

【Practical Report】

Make Your Voices Heard

An Exploration of Homodiegetic and Heterodiegetic Narrative Voices for the Creative Writing Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to assist and inform educators introducing the concept of narrative voice into their creative writing classes by exploring different avenues that narrative voice can take. To this end, this paper analyses to what extent multiple homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative voices improve character depth and allow for differing perspectives of a narrative and its protagonists. In order to do so, the author examines the use of the homodiegetic narrative voices implemented by George Saunders in his Booker Prize-winning *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and the heterodiegetic voices used in Laura Lippman's *Sunburn*.

Key words: narrative voice, homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, creative writing, ESL,
classroom development

1. An introduction to narrative voice

David Lodge's (1992, p. 26) assertion that "The choice of the point(s) of view from which the story is told is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make," is oft quoted. However, this paper will counter that in fiction featuring multiple narrators—or narrators that follow multiple protagonists—it is the narrator's voice and how it is presented, that should hold the mantle of highest import, as how a narrator reacts, and voices that reaction, creates a far greater impression upon the reader than their general standpoint. As such, the narrator's relationship to the story, and how their voice incubates character depth and provides differing perspectives of a story, means that how they are tendered becomes paramount. For students unskilled in creative writing, particularly in Japan, where creative writing is rarely taught in their

own language, this may be daunting, with the authorial voice becoming obtrusive on the page or worse, as “In any second language writing class, many students feel voiceless” (Thorpe, 2021, p. 187)

For writers, often the best way for discovering narrative voice is simple: to read vast amounts. By finding writers students enjoy—or conversely dislike—writers can experiment with styles, adapt them, and discover what works best for them. However, in the ESL classroom, where students may not have the language capability to read substantially in English and therefore lack familiarity with the strategies available (Matsuda, 2001), there is a greater emphasis on teacher guidance. As a result, the exploration of and a broad knowledge about differing literary voices is essential for the creative writing teacher.

2. The heterodiegetic narrative voice

In modern fiction, writers have a wide array of narrative techniques at their disposal. The most prominent of these would encompass what Gérard Genette (1972) referred to as the homodiegetic narrator—one who resides within the world of the story—and the heterodiegetic narrator—one who exists without.

In her noir thriller, *Sunburn*, Laura Lippman eschews the traditional noir trope of the first-person narrator, exemplified by Frank Chambers in James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, a novel to which *Sunburn* is, in many ways, an homage. She instead utilises a close third person heterodiegetic narrative across a multitude of characters, jumping from one narrative point to another within a linear layout (Bordwell, 2013) in a way to obscure the narrative. She “buries her lead by telling her story initially from the perspective of Adam Bosk” (Woods, 2018, online), setting him up as the voice character with which the third-person narrator begins, a character who, despite his good looks, is so bland—even as an asshole he is “Garden variety” (Lippman, p. 10)—he smoothly becomes the reader’s surrogate.

Close third and the obfuscation of fact

Despite this, it is Polly who is the primary character of interest and obvious vocal point, and another author may have considered her for a homodiegetic narrator. However, it is Polly who holds all the cards, who is the gatekeeper of the facts behind story’s drive. Therefore, had she been a first-person narrator, she would have been able to offer up that information, irradicating all potential for suspense. Instead, by shifting the third-person narrative voice between Adam and Polly—as well as several other characters—Lippman is able to drip feed the secrets in carefully apportioned doses (Woods, 2018), granting the reader a broader understanding of the characters and their motivations. However, it is not only the secrets that the narrators share, but also the lies,

and “Through all angles, the reader is given the opportunity to discover not only the truth, but the ways in which they hide the truth from themselves,” (Ward, 2019, p. 11).

They sit outside with sweating tumblers of vodka, swap stories. Polly’s are all made up. Maybe Cath’s are, too, although they’re certainly boring enough to be true. *Younger sister was the pretty one, made the good marriage. I made some mistakes when I was a teen and my family never lets me forget it. Blah, blah, blah.* Maybe everybody lies, all the time
(Lippman, 2018, p. 113)

Through this obfuscation, Lippman provides us with a close third narration, bouncing around the games of poker the characters play, holding their cards of information closely to their chests, only laying one down when absolutely necessary. This silence from Lippman’s heterodiegetic narrators forces the reader to fill in the blanks, and in doing so make moral decisions as to with whom they side. A primary example is how the narrator repeatedly reminds us that, by deserting her daughters, Polly is “unnatural” (Lippman, 2018, pgs. 21, 54, 66, 86, 243), and this abandonment makes it difficult for readers to champion her. Had Polly been able to speak to the reader in first person, she could have shared...

(...) the worst parts about her marriage to Ditmars, the most shaming details. How she knew of his crimes, the people he had killed, but did nothing until she came to believe he would harm her and Joy. How he liked to take her curling iron and hold it against her flesh, demanding that she not scream, teaching her resilience until she learned to stay silent even when he gave her a third-degree burn on her thigh.

