

**The Father's Absence as Narrative Condition: A Genettean Reading of Intermezzo**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the formal representation of grief and emotional dispassion in Sally Rooney's Intermezzo (2024) using Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse. Previous work explored Rooney's engagement in sociocultural realism, intimacy and millennial affect; temporality focalization and voice have mediated her representations of loss with less attention. Reconceptualizing Intermezzo as a narrative through the five categories that shape Narratology (order, duration, frequency, mood, voice) allows us to show how silences, ellipses, analepses and iterative memory not only thematize absence but also represent it in structural terms. Intermezzo is anchored within current narratological discourse on fragmented narratives that represent inner emotional states. Elaborating upon Rooney's reimagining of form as a textualization of private mourning offers a methodological bridge to approaching affect theory and structural narratology, while advancing important refinements to post-realist narrative strategies in the twenty-first century.*

**Keywords:** discourse, duration, frequency, fragmented, Gérard Genette, mood, narrative, order, voice.

**INTRODUCTION**

In modern fiction loss, alienation, absence is not expressed in elaborate speech acts but in the form, through silence, ellipses, divided focalization. This continues into Intermezzo (2024), the fourth novel by Sally Rooney. Instead of the dialogic immediacy of Conversations with Friends or the depersonalized multilayering of Normal People, the novel's fragmented style attempts to do justice to what it is like to be a subject in suspension, though intimacy, class and communication have been the most commonly identified features of Rooney's writing. Narrative temporality and focalization, however have received less critical attention. This gap invites a narratological re-examination of Rooney's work through Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse, which conceptualizes how order, duration, frequency, mood and voice structure meaning and emotional resonance.

Scholars investigating Rooney have primarily emphasized her sociocultural realism and her depiction of millennial affect (McCarthy 2023; Greaves 2024). There is a limited amount of scholarship that exercises structural narratology in relation to her later fiction. As contemporary writers increasingly disrupt time and employ a layered mode of consciousness to convey grief and mental fragmentation, revisiting Rooney through Genette's framework is timely and necessary. This paper thus serves a critical function in contributing to that absence in scholarship by demonstrating how narrative form itself enacts mourning, the way the father is shown absent in Intermezzo is inscribed not in what is told but in how it is told.

The originality of this investigation resides in the connection between Genette's formal categories and the discourse of affective realism, whereby structural absences in time (i.e., analepsis, ellipsis, iterative memory) are functioning as emotional correlatives of grief. By foregrounding a textual close reading, alongside theoretical precision, this investigation draws both narratology and affect theory into a shared interpretive frame. In this instance, this paper argues that Rooney's *Intermezzo* is reconfiguring the boundaries of Genette's narratological categories that translate the experience of grief into the narrative architecture itself transforming temporal fragmentation, focalization and moments of silence into a structural realization of absence/loss.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To provide a context for this inquiry, *Intermezzo* must be located in reference to the contemporary narratological and recent work on narrative form. Previous scholarship has focused on Rooney's concern with intimacy, social alienation and millennial affect, but none has systematically considered how her narrative form. Specifically in terms of temporality, focalization and voice mediates experiences of grief. Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse offers a rigorous framework for addressing this analytical gap, as Genette's categories provide clarity for identifying the narrative techniques that encode or express psychological and emotional states. To make way for a fuller analysis of *Intermezzo*, this literature review will take stock of recent applications of Genette's five categories of analysis: order, duration, frequency, mood and voice in both literary and cross-media analyses. With this review, the aim is to demonstrate both the utility of structural narratology and generate a critical basis for reading Rooney's new and innovative consideration of the themes of absence, loss and mourning in *Intermezzo*.

Recent scholarship in narratology has validated and reclaimed Gérard Genette's framework, as one of the more flexible approaches to studying contemporary fiction, especially when analyzing fiction that destabilizes boundaries around form, temporality and affect. Genette outlined five categories or components: order, duration, frequency, mood and voice, all of which affect how narratives translate experience. Ivana Buljubašić returns to Genette to reconsider his strategy regarding the paratext, which varies in relevance when considering digital and postmodern approaches to literature and a changing field. She notes that the "paratext" (titles, forewords, interviews) is what we can think of as a "zone of transaction" between texts and readers, framing reader responses and interpretation long before narratives begin (Buljubašić 17).

