4.9: Narration, Point of View, Dialogue

Narration

When doing a close reading, you also need to keep the big picture in mind. You already know how to look for major plot points, identify the setting, and list possible themes, but you should also keep in mind who is telling you the story. The narrator, or the person telling the story, is one of the most important aspects of a text. A narrator can be a character in the story, or he or she might not appear in the story at all. In addition, a text can have multiple narrators, providing the reader with a variety of viewpoints on the text. And finally, a story can be related by an unreliable narrator—a narrator the reader cannot trust to tell the facts of a story correctly or in an unbiased manner.
Note: One thing you should always keep in mind is that the narrator and author are different. The narrator exists within the context of the text and only exists in the story. However, in most non-fiction and some fiction, the author can model the narrator after him or her self; in this case, the author and narrator are different people sharing the same viewpoint.

Unreliable Narrators

In reading a first-person narration we encounter a potential problem that we do not have when we encounter an omniscient third-person narrative such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Can you think what that might be?

The factor I was hoping you would identify is that of the degree of reliability we can attach to a first-person narrative. As we read and discover more about a narrator we receive more and more indications that determine the extent to which we can trust the voice telling us the story. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is narrated by its central character, an English butler called Stevens, who recalls various events and incidents from the past in such a way as to constantly cast doubt on the dependability of his narration. At one point we are presented with a prolonged and heated argument between Stevens and the housekeeper Miss Kenton about the butler's ailing father, also a member of the staff of the same country house. The argument is narrated in direct speech, suggesting an authentic recreation of the actual incident, but is followed by a piece of narration by Stevens that immediately undermines our trust in his version of events:
But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: ‘these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realise their larger significance’. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall.

(p. 60)

There are numerous such examples of Stevens' ‘unreliability’ throughout the novel. These become more significant when placed against the wider historical and political backdrop of the story. Stevens had been butler to Lord Darlington, devoting his life to the service of someone he saw as a ‘great man’. However, as the narrative unfolds, and in spite of Stevens’ selective and constantly revised memory, Darlington is revealed as an unwitting pawn of Nazism. The unreliability of Stevens' narration draws an implicit parallel between memory and history and shows both to be liable to distortion and manipulation, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Fragmented Narration

We can see, then, that even when the identity of the narrator of a prose fiction is made clear to us, there are possibilities for uncertainty and ambiguity. So what are we to make of the next extract?.

Exercise \((PageIndex(1))\)

Please read the extract from A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce now and consider what the narrative is describing, and try to characterize the narrative voice and perspective.

Answer

This is not at all an easy narrative voice to characterise. Indeed, it is difficult to define who is narrating at various points in the opening section of this novel. However, I hope you realised at least that, as with the other two extracts, this is an account of childhood experience. It even begins with the time-honoured phrase used for telling stories to children – ‘Once upon a time’. The diction of the remainder of the opening sentence seems very childlike, an excited-sounding unpunctuated flow with repetitions of childish terms such as ‘moocow’ and nonsense words like ‘nicens’. We are a long way from narrative ‘realism’ here. As the novelist Anthony Burgess has implied, a more conventional representation of the child's impressions – ‘My first memories are of my father, a monocled hirsute man who told me stories’ – would have a very different effect on us as readers. Burgess described the beginning of Portrait as ‘the first big technical breakthrough of twentieth-century prose-writing’ (1965, p. 50) and I hope you were able to identify aspects of the extract that might warrant such a description.

The narrative seems to be made up of fragmented, unrelated associations; the father's ‘hairy face’; the mysterious Betty Byrne and her even more mysterious 'lemon platt'; the random and sometimes distorted snatches of song and the sinister nursery-rhyme-like refrain ‘Pull out his eyes /Apologise’; and the unexpected reference to Michael Davitt
and Parnell, which we need some knowledge of Irish politics to understand fully.

But can we detect some sort of order or pattern here? I think we can, though it is by no means obvious. The passage gives me the impression of an attempt to replicate a child’s growing awareness of his world, the relationships between those who populate it, and the development of his facility for language. The novel begins with an episode of storytelling as we have seen, though we can’t be sure whether the child or the father is the actual speaker at that point. The child’s stumbling attempts at language are suggested by the nonsensical line of song – ‘O, the green wothe botheth’ – which seems to be a corruption of the two lines quoted prior to that. A world of sensations, sight, sound, touch, smell, movement is invoked and gradually the wider world begins to impinge and we can see the child beginning to categorise and impose order on his growing knowledge; recognising different smells and the ages of the adults around him. The family unit is then transcended as mention is made of the Vances and the ‘different father and mother’, again implying a developing awareness on the part of the child-narrator. The sense of fragmentation remains strong, however, with the unexplained incident of the child hiding under the table (we are not told why he is there or why he must apologise). The critic Hugh Kenner has described the opening of Portrait as ‘contrapuntal’, and there are certainly at least two contrasting perspectives revealed in this extract; what Kenner calls ‘an Aristotelian catalogue of senses, faculties, and mental activities’ combined with ‘the unfolding of the infant conscience’ (quoted in Beja, 1973, p. 126).