(Lippman, 2018, p. 274)

Instead, the heterodiegetic narrator forces her into silence until later into the novel, resulting in the reader harbouring initial misgivings about her.

Tangential characters

One of the most intriguing uses of third-person narration is in how it allows the more tangential characters to shed light on the primary characters. Were the narrator to focus only on Polly and Adam, the reader’s understanding of the former would have been compromised; the closeness of the narrator is such that it would not have been able to question Polly’s actions adequately, while Adam is too infatuated with her to be sufficiently critical. However, through characters such as Gregg, the husband Polly abandoned, and Irving, the crooked insurance broker who sets the wheels in motion by hiring Adam to investigate Polly, Polly is brought into sharper focus. Aside from Polly herself, Irving alone knows her past, and it is through him—and the

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narrator close to him—that the reader is drip fed the idea that she is not necessarily an innocent party.

That husband better watch his back, Irving thinks, and maybe the kid, too. Ditmars once suggested to him that the issues with the other kid, those were her fault.

(Lippman, 2018, p. 88)

Through Irving's insight into Polly's history, muddying the waters of her motives and providing us with shade to the light of her own justifications, the reader is required to pass moral judgements upon her. But it is not only Gregg and Irving who are given this preferential treatment, as there is an entire menagerie of supporting characters, those who would ordinarily be mentioned only in passing as unimportant extras. Lippman instead gives them entire chapters: an unlucky-in-love PI; Cath, jilted by Adam, frustrated at a failing life; a video-store clerk, proud and respected in his closed world. These all, by way of the close heterodiegetic narrator, either cause us to doubt Polly, like Irving, or at times help us to better understand her. The narrator for Gregg's mother, who detests Polly, shows her pride in raising a chauvinist: "(...) at the end of the day, your man knows he's the king of the castle, the cock of the walk. She raised Gregg to expect nothing less" (Lippman, 2018, p. 170). In doing so, this inadvertently offers up a motive for her daughter-in-law's desertion.

It could be argued that giving these characters so much page space is superfluous padding, but in fact "this clamor of voices gives the novel satisfying depth and texture. There's a sense here that we're brushing up against many lives, many versions of the truth" (Lane, 201, online). In addition, the heterodiegetic narrator passing from one character to the other, illuminating some thoughts while masking others, encourages the reader to be more objective, to weigh up the facts and lies as they arrive, to sift evidence and cast judgements, leading to a more satisfactory conclusion.

3. The homodiegetic narrative voice

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a novel that dramatizes the days following the death of Abraham Lincoln's son, Willie, and the boy's purgatory in the bardo, a liminal space between life and death, George Saunders takes the concept of homodiegetic narrators to an extreme by introducing 166 first-person narrators including historical sources – both real and fictional – and a ghastly crew of spirits suspended in the bardo. Much of the former are first-hand retellings of events, some multiple diary pages, others single line extracts of anthologies, letters, and memoirs. Saunders has evidently put a great deal of research into this element, which allows for authenticity, assisting in

the reader's belief in the world he has created (Michel, 2015). This, combined with use of first-person narration, lends the accounts immediacy, authority, and emotion, so that the reader should at all times feel for the narrators, whether they are, for example, grieving for Willie:

(...) I found, in a coat-pocket, a tiny wadded-up mitten. Many memories came back to me and I burst into tears. I will remember that little boy forever, and his sweet ways.

Hilyard, op. cit., account of Sophie Lenox, maid.

(Saunders, 2017, p. 53-54)

Or railing against Lincoln's war:

If Abe Lincoln should be re-elected for another term of four years of such wretched administration, we hope that a bold hand will be found to plunge the dagger into the tyrant's heart for the public welfare.

In the "La Crosse Democrat."

(Saunders, 2017, p. 235)

Experiments in 'we-narration'

The majority of the novel is told through the inhabitants of the bardo, spirits trapped in the liminal space by their refusal to accept their fates. Their polyphonic pronouncements are passed from one to another, punctuated by interjections, interruptions, spouts of interpolated thought fragments, stitched together like tapestry. Their individualities are marked out by inconsistent spelling, formality of speech, hanging sentences, and the censorship of repeated curse words. These conversations—or, more often, interrupted monologues—"meld together to create a reading experience that is both disorientating and stimulating," (Ní Éigeartaigh, 2019, online). Yet, as distinctive as these voices are, the way they intertwine and merge means the point of narration is not first person singular, but 'we-narration'.

As defined by Uimaniemi (2021, abstract), "We-narration refers to narratives that utilize the first-person plural as the dominant narrative point of view (...) largely based on (...) shared subjectivity, collective experiences, and [an] us vs. them binary". Despite having come from various walks of life—amongst them a respected businessman, a shamed homosexual, an underclass couple, enslaved people—in death, the residents of the bardo regularly narrate as a collective, repeatedly associating with the personal pronoun 'we'.