This idea of a "zone of transaction" is useful when thinking of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*, particularly given its minimal title, cover and the lack of expanded jacket copy. Together, they are aligned to be in line with the paratextual approach described by Genette, where the paratext "mediates, rather than announces, meaning." Rooney's straightforwardness and withholding of explicit commentary in manner represent a paratext which silences, inviting interpretation as Buljubašić suggests.

The temporal categories set up in Genette's theory: order, duration and frequency have circulated in contemporary narratological scholarship to examine how narrative time is elastic. Özgür Yılmazkol and Nilüfer Pembecioğlu's article on the television series *Manifest* uses Genette's temporal triad to demonstrate how posthuman narratives exploit sequences and repetitions to create turmoil in linear temporality (Yılmazkol and Pembecioğlu 135). Their article is indicative of how Genette's distinctions between analepsis and prolepsis extend from print fiction into multimodal storytelling. The same movement informs Moussa Ahmadian and Leyli Jorfi's analysis of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," where they show that temporal disorder operates not only as stylistic fragmentation but as dramatization of the protagonist's psychological dislocation (Ahmadian and Jorfi 112). Such readings shed light on how temporal

manipulation shapes an entry point to affect an argument that is important for examining *Intermezzo*, where the brothers' surreal fragmentations of memory of their father tracks Genette's disruptions of time.

Pedagogical articles, like the one by Fadhlan Ramadhan, Sulastri, and Rima Devi in the *Journal of Interstate Languages and Linguistics*, support Genette's continued usefulness. The authors' teaching model demonstrates the way these five categories can clarify narrative technique, across genres, shifting the structural awareness of readers and writers alike. Likewise, the article "Narratological Analysis of Temporality in Novel" in the *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, stresses Genette's utility for mapping a distortion and duration of story-time, particularly in modern fiction's reflexive orientation towards time. Both articles confirm that Genette's distinctions in the temporal continuum, especially scene, summary, ellipsis and pause etc., continue to shape experience in contemporary narration.

With this context in mind, *Intermezzo* is an exceptional site for Genettean inquiry. Rooney's novel is developed through what Genette would describe as a limited or restricted focalization. Readers only inhabit the consciousness of Peter and Ivan in short fragments. The novel presents a narrative mood that wavers between internal focalization and zero focalization, while revealing and withholding emotional interiority. This is compatible with Eman Helmy Abdel Aal Mohamed and others argument that Genette's categories of mood and voice can include the "subtle interplay of empathy and distance" (Mohamed et al. 47), in Ishiguro's crafting of fiction. Rooney, like Ishiguro, creates a mediated subjectivity that defers emotional closure, a gesture of narrative restraint, which perfects affective minimalism of her style.

The category of "voice," as Genette defines as the narrator's relation to story, has also been reconsidered by contemporary critics. In a study out of Indonesia by Zahro and Indrastuti, Genette's genre taxonomy of voice is utilized to investigate how shifts in tense and pronoun can reshape reader epistemic stance or ethics (Zahro and Indrastuti 60). In terms of *Intermezzo*, this allows us to see how Rooney's alternating third person sections produce an empathy and estrangement rhythm in her work. The neutral quality of the narrator what Genette refers to as a non-intrusive heterodiegetic narration invited the emotional located/undercutting as an equation of rhythm as opposed to revelation of grief.

Throughout recent scholarship, there has been a continual focus on the ways Genette's narratology engages with newer theoretical paradigms. Both Abbott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* and Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* retain Genette's five categories of narrative time as a course of analysis while introducing the postclassical concepts such as cognitive frame and reader response (Abbott 96). Fludernik's *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* similarly develops Genette's structuralism into a model that recognizes experiential realism, and offers a phenomenological suggestion that narrative time and perspective are not only literary but embodied (Fludernik 28). Such developments have led scholars like Currie, Jahn and Lothe to comment on Genette's models of narrative as more like "living grammars" of narrative, that adapt to cultural forms.

