

Unit 19 Point of view

'STORY' AND 'NARRATION'

In most theories of narrative two main dimensions or levels are identified. The first consists of the basic events or actions, in the chronological order in which they are supposed to have happened, together with the circumstances in which the actions are performed. This level is sometimes referred to as the **story**. The second level comprises the techniques and devices used for telling the 'story' to the reader. This latter level is sometimes referred to as **narration**. In effect, these two levels may be seen as corresponding to the distinction between the tale itself and the manner in which it is told – a distinction which is based upon our intuitive recognition that the same tale can be told in different ways. (See Unit 18: Narrative.)

POINT OF VIEW AND NARRATION

The term 'point of view' in the discussion of prose fiction has been used in a variety of ways (see Fowler 1986). It can be used fairly literally to refer to visual perspective – the spatial position and angle of vision from which a scene is presented. It can also be used to designate the ideological framework and presuppositions of a text (e.g. 'the point of view of the emergent bourgeoisie' or 'a male perspective'). Finally, it can be used as a term for describing and analysing basic types of narration – the relation of the teller to the tale in any narrative. It is this relationship – between point of view and narration – that will be examined in this unit.

The simplest distinction that we can make in point of view is between two types of narration: a first-person 'I-narration' and a third-person 'they-narration'.

First-person narration

First-person narration may be found in wide range of novels otherwise different in style and period. Novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*

(1884), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) are all told in the first person. Indeed, in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, the very chapter headings emphasize the use of the first person: 'I go to sea', 'I am very ill and frightened', 'I sow my grain', 'I am very seldom idle'. In most of these novels, the I-narrator is also the central protagonist of the tale. First-person narration often seems more subjective than third-person since it seems to position us within the consciousness of the narrating character. But there are ways of reducing this sense of subjectivity. An important subclass of first-person narration involves cases where the narrative is told not by the central protagonist but by a subsidiary character. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1922) is a well-known case of this. Although Nick, the narrator, tells the story in the first person, he remains on the margins of the events which involve the central figure – Jay Gatsby himself – whose story is thus told from some degree of narrative distance.

Third-person narration

Third-person narration can be used in such a way that we are not particularly aware of the role of the narrator, who remains outside the action of the tale. In such writing the text seems to operate as a simple window on the events of the story; and, because the role of the narrator is carefully effaced, this mode of narration acquires a reputation for objectivity. The opening of *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding is of this type, in the way it introduces an unnamed boy, who is carefully observed from without:

The boy with fair hair lowered himself down the last few feet of rock and began to pick his way towards the lagoon. Though he had taken off his school sweater and trailed it now from one hand, his grey shirt stuck to him and his hair was plastered to his forehead. All round him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat. He was clambering heavily among the creepers and broken trunks when a bird, a vision of red and yellow, flashed upwards with a witch-like cry; and this cry was echoed by another.

The degree to which this figure – the fair-haired boy – is presented from the outside is emphasized by the difficulty of transforming practically any of the text into the first person by replacing *he/his* with *I/my*. 'My hair is plastered to my forehead', for instance, would sound wrong because *plastered* implies a point of observation outside the figure. Overall, then, this passage uses the third person to maintain a position of apparent objectivity.

Not all uses of the third person, however, are of the same type; and it is important to recognize that there are contrasting possibilities within it, which we may sum up in terms of the following oppositions:

Internal	vs.	External
Restricted knowledge	vs.	Unrestricted knowledge

Internal/External: The example of third-person narration given above from *Lord of the Flies* observes characters and events from outside. But third-person narration may also work from inside the consciousness of characters by telling us how they think and feel. Much of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), for instance, despite its title, adopts Connie Chatterley's perspective rather than that of her lover, Mellors. The following passage, with its emphasis on Connie's feelings, is fairly representative of the novel as a whole:

Now she came every day to the hens, they were the only things in the world that warmed her heart. Clifford's protestations made her go cold from head to foot. Mrs Bolton's voice made her go cold, and the sound of the business men who came. An occasional letter from Michaelis affected her with the same sense of chill. She felt she would surely die if it lasted much longer.

Yet it was spring, and the bluebells were coming in the wood, and the leaf-buds on the hazels were opening like the spatter of green rain. How terrible it was that it should be spring, and everything cold-hearted, cold-hearted. Only the hens, fluffed so wonderfully on the eggs, were warm with their hot, brooding female bodies! Connie felt herself living on the brink of fainting all the time.

Although the passage, like the rest of the novel, is consistently in the third person, it none the less is devoted primarily to the inner sensations of the person it describes. Indeed, rhetorically, it is structured around a simple, basic opposition in Connie's sensations between warmth and cold (equivalent to life and death). Significantly, it is difficult to read the penultimate sentence as the narrator's comment. It makes most sense as a piece of *free indirect thought* (see Unit 21: Speech and writing) belonging in part at least to Connie herself. Third-person narration, therefore, has the option of being internal (as in the case of Lawrence) or external (as in the case of Golding).

