



NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND THEORIES OF POLYPHONY IN THE NOVELS OF MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the interrelation between the theories of narrative complexity and polyphony in the works of Mario Vargas Llosa. Based on the novels “The Time of the Hero” and “The Feast of the Goat”, the study explores the writer’s narrative strategies, his methods of constructing multilayered structures, and creating polyphonic discourse. The author connects Vargas Llosa’s artistic experience with the theories of Gérard Genette, Brian McHale, Wolf Schmid, and Mikhail Bakhtin, forming a scholarly framework for understanding narrative and ideological complexity.

The article examines such formal elements as the variability of time and point of view, the unreliable narrator, interior monologue, and stream of consciousness, demonstrating their intrinsic connection with the polyphonic nature of the novels. Furthermore, based on Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, the study analyzes how various social and political voices collide in Vargas Llosa’s works, how “truth” is represented as multiple, and how the absence of a final moral position contributes to this multiplicity.

The results of the study show that for Vargas Llosa, narrative complexity is not merely a formal experiment but a structural expression of a polyphonic worldview. Through the dialogue between diverse voices, his novels reveal political, moral, and philosophical issues, making him one of the foremost representatives of multi-voiced realism in contemporary literature.

Introduction. The novels of Mario Vargas Llosa, particularly *The Time of the Hero* and *The Feast of the Goat*, represent a vivid example of a sophisticated narrative art that deliberately abandons simplicity. His narrative form constitutes a labyrinth of interconnected perspectives, multiple temporal layers, and competing discourses; this, in turn, invites the

reader to become an active participant in the construction of meaning. In order to fully account for this stylistic and thematic complexity, a solid theoretical framework is required. Therefore, this section examines the theoretical foundations of narrative complexity and polyphony, emphasizing the necessity of their combined application in the study of Vargas Llosa's narrative experiments.

Narrative complexity is not merely a matter of style; rather, it is a fundamental mode of storytelling that reflects and interrogates the complexity of human experience. It signifies a departure from traditional linear, omniscient narration toward the representation of reality as fragmented and multifaceted. This complexity manifests itself at both structural and thematic levels and requires new analytical tools for its interpretation.

Structural complexity involves the transformation of the formal elements of a text in order to produce a non-linear narrative and a demanding reading experience. Its most evident feature is the use of unconventional temporal sequencing and fragmented chronology. Events are not presented in a simple "beginning-to-end" order; instead, they unfold through shifts backward and forward in time, often without explicit markers, requiring the reader to reconstruct the sequence independently. For instance, in *The Feast of the Goat*, Vargas Llosa interweaves present-day episodes depicting Urania Cabral's return to the Dominican Republic with narratives portraying the final days of the Trujillo regime and the conspirators' plans. As a result, different temporal layers merge into a mosaic structure in which the central mystery is gradually revealed (Kristal, 2010).

Multi-perspectival narration and variable focalization are also central features. The author does not adhere to a single perspective; instead, he incorporates multiple viewpoints, each of which is partial and subjective. This technique, often referred to as "multiple focalization," shifts the narrative from an omniscient narrator to a character's internal monologue, or from one character's perspective to another.

For example, in *The Time of the Hero*, the events at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy are depicted through several characters-Jaguar, Slave, and Alberto-as well as through an anonymous narrator. This strategy presents not a single unified truth, but rather multiple "truths" that depend on the source of narration.

Furthermore, the novel frequently incorporates embedded narratives, subplots, and digressions. These elements may or may not be directly connected to the main storyline. They enrich the textual world, provide background information, and introduce diverse voices and stylistic registers. Vargas Llosa employs this technique extensively, thereby expanding the scope of the novel-from the inner drama of individual characters to the broader socio-political history of an entire nation.

Methods. Narrative complexity manifests not only at the structural level but also within thematic and psychological layers. Ambiguity, moral relativism, and the disruption of meaning lie at its core. Such complexity demonstrates the absence of absolute moral truth and underscores the notion that "truth" itself is a contested concept. Characters' actions are far from straightforward, and the reader is required to evaluate their ethical implications independently, without explicit authorial guidance.

