

Analyzing Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective from which the persona (speaker, narrator, narrative voice) in a literary work tells stories, defines problems, relates arguments, and expresses attitudes and judgments. Just as ventriloquists can throw their voice, writers can use a persona as a voice through which to speak in literary works.

Point of view depends on two major factors: the persona's physical position as observer and recorder and the persona's social, political, intellectual and emotional stance.

Questions to ask about the persona's physical position

- How close is he/she to the action? Is he/she a major participant in the narrative? Is he/she merely a witness (whether close or distant) to events? How much is he/she privileged to know? How accurate and complete are his/her reports? How do his/her characteristics emerge from the narration? What are his/her qualifications or limitations as an observer?

Questions to ask about the persona's intellectual and emotional position

- How might he/she gain or lose from what takes place? Are his/her observations and words colored by these interests? Does he/she have any persuasive purpose beyond being a straightforward recorder or observer? What values does he/she impart to the action?

Point of view may also be considered the centralizing or guiding intelligence in a work because it is through this mind that the author filters the fictional experience. How authors present reality in stories determines how we read, understand, and respond.

point of view: the perspective from which a narrative is told

first person: the narrator is a character in the story and knows only his or her own subjective thoughts and feelings and what he or she sees or is told by other characters

second person: the narrator addresses a "you" and makes readers part of the story

third person limited (sympathetic): the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of a limited number (usually one) of characters

third-person omniscient: the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of any character in any time and space

third-person objective (dramatic): the narrator describes events as a detached, impersonal, objective observer that has no insight into the thoughts and feelings of any characters

Determining point of view

First-person point of view: *I, my, me, (sometimes we, our, us)*. Personas speak in a number of ways:

- from firsthand experiences: telling what they see, hear, think, and do
- as firsthand witnesses: telling what they have seen others do and heard others say
- from secondhand testimony and hearsay: telling what others say or otherwise communicate to them
- from inference: telling what they can infer or deduce from the information they have learned
- from conjecture, imagination, or intuition: telling what they can construe about how a character or characters might think and act, given the extent of their knowledge of a situation
- innocent or naïve persona: character reports but fails to fully understand

First-person point of view may be most independent of the author because the speaker may have a unique identity with a name, job, and economic and social position. Most often the speaker is more anonymous yet still

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independent (as with unnamed narrators). Lets authors achieve a semblance of autobiographical or psychological veracity. In addition, an *I* (first-person singular) narrative may be pluralized by *we* (first-person plural) when the first person includes other characters.

Major participant

- tells his or her own story and thoughts as a major mover
- tells about others and about her- or himself as one of the major movers
- tells mainly about others and about her- or himself only incidentally

Minor participant

- tells about events experienced and witnessed

Nonparticipating but identifiable speaker

- learns about events in other ways (listening to participants, examining documents, hearing news reports, imagining what might have occurred)
- combination of fact and conjectural reconstruction

Determining Degree of Reliability

First-person personas may have complete understanding, partial or incorrect understanding, no understanding, or complete understanding coupled with interests, motives or limitations that cause them to slant, mislead, distort, or lie. Many first-person speakers are reliable and authoritative, yet others are unreliable. Determine the persona's position and ability, prejudices or self-interests, and judgment of his or her readers or listeners.

Second-person point of view: *you*. This least common stance offers writers two major possibilities:

- persona tells a present and involved listener what the listener himself or herself has done and said at a past time; actions might be a simple retelling of events or might express the person's disputable actions and statements that are open to interpretation
- persona may use *you* to mean him- herself: seems to address a *you* but instead refers mainly to him- or herself and to listeners only incidentally (as if by merely by chance without intention or calculation);
- persona may use *you* to mean anyone: some narrators follow common colloquial usage of the indefinite *you*, such narration refers to no particular listener but rather to anyone, thus avoiding more formal words such as *one*, *a person*, or *people*; being nongender specific, *you* eliminates the need for pronouns such as *he*, *she*, or *he* or *she*
- persona knows more about character's actions than character does

Third-person: *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*. The voice of third-person point is sometimes difficult to characterize. Some personas may have unique and distinguishing traits though no separate identity is claimed for them (as with unnamed third-person narrators). Other personas with no separate identity may represent the words and views of the author (authorial voice). The persona may use an *I* and seem to be identical with the author (as in Langston's Hughes's "Negro") or may be a distinct authorial voice (as in Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill").

