

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)  
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**Session 11: Point of View**

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**Point of view (POV)**

- Who is telling the story?
- Why is this important?
- Who knows what?
- Do we trust the narrator?

Point of view is one of the most important choices that a writer makes, and this is one of the very few choices that the writer can change. You can write something in third person, change it to first, and change it to third intimate. Almost any story will be radically different, but possible, told from a different point of view.

Point of view is whose shoulder is the camera on? Who is recording these events?

A novel can support multiple points of view, a short story cannot. You cannot jump around to various people's heads because you don't really have the space or time. Keep it tight.

Sometimes if a story isn't quite working and you don't know how to make it work, try using a different point of view. Change first to third, third to first, change which character is telling the story. (It can be a useful exercise to do this if you're having trouble, even if you don't go with the change. You will learn a lot about the situation/character by attempting to redraft pieces of a story from another point of view.)

Choices of point of view

- 1<sup>st</sup> person: narrator as protagonist vs. narrator tells of someone else
- 3<sup>rd</sup> person: intimate vs. omniscient

| POV                    | Advantages  | Disadvantages                                      |
|------------------------|---|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> person | Intimacy<br>voice<br>identification<br>natural                            | harder to pull off<br>characters don't know things |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> person | Author knows things<br>Author can pay attention where the character won't | distance from characters                           |

Choices in time:

Current time (the story is unfolding as the narrator tells it)

+ immediate, exciting

-characters do not have perspective

Recent past (the narrator is telling what has been revealed very recently)

Reminiscent past (the story happened long ago and now the narrator knows things that s/he didn't know when this happened)

+characters can comment and give information that was unavailable

-we know that the narrator doesn't die

There is some tradition/assumption that for a story told in first person, especially reminiscent first, that the narrator must give some reason in the beginning as to why s/he is telling this story. I don't think that's necessary but it can be a useful frame or exercise.

### The Unreliable Narrator

Just because someone is telling a story doesn't mean that the narrator knows everything, or is telling the truth. The unreliable narrator can be an exciting choice, but it presents some difficulties. The rule is, the reader has to be able to see what is really happening, not just what the narrator SAYS (which is not always true.)

Narrators can be unreliable because they have an agenda, they are lying, they honestly don't know, or their understanding of the situation is faulty. The story must reveal which it is, and this understanding of the narrator must be essential to the "now" moment.

Unreliable narrators are a lot of fun (for the writer as well as the reader) but do present technical challenge.

Think here of "The Yellow Wallpaper" for a story with an unreliable narrator.

### Explain "French scenes"

"French scenes" are a useful way to break down events into interactions in the story. A French scene is when one person arrives and interacts with the people already there. When someone leaves and the full complements of characters on stage changes, it is a new French scene. So we can break down events into segments defined by which characters are involved in an interaction.

- every scene in a story must move the story toward the NOW
- every scene must be vitally connected to the NOW

All stories:

- Why do you think the author made this choice?
- How would the story be different if the author made a different choice?

| Author    | Short Story          | POV                        |
|-----------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Atwood    | Happy Endings        | 3 <sup>rd</sup>            |
| Updike    | Separating           | 3 <sup>rd</sup> intimate   |
| Mansfield | Miss Brill           | 3 <sup>rd</sup> intimate   |
| Gilman    | The Yellow Wallpaper | 1 <sup>st</sup> unreliable |

"Miss Brill" – small, intimate story—would it work in 1<sup>st</sup> person? Why or why not?

"Happy Endings" – extreme author omniscient

- omniscient out of style right now
- reminiscent vs. unfolding
- long reminiscent vs. short reminiscent

NOTE—this is an experimental kind of story—very different

How does the Gilman work with the unreliable narrator? What is our understanding of what happens in the story? What is hers? How does the reliability of the narrator affect your experience as a reader?

Discuss each story, look at how the pov contributes to our understanding. Think of how each story would change if you changed the pov.

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