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Dr. Duneer

Introduction to Literary Study II

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Trusting the Reliable Narrator:

Narratological and Lacanian Perspectives on The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks

Rebecca Skloot, as the author of The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, has to overcome a great deal of presumption and quite a few obstacles to win/earn the trust, not only of the Lacks family, and in particular Deborah, Henrietta's daughter, but of the readers of the book itself. Skloot is, as were many members of the medical community who dealt with Henrietta and her family, white, educated and privileged. There are innumerable examples of African-Americans, and other underclass populations, that had been taken advantage of by the white, educated and privileged. The Lacks family, being among those taken advantage of, were well-versed in such stories. Rebecca Skloot is well-versed as well and brings this to the attention of the reader. She is laboring under the burden of history and must separate herself somehow from this baggage in order to tell the story. Is she worthy of the family's trust? Is she worthy of the reader's?

As the first step in her journey towards getting to the heart of the Lacks family, in order to

find who the actual, living, breathing Henrietta was, Skloot must pass a "gatekeeper" of sorts, Dr. Roland Pattillo. Dr. Pattillo knows all too well the history of black and white in America and knows what the Lacks family has been through. He does not want them to be taken advantage of, so he questions Skloot when she calls, his concerns immediate:

> For the next hour, Pattillo grilled me about my intentions. As I told him about the history of my HeLa obsession, he grumbled and sighed, letting out occasional *mmmmmmms* and *wellllllls.*
>
> Eventually he said, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you *are* white."
>
> "Is it that obvious?"
>
> "Yes," he said. "What do you know about African-Americans and science?" (50)

Obviously an African-American would not have been asked but Skloot must prove her bona fides. And she does, regaling Pattillo with her knowledge of the Tuskegee syphilis studies and the "Mississippi Appendectomies." After "three straight days of grilling," he finally gives her Deborah Lacks' phone number (51). Of course, it is not all smooth sailing from then on. The Lacks family is very suspicious, and rightly so. They have a well-founded wariness of someone in Skloot's position. They feel they have not been given their due. They have not been adequately informed as to what the HeLa cells actually are or what they are being used for. They have heard all sorts of stories, both real and fantastic, of cloning, of human-animal hybridization and worse. They've heard of "Night Doctors," stories that had been passed around since the 1800s about

African-Americans being kidnapped for research, stories that, while largely made up as scare tactics by slave owners, actually had some basis in fact (Skloot 165-66).

At this point in the book, it is Skloot's story. She is the not only the narrator of the book, but an internal character. In a Narratological sense, she is the focalizer, the character through whose point of view we are reading the story (Parker 73). And what is she viewing, what is the focalized? This changes throughout the book, starting with an investigation of who Henrietta Lacks, the human being, was and the history of the development of HeLa. Gradually, though, it becomes about the Lacks family dynamic, and even more specifically, Deborah Lacks and her need to know the truth of both her mother and HeLa. Deborah and Skloot have mutually dependent needs. Deborah needs Skloot for the truth (she needs "the truth" in every sense from Skloot in order to trust her) and Skloot needs Deborah for her story. The roles of focalizer and focalized are now not as clear-cut. They work both ways, a "shot/reverse shot" as in a film wherein we see one character's point of view and what they are observing (Parker 75). In this case, as in a dialogue scene, each character is the other's object of interest. So it is with Skloot and Deborah. Each is the focalizer and the focalized.

When we look at Deborah as the focalizer, we are seeing it within an embedded story, an internal story within the larger framing story. It is, as earlier noted, about Deborah's quest for the truth, but it is also very much about her relationship with Skloot. It is here where Skloot must establish her reliability, not only for the sake of her relationship with Deborah, but for the sake of her relationship with the reader. The reader needs to believe both the internal story *and* the framing story or none at all. As Robert Dale Parker explains:

> The frame or outside story, for example, might make us look at the inside story more skeptically, or the inside story might make us look more skeptically at the outside story. And if either wobbles, it can make the other wobble with it, sometimes setting off questions about narrative reliability. (69)

Skloot works hard to gain Deborah's trust. As Deborah overcomes her suspicion, so does the reader. Why? Because Skloot accepts Deborah's terms, all the way. She plays by Deborah's rules; she must, for Deborah has access to knowledge that Skloot needs. By the same token, Skloot has access to knowledge that Deborah needs. There is a *quid pro quo* at work; they need each other to achieve their mutual ends. For Skloot, it is the story. For Deborah, it is a healing and closure that can only be attained through the knowledge she seeks. Let us take a look at that for a moment.

Along with knowing about HeLa cells, and the fate of her sister Elsie in the Hospital for the Negro Insane, Deborah has one great need, her prime focalization, her *petit objet a*, as Jacques Lacan would have it. She is seeking a way to reconnect somehow with her mother. Henrietta Lacks died in 1951, Deborah was born in 1949. She never got a chance to know her mother or spend time in Lacan's Mirror Stage, which begins approximately six to eight months after birth. This is when the child "sees itself 'mirrored' back to itself in the reactions of its mother, the point is that the infant now develops during this stage a sense of itself as a whole rather than a formless and fragmented mass" (Tyson 27). Henrietta had spent so much of this time in the hospital, separated from Deborah, heartbreakingly and literally so, when she is forced to watch Deborah and her other children play from inside her hospital room window (Skloot 66). Deborah is denied the opportunity, not only to bond with her mother, but to develop this sense of self.