Third-person Objective (dramatic) Point of View

- most basic, direct, more dispassionate perspective lets writers create an illusion of objectivity
- persona unidentified; reports only what can be seen and heard, a "fly on the wall" perspective, as a camera or microphone might record events; includes thoughts only if they are spoken or written (dialogue, reported or overheard conversation, letters, reports, and such)
- limits events to what is said and happens; persona reaches no conclusions or interpretations, leaving readers or listeners free to reach their own

Third-person Omniscient Point of View

- persona knows all, sees all, reports all

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- persona presents action, dialogue, what occurs in the minds of characters
- explains inner workings of the minds of any or all characters (responses, thoughts, feelings, plans)
- adds another dimension in character development

Third-person Limited Point of View

- more common than omniscient point of view
- limits narration to the thoughts, deeds, actions, responses, feelings of a single (usually major) character
- may probe within the consciousness of the character
- central figure on whom this point of view focuses is called the point-of-view character (Miss Brill in "Miss Brill," Peyton Farquhar in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"); in such works, everything is there because the point-of view characters see it, hear it, respond to it, think about it, imagine it entirely, do it or share in it, try to control it, or are controlled by it

Stream of Consciousness

- narrative technique for rendering the interior experience of a character
- designed to give the impression of an ever-changing series of spontaneous thoughts, emotions, images, and memories without regard for logical sequence, chronology, transitions, or syntax
- author provides minimal if any commentary, description, or guiding discussion to untangle the complex web of thoughts as if reader overhears random pouring forth of the character's mind
- term coined by William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890)
- featured in works of Katherine Anne Porter, Dorothy Richardson, James, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner

Intermixing Points of View

In order to create verisimilitude, authors may mix points of view. Likewise, authors may vary points of view in order to sustain interest, create suspense, or place the burden of response entirely upon readers. Example: The first half of J.D. Salinger's short story, "To Esmé—with Love and Squalor," is narrated by the protagonist, the second by an omniscient author who refers to the protagonist in the third person. The protagonist, so disturbed by war experiences that take place between the two halves, is almost literally "not himself." The shift in point of view highlights his psychological dislocation most dramatically.

Example: in "Miss Brill," Mansfield interrupts the limited omniscient focus on Miss Brill's thoughts and reactions immediately after the young couple on the bench insult her. Mansfield devotes the last paragraphs to objective point of view, until the last sentence, at which point she resumes the limited omniscient point of view. This return to limited point of view isolates Miss Brill in her grief, cutting her off from other characters and from readers who can no longer share her sorrow as they have earlier shared her observations about the characters in the park.

Questions to consider while gleaning evidence in order to discern point of view

How is the narration made to seem real or probably?

Are the actions and speeches reported authentically as they might be in real life?

Is the narrator identifiable?

What are the narrator's qualifications as an observer?

How much of the story seems to result from the imaginative or creative powers of the narrator?

How does the narrator perceive the time of the actions?

If the predominant tense is past, what relationship does the persona establish between the past and the present?

If the tense is present, how does this affect your understanding of the work?