In the case of *Intermezzo*, this kind of theoretical pluralism seems necessary. Rooney's prose does not engage in explicit structural experimentation, but operates through what Genette may call subtle modulations of duration concentrating the events of months of psychological withdrawal into summaries of a few sentences, then expanding moments of silence into textual pauses of several sentences or pages. These methods are similar to the affective temporality of mourning, in that time both stops and speeds up. TEXTUAL TURNINGS (2019) observes that Genette's duration category "turns temporal rhythm into a measure of emotional intensity" (54). At these moments in Rooney's narrative, the stretching of time during scenes of inaction or recollection of memory is exactly that kind of stretching time.

Furthermore, Genette's distinction between story time and narrative time provides a criticism of the treatment of absence in the narrative. The brothers' choppy circular memory of their father, atoms and timelessness, to oscillate between past and present is Genette's definition of anachrony, knitting together time layers that break out of linear sequence. This type of anachrony is symptomatic of the psychological unproductiveness of grief, making *Intermezzo* a narrative of emotional recursion rather than fiction. The analysis demonstrates why Genette's categories for formal interpretation remain absolutely necessary even with the advances of postclassical narratology.

Recent discussions in narratology also emphasize the ways in which Genette's ideas might align with newer frameworks like cognitive narratology, unnatural narratology and affect theory. Researchers like Richardson, Bernaerts, Hühn, Nünning and Alber have modified Genette's labels to analyze what they call "unnatural" narration that breaks mimetic sense. While Herman, Ryan and Kukkonen, are reframing narratology as a model of reader cognition. In this hybrid space, Genette's logic is less a tightly defined system, but more like a heuristic a flexible vocabulary for explaining how narrative structures mediate consciousness, feeling and time.

From this perspective, the novel's pared down structural features, which include muted conversation, non-linear chronology and modulating inwardness, allow for exactly the kind of time and focus breakdown that Genette pioneered. By controlling the variable of duration and the variable of focalization, Rooney makes silence into narrative content and her writing shows us that Genette helps us to continue to think about the thin boundaries of form and feeling that constitute twenty-first-century fiction, notwithstanding the fact that Genette was writing in a structuralist tradition.

In conclusion, the path of contemporary scholarship shows that Gerard Genette's narratology endures not as a closed system, but as a developing critical language. From its pedagogical applications (Ramadhan et al.) to its theoretical reformulations (Buljubašić; Fludernik; Richardson et al.), the framework is still essential in interpreting how texts like *Intermezzo* articulate and structure emotion through time, rhythm and voice. Rooney's more restrained narrative aesthetic becomes, then, a contemporary performance of Genette's principles not just an intermezzo in sound, but perhaps an intermezzo in narrative temporality itself

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper builds directly on Gérard Genette's narratology, most significantly as expressed in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). Genette's model considers narrative in three overarching dimensions: time, mood and voice. Each of these elements can consist of further specific categories, such as Order (which evokes the sequence of events), Duration (the tempo or length of narration) and Frequency (the narration of events or their repetition), as well as mood/focalization (who sees, who perceives) and voice (who speaks, when they speak).

This study maps these categories to Rooney's text to illustrate how narrative structure shifts dialogue as the medium of mourning. Genette's model allows a reading of the text in which form itself becomes emotion and reflects grief as something that cannot be expressed in diegetic space through its fragmented time scheme, limited internal focalization and elliptical narrative voice. This study aims to reach an audience of contemporary literature, narratology and trauma studies scholars, as well as those who care about the shifting stylistic forms of grief depicting in post-2010s novelistic fiction. By intertwining structuralist theory with contemporary realism, this paper identifies how Genette's conceptions remain relevant for capturing how contemporary authors, like Rooney, narrate silence, loss and emotional disconnection.

