


Focalisation and its performative nature in John 3:1–21

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Without seeking to diminish its authority as the Word of God, this article acknowledges the Fourth Gospel as a brilliant piece of literary artistry by the implied author. The aim of this article is to substantiate this assertion by conducting a study on focalisation and illustrating how it invites the implied reader's participation in the narrative. This contribution acknowledges the existence of insightful contributions on the topic, particularly in relation to the Fourth Gospel. However, it asserts that the study of the performative nature of focalisation in this particular Gospel has not received the attention it deserves. The main contribution of this article is its analysis of a selected narrative of the Fourth Gospel using focalisation as an analytical tool, with the objective of demonstrating that the Fourth Gospel is performative in nature, crafted and formulated to consistently engage the implied reader in considering its purpose, as stated in 20:30–31.

Contribution: The article showcases that focalisation, when used as an analytical tool, can unlock, and enable the interpreter of the Fourth Gospel to recognise its performative nature to the implied reader of the text. This is critical, given that the text is crafted to encourage the reader to participate in it by making decisions regarding their faith in Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Fourth Gospel; performative nature; analysis; focalisation; literary artistry.

Introduction and problem statement

While respecting its authority as the Word of God, the Fourth Gospel stands out as a brilliant piece of literary artistry when viewed through a narratological lens, skilfully crafted by the implied author. Central to its brilliance is the explicit purpose outlined in John 20:30–31, as emphasised by Van der Watt (2007:10; Hobyane 2023:7), expressed in performative terms. This means that its aim is to persuade the implied reader to have faith in Jesus Christ, leading to the attainment of eternal life. In this regard, the Gospel presents itself as aiming to achieve a transformative impact in the life of the reader (cf. Van der Watt 2007:10).

The impetus behind this contribution emanates from a general observation, that as the Fourth Gospel is written with such an explicit purpose, the narration of the Gospel, on the one hand, will be biased towards the character of Jesus and the values he represents in the text. On the other hand, it can generally be expected that the casting and/or the reporting will work against the Jewish opponents and their religious views. Therefore, the task in this article is to investigate the manner in which the implied author 'selects narrative information' to invite the implied reader to act on what they read concerning Jesus Christ in the text (cf. Tolmie 1991:76). This phenomenon is called *focalisation*.

Hence, the primary inquiry of this article is to explore and illustrate how reading the Fourth Gospel through the lens of focalisation¹ invites the reader's participation in the text. In essence, the central concern is to demonstrate how focalisation fulfils its performative role towards the reader of the Fourth Gospel. For the sake of clarity, the article will present an outline of this methodology employed and detail its application to the narrative of John 3:1–21. In addition to this methodology, the article will incorporate aspects of the speech act theory, a concept that will be explained in more detail further in the text. Utilising both methodologies, the article aims to illustrate their respective contributions to the Gospel's pursuit of its stated purpose (20:30–31). Acknowledging the intricate nature of the inquiry, the article concedes the necessity of employing multiple approaches to comprehensively analyse the mentioned narrative of the Fourth Gospel.²

1.Scholars such as Dembinski (1979:208–221); Bronzwaer (1981:193–201); Fowler (1982:213); Martin (1986:145–147); Kahlitz (1988:237–255); Chatman (1986:189–204) and Edminston (1989:730–735) have delved into the study of this phenomenon.

2.While commenting on the use of a multiple approach of analysis in his problem-oriented study of Mathew, Viljoen (2018:12) helpfully asserts that 'the interpretation of a text involves many aspects, and this necessitates a multifaceted process. It could be detrimental to stick to only one method. Depending on the questions asked, various methods can complement and reinforce one another'. Egger (1986:8) says, 'In a problem-oriented approach, the challenges and issues presented by the text suggest which method should be used'.

