Narrative point of view: some considerations

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The 'meaning' of a story is determined by a number of factors. One of the main factors is the matter of who is telling the story, and how. There are many 'positions' or 'perspectives' or 'points of view' from which a story can be told. By 'point of view' we generally mean two somewhat different things: 1) the relation of the narrator to the action of the story — whether the narrator is, for instance, a character in the story, or a voice outside of the story; 2) the relation of the narrator to the issues and the characters that the story involves — whether the narrator is sympathetic, whether she agrees supports of opposes a particular cultural practice or doctrine, that sort of question.

The first of these meanings of point of view is more technical: the story must get told, there are various ways to tell it, each way of telling may bring a different emphasis, different knowledge, different ways in which readers process the story. As a more technical concern, and one which deeply affects how the story conveys its meanings, this is the meaning of 'point of view' most often dealt with in discussion of narrative point of view, and it is addressed by the first four of the following five main topics. The second of these meanings of point of view is more thematic and ideological: how the narrator 'sees' various issues with which fiction may deal, the various questions, conflicts and anxieties in the culture that are raised by the narrative. Considerations regarding this sense of the narrator's 'point of view' or 'perspective' or 'position' are addressed in the fifth main topic, "What is the narrator’s orientation?"

There is a caveat (that is, a warning) I will introduce at the beginning: often readers assume that the narrator represents, or speaks for, the author, or that in fact the narrator is the author. This is an area in which one must proceed with care: it often is hard to say that the narrator does not speak for the author, but the narrator is not the author, the narrator is a device of the fiction. Don't make the assumption that the narrator speaks for the author; make the case for it, if you have grounds to believe it to be true, otherwise refer to "the narrator," not to "the author."

I. FROM WHERE IS THE STORY BEING TOLD?

1. From an external narrator: (also known as a 'non-focalized' point of view)
   a. the external narrator is not a character in the story, but rather 'stands outside' the world of the story
   b. an external narrator is aware that he or she is telling a story, and may comment on the story being told
   c. when, as the external narrator tells the story, we seem to be present to the thoughts, experiences and feelings of a character in the story, that character is known as a Reflector Character. We are 'inside' the Reflector Character's mind, but through the agency of the external narrator. The Reflector Character is not aware that she or he is
the subject of narration, is not telling the story but merely having her or his experiences reported: this the crucial distinction between a Reflector Character and an internal narrator. When the story is told entirely as the internal processes of one or more Reflector Characters' minds, we call the narrative method 'stream of consciousness' or 'internal monologue.' [Of course, just to complicate things, there may be an embedded narrative — a story within a story — told by a Reflector Character, who becomes then the narrator of that story, but not of the story in which she and her narrative are embedded. Embedded narratives are very important in constructing meaning, don't be surprised to run across them.]

d. the story may be told by the external narrator so as to put the reader in a **position of irony**, in which we know more of the story, of the fate of the characters, of the motivations of other characters, than do the characters themselves, or in a **position of suspense**, in which we know no more than the character or characters do — as for instance at the conclusion of Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" but not before then, we find out what Mrs. Ansley has known all along, but that Mrs. Slade has not. Had we known earlier in the story that Mrs. Ansley's lively, enviable daughter had been fathered by Mrs. Slade's husband, we would have processed the story differently. [Of course, this leads to the issue of re-reading: that a second reading is a different reading from the first, especially in the case of stories in which the reader is in a position of suspense, of knowing no more that the characters do.]

e. the external narrator may be more or less dramatized, and more or less reflexive.

i. A more dramatized external narrator is one whose own personality, opinions, etc, may begin to obtrude and to influence the reading of the story — we may for instance be aware that the narrator, perhaps unfairly or unreasonably, likes a character more than the events of the story would warrant, or that the external narrator has a certain axe to grind. Such a bias may be inadvertent, but it may also be part of the story-telling strategy.

ii. the external narrator may be simply the voice telling the story, so we don't view him or her in any way as having any particular characteristics or interests. Generally speaking readers will consider such an objective voice to be highly reliable.

iii. A more reflexive external narrator is one who is aware of and comments on the telling of the story. When this consciousness of telling the story becomes very prominent, especially when it is problematized — that is, when the external narrator starts pointing out the fact that this is only a story, that he is making it up, that it could be told in another way with a quite different meaning or outcome and so forth — we may start using words like 'meta-narrator', 'meta-
commentary', 'meta-fiction': the telling of the story itself is being subjected to reflection and questioning.

iv. A less reflexive or non-reflexive external narrator is one who draws no attention to the story-telling process at all, who, as commentators say, 'naturalizes' it, assumes that that the telling of the story is ordinary, entirely reliable, unproblematic.

