

# An existentialist approach to the narrativisation of temporal predicaments in dilemma stories and vignettes

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## ABSTRACT

The institution of diversity in discourses by the postmodern condition and the infinity of interpretations that this entails, have challenged and in fact decentralized the notion of totality in dominant Western discourses. These have inevitably questioned the dominance of hegemonic narratives and thus renewed the call for fresh perspectives on the study of narratives. This study believes that a philosophical and a rhetorically based study of dilemma stories and vignettes (DSV) can adequately establish them as belonging to a narrative genre that is still alive worldwide rather than folklore relics in Africa and Asia. The study therefore attempts a generalised schema of DSV based on the premise that they are examples of intentional narratives that impose a cosmology of temporal possibilities in a rhetorical revelation of the world as a site for freedom. In this context, this study provides an existentialist hermeneutic of dilemma stories and vignettes within their fictive intelligence in order to analyze the themes and narrative techniques used by the stories to capture dilemma situations and possibilities in existential temporality. In doing so the study takes into account the contemporaneity of the genre and the growing global interest in the narrative as a means of understanding the human condition in general and in its specific or historical context.

**Keywords:** Reflective theorisation, existentialist hermeneutics, existential temporality, dominant discourses, subversive narrative techniques, matrix narratives, narrative parallelism.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing global interest in the narrative as a means of understanding the human condition in general and in its specific or historical context. This expansion of interest is found predominantly in human and social sciences that span fields like cognitive science, rhetoric, sociolinguistics, media studies, psychology, and philosophy (Elliot, 2005; Joerges, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988).

A growing number of overlapping methods result from the expansion of narratology into other domains. These methods sometimes enliven and sometimes challenge approaches to the study of narratives, quite often resulting in the revision of old methods, transfer of concepts from one field to the other and a general reconsideration of fiction within emerging new paradigms (Herman, 2000; Sommer, 2004).

Prominent among the several challenges that are emerging is the return of empirical studies to narratology. Narrative studies currently taking place in non-literary domains are mostly empirically based, as noted by Kindt and Schermus (2004: xii) and this may impoverish the status of current reflective theorisation in narratology:

*In literary narratology, as in most forms of literary theory and criticism, theories are constructed primarily on the basis of reference to particular canonical texts rather than using corpus analysis. That is to say, they have a selective rather than empirical basis. And, when our methods are applied in the context of such selective material, progressing rapidly from analytical description to building theoretical models seems not only*

*acceptable but positively desirable. Crossing so easily from the discourse of data to that of theory, however, cannot but seem unusual when we are working with empirical evidence.*

From the above observation garnered from recent practices, it appears there is a clear challenge to post structuralist meta-theoretical methods as a continual standard and a possible re-acceptance of empirical analysis if narratology is to remain relevant to all fields that it has expanded into.

Another important challenge apparent from the expansion of narratology is the conception of 'narrative' itself (Fludernik, 1996; Rimmon-Kenan, 2006). The traditional definition of narrative is increasingly being found wanting with the current reconsideration of narrative mediality. Hyvärinen et al. (2006) in a survey on how narrativity has fared with the expansion of narratology says, "The concept of narrative has become such a contested concept over the last thirty years in response to what is often called the "narrative turn" in social sciences". They further quoted the famous poser made by White (1980:24) to back up their observation:

*Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see "the end" in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicle suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude.*

As White laments, the predominant conception that is still struggling in the field centers on coherence or the assumption that narratives attempt a coherent (mostly in-depth) representation of events and experiences found in real life. Dilemma stories and vignettes (DSV) the subject of this study are examples of narratives that challenge this dominant concept of narrative as exhibiting coherence, integrity, and fullness in representing the world. They defy the notion of fullness and closure in most of their generic forms. Lack of denouement is used purposely within several contexts (e.g folkloric, education, radio shows) to initiate existential and philosophical debates wherein the abortive stories and often, rhetorical posers, are discussed and possible endings given to them.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study therefore is based on ontological hermeneutics, using existentialist ideology and discourse narratology to analyze DSV as a narrative genre as against their consideration as strictly folkloric. Library and archival materials have been used as its corpus. First, an extensive collection of stories from the works of early anthropologists (Bascom, 1975; Courlander, 1947; Skinner, 1969;

Jablow, 1961) has been made. This was followed by another collection of current stories used by researchers (Poundstone, 1992; Kohlberg, 1969; Grassian, 1992) and recent scripts used by radio stations (ABC Yola and Radio Kaduna) in Nigeria. The main purpose for the extensive collection is to collate and analyze a sizeable corpus that is representative of the various forms of DSV so as to attempt delineating the poetics of DSV as a literary genre.

The DSV under study are purely the hypothetical types that are commonly reported in folklore collection (Burton, 1870; Bascom, 1975; Skinner, 1969; Jablow, 1961), education (Grassian, 1992; Kohlberg, 1969), and social modelling exercises rather than those extensively illustrated in fictional novels and drama that do not elicit immediate dialogic sessions or introspection. The stories are usually short narratives, sometimes merely vignettes, used to illustrate dilemmas in life. Since the early collectors of the genre could not collect dialogic sessions that followed, some transcriptions from recent radio discussions have been analysed to illustrate dialogic sessions.

The philosophical approach to this study stems from the perceived fictive intelligence of DSV - that of creating a narrative plurality of possible worlds and a temporal cosmology of possible actions or choices. This perception stems from a metaphysical consideration of the link between fictively created worlds and the world occupied by existential agents based on the existentialist notion of intentionality in fictional creation.

DSV mostly attempt to capture temporal predicaments where choices are more pronounced than usual. The Latin prefix *di* (meaning two) applies only to the rhetorical aspect of the term but not to the existential usage of the word where possibilities (choices) in any situation are in excess of two or any number for that matter. As Oxford Dictionary (2005) explains, dilemma deals with problematic situations in which the need to make a choice becomes more pronounced than usual.

Existentialism proposes that reality is made of plurality of worlds that tallies with DSV narrative cosmology as evident by their general lack of denouement and the creation of ambiguous narrative space calculated to draw in existential agents to make choices. The term agent(s) will be used throughout this study in place of expressions like "human beings", "individuals", "persons" etc., as an enhanced term used generally in existentialist thought to suitably reflect the freedom and will of protagonists who are confronted with dilemmas or are regarded as resolution agents of DSV.

This study is also premised on the argument that the primary focus on existential predicaments and individualistic choice (that is, their cognitive value) could account for the survival, evolution and expansion of DSV up to present day. The genre holds out as distinct having characteristics that are similar to those used currently in education, ethics, and media and those that were used in traditional folkloric settings as documented by anthropologists (Bascom, 1975).

## RESULTS

It is clear from the study of the corpus that the early anthropologic studies, except Paul Goodman's pragmatic introduction to Jablow (1961) collection, have conceptual problem in which a narrative genre is considered as a folktale relic that belongs mostly to Asiatic and African peoples. On the contrary, DSV are universally used in education, social modelling, and entertainment across the world even today. Settings have undoubtedly changed as all cultural tools are bound to, but the genre has remained in both characteristics and functions.

Second, early studies also neglect the rhetorical imperative of dilemma narratives (which Yankah and Peek, 2004 regard as performative) that result in a totally heterodiagetic, authorial narrations where the narrator decides on the form of the dilemma narrative and the involvement of the authorial audience. Within that performative context, he can decide the protagonist who is facing a dilemma to be in the narrative and the audience to identify with that protagonist or make the audience the protagonist of the dilemma story and ask them for their resolutions. Rodriguez (1997) and Yankah and Peek (2004) observe that the narrator can even have a protagonist in the story resolve the dilemma, not necessarily to end a communicative turn in a dilemma resolution session, but to intensify a debate (e.g in Courlander and Herzog, 1947, Cowtail Switch).

