

Focalization

Week 5

MA Course on Narratology

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Focalization

Definitions

Focalization is the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented.

Focalization is the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered.

Focalization is concerned with

1. who sees? who perceives?
2. who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?
3. who serves as a text's center of orientation?
4. In what way is narrative information restricted with respect to completeness of information or omniscience?

Focalization is the selection and restriction of narrative information relative to somebody's perception, knowledge, and point of view.

Focalization: Types

- 1. Zero or non-focalization**
- 2. Internal Focalization**
- 3. External Focalization**

1.Zero or non-focalization

Zero focalization is the position that varies and sometimes unlocatable; there is no systematic conceptual or perceptual constraint that governs what may be presented.

Such type of focalization is characteristic of traditional or classical narrative.

It is associated with the omniscient narrators.

In **non-focalization** or **zero focalization**: the story's events are narrated from a wholly unrestricted or omniscient point of view.

Example

- Here is an excerpt from a 20C novel, James A. Michener's *Hawaii* (1961).
- Across a million years, down more than ten million years [the island] existed silently in the unknown sea and then died, leaving only a fringe of coral where the birds rest and where gigantic seals of the changing ocean play. Ceaseless life and death, endless expenditure of beauty and capacity, tireless ebb and flow and rising and subsidence of the ocean. Night comes and the burning day, and the island waits, and no man arrives. The days perish and the nights, and the aching beauty of lush valleys and waterfalls vanishes, and no man will ever see them. (p. 9)

The passage exhibits a panoramic point of view encompassing huge vistas of space and time. The narrator appears to have access to limitless information which transcends what is accessible to ordinary humans. He lightly refers to a time span of "more than ten million years" and asserts that "no man will ever see" the scenery's "aching beauty of lush valleys and waterfalls". To Genette's question "Who sees" the expected, if slightly surprising, answer is *nobody* because no perceiving character is present. To the question concerning the scope of narrative information the answer is *no restriction*, the narrator is omniscient. Hence, according to Genette, the passage is non-focalized.

Example from Arabic Novels

جاء في رواية الطيب صالح "موسم الهجرة إلى الشمال" ما يلي:

«فوجيء الرجل قليلا، وخيّل إليّ أنّ ما بين عينيه قد تعكّر، لكنه بسرعة ومهارة عاد إلى هدوئه ، وقال لي وهو يتعمّد أن يبتسم: ...» (الرواية ص 35).

فالراوي في هذا المقطع علم أن محدّثه فوجيء ، كما علم أنّه يتعمّد الابتسام وكأنّه عالم بما يدور في نفسيّته ، فنحن هنا أمام راوٍ يعلم كلّ شيء عن شخصياته وهو ما يسمى بالتبئير الصفر. وجاء في رواية "القاهرة الجديدة" لنجيب محفوظ هذا المقطع في الصفحة 71.

«وقال لنفسه راضيا: إنّ اللبيب بالإشارة يفهم؛ وحسبه ذلك الآن. أما عن المستقبل فقلبه يحدثه بأنّ هذه الفتاة لن تذهب من حياته كأنّها شيء لم يكن.» البطل تحدّث مع نفسه وقلبه في هذا المقطع ، فمن أين علم الراوي بذلك؟ إننا هنا أمام تبئير منعدم ، فالراوي يعلم ما ظهر وما خفي ، لذلك يصعب الحديث عن تبئير.

2. Internal Focalization

In **internal focalization** the story's events are focalized through a story-internal character. Narrative information is basically restricted to data available to this character's perception.

Focal character / reflector / reflector character: a character whose perception filters the narrative. The term *reflector* was introduced by Henry James, who also used *center* and *mirror*. Alternate terms include *focal character* (Genette), *figural medium* (Stanzel), *filter* (Chatman), and *internal focalizer* (Bal). The proliferation of terms is an indication of the importance of the concept and the immense influence of the style.

Using **a reflector character** produces a subjective and 'impressionistic' view of the story world. It makes the reader co-experience what it is like to be in the head of somebody participating in the story's events. **Third-person internal focalization** is basically identical to the ***figural narrative situation***, which, strictly speaking, wasn't invented until the early 20C period called 'modernism' (however, see de Jong 2001 for a discussion of much earlier proto-forms such as in Homer around 1000 BC).