We thought.

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hans vollman

We all thought.

the reverend everly thomas

As one. Simultaneously.

hans vollman

One mass-mind, united in positive intention.

roger bevins iii

(Saunders, 2017, p. 254)

In his utilisation of the homodiegetic ‘we-voice’, Saunders has created a strong sense of community within the novel, one that binds the characters together in ways that would have been unthinkable in life, and it is this that ensures that the story can reach its satisfactory climax, the bardo’s denizens working together to rescue Lincoln’s son, Willie, from a tragic fate.

Unreliable narrators and the problematization of truth

While there is some debate as to whether *Lincoln in the Bardo* is a work of historical fiction (Moseley, 2019), Hayes-Brady (2020, p.74) proposes that it “can be situated in the context of contemporary historical fiction [...] in Saunders’ use of radical form experimentation, as a means of disrupting, conventional historiography”. It can be argued that all history is a fiction of sorts, that history is a creative construct made up of a patchwork of recorded details, particularly as this creativity can create contradictory perspectives, here manifesting in the concept of the unreliable narrator.

Like all history, *Lincoln in the Bardo* is littered with examples of contrasting and unreliable first-person accounts. Though these contemporaneous reports should radiate authority, Saunders shows them up for the dubious perspectives that they are.

The full moon that night was yellow-red, as if reflecting the light of some earthly fire.

Sloane, op. cit.

As I moved about the room I would encounter that silver wedge of a moon at this window or that, like some old beggar who wished to be invited in.

Carter, op. cit.

By the time dinner was served, the moon shone high and small and blue above, still bright, albeit somewhat diminished.

In “A Time Departed” (unpublished memoir), by I. B. Brigg III.

The night continued dark and moonless; a storm was moving in.

In “Those Most Joyful Years,” by Albert Trundle.

(Saunders, 2017, p. 19-20)

It is not the historical accounts alone that stretch and shield the truth, as the bardo's residents are consistently lying to themselves, their 'we-voice' cohorts, and the reader.

He was softly sobbing.

roger bevins iii

He was not sobbing. My friend remembers incorrectly . He was winded . He did not sob .

hans vollman

He was softly sobbing, his sadness aggravated by his mounting frustration at being lost.

roger bevins iii

(Saunders, 2017, p. 44)

In this problematisation of the truth, Saunders does not so much highlight the unreliability of the homodiegetic narrator but rather stands atop the White House dome hailing it with a megaphone. And herein lies much of the novel's suspense, for how can a reader trust these compulsively lying ghouls with the redemption of Willie. In fact, it is seemingly only 'Honest Abe' who keeps to his word in returning to his son, though it appears this truth does more harm than good, as it is this promise that jeopardises the boy's soul.

With that said, Lincoln is not the only truth keeper within the bardo. The majority of the spectral narrators fall within the 'we-voice', and as such should not be considered superfluous. One who falls into the 'they' category, and could in fact be considered tangential, is the soldier Captain William Prince, though his impact is phenomenal. Having arrived in the bardo from the Civil War battlefield, he very quickly recognises his predicament.

I am here, am trapped here and I see of this instant what I must do to get free.

Which is tell the TRUTH & all shall be

(Saunders, 2017 p. 138)

Though he appears in a mere three pages, the soldier's heartfelt and emotional confession of his adulteries clarifies for the reader not only the quandary in which the bardo inhabitants find themselves, but of how it can be resolved. Yet, following his 'matterblooming', his audience choose to ignore his insight, one leaving "the coward" (Saunders, 2017, p. 141) a faecal gift upon his grave for good measure. Through this tangential narrator the reader is given the clearest indication that the spirits are fooling themselves, their compatriots in the 'we', and the reader.

4. Conclusion

Through the exploration of these novels, both in their own way masterclasses in varying forms of narrative voice, the creative language teacher can become more aware of the different skills that they can bestow upon their students. Aside from the standard discussion of point of view of first and third person narrators, these novels can open up a variety of voices with which a student can experiment.

This includes in how Lippman's close third-person form heterodiegetic narrators are used to shield truth in a way that a first-person narrator would be unable, hopefully building tension and intrigue, releasing information only when required. Students can also try to emulate Saunders in how his multiple narrators can reveal character flaws purposely problematize the truth, and attempt an audacious 'we' narration. They can even take on advice from both authors and branch out into tangential voices, all fighting to be heard on the page.

In the creative writing classroom, the teacher's role is to elevate students work in a way that is, well, creative, though the means may be challenging. As the great author Junichiro Tanizaki wrote, "we ourselves accept defeat only after having a try at such schemes" (Tanizaki, 1933, p. 3-4), and by using the schemes, difficult as they may be, students may discover that their writing leads not down the path to defeat, but victory over their own authorial voice.

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