Note: Historical Thought and Source Interpretation

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Methodological orientation

The concept of 'focalisation' has received favourable attention from various scholars since its inception in the early 1980s. Throughout the historical survey and research developments on the phenomenon, scholarly contributions have mainly focused on its definition and how it should be described so that it caters to all the narratives (cf. Chatman 1986:189–204; Dembinski 1979:208–221; Hobyane 2023:7). In simple terms, according to Genette (1988:34; Tolmie 1991:276), focalisation is 'a *deliberate* selection of narrative information'. For a narrative to achieve its intended purpose, there must be a deliberate way in which information is supplied to the implied reader (Hobyane 2022:2; Tolmie 1991:273).

Types of focalisation

Tolmie (1991:273) says 'Focalisation may be either external or internal to the story'. Tolmie (1991:273) elucidates that 'regarding *external focalisation*, 'the locus of focalisation' is outside the represented events, for example, in the case of a "narrator-focaliser"' (cf. Bal 2009:37). The narrator-focaliser is the voice that explains and/or reports the events that a proverbial camera is showing the reader in the text. In this case, the narrator-focaliser is the producer of *informative speech acts*.

Regarding *internal focalisation*, the locus of focalisation is inside the represented events (Tolmie 1991:278; cf. Resseguie 2001:21). Put simply, unlike external focalisation where the camera is unable to access the minds and feelings of the characters, internal focalisation allows the narrator-focaliser to possess the ability to delve into the minds and feelings of characters, conveying this information to the reader through notes or asides. The Fourth Gospel beckons the interpreter to engage in this kind of exploration.

Facets of focalisation

The exploration of the performative nature of the facets of focalisation in the selected narratives of the Fourth Gospel will follow the schema of Rimmon-Kenan (1983:77–82; cf. Tolmie 1991:274). She distinguishes the following three facets of focalisation:

Perceptual facet

This facet's exploration involves considering the spatial and temporal dimensions of the narrative. Greimas and Courtes (1979:337) refer to this aspect as 'spatialisation and temporalisation'. Concerning space, 'the focaliser's position may vary from a panoramic view to that of a limited observer' (Tolmie 1991:274). Regarding temporalisation (time facet), Tolmie (1991:274) points out that 'the focaliser may have at his/her disposal all the temporal dimensions of the story (past, present, and future), or it may be limited to the present and past experiences of the characters' (cf. Everaert-Desmedt 2007:30; Martin & Ringham 2000:8).

Psychological facet

The psychological facet focuses on the cognitive and emotive components of focalisation. The cognitive component refers to the contrast between restricted and unrestricted knowledge of the narrator-focaliser. In the case of the emotive component, the contrast between objective or neutral versus subjective or involved focalisation is a critical aspect to be explored or established (cf. Tolmie 1991:278).

Ideological facet

This facet of focalisation explores 'the way in which the characters and events of the story are evaluated' (Tolmie 1991:278). The ideological facet may be presented through 'a single dominant perspective or, conversely, through a plurality of ideological positions in competition, each vying to establish itself as the dominant perspective' (Tolmie 1991:278; cf. Lotman 1975:339–352).

The following sub-section will proceed with the application of the above-mentioned methodology to analyse the selected narrative from the Fourth Gospel to demonstrate their performative nature.

As already indicated, alongside the examination of focalisation, this article will incorporate aspects of the speech act theory, with a specific focus on the performative nature of utterances in its discussion of the facets of focalisation in the Fourth Gospel. Speech act theory will be limited to the study of utterances and their possible effects on the reader. Widely employed for exegetical purposes and literary analysis, this methodology aims to explore the performative nature of utterances in the texts (Botha 2009:486; Briggs 2001:4; Hobyane 2022:147–150; Tovey 1997:68; Van der Watt 2010:144).

The exploration of focalisation in the Fourth Gospel

In exploring the performative nature of focalisation in the Fourth Gospel, this article focuses on the narrative of Jesus and Nicodemus in 3:1–21. The rationale for choosing this particular text lies in the distinct manner in which the narrator-focaliser selects and presents information to the reader in this narrative. Explorations of other texts or narratives, such as Jesus and the Samaritan woman (4:1–42) and the feeding of 5000 people (6:1–14 and 22–71), yield unique results or perspectives. The author is currently engaged in another research project to demonstrate this from the mentioned narratives. With the aim to create context of this analysis, the following subsection provides a summary of the narrative of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3:1–21.