Third and most importantly, early anthropologic studies fail to situate the stories in their fictive intelligence (the creation of a narrative plurality of possible worlds and a temporal cosmology of possible actions or choices), despite acknowledging their intellectual, cultural, legal, and educational roles. Dilemma stories deal with existential predicaments with varying degree of seriousness. They range from light-hearted themes that challenge values and norms to stark matters of life and death. Whether challenging norms or presenting protagonists in states of despair or danger, DSV especially attempt to portray the openness of existential temporality and focus on individuals as agents of existence with will and freedom.

DSV are not the only narrative genres that deal with existential predicaments. Much of the world's fictional literatures and many historical accounts could be said to be explications of the political, economic, social, technological, ethical, and existential dilemmas facing humankind. In introducing Jablow's "Yes/No: The Ultimate Folklore of Africa" (1961:12) Paul Goodman, the American writer, says that:

*In a novel of mine I propounded at considerable length – for about a quarter of million words – the following simple dilemma: “if you try to live in our crazy society, you will surely become demented. But if you withdraw from the only society that there is, you will be surely demented. What to do?”*

This condensation by Goodman shows how a work of fiction or a historical account or any contemporary exposition can be reduced semantically to a dilemma vignette. As an author can create a lengthy narrative from a concept like the one above, so can he also condense his narrative into a short form like a short story or vignette. In this context, the negotiation of temporal experience into a narrative depends on the intention of the narrator. Dilemma vignettes for instance are used as snapshots in presenting fragmentary scenes that focus on existential moments. This 'snapshot' technique is

appropriate in the narrativisation of temporal predicaments where being with all its emotivity is presented to agents for immediate resolution.

Unlike longer prose like novels however, DSV essentially capture temporal predicaments in a short narrative form in order to confront agents abruptly with a need to make choice through mostly a dialogic session. In such an argumentative session, awareness of individual freedom is heightened through reflective lucidity. Furthermore, DSV are characteristically concerned with the portrayal of an existential moment in which stark temporal moments are presented without the benefit of detailed inter-textual historicity that longer prose as novels afford.

In creating a narrative cosmology of predicament and possibilities, the stories use ambiguous narrative spaces with mostly dislocated beginnings and mostly abortive endings in their vignette forms. There is an intentional reduction of inter-textual knowledge in the stories so that resolution agents will have to rely on the extra-textual world to resolve presented dilemmas. This spectral moaning of a specific moment to the detriment of historicity and inter-textual knowledge is characteristic of most dilemma stories and vignettes.

Similarly, unlike other narrative genres that portray the openness of human reality, DSV elicit an immediate intrapersonal reflection or a dialogic session involving a passionate appropriation of existential possibilities by resolution agents. This resolution could be in a traditional fire chat setting as documented by anthropologists, a radio panel forum, a classroom in ethics, a narrative inquiry session for research or just an individual reading of the story in text form as can be possible in contemporary times. Although these settings apparently vary, what knit them together is their used of 'storied dilemmas' to challenge agents to take control of their lives. The abortive endings in dilemma stories constitute a leap into dialogic sessions where the stories continue to be alive as agents deliberate their possible endings from their individual perspectives.

It is therefore essential to reconsider DSV as a narrative genre within a proportion of their implied fictional intelligence to determine how they function in relation to existence. It is also important to study the rhetorical imperative of the genre and the reading that the genre portents within that context by depicting resolution sessions graphically as is done in the discussion. In that way, it will be clear how narrators negotiate stories, resolution agents and the contextual world in narrating the stories that capture existential predicaments.

## DISCUSSION

DSV have currently transcended traditional settings and have found acceptance in electronic media, education and modelling. As genre, its distinct characteristics

however have remained the same both in the traditional tales and the current vignettes used in education and modelling. What constitute a genre are essentially two factors: firstly, the cultural formation in reading has to be established; for instance a listener or reader has to understand that the plot he is presented with is a storied dilemma. Secondly, the dilemma story text (oral or in textual form) itself should possess a generic structure that will schematize a plot type that will call for that reading from the audience. In that way, DSV are open to both genre analysis and narrative technique.

An example of a traditional dilemma tale from Skinner (1969:400), *The Missing Eye Dilemma* and the famous Kohlberg (1969) *Heinz Dilemma* can be used to illustrate how the stories should be considered as a genre despite their different settings; the former being traditional and the latter formal educational setting.

### **The man, his womenfolk, the well and the soldier**

A man was once on a (trading) journey with his mother, his younger sister, his wife and his wife's mother. They had travelled some way and the heat of the sun made them very thirsty. Reaching the foot of a tree, they sat down.

The husband looked out and saw what seemed to be a well, and said to his sister 'Go and see if there is water in that well. If so, draw some and bring it.' She went and peered over the edge of the well, and one of her eyes fell out, down into the well. She held on to the other one and squatted down there.

A little time went by, and she hadn't returned, so the wife said 'Let me go and see what's happening to that girl.' She went over and found her squatting there. Says she 'What's made you squat there without drinking water? Isn't there any?' And going up, she peered into the well - and one of her eyes fell into the well. Then she too squatted down there.

Next, the man's mother (inlaw) said 'What's making them take so long?' and she went after them. When she got there she asked them what had caused them to squat down there like that. 'Isn't there any water?' she added. And she peered down into the well - and one of her eyes dropped down into the well. Then she took hold of the other one and squatted down.

Finally the man's mother went after them, saying 'What can have delayed them like this?' She asked them 'What's made you all squat down here? Isn't there any water?' She peered down the well - and one of her eyes fell out into the well.

More time passed, and the man said 'Well! This is very strange!

Can all be well? Just let me go after them and see.' He did so, and when he got near the well, he said 'What's the matter with you, that you are all sitting there like that?' His wife tried to turn him back with her

hand, but he took no notice and peered into the well, and one of his eyes fell down into it. Holding on to the other one, he too squatted down. And there they all were, moaning, with one eye each.

Presently a foot-soldier came upon them out of the bush, and the man saw him. The soldier too saw them and came towards them. 'Stop there, my friend, till I get you' said the man. He obeyed, and the man came up to him, still holding his eye. Says he 'I've stopped you to prevent you coming to this well. I, my mother, my mother-in-law, my wife and my younger sister, all of us now have only one eye each, from peering into the well.' 'Really?' said the soldier, 'Then you couldn't have heard about this well. There's a jinn in it.' 'I didn't know' said the other. Says the soldier 'If I go into the well and fetch out your eyes, may I take one of them?' 'Yes' said the man.

Down went the soldier into the well, which was more than a hundred cubits deep. But presently he emerged with all five eyes. He handed the man four, and put one in his pocket and went off. The husband took one and replaced his own.

That left three. Well, who would you give those three to? Who would you *not* give them to? People argue about this. And that is the origin [of the saying that] if you want something don't be in too much of a hurry to make an offer for it.

