The Power of Narrative Voice and Point of View in Key Texts

George Norton argues that a writer's choice of narrative voice not only shapes our response to the characters and their story, but can also reveal the political stance of the text.

The Secret Agent – Theatre O's stage adaptation at the Young Vic

'The study of the novel in the 20th century,' the critic Mick Short argues, 'has to a very large extent been the study of point of view.' How writers construct viewpoint and make choices about narration is crucial to the analysis of prose fiction; problematically for A Level students, it's also an area of literary criticism most freighted with complex terminology. The purpose of this article is partly to explain some of the most useful concepts and jargon to give your discussion of narrative some extra precision, but also to show how narrative viewpoint can be key to an understanding of the politics of a novel or short story.

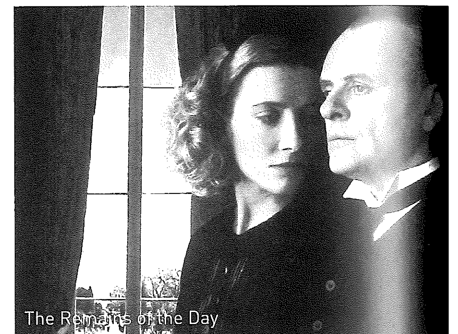
First-Person Narrators

The narrative theorist Gérard Genette distinguishes between two different sorts of first-person narrator: the narrator who is the hero of their own story (Jane Eyre or Huck Finn) and narrators who tell the story of the novel's protagonist. Good examples of the latter are Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. The interesting thing about both Nick and Marlow is that neither is simply the disinterested narrator of someone else's story. Indeed we could say that they move from Genette's second category to his first as both get actively involved in the narrative, influencing events. Marlow lies to Kurtz's fiancée, to prevent things becoming 'too dark altogether', allowing her to believe that the corrupt imperialist was 'a universal genius', utterly devoted to her. Similarly, Nick, who, like Marlow makes his 'choice of nightmares', protects Gatsby's reputation after his death, literally keeping his name clean by erasing the 'obscene word' scrawled on the steps of Gatsby's house in the final pages. As these examples show, Genette's distinction is useful but needs flexible application.

An unreliable narrator makes a text unstable, creating a space for the reader to construct a different narrative for themselves

The Unreliable Narrator

Nick is also an excellent example of an **unreliable first-person narrator**. In a sense, all first-person narrators are unreliable, their viewpoint by definition



The Remains of the Day

subjective as they interpret events according to their own beliefs and values. However, the term should be reserved for narrators in texts which actively draw attention to the fact that the narrative viewpoint is not to be trusted. This sets up a discrepancy between what the speaker tells us and what is actually going on, and often results in irony. Because ironic texts cannot be taken at face value, as readers we become involved in interpreting what the narrator describes. An unreliable narrator, therefore, makes a text unstable, creating a space for the reader to construct a different narrative for themselves.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, the unreliability of the narrator, an ageing butler called Stevens, becomes apparent to the reader quite slowly. In retrospect, we come to realise that the seemingly unnecessary subordinate clauses ('I should

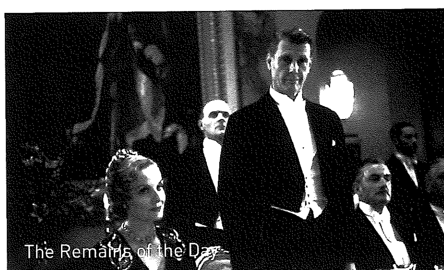
The Great Gatsby

say', 'I should point out', 'as I recall') which pepper Stevens' pedantically formal style, though designed to establish the veracity of his story, in fact serve to do the exact opposite, implying that Stevens is evasive and misrepresents the truth of situations. Indeed, evasions are key to Stevens' view of his work; he believes

> it is, in practice, simply not possible to adopt [...] a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service.

The qualities which make him a great butler (a lack of curiosity, a reluctance to criticise his superiors) are precisely those which make him an unreliable narrator. 'Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?' Miss Kenton asks him in exasperation, a substantial clue to the reader that he's pretending to us, and himself, just as much as he's pretending to her. Unlike other unreliable narrators, Stevens ultimately comes to realise the extent of his own deception of himself and others, facing up to the truth about Lord Darlington's Nazi collaboration and his own missed opportunities with Miss Kenton. Tragically, this moment of enlightenment (coinciding with the switching on of the lights on Weymouth pier) comes much too late; the reader knows way before Stevens that he didn't have

> the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes.


