

Narrative Voice in First Person Narratives

By Mark Attwood for CMN 267: Creativity and Literature: Victorians to Moderns

With the publication of *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker introduced the form of narrative voice particular to the setting and time period in which her novel was set. Although not a new technique, the effectiveness with which Walker uses the vernacular of her characters gives an authenticity to the narrative that set a high standard for works that followed. To broaden this writer's knowledge of narrative voice, the writer conducted an analysis of how Walker, H.G. Wells and Henry James employ narrative voice in a first-person narrative. Further understanding of how narrative voice developed between the publication of *The Time Traveller*, *Turn of the Screw* and *The Color Purple* also requires defining narrative voice, then examining how and to what effect the authors of these narratives use narrative voice.

First-person narratives aim to develop an empathic relationship between the reader and a text through the experiences and senses of a narrator involved in the story. Grenville (1990: 88) notes that point-of-view helps a reader relate to a narrator and an effective narrative voice can intensify the effect. Such a narrative voice can evoke a particular place or time period through the shape of a character's dialect and can build a reader's trust through the simple rhythm of a character's words. Narrative voice can give the reader a lot of information about a narrator, about the narrator's world, and about their position in that world. However, the reader must remember the narrative voice of a character offers a subjective truth. As Booth (1983: 152) observes, 'as soon as we encounter an "I", we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event'. The narrative voice does not offer reality, but a retelling of events distorted by the narrator's opinions, desires, and ego. Understanding is the reader's basic expectation when approaching a narrative, and as such the reader is willing to accept the world of the narrative as true, yet the narrative voice can undermine this truth, leaving the narrative ambiguous and liable to multiple interpretations.

James's *Turn of the Screw* is a noted example of an ambiguous narrative voice open to reader interpretation. Jones (1959: 118) suggests the ambiguity is due to the first-person narrator lacking omniscience. The governess is forced to draw conclusions from incomplete evidence in her efforts to save the children. Orr (2009: 29) suggests the ambiguity is due to the narrative of the governess being 'filled with unresolved questions' such as the governess's ability to see the ghosts when others do not, whether or not the children collude with the ghosts, and whether the ghosts are real or hallucinations. Orr (2009: 44) further points out the narrative voice is suspect, as the governess lies to those about her. She has frequently lied about sending letters to the children's uncle seeking aid. To Mrs Grose she describes a conversation with the ghost of Miss Jessel: 'And what did she say? ... That she suffers the torments—!' (101). The reader has shared the governess's recollection of the encounter, however, and knows no such conversation took place. At no point does the governess offer a motive for these fabrications.

If the reader trusts the narrative voice, then the governess is the saviour of the children, and although Miles dies, it is clear his soul was saved. If, however, the reader distrusts the narrative voice, then the sanity of the governess comes into question. She becomes an unreliable narrative voice and changes the perspective with which the reader views the narrative.

Two narrative voices exist in Wells' *The Time Machine*. The first frames the narrative of the Time Traveller and, like that used by James in *Turn of the Screw*, offers a degree of separation that aids in the construction of narrative truth, allowing the reader to view the tale of the Time Traveller through objective eyes. Berlatsky (2009: 173) states '[t]he use of narrators within narratives ... cognitively frames our responses depending on the characterization of each narrator.' In other words, the framing narrative voice is the lens through which the reader perceives the character of the Time Traveller. Further, while the other guests joke and ridicule, the narrator, while suspicious, is willing to suspend disbelief until he has heard the Time Traveller's narrative. Before it begins, however, the reader is told the Time Traveller is 'one of those men who are too clever to be believed' and has 'more than a touch of whim among his elements' (17). This description creates an air of speculation about the Time Traveller's narrative, leaving the reader to wonder whether the Time Traveller is playing an elaborate hoax or telling the truth.

Walker uses letters or epistles in *The Color Purple* to recount the narrative of Celie, an uneducated black woman living in America's Deep South between the World Wars. Booth (1983: 221) describes a reliable narrative voice as being a guide 'not only to the world of the novels in which they appear but also to the moral truths of the world outside the book'. The harsh reality of the narrator's subjugated, helpless and hopeless life is shown in the blunt and vulgar language used in the opening section of the novel. 'Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it' (1). Celie's narrative voice is initially constructed of short, simple sentences, phonetic spelling and the black folk vernacular of the period. Walker creates an authentic voice that adds verisimilitude to the text, builds empathy for the protagonist and draws the reader deeper into the narrative. As the narrative progresses and Celie begins to find her identity and the courage to speak, the narrative voice grows to reflect the changes in her character. According to Emery (1996: 534) a character's outlook, thoughts and feelings are 'the glue that holds the story together'. By the end of the novel, the narrative voice has become one of strength and hope and Celie has become the magnet that draws all those she loves to her. '...I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt' (173).

The use of narrative voice in literature has progressed to a point where the narrative of the common man or woman can be accepted with the same integrity as that of the privileged well-educated white men typified in *The Time Traveller* and *Turn of the Screw*. Narrative voice is

no longer restricted to a port and pipe retelling of an educated, well-to-do white man's narrative, but can include the voice of an uneducated and abused black woman as in *The Color Purple*. In fact, the language used by Wells and James can be considered outdated and prone to alienate modern readers. An audience expects a writer to shape an authentic voice and incorporate the dialect of the community in which the narrative unfolds, as Walker has done in *The Color Purple*. Profanity, slang and contractions add verisimilitude to modern narratives when used appropriately and in moderation. One could well imagine the surprise of the reader if a modern author employed the verbose and flowery language as used in the narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Use of first-person narrative voice within a narrative has changed since Wells and James saw their texts published. This is shown in Walker's effective use narrative voice, particularly the vernacular used by the characters in *The Color Purple*. Although the ambiguity and speculation used to such effect by the male authors remain relevant narrative techniques, the framing structure and narrative voices have been overworked by writers who followed in the footsteps of these masters. In modern first-person narratives, a reader's expectations have amplified to the point where they expect to encounter a narrative voice that reflects the world truth of the narrative they are experiencing. The task of the modern writer is to be aware of the work Wells, James and Walker have done, the ground they have broken, and be able to innovate and build upon their foundations.

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