This story captures a moment of existential anguish for a man who is traveling with his family on a trading mission. After a tragedy of family members losing their eyes in an enchanted well, the man faces a stark temporal predicament where he has to make a difficult choice that will have serious repercussions for him and his family. Although his choice is absolutely free from the existentialist view, the situation is bound in a cultural milieu that can impinge on his decisions and thus result into fallenness. In variants of the story as documented by Bascom (1975:94-95), the author in the *Bura* version uses some orientation sentences to emphasize the existential predicament faced by the man considering the cultural imperatives in the context:

Here was his mother with one eye looking at him. There was his wife's mother with her one eye looking at him. To whom should he give the one eye he had left? If he gives it to his mother, he will be ashamed before his wife's mother, and before his wife, because both of them are looking at him. If he gives it to his wife's mother, he fears the heart of his mother, because a mother is not something to be played with. This is very difficult indeed; what shall he do? Here is the sweetness of his wife, and the sweetness of his mother. Which would be easier? If this thing would come to you, which would you choose?

The second dilemma story by Kohlberg (1969) is called

*Heinz Dilemma* and is used frequently as an example in many ethics, morality and psychology classes:

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$400 for the radium and charged \$4,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about \$2,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, having tried every legal means, Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz steal the drug? (Kohlberg, 1969).

Heinz's wife has a terminal illness and the only way to get the latest drug that could save her life is to break a religious commandment, burgle someone's property and commit crime by stealing the drug. The *Heinz Dilemma* story has variants e.g. Puka (1994:578) and Thompson (2004:1) as do traditional dilemma stories. In Puka (1994) version orientation sentences are used by the narrator to gain more sympathy for Heinz and less for the Druggist and thereby work out more motivation for Heinz to steal the medicine. In Thompson's version Mrs. Heinz herself is the protagonist. The version focuses on her singular heroic efforts and those of family to work out adequate motivation and sympathy for her likely action of breaking the pharmacist store to steal the drug.

Despite differences in setting, the two dilemma stories have common characteristics, the most important being their use as semantic devices to narrativise existential predicaments (dilemma). They are also used as rhetorical tools to initiate existential discourse for agents of existence to confront their individuality and freedom in the face of the contingency of existence. In that regard, the use of a dilemma story by Kohlberg as a 'way of improving moral development' of his subjects is not different from the narrator of *the missing eye* dilemma. Lockwood (1999:43) who studied the way Kohlberg and other educational scholars used dilemma stories says, 'by developing the ideas of moral discussion, Kohlberg and his associates expand the use of narratives in the classroom'. According to Lockwood, the stories they use open the moral imagination of learners. The stories also draw resolution agents to talk about their experiences by giving other stories in resolving a given dilemma. This exercise is not different from the documented (Bascom,

1975) dilemma resolution session in African settings.

Scharfstein (1998:3) therefore challenges the limited concept of philosophy by the west, if a general consideration of philosophy is based on "wisdom in the face of difficulties in life". Using this belief, he refers to the *Missing Eye* dilemma (Skinner (1969:400) as another way of arriving at philosophical 'truth' without making explicit logical statements as western philosophy demands. He reiterates that "The teller of the tale (that is, the *Missing Eye* dilemma) challenges the audience to make and justify the choice, which is not unlike the choices we try to work out in philosophical ethics or, more practically, in medical dilemmas now discussed by philosophers and hospital committees." Scharfstein is a believer that such existential exercises join philosophy if a broader view of it is taken and that therefore, devaluing such imaginative arts, as early anthropologists did to the genre is wrong. He argues further that considering logical and explicit verbal statements as the only categories of philosophizing is wrong.

Apart from their ideological/philosophical function, the two stories fulfill even the features required of traditional folk stories in the sense that both have variants. The *Heinz dilemma*, the *Prisoners' dilemma* and several 'dilemmas of the commons' used in philosophical arguments and research in the West today have strictly no canonical versions although they may be considered to be researcher-generated dilemma stories. As Goldberg (1997:1) observes, 'A tale becomes traditional if it presents situations that are so interesting to think about that people find the story worth repeating. The situations described in the tale identify it, texts that present the same situations are, by definition, variants of the same tale type.'

Riessman (2005:1) points out that in all the accumulation of various texts, what makes them narratives despite context is their representation of 'storied ways of knowing and communicating'. Dilemma stories and vignettes are narratives used semantically to represent existential predicaments and to thereby initiate an existentialist debate. It is therefore wrong to consider the genre as strictly an African form of folktale as all anthropologists and most encyclopaedias and other folklore studies tend to portray. This study is aware that this challenge raise a number of implications and questions, foremost among which is the efficacy of the tale typing approach to the study of DSV as was prominently adopted by early studies like that of Farnham (1920) and Bascom (1975).

The diffusionistic approach by Farnham (1920) and the tale-typing approach by Bascom (1975), both of them seminal studies of dilemma tales are representative of other similar studies of dilemma narratives of the past century. Bal (1990:731) however summarises the major criticism of anthropological studies from 'narratologists' point-of-view as, "little attention has been paid to the relationship between the generic conventions of

ethnography and the failure of its texts to do justice to their object". Both Farnham and Bascom have difficulty coming to terms with the importance of the fictive intelligence (the creation of a narrative plurality of possible worlds and a temporal cosmology of possible actions or choices) of dilemma narratives despite the fact that glimpses of the ontological status of the narratives exist in their commentaries. Farnham (1920:250), for instance, is contented to state that they are 'problem stories pure and simple': Although Bascom acknowledges the definitional problem and importance of plot in studying dilemma tales, neither he nor Farnham considers the poetics of the stories they studied probably because they were anthropologists.

This study therefore is premised on the belief that DSV form a universal genre that should be studied within their implied fictional intelligence so as to determine how the narratives function in relation to their surrounding world of thoughts (that is, existential temporality). In addition, it is also important to study the theorization of authorship and the reading the genre portents through the analysis of its rhetorical setting and narrative techniques.

### **Dilemma stories and temporal predicaments**

DSV are fictive attempts to capture the temporal events or difficult choices that face agents of existence. They deal with problematic situations or posers in which the need to make a choice becomes more pronounced than usual. The problematic situations are quite often existential, alienating, emanating as they do from situations of anguish and abandonment. For example in the following story (Skinner, 1969:401-402), a man is called upon to make a choice in an instance of isolation without salvation from outside;

#### **The man, his wife, his mother and his mother-in-law**

A man was once going along with his wife, his mother and his wife's mother – four of them. And as they walked, thirst seized them, so that they were nearly dead with it. They came to a well, but had no bucket.

So they wanted to devise some way in which they drink the water. The wife's mother said 'Let me go in. You, mother of my son-in-law, hold on to my foot. If I reach the water, I will draw some. If I don't reach it, your son can hold on to your foot. If we still don't reach it, my daughter can hold on to her husband's foot, and then we can draw water and drink.' And so they did.

And there the girl was, all alone, holding on to her husband's foot. Then she heard a splash, and asked her husband, 'What did I hear that sounded like something falling?' Says he 'I think it was your mother, slipped from my mother's grasp and fallen into the well.' 'No matter' said she, 'Loose hold of your mother and let them both

go. Then I'll pull you out and we can be on our way. If you refuse, I'll let you all go and go off on my own.' Well, what would you do?

The man in this story is immediately called upon to make a courageous choice in an absurd situation. His mother-in-law has slipped off his mother's grip. He wouldn't know if it was intentional or accidental, but he knows very well how his irate wife can be swift in action after presenting him with possibilities. So his choice is to let go his mother and stay alive or lose his life and that of his mother. In such a situation, salvation does not come from outside. The man will have to operate with the possibilities open to him.

