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Point of view in narrative discourse

Ivdit Diasamidze\*

Shota Rustaveli State University, Ninoshvili srt.35, Batumi 6000, Georgia

**Abstract**

Having a storyteller is a vital element for any story: a narrative voice, real or implied, that presents the story to the reader. When we talk about narrative voice we are talking about point of view, the method of narration that determines the position, or angle of vision, from which the story is told. The nature of relationship between the narrator and story, the teller and the tale, is always crucial to the art of fiction. It colors and shapes the way in which everything else is presented and perceived, including plot, character, and setting. Alter or change the point of view, and you alter and change the story. The choice of point of view is the choice of who is to tell the story, who talks to the reader. It may be a narrator outside the work (omniscient point of view); a narrator inside the work, telling the story from a limited omniscient or first-person point of view; or apparently no one (dramatic point of view). These basic points of view, and their variations, involve at the extreme a choice between omniscient point of view and a dramatic point of view – a choice that involves, among other things the distance that the author wishes to maintain between the reader and the story and the extent to which the author is willing to involve the reader in its interpretation. However, the question of point of view is as complex and complicated as it is important. A narrative is a form of communication. According to G. Genette, every text discloses traces of narration; all narrative is necessarily telling and showing by making the story real and alive. A story-teller or narrator that is called point of view is present in all verbally told stories. The present paper is based on different pieces of fiction like *The Lagoon* by J. Joseph Conrad, *The Last Tea* by D. Parker.

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\* Ivdit Diasamidze. Tel.: +995 577 504481  
E-mail address: [ivditdiasamidze@gmail.com](mailto:ivditdiasamidze@gmail.com)

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## 1. Introduction

Point of view is one of the basic elements of a story that determines the perspective from which a reader experiences the narrative. It establishes the relationship between readers and a literary text including all the other crucial elements. The choice of point of view is the choice of who is responsible for telling the story, who talks to the reader. It may be a narrator outside the work (omniscient point of view); a narrator inside the work, telling the story from a limited omniscient or first-person point of view; or apparently no one (dramatic point of view). These four basic commonly used points of view, and their variations, indicate an author's choice that defines to what extent he wants his readers to be involved in its interpretation.

### 1.1. Omniscient point of view

With the omniscient point of view (sometimes also referred to as panoramic, shifting or multiple point of view), an "all-knowing" narrator firmly imposes himself between the reader and the story, and retains full and complete control over the narrative. The omniscient narrator is not a character in the story and is not at all involved in the plot. The narrator is free to tell us much or little, to dramatize or summarize, to interpret, speculate, philosophize, moralize or judge. He or she can tell us directly what the characters are like and why they behave as they do; record their words and conversations and dramatize their actions; or enter their minds to explore directly their innermost thoughts and feelings. When the omniscient narrator speaks to us in his own voice, there is a natural temptation to identify that voice with the author's, although it may seem to reflect the author's beliefs and values, it is as much the author's creation as any of the characters in the story. (Japaridze, T, 2005:58).

Omniscient narrator frequently occurs in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century novels (e.g. Fielding's "Tom Jones" and Thackeray's "Vanity Fair"). In "Vanity Fair" the narrator frankly assumes the role of puppeteer, "the Manager of the Performance", in a manner that may seem offensive and condescending to modern readers who are used to more realistic treatment.

"But my kind reader will please to remember that this story has "Vanity Fair" for a title, and that Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falseness and pretensions. And while the moralist, who is holding forth on the cover (an accurate portrait of your humble servant), professes to wear neither gown nor bands, but only the very same long-eared livery in which his congregation is arrayed; yet, look you, one is bound to speak the truth as far as one knows it, whether one mounts a cup and bells or a shovel-hat; and a deal of disagreeable matter must come out in the course of such an undertaking." (Thackeray, W, Makepeace, 2011:59).

Some critics draw a distinction between omniscient methods that permit their narrator to comment freely in their own voices, using "I" or the editorial "We" (editorial omniscience) and those that present the thoughts and actions of characters without such overt editorial intrusions (neutral or impartial omniscience). In the example cited Thackeray is clearly among the former.

There is an obvious tendency in modern literature away from using omniscience – in part because of an intellectual temperament that tends to destruct, and even deny, absolutes and all-knowing attitudes – twentieth – century authors continue to debate its value and exploit its advantages. The choice of point of view is always a matter of appropriateness. The omniscient point of view, while inappropriate to some short stories, is certainly very appropriate to large, panoramic novels like Tolstoy's epic "War and Peace", in which this mode of narration is used to suggest the complexity and scope of Russian life itself.

The great advantage of the omniscient point of view, then, is the flexibility it gives its "all-knowing" narrator, who can direct the reader's attention and control the sources of information. But as we move away from omniscient telling in the direction of dramatic showing, the narrator progressively surrenders these advantages, restricts the channels through which information can be transmitted to the reader; as a result, the reader is involved more and more directly in the task of interpretation.

