7 Point of View

The story writer has a number of options to consider when deciding how to present events. The final effect of a story is generally achieved through specific manipulations of character and plot. For this reason, the writer's most important technical decision may be what *point of view* to use. Point of view is determined by who is telling the story—an unidentified author, the protagonist, a minor character—and the degree of knowledge possessed by the teller. To decide what point of view to use, an author needs to ask certain questions. For example: How involved do I want the reader to be in the thoughts and actions of my characters? How much should be revealed? What vantage will allow the strongest climax and the most effective resolution of tensions? The basic possibilities are worth examining carefully.

VARIETIES IN THE USE OF NARRATIVE VIEWPOINT

First Person. This means that the story is told from the point of view of a participant—is, indeed, seen through that person's eyes. The narrator, or teller, uses the first-person "I," and access to information is determined by the role of the character. That is, the reader will only know what that "I" reports. However, the writer can exercise a good deal of control by deciding how to place that "I." The speaking voice can belong to a minor character who sees key events from a distance, thus giving an appearance of objectivity. Or, at the other extreme, the teller can be positioned at—and *be*—the center of interest. Both Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (Chapter 6) and Naguib Mahfouz's "The Conjurer Made Off with the Dish" (Chapter 3) are stories told in the first person by the protagonist. Behind them, invisible to the reader, is the controlling presence of the author, who can be said to don the mask of the character. We should never assume that the author is speaking about his or her own experience. This is fiction, after all, and the story belongs to the invented teller.

Second Person. We rarely encounter fiction written in the voice of the second person, or "you," but it does exist. Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes has written a powerful short story, "Aura," using the "you" address. More recently, Jay McInerney adopted this point of view for his highly popular novel *Bright Lights, Big City*. But there are not many other instances, and for good reason. The use of "you" creates a fundamental problem with character identification. "You" is by definition an object of address, and its use implies the necessary presence of another. The sentence, "You wake up and get dressed," suggests either an all-seeing onlooker, an author adopting an intimate relation to the character, or a personality capable of commenting upon its every movement with a self-conscious detachment. Either

possibility raises great problems for a writer with a story to tell, and most writers therefore avoid this mode of address altogether.

Third person. Third person is the most widely used vantage in fiction, probably because it is the most adaptable. The third-person address assumes a neutral, or objective, presentation. It is the lens of the camera trained upon the action. The narrator is presumed to be the author, standing outside the events of the narration. Occasionally, especially in early novels like Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the author would take the liberty of intruding a first-person voice into the third-person action, commenting or philosophizing, something like, "I will now leave my hero in the arms of his beloved . . . ." The effect is intimate, and often humorous, but such intrusions also break the reader's spell. We are awakened, however briefly, from our immersion in events and reminded that this is a book we are reading. Most fiction, however—and certainly most modern fiction—observes a strict separation between the author and the narrative.

The possible variations of the third-person narration are endless, for the author can choose the degree of involvement as well as the extent of knowledge. He or she can be *omniscient* (from the Greek for "all-knowing"), with access to every thought and emotion of the characters. Or the author can elect to be partially informed (the mode is called, somewhat self-contradictorily, the *limited omniscient*), assuming insight only into certain characters—or else assuming only partial insight. Or the author can restrict himself or herself to the position of pure observer, taking in exteriors and noting actions and conversations, but with no pretense to access to the characters' inner workings. French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet takes this approach to extremes, reducing his narratives to nothing more than the minutely rendered reports of what is available to the eye.

In his long story "The Dead," James Joyce shows how a writer can shift from one vantage to another, achieving, in this case, a texture of great complexity and mounting psychological force. Joyce begins the story (Chapter 13) with a straightforwardly objective use of the third person: "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy doorbell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest." And when he introduces his protagonist, Gabriel, one of the guests, the treatment is likewise objective.

Very soon, though, we are let in on what might be called Gabriel's uppermost, or most immediate, thoughts and emotions. Joyce describes his reaction to a remark made by Lily thus: "He was still discomposed by the girl's bitter and sudden retort. It had cast a gloom over him which he tried to dispel by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie." By the end of the story, however, we have been brought into the deepest reaches of his self. Joyce skillfully slides us over the barrier that lies between objective and subjective views, and we feel that we have come to inhabit Gabriel's mind: "He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age." Some part of the story's power surely has to do with the distance we have traveled from the very first third-person mention of Lily.

In the last passage quoted, Joyce switches form the third-person objective to the omniscient mode. In giving us Gabriel's thoughts (notice that he dispenses with the customary "he thought" attribution), he makes use of the *interior monologue*. This is yet another technique. Used in the first person or, as here, the third person, the interior monologue gives the reader direct access to the inner life of a character. Gabriel's thoughts are here composed into orderly sentences and give a stylized transcription of his thought process. Interior monologue is in this way distinct from *stream-of-consciousness* presentation. Stream-of-consciousness, used by Joyce in his novel *Ulysses*, attempts to express the inner process directly, incorporating unedited the characters' incidental thoughts and stray observations. Here is Leopold Bloom, Joyce's protagonist from *Ulysses*, shown in the full rambling chaos of his thoughts: "Where is my hat, by the way? Must have put it back on the peg. Or hanging up on the floor. Funny, I don't remember that. Hallstand too full. Four umbrellas, her raincloak."

It is vital to note that not only do writers use different vantages to tell their stories, but they may also grant their narrators varying degrees of intelligence and reliability. Indeed, one of the staples of modern fiction is the story told by the *unreliable narrator*, a figure whose own personality in some way colors the telling of the events. The story is always filtered through the voice that tells it. That voice may belong to a liar, a fool, or a person so taken up with appearances that he misses the real point of what he is reporting. The reader should always be alert for clues about the narrator's own personality and strive to measure the truth of what is told accordingly. As the old saying goes: "Trust the tale, not the teller."

CONTRASTING VIEWPOINTS AND IRONY

A perfect instance of a story that needs to be carefully filtered by the reader is Frank O'Connor's "My Oedipus Complex," which tells of events in the faraway world of adults as they are experienced by a watchful, but also naive, boy.

Frank O'Connor (1903–1966)

Frank O'Connor was born Michael O'Donovan in Cork, Ireland. His family's impoverished circumstances prevented him from finishing even his early schooling, but his tremendous love for books stood him in good stead—he achieved a place as one of the greatest short story writers of all time.

During the Irish struggle for independence. O'Connor was a member of the Irish Republican Army. Afterwards, when he supported himself working as a librarian in Cork and Dublin, he began to work at short fiction. O'Connor's first important publication came in 1931 when the *Atlantic Monthly* printed "Guests of the Nation,"