According to existentialism, a certain absurdity hovers over the relationship between the man and the universe in the form of lack. There is no scope for transcendence; the man is faced with his stark freedom as a being in a situation where he becomes acutely aware of his estrangement from the world in addition to the awareness that life could be a series of failed projects. From a condition of wanton thirst, he has moved to a matter of life and death in some few moments. The above predicament is an example of the alienating conditions the self (for-itself) comes into in respect to other beings and situations. But alienation can also come from the agent's self, not necessarily from without. The Nkundo dilemma story (Bascom, 1975:89) below illustrates self-alienation as against alienation from agent's projection into the world:

#### **Body parts**

A man was sleeping one night when he heard with his ears that a man was insulting his mother. Unable to restrain himself, he stood up with his legs and took a spear with his arm, his eyes showed him the way outside so that he could fight the stranger. The stranger hid, but the eye saw him, and the arm threw the spear and killed him. When the stranger's family came to retaliate, the notables stopped them, but they told the man to pay compensation. He refused, saying that his ears should pay because they told him his mother was being insulted. The ears refused to pay, saying that it was the leg that came outside. The leg refused, saying that it was the arm that killed the stranger with the spear. The arm refused, saying that it was the eye that showed him where the stranger was hiding...

The story cited above illustrates the extent to which people cannot clearly understand the meanings of their own thought processes, feelings, motivations and actions, as they try to project themselves into the world in which they live. The protagonist of this story rejects his freedom and responsibility, resulting in what Sartre calls 'bad faith' (An agents' refusal to accept the responsibility

for his action and thereby rejecting his freedom). In the story, a single protagonist suddenly dissolves into multiple characters: ears, legs, arms and eyes; each developing into a separate personality in addition to 'the man' who becomes just 'the other' in the story. In every turn in the story, the actions are fragmented and apportioned to the various organs of the protagonist,

"When he heard with his own ears"  
 "He stood up with his legs"  
 "Took a spear with his arm"  
 "His eyes showed him"  
 "The arm threw the spear"

The personification technique used by the narrator finally reaches its peak when the various organs totally assume characters of their own when they speak to deny their culpability to the killing.

The ears refused to pay, saying that it was the leg that came outside.  
 The leg refused, saying that it was the arm that killed...  
 The arm refused, saying that it was the eye ...

Ownership of action or what the existentialists call 'responsibility' is one of the cardinal concerns of existentialism because it is tied to its central tenet: the freedom of an existential agent. Sartre (1943:554) regards events and their resultant feelings as the outcome of an agent's freedom. "There are no accidents in life" Sartre (1943:554) declares;

That man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. 'We are taking the word "responsibility" in its ordinary sense as "consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object." In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens that there is a world; since he is also the one who makes himself be, then whatever may be the situation in which he finds himself, the for-itself must wholly assume this situation with its peculiar coefficient of adversity, even though it be insupportable. He must assume the situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person has meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the ground of the engagement which I am that they appear. It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are.

Sartre is one of the foremost existentialists who believes

in the total freedom of an agent in all situations regardless of other factors inherent in circumstances. According to this view, the murder in the Body Parts story is consequent upon the action of the Nkundo man, he is 'the incontestable author of the event', not his ears, his arms, his legs or his eyes. His attempt to disown the tragedy is only a reflection of his bad faith- that of rejecting his freedom and responsibility in life. It is through his 'project' that the murder comes to be, it is therefore irresponsible for the man to blame his eyes, ears, arms and legs.

Apart from the themes of self-alienation and abandonment, by far the greatest portion of collected dilemma stories and vignettes deal with challenges to dominant norms and values. Here stories and vignettes that deal with normative values actually illustrate Nietzschean challenge to norms and values. In his existentialist philosophy, Nietzsche (1891), especially in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, advocates the re-evaluation of all values;

Behold the good and just! Whom do they hate most? Him who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker: he, however, is the creator. Behold the believers of all beliefs! Whom do they hate most? Him who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the law-breaker-he, however, is the creator. Companions, the creator seeketh, not corpses- and not herds or believers either. Fellow-creators the creator seeketh- those who crave new values on new tables.

...

And he who hath to be a creator in good and evil- verily, he hath first to be a destroyer, and break values in pieces. Thus doth the greatest evil pertain to the greatest good: that, however, is the creating good.

Nietzsche's hero Zarathustra regards values and norms as human creations and as such believes that new values can be created as old ones are destroyed. In Skinner (1969:394) *Abdu, his Father and his Rich Father-in-law*, is a story that typifies this Nietzschean call for re-evaluation of norms.

### **Abdu, his father and his rich father-in-law [III/72]**

There was once a man who had three sons. His eldest son was called Abdu. Now Abdu went and got together money so that he could marry. Whereupon his father took the money away and used it for the marriage of Abdu's younger brother. But Abdu did not feel sore at this – at least he did, but only just a little.

One again Abdu went off and got together money so that he could marry. Once again Abdu's father took the money away and used it for the marriage of his other,

youngest brother. At this Abdu was very upset and he decided to go off and seek his fortune. So he set off along the road and began to walk.

He reached another town and settling there, set to acquire some more money. Then he sought the hand of a daughter of a rich man. The latter favoured his suit and arranged the marriage. And in due course the couple had a child, a boy.

Well, the rich man, Abdu, the girl and the child set off, walking and presently coming to a tamarind tree stopped and were resting there – when comes Abdu's father.

Abdu's father goes up to them, takes hold of the hand of the little boy, and dashes the infant against the tree, killing him.

Thereupon the rich man seized Abdu's father and the two began to struggle, struggling till they both fell to the ground. Abdu drew a knife. Then said the rich man to Abdu 'Give me the knife, so that I can stab him.' And Abdu's father said 'Hey, Abdu, don't you give him that knife, to kill your father with!'

Well? Which of the two was Abdu to choose? Should he give the knife to the rich man, or to his father? You have heard the situation. Which of the two people should he give the knife to, to kill the other? That's all.

In this story, the narrator constructed several existential situations to make the commitment of Abdul's father doubtful. First he sabotaged Abdu's effort to marry by taking away his savings not once but twice, in the second incidence using the money for the marriage of the youngest son to show his outrage. Then in an absolute show of depravity he kills Abdu's first born baby! Being the blood father of Abdu cannot make him a father unless he becomes explicitly 'concern' and 'committed' to that role.

The story illustrates a Nietzschean attack on ethics, which he sees working against virtue and excellence instead of the belief that ethics and values help human development. The challenge in the dilemma story is on whether fatherhood has to do with blood or commitment. In a pragmatic analysis of a version of the story in Jablow (1961) Goodman sees the situation as the passing away of an old value and the embracing of a new one. He terms the anguish of the situation as 'psychological pressures on people' where a son is faced with a choice of either killing 'his father who has done him nothing but harm, or his benevolent father who has given him culture and success'.

DSV and their attendant resolution sessions are humanistic exercises that also delve in a dialogic Nietzschean deconstruction of values. An act that confirms existentialist rejection of essence – to say that we are designed for a specific purpose and thereby can be compelled by situations, our nature or our roles in life, is not acceptable to existentialist views. Since Dilemma stories and vignettes deal with temporal predicaments, an existentialist approach is befitting since existentialism

concerns itself with being-in-the-world and provide doctrines that are suitable for the analysis of existential aspects like possibilities, freedom of choice, commitment and responsibility. It is interesting to consider how some of the foremost existentialist also had used dilemma vignettes in explicating their doctrines. Sartre (1943:6) for instance uses a dilemma story about a factual situation that one of his students found himself in the Second World War as this extract illustrates:

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a "collaborator"; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realized that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance – or perhaps his death – would plunge her into despair. He also realized that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action.

