EXPLORING POINT OF VIEW IN NARRATIVE FICTION

This unit is designed to explore further the concept of point of view by building on the observation, made towards the end of C6, that the *interpersonal* function of language works in parallel with the experiential function in the overall stylistic make-up of a narrative text. The synthesis of the two functions is an important marker of style in its own terms, and the regular co-occurrence of certain functional patterns often serves to distinguish different genres of writing. Unit B7 introduced and reviewed four principal types of point of view. The conclusion to that review was that, of the four types surveyed, *psychological* point of view is the pivotal term of reference for this dimension of narrative organisation. This unit offers the opportunity to develop some practical work around the key interpersonal features which serve to mark out psychological point of view in narrative.

**Modality and style**

The *interpersonal* function, as the term itself suggests, is about how we orientate, shape and measure our utterances as discourse. This function is expressed principally by the grammatical system of *modality* which is that part of language which allows us to attach expressions of belief, attitude and obligation to what we say and write. Modality is therefore the grammar of explicit comment, and it includes signals of the varying degrees of certainty we have about the propositions we express, and of the sorts of commitment or obligation that we attach to our utterances.

A useful way of fleshing out this rather abstract definition of modality, and in a way that helps align it with the concept of psychological point of view, is to consider some alternative types of modal patterning in a short sample narrative. The three invented ‘mini-stories’ that follow were scrawled on the back of a napkin in a British airport late one November evening some years ago. No more than the slightly deranged ramblings of a stylistician at a loss for something to do, these narratives...
make no claim whatsoever to any kind of literary accomplishment, although they do serve a useful purpose in sketching some basic concepts in modality and style. With all disclaimers delivered, consider the first version:

(1) **In the Heathrow cafeteria**
What a nuisance! The bally London to Tunis flight had been delayed, quelle surprise. The tannoy sheepishly attributed this to the late arrival of an incoming flight. Fog is normally the problem at this time of year.
I needed a robust coffee, so I felt I had to confront the busy cafeteria. A lone waitress patrolled the tables.
‘What’ll it be?’ she asked, harassed.
‘Strong coffee please,’ I replied.
Her face tightened in a way that registered the request as unreasonable.
She eventually brought to me, in a flowery mug, a pale grey liquid which I understood was to pass for filter coffee.

This is a homodiegetic narrative where actions and events are relayed through a first person ‘participating’ narrator. So much is obvious, but it is the manner by which these actions and events are relayed that is rather more significant here. The narrator of (1) tells you not only what happens but also what he thinks. Throughout, interpretations and interpolations are offered as to why events unfold in the way they do, with the narrator cooperatively orientating what they say towards an implied reader. Text (1) thus embodies a particular type of modal framework which in narrative discourse is marked by certain key expressions. The narrator, for example, expresses clearly their own desires, duties, obligations and opinions in relation to events and other characters: ‘I needed a coffee’; ‘I felt I had to confront the busy cafeteria’ and so on. Modality which expresses desire and obligation is known as deontic modality. Notice also that the narrator of (1) – and this self-analysis is not to suggest any craft in its creation – employs a generic sentence in the sequence ‘Fog is normally the problem at this time of year’. This key marker of narratorial modality, which is always expressed through the timeless simple present tense, allows the narrator confidently to represent what they say as a universal truth. The text is also rich in what Uspensky (1973) calls verba sentiendi. These are words denoting thoughts, feelings and perceptions, as embodied in mental processes like ‘I felt . . . ’ or ‘I understood . . . ’. Overall, the text is dominated by clearly articulated personal interpretations of felt experience where the narrator makes sense of the experience before relaying it. Let us adopt the term positive shading for this type of modal pattern.

Consider now another version, another embodiment in discourse as it were, of the same basic narrative plot. Here the first person narrator appears to have a little more trouble in making sense of and relaying experience:

(2) **In the Heathrow cafeteria**
The London to Tunis flight must have been delayed because the tannoy said something about the late arrival of another flight. Perhaps it was fog?
I must have been hungry, or maybe thirsty, because I found myself in a large busy room whose appearance suggested it was a cafeteria. A woman, in the attire of a waitress, patrolled the tables.

‘What’ll it be?’ she asked, as if harassed by my presence.

‘Strong coffee please,’ I seem to recall saying.

Her face tightened as though she found my request unreasonable. She eventually brought to me, in a flowery mug, a pale grey liquid which must have been filter coffee.

The overall interpersonal dynamic of this (admittedly bizarre) piece of narrative is very different from (1). This is a narrator who tries to make sense of the world around him, but does so with only limited success. His account is marked by epistemic modality which refers to the system of modal markers used for signalling judgments of belief, certainty or truth. Epistemic modality works principally in (2) to foreground the narrator’s efforts to interpret and make sense of what he sees and hears: ‘[the] flight must have been delayed . . .’; ‘Perhaps it was fog . . .’ and so on. The passage is also rich in ‘words of estrangement’ (Fowler 1996) which reinforce the narrator’s seeming uncertainty about what is going on around him. A consequence of this is that description tends to rely on the narrator’s interpretation of external appearance; notice how it is the appearance of the room which suggests it was a cafeteria, and the woman’s attire that suggests she was a waitress. To accommodate this sort of modal framework, where the epistemic system is heightened as the narrator struggles to make sense of the world, let us reserve the term negative shading.

