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The

Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones (1996)

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# Generating Sympathy for Specific Characters and Events in Mandla Langa's *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones* (1996)

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## Abstract

In this article, I investigate Mandla Langa's short story, *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones*, by applying Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* along with Mikhail Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* to the text. By highlighting the way in which Langa employs narrational strategies to generate meaning in the story, I aim to correct the critical neglect of this aspect of his work. It is established that two narrational modes – intradiegetic–homodiegetic and intradiegetic–metadiegetic – are employed by two central characters in the narrative. The first character narrator is Clementine, the daughter of the second narrator, Simeon Ngozi. This produces a heterodiegetic narrative, that is, a multiple narrative strategy. This multi-voiced polyphonic narrative accentuates the plight of the main characters and their struggles under oppressive and exploitive conditions in apartheid South Africa. It also generates sympathy for these events as well as for Clementine and her father.

**Keywords:** narrational strategies; narrating voice; dialogism; sympathy; Gérard Genette; Mandla Langa; Mikhail Bakhtin

## Introduction

Mandla Langa is a distinguished South African poet and novelist. He received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book in Africa in 2009 and was awarded South Africa's National Order of Ikhamanga for literary, journalistic and cultural achievements in 2007. He also received the Bursary for Creative Writing from the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1991. He has contributed to South African literature by his work that focuses on the liberation of the country during apartheid and social justice in a democratic society. His work experiments with narrational strategies.

Most reviews of Langa's work focus on the social, political and historical conditions in which the narratives are set. His application of narrative strategies in his fictional writing has received no attention in critical reviews of his work before this article. To fill this gap, this study investigates the way in which the narrational strategies Langa employs

in his short story *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones* (1996) function to generate meaning. This is done by highlighting the plight of the main characters and their struggles under oppressive and exploitive social and political conditions. By deploying two narrators and multiple voices to narrate and speak in the narrative, Langa produces a polyphonic text.

The narrative theories of Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) and *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988) along with Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* (1981) constitute the article's theoretical framework. It focuses on Genette's (1980, 1988) narrative theory of voice, signifying narration. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory provides further insight into the voices of the characters as narrators in the multi-vocal narrative. The combination of these two theories enable an analysis and discussion of the polyphonic nature of the narrative and the emphasis it places on the personal experiences and plight of the main characters in the text.

The gist of Genette's (1980, 1988) narration is that a narrative cannot be a discourse or a text unless someone undertakes its narration. This means that the narrating instance produces the narrative text, and the reader has only the concrete narrative text in which to search for the narrator. To identify the narrator of the story, Genette (1980, 248) explains: "If in every narrative we define the narrator's status both by its narrative level (extradiegetic– or intradiegetic) and by its relationship to the story (heterodiegetic– or homodiegetic), we can represent the four basic types of the narrator's status," as follows:

- extradiegetic–heterodiegetic: the narrator at the first level tells a story from which he/she is absent;
- extradiegetic–homodiegetic: a character at the first level tells his/her own story;
- intradiegetic–heterodiegetic: a character at the second level inside the central events tells an embedded "metadiegetic" narrative; and
- intradiegetic–homodiegetic: a character at the second level tells his/her own story.

There is more about the narrator of the story. According to Genette (1980, 258–259), the narrator of a post-modernist text often exploits the narrative situation in the intradiegetic–homodiegetic narrative, also known as the first-person narrative. To Genette (1980, 257), a post-modernist narrator refers to a narrator who performs an extra narrative function that "addresses to the reader, the organisation of the narrative by means of advance notices and recalls, an indication of source, memory-elicited attestation". Such a narrator, according to Genette (1980, 258–259), seems to do this to achieve several effects.

Genette (1980, 229) also identifies several narrative levels with a "view to accounting for narratives within narratives where a character from one narrative can be a narrator in a second narrative". According to Genette (1980), the term "diegesis" denotes a story or narrative according to which it can be shown: if a narrator occupies a position outside

the events of the primary narrative (extradiegetic); if she/he is involved in the story events (intradiegetic); or if, as an intradiegetic narrator, she/he reports on the events at a deeper level of embedding (metadiegetic). Here, Genette (1980) is at pains to state that the diegetic level refers to the main story, and that the metadiegetic is the secondary story that is narrated by one character in the narrative. This metadiegetic narrational strategy is a strategy on its own, as explained below.