Sartre uses this story to illustrate the dilemma that human beings quite often face in the temporal abandonment that results from their existential freedom. Taking one of the options of either joining the resistance army or staying behind to take care of an ill mother, each entails a host of responsibilities that could contingently determine the young man's life. His radical freedom to choose is the basis of his choice, given a context where social and religious laws cannot help him. But until he chooses, the two options just remain possibilities, each with its own prospective obligations and moral order. As Sartre illustrates, if he chooses to stay with his mother, his action may help strengthen her life but at the same he may continue to nurse the bitterness of not avenging his brother probably with some attendant negative feelings. If



he chooses to go to the war, his mother may die of despair and his effort may not leave any mark and he may thus come back to live in regret of leaving his mother to die in despair. Sartre uses this dilemma story to illustrate the abandonment that faces an agent in temporal predicament.

### The dilemma of being-in-the-world

To understand how essential DSV are to capturing existential predicaments like the ones discussed above, it is necessary to preview how such existentialists as Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre have espoused the ontological view of being-in-the-world. Existentialists argue that life is neither a realm of static (logical) possibilities nor a deterministic necessity. Rather, it appears, at least subjectively, life is a realm where possibilities ceaselessly become actualities in real time, and in real freedom. So being-in-the-world is the beginning of existential dilemma for man. Here is a being capable of thinking, imagining, and projecting in the world but a being that cannot at the same time identify with such projection without being negated. Life then is a perpetual engagement in becoming; always a step ahead of being defined until death. As Sartre (1943: 89) explains, human reality is a lack seeking for fulfillment:

Human reality is its own surpassing toward what it lacks; it surpasses itself toward the particular being which it would be if it were what it is. Human reality is not something which exists first in order afterwards to lack this or that; it exists first as lack and in immediate, synthetic connection with what it lacks. Thus the pure event by which human reality rises as presence in the world is apprehended by itself as its own lack. In its coming into existence human reality grasps itself as an incomplete being. It apprehends itself as being in so far as it is not, in the presence of the particular totality which it lacks and which it is in the form of not being it.

The dialectic cited above illustrates that, it is when the consciousness of an agent realizes its lack and its need for fulfillment that it surges forward to become a chosen possibility in an existential event. But even after such a surge toward a certain possibility, it cannot become that possibility which will then become surpassed, and the agent will apprehend his/her nothingness in the sense that it is not the possibility that was projected.

All existentialists have accepted that these moments of existence are characterized by flights and leap that nihilate the past towards the future. Understanding being-in-the-world is important to the study of DSV which capture existential moments in narrative accounts and vignettes. Two characteristics are important in the state of being-in-the-world; first, that the world takes on

meaning only through the projects of an existential agent and that this world comes to the agent's projection as utterly alien by retaining its 'otherness'. So the degree of alienation of an agent either from his 'self' as in the *Body Parts* story or from others as in *Abdu, his Father and his Rich Father-in-law* story depends on his mode of being in relation to the world at that time.

Sartre discussed the modes of being in greater detail than the other existentialists. According to him, an agent can be a being-for-itself when he engages in the world in the first-person perspective. This entails being absorbed in the world without being aware of 'an outside', which is being involved in the world without understanding his preoccupation through a third-person. An agent can also be aware of his world being revealed through others in terms of their expectations, or through cultural norms, thus resulting in 'fallenness'. Sartre describes this state as 'being-for-others', a situation where an agent views himself in the situation from a third-person perspective. In the stories cited above for example, Abdu can give his blood father the knife despite his lack of commitment as a father because that is religio-cultural expectation.

According to existentialism, if such predicaments as captured by dilemma stories and vignettes are presented to be debated from individual perspective, then the singularity of existence could be regarded as important. If the singularity of projection in the world is deemed important, then recovery from alienation in situations (authenticity) is also essential. Interestingly a story titled *Son in-law* (in Jablow, 1960:68) illustrates this value of authenticity even in strong traditional settings. Although Njila and Sefu, Shangba's two suitors in the story, are given a test to bring a live deer from the forest to earn her hand in marriage, Sefu respects his feelings and physical state in the process of contest, which he did not deem as a failure. In the end the village council surprisingly declares him as the most suitable suitor for Shangba despite his not bringing a live deer from the forest:

The Council of Elders deliberated and finally they said, "You, Sefu, who abandoned the chase after the deer, you are our son-in-law. Njila caught the deer and is a man of great heart. If he wished to kill he would stop at nothing till he fulfilled his wish. He would not heed one who scolds or gives advice. If we gave him our daughter and she did wrong, he would beat her and not listen to one who pleads for her. We do not wish him for a son-in-law.

In essence Sefu succeeded in bracketing a normative expectation in achieving authenticity, as he says, 'Why should I suffer such exhaustion and destroy myself for Sangba? There are other women who can be married more easily. Anyway, what sort of wooing is this, with a live deer? I have never heard of such a thing before'. Existentialism calls for such a reflective approach, this

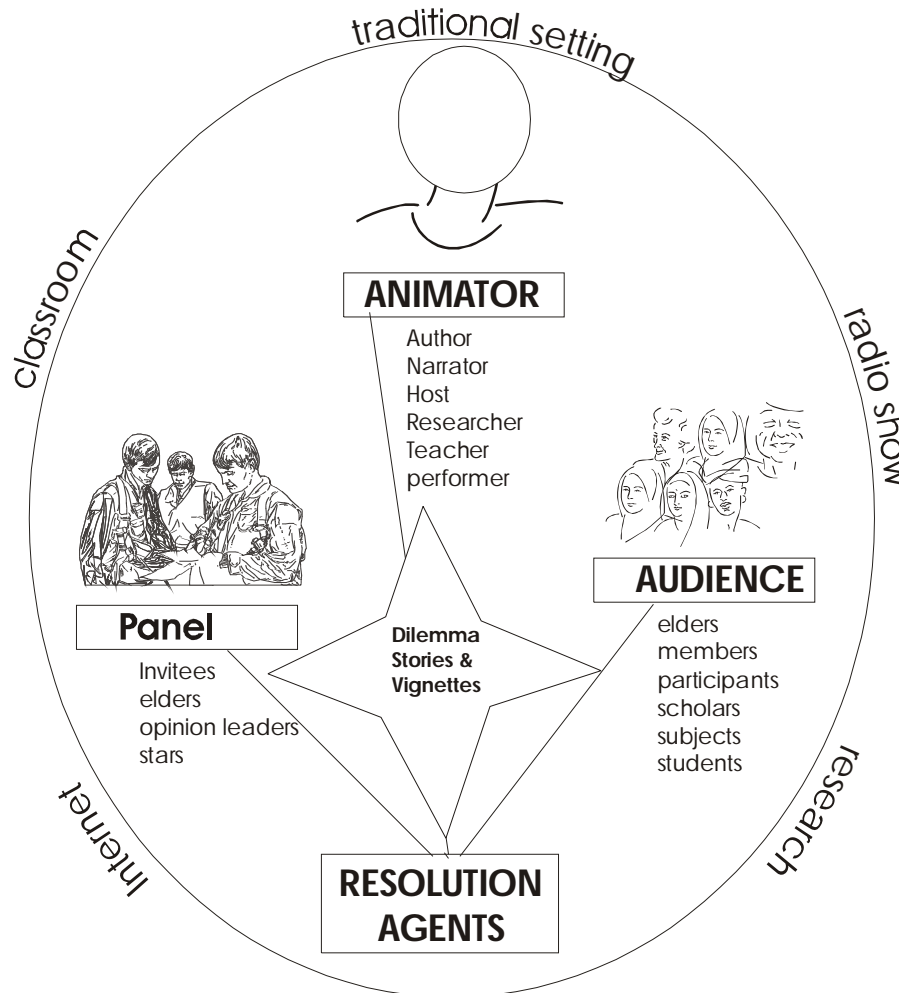


Figure 1. Dilemma dialogic session.