2. From an internal narrator: (also known as a 'focalized' point of view).

a. When the narrator is a character in the story and is aware that she or he is telling a story, the story is being told from an internal point of view.

b. This internal narrator may be a protagonist — one of the main characters or a less central character, an observer of the protagonists' lives (as, for instance, Nick in The Great Gatsby.)

c. There may well be more than one internal narrator. In this case we get the story from more than one point of view, and often such a method emphasizes the subjectivity of experience and the fact that the same event can have different meanings for different people.

d. The internal narrator may tell the story retrospectively, after he or she has lived through it, or as it is happening. It makes a difference which of course, because the retrospective story is told by a person who has lived through the experience and usually has been changed by it. The retrospective narrator knows more than the reader, and is in a position of irony in relation to the events of the story.

e. Alternatively the internal narrator or narrators may tell the story as it is happening. In this case the narrator knows no more than the reader, does not know the outcome, is in a position of suspense in regard to the story.

f. Internal narration may take various forms: it may be a voice telling a story, but it may also be a diary, or letters, or a discovered manuscript, even an overheard conversation or telephone call.

g. There can be internal narratives within internal narratives (embedded internal narratives) — for instance in Frankenstein the narrator Walton tells the story, which includes the story told him by Dr. Frankenstein, which includes in it the story told to him by the monster. These are embedded internal narratives; generally there will be significant relations among, them, as for instance the parallels between Walton and Frankenstein. A letter within a narrative written by someone other than the narrator, telling of an event, is an embedded internal narrative. Note that there may be a difference between a 'principle' internal narrator and the narrator of an imbedded
narrative, in that their intended audiences, who they are narrating to, and what for, may be different

II. HOW MANY NARRATORS ARE THERE?

1. There may be more than one 'narrator', but this may take more than one form:
   a. There may be more than one internal narrator, that is, narrator who is aware that it is he who is telling the story. So a book might have one section narrated by a parent, a second by a child, a third by a social worker, and we would get different perspectives. It is likely (but not necessary) in this case that they would be perspectives of the same events, so the 'story,' the 'what happened,' may be told (and likely re-configured) more than once. Embedded narratives may create a number of different internal narrators.
   b. There maybe more than one external narrator: a story may be told by different people who are not characters in the story. This is much rarer, but is an entirely possible strategy. In this case, it becomes clear that the narrator is not the 'author.' The narrator never was the author.
   c. We need to distinguish multiple narrators, voices aware that they are telling the story, from multiple reflector characters, consciousnesses revealed, who are not aware that they are narrating a story. There may well be multiple Reflector Characters: these are not narrators.

III. HOW MUCH DOES THE NARRATOR KNOW?

1. An important element in the telling of the story is how much the narrator knows.
   a. If we are assured that the narrator 'knows everything,' then we read the story with trust: what is presented to us is 'what is.'
   b. If we are not so assured, we read the story with suspicion, noting the things that the narrator does not know, or does not understand, and struggling to make sense of the 'data' of the story ourselves and to decipher the narrator as well as the story.

2. This question may arise both with external and internal narrators. We see limited knowledge in internal narrators as normal, expected. But it is also possible for an 'author' to write a story in which it becomes clear that the external narrator does not understand the implications of what she is narrating, is misrepresenting what is happening, and so forth: it becomes clear that the 'author' and the narrator are not 'the same.'
3. This question of what the narrator knows is a separate matter from what the narrator chooses to tell us.

IV. HOW RELIABLE IS THE NARRATOR?

1. Any narrator can be more or less reliable. This is a matter of what they know, but also of what their intentions in telling are, of what their biases are, of what their own particular blindesses are.

V. WHAT IS THE NARRATOR’S ORIENTATION?

This category covers a number of ways in which the narrator may relate to the story and to the listener. Here are some categories:

1. **Distance:** the narrator can be emotionally or in other ways distant from the story she is narrating, or very close, very involved. This can take a number of forms, including, for instance, the coincidence or non-coincidence of dialect, vocabulary or style (as transitions from the 'voice' of the narrator of Pride and Prejudice to that of Elizabeth Bennet, i.e. from the narrator's reporting of what is in Elizabeth's head to her representation of Elizabeth's precise thoughts, are difficult to discern), distance in time, distance in culture.

2. **Interest:** the narrator may share the 'stakes' of the story with the characters or may not; may show a great interest in the outcome of the story and the choices the characters make or may be clinical, reserved, apparently uninterested, or disinterested (that word means 'impartial', not 'uninterested').

3. **Sympathy:** not dissimilar from distance as emotional distance, this refers to how much the narrator empathizes with the characters, or judges them, or approaches them as a clinical observer. It differs from emotional distance in that the narrator may be emotionally close, but judgmental or antipathetic.

4. **Voice:** this refers to what the narrator is like, as it is conveyed by the language of the narration, the tone, the choice of comments and descriptions, and so forth: These may indicate
   a. what her personality is
   b. what her attitude is to the characters, to the subject of the story, to the readers
   c. what her ideological position, faith commitment, intellectual and emotional positions are

5. **Orientation:** this is a category which is useful, but may repeat aspects of the categories above: is the narrator approaching the story from a certain position of commitment and concern, for
instance of ideological or sexual or theological or social or political commitment or concern. The term "orientation" can at times be replaced by the term "standpoint." "Standpoint" is associated with Standpoint Theory; you may read about that on my page on some feminist theories.

6. **Sense of Audience:** narrators may differ in their sense of who they are narrating to, and why. In this case the narrator of an embedded narrative (an account, a diary, a letter, etc) will likely have a very different audience than the primary internal narrator.