Narrative Organization

The way a story unfolds is as important as who tells it. Even though prose is just “regular writing,” there are many different kinds of prose. Some prose is written as short-stories, while other prose is written as novels and novellas. Each type of prose has its own organizational scheme as well. For instance, some stories are organized into large sections, while others are organized into chapters. Some prose is even organized into sections of journal entries or letters between characters.

It is important to note how an author divides a story. Ask yourself why a chapter ends where it does. Does the chapter ending add suspense to the story, or does it just provide a place to transition to another character’s point of view? Does each section of a story have its own theme, or is there only one overarching theme? If you are reading an epistolary novel, why do you think one character chose to reveal certain information to another? Paying attention to how a text is organized, divided, and sub-divided, will provide you insight into the plot and theme.

Points of View

All prose is written in one of three points-of-view: first-person narration, third-person limited narration, and third-person omniscient narration.

First Person

First-person narration is written in the first person mode, meaning that that story is told from the viewpoint of one person who often uses language like “I,” “you,” or “we.” A first-person narrator can even be a character in the story she is narrating. Furthermore, the narrator will have a limited perspective; he cannot tell what the other characters are thinking.
or doing, and his telling of the story is influenced by his feelings about the other characters, the setting of the story, and the plot. When you read prose related by a first-person narrator, pay attention to the narrator's biases—they can tell you a great deal about the other elements of the story. For instance, here's an example of first person narration:

As I walked home from the store, I could feel the cool spring breeze stir my hair. It was getting warm, and I had been looking forward to the end of snow, sleet, and rain for the past few months. I saw Charley coming down the sidewalk towards me. He was a nice guy, that Charley, but I always thought he was a few bulbs short of a chandelier. He waved at me, and I nodded in return.

As you can see, in the first-person mode, the narrator tells the story directly from his point-of-view. He has the ability to influence the reader's opinions of characters through his narration-- here the narrator explains Charley is not a very intelligent person. However, for all the reader knows, this could just be the narrator's bias, not fact. Thus, when you read a story written in the first-person mode, look for evidence to support the narrator's claims.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

How would you describe the narrative voice and perspective of this extract?

Click to read the opening of [Great Expectations by Charles Dickens](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Literature_and_Literacy/Writing_and_Critical_Thinking_Through_Literature_(Ringo_...)

Answer

This is an example of first-person narration. The story is told by a character who is also a protagonist in the narrative. In *Great Expectations*, as in most first person narratives, the narrator is also the central character. The opening paragraph, with its emphasis on the narrator's family background, and the repetitions of his name – ‘So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip’ – are an immediate suggestion that the character telling us the story is likely to be at the heart of it. This is further reinforced as we are then given more information about his family and his circumstances.

The story begins, then, with the narrator giving us an introduction to his own childhood, moving rapidly from the general to the particular and his meeting with the ‘fearful man’ he met in the churchyard. Again, the relation of this incident at the start of the novel leads us to attach some significance to the episode and its participants, raising expectations that are not fulfilled until much later in the narrative.

Here, and throughout *Great Expectations* there is in a sense a dual narrative perspective, presenting events narrated by the adult Pip which are at times mediated through the perceptions of the child Pip. The opening encounter in the churchyard, for instance, is enacted with a vivid immediacy. Look again at the point at which the narrative shifts from description to direct speech. The rapidity of the exchanges, with further repetitions of the main character's name and the allusion to his feelings of terror engage us much more directly with the boy's feelings of horror and dismay.

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**Third-Person Limited and Omniscient**

Third-person narration is related by someone who does not refer to him or her self and does not use “I,” “you,” or “we” when addressing the reader. Here’s the same story as above, told in third-person narration:

As Bill walked home from the store, he could feel the cool spring breeze stir his hair. It was getting warm, and he had
been looking forward to the end of snow, sleet, and rain for the past few months. He saw Charley coming down the sidewalk towards him. Charley was a nice guy, but he was a few bulbs short of a chandelier. Charley waved at Bill, and he nodded in return.

In this example, the story is told by someone looking at the characters from an outside perspective. A third-person narrator will not be a character in a story, but an outside entity relating the story’s events. Third-person narrators rarely give biased accounts of events, but sometimes you will encounter an unreliable third-person narrator.

Some third-person narrators tell from a limited perspective. These narrators relate a story from one point of view, which is often the main character's point of view. Because readers can only tell what that character is thinking and feeling, they have a limited perspective of what other characters are thinking and feeling. In addition, since only one character's perspective is narrated, the audience gets to see the world through that character's eyes; this can be good for revealing certain facts about setting and character, but it can also present a slightly biased story.