Restricted/Unrestricted: A second distinction may be made in third-person narration between narrators with no restrictions on their knowledge and narrators whose knowledge is limited. We tend to assume that narrators have unrestricted access to knowledge unless there are indications to the contrary. Such indications of limited knowledge are usually signalled by phrases of doubt, such as *it seemed/appeared/looked as if*. The following paragraph, for example, from 'Open House' by Nadine Gordimer, uses several signals of doubt (like 'no doubt' 'somehow' and the question form: 'Hadn't he written a book about the Bay of Pigs?'):

The voice on the telephone, this time, was American – soft, cautious – no doubt the man thought the line was tapped. Robert Greenman Ceretti, from Washington; while they were talking, she remembered that this was the political columnist who had somehow been connected with the

Kennedy administration. Hadn't he written a book about the Bay of Pigs? Anyway, she had certainly seen him quoted.

It is no accident, of course, that this kind of narrowing down of a potentially omniscient narration should come in a narration that aligns itself strongly with the consciousness of one character, even while remaining third person. It is important to recognize, therefore, that third-person narration need not of necessity remain objective. It can quite easily work from subjective, internal and restricted positions.

FOCALIZATION

We can see, therefore, that the distinction between first-person and third-person narration is not sufficient in itself to account for different types of point of view. An additional complication arises from the fact that most prose fiction is not stable or homogeneous in the point of view which it adopts, so that it can be quite misleading to describe a story as 'told externally in the third person' (which would imply that this was a consistent point of view throughout). Even Ernest Hemingway, who might be thought an exemplar of the external third-person viewpoint, does in practice use a variety of modes of narration, often within the same text, which allow for subjective and internal points of view. Because of this instability in point of view, some accounts of narrative (e.g. Mieke Bal 1985, and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 1983) have developed an alternative model using the term **focalization**. Focalization refers to the way in which a text represents the relationship between *who* 'experiences' and *what* is experienced. The one who experiences is termed the **focalizer**, and who or what the focalizer experiences is then called the **focalized**. Focalization falls into two main types: external focalization, where an anonymous, unidentified voice situated outside the text functions as focalizer; and character focalization, where phenomena are presented as experienced by a character within the story.

It is possible, then, to map shifts and tendencies in focalization within any one text by using the following simple notation:

External focalizer	EF
Character focalizer (first person)	CF1
Character focalizer (third person)	CF3
Focalized phenomenon	F

The advantage of the notion of focalization is that it helps to reveal the way a text will shift from sentence to sentence in terms of who is experiencing what and how. Crucial evidence for deciding who is focalizing is the presence or absence of verbs of experiencing – such as *look, see, touch, smell*, etc. Consider the following example from Rosamund Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) (the sentences have been numbered):

[1] She [Olivia] ran down to the next floor, telephoned for a taxi, then

opened the door of Etty's bedroom, adjoining the sitting room. [2] Silence and obscurity greeted her; and a smell compounded of powder, scent, toilet creams and chocolate truffles.

In the first sentence Olivia and her actions are focalized from without by an unidentified focalizer. In the second sentence, however, the smell and the silence are impressions that belong to Olivia rather than to the external focalizer of the first sentence. The focalization shifts therefore from external focalization (EF) to character focalization (CF). This can be summed up as follows:

Sentence 1: EF (unspecified) → F (Olivia)

Sentence 2: CF (Olivia) → F (silence, smell, etc.)

Similar shifts can be detected in the following passage from the same book:

[1] Between stages of dressing and washing she [Olivia] packed a hasty suitcase. [2] Pack the red dress, wear the dark brown tweed, Kate's cast off, well-cut, with my nice jumper, lime green, becoming, pack the other old brown jumper – That's about all.

Again, the extract begins as externally focalized, but in the second sentence there is a switch to Olivia's 'inner speech' or thoughts, as she does her packing (presented in free indirect style; see Unit 21: Speech and writing). Moving into the character's consciousness in this way entails a change of focalization from external to character focalization. Here again we can summarize:

Sentence 1: EF (unspecified) → F (Olivia packing)

Sentence 2: CF1 (Olivia) → F (Olivia packing)

On this occasion, the notation helps to highlight not just a shift in focalization, but the way in which Olivia in this passage comes to be focalizer of her own actions. For a moment she is the object of her own subjective consciousness in a way that is both intimate and distanced. In ways such as these the notion of focalization can become an important supplement to notions of point of view, because it prompts close attention to the shifts, developments and balances within point of view within a particular text. *The Weather in the Streets*, for instance, moves between external and character focalization which is centred primarily on Olivia, who figures sometimes as third person, sometimes as first person. These subtle variations help construct her as simultaneously both subject and object of the narrative.

Focalization can in this way be studied in terms of how it is realized from one sentence to another in a text. It may be observed at the level of the form of the text. But focalization at a deeper level is more than this. Patterns of focalization are at once the expression and construction of types of consciousness and self-consciousness. In that respect, *The Weather in the Streets* is very much a novel of the first half of the twentieth century. It is

quite distinct, for instance, from *Robinson Crusoe*, even though Crusoe also figures as both subject and object of his own narrative. The relentless 'I' of Crusoe's narrative seems to present the human subject as individual, stable, unified and separate. The shifting patterns of focalization in *The Weather in the Streets*, on the other hand, seem to present an idea of subjectivity as split and dispersed at the very moment that it becomes possible to grasp it in a self-conscious way.