Unit 3: Point of View

Introduction

In this unit, I am asking you to read Appendix II on “Point of View” (pp. 1745–1748) because it is a good explanation of the different ways a writer can tell a story. If anyone in the class has ever tried to write a story, she knows that in exploring different narrators, she will find out what the story wants to say.
Part 1: The Voice of the Story

Experimenting with third-person and first-person narration can surprise the author with the real story she wanted to tell all along. The narration becomes the voice in which the author and reader hear the story. That voice paces the story, decides the events, and defines characters. Think about the change a first-person narrator would make in the voice telling “Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?”: “My name is Connie,” it would begin, but we doubt if Connie would then go on to describe herself as having a “quick nervous giggling habit” of checking herself out in the mirror. Although most of this story is focused on what Connie thinks and how she behaves, it is narrated in omniscient third-person, which allows Joyce Carol Oates to tell us things about Connie and her life that Connie herself might leave out or interpret differently if she were given the opportunity to tell the whole thing herself.
Part 2: Third-Person Narration and the Flexibility Within It

In one of our next stories, “Tiny, Smiling Daddy,” we see a limited omniscient third-person narrator. In using this point of view, Mary Gaitskill can take us up close to her protagonist, telling us directly his thoughts and feelings. Compare the tone of the third-person narration of Joyce Carol Oates’s story in Unit 2 with Mary Gaitskill’s story here and you will find more differences. In “Where Are You Going,” we almost hear the sound of a fairy-tale with its faraway language: “Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar complaints. . . ” Now, note the difference in language at the beginning of “Tiny, Smiling Daddy: “The phone rang five times before he got up to answer it. It was his friend Norm.” Third-person again, but we are somehow very close, the phone ringing in our ears as well as in Stew’s. The difference in tone, in choosing the omniscient third-person or limited omniscient third-person, allows each author room to create the feeling she wants in her reader. Both settings are domestic, and both situations contain parents who are dissatisfied, but each author put the reader in the place that is right for her particular story. Imagine the writer crafting the spatial distance between the reader and the narrative the same way a filmmaker considers the position of the camera. Is it far back so that it is focused on the action as a whole? Or does he want the camera riding on one of the character’s shoulders so that we view the scene through that character’s eyes? The closer the camera, the more emotional intensity.

Because of the position of her “camera,” Gaitskill can include minute details about Stew, but they will ring false unless the details sound like they are very much coming from Stew himself. In fact, instead of using third-person at all, why hasn’t Gaitskill written this story in first-person? We might think that Stew should be telling his own story because all judgments seem to come through his eyes. We’ll come back to this question in a moment.

Go back to Oates’s story and locate the source of the details about Connie. Where is the voice of that story coming from?

At one point we are quite literally staring up Stew’s nose. But in Connie’s story, it’s as if we are watching from seats in the audience or somewhere up on the technician’s catwalk. A kind of eerie light bathes Connie and her family on the stage. We shift in our seats. The careful indifference of the narrator makes us wary. In “Where Are You Going?” no one is particularly gross or oafish. Surrounded by the cold tone of the narration, we sense danger, as if an unseen power will soon engulf us. We, the readers, will be swept into a relentless current.

In Gaitskill’s story, Stew is center stage and in control as the man in this household. He is the filter through which we must view the entire story. However, we read between the lines. The irony is that Stew is not really in charge. He is the husband who impatiently waits for his wife to bring the car home so he can use it. He’s obviously not in control of his daughter. Stew works very hard at being right (like most of us). But he is not impenetrable: because of the flexibility of the third-person narration, Gaitskill can tell us
that “he wasn’t usually so aware of this unpleasant sense of disconnection between him and everyone else, but he had the feeling it had been there all along.” Now we see why perhaps this author did not choose to write this story in the first-person. We feel connected to Stew here because he suffers, but because the story is in third-person, we also see him from a delicate distance. In this sentence, Gaitskin gives us a breather and places us far enough away from Stew so that we don’t have to see his nose hairs; we observe him with a little more empathy because he’s really lost in his own myopic vision. We have the opportunity to know more about Stew than he does himself.
Part 3: First-Person Narration, the Character Concentrate

There’s another way to allow a reader a special peephole. An author may use first-person narration when he want us to see flaws that his character refuses to see in himself. In Eudora Welty’s “Why I Live at the P.O.,” Sister’s pettiness is hilarious even though we know she is dead serious. This is a good story to study first person narration because it is concentrated here in the form of a monologue. And instead of only having a peephole, we are invited into the middle of the spat as a participant!

Sister heedlessly marches straight into the harrowing mire that is her family, all of them living on top of each other, all of them as stubborn as she. Sister does a good job of creating the mire herself, although she would not believe you if you were to stop her in the middle of her argument and point this out.

That’s the delight of “Why I Live at the P.O.” Oh, the fun the author has with this character who talks nonstop, refusing to see beyond her limited perspective. Eudora Welty had to love and cherish Sister with all her faults. Welty also knew that Sister is like a lot of people. At one time or another, many of us have felt outside a circle of people who cast judgments on us. “But I see them clearly,” Sister might say, “so it’s not as if I want to be in their little club.” No, but it doesn’t make her happy to be on the outside, either. This empathetic tug on the reader adds depth to Sister. Otherwise, she would be simply a funny person from the picturesque South.

Think of another outsider who feels that his family works against him. Remember Hamlet? Hamlet contemplates the value of his own life in his “To be or not to be” solo. Here Shakespeare allows Hamlet a one-way conversation, with nobody else having the power to grab the story away for a time. Welty, like Shakespeare, wants her main character speaking, and wants us caught by that personal story as we juggle three balls at once: empathy, dismay, and cooler judgment.