A summary of the story and commentary on John 3:1–21

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus probably contains the most well-known misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel (Keener 2003:546–547). The story is reported in 3:1–21 and falls within the section of Jesus' public ministry (1:19–12:50).

Nicodemus pays Jesus a visit at night. Bruce (1983:81) comments that, 'It is best to take the statement that Nicodemus's visit was paid at night as a simple factual reminiscence, without giving it an allegorical interpretation, as though the darkness without, reflected the darkness of Nicodemus's understanding, which required to be illuminated' (cf. Barrett 1978:204). Lindars (1972:149) already held a similar view when he said, 'Thus Nicodemus' nocturnal visit is a search for truth in which he himself will be exposed'. Wallace (2004:46) also points out that 'Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night because he belongs to the night in heart and mind' (cf. Brown 1975:130). Barrett (1978:169) already cautioned that, despite the suggestions by other scholars that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in search of the truth, the purpose of his visit is not explicitly mentioned. Regarding the narrative of Jesus and Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, Kanagaraj (2005:115) observes that after previously focusing on Jesus' ministry to the masses, John now shifts the focus of his ministry to individuals, for example, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman (4:1–42), and the βασιλικός (4:46). In this narrative, Jesus explains God's plan of salvation to Nicodemus, the Jewish ruler. The passage begins with the narrator's voice, as can be expected in a historical narrative, introducing the two characters and the time of the story. The text introduces them as follows:

Ἦν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων· οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτὸς [There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night].

In this context, the characters are Jesus and Nicodemus, the latter being a *Pharisee* of notable education and scholarly expertise. He held esteemed positions as a ruler of the Jews, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, a senator, and a privy-counsellor, signifying his authority in Jerusalem (cf. Bruce 1983:81; Henry 1996:1927). The story unfolds in Judea, and it is suggested that Nicodemus may have initially been drawn to Jesus by the miracles he performed (τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίησεν), as reported in 2:23–25 (Schnackenburg 1968:366). This report by the narrator-focaliser forms a critical connection between 2:23–25 and 3:1, while also offering the reader the essential context within which the conversation is taking place, as Vande Vrede (2014:715) also observes.³ It seems that Nicodemus desired to know more about Jesus, his teachings, his origin, and the miracles he was performing, and indeed 'more' is what he gets from Jesus.

Van der Watt (2007:13) comments that chapters 3–4 form a narrative that reveals that 'eternal life is available for everybody'. The intriguing aspect lies in the identity of the people Jesus encounters in this narrative section. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1997:130) suggest that sincerity and timidity are seen struggling together in the character of Nicodemus. From a narrative point of view, the story is presented through various levels of communication. Initially,

³The narrative transitions with 2:23–25, stating that many people believed in Jesus after seeing the signs he was doing (τὰ σημεῖα ἐποίησεν) is crucial. Scholars point out that the application of ἄνθρωπος to Nicodemus (3:1) connects him firmly to this transition, for he also tells Jesus that, 'no one can do these signs that you do' (οὐδείς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν).

the narrator-focaliser provides a report (*informative speech act*, e.g., vv. 1–2a). Here the narrator-focaliser provides the reader with necessary information regarding the space, time, and the statuses of the characters involved. While discussing this aspect of the story's context, it is imperative to point out that the kind of focalisation employed is not neutral in its performative intent. Rather, it provides the reader with essential information about the narrative's backdrop. Devoid of this contextual information, the reader would encounter difficulty in making sense of the unfolding story. Therefore, the sharing of this information is not merely an informative exercise but also performative in nature and intent. The shared details actively persuade the reader to cultivate pre-judgemental attitudes towards certain characters in the narrative. Subsequently, the story unfolds through a dialogue between the two characters. The narrator-focaliser directs the reader's attention to Jesus and Nicodemus, effectively positioning the proverbial camera on them and providing an opportunity to enjoy their interaction (questions and response speech acts, e.g., vv. 3–21). In these exchanges, the characters exchange ideas regarding the pressing issue at hand – the discourse on salvation.