This research aims to investigate how Gérard Genette's narratological framework, his concepts of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice, serve to explicate the representation of the father's absence in Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*. In particular, the study will analyze the technique's capacity to structure the emotional and temporal experience of loss; specifically, how the father's death is transformed from an event into a structural absence. By attending to narrative order and temporality, I will explore how Rooney manipulates time and perspective to tell a story about grief that is not only thematic but also part of the narratological and psychological structure. Accordingly, the study will be organized around two primary questions: How does *Intermezzo* use Genette's narratological categories to build a structural absence of the father that informs the narrative form and structure? and How does Rooney employ narrative techniques like perspective shifts and temporal absence to depict the characters' experience and meaning making around the absence of their father?

### **Materials and Methods**

This research uses a qualitative textual analysis based on the narratological model proposed by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980). Genette's model comprises five main categories: order, duration, frequency, mood and voice, presented as a means of analysis when studying how narrative form encodes the theme of absence. The reason for drawing upon Genette's theory is the precision with which it identifies the ways in which structural manipulations of time and point of view evoke emotional and psychological states. For the purposes of this study, *Intermezzo* is treated as a literary discourse because, in its orchestration of form, it too stages meaning and is not simply a container of meaning.

The primary text is *Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney (Faber & Faber, 2024), specifically Part One, in which the death of the father and its implications are introduced. This part is chosen on the basis that it is where the most potent examples of narrative fragmentation, the dislocation of time and shifts in focalization can be located. Additionally, all textual evidence reviewed in this paper comes directly from the published text, unaltered and remains unmoderated and respectfully.

The analysis takes place in three steps, first step is the Identification of Narrative Elements: Each quote is examined to see the temporal and structural characteristics, whether it is analyzed as analepsis (flashback), ellipsis, iterative frequency or some mode of focalization or narrative voice. Temporal axes include order (the sequence of events), duration (the length of narrated periods) and frequency (how often an event is reported). By mapping fabular time onto the narrative timeline, Genette can identify techniques such as analepsis (flashback) and prolepsis flash-forward (Steinby)

The second step is Categorization according to Genette's categories: The excerpts are organized by Genette's five categories of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice, illustrating how formal mechanisms illustrate the absence of the father. The third step is Interpretive synthesis: Finally the excerpts are discussed thematically, connecting narrative disruptions (that is, withholding the chronology or quickly noting grieving scenes) with the emotional logic of mourning. Ultimately the goal is to show how Rooney's formal decisions make the narrative perform absence in which grief is experienced as a disruption of time and perception. The reliability of the study rests in the reproducibility of close reading. A researcher, utilizing the same theoretical constructs, would apply categories from Genette to the same markers from the text, ultimately arriving at similar structural observations. The interpretive limit is justified through a theoretical foundation and secondary criticism within the field of narratology and contemporary fiction.



## **DISCUSSION**

### **Narrative Order (Deferred Revelation and Temporal Displacement)**

Genette treats narrative as a multi-layered discourse in which the fabula (the story's chronological events) is distinct from the syuzhet (the order of presentation) and from the act of narration itself (Steinby). Genette defines order as the relationship between the order of events in the story (histoire) and the order they are presented in narrative (récit). In *Intermezzo*, Rooney disrupts this linear order and begins after the father's death, placing the reader directly in its aftermath rather than the event itself. The text opens, "Eleven or is it twelve days since the funeral, back in town" (Rooney 3). Both the character and the reader is effectively disorientated, when time is unclear, the event that is referred to (the funeral into which they are both presumably going) has already happened and emotional apprehension becomes disconnected from chronology. Rooney's choice compels the reader to wait until after the referent effects (dislocation, withdrawal) until he provides the referent cause (the death). Genette calls this analeptic structure; here, the narrative does indeed take place in the past sense and forward in time, the means by which the reader will ultimately come to understand this event.

When Peter later responds to Naomi's teasing "Naomi, sweetheart, ... My dad died" (Rooney 3) the deferred revelation shatters the mundane flow of dialogue. Genette would call the anachronic rupture as a prior event intruding into present discourse belatedly. The cancellation of time works to not simply present grief as an 'event' complete in itself; it presents grief as a rupture in time: the character's inner chronology is no longer aligned with the time of the narrative. The father's death becomes a temporal absence, felt as a gap in the order of the narrative itself. Rooney's torquing of the linear order reflects how trauma resists a straightforward chronology. The past returns in ways that dis-organize forward progression in the narrative as well as the coherence of the person's psychological experience.

