reminded of the construction history of that thing through which the narrative orientation changes too. His imagination is, however, a unifying narrative device bringing together the past and present in the same way he relies on it to reconstruct his own home: "When he could not turn his head any farther, he had to imagine the rest of the room behind him" (*Tinkers* 33). By the same token, George's narrative is not independent from Howard's narrative. It is their "mutual commentaries" and "mutual enrichment" that succeed in narrative progression in *Tinkers*. The analogical fulfillments represented in the two men's narratives, moreover, suggest the degree to which a person can be in time's arrows. Focalized through George's perspective, the primary narrative mainly recounts George's childhood, his father's absence and George's suffering from this separation. In the same way, the second narrative recounts a universe focalized by Howard, George's father, focusing on his relationship with his minister father and his sudden absence, and Howard's lifelong waiting.

Representing connected consciousness, the two parallel narratives in *Tinkers* are hardly independent of each other. Their constituent or pivotal shared point is Howard by whom George is, on the one hand, connected to his grandfather and, on the other hand, the nature of George's relationship with his father as well as the nature of his own character is revealed. At the end of narrative, it is implied that passage of time has not been able to extinguish George's lifelong craving for his father although they can only be united in death as did Howard with his father. Accordingly, George's moribund consciousness experiences deterioration represented, on the one hand, through his own life narratives wherein his long dead father's stories are embedded too, and by the reiteration of the same form of the son-father relationship between his father, Howard, and his grandfather on the other hand. Thus, the parallel narratives in *Tinkers* come together in George's gradually dwindling but still questing mental functioning that orients his consciousness and the narrative progression, to the far Fpast in order to reconcile him with his father and his father with his grandfather at the same time. Moreover, some excerpts from a clock repair book *The Reasonable Horologist* (1783) are intermingled in

² "The act of recounting a series of situations and events and, by extension, the spatio-temporal context of that act. There can be several distinctive narrating instances in a single narrative, each involving the same narrator or a different one" (Prince 57).

the frame narrative showing both George's interest in time as well as the importance of time in the narrative meaning. Furthermore, the non-narrative excerpts—diary entries, stream-of-consciousness musings and excerpts from clock-repair manuals—“tell both men's [Howard's and George's] stories” (Review) representing a “lyrical meditation on life, death, and time” (Leepe). Thus, disrupting the chronological order of the past time and combining the actual lived experiences with the imaginary ones, the narrative represents George's conscious and unconscious perceptions pursuing relentlessly tranquility through explorations of his last two generations. That dying wish, however, is fulfilled at the narrative end symbolically bringing together the reader's frustrated desire for an ending with the general sense of an ending in the narrative since in general “Narratives both tell of desire—typically present some story of desire—and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification” (Brooks 37). Regarding this, time in *Tinkers* changes into a central point and, as Angela Leepe put, “Focusing on introspection rather than dialogue, Harding also plays with time, interrupting the narrative with stream-of-consciousness musings, present-tense passages, and entries from *The Reasonable Horologist*, a fictional clock-repair manual from 1783.”

That George's belated reunification with his father represented from two perspectives discloses their protracted anguish. The reader is primarily presented Howard's decision about going out in order to find his son, George, but when we are told that he “knocked on his son's front door” (*Tinkers* 187), his story is left incomplete. The last narrative event represented from George's perspective is his reunion with his father which, as he remembers while dying, took place on a Christmas dinner in 1953 (*Tinkers* 190). Moreover, applying We-Narrative, an excerpt from “*Homo Borealis*” shows the son's and father's shared destiny:

When it came time to die, we knew and went to deep yards where we lay down and our bones turned to brass. We were picked over. We were used to fix broken clocks, music boxes; our pelvises were fitted onto pinions, our spines soldered into vast works. Our ribs were fitted as gear teeth and tapped and clicked like tusks. This is how, finally, we were joined. (*Tinkers* 190)

Therefore, the seeming cyclicity in the two parallel narrative plots indicates the survival of the same questions through the Crosby's dynasty.

