

The Shadow of a Doubt:

A Study on the Perspectives on Danny Miller in Barker's *Border Crossing*

Svante Myremark

C-essay

Department of Languages and Literatures/English

Göteborg University

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Supervisor: Fereshteh Zangenehpour

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Introduction

This essay will concern and analyse Tom Seymour's perspective on Danny Miller in *Border Crossing*, by Pat Barker. The novel was written in 2001 and it deals with several interesting subjects such as the distinction between good and evil, damnation and redemption, etc.

When I first read *Border Crossing* some years ago I found the aspects of perspective fascinating and I wrote a piece on the narrative point of view in a home exam. Then, when I re-read the novel I realized that it is a thriller, and yet, there seemed to be no actual or external suspense. From this realization my interest of how the suspense manifests itself began to grow. After yet another re-reading of *Border Crossing* I started to notice that both the perspective aspect and the nature of the suspense could be combined. It was, essentially, one sentence that caught my attention, “[a]nd, anyway, he [Danny] has to be given the benefit of a doubt” (80). I realized that to doubt is to be uncertain, a state in which both Tom and the reader find themselves throughout the story. *Border Crossing* lacks, in many respects, external suspense, i.e. hostile and dangerous situations and the like. My claim is that I believe that the suspense of the novel, from the point of view of both Tom and the reader, is constituted by the way in which Tom perceives Danny Miller and his intentions rather than the actions that entangles the plot. Within the perspective there is room for both doubts and hopes, both of which will alternate in the continuing relationship between Tom and Danny. Therein lays the persisting tension of the novel.

The idea of which approach this essay should have comes from the subject of the home exam mentioned above. The approach will be that of narratology, which means that I will also investigate the role of the narrator as well as what other features of narration the author has used in order to create the suspense.

As for the events that form the premise for the suspense, which is the scope of this essay, they are as follow: Tom Seymour, the protagonist of the story, is a child psychologist, who one day rescues a young man from the river, unaware that it is a former patient of his, whose name is Danny Miller. Danny had been sent to prison for murdering an old lady, after an assessment made by Tom. After his release from prison, Danny, under the new identity by the name of Ian Wilkinson, wants to come to term with his past and therefore wants to talk to Tom only or he will not talk at all. Tom is not sure whether he should accept or not and yet, step by step he is drawn into Danny's world.

In further detail, this study will be divided into two chapters. In the first chapter I will discuss how, from a limited third-person point of view, Tom's supposed doubts regarding Danny's intentions contribute to the suspense. Also, I will account for the narrative features, such as prolepsis and the significance of the narrator. In the second chapter I will try to show the implications of perceiving and treating Danny subjectively or objectively and how that affects the tension level.

For the narrative approach I will use terminology and concepts from Seymour Chatman's *Reading Narrative Fiction* in order to explain the significance of different narrative features. For the discussions on both Tom's perspective and the subjectivity versus objectivity I will use other references, including two reviews and two critical essays on *Border Crossing*, in order to support my theories that in turn support my claim.

Chapter 1 - Tom's Perspective

This chapter will deal with Tom's perspective on Danny. In detail, that means that I will investigate and display that the suspense, from a third-person perspective as well as the reader's, lies in the uncertainty of not being able to access Danny's mind. That is, neither Tom nor the reader can be really sure regarding Danny's agenda or, perhaps, agendas. The two factors behind this are character-based and narrator-based and they will be examined separately.

