

Narrators and their roles

“Unreliable” first person narrator. We’ve seen that there are many different degrees of unreliability. A narrator can play a very active role both in the story’s events and in the telling of the tale, as with the narrators of “Ligeia,” “Bartleby the Scrivener,” and “That Room,” told *after* the fact, or *as the events are happening*, as with “Jane” (?), the diegetic narrator/writer of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Note that although such first-person stories give us one point of view toward the events, the author of the story may open up the possibility of us interpreting that narrator’s summary to be biased, partial, or incorrect. We may come to very different conclusions about the events than the narrator does: think of Poe’s “Ligeia” or Bambara’s “The Lesson,” or the narrator in “That Room” proudly stealing words from Eduardo in order to end his tale’s scary meditation on what’s *out* of control in our lives by touting his worldly knowledge and control (via his comment about putting up wet hay).

Second-person or third-person narrator, who both guides us into one or more characters’ mind, giving us access to what they’re thinking and feeling, *and* may also at key moments stand apart from that point of view, stating or implying a different one. As with a first-person narrator, this technique too allows us access to a character’s thoughts and feelings but guides us towards understanding blind spots, or (as in Sui Sin Far’s story) a *different* take on the concluding events. For contemporary examples of the powers of a third-person narrator, think of Rishi Reddi’s story, or Adam Haslett’s “The Volunteer” or Moore’s “Paper Losses”; Moore’s is especially interesting because its third-person narrator jumps forward in time in places to give a larger and different perspective on the main events. “That Room” does this too.

Most of the stories we’ve read give us a concluding moment that is *very* open to different interpretations; the narrator doesn’t intervene to tell us what to conclude. One name for the contrast between a character’s point of view and one implied by the story is **dramatic irony**: dramatic because of the contrast and ironic because our point of view often involves a kind of forgiving or unforgiving view of a character’s limitations.

Flashbacks and flashforwards. Note in particular not just the events that occur in these but where they’re placed in the story and how they begin and how they end.

Dialogue, scenery/setting description: we’ve read these all semester not just for the information they provide but also as *character revelation*: they reveal a character’s point of view indirectly; they may also subtly move the plot forward. One example: our discussion of the opening sequence in Faulkner’s “That Evening Sun,” when Quentin the narrator is waxing nostalgic about the Jefferson he used to know, including his idealized vision of Nancy—before we get to the heart of his story, his revelations about darker truths of Nancy’s story and Quentin’s own family’s complicity in her fate.

Hybrid or mixed languages may play a key role in character and plot development. Various kinds of English may be mixed together, as well as other languages mixed with English and sometimes translated, sometimes not. When and what is translated is often very important, and remember sometimes the “English” we’re reading is actually a (silent) translation of dialogue in another language: this occurred in tales by Sui Sin Far, Nicholasa Mohr, Junot Díaz, and others.

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American memory (personal, community, and national) has been a frequent theme, especially its erasures, substitutions, crises, revisions. From Washington Irving to Reddi and Saunders and Moore and Russell.

In our discussions of stories, we've often focused less on judging character from our own alleged position of superiority, as if the characters were "real." Instead, we've focused on entering another world's reality and then testing, questioning, and revising your reactions to that world. Stories teach **flexibility and resilience** (and also the consequences of not having these qualities). Through them, you can learn how to change your mind, to deal with new and conflicting information, and to acknowledge mixed and complex feelings, not simple emotions.

We've discussed the story as a **crucial space for experiment, risk-taking, discovery**. Several of the writers we've read work mostly in the short story, but most of them use it as a lab to work on story-telling ideas and techniques that they may then apply on a bigger canvas, long fiction. The short story is being reborn in the era of the blog and the e-book, for authors have more opportunities to publish short fiction—and many readers may actually prefer short rather than long pieces. But earning a living writing short fiction is more difficult now than it has ever been; long gone are the days when an F. Scott Fitzgerald made most of his money from short fiction, not from his novels. (One of his stories paid him over 20 times what he made from *The Great Gatsby*, which at first sold relatively poorly.)

We've also stressed this semester **learning to appreciate a wide variety of voices, styles, approaches, and even genres** from satire to tragicomedy, from "realism" to fantastical modes where ghosts can appear or girls actually seem to be were-wolves. It's best to take a story on its own terms first, understanding its logic and its power from inside, so to speak, before you pass any judgment on whether the story's good or not.

Most of the stories we've read (the professor's at fault here) are profound **riddles or parables**; they don't really tell us directly how to interpret them, though (hopefully) they take us for a powerful time-machine ride and haunt us afterwards. They are valuable not for providing answers so much as for encouraging us to imagine entering another person's experiences, to ask questions, and to imagine "what if?" Ultimately this makes these fictions not unreal or fantastical but incredibly useful (not to mention fun). If you can't enter another person's experience and imagine how their and perhaps your world too might be different, you're trapped in the limits of your own space and time and mindset—and our society is too. Think of the power of make-believe at the end of Englander's story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank."

Openly experimental or **metafictional** stories (such as by Barth, Pynchon, or Yu) push this uncertainty principle in fiction to the limit, by constantly reminding us that we're reading a story and by giving us multiple ways to interpret things. But "realist" stories can do this too; think of Lorrie Moore's narrator saying at one point to us "who told you that?" or flashing forward in time to reveal how Kit the protagonist revised the experiences we have just read about when she spoke about those events to others later in her life, "as a story."