Finally, consider a third variant:

(3)  In the Heathrow cafeteria
The London to Tunis flight had been delayed. The tannoy referred to the late arrival of an incoming flight. I went into a cafeteria. A woman patrolled the tables.

‘What’ll it be?’ she said.

‘Strong coffee please,’ I said.

Her face tightened. She eventually brought me a mug of coffee.

This version is characterised by, if anything, a marked absence of narratorial modality. It is constructed entirely from categorical assertions; that is to say, from raw propositions which have no trace of explicit modal comment. Because they are stripped of modality, categorical assertions are in a certain respect non-negotiable, and the removal of interpersonal markers in (3) explains in part why it is much shorter than the first two versions. In this type of modal framework (or, better, ‘demodalised’ framework), the narrator withholds subjective evaluation in favour of an ostensibly more ‘neutral’ description of events. Straightforward physical description dominates, while there is little or no attempt at any psychological development or interpretation. Even the reporting clauses which are used to relay sequences of Direct Speech (see thread 8) have been stripped of their adverbial embellishments, so that nothing other than the most basic of reporting verbs remain. Let us refer to this type of modal framework as neutral shading.
Before we move to consider the significance of this exercise and of the three narrative modalities identified, it is worth noting that transpositions to third person variants are possible with all three texts. In other words, the same basic modal framework can be transferred across into corresponding heterodiegetic modes. For example, version 2 might be rewritten thus:

(2a)  In the Heathrow cafeteria

The London to Tunis flight must have been delayed because the tannoy said something about the late arrival of another flight. Perhaps it was fog?

Simpson must have been hungry, or maybe thirsty, because he found himself in a large busy room whose appearance suggested it was a cafeteria. A woman, in the attire of a waitress, patrolled the tables.

‘What’ll it be?’ she asked, as if harassed by his presence.

‘Strong coffee please,’ he replied.

Her face tightened as if she found his request unreasonable. She eventually brought to him, in a flowery mug, a pale grey liquid which must have been filter coffee.

In this version, the original narrator of (2) becomes a character within the story, a character who in fact occupies the role of reflector of fiction (see A7), while the new narrator is ‘heterodiegetic’ in the sense of being different from and external to the story. Although the negatively shaded modality follows the transposition, the source of the epistemic warrant for what is narrated is now less clear. Is it the reflector of fiction who is the ‘bewildered’ focaliser here? Or is it the external, non-participating narrator? Or is it even some combination of both? Both of the other original versions can be similarly transposed, so that the same modality (of lack of it) carries over into the third person framework. Again, the same questions are raised about where the source for the modal comment should be situated. Basically, the third person framework offers two options: either align the modality with the external narrator or locate it in the viewpoint of the character-reflector. This means that the point of view model becomes a little more complex when applied specifically to the third person mode because it offers two variants for each of the three modal possibilities. It also means that there is considerable scope for ambiguity, and sometimes for irony, in this mode, because we are often less certain about whose point of view exactly is being relayed in third person narratives.

**Modality and psychological point of view**

This sub-unit outlines some practical activities that follow from the point of view rewrite exercise undertaken above. Before going on to consider some of the implications of the exercise for passages of ‘real’ fiction, it will be worth recapping upon and tightening up the three basic types of modal patterning identified thus far in our survey:

*Positive shading:* this is a narrative modality where the narrator’s desires, duties, obligations and opinions of events are foregrounded. The deontic modal system is
prominent and the narrative is rich in generic sentences and in *verba sentiendi* (words denoting thoughts, feelings and perceptions). Positive shading is perhaps the most common point of view modality, underpinning a great many first and third person fictional works.

**Negative shading:** this is a narrative modality where an often ‘bewildered’ narrator (or character) relies on external signals and appearances to sustain a description. The *epistemic* modal system is foregrounded and the narrative is rich in ‘words of estrangement’. The narrator’s uncertainty about events and about other characters’ motivations is often expressed through structures based on human perception (*as if; it seemed; it appeared to be*, etc.). Negative shading often characterises ‘existentialist’ or ‘Gothic’ styles of narrative fiction.

**Neutral shading:** this style is characterised by a complete absence of narratorial modality and is typified by *categorical assertions* where the narrator withholds subjective evaluation and interpretation. This type of shading often comprises ‘neutral’ physical description at the expense of psychological development. Neutral shading embodies the principle of ‘objective realism’ in fiction and it corresponds to what the narratologists Genette (1980) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983) have called ‘external’ focalisation. Given the often sparse feel this mode engenders, narratives written entirely in a neutrally shaded modality are rare.

It is, of course, possible for a literary text to shift from one pattern to another, even while a particular pattern dominates overall.

You will find below seven passages of prose fiction. The passages are not ordered in any particular or significant sequence, and the only thing to bear in mind is that there are present at least two representatives of each of the three categories of modal shading. As you work through each passage, follow the guidelines below:

(i) Identify (as far as you can tell) the narrative *mode* in which the passage is written. That is, say whether it is first person or third person.

