

Point of View and Narrator

Literature allows us to observe life through multiple perspectives. We consider life differently when we view it through an author's panorama or via a character's particular slant. How an author chooses to portray an incident or whom an author chooses to narrate an event is the story's point of view. An author's perspective may include the use of irony or inconsistencies with what the characters do or say and what the author and readers know or comprehend. By understanding point of view and irony, we as readers can be more aware of how our perceptions of ourselves and of life can influence our reading of literature and our daily actions.

Point of view is easily evident in variations of two familiar fairy tales—"The Three Little Pigs" and "Cinderella." In "The Three Little Pigs," we hear the story from the pigs' point of view as they become the big bad wolf's victims. Two other versions present the story from different points of view. Jon Scieszka focuses on the wolf's perspective in *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs by A. Wolf*. Mr. Wolf is a kindly fellow who wants to bake a cake for his dear old granny, but he runs out of sugar. He asks his neighbor pig for a cup of sugar, but because of Mr. Wolf's sneezing cold, he accidentally blows the house down with a giant sneeze. And as Mr. Wolf explains, it seemed a shame to leave a perfectly good ham dinner lying there in the straw. So he ate it up. At the end we sympathize with the scandalized Mr. Wolf because of news reporters who have ruined his life when they jizzed up the story. A second version by Eugene Trivizas called *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* places its focus on three cuddly little wolves who set out on their own. These gentle wolves, who play croquet and badminton, build homes of brick, of concrete, and of iron bars and armor plates. But the big bad pig destroys their homes with his sledgehammer, jackhammer, and dynamite. The three little wolves finally build a home of flowers: marigolds, daffodils, pink roses, cherry blossoms, sunflowers, and daisies. When the big bad pig inhales to sneeze, he's overcome by the beautiful scent. His heart grows tender, and he decides to become a big good pig.

Cinderella also has variations of her story. Instead of the Disney version of Cinderella and the ugly stepsisters and evil stepmother, Helen Ketteman creates *Bubba, The Cowboy Prince: A Fractured Texas Tale*. Bubba lives on a ranch with his wicked stepdaddy and his hateful and lazy stepbrothers Dwayne and Milton. Bubba does all the work on the ranch. Down the road lives Miz Lurleen, the purtiest and richest gal in the county, who throws a ball to find some companionship. Through his fairy godcow, Bubba goes to the ball and wins Miz Lurleen's heart. He flees at midnight leaving behind his cowboy boot. A more urban version of Cinderella is Babette Cole's *Prince Cinders*. The "small, spotty, scruffy and skinny" Prince Cinders has three big hairy brothers who make him do all the work. The brothers take their princess girlfriends to the Palace Disco. While alone, Prince Cinders makes a wish to a fairy that he be big and hairy. She mistakenly turns him into a big hairy monkey. At a bus stop, a pretty princess is frightened by a big hairy monkey. But luckily, midnight strikes, and Prince Cinders changes back to himself. She thinks he has saved her from the big hairy monkey. The shy Prince Cinders runs away so fast he loses his trousers, and the pretty princess must find a prince who is not big and hairy and who can fit into the pants.

These versions of familiar stories are different because of point of view. Instead of learning of the story from the pigs' point of view, we get the wolves' perspective. Instead of learning of the story from Cinderella's point of view, we get Bubba's and Prince Cinders' perspective. Point of view influences how an author tells the story. These versions also use irony, because badminton-playing wolves and godcows are inconsistent with our expectations of what should be happening in these tales.

All stories are narrated by someone. Consequently, one of the first choices an author makes is to determine how to tell the story. That choice is the point of view, or the particular perspective an author uses to describe the story's events.

Point of View

Henry James, an American author and literary critic (1811-1882), describes what he calls The House of Fiction. Imagine a multilevel apartment building with windows facing the street. Standing at each window is a different person. All at a window see the same crime take place on the street. Although each sees the same crime, each reports the crime differently. A reason for this discrepancy is point of view. An author needs to determine who sees and describes what is taking or has taken place, and what that person's vantage point or angle is in describing the event.

Most authors use one of four points of view:

- first person
- omniscient
- limited omniscient
- dramatic

First person point of view relies on a character in the story to narrate what is taking place. Readers get all of their information from that character. Laurence Perrine cleverly illustrates the different points of view with a retelling of the ant and the grasshopper fable. Here is the first person point of view:

Cold and hungry, I watched the ant tugging over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. My feelers twitched, and I was conscious of a tic in my left hind leg. Finally, I could bear it no longer. "Please, friend ant," I asked, "may I have a bite of your corn?"

He looked me up and down. "What were you doing all last summer?" he asked, rather too smugly it seemed to me.

"I sang from dawn to dark," I said innocently, remembering the happy times.

"Well," he said with a priggish sneer, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

Notice the focus on the individual using the personal pronoun *I* from the ant's perspective.