'reaching out to the world', so that the fundamental concept of intentionality as the basis of freedom and existence could suffice for being-in-the-world. Existentialist ideology of authenticity does not necessarily call for revolt against existing norms and values; it only upholds that if being-in-the-world can be disciplined through conscious intentionality, the possibility of a taken-for-granted-way of existing or a bandwagon (herd) mentality, what Heidegger (1962) calls *das Man*, can be reduced. This forms the central role of dilemma resolution sessions, especially in traditional settings. The focus is on whether an agent is choosing a possibility with a lucid awareness of his choice or as any one does (that is, as a *das Man*).

#### **Authorial narration and subversive narrative techniques**

Apart from the significance of dilemma stories as rhetorical tools for initiating existential discourse, their

form as semantic devices is also worth studying. If dilemma stories narrativise existential predicaments and possibilities, there must be some definable techniques that narrators employ to ensure stories achieve systematic depiction of existential situations in the world. Most of the techniques used in the semantic account of dilemma situations involve the creation of ambiguous narrative space and other subversive narrative techniques from an authorial narrative level. This complex narrative process is sketched out in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates that the narrative account in DSV is authorial in nature. The animator who could be an elder, a story teller, a researcher, a radio host or a member of the audience, tells a story or a vignette that captures a dilemma situation which is presented to the resolution agents to solve. Authorial narrations have three prominent characteristics that have been well noted by narratologists especially by Stanzel (1986) and Gennette (1983). Firstly there is the high level of impersonal narration as can be noted in most dilemma stories. There is also a general negation of singular perspectives since

most of the stories emphasize aspects of multifaceted phenomena. This subversion of a singular perspective is required not only to capture the dilemma condition of temporal events but also to give resolution agents the horizon to resort to script and extra-textual knowledge to resolve dilemmas by expanding text and giving stories, endings.

Second, the animator can decide whether the story or vignette has protagonists or not. In that sense he can even decide to make his audience to become the protagonists of his story by asking them to imagine so. This authorial role has repercussions on the type of stories: one can be protagonist-centred story, another imperative-centred story. *The Man, his Wife, his Mother and his Mother-in-law* (page 7) and *Abdu, his Father and his Rich Father-in-law* (page 10) are examples of protagonist-centred stories. The central characters in the stories face dilemmas, the animator only calls on the resolution agents (Figure 1) to imagine they are in the protagonists' condition. However if the animator decides to make the resolution agents the protagonist of his story like the ones below, then, it becomes an imperative-dilemma vignette:

### ***Death or Mother-in-law***

83:1 (Ewe) Death comes to you and tells you to work his farm or else you must die. Your mother-in-law comes to you and tells you to work her farm or else she will take back your wife. Whom will you follow? (Schonharl, 1909:106).

### ***Experience machine***

"Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super – duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you will be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?" (Nozick, 1974).

The above vignettes are meant to initiate philosophical debates on existential choices – between honour and death and between everyday reality and artificial reality. In the above examples, the animator speaks directly to the resolution agents in a fictive context where he, as an authorial animator, makes the resolution agents the protagonists of his dilemma. Modern dilemmas narratives are presented more in the form of vignettes than the more developed traditional dilemma tales. The function of vignettes in the literary domain is like the role of snapshots in visual arts. They are fragmentary evocative

literary scenes or posers that focus on moments and therefore suit the narrativisation of temporal predicaments where being with all its emotivity is important than plot.

The third attribute of authorial narration gives the animator as an outsider, godlike abilities such as omniscience and omnipresence in narrating the dilemma situations. This privilege quite often results in telling matrix stories that can be called *agent-centred* dilemma stories. In such stories which several studies called competition stories, there are two or more stories that are linked to a hyper-narrative through a theme. The stories involve the pitting of two or more characters, conditions etc in apparently different turns, in order to find out, the strongest, the most wicked, the most dangerous elements etc. The characters or conditions pitted are not facing dilemmas within their own story context; the agent (resolver) is in a dilemma of choice instead. He is called upon to make a choice or judge a condition. Bascom (1975) calls this category of stories competition type while Skinner (1969) calls them judgment tales. Whatever the case may be, they are mainly designed to elicit debate and knowledge discovery. In old collections of tales like in Burton's (1870), Jablow's (1961), and Skinner's (1969), such stories are fully developed. A good example is 'Of the Relative Villainy of Men and Women' in Burton (1870) which illustrates the capacity for wickedness by both sexes. This is encapsulated in Figure 2.

In this particular story, the first hypo-narrative centers on how a hunchback led a hedonistic life and in the process destroyed an infatuated princess while the other hypo-narrative tells how a devilish woman destroyed a gullible prince. The story is narrated within the hyper-matrix of a story involving a cursed Hindu King who had to bring a demon infested corpse to a Guru for exorcism. On the way the demon narrates dilemma stories which the king had to resolve upon the pain that the demon escapes back to the graveyard if he fails to.

In *Ingratitude* (Jablow, 1961), another type of authorial matrix narrative, there are three hypo-narratives. Firstly there is the ordeal of a snake that was pursued by its killer that then begged a farmer to allow it refuge in his stomach until danger is over. The snake then refused to come out leaving the farmer in great agony and peril. Second is the farmer himself who was relieved of his pains by a sympathetic heron which removed the snake from his stomach. In turn the farmer grabbed the heron in readiness to kill it for a meal. The third hypo-narrative deals with the farmer's wife sympathy for the heron that resulted in her death, when the heron flew high and swooped on her, removing her eyes.

As sketched out in Figures 2 and 3, the story matrix of agent-centred dilemma stories can vary from simple matrixes consisting of not more than two hypo-narratives in two embeddings to complex matrixes that may consist of several hypo-narratives and story embeddings as the

Narrator of the tales Baital Pachi  
about a cursed Indian King Vikram,  
who had to bring a demon to a magician to break the spell

The Baital (demon) that narrates the 25 dilemma tales to Vikram on their way to the Guru. The narrations are upon the pain that the demon escapes back to the forest whenever the King fails to resolve any of the dilemmas.

Parrot	Jay
Belonging to Prince Raja Ram that narrates the 2nd hypo-narrative about how a devilish woman destroyed the life of a gullible princess	Belonging to Princess Chandravati that narrates the 1st hypo-narrative how a hunchback led a devilish life that resulted into the death of his wife and her father

Figure 2. The relative villainy of men and women.

## Ingratitude

Which of the three was the most ungrateful?  
The Snake, the Man or the Heron

Hypo-narrative 1	Hypo-narrative 2	Hypo-narrative 3
A snake hotly pursued by its killers begged a farmer for a sanctuary in his stomach. The farmer reluctantly agreed but when danger wa over, the snake refused to come out of the farmer’s stomach resulting into great agony for him.	A heron met the farmer in agony, volunteered to help remove the snake from the farmer’s stomach for a fee, but the farmer defaulted when relieved and maliciously grabbed the heron preparing for a meal.	The farmer’s wife felt sorry for the heron and let the bird free, but when the heron flew high it turned around and swooped on the woman removing her two eyes and leaving her in agony

Figure 3. Matrix narrative: The narrative model of agent-centred dilemma stories.

story, *Of the Relative Villainy of Men and Women* (Figure 2) illustrates. The main focus of this category of stories is to elicit debates during which resolution agents bring in extra-textual knowledge and personal experience stories to support their standpoints.