### **Duration (Compression, Ellipsis, and the Rhythm of Repression)**

Genette's categorie, 'duration' is defined as the speed of narrative discourse or how long a period of time takes events takes in narrative re-time. In this case, through ellipsis, Rooney works to depict grief not as an extended length of time, but by significant compressions of time of time. The opening marker of time "Eleven or is it twelve days since the funeral" (Rooney 3) collapses the funeral and its emotional aftermath into a single uncertain phrase. This brevity indicates a summary of narrative rather than a scene, compressing what would normally be the emotional core of a family narrative to a hastily added aside.

When Rooney does momentarily recall the funeral "At the funeral, she muttered to Peter: The cut of him ... He replied: Well, his appearance may not have been foremost on his mind this week" (Rooney 10) the description centers not on loss but on superficial social exchange. The emotional core of the event is also unreachable through irony. Genette designates this as ellipsis, which refers to the events that are left out or omitted because their emotional resonance is too overwhelming or inaccessible to narrate. Rooney increases narrative duration and mimics the rhythm of repression wherein grief becomes unnamed. The pacing of the narrative itself carries avoidance, functioning as protection from emotional exposure by forming time as a barrier. The father is doubly omitted; the father, as a person, is absent from the story, as is the duration of absence from the narrative.

### **Frequency (Iteration, Repetition, and the Language of Loss)**

Genette's idea of frequency is concerned with the number of times the event is narrated in relation to the number of times the event occurs. In *Intermezzo* the father's death is mentioned several times and while it

would be a unique event the repetition does not reconstitute the event or the understanding of emotion. Peter recalls, "And the man was no age, as everyone kept saying, sixty-five, that was all" (Rooney 10). The phrase "as everyone kept saying" denotes iterative narration, essentially the repetition of speech acts within the diegesis. While repetition does not close the narrative circle, it does narrow the father's view of his experience to a collective cliché, a line muttered by acquaintances rather than an acknowledgment of individual memory.

This repetition serves to construct what Genette may refer to as narrative frequency as a social ritual: the event becomes emptied through its repeated articulation as a shared sense of sadness. The father is increasingly distanced from authentic mourning with each reiteration of condolence or stock phrase, which ultimately substitutes ritualized speech for emotion.

Effectively, the father's death serves as a verbal refrain. Rooney employs this iterative narrative technique to demonstrate how contemporary grief often devolves into linguistic automation. This ultimately becomes a condition of absence that is sustained linguistically rather than emotionally; the father lives on as an echo rather than an essence.

### **Mood (Internal Focalization and Fractured Perception)**

Genette's category of mood or focalization, relates to "who sees" rather than "who speaks." Rooney's narrative closely aligns with Peter's perception, often collapsing the boundaries between the narrator's consciousness and Peter's own.

The line "He crosses Watling Street now towards the apartment that is not an apartment, the house that is not a house" (Rooney 1) exemplifies **internal focalization**. Peter's utilization of negation ("not an apartment... not a house") externalizes his emotional disconnection to a physical space. His outward setting mirrors his own mental disconnection; the actual place becomes unstable with losses, through the eyes of someone experiencing grief.

Later, Rooney intensifies this interiority through free indirect thought: "Next minute might die. Happens every day to someone" (Rooney 9). This moment holds Peter's internal thought with the grammatical construction of the narrator and creates what Genette calls variable internal focalization. Where the narrative voice slides easily, across the narrator and the character. The hovering notion creates an awareness of how grief warps vision: Peter cannot pull apart his consciousness from the universal banality of death. Everything in the world feels muted, with no intimacy. Therefore, Rooney uses mood to stage the phenomenology of absence, how grieving changes not what one sees but how one sees.