The narrative, furthermore, mixes up the omniscient narrative mode with the first person; and, simultaneous narration with the retrospective and prospective narratives. That is to say, first, George's narrative is embedded in his father's and, second, Howard's narrative appears in the preacher's (his own father's) narrative. The overall *Tinkers* narrative, however, does not seem a hodgepodge, instead the third person presentation of George's mental states changes into the first person presentation of his own mental functioning in a way that sometimes he and his narrative overlap each other completely. In this way, the immediacy of narrative level or the realistic illusion of the narrated events and situations increase significantly engaging the reader closely with the experiencing character. Moreover, George's narrative changes into presentation of the echoes of the mysterious past and the gloomy future in his poetic imagination. In other words, he endeavours to solve the “personal mysteries” through narrativization of his life mostly to himself. In the following passage, the narrative voice changes from third person into first person reporting George's internal broodings concurrently:

Personal mysteries, like where is my father, why can't I stop all the moving and look out over the vast arrangements and find by the contours and colors and qualities of light where my father is, not to solve anything but just simply even to see it again one last time, before what, before it ends, before it stops. But it doesn't stop; it simply ends. It is a final pattern scattered without so much as a pause at the end, at the end of what, at the end of this. (*Tinkers* 66)

The two parallel narratives in *Tinkers* also represent three characters lost in their “personal mysteries.” Being astonished by them and sacrificing themselves on the way of their quest are the common threads among the three kinsmen. As is George's case, whenever the narrative focuses on Howard, it mixes third person heterodiegetic narration with the first person homodiegetic one. This reveals how the central character is embedded into the narrative(s) he is recounting:

Such vanity! What gall to elect for yourself such attention, good or bad. Project yourself above yourself. Look at the top of your dusty hat: cheap felt, wilted and patched with scraps from the last wilted and patched felt hat. What a crown! What a king you are to deserve such displeasure, how important that God stop whatever it is He is tending and pitch bolts at your head. (*Tinkers*73)

Moreover, the concurrent presentation of the father's and son's embedded narratives³ displays the impacts of the former on the mental functioning of the latter delineating the interrelated nature of their life, too. However, George is the primary centre of narrative consciousness and, according to Donna Seaman, "he is at the mercy of chaotic forces and seems to be channeling his late father, Howard, a tinker and a mystic whose epileptic seizures strike like lightning. Howard, in turn, remembers his 'strange and gentle' minister father." The two son-father narratives, furthermore, are similar to each other in presenting the way their mentality would function and, as Seaman put, "Each man is extraordinarily porous to nature and prone to becoming 'unhitched' from everyday human existence and entering a state of ecstasy, even transcendence [...] novel of spiritual inheritance and acute psychological and metaphysical suspense." However, the two levels are not disconnected. In Howard's narratives, for example, recapitalization of George's memories are represented in a way that the reader gets to know the lost fragments of George's life that he cannot remember now from the sub-narratives of his life in his father's account. The following first person passage, for instance, is embedded in a narrative mainly focalized through Howard's perspective:

Father said, George, I can't find the cribbage board, and I said, That's funny, Daddy; it should be on the porch, where we left it. I pretended to help him look for it for an hour until he gave up and I pretended to and we used a piece of old newspaper to keep score. I took the board. I stole it and took it to Ray's shed, where we smoked and played cribbage for marbles or an arrow head. (Tinkers 76-77) (emphasis is original)

The extradiegetic narrator, however, regulates the relationship between the parallel narratives it tries to have a control over the relationship between the two units of son-father focusing on one pair whenever needed although representation of the archaeology of now-dying George seems to be its primary focus. For example, when Howard once was looking for the missing adolescent George, the moment he finds his son the narrator changes the narrative voice into Howard's, who serves as character (experiencing) and as narrator (telling the story):