The fourth attribute of authorial narration is the possibility of intrusion by the animator (Figure 1) where he/she can speak directly to the resolution agents in order to comment on actions within the story or to evaluate characters or make philosophical comments or criticism while narrating the story. In Skinner (1069:400)

story titled, *The Man, his Womenfolk, the Well and the Soldier* (p6), although the author ends the protagonists story by giving a poser, he adds an orientation adage ‘and that is the origin [of the saying that] if you want something don’t be in too much of a hurry to make an offer for it’, as an authorial intrusion to spice a subsequent debate. This attribute leads to the fourth type of dilemma story, the *epiphanic dilemma* story. Epiphanic dilemma stories presented a challenge to early studies because they either did not end with the usual evaluative codas (questions) or they are resolved by the animator or

a character in the story. A typical example is the most often quoted dilemma story, *The Cowtail Switch*, in Courlander and Herzog (1947). A great warrior could not return from a hunt. His family decided he was dead, but his youngest child kept asking about him. The 5 elder brothers finally decided to venture forth in search of their father. Each exhibited great magical feats in finding the remains of the father and bringing him back to life. When the warrior-hunter was received with celebrations and it was time to choose who deserve a prize for bringing him back to life it was hotly debated by the elders. The closing paragraphs in the story illustrate the essence of this authorial intrusion:

Before long not only the sons but the other people of the village were talking. Some of them argued that the son who had put blood in Ogaloussa's veins should get the switch, others that the one who had given Ogaloussa's breath should get it. Some of them believed that all of the sons had done equal things, and that they should share it. They argued back and forth this way until Ogaloussa asked them to be quiet.

"To this son I will give the cow-tail switch, for I owe most to him," Ogaloussa said.

He came forward and bent low and handed it to Puli, the little boy who had been born while Ogaloussa was in the forest.

The people of the village remembered then that the child's first words had been, "Where is my father?" They knew that Ogaloussa was right.

For it was a saying among them that a man is not really dead until he is forgotten.

An analysis of the last five paragraphs of this story shows how the animator uses an intrusive adage 'For it was a saying among them that a man is not really dead until he is forgotten' as a strategy to emphasize the philosophy behind the choice of young Puli by Ogaloussa. Again such authorial narration where the narrator is free to attribute direct speeches or statements to characters or the story itself can best be understood within the context of authorial narration in a dialogic resolution session (Figure 1). Within the dilemma dialogic session, an authorial intrusion does not signal a turn for the end of the story, it may only initiate a hotter debate now that the animator or a character in the story has taken a standpoint.

The questions raise are; who is the animator? A researcher, a host of a radio program sitting with a panel, an elder surrounded by youth? In the case of this narration, it appears the animator is also a strong resolver in Figure 1. He might have occupied a position of an elder in the diagram probably surrounded by other resolvers who look up to him for a final resolution. This fact can be supported even from the traditional collections (Bascom, 1975:119,129) where the important

role of elders in resolution sessions is documented.

### The use of parallelism

Parallelism is another authorial technique prominent in agent-centred dilemma stories, and since they form over 80% of collected traditional stories and modern radio shows, the technique can be considered as the most important aesthetic feature of dilemma stories. Parallelism as a literary technique involves the repetition of form, mostly syntactical at the sentence level. But when taken to discourse and narrative levels, parallelism involves the insurance of similarity and balance by repetition of similar deeds, efforts, merits etc. among contesting protagonists, events, or hypo-narratives. The technique is used subversively in the dilemma narrative genre to make choice difficult for resolution agents. Narrators of agent-centred dilemma stories especially where competition and reward are involved make sure that balance is maintained among contestants in all turns of events.

A typical example is Jablow's *Friends Called Kamo* (1960:115) which is a tragic agent-centred dilemma story. The story's hyper-matrix centers on self-sacrifice for friends. Two long lost friends who set out to find each other met nearly half way from their hometowns. The first test is making an effort to find a friend, which they did, East Kamo by first consulting a diviner; West Kamo also consulted a diviner later in the story. Similarly, both of them come to face danger, West Kamo by being swallowed by a python and East Kamo by venturing out at night when he knew how perilous it was. Lastly both of them made profound sacrifices to save each other's life. In general, the technique of parallelism that the story entails can be illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows how the elements of competition are balanced to make choice difficult for the dilemma resolution agents. Each of the Kamos scores in the four elements of the competition, that is, setting out to look for a lost friend, consulting a diviner, facing danger and making an ultimate sacrifice. The example of the parallel technique used in constructing agent-centred dilemma stories, especially where competition or valuation is involved; permeate the whole corpus of agent-centred dilemma stories, both in old and current collections.

### The creation of dislocated temporality

Another technique used in the creation of ambiguous narrative space in DSV is the emphasis on a single event to the detriment of serially interconnected events as in novels and other longer narratives. A single crisis is profoundly bemoaned by drawing attention to its existential crisis. The narratives have beginnings but arrive at abrupt ends that are so overbearing on the

Which of them was the greater Friend?	
East Kamo	West Kamo
Set out to meet long lost friend West kamo	Set out to meet long lost friend East kamo
Consult a diviner regarding his long lost friend	Consult a diviner regarding how to save his friend
Life in Danger cannot go out in the night	Life in Danger being swallowed by a python at night
Risked his life saved his friend in the night	Sacrificed his son to restore the sight of his friend

**Figure 4.** The technique of parallelism in agent-centred dilemma stories.

whole story, especially in imperative dilemma vignettes as the following excerpts illustrate:

Sophie is an inmate in a prison camp in a country torn by civil war. A sadistic guard is about to hang her son who tried to escape and instructs her to pull the chair from underneath him. He says that if she refuses to participate he will not only kill her son but some other innocent prisoners as well. The guard's reputation leads Sophie to believe he is telling the truth.

What should she do?

In this Grassian's (1992) vignette detail knowledge about the nature of the civil war, the character of Sophie and her son, the prison camp and the guard are all subverted to the moment of decision by Sophie, 'to pull the chair under her son's feet or not'. The historicity of the event is intentionally subverted to give primacy to temporal events and to force resolution agents to work with their extra-textual knowledge in solving the dilemma. In this way the significance of temporal being is continuously given primacy. In the following Kohlberg (1969) vignette, the historicity of the event is also subdued.

### ***The escaped prisoner***

A man had been sentenced to prison for 10 years. After one year, however, he escaped from prison, moved to a

new area of the country, and took on the name of Thompson. For eight years he worked hard, and gradually he saved enough money to buy his own business. He was fair to his customers, gave his employees top wages, and gave most of his own profits to charity. Then one day Ms. Jones, an old neighbor, recognized him as the man who had escaped from prison eight years before and for whom the police had been looking. Should Ms. Jones report Mr. Thompson to the police and have him sent back to prison?

In this excerpt, the nature of the crime committed by the man is not given because it will definitely influence the decision of the resolution agents. Only the number of years he spent in jail is given. Similarly his previous record as a neighbor is not given, although it will be crucial in understanding Ms. Jones' dilemma. The vignette skillfully balances the negative feelings towards the man's previous criminality and his new repentance in the form of hard work and charity, thus making it hard to make a choice without depending almost totally on extra-textual knowledge in a fresh negotiation of the script.

This subversive technique in a way suits human experience of temporality because according to existentialists, we experience life contingently; moments that are suspended from the future and often from the past in situations where protagonists and actions face dangers abruptly and make difficult choices as in Sophie's dilemma and in many cases where life projects are aborted. By suspending the past and the future, the horizon of the story is limited. Unlike in longer narratives where events are interconnected within an inter-textual world that provide clues to life experience, in dilemma stories, such unifying features are aborted thereby portraying the protagonist in existential crisis and leaving the resolution agent in hermeneutic difficulty.