### **Voice (Embedded, Metadiegetic, and Simultaneous Narration)**

In Genette's theory of narrative voice refers to both the level and temporality of narration, who speaks and where they are narrating from. Rooney layers her narrative voice to indicate emotional distance. When Peter recalls, "He didn't know the first thing about me, Sylvia. We were allergic to each other" (Rooney 20), The utterance exists within another dialogue, Peter's dialogue with Sylvia resulting in a type of metadiegetic narration or a narration within a narration.

This creates another layer of distance for the father; he lives not in the moment of narration but as a story within the story that has been distilled through Peter's reactive language and presence. Each level of mediation re-stages emotional detachment and instead of being a recollection of memory, it becomes a story rather than a confession.

The future tense projection “he’ll say” illustrates what Genette calls simultaneous narration. The voice of narration co-existing within an imagined future utterance. The grammar further anticipates again the repetition of mourning, Peter practices the social performance of grief before it occurs. Voice here becomes both an echo and armor; to speak about the father to similarly prarock will replace his speaking to him. This allows Rooney to move Genette’s more abstract categorization into its emotional function, what becomes an overall structure of narration becomes a substitute for intimacy and language performs as a stand-in for her presence.

### **Synthesis (The Narrative Form of Absence)**

Across these temporal, modal and spatial categories, Genette’s dimension of narratology is dealing with performance of Order, Duration, Frequency, Mood and Voice allow the father mourning to transform from a narrative event to a narrative condition. The interrupted natural order reflects temporal shock; spectators and characters foregrounded within compressed duration create repression. Iterative frequency embodies social absence; internal focalizations mirror distorted perceptions and a layered voice effectually acts as emotional displacement. Each of these structural devices marks absence, here not as silence but rather form absence as the grammar of grief.

By shifting loss into a narratological concern, Rooney connects emotional and formal thinking in narrative discourse. The father dies but his death does not just get told, it gets enacted by how the narrative is told. In Genette’s terminology, *Intermezzo* moves the “story of mourning” into a “mourning of story,” in which even the boundaries of narration itself establish loss.

The father haunts the text not as memory but as structure: in withheld chronology, reduced scenes, habitual phrases modelling mourning and recursive presence. Rooney’s narrative does not restore coherency in the aftermath of death; it formally contains dislocation. Through Genette’s lens, *Intermezzo* emerges as a novel wherein the absence of the father is not only felt by the characters but in fact experienced by the readers in the fractured rhythms and oscillations of the narrative itself.

This research aimed to explore how Sally Rooney’s *Intermezzo* (2024) illustrates the absence of the father through the formal mechanisms of narrative structure instead of through direct narrative. The analysis of these narrative features used the narratological categories developed by Gérard Genette. The analysis using Genette’s criteria of order, duration, frequency, mood and voice evidences that Rooney’s fiction performs mourning at the level narrative discourse, rather than narrating mourning at the level of plot.

### **CONCLUSION**

The father’s death is disclosed only after its emotional impacts, which establishes a temporal displacement and analeptic delay that opens the narrative for the reader to experience disorientation similar to Peter’s feelings of disorientation. Ellie and compression compress phenomena of grief into minimal time frame, creating absence that is materialized in the form of structural void. Iteration narrates grieving collective platitude instead of grieving memories as belonging to the particular character; while internal focalization trivializes the reader’s experience, reaffirming the fragility of knowing loss in the mind of an individual. Finally, the layering of metadiegetic perspective distances the father, presenting the possibility of the father’s presence but only in the recollection and language as mediation. These results affirm the research aims: Rooney’s intervention within Genette’s categories creates a narrative ecosystem of absence in which grief acts as both theme and form. The research’s contribution to new pathways in narratology and contemporary fiction is to demonstrate how a structural approach can heighten, revise or complicate the



emotional experience in reading. This research also provides a model to examine in more contemporary narratives of loss and disconnection, how form enacts affect.

Future research can build on this model by comparing Rooney's stylistic decisions with those of other twenty-first-century writers employing temporal and focal disruptions to render emotional alienation, such as in the works of Rachel Cusk, Jenny Offill or Ben Lerner. Such work would further enrich the discourse around how contemporary literature differs in creating a formal representation of personal loss, revealing a sense that absence in itself is now one of the defining structures of modern narrative.

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