

POINT OF VIEW

"*Point of view*" means how a story gets told. It means who is telling the story, and how much that person knows. The question of point of view has always been a practical concern for novelists, and there have been scattered observations on the topic in critical writing since the modern novel first emerged in the 18th century. But it was Henry James's prefaces to his various novels, later collected as *The Art of the Novel* (1934), and Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1926), which codified and expanded on James's comments, that made point of view one of the most prominent and persistent concerns in modern treatments of the art of prose fiction.

There are three main types of point of view:

I. Third-Person Point of View

The narrator stands outside the story. The narrator calls characters "*he*," "*she*," "*they*." Its subtypes are the *Omniscient* and the *Limited* points of view.

i. Omniscient point of view: The narrator knows everything. This includes every character's thoughts, feelings, and secrets. The narrator can move freely through time and place.

An omniscient narrator can be *intrusive* or *unintrusive*. An *intrusive* narrator does not just tell the story. The narrator also comments on, and judges, the characters directly. An *unintrusive/objective* narrator, on the other hand, mostly just shows scenes, without commenting.

Critic Gérard Genette pointed out something important. Who tells the story (*focus of narration*) and whose perspective we follow (*focus of character*) can actually be different people. One example is Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*. In this novel, an adult narrates the story. But we follow the perceptions of a child character.

ii. Limited point of view: The narrator stays inside just one character's mind. Henry James called this the character's "*center of consciousness*." This technique developed into the *stream-of-consciousness* technique. This style shows a character's continuous flow of thoughts and feelings. Writers who used this style include Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner. Some critics think this style feels more "real" to readers. It feels more real than even an objective omniscient narrator. Why? Because it makes us feel like we are directly inside a character's mind. We do not feel like we are being told about it from outside.

II. First-Person Point of View

The narrator says "I." This narrator is somehow part of the story. There are different levels:

- i. A minor witness, barely involved in the story. Example: *Marlow* in *Heart of Darkness*.
- ii. A smaller character in the story. Example: *Nick* in *The Great Gatsby*.
- iii. The main character themselves. Examples: *Jane Eyre*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Holden Caulfield*. The epistolary novel — told entirely through letters — is a special type of first-person narration.

III. Second-Person Point of View

This is rare and unusual. The story addresses "you." It is as if you (the reader) are the one experiencing events. Example: Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. This novel begins: "*You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this...*"

Two Important Related Ideas

- I. The self-conscious narrator: This narrator breaks the illusion that the story is "real." The narrator reminds readers that they are reading fiction. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a famous comic example. This idea connects to romantic irony.
- II. The unreliable narrator: This is someone whose account of events does not match what the author actually wants us to believe. We are meant to notice this gap. We must read "between the lines." Henry James used this technique often. In his story "The Turn of the Screw," critics still disagree about how much we should trust the narrator. This makes the story deliberately mysterious.