So there is my son, hiding behind the last vestige of a house transformed from timber into ash into the dimming memories of those who still remember it. [...] So there is my son, already fading. The thought frightened him. The thought frightened because as soon as it came to him, he knew that it was true. He understood suddenly that even though his son knelt in front of him, familiar, mundane, he was already fading away, receding. His son was fading away before his eyes and that fact was inevitable, even though Howard understood, too, that the fading was yet to begin in any actual sense, that at that moment he and his son, the father standing in the dimness, the son kneeling and partly obscured by the charred door, were still only heading, not yet arrived, toward the point where the fading would begin. (Tinkers 119-120)

George still misses his father, as he did for a long time when Howard left home permanently: "He thought about his father, who had bitten him and who was a madman about to be taken to the mad house. It suddenly occurred to him that his brother, Joe, would be sent to the mad house, too, sooner or later" (Tinkers 104). Therefore, his narrative can be considered as a narrative of prolonged suffering in the same way his father's narrative is mostly represented as a personal musing on a bitter parting.

As the characters have something in common with each other in terms of their past experience pertaining to the issue of father, the narrative gives an impression that their narrations are almost dealing with the re-telling of the same story. In the third part, the narrative recounts Howard's story of his minister father's "deteriorating condition" (Tinkers 132). However, without having any idea as to what happened years ago to his grandfather, George is revealed by the Tinkers narrative to be imprisoned in the sheer ignorance of their familial history because, as the narrator puts, "it had never occurred to Howard to tell George about his own father" (Tinkers 127). The narrative, accordingly, recedes more in time into the far past in order to unfold George's states of mind during his impending death through the revelation of his genealogy. As the narrative progresses, Howard's past is gradually revealed delineating his father's unexpected disappearance and his first experience of epilepsy. Howard's story of his father runs almost the same course as that of George's on his father—they both suffer from a long separation since they both felt deeply intermental with their fathers. Never is a full recovery from the great loss of their adolescent period achieved and throughout their lives they desperately aspire the mutual affection they once shared with their parent. After the time his mother says to him that his father has gone, Howard recurrently dreams about him:

Howard, she said, Father is gone. [...] I often had dreams in which my father came into my bedroom to kiss me and cover me up with my blankets, which, restless sleeper that I was, had fallen to the floor. In those dreams, I awoke and, seeing my father, felt an overwhelming sense of how precious he was to me. His having died once, I understood what it would mean to lose him, and now that he had returned I was determined to take better care of

³ According to Alan Palmer, "Its more familiar meaning is a self-contained narrative that is embedded within a so-called *frame narrative*" (20).

him. Dad, I said to him in those dreams, what are you doing here? I'm not gone just yet, he would tell me in a humorous tone that I should have recognized as belonging to a dream, since he had never used it in life, although I had often wished for it. Well, this time we're going to make sure you stay well, I would say, and hug him. (*Tinkers* 139-140)

The moment of death, in *Tinkers*, serves as a central device to achieve an internal engagement between the characters. George's inner desire for his lost father seems almost prevailing over him until it manifests itself through the narrations prior to the moment of death. When the father and the son are reconciled after a long separation. The frame narrative, at this moment, represents the fulfillment of George's lifelong desire, too. Howard returns to his son's home after twenty five years and this is the last moment in George's fading consciousness portrayed towards the end of narrative:

His father sat on the edge of the couch with his hat in his lap and the motor of his rented car idling outside. Food steamed on the table and he said No, no, he couldn't stay. He asked how things were: Are you well? How are your sisters? Your mother? Joe? Oh, I see. And this is? Ah, Betsy. And you are? Claire, yes. Yes, yes, of course you are shy—I am a strange old man, yes. Well, no, I'd better be going. It was good to see you again, George. Yes, yes, I will. Good-bye. (*Tinkers* 192)