### 1.2. Limited omniscient point of view

With a limited omniscient (also referred to as third-person or selective omniscient) point of view, the narrator is limited to enter the minds of characters by selecting a single character to act as the center of disclosure. Thus what the reader knows and sees of events is always restricted to what this focal character can know and see. At times the reader may be given direct access to this focal character's own "voice" and thoughts through dialogue or presented dramatically through monologue, represented speech or stream of consciousness. On all occasions, the reader's access is indirect; it is the narrator's voice, somewhere on the sidelines, that tells the story and transmits the action, characterization, description, analysis, and other informing details upon which the reader's understanding and interpretation depend. The character chosen as narrative center, and often referred to through the use of a third-person pronoun as he or she, may be the protagonist or may be some other major character. Often, however, the assignment is given to a minor character that functions in the role of an onlooker, watching and speculating from the periphery of the story and only minimally involved, if at all, in its action.

Joseph Conrad exploits omniscient third-person point of view in the story "The Lagoon" enabling the narrator to reveal the thoughts of the character. Besides readers are not under the narrator's complete influence as they have to draw inferences on their own. (Tevdoradze, N, 2010:9).

Have a look at the following lines from "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen:

"When Jane and Elizabeth were alone, the former, who had been cautious in her praise of Mr. Bingley before, expressed to her sister how very much she admired him."

"He is just what a young man ought to be," said she, "sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! — so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!" (Austen, J, 1996:8).

These lines demonstrate a fine use of the third person point of view. The excerpt shows the reader two different ways of the use of the third person point of view. Jane Austen first presents two leading characters Jane and Elizabeth, from the third person point of view and then shows us that the two characters are talking about Bingley from their own third person point of view. This can be a good example of the use of dual third person point of view — first by the author and then by the characters.

The advantages of the limited omniscient point of view are the tightness of focus and control that it provides and the intensity of treatment that it makes possible. These advantages explain why the limited omniscient point of view is so admirably suited to the short story, whose restricted scope can accommodate full omniscience only with great difficulty.

### 1.3. First-person point of view

The use of first-person point of view places still another restriction on the voice that tells the story. It involves the author's decision to limit his omniscience to what can be known by a single character. This character refers to him or herself as "I" in the story and addresses the reader as "you", either explicitly or by implication.

As with limited omniscience, first-person narration is tightly controlled and limited in its access to information. The first-person narrator, while free to speculate, can only report information that falls within his own first-hand knowledge of the world or what he comes to learn second hand from others. First-person narratives, however, are necessarily subjective. The only thoughts and feelings that first-person narrators experience directly are their own. The implications of this incorrect subjectivity are crucially important, for it means that the reader can never expect to see characters and events as they actually are but only as they appear to be to "I" narrator. For this reason it is always necessary to pay particular attention to the character that fills that role — to his or her personality; built-in biases, values, and beliefs; and degree of awareness and perceptivity- in order to measure his reliability as a narrator.

The first-person point of view has its advantages, however, not the least of which is the marvelous sense of immediacy, credibility, and psychological realism that autobiographical storytelling always carries with it. Mark Twain wrote "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" but he does not tell the story; Huck tells the story and he begins thus:

"you don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There were things he

stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing, I never seen anybody, but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly – Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is – and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book – which is mostly a true book; with some stretches, as I said before.” What Huck says and the confidential and intimate way in which he says it are of course deliberately calculated to engage the reader’s sympathy and trust. (Cope, V. H, 2012:1).

Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe wrote “The Cask of Amontillado,” but the story is told by a man whose name, we learn later, is Montresor. Here is the opening:

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could,  
But when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. (Beatty, J., & Hunter, J.P., 1973:67)

Each of these passages gives a reader a very strong sense of the narrator, that is, of the invented person who tells the story, and it turns out that the works are chiefly about the speakers.

Not all the protagonist-narrators tell their own stories. Sometimes the protagonist-narrator is charged with the responsibility of telling someone else’s story, as Nick Carraway, the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby”, is charged with the responsibility of telling Jay Gatsby’s.

Hamlet, the protagonist, explains the feeling of melancholy, which afflicts him after his father’s death in the following lines (from Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, Scene II of Act II).

“I have of late,—but wherefore I know not,—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory.” (The complete works of William Shakespeare 1997).

This is one of the best first person point of view examples. The use of first person point of view gives us a glimpse into the real inner feelings of frustration of the character. The writer has utilized the first person point of view to expose Hamlet’s feelings in a detailed way.

