

# **Narrative (Un-)Reliability: Epistemic Gaps in Narratives and the Limits of Ethical Representation**

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This paper proposes to integrate the category of narrative (un-)reliability into the discussion of the inner limits of narratives, and especially, into the discussion of the function of gaps in the ethical dimensions of narrative. To this day, the majority of narratological research into unreliability has been focusing on bridging differences between rhetorical and constructivist perspectives on unreliable narration (Shen 2014), and the category also only features in very brief passing in Schmid's recent exploration of the non-narrated (2023: 16). My paper seeks to demonstrate, however, that unreliable narration functions as a key feature in narratives to create 'epistemic gaps', through which authors can make visible or invisible forms of racial, gendered, and social injustice. Inspired by the concerns of postcolonial narratology, my paper seeks to discuss the multifaceted ways in which the question of narrative reliability can be used by authors as a self-reflexive, meta-textual device to highlight the inner and ethical limits of narrative representation.

Drawing on a reading of Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's (1830-1916) novella *Er lässt die Hand küssen* (1886) in the context of the German-Czech national conflict in late Austria-Hungary to exemplify my argument, I will show that narrative unreliability in Ebner's works functions as a self-reflexive device by which the author is able to negotiate crucial questions about the epistemic limits of empathetically representing disenfranchised "Others", and the ethical boundaries of narrating the stories of those whose suffering and injustices we do not share.

In the second part, my paper intends to show that narrative (un-)reliability can also serve to highlight narrative and epistemic gaps on a less observed side, namely that of the narratee. Drawing on a further function of narrative (un-)reliability in Ebner's text, I am seeking to propose the concept of an "unreliable narratee" in my paper, an intra-fictive or implied narratee that deliberately exerts ignorance, and challenges or denies the truth claims of a narrative out of dubious motives, such as personal discomfort or the rejection of responsibility, and therefore also creates (epistemic) gaps in narratives. Using the ambiguities created by the narrative gaps in Ebner-Eschenbach's works, I will also demonstrate how extending the corpus of contextualist narratologies to the complex identity discourses in Central Europe can complement and reinvigorate recently stalled, mostly anglophone efforts (Heinen 2021) to advance the development of a postcolonial narratology.