### **The creation of fictional posterity**

The hermeneutic difficulty that resolution agents face is contingent upon the continuation of narration that dilemma stories portend. They create a post-narrational projection which is open to hypothecation by resolution agents. From the 'text' the story leaps into the resolution sphere where agents deliberate on the details of the story and its endings. Resolution agents debate endings without the benefit of complete inter-textual resources because dilemma stories destabilize the historicity of an event by reducing details that may help resolution agents task a story. Reports of resolution sessions in early collected dilemma stories (Bascom, 1975) show how intensive resolutions sessions were in traditional settings and how post fictive experience of dilemma stories draws much from extra-textual knowledge especially cultural values and norms as reported in the resolution of the dilemma below:

125:2. (Kpelle) A trap maker saw a chip of wood

floating down a river and realized that there was someone upstream. He found a palm wine tapper and later a weaver joined them, and they founded a village in the forest. The trapper spotted the footprints of a woman, but they could not take her by force. The trapper offered her meat which she refused. When the weaver offered her cloth, she accepted it and went to live with the men. To which man did she belong? (Gay and Cole, 1967:26).

Gay and Cole comment on the ensuing discussion and the resolution of the dilemma:

The answer might seem clear to an American – she belonged to the man whose gift she had accepted. But the discussion waxed furious, with the debate shifting back and forth between advocates of the trap maker and the weaver. They chose sides, apparently for the sheer joy of the debate. Basically, the argument in favour of the trap maker was that he had been first in the forest, had brought the other two men to the site of the village, and thus had primary rights over the produce of the area, including the woman. As evidence in his favour it was claimed that the first hunter to see an animal owns it, even though another may actually kill it. It was pointed out by the trap maker's advocates that he had first found the woman's footprint, and had tracked her down.

Those who supported the weaver gave the argument Americans might prefer, yet couched it as an alternative expression of traditional values. Someone suggested the analogy of a rice farm. The supporters of the trap maker said that the man who cleared the farm should claim the rice. Supporters of the weaver said that the man who harvests the rice owns it. At this point the argument began to center on one of the possible traditional values, and several persons were of the opinion that even if the palm-wine producer alone had captured the woman, he should give her to the weaver, who had customary rights. It was at approximately this point that the discussion ended, with the decisions of the group given by a village elder in favour of the trap maker, on the basis of traditional privilege.

The reported resolution session of this dilemma story show how the story expands, attracting analogies and arguments that derive from extra-textual knowledge especially that of tradition until finally an elder declare the choice of the trap maker as the winner based on traditional privilege.

### **The use of actants in character portrayal**

Another notable subversive technique used in dilemma

stories is characterization. The existential view of “others” as objects to relate with in being-in-the-world underlie the lack of psychological approach to characterization in dilemma stories and accounts for what Herman (2000) notes as the basis of the structuralist character analysis in the late 60s and early 70s, when some critics began using the label ‘actants’ instead of characters. The actantial perception of participants in narration reduces characterization to participatory roles, to a kind of subordination to action of participants. A participant is nothing other than the series of plot action he/she performs thus underlining the existentialist view of life as a sum of series of contingent choices. This pro-actional reduction is somewhat ‘anti-psychological’ as Herman (2000) notes in these words:

‘From a broadly Proppian perspective, as in existentialist theories of the self, characters’ motivations do not precede and explain their actions, but are rather born with the actions themselves. “Interiority” or psychological essence is not a cause but an effect of the way characters (and people) behave;’

Herman's view agrees with Sartrean concept of intention and action, that the act and intention cannot be separated or reduced. Herman has even gone further to equate purpose with action. It explains therefore why a narrator of dilemma perceives the characters in his narration, ‘the others’, as mere objects whose significance is rooted in their manifested actions in the plot of the story, rather than the psychological ‘round character’ whose names and interior perceptions are significant to the narrative. There is therefore no precision in participant identification in most dilemma stories and vignettes although referential distinctiveness and participant identification is crucial in storytelling and literary composition. This character fragmentation is also noticed by Breton (2001:2) who studied Beckett's first person narrative as something near the renditions of dilemma stories. As Breton states:

Novelistic codes establish that a character should be defined by a set of attributes that will allow the reader to identify with him/her. S/he is portrayed as a real-life human being whose physical description is coherent and who bears psychological and moral values. Moreover, his/her actions are of major importance in the unfolding of the storyline. Therefore not only his/her “being” but also his/her “doing” need to be taken into account within the diegesis in order to understand the characters’ numerous characteristics, which construct his/her being through the *praxis*.

Few Dilemma stories and vignettes collected have names of the protagonists given, in fact in most agent-centred DSV, the animators use ambiguous referents to identify

**Table 1.** Ambiguous referents in the cowtail – switch.

One of them	One of the sons	One of the sons
Another one	Another son	Another
A third son	A third son	Another son
One of them	Another of the sons	Another son
Another son	Another of them	
Another son	Another son	

the competitors. In the *Cowtail Switch* (Courlander and Herzog, 1947), for instance, there are eighteen ambiguous referents, which at any point could refer to any of the six competitors as shown in Table 1.

The refrain from distinct participant identification by the narrator is a further subversive narrative techniques used to prop an assemblage of acts that propel the story so that referential ambiguity is deployed to make participants act in many roles without seeming contradictions. Consequently the uses of ambiguous referents like “the first one”, “the other”, “the one ...”, although cumbersome, demonstrate what Sartre (1946:47-48) in his famous summary of the existentialist maxim describes as existence preceding essence:

Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life ... what we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that his is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which makeup these undertakings.

The contingent nature of existence as espoused by existentialists like Sartre reduces the prominence of characterization in fiction. According to the above quotation, man exists first and then defines himself through series of acts that culminate in his definitive death. In the use of subversive narrative techniques in dilemma stories, grammatical pronouns are deployed instead of names in order to subdue representation in portraying the chaos of existence that face agents. The subversion is also used to reverse the possibility of a resolution agent identifying with a character in the narration so that the dilemmatic condition is given priority over the coherent portrayal of characters. In this way, true to existentialist ethos, characters are subordinated to action in line with existentialist subordination of essence to existence.

Generally dilemma stories are created as simulations of conditions in universal trans-cultural settings, which make the naming of participants risky. The risk lies in the cultural connotations of names and the likelihood of biasness in agent’s reception which should be negated in forming dilemma stories. In that way a neutral multiperspectivist portrayal of an existential dilemma situation is achieved.

## CONCLUSION

In general, the study from which this presentation is derived explores DSV as a universal genre that acts as both semantic devices and rhetorical tools for encapsulating temporal predicaments. By widening the contextual conception of dilemma narratives and situating them within their fictive intelligence, their typology as aesthetic forms becomes comprehensible and their morphology becomes perceptible. This study has shown how dilemma stories and vignettes act as both semantic devices and rhetorical tools for capturing temporal predicaments and initiating existential debates. DSV achieve enigma through the creation of ambiguous narrative space, where inter-textual horizon is highly limited by using subversive techniques that force resolvers of the dilemma not to depend solely on the script as in dominant narratives like the novel. This ambiguity is achieved through discernable techniques like the subversion of the historicity of events, the negation of a singularly perspective to stories that dominant narratives are known for, and the use of multiperspectivist framing techniques like parallelism. Other techniques include the creation of fictional posterity by truncating the end of stories, thereby forcing them to continue in resolution sessions and the use of actants as characters to illustrate the existentialist maxim that ‘existence precedes essence.’

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