

Jonathan Culler “Theory” and “Narrative” from *Literary Theory: a very short introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1997)

James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (Picador, 2008; 2018)

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Jonathan Culler “Narrative” from *Literary Theory: a very short introduction*

“Narrative”

Culler begins by talking about the significance of narrative and the way in which story-making can be said to structure experience (82-83).

Looks back to Aristotle who argued for the **centrality of plot**: “good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering” (84)

Culler adds that the “a plot requires a transformation” (84) and later suggests that we are driven to read narrative because we want to follow out the complications of that transformation and our “desire to know” or “**epistemophilia**” (91)

Also raises the very large question as to the effect of narrative: does it “police” and contain desire and rebellion? Or does it facilitate desire and prompt questioning of authority? (92) A question that Culler wisely encourages you to puzzle over rather than answering.

Terms from Culler:

A Basic Distinction of Narratology between

events / plot

story / discourse

raw materials of the narrative / the way in which the narrative is told

what / how

The narratologist's questions:

Who speaks?

The most common types of point-of-view include **first-person** (the narrator is the protagonist in *Jane Eyre*, *The Hunger Games*) but first-person narrators might be minor characters in the novel (participants *The Great Gatsby*) or even an observer (unusual *Wuthering Heights*)

omniscient third-person (often Jane Austen's narrative voice)

limited third-person (less common; third-person but focalized through a particular character or a particularly opinionated narrator; Woolf's *The Waves* or Morrison's *A Mercy*)

Who speaks to whom?

The narratee is the intended audience for the narrator's story who may (or may not) be identified.

Narrator : Narratee // Speaker : Auditor

In *Moll Flanders*: Writer of the Preface: Reader but also Moll: the Reader

Who speaks when?

Think of this as the temporal variable; it includes the compression of time and flashbacks. At the very end of *Moll Flanders*, the reader learns that Moll tells her story in 1683, rather than in 1722 when the novel was published. In 1683 she is 70 and residing in London once more.

Who speaks what language?

What characterizes one voice from another? To what degree does the novel represent many, unique characters (**polyphonic or dialogic**) or focus upon a single voice (**monological**)

Who speaks with what authority?

The unwritten contract between reader and text usually implies that we'll believe the narrator until given a good reason not to. Narrators can be unreliable and they can be self-conscious and thus lead the reader to question the narrative integrity of narrator.

Focalization

Who sees? In some novels, the action is seen through the eyes of a character other than the narrator. In epistolary novels, for example, focalization shifts along with the letter writer, so that the focalizer is also the narrator, but also when a character in a non-epistolary novel reads a letter or shares the story of their life (i.e. embedded narration, or a story within a story)

The first person narrator is often – but not always – the focalizer.

Three variables that effect focalization:

Temporal: significance if events are narrated looking backwards into the past or forward into the future

Distance and Speed: some temporally brief events are dwelled upon; in other cases, long periods of time are summed up in a brief sentence. The compression and expansion of narrative events in the novel effects tone as well as structure.

Limitations of Knowledge: The novel's presentation of one character's focalization is often radically limited

James Wood, *How Fiction Works*: the title itself places this work in the category of “theory,” although Wood is deliberately writing in a particularly accessible form.

Good definitions of important terms: direct or quoted speech, indirect or reported speech, and then free indirect speech/style/discourse

“The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to ‘own’ the words” (7)

“we see things through the character’s eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge – which is free indirect style itself – between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance” (9)

Wood links FID to dramatic irony: “to see through a character’s eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see” (9); also connects it to another satiric technique, the “mock-heroic”

But also connected to characterization: we inhabit the character’s consciousness, language, and focalization (i.e. example of James’s Maisie)

Can occupy multiple perspectives, most commonly a character and a narrator (although at times also the implied author as well) (16)

Also notes what he calls “village-chorus narration” or “unidentified free indirect style”, that is when the “omniscience” seems like less than an objective narrator, or one affiliated with the implied author, but rather with the very culture and collective consciousness of the text’s world

Other useful definitions of free indirect discourse:

“. . . the way, in many narratives, that the reports of what a character says and thinks shift in pronouns, adverbs, tense, and grammatical mode, as we move — or sometimes hover — between the direct narrated reproductions of these events as they occur to the character and the indirect representation of such events by the narrator” (from Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

“Discourse that is represented, rather than directly related, to the reader . . . in which the thoughts, statements, and even dialogues engaged in by the characters are recounted to the reader” (*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*)

Definitions of Narratology

"The **poetics of narrative**, as we might call it, both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyzes how particular narratives achieve their effects" (Culler 83)

"Narratology denotes recent concerns with the general theory and practice of narrative in all literary forms. **It deals especially with types of narrators, the identification of structural elements and their diverse modes of combination, recurrent narrative devices, and the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told, as well as with the narratee** – that is, the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narratee" (Abrams, *The Glossary of Literary Terms* 173)

"The analysis of structural components of a narrative, the way in which those components interrelate, and the relationship between this complex of elements and the narrative's basic story line . . . [Narratologists] seek to explain how an author transforms (or how authors in general transform) a story line into a literary plot by analyzing the 'rules' that generate plot from story. They pay particular attention to such elements as point of view; the relations among story, teller, and audience; and the levels and types of discourse used in narratives" (*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* 232-33)

Other Important Terms:

Public narration (narration implicitly or explicitly addressed to a narratee external to the text i.e. when the narrator directly addresses a reader outside of the text) and **private narration** (addressed to a narratee within the textual world, i.e. when Evelina writes a letter and send it to her guardian)

Embedded Narration: a story within a story

Direct Address: when the narrator addresses the reader outside of the text

Paralepsis: emphasizing a point by seeming to pass over it

Metaphor/Simile

Parallelism, Alliteration, Anaphora