First, the narrator-based discussion concerns the role and attitude of the narrator. That is whether or not he or she in some way tries to influence the reader. Regarding the importance of the narrator, Seymour Chatman observes, "[o]bviously, our reading of a fiction is very much controlled by what the narrator shows or tells, or [...] what the narrator is authorized to tell. [...] It is the [...] author who chooses what – and how much – the narrator may explicitly tell and/or show (93). Here we can say that the narrator is important, but he or she is subordinated in relation to the author in terms of choices. Concerning the influence of the narrator, Chatman argues that if he or she "makes comments about character's behaviour or about the nature of the world, and so on, we feel that the narrator is some specific person addressing us" (91). But the narrator of *Border Crossing* is, with Chatman's terminology, an "authorial narrator" (92), which means that the narrator is not a character in the story. However, being an "authorial narrator" does not necessarily mean that he or she does not influence the reader. Still, in the novel, the narrator does not, as far I can tell, share his or her opinions or attitudes but presents the setting and Tom and his wife Lauren in an objective manner, almost from an omniscient bird's view from above. Then the narrator enters Tom's mind providing his perspective.

As one means of create suspense, the narrator uses analepsis and prolepsis. The instances of analepsis, almost equivalent to the notion of the flashback, do not concern the suspense of *Border Crossing*, and therefore I will only analyse the effect of the prolepsis. By prolepsis means, using the terminology from the Encyclopædia Britannica website,” [a] figure of speech in which a future act or development is represented as if already accomplished or existing.” The narrator makes use of prolepsis especially in the beginning of the story, before entering Tom’s mind, as in, “[a] gull, bigger and darker than the rest, flew over, and he [Tom] raised his eyes to follow it. Perhaps this focus on the bird’s flight explained why, in later years, when he looked back on that day, he remembered what he couldn’t possibly have seen: a gull’s eye view of the path” (2). This is when Tom thinks about this moment in his future, even though that future has yet to happen in the storyline. The sea gull quote combined with a part of the opening sentence of the novel, “and as far they knew they were alone” (1), the narrator creates, for the reader, a sense of anticipation of coming events. The two quotes in this paragraph are taken from the moments before Tom rescues Danny from drowning, which is an important moment in the novel. But, regardless of its importance, the features of prolepsis contribute to a feeling of anticipation rather than suspense, because Tom does not know that it is Danny he rescues until later on.

In terms of the suspense of the novel due to narration, the latter part of chapter seven functions as the most interesting piece of text. In those last pages of the chapter, the narrator enters the thoughts of Danny’s parole officer, Martha Pitt, as she is riding in a car with Danny (84-91). This is the only place in the novel, after the narrator has entered Tom’s thoughts, where the perspective changes from Tom to another character. Now bearing in mind what Chatman observed above concerning the narrator, there lays a reason or reasons behind the choice of the temporary change of perspective.

I believe the main reason is to cast additional doubts towards Danny's agenda and in doing so, raising the level of suspense. First of all, the reader is provided with another character's perspective, a character that begins to question both her own perception of Danny and the nature of his intentions, thinking, "[h]e might have changed, but she didn't believe it. Not absolutely. Not without doubt" (88). Now Martha's perspective has changed and she is more aware to the implications surrounding Danny. Still, the limited amount of pages suggests that there is more to this than just another perspective. Chapter seven marks the only instance in which Danny airs his opinions without Tom being present. Given the history between Tom and Danny, the latter one can talk more freely when the former is elsewhere. Martha describes Danny's voice to be carrying "betrayed trust" and "[a] sense of something good gone disastrously wrong" (91). In addition to that, in the last paragraph of the chapter Martha states that she does not know how or why Tom had become the only person who could help Danny, when he was the last person a month earlier (91). Martha's perspective and insight to Danny do not necessarily change the perspective for the reader but they certainly contribute to the mystery that Danny is shrouded in.

Then, there is the character-based part, which, of course, deals with Tom Seymour. He is not only the protagonist of the story but also the filter-character, again using Chatman's terminology (133). A character's filter can be described as Chatman puts it, "Filter turns the character's consciousness into a kind of "screen" through which we learn of the events of the story and their impact on her" (130). According to Chatman, the author can apply this filter by means of limitation or omniscience which means that the narrator either access the mind of one character or all of the characters (93-94). In *Border Crossing* the narrator accesses the mind of one single character, namely Tom. The only exception to this is the passage with Martha as the filter-character, which implications are examined in the above paragraph.

