

Narrative Situations

Week 4: MA Course on Narratology

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2022-2023

Narrative Situations

Definitions

Both Genette and Stanzel (1984) use the term narrative situation to refer to more complex patterns of narrative features. Genette's system uses the subtypes of voice (narration) and mood (focalization) in order to explore a range of possible combinations; Stanzel is more interested in describing 'ideal-typical' or prototypical configurations and arranging them on a 'typological circle'. Stanzel's narrative situations are complex frameworks aiming at capturing typical patterns of narrative features, including features of relationship (involvement), distance, pragmatics, knowledge, reliability, voice, and focalization. This line of approach results in complex 'frames' of defaults and conditions.

Narrative Situations: Types

A **first-person narrative** is told by a narrator who is present as a character in his/her story; it is a story of events s/he has experienced him- or herself, a story of personal experience. The individual who acts as a narrator (**narrating-I**) is also a character (**experiencing-I**) on the level of action.

An **authorial narrative** is told by a narrator who is absent from the story, ie, does *not* appear as a character in the story. The authorial narrator tells a story involving other people. An authorial narrator sees the story from an outsider's position, often a position of absolute authority that allows her/him to know everything about the story's world and its characters, including their private thoughts and even their unconscious motives.

A **figural narrative** presents a story as if seeing it through the eyes of a character.

1. Narrative Situations: **First-person narration**

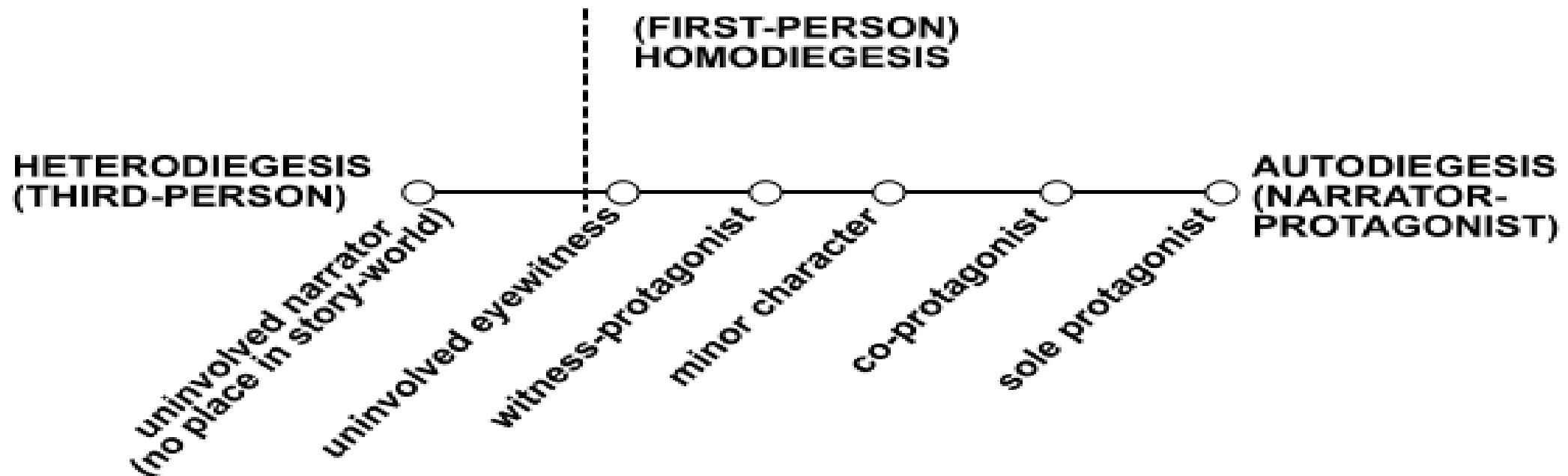
In first-person narration, the first-person pronoun refers both to the narrator (**narrating-I** or **narrating self**) and to a character in the story (**experiencing-I**). If the narrator is the main character of the story s/he is an **I-as-protagonist**; if s/he is one of the minor characters s/he is an **I-as-witness**. With respect to focalization, a first-person narrative can either be told from the hindsight awareness of the narrating-I (typical discorsal attitude: *Had I known then what I know now*) or from the more limited and naive level of insight of the experiencing-I (functioning as an internal focalizer). Epistemologically (knowledge-wise), first-person narrators are restricted to ordinary human limitations. They cannot give witness accounts of things that happened in different locations, they don't know what will happen in the future, they cannot (under ordinary circumstances) narrate the story of their own death (with exceptional 'postmortal narratives' and they cannot know for certain what other people think or thought (the common problem of 'other minds'). The temporal and psychological distance between the narrating-I and the experiencing-I is called **narrative distance**. Usually, the narrating-I is older and wiser than the experiencing-I, but other configurations are thinkable