The following section will continue with the analysis of focalisation, exploring its various types and facets while emphasising their performative nature in shaping the narrative.

Types of focalisation and its performative nature in John 3:1–21

When determining the type of focalisation in John 3, it is essential to bear in mind that the Fourth Gospel represents the theological interpretation of its author, John. From this consideration, it can be asserted that, generally, the type of focalisation found in the entire Gospel will be external focalisation. Accordingly, chapter 3 is no exception to this observation. The narrator-focaliser 'is external, but of course not excluded, from the unfolding events of the story' (cf. Hobyane 2022:2). He or she proves to have reliable insights about the story. Demonstrating reliable insights, they assist the implied reader by providing information about Nicodemus and his societal role and status. Specifically, the narrator reveals that Nicodemus holds esteemed positions as both a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. The narrator-focaliser proves to have some knowledge about this character (3:1). The report sounds emphatic, trustworthy, and reliable. This is commendable as the implied reader relies on the narrator-focaliser's information to know the characters and understand the story, as already alluded to. The implied reader is encouraged to stay close to the narrator-focaliser and trust the lenses through which the story is externally focalised. Consequently, a relationship of trust is built between the implied reader and the narrator-focaliser. This is already viewed as performative because it invites the implied reader to stay close to the narrator-focaliser to witness the unfolding of the story. The narrator-focaliser serves as the eyes through which the implied reader can perceive the narrative's development. In this performative dynamic, the implied

reader's ability to act or make decisions within the narrative is contingent upon following the unfolding story.

Regarding internal focalisation in John 3, it can be asserted that the narrator-focaliser's view is limited. All she or he could manage is to entrust the responsibility of conveying theological truths to the characters as they enter the dialogue. The narrator-focaliser neither discloses this information to the implied reader nor mentions whether Jesus (the Protagonist) was aware of this visit and its purpose beforehand. Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a sure knowledge that Jesus is the Rabbi who comes from God – judging by the nature of signs he performs. Jesus is focalised, introducing the object of quest in the narrative, that is, being born again [γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν] and its ensuing benefit (being able to see the kingdom of God [ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ]). On the one hand, the character, Jesus in particular, proves to know everything about the topic. Nicodemus, on the other hand, proved to know nothing about the subject of being born again (Brown 1975). Jesus exposes him in the opening words in his *responsive speech act* in verse 10 when he says:

οὐ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ταῦτα οὐ γινώσκεις [You are the teacher of Israel and you do not know this?]. (p. 138–139)

Although Nicodemus is introduced as a teacher of Israel and a ruler of the Jews, he is focalised as someone who possesses no knowledge of the focalised object (the subject of being born again), and therefore cannot be trusted by the implied reader. It is noticed that the encounter between these two characters rapidly changes from a dialogue to a monologue, with Jesus assuming the role of the primary speaker, sharing substantial information about the introduced subject. The prism through which the narrative information is conveyed or processed is heavily biased towards Jesus. This is judged as a deliberate act by the narrator-focaliser, as arranged by the implied author, to impact the reader. This way of focalising the narrative does have potential to persuade the implied reader to associate themselves with Jesus. The implied reader is encouraged to act on Jesus' point of view. The focalisation of the story suggests that the implied reader has nothing to learn from Nicodemus, as he knows nothing about being born again.

Facets of focalisation and their performative nature in John 3:1–21

Perceptual facet

The focus of the perceptual facet is on the aspect of space and time in the story. Regarding space, it seems that the narrator-focaliser is limited or fixed to the same angle of focalisation. However, he proves to have a full view of the proceedings between the two characters in the dialogue, starting from Nicodemus' movement into the space where Jesus is. In verse 1, the narrator-focaliser reports that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night [οὗτος ἦλθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν νυκτός] – this is a noteworthy point. The reference to the word 'night' [νυκτός] carries substantial implications for the implied reader. Night is associated with darkness, a contrast that is not attributed to the person of Jesus (see 1:7–9). Therefore, the movement of

Nicodemus from the dark night towards the focalised space where the dialogue takes place (where Jesus is) has some symbolic connotation, as already mentioned. Symbolically, Nicodemus' visit to Jesus can be interpreted as a movement from the dark state of life to the light-life in Christ (Wallace 2004:46). The implied reader by now knows and associates Jesus with the Light that has come into the world (1:7). It can also be viewed as a movement from a state of not knowing to gaining knowledge about salvation. The movement towards the focalised space should be credited to Nicodemus as a wise movement as he comes to seek knowledge regarding being born again. The perceptual facet, in this regard, is judged as performative in the sense that it encourages the implied reader to also approach Jesus in the text to seek for such kind of knowledge.