The term “diegesis” refers to the narrating of the story. However, Herman, John and Ryan (2005, 107) acknowledge that diegesis has two meanings, which originate from ancient Greek:

- it refers to a story; and
- it is the manner of narration; it is the telling of the story.

The metadiegetic narrative, Genette (1980, 232) maintains, consists of an action done by a character in the primary narrative, who tells a secondary narrative that is embedded in the primary narrative. This method of narrating goes back to the origins of epic narration. Genette (1980, 232) also points out that there is a connection relationship between the primary and the metadiegetic narration. He states the functions of the relationship between the primary and the metadiegetic narratives as follows:

The first type of a relationship is direct causality between the events of the metadiegesis and those of the diegesis, conferring on the second narrative an explanatory function. The second type consists of a purely thematic relationship, thereby implying no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis. The third type involves no explicit relationship between the two story levels: it is the act of narrating itself that fulfils a function in the diegesis, independently of the metadiegetic content – a function of distraction, for example, and or of obstruction. (Genette 1980, 232)

In the article, key passages from the text are analysed following qualitative and interpretative methods. The analysis favours theoretical foundations and provides fewer opinions about the text. This aims to identify the employed narrational strategies and also to highlight the plight of the main characters and their struggles under oppressive and exploitive conditions in which the story is set.

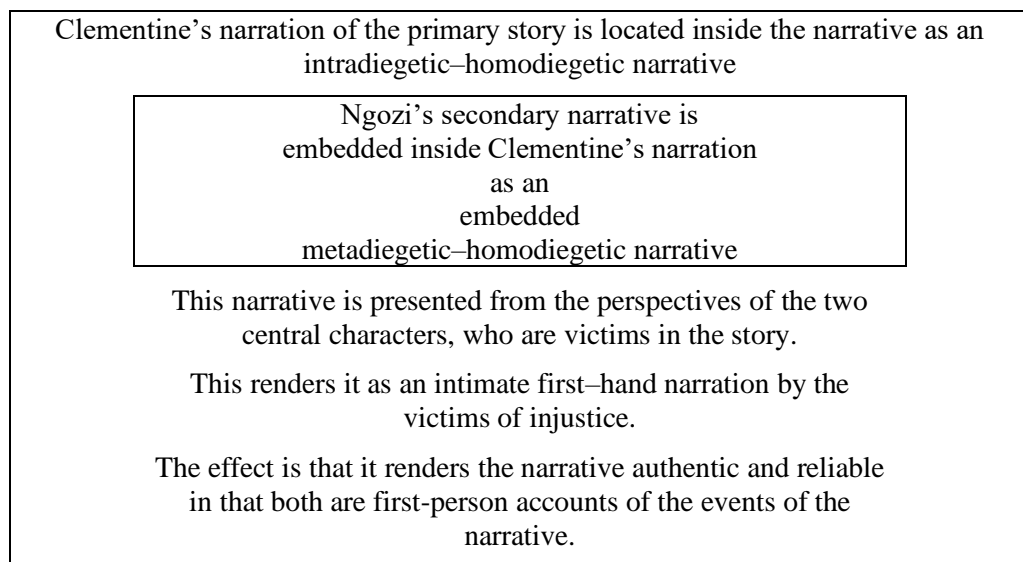
## The Generation of Meaning and Sympathy for Specific Characters and Events in the Text through Narrational Strategies

Langa’s *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones* (1996) follows the thoughts of the protagonist, Clementine. She is orphaned and confined to a reformatory along with her sister, as if they are juvenile criminals. She recalls painful memories of incidents on Visser’s farm, which led to the deaths of her parents. Her father, Simeon Ngozi, died at the hands of the police and her mother died from grief after his death. These incidents caused Clementine and her twin sister, Benedicta, to become orphans.

