English & Cultural Studies 1A03

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Narrative Form or Narration in Fiction

Questions to ask of fiction: Who is doing the talking? Who is relating the story? What is the point of view?

By asking these questions, you are in fact asking about what kind of narration or narrative form is being used in a short story. There are several different kinds of narration, some more experimental and risky than others. But three types of narration dominate the writing of fiction, whether short stories or novels. Narration is a central element of form in fiction, along with characterization, setting, plot, symbol and metaphor. In fiction, as in poetry, and as in all forms of literature, form and content complexly support each other. An author selects a particular narrative form to accomplish a certain kind of work and to perform or embody in language the story's meanings. It shapes how the story is told and is therefore central to understanding the story that is being told. Identifying the particular narrative form in a short story is an important first step; but the next step is even more important-- and that is determining how the choice of that form contributes to how the story means what it means.

Three common types of narration or narrative form (plus a bonus fourth that is uncommon):

1.) <u>First Person Narration</u>

Example: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

--Because this short story is only and entirely composed of diary entries, the only voice we read and hear is the voice of the diarist, i.e., the otherwise unnamed wife of John, the physician. Everything is thought and told from the point of view of an "I."

--So, there is no narrator standing back and describing what happens to the diarist, or conveying the life and experience of the diarist---only the diarist describing what she is experiencing. We don't read something like, "John's wife didn't know why she should write this. She didn't want to. She didn't feel able." That kind of narration would no longer be First Person Narration but Third Person Narration (see below). First Person Narration here makes sense since it conveys the claustrophobic life that the narrator lives, the way in which she is trapped, incarcerated both by others and by her own thoughts, fears, and imaginings. First person narration can capture a pressing sense of immediacy. The fact that Gilman's story is not only First Person Narration but narration in the form of diary entries helps convey

the sense that we are privy to the speaker's secrets, otherwise hidden from others . . . like the three doctors in her life. (Who are the three doctors in her life?)

Example: Alice Munro, "Friend of My Youth"

I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dreamed stopped, I suppose because it was too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness.

--Note how the narrative is <u>not</u> written this way: "She used to dream about her mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same. The dream stopped, she supposed because it was too transparent in its hopefulness." To write the story in this way would be to use a Third Person Narration (see below). No one is standing back and relaying the story of the daughter to us. The daughter is relaying the story to us directly. Munro's choice of this narrative form makes a great deal of sense when you consider that "Friend of My Youth" explores the difficulties of telling one's own story.

--But early on in the story, Munro complicates her First Person Narration by removing most of the references to "I" and by removing phrases like "as my mother remembered"—words and phrases that remind us that this is a First Person Narration. These are the words and phrases that in effect say: "I am the one telling the story, including telling the story of a story my mother told me . . . but it is still me speaking!" But for parts of "Friend of My Youth" those identifying words and phrases drop out and it is in these parts of the story that it can feel like the narrator-daughter has stepped out of the narration, absented herself, letting the story of the Grieves's sisters tell itself. For moments in this First Person Narration, we are invited to forget that it is a story spoken in the voice of the daughter (or even in the voice of the mother) and so not a First Person Narration at all. That individual and identifiable voice will soon surge back, to be sure, but for parts of the story it is easy to forget that the whole story is spoken in that particular voice, the voice of the daughter remembering her mother's memories and struggling to affirm herself in her mother's powerful wake.

--Munro accomplishes several things by revising the First Person Narration in this way. For example, she reminds us that this is, after all, a story precisely about the complex ways in which the narrator-daughter is over-written by the stories of other people, especially her mother. The fact that the narrator-daughter sometimes fades from the narrative puts to us how powerful these other stories are. –And how important. By sometimes absenting herself from the narrative, the daughter-narrator honours the stories of others, lets them unfurl alongside her own story, affirming the fact that her own story is inextricably bound up with her mother's story. The daughter-narrator, the teller of this tale, finds it very hard to honour her mother's story, and actively seeks ways to take control of it, long after her death. But the narrative of the tale tells a different story, letting other stories breath and have life amid the daughter's own. Trust the tale not the teller!