Questions about First-Person Point of View

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- Who is the persona? What is the persona's background?
- How does the persona describe various situations? What prompts him or her to tell about these things? Are the persona's methods a function of his or her character?
- To whom is the persona talking: the reader? a listener? him- or herself? How does this sense of audience affect what the persona says? Does the persona speak directly to you so that you become a listener or eavesdropper?
- Is the diction level appropriate both for this persona and for the situation? How much does the persona reveal about him- herself?
- Does the persona have biases that may color his or her perceptions of other characters and make his or her conclusions inaccurate? How often does the persona rely on information from others? How reliable are these others? Does the persona criticize others? Why? Does the persona seem to report fairly and accurately what others have said? Should you question the validity and accuracy of the persona's opinions? Why? Does the persona seem to have anything to conceal? May the persona be using the story for self-justification or exoneration? What effect does this complexity have on the work? How did the persona acquire the information he or she presents? How much does the persona disclose? conceal?
- Does the persona undergo any changes that have any bearing on how they present material in the work? Is the persona aware of these changes? Does the persona notice one kind of thing but miss others? What might have escaped the persona's notice?
- To what extent is the persona involved in the action (major participant, minor participant, nonparticipating observer)? How close to or distant from the action is the persona? Does limited sensitivity, knowledge, or powers of language limit the persona's ability to tell the story accurately? Is the persona in any situation that he or she can describe but not understand? Is the persona ever confused?
- Does the persona make him- or herself the center of humor or admiration? How?
- Is there a discrepancy between what the persona understands to be happening and what you as reader understand? First person offers excellent opportunities for dramatic irony. Often the heart of the story may lie in the difference between what the narrator perceives and what the reader perceives.
- Does the persona represent the author's perspective or contradict it? First person offers no opportunity for *direct* interpretation by the author and the presence of irony will undercut the narrator's story. Consequently, identifying the narrator's attitude with the author's must be undertaken with extreme caution.
- Does the persona show emotional involvement in any situations? Does this elicit a sympathetic response in you as a reader, or are you put off by this involvement? If the speaker comments on anything, are his or her thoughts valid? To what extent is the persona as interesting as the material he or she presents?
- Are there shifts in point of view? A change in narrator changes the biases through which the story is told. If narrators change, consider what the purposes of the author might be.

Questions about Second-Person Point of View

- What situation prompts the use of second person point of view?
- How does the persona acquire the authority to explain things to the listener? How directly involved is the listener? If the listeners are indefinite, why does the persona choose to use *you* as the basis of the narration?

Questions about Third-Person Point of View

- Does the author seem to be speaking in an authorial voice or has the author adopted a special but unnamed voice for the work?
- What is the persona's level of diction? Do the words direct you toward any particular interpretations? Are actions, speeches, and explanations made fully or sparsely? Do descriptions reveal bias toward any characters? Are descriptions full or bare? Are characters' thoughts described?
- From what apparent vantage point does the persona report action and speeches? Does this vantage point make the characters seem distant or close? How does the persona describe the action? How

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does he record dialogue? Does the persona supply background material? How much sympathy does the speaker express for the characters?

- To what degree is your interest centered on a particular character? Does the persona give you the thoughts and responses of this character (limited third person)?
- If the work is third-person omniscient, how extensive is this omniscience (from all characters or just a few)? Generally, what limitations or freedoms can be attributed to this point of view?
- What special kinds of knowledge does the persona assume that the audience possesses (art, religion, history, navigation, music, philosophy, economics)?

Gleaning evidence for writing about point of view

Consider all aspects that bear on the presentation of material in the work. Areas of concern include language, selection of detail, characterization, interpretive commentaries, narrative development. How does point of view contribute to making the story what it is? How does point of view contribute to your interpretation. How has the persona influenced your response to the story? What special qualities would the work lack if the author had used another point of view?

emphasize the presentation of events and ideas and the reasons for this presentation. Show how point of view enables you to interpret the work. Use the material in the work to illustrate your assertions about point of view. Keep this pattern in mind: the persona says this, which shows this about him or her and his or her attitudes. Keep in mind that you are writing about point of view in the entire work. So don't talk about the persona's point of view, but, rather, talk how the author achieves certain things by using a particular point of view. Remember to distinguish between point of view and opinions or beliefs. Point of view refers to the angle of narration from which things are seen, heard, reported; opinion refers to thoughts about something. In an essay about point of view, you discuss the author's method of narration, not his or her ideas.

Introduction

Which point of view is used? What is the major influence of this point of view on the work? To what extent does the selection of point of view make the work particularly interesting and effective? Which aspects of the work will you analyze in support of your thesis?

Conclusion

How successful is point of view in the work: is it consistent? effective? truthful? What does the writer gain by selecting this particular point of view? What does he or she lose?