The other type of third-person narration is told from an omniscient perspective. This means that the narrator relates the story in third person but has access to all information in the story. The third-person omniscient mode is often used when an author wants to relate a text through the viewpoints of several characters. Third-person omniscient narrators tend to be the most reliable narrators, as they can present all the facts of a story.

Finally, you will sometimes encounter a story that is told in first-person narration by multiple narrators. When reading a multi-narrator text, you must always be aware of who is speaking. Multi-narrator prose provides the reader with as much insight about the characters as third-person omniscient narration does. However, because the reader only receives first-person accounts from each character, this kind of narration tends to be very biased. Thus, it is up to the reader to analyze the information provided by the narrators to reach conclusions about the story.

Omniscient Narrators

This would perhaps be a good point at which to say a little more about third-person narrators. These are often known as an 'omniscient' narrators. An omniscient narrator is one that exhibits full knowledge of the actions, thoughts and feelings of each of the characters in the story. Austen invariably used this omniscient perspective, and it remains a popular means of narration amongst contemporary writers. Indeed, more recent authors have made great play of drawing attention to the narrator's role as an all-powerful figure, an embodiment of the author who has full control of the characters at his or her mercy. The beginning of Martin Amis' novel London Fields demonstrates this well:
This is a true story but I can't believe it's really happening.

It's a murder story, too. I can't believe my luck.

And a love story (I think), of all strange things, so late in the century, so late in the goddamned day.

This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murdereee. I know the time, I know the place. I know the motive (her motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they start creating.

What a gift. This page is briefly stained by my tears of gratitude. Novelists don't usually have it so good, do they, when something real happens (something unified, dramatic and pretty saleable), and they just write it down?

(1989, p. 1)

We might be forgiven for thinking that this is the direct voice of Martin Amis himself. After all, he is the author of the novel, the manipulator of events and characters. But as we read on we realise that this narrator is another character, an American writer called Samson Young, who is living in London in the flat of yet another fictional writer, Mark Asprey (note the initials). To further confuse matters a writer called Martin Amis also makes a cameo appearance in the novel! London Fields uses a variety of narrative perspectives. When Samson Young is actually present at the events described first-person narration is used; when he is not we have something akin to the omniscient narrator of the Austen extract in Activity 2, but we also have the sense that that narrator has a name and a role in the novel.
Dialogue/Dialog

Dialog is defined as a conversation between two or more people in a movie. In addition, a fictional piece could have a monologue where a character is speaking out loud when he or she is alone. A character, for example, may contemplate the pros and cons of taking some form of action in a monologue. Dialogue, monologue, and narration progresses the story in literature.

When analyzing character, the terms dialogue, monologue, and soliloquy take on increased importance. Conversation between two or more characters is referred to as dialogue (usually the majority of speech in plays consists of dialogue). A monologue is when one character delivers a speech to convey his or her thoughts, although other characters may remain on stage in scene. Similar to a monologue, a soliloquy is a speech made by one character but delivered when he or she is alone on stage. Knowing the root words of each term can help clarify the distinction. Monologue comes from the Greek words monos (single) and legein (to speak); soliloquy comes from the Latin words solus (alone) and loqui (to speak).

What would fiction be without dialogue? Take a look at the following example of a scene with and without dialogue.

Jack, Suzie and Alec are walking home after work. Jack begins the conversation, as he always does. Suzie speaks, as she is always the first one to respond. Alec is silent for a moment and the other two stop walking. Alec notices that they stopped so he stops walking too. Bewildered, Alec mumbles. Jack retorts. Alec looks at them both. Suzie interjects. Alec
returns a comment. After a brief moment of silence where all three look at one another, they shrug their shoulders and begin to walk again.


The above scene, with no dialogue but just a description, is only a group of actions with no meaning. They could refer to almost any type of situation. As a viewer, after watching the above scene, would you be interested enough in watching the rest of the movie with no dialogue?

Now read the scene with dialogue.

Jack, Suzie and Alec are walking home after work.

Jack begins a conversation as he always does, "How was the work day?"

“All right,” Suzie says as she is always the first one to respond.

Looking at Alec, Jack asks, “How was your day, Alec?”

Alec is silent for a moment as the other two stop walking. Alec notices that they stopped walking so he stops. Bewildered, Alec mumbles, “What?”

“How was your day?” Jack retorts.

“Fine, fine.” Alec looks at them both. “How do you think it was?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I asked.”

Suzie interjects, “That’s why we asked. We like to know how your day was.”

“Oh,” Alec returns.

After a brief moment of silence, where all three look at one another, they shrug their shoulders and begin to walk again.

“Wait a minute! You never did tell us how your day was,” Suzie questions. “Yeah!” agrees Jack.

“Oh,” Alec comments again. There is silence again and Suzie stops the other two.


“I quit my job,” Alec calmly states. Jack and Suzie look at each other stunned.

The dialogue gives the viewer an understanding of what is going on. If the above scene was at a beginning of the fiction piece, the viewer would have an idea what the conflict in the story was going to be.
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