An approach to the story by the narrative theories of Genette (1980, 1988) and Bakhtin (1981) befits the text. These theories help to identify and discuss various narrational strategies and the narrative voices employed to produce and communicate meaning. This varies from the relatively simple to the highly complex narrational forms and voices.

The primary character narrator and the secondary character narrator are identified to show which strategies they deploy and the way in which they generate meaning and sympathy for specific characters and events. This manifests from the plight of the main characters and their struggles under oppressive and exploitive conditions, as revealed through the analysis of the story.

In the story, the two main narrators are Clementine and her father, Simeon Ngozi. They recount their individual experiences. This highlights that more than one character recounts parts of the story. Although Clementine is an intradiegetic–homodiegetic character narrator, Ngozi is embedded inside Clementine’s narrative as an intradiegetic–metadiegetic character narrator in a *mise en abyme* framework. This is presented in Diagram 1.



**Diagram 1:** *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones* (1996)

Diagram 1 shows Clementine’s primary narration situated inside the story at the intradiegetic level. She narrates her own tale. Ngozi’s metadiegetic narrative is internal to the events narrated by Clementine. His narrative is consequently embedded inside Clementine’s main story.

Clementine and Ngozi exemplify Genette’s (1980, 213) explanation that the person in the narrating instance is not only “the person who carries out or submits to the action,

but also the person (the same or another) who reports it, and, if need be, all those people who participate, even though passively, in this narrating activity". Narration here is therefore performed by two characters.

As the primary character narrator, Clementine's intradiegetic–homodiegetic narration becomes evident when she narrates her experiences at the orphanage:

They call me Clementine, here, although that is not my real name. . . . This is a home that is something between a reform school and an orphanage. . . . It was Papa who went first; Mama didn't die in the way that people die and are made one with the groaning earth. When she lost her baby – I understood this much, much later – to the shock of Papa's death, all light left her eyes; she would stare at the walls of our homestead. The social workers came and took her to a place for the people who can no longer be responsible for their actions. Her mind had taken the long, returnless journey into the very jaws of oblivion. (Langa 1996, 1–2)

Clementine suggests that the school she attends is, for her, a jail rather than an orphanage. She narrates the incidents that led to her being taken there after her parents' death. She also describes the trauma caused by the way they died.

Her father, Simeon Ngozi, is the secondary character narrator. This renders him homodiegetic–metadiegetic, meaning that he is present as a character in the secondary narrative that he narrates at the metadiegetic level. This is evident when he tells his family about his work and the treatment that he and his fellow workers received from Skotnes, a new manager at the farm:

Since Baas Visser got that stupid Skotnes boy to take care of the culling and dipping of cattle, nothing has ever gone right. That boy carries on like a regular slave-driver. I have never liked him, anyway with a face like the underbelly of a crocodile. He calls those men from prison kaffirs. (Langa 1996, 4)

Ngozi describes Skotnes' racist behaviour and disrespectful attitude towards him and other workers, which undermine their well-being and morale. His narration condemns the abuse of the farm workers and sympathises with them in the fictional world.

In Genette's terms (1980, 258), Clementine and Ngozi use the narrative situation to recount their experiences. This allows them the freedom to address the intended reader, to organise their narratives, and to portray the world and other experiences from their own perspectives.

Ngozi's employment at the metadiegetic level highlights his relationship with the events in the story. As a character in the story, according to Genette's (1980, 231–232) explanation, Ngozi occupies the position of a "character within the first narrative to tell a second narrative that is embedded in the actual narrative". Genette (1980, 231–232) observes that there is a relationship between the primary and the metadiegetic narrations

brought about by these polyphonic, multiple narrational strategies since they connect the levels of narration in three possible ways as outlined in the theoretical approach.