Tom is a human being and, as is the situation for all humans, he cannot completely know and comprehend any other person than himself, and not knowing makes humans fear and doubt. In this manner it is significant that the narrator does not enter Danny's mind which results in that, as David Dalgliesh puts it, "Danny therefore remains as unfathomable to us as he is to Tom." Naturally, due to his profession and their history, Tom can have a realistic view of Danny's supposed agenda, but, ultimately, neither he nor the reader can know for sure. This uncertainty, in terms of narrative perspective, helps increase the tension level of the novel.

From the beginning there is the question on whether or not Danny planned and staged his suicide attempt. At first Tom wonders if their meeting was "genuine coincidence" but he dismisses the idea, thinking "[i]t made no sense" (22). Still, when Danny states, "[t]here is a purpose", meaning fate, Tom wonders "whose" purpose it is (22). All these instances suggest that Tom is cautious regarding Danny's intentions but there is something more to it, a hope of change.

This hope of change manifests itself through Tom's profession and a more fundamental human need. In terms of his profession, i.e. being a psychologist, Tom believes, as Nick Rennison states, "in the healing power of confronting the demons within" (30). In Danny's case that means that Tom needs to believe and hope that Danny can and, possibly, has changed in order to carry out his help. However, I believe that there is also a fundamental need for Tom to help Danny. Tom feels, in some ways responsible for Danny's sentence. It was, after all, Tom's assessment that sent Danny to the court even though he was only ten years old. Tom knows that Danny was guilty but he still feels, if not responsible, then at least involved in Danny's conviction. Then, when Tom meets the adult Danny he encounters a depressed soul who tried to commit suicide. I believe Tom sees helping Danny as an

opportunity to redeem both of them. It is this need that urges Tom to continue their sessions despite his doubts towards Danny's intentions (80, 202, 206, 225).

Whereas the hope of change forms Tom's reason why he continues the sessions with Danny, it is Tom's awareness and cautiousness in regard to Danny that makes it interesting from the point-of-view of suspense. Regardless of his hope(s), Tom still expresses doubts concerning Danny's version of the suicide attempt stating, "he [Danny] has to be given the benefit of a doubt" (80). David Dalgliesh puts this aspect as, "the shadow of past violence and the potential for future hovers over the two men, poised like a bird of prey, as they skirt their way around mental quicksand." Since the novel, almost consistently, lacks any form of external suspense and violence, the important factor is the internal suspense and potential violence, which is the one on the psychological level.

In the second chapter I will discuss how treating Danny Miller subjectively or objectively might affect the suspense.

Chapter 2 - Subjectivity versus Objectivity

When it comes to the issue of a subjective versus objective mind regarding Danny, there are two aspects I would like to examine. The first feature will deal with the concern of how Danny, in terms of subjective and objective perspective, was treated by some characters during his stay at Long Garth. Emphasis will be on how Danny affected their judgement. This part will feature as a background layer to the difficulties that Tom will face when he tries to keep a subjective mind in relation to Danny and how he himself, through his way of behaving, contributes to the continuation of their ongoing sessions. In the later part of this chapter I will examine how Danny is treated by Tom. I will begin by highlighting some scenes in which Tom finds out about several other character's behaviour around Danny and how certain aspects of subjectivity clouds their judgement. After that I will examine whether or not Tom himself bends the rules regarding Danny.

To begin with, there are the accounts of the people involved during Danny's time at the Long Garth facility. These persons are, Danny himself, the warden Bernard Greene, his wife Elspeth Greene and the teacher Angus McDonald. Concerning Danny and the policy as such, Bernard Greene says to Tom that "there was never any preferential treatment" (161). However, Greene does admit that they made "special arrangements" (162) for Danny's education. He justifies these arrangements by saying that they would have made the same special arrangements "if a boy had been profoundly deaf, or blind." (162).

