

Point of View

Courtesy of Wayne Ude

First Person Central

After Old Sunny was gone, I sat in the chair for a while and smoked a couple of cigarettes. It was getting daylight outside. Boy, I felt miserable. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed. I keep telling him to go home and get his bike and meet me in front of Bobby Fallon's house. Bobby Fallon used to live quite near us in Maine—this is years ago. Anyway, what happened was, one day Bobby and I were going over to Lake Sedebego on our bikes. We were going to take our lunches and all, and our BB guns—we were kids and all, and we thought we could shoot something with our BB guns. Anyway, Allie heard us talking about it, and he wanted to go, and I wouldn't let him. I told him he was a child. So once in a while, now, when I get very depressed, I keep saying to him, "Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up." It wasn't that I didn't use to take him with me when I went somewhere. I did. But that one day, I didn't. He didn't get sore about it—he never got sore about anything—but I keep thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed. (Salinger 98-9)

This is clearly the first person central; the narrator tells of events involving other people but is most concerned over what those events mean to him; he is central to the story, it is his story.

Third Person Limited

The light and noise of the bar held him at the doorways for a few moments. He looked about him, but his sight was confused by the shining of many red and green wine-glasses. The bar seemed to him to be full of people and he felt that the people were observing him curiously. He glanced quickly to right and left (frowning slightly to make his errand appear serious), but when his sight cleared a little he saw that nobody had turned to look at him; and there, sure enough, was Ignatius Gallaher leaning with his back against the counter and his feet planted far apart. (Joyce 74)

This is third person because of the use of "he" rather than "I" and is limited because we know nothing but what the character knows. He is confused, the bar seems full of people who seem to be observing him curiously; we learn only when he does, when "his sight cleared a little," that "nobody had turned to look at him." We see, we have knowledge of, only what he sees and has knowledge of.

Omniscient

At midnight he was sitting on the crest of a hill. He did not know it was midnight and he did not know how far he had come. But there was no glare behind him now and he sat now, his back toward what he had called home for four days anyhow, his face toward the dark woods which he would enter when breath was strong again, small, shaking steadily in the chill darkness, hugging himself into the remainder of his thin, rotten shirt, the grief and despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair. Father. My father, he thought. "He was brave!" he cried suddenly, aloud but not loud, no more than a whisper: "He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris' cav'ry!" not knowing that his father had gone to that war a private in the fine old European sense, wearing no uniform, admitting the authority of and giving fidelity to no man or army or flag, going to war as Malbrouck himself did: for booty—it meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own. (Faulkner 26-27)

Clearly, this narrator knows and is able to tell us much which is not known to the character. The narrator is able to go into the past, before the boy was born, and tell us things which the boy does not have any knowing—indeed, will probably never know. Further, the narrator is able to evaluate and comment, to compare the father's actions to a "fine old European" tradition. Nor does the narrator have to explain to us how he knows all this. He has complete knowledge, and also complete freedom to use that knowledge. Hence, we call this narrator omniscient, one who knows all.

Third Person Shifting

She looked at him—and in spite of herself, smiled.
'I don't like you in those clothes,' she said.
'Do I look a sight?' he answered.
They were shy of one another.* *an omniscient moment
'I'll make you some tea,' she said.
'No, I must go.'
'Must you?' And she looked at him again with the wide, strained, doubtful eyes. And again, from the pain of his breast, he knew how he loved her. He went and bent to kiss her, gently, passionately, with his heart's painful kiss.
'And my hair smells so horrible,' she murmured in distraction. 'And I'm so awful, I'm so awful! Oh, no, I'm too awful.' And she broke into bitter, heart-broken sobbing. 'You can't want to love me, I'm horrible.'
'Don't be silly, don't be silly,' he said, trying to comfort her, kissing her, holding her in his arms. 'I want you, I want to marry you, we're going to be married, quickly, quickly—to-morrow if I can.'
But she only sobbed terribly, and cried:
'I feel awful. I feel awful. I feel I'm horrible to you.'
'No, I want you, I want you,' was all he answered, blindly, with that terrible intonation which frightened her almost more than her horror lest he should not want her. (Lawrence 457)

(note: the story as a whole is probably in omniscient, but this passage works too nicely as an illustration of third shifting to pass it up.)

Again we see that the passage is in third person, using "he" and "she," but also that it shifts back and forth between the two characters. However, it doesn't tell us anything which would not be known to one or both of those characters. We still have a narrator who is separate from either character, who tells the story from outside the action, but who tells us nothing but what is known to one or more of the characters.

Objective

The girl looked across at the hills.
"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."
"Should we have another drink?"
"All right."
The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.
"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.
"It's lovely," the girl said.
"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."
The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.
"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."
The girl did not say anything.
"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."
"Then what will we do afterward?"
"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."
"What makes you think so?"
"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."
The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.
"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy." (Hemingway 274-5)

Note how careful this narrator is to never go into any character's mind, but to show us only what we might see and hear if we were an invisible audience, crouching in a corner. And also note how careful this narrator is to never evaluate anything, never judge, never explain. The narrator is as objective as possible, leaving us to find the passage's meaning for ourselves (and yet clearly intending the meaning we do find). This extreme objectivity is very different from the omniscient narrator's ability to explain, to judge, to evaluate, though in many respects the two narrators appear similar.

Stream of Consciousness

a quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose theyre just getting up in China now combing out their pigtails for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus theyve nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarmclock next door at cockshout clattering the brains out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers are those they invented like the stars the wallpaper in Lombard street was much nicer the apron he gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so as I can get up early Ill go to Lambes there beside Findlaters and get them to send us some flowers to put about the place in case he brings him home tomorrow today I mean no no Fridays an unlucky day... (Joyce 786)

Though stream of consciousness often does use the "I" to identify narrator, it differs from first person because it attempts to present a mind as it might sound if we could somehow listen in; it also attempts to present that mind as it rambles from one level of consciousness to another. Stream of consciousness is not simply a very emotional first person, as students often assume; in fact, as in the example above, it often isn't terribly emotional at all.

Point of View Identification

Directions: Read each of the following passages from different literary works carefully. Determine the point of view for each, and list at least three pieces of evidence from within the text to support your conclusion.

A.

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B.

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

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"All right."

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"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy." (Hemingway 274-5)

C.

a quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose theyre just getting up in China now combing out their pigtails for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus theyve nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarmclock next door at cockshout clattering the brains out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers are those they invented like the stars the wallpaper in Lombard street was much nicer the apron he gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so as I can get up early Ill go to Lambes there beside Findlaters and get them to send us some flowers to put about the place in case he brings him home tomorrow today I mean no no Fridays an unlucky day... (Joyce 786)

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She looked at him—and in spite of herself, smiled.

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