The first type establishes a direct causality between the events, whereas the second is a purely thematic relationship. These two dominate the story. The direct causality occurs when Visser dies during a hunt and Ngozi is wrongly blamed for his death. The police arrive and take him to the exact spot where Visser disappeared so that he too can die; this implies that the police murdered him. After Ngozi's death, his wife also dies. This results in the children, Clementine and her twin sister, being sent to the orphan reformatory – a place where they are treated like juvenile criminals since their father is suspected of killing Visser. The metadiegetic story provided by Ngozi is linked to the primary narrative provided by Clementine. This reveals direct causality between the two through their personal experiences:

I got around the thicket and he went his way. I could not see him, then, the place is dense. After a moment, I heard the loud crack of the riffle, then there was a silence then there was a scream. . . . Mevrou Visser came into the house, screaming, 'Waar's my man? Waar's my man?' and the white policemen – who were certainly the only reassuring faces Mevrou Visser saw. . . . the policemen handcuffed my father . . . steered him out of the house into the waiting Land Rover. (This is not exactly an arrest; we just want him to show us the spot, all right?) . . . Mama lost the baby that night; papa lost his life. (Langa 1996, 8)

They took us away instead. (Langa 1996, 9)

This is a home that is something between a reform school and an orphanage. (Langa 1996, 1)

The above extracts relate numerous events drawn from different parts of the story. They show Ngozi's ill treatment at the hands of Visser and later by the police. During the hunt, Visser leaves the group and goes his own way, which leads to his death, because he disregards Ngozi's advice as he does not respect Ngozi. The police arrive with Visser's wife and blame Ngozi for Visser's death. Ngozi is taken away to die on the spot where Visser disappeared. This results in the death of Ngozi's wife from grief. In the end, the death of Clementine's parents results in her and her twin sister being treated as juvenile criminals when they are sent to the orphan reformatory.

The second type, the thematic relationship, emerges from the treatment of Ngozi's family by their employers and the police. All the elements in the story, including the narrational strategies, contribute to the central theme, which includes exposing the racist behaviour of the white employers and the brutality of the police towards the Ngozi family. It is also evident in the treatment of Clementine and her sister. They are treated like criminals for a crime that neither they nor their father committed, as shown in the extract above. These two narrative devices contribute directly to the main theme of injustice in the story. Clementine narrates her version of events, which demonstrates

that the apartheid government mistreated her for crimes that neither she nor her twin sister, nor even their father, committed.

The living conditions of the characters that emerge from the narrators' narratives provide direct insight into the hardship and misfortune of the family. This emphasises the injustice to which Africans working on white farms under apartheid were subjected. The condemnation of this situation is the central element of the story. Clementine presents herself as an unhappy orphaned child with a bleak future. She will not live much longer since she is being targeted by the police, and she is threatened if she makes any mistake. On the other hand, from Clementine's perspective, Ngozi does not appear to be happy. He is akin to a tool or a cog in a machine that can be replaced by someone else. In reality, he lacks happiness, freedom and equality. Ngozi does not live much longer since he is targeted by his white employers and the police and threatened if there was any misstep.

The decision to deploy Clementine as an intradiegetic–homodiegetic narrator is manifested in the way she represents her narrative by using the first-person pronoun "I" for both her narrating and experiencing self. Clementine's narrating "I" is the voice that tells us about the past: "They call me Clementine, here, although that is not my real name; but . . . I don't own a single thing here" (Langa 1996, 1). Her experiencing "I" is also the person performing this narration.

Clementine's narration produces sympathy for her plight. She tells of her personal experiences at Visser's farm and the treatment of her father, presenting these events only from her perspective. This is possible because she has knowledge and experience of events and situations, not only of her own, but also those of her family, including her father, mother and others. She narrates the present and past experiences of her younger and older narrating "I" to cope with her realities. It enables her to recall the circumstances of her parents' deaths. It also exposes the indifference of the police to her father's death and condemns their brutality. Instead of investigating Visser's disappearance and death at the mysterious place on the mountain, the police want Ngozi to pay with his life for a crime he did not commit. They achieve this, regardless of the immoral actions of Gert Visser, namely, his vicious hunting practices and the exploitive working and living conditions of his employee, Simeon Ngozi. When hunting, Visser does not follow basic hunting rules and practices and he ignores Ngozi's advice "to approach our quarry from the other end, out of the wind. He goes straight in, keeping to the left. I got around the thicket, and he went his way" (Langa 1996, 8). This endangers Ngozi's life and results in Visser's death, for which Ngozi is blamed.