As suggested, Howard's "good bye" to his son, George, signs simultaneously George's good bye to life. Yet, figuratively put, the absence of his father in his life meant death long before his literal death. Therefore, the *Tinker* narrative, in an ouroboros manner, brings the two parallel narratives together finally highlighting the similarities between the two. In its final part, the narrative focuses on the presentation of the past events and situations through George's consciousness and intermittently through Howard's narrative too, as it does in the first part, prescribing the retained information, in terms of Howard's narrative, from the reader in the earlier parts. Furthermore, the narrative ends with the revival of George's memory of his father's unexpected returning after twenty five years. This moment of reunification coincides with George's death and the two seemingly separate subjects' narratives at last come together when his consciousness stops.

The perpetual swaps, however, between the two focal narratives correspond to the actual world chronotope in a way that the implied reader may conveniently come to experience the former by using the default knowledge from the latter. Moreover, the narrative, although simultaneously developing three different narrative chronotope through focalizing characters, reveals in the first place the central character's—George's—frustrations and fulfillments, digging up some facts in his genealogy. All of his familial memories, however, appear to him concurrently in the form of a mass during the last eight days terminating to his death, as the extradiegetic narrator's intruding comment reveals:

George Crosby remembered many things as he died, but in an order he could not control. To look at his life, to take the stock he always imagined a man would at his end, was to witness a shifting mass, the tiles of a mosaic spinning, swirling, report raying, always in recognizable swaths of colors, familiar elements, molecular units, intimate currents, but also independent now of his will, showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment. (*Tinkers* 18)

Some of the fragments of his "mosaic spinning" are filled by the extradiegetic narrator's narrativization of George's father's and grandfather's stories. George's recollection makes him re-experience his past. His reminiscences and past revisions seem to be unintentional as he has given himself to involuntary actions. He is caught up in his lingering memories with the far past when his father was working, then he unexpectedly left George and his mother and twenty-five-years of absence during which George got married with two children and his mother has thus far passed away. The narrator's account of George's internal conflicts regarding his tendency either not to permit himself to imagine his father or even wish to imagine him:

George never permitted himself to imagine his father. Occasionally, [...] he had a vision of his father on the floor, his feet kicking chairs, bunching up rugs, lamps falling off of their tables, his head banging on floorboards, his teeth clamped onto a stick or George's own fingers. [...] As he lay on his deathbed, George wanted to see his father again. He wanted to imagine his father. (*Tinkers* 20-21)

Howard's narrative, moreover, can be taken as a narrative of embarrassment by poverty and exploitation by the Capital. Nevertheless, George has ended out well having had some bank accounts: "By the time of his dying, there were these six boxes of cash, another full of treasury bills, three checking accounts, two savings accounts, and seven certificates of deposit tucked away in a total of eight different banks. George regularly visited each bank in order to soothe himself

with rates and principals, compound interest and tightly banded stacks of bills” (*Tinkers* 165). Despite his financial advancements, George has not been able to alleviate his desire for his father. In other words, his financial improvements have not brought peace and satisfaction for the one who is in utter need of paternal affection.

Thus, through three generations’ embedded narratives in one frame narrative besides embedding some non-literary excerpts, *Tinkers* primarily highlights the continuity of the past in the present. Narratives by different characters complete one’s narrative of death. The parallel structure helps the implied author to intersect the ostensibly disconnected narratives through disrupting the spatio-temporal factors in order to unfold the causes of George’s mental functioning prior to death-moment. Therefore, *Tinkers* present the reader with separate narratives that act as a supporting basis for the primary narrative. The significance and the complication of the issue of time is also reflected as a motif in George’s profession. His internal minute concerns with time and clocks, both throughout his life and during the last moments of his dying time, all represent the centrality of time to his life and perceptions. Wrought in a poetic style and employing interspersed parallel narratives, the overall narrative, therefore, reveals the impact of time, as well as death and past, on the central character’s mental functioning.

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