The first-person narrator is frequently not the protagonist at all, but rather a character whose role in the plot is clearly secondary. He or she may, in fact, have almost no visible role in the plot and exist primarily as a convenient device for transmitting the narrative to the reader. The narrator of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” is a good example. Often such narrators have greater freedom than the protagonist-narrator. From their positions at the periphery of the action they may move among the other characters with relative ease, using them as sources to acquire helpful information. Minor characters serving as first- person narrators very often appear in the role of confidant, in whose wisdom or judgment (or presumed neutrally) others seem willing to confide.

In their relationship to the other characters and to the actions of the plot, first-person narrators may be either interested and involved or disinterested and detached. In either case, however, they are always subject to hidden biases and prejudices in their telling of the story. Minor characters serving as narrators, no less than major ones, must be watched constantly, especially if the reader has reason to suspect that they may be other than totally reliable guides to the truth of what they report.

#### 1.4. *Stream of consciousness*

Stream of consciousness is a narrative device that attempts to give the written equivalent of the character’s thought processes, either in a loose interior monologue (see below), or in connection to his or her actions. Stream-of-consciousness writing is usually regarded as a special form of interior monologue and is characterized by associative leaps in thought and lack of some or all punctuation. Stream of consciousness and interior monologue are distinguished from dramatic monologue and soliloquy, where the speaker is addressing an audience or a third person, which are chiefly used in poetry or drama. In stream of consciousness the speaker’s thought processes are more often depicted as overheard in the mind (or addressed to oneself); it is primarily a fictional device. (Stevenson, R, 1992:39). The term “Stream of Consciousness” was coined by philosopher and psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890): consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits ... it is nothing joined; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let’s call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.

Stream of consciousness is the technique of characterization that renders from the inside the conscious or unconscious content of the human mind and the myriad of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and associations that ebb and flow there. To the extent that an author chooses to locate the center of narrative authority exclusively

inside the mind of a single character and to record external reality (including speech and action) only as it registers its impression upon that mind, **stream of consciousness can also be used as a variation of first person point of view**. An excellent example is offered by opening passage of William Faulkner's "The Sound and fury":

"Though the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. They were coming toward the flag was and I went along the fence. Luster was hunting in the grass by the flower tree. They took the flag out, and they were hitting. Then they put the flag back and they went to the table, and he hit and the other hit. Then they went on, and I went along the fence. Luster came away from the flower tree and we went along the fence and they stopped and we stopped and I looked through the fence while Luster was hunting in the grass". (Faulkner W, 2004:5).

The speaker is Benjy Compson, the thirty-three-year-old idiot whose point of view dominates the first section of Faulkner's novel. But the voice that addresses the reader is not Benjy's speaking voice. Rather we are made privy to his thought and sensation unfolding within Benjy's infantile mind as he watches golfers through the fence. Stream of consciousness used as first-person point of view is of course difficult to sustain over a long period of time because of the heavy demands it makes on the author and reader alike. Besides, it prevents the author from providing stage directions and clarifying comments and from asserting other forms of direct control over the development of the narrative. To avoid these difficulties, and still full adventure of the possibilities of stream-of-consciousness narration, authors will typically utilize the omniscient or limited omniscient point of view, which allows the necessary external control while making it possible to explore the content of the mind of one or more of the characters.

### *1.5. Dramatic point of view*

In the dramatic (or objective) point of view the story is told ostensibly by no one. The narrator disappears completely and the story is allowed to present itself dramatically through action and dialogue. With the disappearance of the author, telling is replaced by showing; and the illusion is created that the reader is a direct and immediate witness to an unfolding drama. Without a narrator to serve as guide, the reader is left largely on his own. There is no way of entering the minds of the characters; no evaluative comments are offered; the reader is not told directly how to respond, either intellectually or emotionally, to the events or the characters. The reader is permitted to view the work only in its externals, from the outside. Although the author may supply certain descriptive details, particularly at the beginning of the work, the reader is called on to shoulder much of the responsibility for analysis and interpretation. He or she must deduce the circumstances of the action, past and present, and how and why the characters think and feel as they do on the basis of their overt behavior and conversation. The Last Tea by Dorothy Parker is the perfect example of the dramatic point of view where author chooses to only share the action of a scene and not the internal thoughts or emotions of a character. Readers are largely left alone to speculate, make conclusion, and comprehend characters inner personalities. (Tevdoradze, N, 2010:101). When dramatic point of view is compared to the perspective from which we observe a film or a stage play, this analogy might be helpful but by no means perfect. The writer of fiction, whose medium is language, selects and arranges language within a printed page and exercises far greater control than either the filmmaker or dramatist in focusing the reader's attention.

The dramatic point of view appeals to many modern and contemporary writers because of the impersonal and objective way it presents experience and because of the vivid sense of the actual that it creates. Point of view is an integral tool of description in the author's hands to portray personal emotions or characters' feelings about an experience or situation. Writers use a point of view to express effectively what they want to convey to their readers.

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