This registers sympathy for Clementine and the other characters in the story, as seen in the following extract when she speaks about the orphanage:

This is a home that is something between a reform school and an orphanage. There are some pretty tough kids here: and the sisters are quick to punish for infringements like wetting the bed or using bad language. Benedicta and I are sixteen years old this year,



and it is close to Christmas. This place is pleasant, though, despite the unexpected punishments. Everyone (the sisters, that is) seems to be fighting a war to make us forget what happened in the past, the events that brought us here. Many other children here have many tales to tell. We eat a lot, more, in fact, than back home, but Benedicta and I are increasingly – daily getting thinner and thinner. I guess food can never be a substitute for what the spirit hankers after. It is all very simple: we miss our parents. I can't understand why this knowledge escapes the sisters and the Matron especially, since they are holy and knowledgeable and highly cultured people. (Langa 1996, 1–2)

Clementine also describes the conditions at the reformatory school. She longs to live with her parents, who are both dead. She then narrates how she and her sister ended up in the orphanage. This links to the traumatic events recounted by Ngozi given the evidence that he suffered horrible abuses and affects Clementine's mental health.

As an intradiegetic–homodiegetic narrator, Clementine is close to the events in the story, making it possible for her to provide direct access to her thoughts and those of other characters. For instance, she reveals Ngozi's thoughts as he reflects on his living and working conditions and his treatment at the hands of his employers and the police. Through her narrative, Clementine reveals Ngozi's feelings about his work and his concern for his safety and fate as a farm worker. He experiences events and situations as a victim of injustice. Throughout, Clementine maintains an authoritative, trustworthy and reliable narrative, which registers sympathy for Ngozi and other characters, including Clementine herself. At the same time, she describes Ngozi as a dignified, loving father and husband:

My father was perhaps the most handsome man I have ever seen. Whether he was in tattered overalls or his Sunday best, he managed – God knows how, because I knew how harried he must have been – to look as unruffled as ever. He had that detached air of someone perpetually preoccupied, someone wrestling with something deep and unutterably strangling. He must have loved Mama very much. That one evening, for instance, Papa was on the verandah, cleaning his master's guns. To me, they looked like the rifle that was so much part of the guard who strutted arrogantly, on horse-back. (Langa 1996, 3)

When Ngozi recounts his metadiegetic story, it highlights that Clementine is not the only narrator in the text. This can be seen when Clementine offers Ngozi a chance to speak about his experiences, his living and working conditions, and the way in which he perceives himself and the world around him. The events that Ngozi narrates have a completing and explanatory thematic function that is distinct from but related to Clementine's homodiegetic narration.

Another narrative aspect that is profoundly highlighted in the story, is Ngozi's thoughts. Access to his thoughts is given when he thinks about his work with Skotnes and his worries about his safety and fate as an employee living on Visser's farm. This stems from his experiences, which show how he perceives himself and his situation. Ngozi's use of the metadiegetic and *mise en abyme* narrational strategies in his metadiegetic

account becomes evident when Clementine allows him to express his thoughts. This entails a succession of events in his life represented in numerous parts of the story to highlight the escalating tensions between him and his employers:

I figure someday very soon we're going to have to leave this farm. I'm up to here with the way things are happening around here. . . . since Baas Visser got that stupid Skotnes boy to take care of the culling and dipping of cattle, nothing has ever gone right. That boy carries on like a regular slave-driver. I have never liked him, anyway, with a face like the underbelly of a crocodile. He calls those men from prison kaffirs. Kaffir this, kaffir that! (Langa 1996, 4)

Today we drove to the hardware store to get the plough-share sharpened. On the way we saw a big snake crossing the road, leisurely. It must have been a rinkhals, and you know how dangerous those type is. I thought that Skotnes boy would wait until the snake had slithered into the grass, or even to avoid it. You think he'd do the sensible thing? But no. He swerved to run over the snake. I don't know whether he succeeded in hitting it or not, but that doesn't matter, you just don't do a damn fool thing like that with a rinkhals, or with any snake, doesn't this boy have some sense! . . . he said get out and push the blerry van. . . . on our return, he said he'd certainly report me to Baas Visser. (Langa 1996, 5)