Regarding the temporal dimension, it cannot be proven from the text that the narrator-focaliser has all the temporal dimensions of the story. For example, the narrator-focaliser does not prove to know any previous events other than the present. It can therefore be suggested that his or her temporal dimension was limited to present focalised experiences of the characters. Although he or she provides information about Nicodemus' background, that is, he is a ruler of the Jews, this is all the narrator-focaliser reports to the reader.

Apart from this information, the implied reader remains unaware of any background or past events in the life of Nicodemus. Later in the narrative, the implied reader learns that Nicodemus holds the position of 'teacher of Israel' (3:10). This study acknowledges the humorous nature of the perceptual facet presented to the implied reader in this regard. Disappointingly, the implied reader discovers that the ruler of the Jews and the teacher of Israel knows nothing about the idea of being born again or experiencing a new birth or rebirth (Hendriksen 1961:133; cf. Louw & Nida 1996:509). The story, in this sense, is focalised in the manner that the implied reader is persuaded to engage in self-introspection as well. Through the unfolding dialogue, the Protagonist is focalised, informing Nicodemus (and the implied reader) about the past events concerning himself. The Protagonist mentions that he comes from heaven [ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου]. He also hints about the future, that is, to the cross [οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου]. This temporal dimension by the Protagonist should be encouraging and persuading to the believing reader. At the same time, it is an invitation to the unbelieving reader to make some considerations about believing in Jesus Christ.

Psychological facet

As suggested in the exploration of the type of focalisation, the narrator-focaliser is an 'onlooker' but not excluded from the unfolding of the story. The text does not provide enough information to enable the implied reader to determine the cognitive and emotive components of focalisation in reference to the narrator-focaliser. The text does not portray the narrator-focaliser as possessing specific knowledge about the

narrated world, especially regarding the content of the Protagonist's teachings. Nonetheless, it is noticed that this is not the case in some other Johannine narratives, such as 13:2–5 (see the analysis by Tolmie 1991:282). In those instances, the narrator-focaliser may have a more comprehensive and unrestricted knowledge of the focalised object compared to the disciples. Referring specifically to the passage in 3:1–21, the narrator-focaliser is limited in the information provided to the implied reader. The focaliser can only offer details about Nicodemus' identity and his role as a Jewish leader. The implied reader is not privy to any additional insights into the thoughts of the Protagonist (Jesus) beyond what transpires in the dialogue.

From the textual evidence at our disposal, it seems justifiable to suggest that the narrator-focaliser's cognitive component is restricted. The same can be said regarding his emotive component. It can be labelled as neutral or uninvolved.

However, the narrator-focaliser focalises Jesus conveying the necessary knowledge (theological truths) to Nicodemus and to the implied reader. As observed earlier, the study sees this type of focalisation as performative, as it has the potential to persuade the implied reader to soberly focus their attention on the Protagonist and the knowledge he is sharing. This has the potential to bring the implied reader to the point of having faith in Jesus.

Regarding the expansion of these theological truths in the narrative, few examples can be cited in the text:

Firstly, Nicodemus expresses confusion about the concept of 'being born again', especially when one is already old. In response, the Protagonist elucidates that to enter the kingdom of God, one must be born of water and spirit [ἐάν μὴ τις γεννηθῆ ἔξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος], which entails a thorough spiritual purification by the work of the Holy Ghost (Jamieson et al. 1997:131). This theological truth extends beyond Nicodemus; it is also imparted to the implied reader, making it inherently performative. Essentially, it emphasises the importance of placing faith in Jesus Christ for the attainment of eternal life (20:30–31).

