

NAMES AS DISTANCE CONTROLLERS IN LITERATURE

Frederick M. Burelbach

State University of New York
College at Brockport

At the 1984 Conference on Literary Onomastics, Dr. Leonard Ashley reminded the audience that the charactonyms found so often in Restoration comedy--Lucius McTrigger, Mrs. Wishfort, Sir Fopling Flutter, et al.--help to create a psychological distance between the literary work and its audience. Such a distancing effect aids the satirical intention by making audiences observers rather than participants, by emphasizing the critical, evaluative faculties rather than empathic, nonjudgmental attitudes. The name becomes a simple sign that fulfills the attributes of comedy in at least two ways: by being in itself ridiculous, it increases the turpeditas or external ugliness of the character that Cicero claims as the source of laughter; and by reducing the human complexity of the character to a one-word descriptor, it turns the character into a mechanical doll, as Bergson observes. A characteristic of "normal" naming practices is that names do not so readily lend themselves to one-dimensional meaning, but, like the persons they label, have complex and even changing significations. For instance, Johan Combrink has described the way names change to reveal various levels of intimacy in Afrikaans

nomenclature.¹ The addition of diminutive suffixes and the use of nicknames are the most obvious ways in which increased intimacy can be developed between characters and audiences. In fact, by judicious use of character names, authors can subtly regulate audience distance from the work between the parameters of extreme remoteness and extreme intimacy.

An example of this is the name Huckleberry Finn, which starts off as a charactonym almost as far removed from normal naming practices as Sir Fopling Flutter. Huckleberry directs us to the proverb about going huckleberrying as equal to daydreaming or being lazy, and Finn is a common Irish name (cf. "Mickey Finn," slang term for a doped drink). Finn is appropriate for the stereotyped stage-Irishman: feckless, irascible, and drunk. In fact, Pap Finn fits the stereotype exactly and so reinforces it. However, Huckleberry is one step removed from the obvious satirical naming practices of a Congreve or Etherege because it does not in itself designate an opprobrious character trait (as Fopling and Wishfort do) but only hints. It is like the difference between a sign saying "Stop" and one saying "Yield." The former traffic sign leaves no room for shades of meaning, whereas a "Yield" sign on the road allows room for judgment. "Stop," like "Fopling," means just what it says. "Yield" could lead to a stop, a slowdown, or no change in speed, depending on the traffic situation.

The driver must relate the sign not only to its intrinsic meaning but also to the nature of the extrinsic situation and the appropriate response to it. Much more flexibility is permitted, so more thought, more of what characterizes human beings, is required. Similarly, Huckleberry could imply laziness, or could suggest sweetness of disposition, or rough and ready closeness to nature (as contrasted with the cultivated blueberry), or fertility of imagination, etc. Because the name is multivalent and flexible, then, rather than univalent and limited, the path is open for the audience to adjust its vision of the character without a break, an expansion or growth rather than a dislocation. Like his name, Huckleberry Finn opens to further possibilities.

One of these possibilities is revealed when the name Huckleberry is shortened to the nickname Huck. This process does several things: (1) it indicates that the name, already representative of a living, organic thing, is itself organic and subject to change, like human beings in general and like the character in particular (unlike the static characters of most satire); (2) it removes the most "abnormal" part of the name, changing it from a charactonym suggestive of idleness to a name that the audience can accept as more "normal" and opaque, and so makes the character seem more acceptably human; (3) it acts, like all nicknames, to narrow the distance between the character and the audience, so that the character can be seen as a friend or intimate, not a remote figure of fun. The

audience can still chuckle at Huck's naive responses to his environment, but it is the sympathetic response to one we care about, who reminds us of our own youthful fumbings, rather than a laughter that puts down or thrusts away the object of ridicule. In fact, we move from observing Huck from the outside to observing the world through Huck's eyes. Twain has thus used naming to adjust audience response. First he sets up an expectation that Huckleberry will be an object of satire, an antisocial gamin or underage Falstaff whom the audience can comfortably laugh at. Then he opens up more complex possibilities for the character, at the same time moving him closer to the audience, so those expectations have to adjust to a new reality. The process parallels his formal purpose, to make Huck the naive observer of satiric comedy, as well as the character development of Huck himself, who must constantly adjust to new situations. The process also parallels Twain's thematic intent to reveal the unreality and inhumanity of certain rigid social patterns, and to make the initially unacceptable (such as a view that Blacks are as human as Whites) into something acceptable by the audience.

