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NARRATION AND POINT OF VIEW

When we read fiction, our sense of who is telling us the story is as important as what happens. Unlike drama, in which events are acted out in front of an audience, fiction is always mediated or represented to us by someone else, a narrator. Often a reader is very aware of the voice of a narrator telling the story, as if the words are being spoken aloud. Commonly, stories also reveal a distinct angle of vision or perspective from which the characters, events, and other aspects are viewed. Just as the verbal quality of narration is called the voice, the visual angle is called the focus. Focus acts much as a camera does, choosing the direction of our gaze, the proportions and framework in which we see things. Both voice and focus are generally considered together in the term point of view. To understand how a story is narrated, you need to recognize both voice and focus. These in turn shape what we know and care about as the plot unfolds, and they determine how close we feel to each character.

A story is said to be from a character's point of view, or a character is said to be a focal or focalizing character, if for the most part the action centers on that character, as if we see with that character's eyes or we watch that character closely. But the effects of narration certainly involve more than attaching a video camera to a character's head or tracking wherever the character moves. What about the spoken and unspoken words? In some stories, the narrator is a character, and we may feel as if we are overhearing his or her thoughts, whereas in other stories the narrator takes a very distant or critical view of the characters. At times a narrator seems more like a disembodied, unidentified voice. Prose fiction has many ways to convey speech and thought, so it is important to consider voice as well as focus when we try to understand the narration of a story.

Besides focus and voice, point of view encompasses more general matters of value. A story's narrator may explicitly endorse or subtly support whatever a certain character values, knows, or seeks, even when the character is absent or silent or unaware. Other narrators may treat characters and their interests with far more detachment. At the same time, the style and tone of the narrator's voice—from echoing the characters' feelings to mocking their pretentious speech or thoughts to stating their actions in formal diction—may convey clues that a character or a narrator's perspective is limited. Such discrepancies or gaps between vision and voice, intentions and understandings, or expectations and outcomes generate irony.

Sometimes, the point of view shifts over the course of a narrative. Or the style of narration itself may even change dramatically from one section to another. Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), for example, is variously narrated through characters' journals, letters, reports, and newspaper articles.

The point of view varies according to the narrator's position in the story and the grammatical person (for example, first or third) the narrative voice assumes.

These elements determine information the reader

TYPES OF NARRATION

Third-Person Narration

A third-person narrator referring to all characters is virtually always omniscient, omniscient means knowing all that is going on in the story and does not participate in the action.

An omniscient or external narrator usually focus on an external, third-person usually that of a single character. The action from his or her central consciousness and feelings of a small number of characters about the central characters. For example, in *War and Peace*, the focal character does not explicitly refer to other characters, but suggest them through their actions. Third-person narrators consist mostly of omniscient or external narrators.

First-Person Narration

Instead of using third-person omniscient or external narration, in which the narrator refers to major or minor characters from the point of view of an external narrator, first-person narrators address an auditor, a character who is not part of the story.

One kind of first-person narrator is the unreliable narrator. First-person narrators may try to impress or persuade the auditor. Or narrators may know to be false or distorted. For example, in *Anna Karenina*, Anna's self-justification of her flaws or misperceptions of others should dismiss every reader's alert for ironies.

Less common is the first-person plural narrator. The plural may be used especially in the first person plural, as in Gaskell's classic *North and South*.

These elements determine who is telling the story, whom it is about, and what information the reader has access to.

TYPES OF NARRATION

Third-Person Narration

A *third-person narrator* tells an unidentified listener or reader what happened, referring to all characters using the pronouns *he*, *she*, or *they*. Third-person narration is virtually always external, meaning that the narrator is not a character in the story and does not participate in its action. Even so, different types of third-person narration—omniscient, limited, and objective—provide the reader with various amounts and kinds of information about the characters.

An *omniscient or unlimited narrator* has access to the thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of more than one character (often of several), though such narrators usually focus selectively on a few important characters. A *limited narrator* is an external, third-person narrator who tells the story from a distinct point of view, usually that of a single character, revealing that character's thoughts and relating the action from his or her perspective. This focal character is also known as a *central consciousness*. Sometimes, a limited narrator will reveal the thoughts and feelings of a small number of the characters in order to enhance the story told about the central consciousness. (Jane Austen's novel *Emma* includes a few episodes from Mr. Knightley's point of view to show what he thinks about Emma Woodhouse, the focal character, and her relationships.) Finally, an *objective narrator* does not explicitly report the characters' thoughts and feelings but may obliquely suggest them through the characters' speech and actions. Stories with objective narrators consist mostly of dialogue interspersed with minimal description.

First-Person Narration

Instead of using third-person narration, an author might choose to tell a story from the point of view of a *first-person narrator*. Most common is first-person singular narration, in which the narrator uses the pronoun *I*. The narrator may be a major or minor character within the story and therefore is an *internal narrator*. Notice that the first-person narrator may be telling a story mainly about someone else or about his or her own experience. Sometimes the first-person narrator addresses an auditor, a listener within the fiction whose possible reaction is part of the story.