(ii) Identify the *dominant* type of modal shading in each passage. Do not try to analyse the passage on a sentence by sentence basis, but rather pick out the modal framework which best describes the passage as a whole. Highlight any of the tell-tale devices that help confirm your interpretation.

(iii) If you identify a passage as third person, try to work out whether its modality (ie. the attitudes, opinions and beliefs it expresses) comes from (a) an external heterodiegetic narrator who is situated *outside* the story or (b) from an individual character, a reflector of fiction (A7), who is situated *inside* the story.

(iv) Wherever feasible, think of the stylistic impact of both the narrative mode and the point of view framework that each writer has chosen. What would happen if either the narrative mode or the particular modal shading were altered?
Seven passages

a) Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal features seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discolouration of ages had been great. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling of the individual stones. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure [...]

*The Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allan Poe 1986 [1839]

b) In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

‘Whenever you feel like criticising any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.’

He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person [...]

*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald 1994 [1925]

c) The fat white circles of dough lined the pan in rows. Once more Sethe touched a wet forefinger to the stove. She opened the oven door and slid a pan of biscuits in. As she raised up from the heat she felt Paul D behind her and his hands under her breasts. She straightened up [...]

*Beloved*, Toni Morrison 1987

d) Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. His landlady’s cook, who always brought him his breakfast at eight o’clock, failed to appear on this occasion. That had never happened before. K. waited for a little while longer, watching from his pillow the old lady opposite, who seemed to be peering at him with a curiosity unusual even for her, but then, feeling both put out and hungry, he rang the bell. At once there was a knock at the door and a man entered whom he had never seen before in the house. He was slim and yet well knit, he wore a closely fitting black suit, which was furnished with all sorts of pleats, pockets, buckles, and buttons, as well as a belt, like a tourist’s outfit, and in consequence looked eminently practical, though one could not quite tell what actual purpose it served.

‘Who are you?’ asked K., half raising himself in bed. But the man ignored the question, as though his appearance needed no explanation.

*The Trial*, Franz Kafka 1985 [1925]
e) He [Strether] was to delay no longer to reestablish communication with Chad, and [...] he had spoken to Miss Gostrey of this intention on hearing from her of the young man’s absence. It was not, moreover, only the assurance so given that prompted him; it was the need of causing his conduct to square with another profession still – the motive he had described to her as his sharpest for now getting away [...] He must do both things; he must see Chad, but he must go. The more he thought of the former of these duties the more he felt himself make a subject of insistence of the latter.

(The Ambassadors, Henry James 2001 [1903])

f) We were in a garden in Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed over up the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him [...] Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.

(from a story in In Our Time, Ernest Hemingway 1925)

g) Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.

(Orlando, Virginia Woolf 1998 [1928])

Summary
I hope your analysis of the sample passages above will have underscored the stylistic significance of modal shading as a marker not only of point of view but of narrative style more generally. As with all the units in this Exploration section, I do not propose to provide a circumscribed set of ‘answers’, and in any case my own interpretation counts as just one of many possible interpretations that can be systematically reached on the basis of a stylistic analysis. I will however footnote briefly one of the passages, the Toni Morrison excerpt c), because of the particularly interesting issues it raises.

On the grounds that it is devoid of any modality at all, my analysis suggests that this passage embodies neutral shading. Whereas its narrative mode is third person, its point of view is aligned, significantly, with the reflector of fiction. That is to say, in spite of the third-person framework, the narrative camera angle assumes the vantage point of a particular character, here Sethe, and it is her experience of events which is recorded and relayed. (Notice how this is established by the word ‘felt’, the one verb of perception in the passage.) Interestingly, this generally ‘flat’ modal framework tends in this discourse context to make the central character seem numb, and very much acquiescent to the advances of Paul D. We are given no information as to whether she welcomes or is offended by his advances, the sort of information that would be communicated precisely by a positively shaded modality. Prior to this point in the novel, we have learned of Sethe’s experience of having to have sex with a stonemason simply to get an engraving on a dead child’s headstone, and this and other traumatic events may have rendered her emotionally dead, and unable or unwilling...
to react to the events around her. This is not to argue, though, that the modality of
the novel as a whole is neutrally shaded nor indeed that this character’s perceptions
of the world are always relayed in this way. It is very much in the idiom of the ‘post-
modern’ novel, of which *Beloved* is a preeminent example, that it tangles up different
domains of discourse and allows its characters to migrate between different text
worlds (McHale 1987). To my mind, variable narrative focalisation is just one of the
reflexes of the post-modernist ‘style’, such as it is, where the oscillations in point of
view give rise to many alternating viewing positions and modalities.

Looking at how patterns in point of view mark out not just the postmodern novel
but other genres of narrative fiction would make for a useful future study. Another
would be to see if additional modal frameworks could be developed, beyond the three
proposed in this unit, which could more subtly delineate types of writing style. Some
more general issues to do with narrative viewpoint are raised in Mick Short’s reading,
D5, which ‘doubles up’ as a useful reading for this thread.