First-person narration: Example

Later I learnt, among other things, never to buy cheap raincoats, to punch the dents out of my hat before I put it away, and not to have my clothes match too exactly in shade and color. But I looked well enough that morning ten years ago [*exact specification of temporal distance*]; I hadn't then begun to acquire a middle-aged spread and – whether it sounds sentimental or not – I had a sort of eagerness and lack of disillusion which more than made up for the coat and hat [*a block characterization of the experiencing-I, from the point of view of the narrating-I*] (Braine, *Room at the Top* 7)

First-person narration (Cont.)

Evidently, the first-person types I-as-protagonist and I-as-witness, originally proposed by Friedman (1967 [1955]), can be related to the narrator's degree of involvement in the story world. Following up on this, Susan Lanser has made an attempt to locate additional roles on a gradient that stretches between the two poles of 'heterodiegesis' and 'autodiegesis'. An **I-as-co-protagonist** would be Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Other experiencing selves include the **I-as-minor-character** in Dickens's "The Signalman", the **I-as-witness-protagonist** in chapter 1 of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and the **I-as-uninvolved-eyewitness** in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (actually, it's a "we" in this case). Consider Lanser's instructive graphic:



First-person narration: Sub-divisions

A first-person/ homodiegetic narration aims at presenting an experience that shaped and changed the narrator's life and made her/him into what s/he is today. Sometimes, a first-person narrator is an important witness offering an otherwise inaccessible account of historical or fictional events (including science-fiction scenarios). Typical subgenres of first-person narration are fictional autobiographies, initiation stories, and skaz narratives, as defined in the following.

1. **A fictional autobiography** is an I-as-protagonist (Genette: autodiegetic) narrative in which the first-person narrator tells the story (or an episode) of his/her life. Example: Sillitoe, "The Fishing Boat Picture".
2. **A story of initiation** is a story about a young person's introduction into a new sphere of society, activity, or experience. Many stories of initiation involve some stage in the transition from childhood and ignorance to adulthood and maturity and climax at a moment of recognition. Many stories of initiation also begin with a journey, often they involve a character's first sexual experience or some growing-up ritual or ceremony, which sometimes turns into an ordeal. Occasionally, the protagonist (technically, the 'initiate') can turn to an adult helper, but often enough there is no helper, or the helper turns out to be a fraud, and the whole initiatory experience may become a catastrophic and traumatic failure. (Note that not all initiation stories are *necessarily* homodiegetic ones. Consider also what it means to say that someone is "uninitiated".)
3. **Skaz narrative** (from Russian *skaz*, 'speech'): a literary form that represents an oral (or 'conversational') storytelling situation in which a speaker tells a story to a present audience. Apart from having a distinctly oral diction and syntax, a skaz-narrator's discourse is also characterized by a high incidence of phatic and appellative elements, signaling the presence of the listening audience. Skaz is closely related (and usefully compared to) the poetic genre of the 'dramatic monologue'. (Not all skaz narratives are necessarily homodiegetic ones, however).

Narrative Situation: Authorial narration

An authorial narration tells a story from the point of view of an 'authorial narrator', ie, somebody who is not, and never was, a character in the story itself. (Note, however, that, like a first-person narrator, an authorial narrator may refer to him- or herself in the first person.) Often, the authorial narrator's status of an outsider makes her/him an authority commanding practically godlike abilities such as omniscience and omnipresence. Many authors allow their authorial narrators to speak directly to their addressees, to comment on action and characters, to engage in philosophical reflection, and to 'interrupt' the course of the action by detailed descriptions. As Friedman puts it, "The prevailing characteristic of omniscience [...] is that the [authorial narrator] is always ready to intervene himself between the reader and the story, and that even when he does set a scene, he will render it as he sees it rather than as his people see it" Example: Fielding *Tom Jones*. Usually, the authorial narrator is an omniscient and omnipresent mediator (or 'moderator') telling an instructive story (a story containing a moral or a lesson) set in a complex world. The authorial narrator's comprehensive ('Olympian') world-view is particularly suited to reveal the protagonists' moral strengths and weaknesses, and to present a tightly plotted narrative. Typical subgenres are 18C and 19C novels of social criticism.