In other examples we can see a similar process, or its reverse. In discussing Agatha Christie's use of names, Leonard Ashley comments that names in detective fiction, or escapist literature in general, should contain "no 'artistic' manipulation which will distance the reader from the story...."² Names that are too obviously meaningful

or unusual will tease the readers into thought, thrusting them out of the fictional world into a realm of critical appreciation and analysis. Of course, in some types of writing, such as Restoration comedy, that is exactly what the author wishes. Or in a work like Carlyle's Sartor Resartus, supposedly the fictional autobiography of the central character Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the obviously meaningful, paradoxical name ("God-born Devil's-dung") pushes the reader toward Carlyle's true intention: intellectual consideration of the philosophical issues rather than emotional involvement with the character. At the other end of the continuum, thoroughly realistic literature like Hemingway's uses names that could belong to the readers themselves or to their neighbors. Catherine Barkley, Frederic Henry, Jake Barnes (note the nickname)--names like these make the characters and events seem ordinary, routine, even a little dull, and this fits Hemingway's reductionistic concept of a world without romance or glory. The readers enter and experience this world through the names (among other features of style) and find it wanting. Names, therefore, can hold audiences aloof from the fiction or pull them into it, but there is a large gray area between these two extremes. In fact, clever or lucky authors can manipulate with names not only the amount but also the kind of distance they wish between the audience and the fiction.

Let's take an example. In Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie we first encounter Tom Wingfield. Now

Tom is a perfectly ordinary name--it is not until much later that the events of the play make us see an appropriate connection with Doubting Thomas--but Wingfield rather obviously contains "significance." Nevertheless, the name as a whole is not too remote from commonplace names, and so the audience is quite ready to believe in Tom as a real person. Williams' staging reinforces this belief, since Tom opens the play by speaking directly to the audience, as though he and the audience share the same level of reality. The next character who appears is Tom's mother, Amanda Wingfield. Again the name is quite believable, if a little old-fashioned, but then the audience notices that: (1) the name Amanda is a Latin gerund meaning "she who is beloved," and in connection with Wingfield is a little too apt to be without "'artistic' manipulation"; and (2) the old-fashionedness of the name evokes tender memories, and that is just what Williams' staging--the raising of the scrim to usher us into the past--has brought about, so again the audience senses manipulation. The audience, therefore, is likely to be pushed away to some extent, into a critical, analytical distance. Next we meet Laura Wingfield and are pushed still further away into intellectual analysis and evaluation, because Laura is just too much of a good thing. The hand of the auteur becomes obvious when the ingénue of the play is named after the subject of Petrarch's love-sonnets. At this point, the audience is apt to become critics of, not participants in, the world of the play. From the

gradually achieved distance--having been pushed away by increasingly artificial names--the audience is apt to consider the attitudes of the characters as flimsy sentimentalism.

Finally a character enters--Jim O'Connor--who, as Tom says, is "an emissary from reality" and who has a fine, realistic name. The audience also enters with Jim; here is no artifice to tease us into thought or memory, and the nickname Jim contributes its share of intimacy. More than any other character, Jim is part of our world; he represents the audience. But Jim's entry into the flimsy, romantic world of Laura and Amanda is disastrous--their illusions are shattered--and the audience, having broken into Laura's world with Jim, must share the guilt. Williams leaves open the question of whether turning a unicorn into a horse is salutary, but he has inviegled the audience into a shocked awareness of the pain involved. By holding us aloof with "artistic" names, he makes it easier for us to identify with Jim O'Connor, and thus to share in his destructive ordinariness and lack of empathy. The audience is thus forced to see itself as it is.

Names that are lexically opaque and fairly simple strike us as "real," even in a fantasy, where we expect names to follow different naming conventions. Names with lexically analyzable features or ones that evoke historical, mythical, biblical, hagiographical, or literary associations may strike us at first as contrived, with greater or less degrees of contrivance depending on the familiarity of the

name or the combination of elements. Amanda Wingfield, for instance, seems to be less contrived than Diogenes Teufelsdröckh or Crayola Catfish (to take an example from my favorite science-fiction writer, R. A. Lafferty). The sense of contrivance or "'artistic' manipulation" increases or decreases depending on the context: style, character development, plot, setting, theme, genre, other names, etc. The better the "fit" between the name and the character's personality or role, the greater the sense of manipulation and therefore the greater the distance between audience and character. On the other hand, a name that at first seems contrived may come to seem no more meaningful or specially adapted to the character and theme than names we encounter in ordinary life. After all, the world is full of Lauras who don't remind us of Petrarch, Kates who aren't shrews, and Toms who aren't doubters. This is the norm, and when an allusive connection is not developed in the literary work we can allow ourselves to suspend disbelief and enter the fictional world as if it is real. The author can therefore control the degree and speed of the reader's immersion in the fiction with a great deal of precision, depending on the extent of the correspondence between the name and its typos and the speed with which that correspondence either is revealed or is negated.