For instance, in *The Feast of the Goat*, the motives of the assassins, victims, and survivors are subject to varying interpretations by the reader, thereby complicating the conventional “hero-villain” dichotomy.

Another hallmark of this complexity is the use of the unreliable narrator. An unreliable narrator is a character within the narrative who presents events in an inaccurate, biased, or incomplete manner due to limited knowledge, manipulative intent, or psychological instability. As a result, the reader continuously questions the information provided in the text, analyzing falsehoods, half-truths, and subjective interpretations, effectively becoming a “detective” of the narrative. Mario Vargas Llosa employs this technique masterfully, cultivating a sense of doubt in the reader and illuminating the constructed nature of “truth.”

Finally, techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue allow for a deep exploration of the characters’ inner worlds. The author represents their thoughts and emotions in a non-linear and often fragmented manner, thereby producing a strong effect of psychological realism. In *The Time of the Hero*, internal monologues reveal the characters’ fears, anxieties, and desires, often in ways that contradict their outward behavior.

To provide a solid scientific foundation for the analytical model, the study draws upon the works of prominent narratologists. Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* offers a precise terminology for analyzing the relationship between story and narrative. His concepts of order, duration, and frequency are particularly valuable for examining structural complexity in the works of Mario Vargas Llosa.

In addition, Brian McHale’s studies on postmodernist poetics expand this discussion. He introduces the concept of the “ontological dominant”: whereas modernism is concerned with the question “What can be known?”, postmodernism foregrounds the question “What kind of world is this?” In this sense, narrative complexity represents a textual manifestation of a world in which multiple, and sometimes conflicting, realities coexist. In Mario Vargas Llosa’s novels, the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, are easily blurred, exemplifying a distinctly postmodern sensibility.

Results. Wolf Schmid’s model of narrative levels constitutes another valuable analytical tool. Schmid distinguishes between “story” (the sequence of events), “narrative” (how the story is told), and “presentation” (the author’s choice of language and style). This framework facilitates an understanding of how Mario Vargas Llosa’s techniques—such as variable focalization and the incorporation of embedded narratives—contribute to the overall effect of complexity.

While narratology explains how narrative complexity functions, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony elucidates why it functions in this way. Articulated in his study of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works, this theory provides an effective framework for understanding how the novel can represent multiple, autonomous voices and consciousnesses that exist independently of authorial control.

The polyphonic novel stands in direct opposition to the monologic novel. In a monologic novel, the author’s voice occupies the central position, and all other characters and their discourses are subordinated to the author’s worldview. In contrast, in a polyphonic novel, characters are not merely objects of the author’s imagination but subjects endowed with independent voices and consciousnesses.

As Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes, the author of a polyphonic novel is not a traditional “puppeteer,” but rather a “conductor” who orchestrates diverse, often conflicting voices without reducing them to a single unified harmony. The author’s voice is only one among many and frequently enters into dialogue with the voices of the characters.

Two of the most important concepts in Bakhtin’s theory are dialogism and heteroglossia.

Dialogism refers to the interconnectedness of all utterances and their existence within an ongoing process of dialogue. No word or idea exists in isolation; it is always infused with the voices of others who have previously articulated it. This dialogic interaction may be internal (within a single text) or external (intertextual). In Mario Vargas Llosa’s works, social and political issues are not presented as singular truths but rather as subjects of continuous debate and dialogue among characters.

Discussion. Heteroglossia, in turn, denotes the multiplicity of social voices within language itself. Within a single national language, various social dialects, jargons, and individual speech patterns coexist. The polyphonic novel incorporates this diversity, thereby reflecting the coexistence and conflict of different social and political discourses.

For instance, in *The Feast of the Goat*, the official political discourse of the Trujillo regime is juxtaposed with the conspirators’ slang and Urania’s intimate inner voice. As a result, diverse social and ideological positions generate a rich and complex discursive structure.

Mikhail Bakhtin also introduces the concepts of the “word with a loophole” and “double-voiced discourse.” A “word with a loophole” refers to an utterance that deliberately leaves room for reinterpretation, lacking a single fixed meaning. “Double-voiced discourse,” on the other hand, is speech that simultaneously embodies two meanings—one belonging to the author and the other to the character.