Narrative Situation: Figural Narration

A figural narration presents the story's events as seen through the eyes of a third-person 'reflector' character (or internal focalizer or 'figural medium'). The narrative agency of figural narration is a highly *covert* one; some theorists go so far as to say that figural texts are "narratorless" (Banfield 1982). While figural narration is realized as a heterodiegetic (third person) text, we can also make use of the more flexible concept of 'reflector-mode narration' which allows the inclusion of first-person texts:

- **Reflector-mode narration** is mode of narration in which the story is presented as seen through the eyes of *either a third-person or a first-person* reflector character/internal focalizer. A figural narrative presents the story's action as seen through the eyes of a reflector figure. Often, a figural text presents a distorted or restricted view of events – to many authors, such a distorted (but 'psychologically realistic') perspective is more interesting than an omniscient or 'objectively true' account of events. Because figural texts have a covert narrator (a withdrawn, subdued narrator) only, figural stories typically begin 'medias in res' (in the middle of things), have little or no exposition, and attempt to present a direct (ie, both immediate and unmediated) view into the perceptions, thoughts, and psychology of a character's mind. Typical subgenres are 'slice-of-life' and 'stream of consciousness' stories, often associated with 20C literary impressionism and modernism. Indeed, many authors specifically aimed at capturing the distortive perceptions of unusual internal focalizers – eg, a drug addict (Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*), a drinker (Lowry, *Under the Volcano*), a two-year old child (Dorothy Richardson, "The Garden"), a dog (Woolf, *Flush*), a machine (Walter M. Miller, "I Made You"). Figural storytelling is usually considered a modern form, whose beginnings are located in the 19C.

Narrative Situation: Figural Narration: Elements

Four additional elements of figural narratives are worthy of closer attention: incipits using referentless pronouns and familiarizing articles, slice-of-life format, epiphanies, and the mirror trick.

1. Referentless pronoun: many figural stories begin with a third-person pronoun whose referent has not yet been established. This is usually indicative of a narrator's covertness, his/her relinquishing of exposition and conative solicitude. Usually, the pronoun identifies the text's internal focalizer.

2. Familiarizing article presents new information (as far as the reader is concerned) in the guise of given information (as far as a story-internal character is concerned). Cf. the incipit of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "He [referentless pronoun, identifying the reflector] lay flat on the [familiarizing article] brown, pine-needed floor of the [another familiarizing article] forest [...]". Who is "he"? Which forest?

3. Slice of life story/novel: a short story or novel whose story time is restricted to a very brief episode in a character's life, often only a day, a few hours, or even just a single moment. Examples: Joyce, "Eveline", Mansfield, "Miss Brill", Richardson, "The Garden", Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Joyce, *Ulysses* (but note, the latter text is a 600+ page novel!).

4. Epiphany: originally, a Greek term denoting the 'manifestation' or appearance of divine quality or power. The term was appropriated by James Joyce in *Stephen Hero* (1905) to denote a moment of intense insight, usually occasioned by the perception of a more or less ordinary object or event. The term is closely related to what other authors variously term 'moment of vision' (Conrad, Woolf), 'moment of being' (Woolf, again), or 'glimpse' (Mansfield). According to Beja, "epiphany is a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind – the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it".

Narrative Situation: Figural Narration (Example)

Here is the relevant passage from Joyce's *Stephen Hero*:

Stephen as he passed [...] heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely:

The Young Lady – (drawling discreetly) ...O, yes ... I was ... at the ... cha...pel...

The Young Gentleman – (inaudibly) ... I ... (again inaudibly) ... I ...

The Young Lady – (softly) ... O ... but you're ... ve...ry wick...ed ...

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.