Secondly, Jesus reveals to Nicodemus God's salvation plan for humanity in 3:16. He elucidates that God's love is neither limited to a few nor confined to a particular group, such as the Jewish people. Rather, his gift is intended for the whole world, encompassing all nations, cultures, and races. The epitome of this love is revealed in the sacrificial offering of his most priceless gift – his unique son (Blum 1985:282). Again, from a performative point of view, this announcement is both encouraging to the believing reader and inviting to the unbeliever.

Regarding the emotive facet in 3:1–21, it is nearly impossible to discern any emotional involvement from the narrator-focaliser or the Protagonist. The narrative does not unveil whether Nicodemus was ever confounded or if Jesus was

indignant during their dialogue. However, it becomes apparent that the Protagonist is focalised as calm and composed throughout the story. He engages with Nicodemus confidently and authoritatively. In this context, the emotional facet of focalisation can be described as 'neutral' or 'uninvolved'.

Ideological facet

When doing an analysis of the ideological facet of John 13–17, Tolmie (1991:283) makes an invaluable observation regarding the ideology of the entire Fourth Gospel. He helpfully points out that:

The ideological orientation of the Gospel as a whole is largely related to the question of Jesus' identity. The narrative is focalised in such a way that it becomes clear that the protagonist is to be viewed as a unique character. As the Son of God, he is sent by the Father to the κόσμος where he reveals his δόξα to mankind through various signs. The revelation of his δόξα comes to a climax during his 'hour', that is his crucifixion and resurrection. Furthermore, it is stressed throughout the Gospel that mankind's reaction to the protagonist is twofold: On the one hand there are those who accept his identity (this process is described as belief, knowledge or sight) and receive eternal life. On the other hand, there are those who reject his identity and deliberately choose to remain a part of the κόσμος.

From the textual evidence gathered so far, it can be argued that the ideological facet of John 3:1–21 aligns with that of the entire Gospel, as also observed by Tolmie. The narrative is carefully crafted to introduce the implied reader to Jesus and his ideological stance. He is introduced here as follows:

- The Son of Man who came down from heaven (v. 13)
- The Son of Man who will be lifted up – reference to his death on the cross and resurrection (v. 14)
- The only begotten Son [τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ] given by God the Father to the world (vv. 16–18), so that by believing in him the world may be saved and have eternal life. His coming into the world is also described as the coming of light [τὸ φῶς] (see also 1:9) into the world (vv. 19–20).

The above-mentioned points highlight the ideological facet of the passage, effectively conveying its message to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a representative of the unbelieving ruling and teaching class among the Jewish opponents, serves as an essential figure in the narrative. The ideological facet is not limited to Nicodemus alone but extends to the reader, both real and implied. As already highlighted earlier, another observation concerns the textual space given to the Protagonist to convey this message to Nicodemus. Nicodemus only came in to ask a few questions about being born again and thereafter becomes a mute character. The implied reader never heard from him again in this narrative. The text, through a dominant monologue, centres on the ideology of Jesus. In other words, the text is biased towards Jesus and the values he represents and/or advocates. This study interprets this type of focalisation as a purposeful choice by the author, and therefore performative towards the

implied reader. The text intentionally restricts the implied reader's exposure to viewpoints other than that of Jesus. Throughout Jesus' entire *responsive speech act* (vv. 10–21), there is a notable absence of interruptions from Nicodemus in the narrative. The author wants the reader to relate to Jesus and all that he represents.

Furthermore, in reference to Tolmie's observation provided earlier, it remains unclear how Nicodemus received and responded to the message regarding the identity of Jesus and his ideology. The implied reader is not immediately informed whether he believed or rejected the message. The revelation of Nicodemus's stance becomes apparent only when the reader progresses further in the Gospel to 7:50–51 and 19:39–40.⁴ This choice of presenting a character in a dialogue is not neutral in its pragmatic intent. The selection and presentation of the narrative material leaves the reader with no choice but to consider the propositions of Jesus, which is precisely what the author desires to achieve with the message of the Fourth Gospel (20:30–31).