Danny describes his view on the policy of Long Garth as, "[y]ou knew what the rules were, what the rewards were, what the punishments were, and it was always the same, and it was the same for everybody. [...] You couldn't go to the lavatory on your own, you couldn't close your door, you weren't allowed to be alone with anybody, you couldn't go out ..." (173-174).

However, both Mr. Greene and Danny's versions are contradicted by those of Angus and Elspeth Greene's. Initially it is Elspeth Greene who airs her opinion of the special arrangements to Tom, meaning that "[t]he whole school was reorganized round him" (167). Both Mrs. Greene and Angus McDonald point to the plausible implication of getting over-involved with Danny (170, 203).

Out of these four character's accounts, Mrs. Greene's is most credible because she is least biased. Mr. Greene cares about the reputation of his facility, which he is very proud of. Danny is of course not entirely trustable since he is the subject of the accounts. Angus McDonald might be biased because he loved Danny, by whom he was falsely accused of sexual abuse and he lost his job. Elspeth, on the other hand, seems to have been less impressed by Danny than most of her colleagues (164); she is able to supply Tom (and the reader) with a rather detailed, and interpreted, account of Danny's behaviour at the Long Garth unit.

The fate of Mr. McDonald needs to be investigated a bit further because it represents a warning for Tom in his sessions with Danny. Angus was an English teacher who had Danny to write about his past. Eventually Danny reached the episode of the murder. The writing process made Danny "frightened" because "he couldn't stop" and "he knew he was going to tell [Angus] about the murder, and that was a terrible thought. Because he'd never actually admitted it" (206). The result was that Danny accused Mr. McDonald for sexually abusing him and which led to that the latter one was fired from Long Garth. Mrs. Greene issues the same warning, "Bernard thinks we transformed him [Danny]. I don't think we even scratched the surface. Or, if somebody did, it was Angus, and look what happened to him" (171).

Angus, who seems to be the one that has come closest to understanding Danny's inner mind, ended up having to quit his job due to Danny. This represents an explicit warning to Tom in his relation to Danny, but also, more implicitly, a potential fore-shadowing of coming events. For Tom, the risk of ending up like Angus is imminent yet avoidable.

Bearing all this in mind, we move on to investigate whether Danny receives preferential treatment from Tom. Tom's connection to Danny is work related and in that field he needs to be able to do an objective assessment of Danny. However, the preceding part of this subchapter points to different aspects of the shared problem of treating Danny in a formal, objective and non-preferential circumstances. In comparison to these other characters, Tom has the advantage of understanding the complex and delicate nature of which Danny composes. Having written that, I shall point out that it might be so that his understanding of Danny will not make it easier for Tom to maintain an objective perspective.

I would like to begin this reasoning by displaying a key event from the scene at the hospital, in which Tom realizes that it is Danny he has rescued from the river. After some conversing about Danny's attempted suicide, Tom suggests to Danny, "[y]ou know, you could come and talk to me, if you think it would be useful. Nothing formal. Just a chat" (24). This is where the circumstance and objective perspective begins to blur. On the one hand, it is Tom, not Danny, who, seemingly, is beginning to lay the path back into Danny's world. On the other hand, Danny has not yet entered into Tom's life and therefore there is not yet a valid question of subjective or objective assessment. However, when the "chat" Tom suggested occurs, his thoughts are presented in this way, "[n]ot an easy situation, Tom thought. You could hardly pretend it was a social call, and yet it wasn't consultation either" (65). Even though their sessions later develop into formal meetings, this quote illustrates how Tom's attitude towards Danny has reached a grey zone in terms of objectivity. On this grey zone subject Eluned Summers-Bremner observes, "[i]n the course of their conversations Tom becomes increasingly uncertain as to his professional relation to, and his own culpability for, Danny's sufferings" (268).

