

## THE BASICS OF POINT OF VIEW

Determining point of view can easily become confusing and complicated. Asking a few questions before you decide upon which point of view you are reading can simplify your decision: Who is telling the story -- an unnamed speaker/narrator; a character in the work? How well informed is the speaker? Does he/she have a limited knowledge of what is happening, or does he/she know all the characters' innermost thoughts? Keep in mind that authors may not consistently use the same point of view, or that a variety of combinations can be used. *The most important thing that you need to remember is what the author is telling you about the characters and how point of view contributes to that.* Following are the basic points of view:

### 1. FIRST PERSON POINT OF VIEW

The story is told by a minor or major character, using the word "I" and sometimes the word "we." The speaker could be the protagonist or even a very minor character, but the choice of speaker can make a vast difference. On the positive side, the first person speaker offers the reader fast availability to any events in the story, but it doesn't offer any direct interpretation by the author. However, the character/narrator tells of events and emotions as they seem to him/her.

First person point of view can work well with dramatic irony. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers excellent examples of dramatic irony. Twain *indirectly* expresses his opinion through Huck. For example, when Huck describes the Grangerford house in an awe-filled voice, the reader sees Twain's *intimations* of tackiness. Twain cleverly expresses his opinion as he plays off Huck's naiveté. The novel is highly dependent upon point of view which Twain has expertly manipulated.

Look at the age-old story of Jack and Jill. Told from a first person point of view (Jill's), it goes something like this:

"Jack and I went up the hill with Jack complaining all the way. As usual, he didn't want to help carry the water. So, he was "horsing around," and I told him to be careful! But did he listen? Of course not! So the next thing I know, he's tumbling all the way down, pulling me with him, and spilling water everywhere! So now that he broke his crown, I have to carry all the water myself even though I hurt my ankle and my knee and my arm! And it's all his fault!"

### 2. OBJECTIVE OR DRAMATIC POINT OF VIEW

To understand this third person point of view, think of what you experience when watching a play. You see what the characters do and say but not what they feel unless they express their feelings dramatically. The author does nothing to interpret their feelings, so that sometimes this writing has an informational feeling like a news

report. A whole story written in dialogue is an example of this point of view. *Hills Like White Elephants* by Ernest Hemingway is an example of objective point of view, as is part of *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson.

Back to Jack and Jill we go. The original story that you know is told in the objective point of view:

"Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down and broke his crown  
And Jill came tumbling after."

### 3. OMNISCIENCE

This point of view is told in third person, usually by a narrator / speaker who is all-knowing. He / she knows the thoughts feelings of all the characters, and can interpret their behavior and can comment on anything he/she wants. *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant exemplifies omniscient narrator as he comments about Mathilde Loisel and her husband's thoughts.

In the Jack and Jill story below, the narrator's words are in italics.

"Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water.

*'He's so lazy; he never wants to help me do anything!'*

*'She's always nagging me to help her do her chores,' Jack thought.*

Jack fell down and broke his crown  
And Jill came tumbling after.

*'I told him to stop horsing around,' thought Jill, 'but he never listens.'*

*I wonder if those two will ever learn."*

### 4. LIMITED OMNISCIENCE

This point of view is told in third person by one character whose thoughts and opinions interpret the story. This person cannot see into the mind of anyone else, so the reader only sees this one character's viewpoint. An example of limited omniscience is seen in the character of Peyton Farquhar in *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*.

The Jack and Jill version might read:

"Jack and Jill went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water.  
*Tired of hearing her complain about everything,  
He wished Jill would stop nagging.  
Just then he felt his feet slip out from under him  
And down he fell, bumping his head.  
He realized that the only good thing to come from this was --  
Seeing Jill sprawled out at the bottom of the hill.*

## ASSIGNMENT 2: WRITING ABOUT POINT OF VIEW

Working in groups, choose a nursery rhyme, fairy tale, or other simple story which has at least two characters. Then tell the story from all four points of view, using the story of Jack and Jill as a model. Some suggested stories include *Hey Diddle Diddle*, *The Cat and the Fiddle*; *The Three Little Pigs*; *Little Red Riding Hood*; or any other story of your choice. You will share the stories with the class.

## Point of View

### General Questions

1. Is the author sympathetic or unsympathetic with the narrator?
2. How does the point of view enhance the story's theme?

### Types of Point of View

1. Third person objective viewpoint—no thoughts or feelings of characters are recorded. The narrator becomes a camera, recording actions and behaviors without comment or interpretation. This narrator cannot record thoughts or feelings. Readers must read between the lines to discover the tone and thoughts behind the words.
2. Third person omniscient viewpoint—the all-knowing consciousness. The following are indications of omniscience (in increasingly intrusive order):
  - a. Thoughts, feelings, perceptions of characters reported as narrator, not character, understands them
  - b. Setting descriptions that do not arise from character's actions
  - c. Identifications of characters on first appearance—introductions
  - d. Temporal summaries (what happened before or after)
  - e. Summary that epitomizes a character or event
  - f. Commentary from the narrator
    1. Explicit commentary
      - a. Interpretation—to explain the relevance or significance of an event or reaction
      - b. Judgment—to evaluate on the basis of certain criteria held by the narrator
      - c. Generalization—to apply significance from the narrative to the wider world
      - d. Self-conscious narration—comments on the narrative itself
    2. Implicit commentary or ironic narration—narrator is conscious of and intends irony, the "butt" of the irony is the character(s) or society described.
3. Third person limited omniscient—narrator's knowledge of thoughts, actions, visual perceptions, and feelings is limited to one of a few characters.
4. First person viewpoint—point of view is limited to the consciousness of a particular character(s).

Indications of subjective viewpoint

  - a. Thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the narrating character who refers to himself or herself as "I" are reported as they seem to that character, happening now. Focus is not only on the action, but also on what the narrator makes of it.
  - b. Other characters, what they look like, what they do, what they think, appear only through the narrator's consciousness.

### Narrative Framework

1. Without frame—events are reported as though they were happening, just as the reader reads about them.
2. With frame—narrator appears at beginning and usually at end of narrative to tell his or her story to (a) listener(s) outside the main narrative.

### **Narrator's Reliability**

1. Author's attitude toward narrator
  - a. **Reliable**—narrator is a trustworthy, intelligent, insightful, involved, and knowledgeable guide.
  - b. **Reliable/unreliable**—narrator has limited capacities because of
    1. **Tunnel vision**—narrator sees only one type of thing.
    2. **Confused emotions**—narrator's involvement keeps him or her from being an accurate reporter.
    3. **Naivete**—narrator is incapable of understanding what he or she reports.
  - c. **Unreliable**—narrator is dishonest to make him or herself look good.
  - d. **Unreliable**—narrator is a pawn of the author, i.e., manipulated to withhold information to provide suspense (detective story, Saki's stories).
2. Reader's detection of narrator's unreliability through inconsistencies in narrator's story
  - a. Narrator has invalid presuppositions that distort his or her view.
  - b. Narrator does not suppress certain facts, reported to the reader, that are inconsistent with the narrator's conclusions.