2) <u>Third Person Narration</u>

Example: James Joyce, "The Dead"

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 when the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest.

--Characters in the story are not referred to as "I" or "we" as in First Person Narration but only by name or as "he," "she," "they." We don't hear Lily say, for example, "Well, that night I was literally run off my feet. Hardly had I brought one gentleman into the little pantry and helped him off with his overcoat when the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and I had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest."

--Although most of the remainder of the story will be taken up describing Gabriel Conroy's experiences, thoughts, feelings, and memories, here, at the start of the story, "someone" else is describing events in the Morkan's home for which Gabriel is not yet present. He and Gretta haven't arrived at the home when the narrative begins. Yet we hear about what is going on in the home, specifically about how Lily is run off her feet greeting guests. Importantly, that narrator, that anonymous "someone" is not a character in the story but in fact completely removed from the story's characters and characterizations. The omniscient—"all-seeing"-- narrator moves effortlessly "above" the scene in Dublin, relating the stories of those who live there—Lily, Gabriel, and others.

--So, the narrative voice is not a character in the story but instead, for a bit, feels neutral, objective, making the story seem like it is telling itself. But Joyce complicates the narration, transforming it . . .

3) Free Indirect Discourse (a particular kind of Third Person Narration):

Example: James Joyce, "The Dead"

A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory. She has once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all.

--"The Dead" begins looking like it will be written using Third Person Narration but with Gabriel's arrival on the scene the narrative form rapidly morphs into a particular kind of Third Person Narration called Free Indirect Discourse. (Free Indirect Discourse as we understand the term today, by the way, is a relatively recent invention, perfected by Jane Austen in her novels written at the beginning of the 1800's.)

--In Free Indirect Discourse, a third-person narration is strongly focussed or lensed through the experiences of a particular character. Rather than neutrally describing what is happening to different characters and relaying what is going on in their minds, the narrator hews unusually closely and consistently to a particular character, namely Gabriel Conroy.

--The narrator, who is larger than Gabriel and stands outside of him, nevertheless starts to sound like the character through which the story is lensed. To be sure, Gabriel is not speaking for himself. This is not a First Person Narration in which Gabriel might be imagined to say something like "A shadow passed

over my face as I remembered my mom's sullen opposition to my marriage." Instead, as you can see, Gabriel's thoughts are relayed to us from somewhere else, from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. Yet for almost the entire story, that narrator relays only Gabriel's words, thoughts, memories, hopes, fears and desires. The omniscient or Third Person narrator is, it were, "stuck" on Gabriel, and so the Third Person Narrative morphs into Free Indirect Discourse.

4) Second Person Narration

First Person, Third Person, and Free Indirect Discourse are, as I say, the three dominant kinds of narrative form that we see in fiction. Sometimes authors will experiment with another form, namely Second Person Narration. In this course we see a brief flash of that kind of narration in Margaret Atwood's story, "Happy Endings." In that story, the narrator is describing a possible outcome of the tale of "Mary" and "John." About the tortured relationship between Mary and John, the narrator says:

> *You'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out.*

And:

> *You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey.*

We know this is Second Person narration because the narrator is using the pronoun "you" when referring to readers, i.e. she is communicating to the reader and addressing the reader as you. What is the effect of this kind of narration? For one thing, it draws the narrator and the reader into a tight circuit. We as readers find ourselves directly spoken to. And in this story, that direct address to us enables the narrator to be quite directive. In these close quarters, the narrator thinks she can instruct us, in this case, telling us what to look for, how to interpret the text at hand. Second hand narration "personalizes" the relationship between narrator and reader, i.e., makes the relationship more intimate . . . but that closeness can also be claustrophobic and controlling. The narrator of "Happy Endings" takes advantage of that proximity in order to tell the reader what to think. The irony is that in the final analysis, the narrator doesn't really care what we think and in fact demonstrates remarkably little investment in helping us understand how fiction works. But for a moment, when the narrator resorts to Second Person Narration, she sounds like she does care and does have designs on us as readers.