In the practice of many authors, notably Woolf and Mansfield, epiphanies may turn out to be deceptive, misguided, or otherwise erroneous (see Mansfield's "Bliss" for a particularly striking pseudo-epiphany). In many modernist texts, epiphanies are made to serve as climaxes or endings ('epiphanic endings').

mirror trick: a way (perhaps the only way) of conveying the physical features of a reflector figure without using overt narratorial description. Example:

Mr. Hutton came to pause in front of a small oblong mirror. Stooping a little to get a full view of his face, he passed a well-manicured finger over his moustache. It was as curly, as freshly auburn as it had been twenty years ago. His hair still retained its colour, and there was no sign of baldness yet – only a certain elevation of the brow. "Shakespearean," thought Mr. Hutton, with a smile [...]. (Huxley, "The Gioconda Smile")

Narrative Situation: Four Peripheral Categories

1. **we-narrative:** a form of homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator's experiencing self belongs to a group of collective internal focalizers.
 2. **you-narrative/second-person narrative:** a narrative in which the protagonist is referred to in the second person. Functionally, *you* may refer (a) to the narrator's experiencing Self, (b) to some other character in a homodiegetic world, or (c) to a character in a heterodiegetic world. (Note, we are not talking here of the 'general' "you", meaning 'anyone', nor the "you" that first-person or authorial narrators use for addressing their narratees). You-narratives are special forms of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narratives.
 3. **simultaneous narration:** a type of homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator tells a story that unfolds as s/he tells it. The problematic logic of this type of narrative situation demands that the narrator does not know how the story ends, that there can be no objective flashforwards, that all sentences of narrative report are in the present tense, and that the narrating and experiencing selves (external and internal focalizers) overlap and merge. Simultaneous narration exhibits a certain resemblance to both journalistic 'on-the-scene reporting' and interior monologue. The term was originally coined by Genette; the current extended definition is Cohn.
 4. **camera-eye narration:** the purely external or 'behaviorist' representation of events; a text that reads like a transcription of a recording made by a camera. Originally, the term was appropriated from the introductory paragraph of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (quoted below); today, the term is more often used as a metaphor of strictly 'neutral' types of heterodiegetic narration. Stanzel (1955: 28) briefly toyed with the notion of a separate category of 'neutral narration' but eventually subsumed this under figural narration; however, 'neutral narrative' is still an active category in Lintvelt's (1981) model, where it is characterized by covert narration, absence of inside views, and the point of view of a stationary camera.
1. We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will. (Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily")
 2. I persistently imagine you dead. You told me that you loved me years ago. And I said that I, too, was in love with you in those days. An exaggeration. (Alice Munro, "Tell Me Yes or No")
 3. But in the places where it [the wallpaper] isn't faded and where the sun is just so – I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about that silly and conspicuous front design. There's sister on the stairs! (Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper")
 4. From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied facades, dirty plaster-frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices. [...]

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed. (Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*)

Narrative Situation: Alteration

Sometimes a narrative has a surprise in store, either because its story takes an unexpected turn or because it becomes difficult to reconcile a present mode of presentation with the general frame or contract that we thought we could use in order to optimally read and understand. It is this second type of narrative effect which Genette terms 'transgression' or 'alteration' or 'infraction of code'.

- **alteration:** a (usually, temporary) shift into a mode of presentation which does not conform to the standard expectations associated with the current narrative situation. Genette specifically invokes the analogy of a musical composition which momentarily becomes dissonant or changes its tonality (Genette 1980 [1972]).

Some of the problem cases mentioned above can clearly be analyzed as infractions/alterations in this sense. Genette further differentiates between the following two main types of alterations:

- **paralepsis:** an infraction caused by saying too much; a narrator assuming a competence he/she does not properly have; typically, a first-person narrator (or a historiographer) narrating what somebody else thought (Genette's 1980 [1972]: 208 example is Marcel's narration of Bergotte's dying thoughts), or what happened when s/he was not present (illicit assumption of authorial competence).

- **paralipsis:** an infraction caused by omitting crucial information; saying too little; typically, an authorial narrator pretending "not to know" what happened in her/his characters' minds, or what went on at the same time in another place, or distortively censoring a character's thought, or generally pretending to be restricted to ordinary human limitations. (To remember this term, think of the rhetorical figure of ellipsis, omission.)