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# Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction

Marco Caracciolo

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# Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction

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# Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction

*Explorations in Readers'  
Engagement with Characters*

MARCO CARACCILO

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln and London

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Set in Minion Pro by L. Auten.

*It is this very obliquity of thought and memory which makes mental disease such a fascinating study. Perhaps I may gain more knowledge out of the folly of this madman than I shall from the teaching of the most wise.*

BRAM STOKER, *Dracula*





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I dedicate this book to my parents—Lucia Benini and Stefano Caracciolo—who first taught me to respect strangeness.

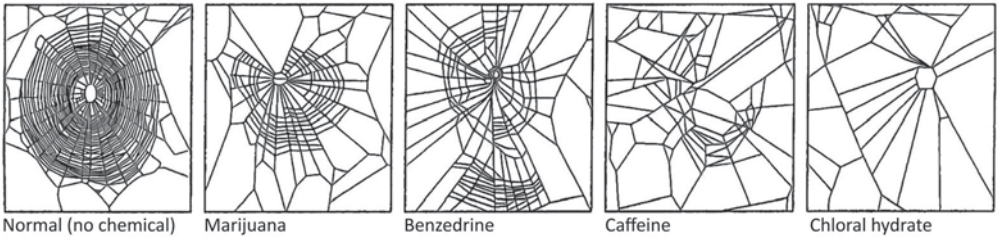


Fig. 1. The effects of psychoactive drugs on the webs spun by *Araneus diadematus*. Adapted from Noever, Cronise, and Relwani 1995.



## Spiders on Drugs

### *A Prologue*

*The strangest and most wonderful constructions in the whole animal world are the amazing, intricate constructions made by the primate, Homo sapiens. Each normal individual of this species makes a self. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it doesn't have to know what it's doing; it just does it. This web protects it, just like the snail's shell, and provides it a livelihood, just like the spider's web, and advances its prospects for sex, just like the bowerbird's bower. Unlike a spider, an individual human doesn't just exude its web; more like a beaver, it works hard to gather the materials out of which it builds its protective fortress. Like a bowerbird, it appropriates many found objects which happen to delight it—or its mate—including many that have been designed by others for other purposes.*

DANIEL DENNETT, *Consciousness Explained* (1991)

In 1995 three NASA researchers published a scientific report illustrating the effects of psychoactive drugs on the webs spun by *Araneus diadematus*, commonly known as the European garden spider (Noever, Cronise, and Relwani 1995). Building on pharmacologist P. N. Witt's research from the 1940s, the authors demonstrate that spiderwebs can be used to test the toxicity of chemicals such as mescaline, amphetamine, or even caffeine.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the webs woven by spiders exposed to these substances display distinctive alterations when compared to spiders in the control condition, as evidenced by the drawings included in the report: the healthy compactness of drug-free webs gives way to the loose, asymmetrical edges of Benzedrine webs, the twisted geometry of caffeine, and the skeletal structure of chloral hydrate (see figure 1). In the eyes of a fascinated ob-

server, these visual patterns stand for the distortions caused by these chemicals in the spiders' microscopic nervous system, almost becoming an objective correlative for their drug-induced cognitive processes.

This fascinated observer may go on thinking that the spiderweb is also a powerful symbol, seen by various cultures as an allegory of creation and technical prowess. In the Mundaka Upanishad, God is compared to a spider that “sends forth and draws in its thread” (Müller 1969, 28); in Greek mythology, Arachne is turned into a spider by Athena because she had claimed to be a superior weaver to the goddess herself. In a further imaginative leap, our observer may combine two common metaphors—spiderwebs resemble human-woven fabric, stories are spun as if on a loom—to conjure up a third image: narrative itself is like a spider's creation. Philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett reasons along these lines when, in the passage quoted above, he compares spiderwebs to human selfhood, suggesting that humans weave a self through narrative: our self—the originating center of our conscious experiences—derives from the stories we tell about ourselves, and these stories are often just as natural and spontaneous as it is for spiders to spin their webs.