Omniscient point of view allows readers to be all-knowing by knowing the actions and thoughts of all principal characters. This point of view gives readers the advantage of having a lot of information, but this point of view is also difficult to develop because it becomes complicated trying to reveal all character's thoughts and actions. Perrine offers this example of the ant and the grasshopper:

Weary in every limb, the ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. It would taste might good at dinner tonight.

A grasshopper, cold and hungry, looked on. Finally, he could bear it no longer. "Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of corn?"

"What were you doing all last summer?" asked the ant. He looked the grasshopper up and down. He knew its kind.

"I sang from dawn till dark," replied the grasshopper, happily unaware of what was coming next.

"Well," said the ant, hardly bothering to conceal his contempt, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

Notice in this omniscient point of view, we get inside perspectives to both the ant and the grasshopper. The ant assumes he knew the lazy kind of grasshopper, and grasshopper is happily unaware of what is coming. We see inside each mind.

Limited omniscient point of view allows readers to focus on a single character's thoughts and actions. Limited omniscient gives readers the sense that they are standing beside a character observing actions and accessing thoughts. We see the story through this character. This point of view is common because it works well. Perrine shares this perspective:

Weary in every limb, the ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer. It would taste mighty good at dinner tonight. It was then that he noticed the grasshopper, looking cold and pinched.

"Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?" asked the grasshopper.

He looked the grasshopper up and down. "What were you doing all last summer?" he asked. He knew its kind.

"I sang from dawn till dark," replied the grasshopper.

"Well," said the ant, hardly bothering to conceal his contempt, "since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter."

We only see this encounter from the ant’s point of view—it’s limited to a single point of view. We learn that the ant thinks this corn would be good for dinner, yet we don’t get any of the grasshopper’s thoughts. This is limited omniscient point of view.

Objective point of view (sometimes called dramatic point of view) allows readers to view the events as if through a camera lens or as if on stage. Readers only have information on what they would see or hear. Wayne Booth, another literary critic, calls the objective point of view the fly-on-the-wall point of view. The author does not provide any insights pertaining to any character's thoughts or actions. In some respects this point of view is similar to what a reporter may sometimes have to do: describe only the who, what, when, and where without addressing the why or how and without offering any opinions. This point of view is not common in fiction, but it dominates drama. Perrine helps us understand this point of view:

The ant tugged over the snow a piece of corn he had stored up last summer, perspiring in spite of the cold.

A grasshopper, its feelers twitching and with a tic in its left hind leg, looked on for some time. Finally, he asked, “Please, friend ant, may I have a bite of your corn?”

The ant looked the grasshopper up and down. “What were you doing all last summer?” he snapped.

“I sang from dawn to dark,” replied the grasshopper, not changing his tone.

“Well,” said the ant, and a faint smile crept into his face, “since you sang all summer, you can dance all winter.”

We do not receive any insights into the ant’s or the grasshopper’s thoughts—we only observe what takes place before us—it’s as if we’re watching the encounter on a stage or screen. This is objective point of view.

Most often authors try to maintain the same point of view throughout the story, but that is not always the case, especially in longer writings. However, there tends to be a dominant point of view.

Narrator

While discussing point of view, we have also been suggesting the role of a narrator in a story. The narrator is the person who is telling the story. The narrator can either be a participant in the story as a major or minor character, or the narrator can be a nonparticipant who simply observes. As a participant, the character can describe the events in first person, or the character can describe the events in third person using omniscient, limited omniscient, or objective points of view.

Sometimes I imagine accounts told through different narrator's. For instance, the parable of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is omniscient point of view because we get glimpses inside the thoughts of the elder son and the prodigal son. But I wonder how the telling would be different if the wayward son gave a first person account of why he wanted to leave home, how long and what kind of riotous living took place, how degrading was it to give up so much to eat husks fed to pigs, what guilt he must have felt realizing all he had lost, yet what hope he must of anticipated in returning to his home, not to receive an inheritance, but to be with people who loved him. On the other hand, how would the story be different if told through the voice of the elder son who faithfully stayed home but may have felt underappreciated and disappointed in his father's outward acceptance of him as the hard-working son? Or what would it have been like from the father's point of view sensing all of his language at assuming his son was going to destroy his life and happiness, but a father who allows his son agency while observing with sorrow on the sideline?. Or what about a father who wants brothers to love each other and to rejoice in each others' return to God? Each individual in the parable would a different narrator who would our perspective of what is happening.

The narrator can tell the story as it occurs, shortly after, or much later. If the narrator is describing the events as they occur, as readers we need to determine whether the narrator has the proper perspective to understand the significance of what is happening. If the narrator is describing the events after they have happened, as readers we need to determine whether their memories are accurate or if their interpretations of what has happened are meaningful.

Most of the time we trust narrators, but at times they may not be reliable. The narrator may not understand the implications of an action within the story, or the narrator may not care about what is happening in the story, so his or her comments may not be accurate. This narrator is not reliable.

Often we read stories without paying attention to who is telling us what is happening or how an author chooses to give us access to information. However, the more attentive we are to an author's decisions about point of view and narrator, the more selective we may be in accepting information.