Nevertheless, Tom's suggestion provides a possible way in for Danny and further down the page some of Tom's thoughts about Danny are shown. The narrator reveals that "part of

Tom's interest was simple professional curiosity" (24), but also that he is "concerned for this unknown young man whose face and personality seemed to contain, untouched, the child he had once been" (24). Tom's thoughts reveal him to be somewhat blurred in his objectivity and also that he, at least to some extent, respond to Danny as a child. What is more, these thoughts highlight a more negative aspect of objectivity in Tom having a history with Danny.

This brings up the question whether or not Tom is a reliable character. In terms of being a psychologist, we expect him to be reliable and able to cope with Danny in a professional manner. However, I established in the above paragraph that Tom shows signs of subjectivity in relation to Danny. Summers-Bremner puts it like this, "[f]rom the moment Tom agrees to allow Danny to talk to him about his past [...] the child/adult distinction [...] comes under increasing pressure. Tom's reasons for engaging in the excavatory journey are suspect from the first, so that the border between patient and therapist is also in question" (268). These are two examples of borders being crossed, to which the title of the novel, *Border Crossing*, is referring.

The significance of the reasoning in this chapter is to show that in getting too close to Danny you are leaving him in control of the situation. This, combined with Tom's knowledge of Danny's history of violence and his antagonism towards Tom, constitutes a part of the suspense of the novel. John Brannigan argues that, "Tom's fear, [...] as is often the concern of Barker's novels, is that history can repeat itself, or rather that the wounds of one time may open up in another, with no less effect" (150).

Another part of the suspense is constituted by the uncertainty for the reader whether or not if Tom, throughout the story, lets Danny have the control. Furthermore, there is the threat of violence when Tom and Danny reach the point of the murder in their session. It turns out to be a real threat because in the climatic scene of the novel Danny almost, however unconsciously, sets Tom's house on fire (259-260). The doubts towards Danny's agenda are never actualized

but that does not erase their validity, in terms of the tension of the novel, since neither Tom nor the reader knows this until the end of the story is enacted.

Danny's manipulative control over Tom becomes evident, when Tom against his better judgement agrees to let Danny transfer away under a new identity (266-267). Regarding this, Tom observes that, "at the crucial moment, Danny had looked at him, and it had not seem possible to betray him" (274). On this Richard Eder in his review observes, "[m]anipulative charm has again prevailed. Danny gets a new identity and safe haven" (3). The fact that Danny does not end up in a secure hospital facility means that there is a potential risk, which Tom airs near the end of the story (274), in that he might relapse into his previous violent behaviour. In terms of an ongoing suspense, however, this potential risk does not concern the suspense of this novel.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored Tom's perspective of Danny Miller in Pat Barker's *Border Crossing*. My aim was to prove that the suspense of the novel lies in Tom's perspective of Danny.

In the first chapter, I explored Tom's perspective from two angles, a narrative and a character point of view. Using the concepts of Seymour Chatman's *Reading Narrative Fiction*, I concluded that the narrator plays an important role but only in the way in which he or she "filters" the characters. By filtering the story through a another character than Tom, if only for a short time, the narrator manages to provide the reader with a different perspective as well as casting doubts upon Danny's agenda. In this chapter I also tried to show that the level of suspense is determined by both doubts and hopes from Tom.

In the second chapter, I tried to show the implications of how a subjective mind in regard to Danny might cloud the judgment of those who had dealt with him. In addition to that, I also tried to indicate that by keeping a subjective mind they let Danny be in control. These two aspects together with the doubts, established in the previous chapter, contribute to raise the tension.

To sum up, it is the first chapter of the essay that, in furthest detail, supports my claim, i.e. that the suspense of *Border Crossing* is constituted by the perspective Tom has on Danny. In this respect, all Tom's doubts, hopes and needs are significant factors behind the ongoing "relationship", in which the tension between him and Danny lies. The second chapter is more of a support to the first chapter. There I show what happens if Danny has the control of the situation and also the uncertainty that both Tom and the reader hold concerning the Danny's potential violence. The novel lacks, almost consistently, any form of external violence and

suspense; instead it is the fear for this to happen that constitutes the suspense, all of which take place on a psychological level.

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