But fictional stories themselves can be compared to spiderwebs. Virginia Woolf wrote that fiction “is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (1972, 43). Just like a spiderweb, narrative fiction is carefully arranged in a pattern that is meant to ensnare prey (or readers) through its exquisite workmanship. But there is more. Some of these carefully woven fictional webs are meant to mimic the narrative selves described by Dennett: when (and if) readers are captured by the storyteller's art, they become prone to considering these particular webs as if they expressed a fictional character's self. As Dennett himself acknowledges (1991, 429–30), fictional characters can project selves that are, at one level, indistinguishable from the “natural” narrative webs we spin in our everyday lives. First-person narration, in particular, calls for interpretive strategies that are not different—at least not *completely* different—from those we use to make sense of real people's life stories: in both cases we may connect the narrated events to the self of a (real or imagined) interlocutor. In engaging with first-person narrative, readers, and especially readers interested in the psychological dimension of characters, are encouraged to build a mental model of the narrator's fictional, but still narratively woven, self. In literature

such models come in a variety of forms—almost as many as there are characters—but some of them are likely to appear particularly strange or unusual to readers. Like the drugged spiders’ striking creations, they are fascinating because of how they deviate from the selves we tend to encounter in our everyday experience, including—of course—our own self.

The observer’s train of thought will thus have come full circle. Seen in this light, the NASA scientists’ experiment becomes a perhaps extravagant symbol for a class of *literary* experiments, or rather for a specific form of engagement with these experiments: literary narrative can ask readers to perceive a pattern of continuity and deviation between their own self and the self they attribute to a fictional character. This pattern involves continuity insofar as what is being woven is a recognizably human self: it is reassuringly familiar, it speaks in a human voice, it evokes images of everyday interaction, conversation, even intimacy. But at the same time the pattern involves deviation: what readers hear from the character is at odds—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically—with what they would wish or expect to hear. The feelings of strangeness that result from this pattern are at the center of this book. We will examine how readers experience such feelings as they make sense of psychologically challenging narrators and reconstruct their deviant webs of selfhood.

What are these “feelings of strangeness”? Those who have had the patience to follow my metaphorical reasoning so far may object that there is something vague in this notion. Yet the vagueness of the concept is meant to reflect the vagueness of the feelings. Readers can be intrigued, perplexed, or disturbed by a narrator whose thought processes differ from their own. These feelings span a relatively wide experiential gamut and are often characterized by a different emotional valence (positive for being intrigued, negative for being disturbed, neutral or negative for perplexity). Yet it would be counterproductive to draw sharp distinctions between such feelings: puzzlement often borders on curiosity, and both may paradoxically go hand in hand with aversion. If we kept the conceptual net too tight, if we focused on a single, clear-cut nugget of feeling, we would miss many of these experiential dynamics—and we still wouldn’t have gone far, since encapsulating a particular experience in a language-based definition is a daunting task, requiring huge efforts of verbal fine-tuning: just because we have a word and a concept for “puzzlement,” we cannot assume that puzzlement feels the same to me and



to you, that puzzlement at the car not starting is experientially identical with puzzlement at not finding the solution to a chess problem, and so on.

What I aim to do, rather, is change strategy: “feelings of strangeness” are defined in this book not by reference to one or more shared experiential traits (although they often *do* share some traits) but in terms of the psychological structure that underlies them. This structure is, at the same time, situational, phenomenological, and cognitive. It is situational because it is grounded in readers’ encounters with the first-person narrators of literary fiction, a form of interaction that bears a striking resemblance to everyday intersubjectivity but also deviates from it in interesting ways. The structure is phenomenological because it generates an experienced tension between readers’ self and the self they attribute to the narrator. Finally, the structure is cognitive because—as I will show—it involves a paradoxical interplay of empathetic closeness to the narrator and distanced incomprehension, or rejection, of his or her attitudes. This interplay corresponds to what I will call, borrowing Viktor Shklovsky’s (1965) influential term, “defamiliarization” in readers’ engagements with characters.<sup>2</sup> Before saying more about defamiliarization, however, I should offer a bird’s-eye view of the ground covered by this book. That is the task of the introduction.