A first-person narrator brings the author another huge advantage. Even though we may be able to see all Sister’s faults, we feel privileged to be her confidante. It’s just natural to feel included when you are the recipient of someone’s personal news. Sister asks us to agree with her: “Do you remember who it was really said that?” she asks us, wanting a comrade to help her paint Stella-Rondo as a liar. The use of first-person allows us intimacy with a character. We are in the small, private circle of the main outsider. Hamlet does not sense our presence as he lets his thoughts wander during his monologue. We are bystanders. But Welty wants much more intimacy in “Why I Live at the P.O.” Sister is talking to us. Hold onto your hat, because you’re a character in this story, just as if you walked through a real door. And she’s naming names. Nobody has any privacy in this town.

Where are we, the readers, in “Why I Live at the P.O.”? When does it happen? It may sometimes feel as if we’re witnessing this family feud as it happens, but Sister begins in the past tense: “I was getting along fine with Mama. . . ” Soon, however, we’re right in
the present: “Stella-Rhondo just calmly takes off this hat…” And now look at the ending, “But oh, I like it here. It’s ideal. . . .” Because Eudora Welty must use Sister to say everything, Sister may not tell us our exact location in time and space; we have to infer it through clues like these.

In Unit 4, we’ll read a Story by Raymond Carver, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” in which first-person narration is used, but we get the story from a minor character, not a main character. Here the effect is quite different, and we’ll talk about it in more detail later. But all first-person narrations have the advantages of intimacy and authenticity (because the reader is a witness). First-person narrations also have a flexibility with the reader that third-person narrations don’t have: it allows the narrator who is telling the story from his point of view to skip around in time and space more easily. The informality of first-person narration suspends the reader in the bubble of the speaker’s personality, which we immediately understand because it’s feels like a real person talking. We might go back later and sift through certain hints to understand where we are and when, but we’re not so concerned about it at the time we are taken into confidence with the narrator.
Part 4: Are There Disadvantages to Using First-Person Narration?

With a first-person narrator, we may think that the author puts us at a disadvantage. Sometimes an author may even use an unreliable narrator, clearly NOT presenting the author’s true feelings. This is the case in “Why I Live at the P.O.” But Nick in “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” is an reliable, objective observer. It’s true that in first-person we’re always getting the facts from only that one person, but we are the judge of the particular situation and the credibility of that person.

Contemporary fiction often plays with eliminating any disadvantage in having an unreliable narrator, while retaining the advantages. The author gets us involved in figuring out inaccuracies. If the narrator is unreliable due to being impaired socially, mentally, or physically, we become greatly involved in interpretation. This reader-involvement can turn this seeming disadvantage in the story’s favor.

And always, in using first-person, an author brings the reader in as a confidante, placing him emotionally close to the action.
Assignments

Reading:

- “Tiny Smiling Daddy (pp. 559–68) and “Why I Live at the P.O.” (pp. 1368–77).
- Related author biographies: Gaitskill, (p. X) and Welty (p.X)
- Appendix III, “Point of View” (pp. 1745–1748)

Discussion Forum questions on “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” and “Why I Live at the P.O.”

You must choose ONE Discussion Forum question. Please indicate the number of the question to which you choose to respond.

*1. Discuss, using specific examples, how “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” would have been different if Gaitskill had chosen a first-person narration instead of a third-person narrator?

OR

*2. In this week’s commentary on the stories, I discuss the voice in Joyce Carol Oates’s story “Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?” and the voice in Gaitskill’s “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” as being very different. You can also read Ann Charter’s comments on page 1748 about “Style and Voice” for further clarification. How would you describe the voice in “The Kuglemass Episode or “A Good Man is Hard to Find?”

Questions to Ponder

“Tiny Smiling Daddy” and “Why I Live at the P.O.”
( use as a study guide for yourself):

1. In “Tiny, Smiling Daddy,” when Kitty publishes the article, Gaitskill says Stew wonders, “How could she have done this to him? She knew how he dreaded exposure of any kind.” Exposure of what?

2. Can you defend Stew? Do you understand his inner contradictions?

3. How effective is the third-person point of view in Gaitskill’s story? Would it be better or worse if Stew narrated it in the first person?

4. The characters in “Why I Live at the P.O” use racial slurs and have bigoted attitudes. Discuss whether or not you think Welty needed these in her story. How does language help characterize the speaker of an interior monologue?
5. Discuss how “Why I Live at the P.O.” would change if it were told from Jaypan’s point of view or the little girl with the wagon.

6. During her monologue, where is the narrator in “Why I Live at the P.O.”?

“Go Further” (optional)

Considering “Why I Live at the P.O.:

When asked about “Why I Live at the P.O.,” Eudora Welty once said, “I was trying to show how, in these tiny little places such as where they come from, the only entertainment people have is dramatizing the family situation, which they do fully knowing what they are doing. They’re having a good time. They’re not caught up; it’s not pathological. It’s a Southern kind of exaggeration.”

- What do you think of this family?
- How would this story change if it were told from Jaypan’s point of view?

Creative Exercise—shared in a workshop atmosphere of experimentation!

Go to the snapshots posted for this exercise and choose one. Write a brief one-half to one-page monologue (just this person talking) during which this person tells us about anything he/she wants to talk about. Use the language you would imagine this person would speak. Let the language and subject matter characterize him/her. DON’T identify the picture you have chosen. We’ll see if we can guess!