position of a participating character-narrator whose account of actions and events is the one we must as readers share. Alternatively, the story might be narrated in the third person by a detached, invisible narrator whose ‘omniscience’ facilitates privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of individual characters. Yet further permutations are possible. We may encounter a kind of ‘restricted omniscience’ where a third-person narrator, although external to the action of the story, comes across as unable or reluctant to delve at will into the thoughts and feelings of characters. These issues of narrative organisation are very much at the heart of story-telling and, as noted in A5, function as an important index of characterisation in fiction. The umbrella term reserved for this aspect of narrative organisation is point of view.

**Point of view in fiction**

Much has been written on point of view by stylisticians and narratologists, such that there is now a proliferation of often conflicting theories, terms and models. In these circumstances, the best way to develop an introduction to point of view will be by going straight to a textual example from which can be garnered some basic categories and principles. Below is a passage from Iain Banks’s novel *The Crow Road* which raises a number of interesting general issues concerning point of view in fiction. Kenneth McHoan, one of the novel’s central characters, has just returned from university to his home town of Gallanach, and this episode details his arrival in the rural village station.

He rested his arms on the top of the wall and looked down the fifty feet or so to the tumbling white waters. Just upstream, the river Loran piled down from the forest in a compactly furious cataract. The spray was a taste. Beneath, the river surged round the piers of the viaduct that carried the railway on towards Lochgilphead and Gallanach.

A grey shape flitted silently across the view, from falls to bridge, then zoomed, turned in the air and swept into the cutting on the far bank of the river, as though it was a soft fragment of the train’s steam that had momentarily lost its way and was not hurrying to catch up. He waited a moment, and the owl hooted once, from inside the dark constituency of the forest. He smiled, took a deep breath that tasted of steam and the sweet sharpness of pine resin, and then turned away, and went back to pick up his bags.

(Banks 1993: 33)

A good general technique for the exploration of point of view in a piece of narrative is to imagine it as if you were preparing to film it. That is, try to conceive a particular episode, as a director might, in terms of its visual perspective, its various vantage points and viewing positions. There are often clear textual clues about where to point your camera, so to speak, and about how a visual sequence should unfold. This passage works extremely well in this respect insofar as it abounds in point of view markers that work to structure the panoramic sweep of the narrative camera. There will be more on these markers shortly, but a feature of more general interest is the way this passage offers an almost model explication of a core distinction in point of view theory. This is the distinction in a story between who tells and who sees. It is clear from this passage that whereas a detached, omniscient narrator tells the story,
it is a particular character who sees the unfolding scene described. Although this is not the pattern for the whole of Banks’s novel – most of it is written in the first person, in fact – there is a marked limiting of narrative perspective, in this instance at least, to that of an individual character within the story. We see what McHoan sees, and we see it in the gradual and accumulative unfolding of the focal points that are reflected in his visual purview. Following the relevant terminology, that makes the character of McHoan, even if momentarily, the reflector of fiction.

Even working from so short an extract, there is much more that can be said on the general dynamic of point of view in narrative fiction. We have established that the third person narrator is external, detached, situated outside the story as such. In the sense that its narrator is ‘different’ from the exegesis that comprises the story, this makes the narrative heterodiegetic. However, had the events described been narrated directly in the first person by McHoan himself, the narrative would be homodiegetic. A homodiegetic narrator is one who is internal to the narrative, who is on the ‘same’ plane of exegesis as the story.

The distinction between heterodiegesis and homodiegesis can be explored by transposing the text between first-person and third-person modes of narration. This is a very useful exercise in terms of what it can reveal about point of view, and it is often surprisingly easy to carry out a transposition in those instances where a third person narrative employs a reflector of fiction. Converting the character of McHoan into an internal, homodiegetic narrator requires very little alteration to the text. Indeed, most of the passage can stay exactly as it is, as this checklist of third-to-first-person transpositions shows:

I rested my arms on the top of the wall [. . .] I waited a moment [. . .] I smiled, took a deep breath [. . .] and went back to pick up my bags.

The smoothness and facility of transposition shows just how strongly in the reflector mode the original passage is; in effect, nothing is narrated that has not been felt, thought or seen by McHoan. (Indeed, the passage reverberates with references to its reflector’s senses of taste, sight and hearing.) However, a first person version makes for a very different narrative in other respects. For a start, it brings us psychologically much closer to the central character. In consequence, it loses much of the space, the often ironic space, that can be placed by a writer between the narrator of a story and a character within that story. There will be more on this issue later in this strand, but for now it is worth developing yet further features of general interest in the passage.

Throughout the Banks extract, as noted above, there are stylistic cues about the viewing position it privileges. These cues are a result of the combination of two levels of language: the semantic principle of deixis (see unit A2; and further B7) and the use of certain types of grammatical Adjunct (see units A3 and B3). The first of these, deixis, works primarily by situating the speaking voice in physical space. In the passage, the reflector of fiction forms a deictic centre, an ‘origo’, around which objects are positioned relative to their relative proximity or distance to the reflector. Notice, for instance, how certain verbs of directionality express movement towards the
speaking source: eg. ‘[A grey shape] zoomed . . .’. Alternatively, movement away is signalled when, near the end of the passage, the reflector ‘turned away’ from the scene and when he ‘went back’ (not ‘came back’) to pick up his bags. This deictic anchoring is supplemented by groups of Adjuncts which express location and spatial relationship. These units of clause structure are normally expounded by prepositional and adverb phrases indicating place and directionality, of which a selection from the passage includes but is not restricted to:

[looked] down
Just upstream
[piled] down
Beneath
across the view
from falls to bridge
into the cutting
on the far bank of the river
from inside the dark constituency of the forest.

The umbrella term *locative expression* is used to cover grammatical units, such as those listed, which provide an index of location, direction and physical setting in narrative description.

Lastly, there is in the passage an occurrence of a particular, specialised point of view device which merits some comment. The term *attenuated focalisation* refers to a situation where point of view is limited, even if temporarily, to an impeded or distanced visual perspective. Lexical items which signal that such a restricted viewing has occurred are nouns with generalised or unspecific reference like ‘thing’, ‘shape’ or ‘stuff’. Consider this sequence from the passage:

A grey shape flitted silently across the view . . .

McHoan sees something which (at that point) he can’t make out, and that blurring of vision is relayed as attenuated focalisation. However, the restriction in point of view is only temporary and, as is often the case when this technique is deployed, is soon resolved. Interestingly, whereas most attenuation is resolved when an indistinct object comes into shaper focus visually, the status of the shape is resolved here by recourse to another mental faculty, through auditory and not visual identification:

. . . the owl hooted . . .

Attenuated focalisation often works subtly in relaying the impression that we are momentarily restricted to the visual range of a particular character. As always in point of view analysis, transposition exercises will accentuate the technique and its stylistic effect. Consider, for example, how the impact would be nullified had the sequence been reversed in the first instance; that is, had the item ‘owl’ replaced ‘shape’ thus: ‘A grey owl flitted silently across the view’.