Because Deborah is denied this, she is never initiated into Lacan's Imaginary Order, a "world of fullness, completeness and delight," a period when "the child's feeling of connection with the mother is, for good or ill, its first and most important experience, and this primary dyad, or twosome, continues until the child acquires language" (Tyson 27). If the *petit objet a* is an attempt to recapture the Imaginary Order, what is it when the child is denied this order to begin with?

Deborah is trying to capture, not recapture, a connection with her mother and with it, a sense of self. Interestingly enough, in her pursuit, she forms a dyad with Skloot; a close bond that proves successful for both in their quests. (Interestingly, Deborah, as she seeks her wholeness, also seeks to acquire the language of science in the genetics textbook.)

Deborah feels her lack surrounding her. Her sense of her mother is all around her yet distant and unattainable. She feels that Henrietta is there somehow guiding or helping along events. And in a very real sense, Henrietta's cells are all around her. They are virtually everywhere, growing and expanding, used in ways that touches countless lives. And yet, Deborah cannot touch her mother back. The only way she can is by seeking the truth and Skloot seems to be the only one that can help her. But can she trust her? What will it take to know?

It all comes down to the pivotal scene in the hotel room, when Deborah makes Skloot promise not to use a specific word found in Elsie's autopsy report. Obviously the word is very important to Deborah: it involves her sister and her sister's horrendous treatment. No matter how involved and concerned Skloot is, she could never be as intimately involved. Throughout the story, Skloot has exposed the family's vulnerabilities; she never exposes her own. This scene ups the

stakes, makes it much more intimate for Skloot, who is the narrative "I" here:

> She [Deborah] sat down next to me and pointed to a different word in her sister's autopsy report. "What does this word mean?" she asked and I told her. Then her face fell, her jaw slack, and she whispered, "I don't want you puttin' that word in the book."
>
> "I won't," I said, and then I made a mistake. I smiled. Not because I thought it was funny, but because I thought it was sweet that she was protective of her sister. She'd never told me something was off-limits for the book, and this was a word I never would have included – it didn't seem relevant. So I smiled.
>
> Deborah glared at me. "Don't you put that in the book!" she snapped. (282-83)

Skloot swears, but it is not enough, not yet. Deborah accuses Skloot of working for Johns Hopkins. Perhaps, all along, Skloot was just another white, educated and privileged person coming to take advantage. Deborah physically assaults Skloot and it is not until Skloot gets angry, showing real human emotion, can Deborah trust her. Deborah needs to trust her and so does the reader. Skloot knows this. There is no narrative need to include this passage. If she never included the forbidden word, she would have kept her promise. Deborah would know and the reader would be none the wiser. The bond between the women would remain. But what of the bond between the author and the reader? Does the reader know he/she can trust Skloot? In a work of non-fiction, the reader needs that trust, needs to believe that he/she is reading the truth. But why? In the case of a textbook, there is an implicit assumption of truth. There are presumably boards of review, and

such, through which the textbook must pass. Even if there are falsehoods or inaccuracies, there are many opportunities for these to be corrected. In any case, no student would take it personally.

In a book such as The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, although it is non-fiction, the reader gets intensely, emotionally involved. Skloot brings us intimately into the Lacks' lives. We are privy to the incest, the abuses, the crimes, and we are made to care. If we were to find it all a lie, we would feel betrayed. And the Lacks family would be betrayed, yet again. Once Skloot has earned the trust of the family, she is obligated to present their story as honestly as she could (and, to her credit, without judgment). It may not have been her original intention, which was to learn and tell the story of HeLa and of the "woman in the picture." She could not have expected to get so intimately involved with the family, particularly Deborah, but this was the pact she had to make. Deborah made her promise to "tell *all* the Lacks story," then tells her "You got no idea what you getting yourself into" (Skloot 233). Neither does the reader.

Perhaps it is some kind of invasion of privacy, even if sanctioned by Deborah. Perhaps it is as invasive as what happened to Henrietta. But perhaps it was necessary to humanize the story, to make it come alive emotionally in order to touch lives, so readers would learn in a deeper sense what the cells have done, how they came to be, the cultural milieu in which they came to be, as well as all that came in their wake. The story is more than science; it is about human beings, actual living creatures. Just as Mary Kubicek, in the morgue, sees the chipped red polish on Henrietta's toenails and thinks, "*Oh jeez, she's a real person*" (Skloot 91), the readers realize that these are real human beings who lives had been deeply affected by the cells, the research and all that came with it. A textbook would not have brought this story to life.

This story, like Henrietta's cells, keeps spreading and continuing to teach. Along with the healing it brings – better understanding of past abuses, race relations, the healing of Deborah herself – it carries with it so much more. The HeLa cells were not a pure balm; in fact, it became a "bomb," contaminating other cells and damaging much research. Likewise, this book had to contain the less savory aspects, necessary to tell the whole story, at least as much as it is possible for one book to tell a whole story. It seems that Skloot did the best she could, presenting it as honestly as possible. For after much reflection, despite the inherent doubt and cynicism that is this reader's nature, the author has earned my trust.

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