Example

For a typical example reconsider the beginning of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943):

He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees. The mountainside sloped gently where he lay; but below it was steep and he could see the dark of the oiled road winding through the pass. There was a stream alongside the road and far down he saw a mill beside the stream and the falling water of the dam, white in the summer sunlight.

The passage closely represents and follows the reflector character's current perceptions – things he sees, feels, and hears ("he could see", the "pine-needled floor", the "gently" sloping ground; the wind blowing "high overhead".) Note that all narrative information is restricted and aligned to the reflector's current spatial and temporal co-ordinates. The notable effect of this technique is that the reader is *sucked* into the story, invited to see the world just as the character sees it, and co-experience what it is like to be a participant in the events. It is a hugely successful stylistic device, and we squarely owe it and its many variations to Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.]

Another Example

جاء في رواية أحلام مستغانمي "ذاكرة الجسد": «كنت أتحرج يوما بعد آخر نحو هاوية حبك ، أصطدم بالحجارة والصخور ، وكل ما في طريقي من مستحيلات. ولكنني كنت أحبك.» (الرواية ص 140).

في هذا المقطع يتعرف القارئ على مشاعر الشخصية الحكائية من خلال ما باحت به من مشاعر الحب. فالتبشير هنا داخلي ، مما باحت به الشخصية عن حالتها النفسية.

3. External Focalization

External focalization is a form of presentation that restricts itself to mere "outside views", neutrally reporting what would be visible and audible to a virtual camera (plus sound recorder), without any "inside views" into the minds of the characters. (In contrast, zero focalization freely allows and internal focalization strictly depends on inside views.) Externally focalized narratives typically consist of dialogue and "stage directions" only.

Example

The following example often quoted the beginning of Hemingway's short story "The Killers" (1927).

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.

What's yours? George asked them.

"I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?"

"I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat."

Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in.

Example from Arabic Text

جاء في الرواية: «وقبل أن تصلني كلماتك، كان نظري قد توقف عند ذلك السَّوار الذي يزيّن معصمك العاري الممدود نحوي. كان إحدى الحلّي القسطنطينية التي تعرف من ذهبها الأصفر المصفور ، ومن نقشتها المميزة.» (الرواية ص 52).

المبرّر في هذا المقطع خالد ، والمُبَار: السَّوار الذي كان بمعصم "أحلام" ، والتبئير تمّ بالعين المجرّة ، بما رآه ، فهو تبئير خارجي. (محاضرات في تحليل الخطاب ص 38)

Fixed, Variable and Multiple Focalization

Genette additionally distinguishes three arrangement patterns.

- (1) Texts employing **fixed focalization** are exclusively presented from the point of view of a *single* reflector as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).
- (2) **Variable focalization** occurs in narratives that employ *several* reflectors (in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, events are variously seen through the eyes of six major characters).
- (3) **Multiple focalization** (a special case of variable focalization) occurs in texts in which the events are told two or more times, each time seen through a different reflector.

Genette also points out that focalization patterns can be static or dynamic along longer stretches of text. Fixed internal focalization is a static pattern by definition, other patterns dynamically shift from one type to another. For instance, Genette notes that many 19C novelists tend to introduce characters via externally focalized block description before picking one of them as a reflector and presenting the events from his or her point of view (1980: 190).

Hypothetical and Empty center Focalization

Two special cases of focalization have attracted some attention in the literature, so I will briefly mention them here:

Hypothetical focalization: the representation of events or existents as they might have been perceived by a hypothetical observer or virtual spectator. [Herman 1994; Edmiston 1991: 150-9; Fludernik 1996: ch5.3.] Example: "Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher").

Empty center focalization: basically like internal focalization except there is no actual reflector character present in the scene. Focalization in this case is assumed to proceed from the point of view of an 'empty (deictic) center'. Banfield (1987 – discussion of the "Time Passes" section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*); Fludernik (1996: ch5.2 – 'figuralization' in Mansfield's "At the Bay")