One of Mikhail Bakhtin’s most radical ideas is that, in a polyphonic novel, the character’s voice holds a status equal to that of the author. Characters are not passive carriers of the author’s ideas; rather, they are active subjects endowed with autonomous worlds of their own.

This perspective gives rise to the concept of the “unfinalized nature” of the character. Whereas characters in monologic novels have destinies definitively shaped by the author, those in polyphonic novels remain in a continuous process of becoming. Their consciousness and worldview evolve through ongoing dialogue with other characters.

Such openness—marked by the absence of a final, absolute truth—reflects the plurality of truths within the novel.

At the intersection of narrative complexity and polyphony, a more comprehensive understanding of Mario Vargas Llosa’s aesthetic vision emerges. While narrative complexity explains the structural organization and formal dynamics of his novels, polyphony elucidates their ideological and philosophical foundations.

Thus, a complex narrative structure is not merely “style for the sake of style,” but a necessary condition for the full realization of polyphony.

In Vargas Llosa’s works, the clash of multiple voices and ideologies constitutes a primary source of narrative complexity. His novels are not centered on the adventures of a single protagonist; rather, they are constructed around dialogues and conflicts between differing worldviews.

This dialogic relationship produces a complex narrative network in which no single perspective can claim absolute truth. For example, in *The Time of the Hero*, the conflicting accounts of the Slave's death, the varying motivations of the cadets, and the ambiguous resolution all exemplify the outcomes of polyphonic tension.

This approach also enables a deeper analysis of the dialogic relationships among the narrator, the characters, and historical figures. In *The Feast of the Goat*, Mario Vargas Llosa brings the real historical figure Rafael Trujillo into dialogue with fully fictional characters such as Urania Cabral and the conspirators.

Conclusion. As a result, historical reality is enriched by personal and subjective dimensions, precluding a monologic, one-dimensional understanding of history. Different narrators recount the same events in conflicting ways, compelling the reader to engage continuously in interpretation.

The intersection of narrative complexity and polyphony yields profound thematic implications. The most significant outcome is the fragmentation of truth and the impossibility of a singular, complete reality. In *The Time of the Hero* and *The Feast of the Goat*, readers are presented with multiple, often contradictory "truths." These works interpret "truth" not as singular but as plural, filtered through each individual's experience, ideology, and worldview.

This is particularly relevant in depictions of authoritarian regimes, where official history is often monologic and unilateral. Mario Vargas Llosa disrupts such "official history" through the polyphony of voices, revealing the multifaceted experiences of individuals living under dictatorship.

Moreover, the clash of opposing perspectives produces moral and ethical ambiguity. The novels never offer simple moral judgments: characters are neither entirely good nor wholly evil, and their actions are driven by complex motives. Readers are thus compelled to confront these ambiguities and draw their own ethical conclusions. This engagement with moral ambivalence is a central feature of Vargas Llosa's literary practice.

For example, in *The Feast of the Goat*, the conspirators assassinate the dictator, ostensibly performing a "heroic" act; yet their internal fear, weakness, and moral corruption complicate any straightforward heroic interpretation.

These theoretical concepts are directly linked to the social and political content of the novels. While polyphonic voices reflect the social and ideological fragmentation of the nation, narrative complexity formalizes the representation of moral and political disruption. Through these techniques, Mario Vargas Llosa analyzes structures of power, corruption, and violence, demonstrating how the very form of the novel can serve as a tool of socio-political critique.

Narrative complexity and polyphony together provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Vargas Llosa's narrative strategies. The concept of complexity supplies the terminological basis for describing the author's style and formal solutions, while polyphony explains their philosophical and ideological underpinnings.

Non-linear structures, multi-centered focalization, and multi-voiced discourse are thus not merely literary embellishments or formal experiments, but the formal expression of a polyphonic worldview. In this world, "truth" is never singular; it exists as a multiplicity of voices in ongoing dialogue, contested and evolving.

This integrated approach enables a clear understanding of how Vargas Llosa, through fragmented and polyphonic narratives, engages deeply with political, historical, and philosophical issues.

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