The Remains of the Day

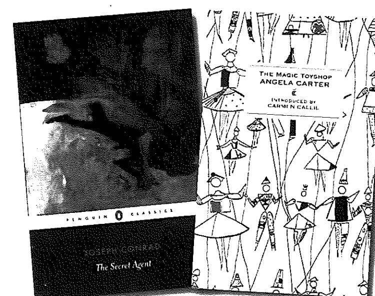
Third-Person Narration

Whereas first-person narration allows the reader direct insight into the narrator's mind, third-person narration can offer greater detachment and objectivity, especially if **omniscient narration** is used. Omniscient means 'all knowing', so an omniscient narrator sees everything that happens and knows everything about the characters and their thoughts; omniscient narration can be **unintrusive** or **intrusive**. When unintrusive, we are not really aware of how the story is told; the writing is apparently transparent, the action presented without authorial judgement or interpretation. Such a style is characteristic of many realistic modern novels and is employed by writers like Graham Greene and Ernest Hemingway.

However, earlier novelists, especially in the 19th century, like to comment on the action and the characters as the story progresses and so interrupt their narratives to remark on the significance of what is being presented and, often, provide a moral interpretation of events. This may or may not be equivalent to the voice of the 'real' author. In novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, the **intrusive narrator** is by and large understood as a trustworthy, constructive influence in making sense of the text, though more recent critics have found this problematic, seeing the omniscient voice as having no more or less authority than any other in the text. At one point in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the narrator remarks of the odious Mr Casaubon,

> For my part, I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self.

Are such comments designed to rebalance the reader's sympathies or should they be taken as ironic, an indication of even the supposedly detached narrator's dislike? In many contemporary (and interestingly also in very early) novels, what can be construed as heavy-handedness (telling rather than showing) is abandoned in favour of a more disruptive intrusive narrator who destabilises the apparently transparent process of narration. Novels by Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Jeanette Winterson are good examples of this tendency.



The Remains of the Day

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As I've said, prose fiction written in the third person is sometimes characterised as detached, free of the subjective viewpoints of particular characters. However, there are two related techniques – free indirect style and focalisation – which allow the exploration of an individual consciousness without using a first-person narrator. Focalisation describes the way in which third-person narration privileges the perspective of a specific character or characters (the focaliser), thus relinquishing omniscience or objectivity. It's quite possible to have more than one focaliser, as, for example, in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* or Nick Hornby's *About A Boy*. These multiple viewpoints mean that the reader has no stable perspective from which to view things, which can make the experience of reading perplexing and equivocal.

Free Indirect Style

Another way of bringing the reader closer to the viewpoint of a particular character while remaining in the third person is a technique known as free indirect style. Gérard Genette defines this as occurring when

> the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or [...] the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are merged; in immediate speech, the [omniscient] narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him.

Free indirect style, explains David Lodge,

> gives the illusion of intimate access to a character's mind, but without totally surrendering authorial participation in the discourse.

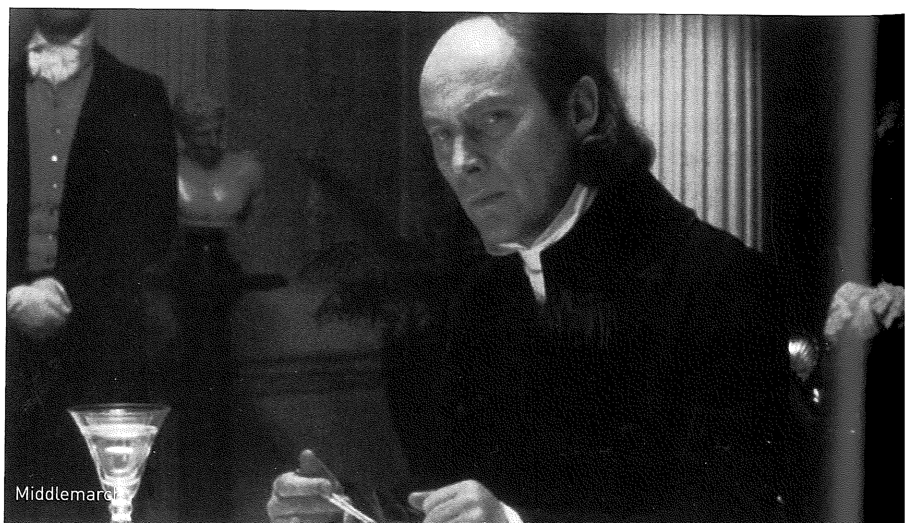
Here's an example from Angela Carter's novel *The Magic Toyshop*. Fifteen-year-old Melanie, newly orphaned and intensely middle-class, has just met her cousin Finn:

> They had come to London and eaten rabbit pie and the day ended inappropriately with music and dancing. Finn dancing in his stained vest and Francie playing the fiddle like the devil himself who had been a fiddler, and the dumb aunt in cape of fiery hair whistling along a flute. Or ha she dreamed it? But, if so, why? And if she had not dreamed it, how had she got back to bed? Had Finn carried her? She pictured herself in her graceless flannel pyjamas clutched to Finn' narrow young breast, she limp as a bolster wit a black wig on it. Finn looked like a satyr. Mayb his legs were hairy under the worn-out trouser coarse-pelted goat legs and neat, cloven hoove Only he was too dirty for a satyr, who would probably wash frequently in mountain streams

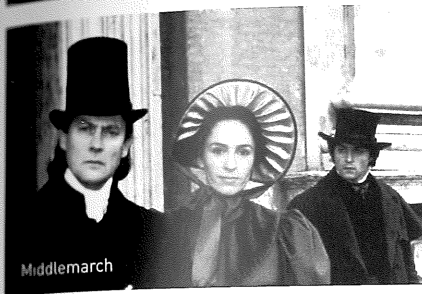
It's important to stress that not all of this passage is in free indirect style but key parts of it are. Certainly the rhetorical questions ('Or had she dreamed it? But, if so, why?') are Melanie's thoughts and are presented in an approximation of her voice. Similarly, the bookish Melanie tenc to see things in terms of their literary equivalents so that it is Melanie rather than the omniscient narrator who thinks Finn looks 'like a satyr'. Carter also mimic Melanie's immature voice through the use of fairly straightforward sentence structures ('Finn looked like a satyr') and her snobbish, fastidious attitude to Finn's less than rigorous personal hygiene. This she uses to deflect her sexual interest in him, something which has already been mentioned when she pictures herself 'clutched to Finn's narrow young breast'.

Politics as well as Form

I said at the start of this article that questions of viewpoint are not simply arid discussions of form but key to a text's politics as well. A fine example of this can be seen in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. *The Secret Agent* has an omniscient narrator but one who is far from detached and objective; this voice is cynical and jaundiced, contemptuous of the human failings and idiocies exposed by the novel's action. However, Conrad makes frequent


Middlemarch

The Remains of the Day



Middlemarch

use of free indirect style too, giving the reader an insight into the characters' minds unmediated by the narrator's disdain; and often there is an ambiguity over which voice is speaking at a given time. In the novel's final paragraph, the Professor, a political fanatic equally contemptuous of ordinary people, walks away,

> averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable – and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world.

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Clearly most of this passage is in the voice of the omniscient narrator, but there is ambiguity over the phrase 'the odious multitude of mankind' which, given Conrad's characterisation of the Professor, is just as likely to be his sentiment. If this is the Professor's voice, it's easy to ascribe this withering judgement to an ideological extremist, verging on insanity; if it's the assessment of the narrator, such a voice is much less easy to dismiss and may be close to Conrad's own viewpoint, making the novel as a whole even more pessimistic.

The identification of the speaker is essential to meaning, going far beyond a simple academic question of narrative form.

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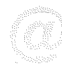
Further Reading

Lodge, D. 1994. *The Art of Fiction*. Penguin.

Short, M. 1994. *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. Longman.



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The Naïve Narrator and the Worldly Reader – Narrative Voice in the *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

Child Narrator – *Spies*

The Unreliable Narrator in *Enduring Love*

The Art of Narrative – an Interview with David Lodge

The Unreliable Narrator – How Unreliable is Unreliable?

The Role of the Narrator in Fiction

The Role of the Narrator in Fiction – a Focus on Second-Person Narratives

In emagclips, Professor John Mullan on Aspects of Narrative: First-Person Narratives and Third-Person Narratives and Nicolas Tredell on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: Nick as narrator

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