I left this morning, . . . with Baas Visser to our usual hunting spot in the mountain. It is very rocky, this hunting spot, and full of treacherous precipices. 'We have to be careful Baas,' I told the Baas . . . but, then, he told me he had been hunting on these since he was this high. . . . And then saw a bush buck darting out of a thicket into a clearing in the woods. I gave him his .303, and he told me that the bush buck would be heading our way, it seems like something startled it, for it soon bolted right back into the woods, some distance away. Baas Visser motioned for me to be stealthy as possible and try to approach our quarry from the other end, out of the wind. He went straight for it, keeping to the left. I got around the thicket, and he went his way. I could not see him, then, the place is dense. After a moment, I heard the loud crack of the rifle, then there was a silence then there was a scream. (Langa 1996, 7–8)

The passages complement Clementine's statement about her father being a dignified and caring person. The employers do not treat him with respect and have a racist attitude towards him, whereas he respects them. First, Skotnes endangers Ngozi's life by running over a snake with his car. When Ngozi protests about being mistreated, Skotnes threatens to dismiss him. On the hunt, Ngozi shows that he cares about his employer, Visser. However, Visser does not listen to Ngozi's advice and guidance. This resulted in his death due to his reluctance to follow safe hunting practices.

During the story, Clementine speaks alone for long periods, and her discourse is "artistically represented". Her voice is that of the speaking person in Bakhtin's (1981, 332–333) terms, and she is what makes the story, *The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones*, a story. Clementine has a role in articulating the story's implied meaning, as well as in inserting other characters' speech into the discourse through dialogue quotations,

paraphrasing and referencing. From the evidence provided, Clementine's narrating role compares to what Bakhtin (1981) dubs a living person. She achieves this narrating activity because she talks about what others say, which Bakhtin (1981, 337) sees as transmitting, recalling, weighing, and passing "judgement on other people's words, opinions, assertions, information; people are upset by others' words, or agree with them, contest them, refer to them and so forth". Clementine's speaking voice is sustained throughout the story, as she narrates events and the lived situations of the characters, including her own.

Clementine's narration at the deeper level of the story incorporates other voices, which allows her to produce a multi-vocal discourse containing dialogues that characters enter into the narrative, and which are emphasised. Some of these characters also assume the role of narrating events from their own perspective, which results in the narrative being multi-voiced and dialogical. Ngozi's secondary narrative corresponds with Bakhtin's dialogical requirement because his dialogues with Clementine recount stories of his typical working days at Visser's farm. In this regard, Ngozi's narrating role enables him to be identified as a secondary character narrator, which delivers a polyphonic narrative of multiple voices. Bakhtin (1981, 335) refers to this as a narrative that "presents other . . . characters for whom the role of narration is assumed by them".

## Conclusion

Langa's short story applies multiple narrational strategies and transforms his fiction using characters who narrate and bring the story to life in a Bakhtinian polyphonic mode. Evidence from the text reveals that the first-person character narrators use intradiegetic-homodiegetic and intradiegetic-metadiegetic strategies. This makes the narrative strategy heterodiegetic, because more than one narrator narrates in the narrative. Consequently, the narrators of this multi-voiced text relate their intersecting individual experiences. For example, Clementine recalls painful memories of incidents on Visser's farm. It is evident from the narrators' accounts that their narrational strategies function to highlight the plight of the main characters and their struggles under oppressive and exploitive conditions in apartheid South Africa.

In addition, using alternating narrators demonstrates the polyphonic nature of Langa's fiction. Presenting narratives from different perspectives provides a variety of views about the characters, events, situations and living conditions of the personages. The polyphonic quality of these narratives conforms to Bakhtin's multi-voiced dialogical conception of the novel and Genette's complex and detailed anatomy of the narrational strategies in fictional narratives.

The key takeaway from this article is that narrational strategies are one of the simplest ways to read a story for its meaning and to enhance understanding. This approach distances itself from the old practice dominating South African literature by which

stories are still being read for their themes and characters as one way of gathering generated meanings, as was the case with Langa's fiction.

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