One kind of narrator that is especially effective at producing irony is the *unreliable narrator*. First-person narrators may unintentionally reveal their flaws as they ^{then} ~~try~~ ^{unreliably} to impress. Or narrators may make claims that other characters or the audience know to be false or distorted. Some fictions are narrated by villains, insane people, fools, liars, or hypocrites. When we resist a narrator's point of view and judge his or her flaws or misperceptions, we call that narrator unreliable. This does not mean you should dismiss everything such a narrator says; but that you should be on the alert for ironies.

Less common is the first-person plural, where the narrator uses the pronoun *we*. The plural may be used effectively to express a shared perspective of a community, particularly one that is isolated, unusually close-knit, or highly regulated. Elizabeth Gaskell's classic short novel *Cranford* (1853) is a good example. The narrator

is a young woman who visits a community of genteel widows and spinsters in the English village of Cranford and describes their customs. At one point, a visitor arrives, Lady Glenmire, and all of Cranford society is in awe of her aristocratic rank and title. At an evening party, "We were all very silent at first. We were thinking what we could talk about, that should be high enough to interest My Lady. There had been a rise in the price of sugar, which, as preserving-time was near, was a piece of intelligence to all our housekeeping hearts, and would have been the natural topic if Lady Glenmire had not been by. But we were not sure if the Peerage ate preserves" (that is, whether aristocrats ate fruit jam). The high price of sugar doesn't seem "high enough" in another sense for a high-ranked guest to talk about.

The narrator of *Cranford* does refer to herself as "I" and sometimes addresses the reader as "you." The narrative perspective and voice is rather similar in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a novel that also portrays an isolated group that follows regulated customs. At a boarding school, a student, Polly, suddenly questions one of the rules: "We all went silent. Miss Lucy [the teacher] didn't often get cross, but when she did, you certainly knew about it, and we thought for a second Polly was for it [would be punished]. But then we saw Miss Lucy wasn't angry, just deep in thought. I remember feeling furious at Polly for so stupidly breaking the unwritten rule, but at the same time, being terribly excited about what answer Miss Lucy might give" (emphasis added). Ishiguro's narrator, like Gaskell's, resorts to different narrative perspectives and voices to represent the experience of both a community and an individual in it.

Second-Person Narration

Like narrators who refer to themselves as "we" throughout a work of fiction, *second-person narrators* who consistently speak to you are unusual. This technique has the effect of turning the reader into a character in the story. Jay McInerney, for example, in his novel *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) employed the second-person voice, creating an effect similar to conversational anecdotes. But second-person narratives can instead sound much like instructional manuals or "how-to" books or like parents or other elders speaking to children.

TENSE

Along with the grammatical "person," the verb tense used has an effect on the narration of a story. Since narrative is so wrapped up in memory, most stories rely on the past tense. In contemporary fiction, however, the present tense is also frequently used. The present tense can lend an impression of immediacy, of frequent repetition, or of a dreamlike or magical state in which time seems suspended. An author might also use the present tense to create a conversational tone. Rarely, for a strange prophetic outlook, a narrator may even use the future tense, predicting what *will* happen.

NARRATOR VERSUS IMPLIED AUTHOR

As you discover how a story is being narrated, by whom, and from what point of view, how should you respond to the shifting points of view, tones of voice, and hints of critical distance or irony toward characters? Who is really shaping the

story, and how do you know who? "Who is telling this story?" with practical, however, to distinguish the flesh-and-blood author who writes from the implied author. If you are writing an essay about a biography of the author or find little on the writing process or the intellectual information may enrich your approach), but it is not *necessary* only consider the narrator when account for the effects of distance or the actor's limitations. Many critics can be confused with either the flesh-and-blood narrator who relates the words or the implied author. About the "author" of a work, we must consider the tone and values that govern the work.

Why not ignore the idea of the implied author with writing an essay about *Great Expectations* to the author, Charles Dickens? We know that Pip's coming-of-age story begins with the first sentence of the novel: "I am telling the story: Pip, the first name, and my Christian name, and my name, came to be called Pip." The reader, as an abused child, but the narrator himself realizes when he has grown up that the reader understands Pip's errors and that the narrator and story who created the narrator and story or accurate would it be to attribute to Charles Dickens? The facts of the narrator's personality differ widely from that of Charles Dickens himself. Referring to a narrator and an implied author in essays, these concepts help us to understand what we might never pin down: Who in fact is telling the story in *Great Expectations*?

Reading a story, we know that the narrator is speaking to us, giving us a point of view. At the same time, we recognize that the narrator's words are not absolute truth, but rather a partial concept of the implied author's (necessarily imperfect) personality and that we must distinguish between the act of writing and the act of "telling" the story: The narrator is

story, and how do you know what is intended? Readers may answer the question "Who is telling this story?" with the name of the author. It is more accurate and practical, however, to distinguish between the narrator who presents the story and the flesh-and-blood author who wrote it, even when the two are hard to tell apart. If you are writing an essay about a short story, you do not need to research the biography of the author or find letters or interviews in which the author comments on the writing process or the intended themes of the work. This sort of biographical information may enrich your study of the story (it can be a good critical approach), but it is not *necessary* to an understanding of the text. And yet if you only consider the narrator when you interpret a story, you may find it difficult to account for the effects of distance and irony that come from a narrator's or a character's limitations. Many critics rely on the concept of the *implied author*, not to be confused with either the flesh-and-blood person who wrote the work or the narrator who relates the words to us. Most of the time, when we ask questions about the "author" of a work, we are asking about its implied author, the perspective and values that govern the whole work, including the narrator.