The author can also, to a great extent, control the kind of audience involvement. Names that succumb easily to semantic analysis, like Wingfield or Sam Spade's surname,

can reach all audiences. Everyone can be expected to see some degree of significance in such names and therefore to be turned into critics at least to some extent. However, it requires more sophistication and/or energy to discover meaning in names like Amanda or Teufelsdröckh, Laura, Ahab, Sam, or Bayard Sartoris. For some readers the allusion will spring to mind immediately, or the appearance of allusiveness will be readily apparent. Names like Captain Ahab and Ishmael in Moby-Dick will obviously warrant investigation even for those not thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, and therefore will prevent immediate immersion in the fiction. Other names will require other kinds of expertise and/or more intensive scholarly research. Audience responses can then sort themselves into naive acceptance of the name as opaque and therefore undemanding of critical analysis, so that suspension of disbelief can be immediate. Alternatively, audiences can arrive at greater and greater degrees of distancing as more intellectual awareness of meaning and authorial intent to suggest subtext is developed. The more we become conscious of the author's craft, the more apt we are to become appreciative spectators or analytical critics and therefore the less apt to become participants involved in the world of the fiction.

The passage of time adds another dimension, uncontrolled by the artist. Names that an author could at one time assume his or her readers to understand immediately might pass into opacity through decreased knowledge of their roots. Examples

can be found in The Faerie Queene. Although the initial elements of Una and Duessa are familiar enough as prefixes meaning "one" and "two," how many modern readers know enough Greek to make immediate sense out of Pyrocles, Orgoglio, or even George? Or enough French to quickly recognize the allegorical significance of Sansfoy, Sansloy, and Sansjoy? Spenser could perhaps assume wider knowledge of the root languages in his more classically trained era. Differences in space might also make a difference. Names that would be readily allusive to a British audience might elude an American reader, and vice versa. Certainly the connotative associations would not be the same. In such cases of distance in both time and space, the names would work differently, pushing some readers away to a critical distance while enticing other readers, by the opacity of the names, into naive acceptance.

In addition to the usual tasks of critical interpretation, the author who uses allusive or lexically meaningful names imposes on the audience the further burden of determining the relationship between the allusion or meaning and the character or theme. This additional burden can be light or heavy depending on the complexity of the entire situation. For a Laura Wingfield, the connections are fairly obvious and almost as clear-cut as simple allegory. For a Sam Spade or a Bayard Sartoris, the allusions are more recondite and complex, yielding their extra contributions to the meanings of the works only after the cobweb-

touch of oddness is followed up by research. Although that oddness and perception of the need for research prevent the reader from entering fully into the world of the fiction, the ultimate result is increased subtlety, complexity, and depth of meaning. The fiction becomes more like the complex nature of reality (though at first seeming less "real") and more absorbing. The use ofonyms, like Kafka's K. in The Trial, similarly pushes the reader away from emotional involvement in the character and into a puzzle-solving mode, so that the world of the fiction seems unreal or surreal and the emphasis is on the complexity of the ideas being explored. The fascination of the puzzle attracts the reader into seeking a solution and thus draws the reader into the meaning of the fiction while simultaneously distancing him from the fictional world itself. Consequently, the author can use names to control the kind of audience involvement with the fiction.

Authors have at their disposal many techniques to control audience distancing: the type of narrator employed, breaking into the fiction with direct authorial comment, manipulation of time and space in the narrative, usage level of vocabulary, staging in plays, and many others. But names are among the most common, powerful, and readily available means of achieving this control. It may not be possible to establish a chart containing lists of names suitable for achieving various degrees and kinds of distance--the issues are too complex and depend too

much on other variables for that--but this paper has attempted to suggest some of the principles behind this aspect of authors' uses of names.

Frederick M. Burelbach
State University of New York
College at Brockport

NOTES

¹ Johan Combrink, "Aspects of Emotive Forms of Address in Afrikaans Literature," Literary Onomastic Studies 10 (1983), 87-132.

² Leonard R. N. Ashley, "'The Sausage Machine': Names in the Detective Fiction of Dame Agatha Christie," Literary Onomastic Studies 11 (1984), 31-32.