Conclusion and summary of findings

The main objective of this article was to conduct an analysis of the narrative of Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) using focalisation as an analytical tool. The aim was to demonstrate how the Fourth Gospel can be understood or treated as a performative text, captivating and influencing the implied reader through this methodological approach.

The study began by providing a concise summary and brief commentary of the passage or narrative, outlining its unique setting and context. In this examination of the setting, the study delved into various aspects, such as space (where?), time (when?), the characters involved (who?), the central theme or plot (what?), and the (how?), that is, the manner in which the story is presented or focalised (Bal 2009:5; Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:7; Phelan 1996:8; Tolmie 1999:4). Regarding the type of focalisation, the article suggested that it can be described as external, indicating that the narrator-focaliser is positioned outside the story. He or she was also perceived as having reliable insights into the story, and as a result, the implied reader can trust the perspective and information provided by the narrator-focaliser. The analysis suggests that the role of the narrator-focaliser is commendable and does have the potential to encourage the implied reader to continue reading the story.

Regarding the three facets of focalisation, it was initially established that the *perceptual facet*, particularly in reference to the spatial dimension, is fixed or limited. The study observed, in reference to the spatial dimension, that Nicodemus' movement in the night [*νυκτός*] towards the Protagonist (Jesus who is already known to be the 'true Light') is rich with imagery of light and darkness, creating

⁴This study observes that even from these references, it is not explicitly stated whether Nicodemus believed in Jesus or not. The reader still does not know about Nicodemus' position in relation to Christ. In both instances, e.g., 7:50–51, Nicodemus still represents the interpreters of the Law, and in 19:39–40, he is just performing a Jewish burial custom.

intrigue for the implied reader and therefore demonstrating a performative nature. The movement towards the focalised space serves as an inviting aspect for the implied reader. As the reader engages with the story, this invitation beckons them to approach and encounter the transformative power represented by Jesus. The perceptual facet, concerning space, in this regard is judged as performative.

Regarding the temporal dimension of the narrator-focaliser, it was established that his or her temporal dimension was limited to the current experiences of the characters. However, the study suggested that the narrator-focaliser does possess some background knowledge of Nicodemus, specifically recognising him as a ruler of the Jews and being addressed as a teacher of Israel by the Protagonist. This revelation was deemed both surprising and disappointing to the implied reader, given Nicodemus' deficiency in understanding the concept of the new birth. The implied reader would expect such a prominent religious figure in the community to have some knowledge about the matter. The essence of the performative nature of this revelation lies not only in its invitation for the implied reader to reflect on their own understanding of the new birth in Christ but also a call to judge Nicodemus for his lack of insight.

The *psychological facet* of focalisation of the narrator-focaliser was described as having a restricted cognitive component and a neutral emotive component. The text does not reveal him or her as possessing some knowledge about the narrated world, particularly the theme of new birth, which the Protagonist presents. It was also observed that this is not the case with regard to the Protagonist's cognitive component. The Protagonist proves to have extensive knowledge (theological truths) about the theme of new birth. The study concluded that this is performative as it has the potential to invite and compel the implied reader to focus their attention on the Protagonist's teachings. This eventually brings the implied reader to a position of decision-making about Jesus in the text.

The third facet of focalisation centred on the *ideological perspective* of the story. The study posits, supported by evidence from the text, that the ideological facet of John 3:1–21 aligns with that of the entire Fourth Gospel. The story is meticulously crafted and presented in a way that highlights the dominance and allure of the Protagonist's ideology. Nicodemus, posing only a couple of questions (two, to be precise – 3:4 and 9), essentially functions as a catalyst for Jesus' ensuing monologue.

The study views this bias as a deliberate act on the part of the author and therefore performative towards the implied reader. It intentionally limits exposure to other religious ideologies, such as that of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a teacher of Israel. The story is focalised in a way that shields the implied reader from potentially harmful or wrong teachings, at least from the perspective of the author and Jesus. Such a choice of formulating and concluding the story

or dialogue is performative in its intent. The implied reader is left to make their own decision about Christ.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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