Why not ignore the idea of the narrator or the implied author? What's wrong with writing an essay about *Great Expectations* (1860–61) in which you refer only to the author, Charles Dickens? After all, his name is on the title page, and we know that Pip's coming-of-age story has some autobiographical aspects. Yet from the first sentence of the novel it is clear that someone besides Charles Dickens is telling the story: Pip, the first-person narrator. "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip." The reader sympathizes with Pip, the focal character-narrator, as an abused child, but he is also flawed and makes mistakes, as Pip himself realizes when he has grown up and tells the story of his own life. The reader understands Pip's errors through the subtle guidance of the implied author who created the narrator and shaped the plot and other characters. How useful or accurate would it be to attribute Pip's character and experience to the real Charles Dickens? The facts of the flesh-and-blood author's life and his actual personality differ widely from the novel's character, which in turn may differ from what Charles Dickens himself consciously intended. Hence the value of referring to a narrator and an implied author of a work of fiction. In critical essays, these concepts help us discover what even the most detailed biography might never pin down: Who in fact was Charles Dickens and what did he actually intend in *Great Expectations*?

Reading a story, we know that it consists of words on a page, but we imagine the narrator speaking to us, giving shape, focus, and voice to a particular history. At the same time, we recognize that the reader should not take the narrator's words as absolute truth, but rather as effects shaped by an implied author. The concept of the implied author helps keep the particulars of the real author's (naturally imperfect) personality and life out of the picture. But it also reminds us to distinguish between the act of writing the work and the imaginary utterance of "telling" the story: The narrator is *neither* the real nor the implied author.

Questions about Narration and Point of View

1. Does the narrator speak in the first, second, or third person?
2. Is the story narrated in the past or present tense? Does the verb tense affect your reading of it in any way?
3. Does the narrator use a distinctive vocabulary, style, and tone, or is the language more standard and neutral?
4. Is the narrator identified as a character, and if so, how much does he or she participate in the action?
5. Does the narrator ever seem to speak to the reader directly (addressing "you") or explicitly state opinions or values?
6. Do you know what every character is thinking, or only some characters, or none?
7. Does the narrative voice or focus shift during the story or remain consistent?
8. Do the narrator, the characters, and the reader all perceive matters in the same way, or are there differences in levels of understanding?

Because our responses to a work of fiction are largely guided by the designs and values implied in a certain way of telling the story, questions about narration and point of view can often lead to good essay topics. You might start by considering any other choices the implied author might have made and how these would change your reading of the story. As you read the stories in this chapter, imagine different voices and visions, different narrative techniques, in order to assess the effectiveness of the particular types of narration and point of view. How would each story's meaning and effects change if its narrative voice or focus were different? Can you show the reader of your essay how the specific narration and point of view of a story contribute to its significant effects?



EDGAR ALLAN POE
(1809–49)

The Cask of Amontillado

Orphaned before he was three, Edgar Poe was adopted by John Allan, a wealthy Richmond businessman. Poe received his early schooling in Richmond and in England before a brief, unsuccessful stint at the University of Virginia. After serving for two years in the army, he was appointed to West Point in 1830 but expelled within the year for cutting classes. Living in Baltimore with his grandmother, aunt, and cousin Virginia (whom he married in 1835, when she was thirteen), Poe eked out a precarious living as an editor; his keen-edged reviews earned him numerous literary enemies. His two-volume *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* received little critical attention when published in 1839, but his poem "The Raven"

(1845) made him a literary celebrity already an alcoholic, became increasingly famous in Baltimore.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had not as yet ventured upon insult. I vowed that I would not suppose, for a length of time, that I would be avenged; this definitiveness with which it was only punish but punish with irritation overtakes its redresser. It is to make himself felt as such to his victim.

It must be understood that no cause to doubt my good will. I could not and he did not perceive that I was making an immolation.

He had a weak point—this I must not forget. A man to be respected and even feared in his profession. Few Italians have such an enthusiasm for their craft. My own was adopted to suit the taste of the British and Austrian markets, like his countrymen, was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from the Italian vintages myself, and

It was about dusk, one evening during the carnival season, that I encountered my friend Fortunato. He had been drinking much wine and wore a parti-striped dress,¹ and his head was on his shoulders. I was so pleased to see him that I stopped to talk with him.

I said to him—"My dear Fortunato, you are looking well. Excellent! Well you are looking to-day. Excellent! And you have my Amontillado, and I have my cough."

"How?" said he. "Amontillado! Excellent! Excellent! Carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied. "You have your Amontillado price without consulting your friend. I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

1. Fortunato wears a jester's costume (a parti-striped dress).
2. Large cask.