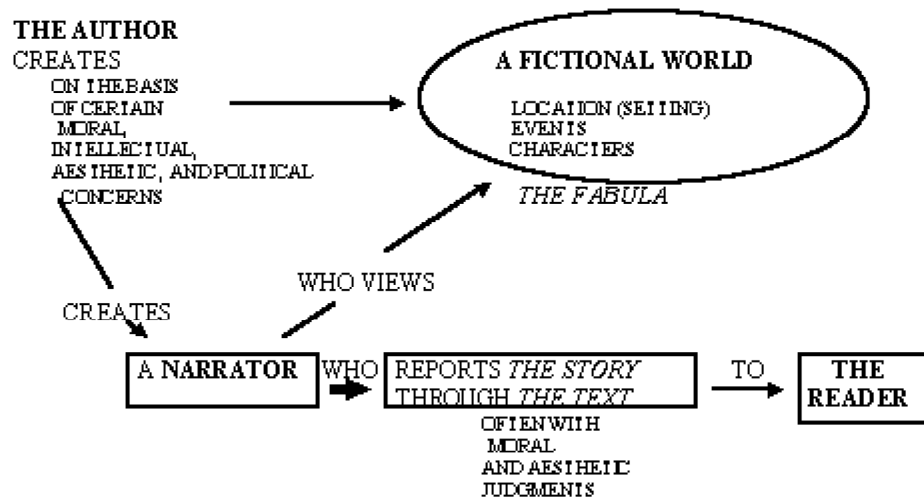


THE (Summation of) NARRATIVE SITUATION

Obviously anything followed by the word “theory” most likely lacks any sort of brevity. Keeping that in mind, a topic such as “Narrative Theory” is not something to be completely covered in one sitting or to be fully encompassed by a single handout. What follows then is a very brief overview. The hope is that by understanding the basics of narrative theory you will be better able to critically analyze the texts this year and form valid, insightful interpretations.

THE NARRATIVE SITUATION



The diagram above should clearly tell you all you need to know. Still, for the sake of the less visually oriented here's a bit of explanation:

It all starts with the **AUTHOR** who has some sort of moral, political, intellectual, psychological, and aesthetic concerns (some conscious, others not so much).

Who creates a fictional world based on such called **THE FABULA** (which includes a location, characters and a sequence of events).

And creates a **NARRATOR** to report the events, characters and setting to the **READER**.

Note this: The **AUTHOR** may speak through the **NARRATOR**, but he is **NOT** the **NARRATOR**. The **NARRATOR** is a creation of the **AUTHOR**.

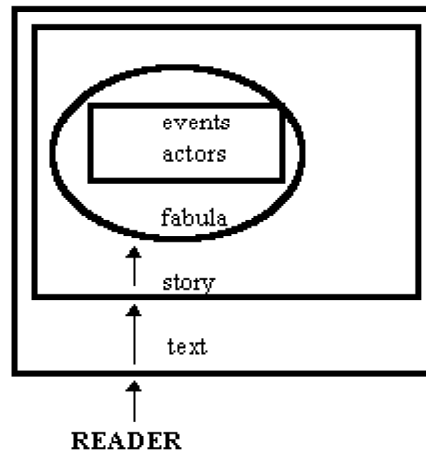
The sequence of events as reported by the **NARRATOR** is **THE STORY**. All you have as a **READER** is the **STORY** as reported by the **NARRATOR**. Also, the **NARRATOR** may choose to report the events out of the order that they occur in the **FABULA** (basically the **AUTHOR** creates the **FABULA** and the **NARRATOR**, but the **AUTHOR** does not need to reveal the **FABULA** via the **NARRATOR** in a linear way; this is where one would consider various forms of narration and their effects).

The **READER** receives the **STORY** through **THE TEXT** and that is where the **NARRATOR** makes his moral and aesthetic judgments, if he chooses to make them at all (or rather where the **AUTHOR** shows the judgments he'd have the **NARRATOR** make).

- ***Note** that the arrows connected to the author are one way. This is important because **THE READER** can only work "backwards" along the arrows to infer the concerns of the **AUTHOR** and to infer from the **STORY** and the **TEXT** the order of events in the **FABULA** and the characters.
- ***Note** that the **AUTHOR** and the **READER** are transcendental (outside) to the **TEXT** while the **NARRATOR** and the fictional world are immanent (within or present) to the **TEXT**.

Another way to see the relationship among these various narrative factors is via the diagram below:

NARRATIVE LEVELS



The arrows indicate the order of access. Basically, the reader gets the story from the text, and gets the fabula from the story.

Now for Interpretation:

This is part of what we mean by interpretation. The reader "discovers" the concerns, both conscious and unconscious, of the author by recognizing repeated situations, characters and structures. Remember that these concerns can be moral, political, intellectual, psychological and/or aesthetic. The last two of these especially are subjects for interpretation in the sense we often think about it - revealing a pattern, a concern in the text that may have been unrecognized by other readers or even by the author himself.

A Word on 'the Real Reader' and 'the Implied Reader' (and this is so very T.O.K.):

Implied Reader: this is who an implied author speaking through a narrator requires to read or hear the narration. That is an author expects a certain kind of reader, a certain intellectual level and a certain level of familiarity with cultural elements and human emotions (this is basically understanding who the audience for a given work was). Certainly the implied audience for the ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex* is different than the implied audience for the twentieth century *Death of a Salesman*. And just as the implied author is not the real author, so the implied reader is not the real reader, not you.

"Real" Reader: This is who actually reads the work. Clearly as time passes and a text continues to be read, it is safe to say that the real reader begins to differ substantially from the implied reader (Do you understand Middle English?) You are not reader Shakespeare had in mind. Thus you will need to separate yourself from the implied reader in a text, for you may object to the values that seem to be promoted in a text because its implied reader is from a different culture or time than you, but you will have to put yourself in the place of the implied reader at least for the time being even if you do not understand everything that is going on. Obviously when the gap between the implied reader and the real reader is great, the real reader has tremendous difficulties understanding and assimilating the text.

NARRATIVE OPTIONS?

Obviously the author has a multitude of options when creating the narrator and as such the author must carefully choose the best options for relaying the world of the fabula and the story to the implied reader. Along with the narrator, the author then creates the **narrative consciousness**. The **narrative consciousness** is the only way that we, the reader, know the fictional world (think of it as the narrator's voice). This consciousness makes several kinds of choices in reporting the world to us. These are the aforementioned **narrative options**. Before we consider those, however, let's look a bit more at what the narrative consciousness actually does.

WHAT - The narrative consciousness decides which events of fictional world (fabula) will be reported to the reader. (It may seem, though, that the events reported by the narrator would constitute completely the events of the fictional world. But there are unreported events which must have happened if the fictional world is to be at all coherent. For example, if the

narrator reports that "We attended Charlie's funeral", then there must have been an event CHARLIE'S-DEATH that occurred, although its details are not reported by the narrator.) Often this choice is an implicit statement on the value that the event has to the narrator or on the narrator's consciousness itself (he may be avoiding the details of the event).

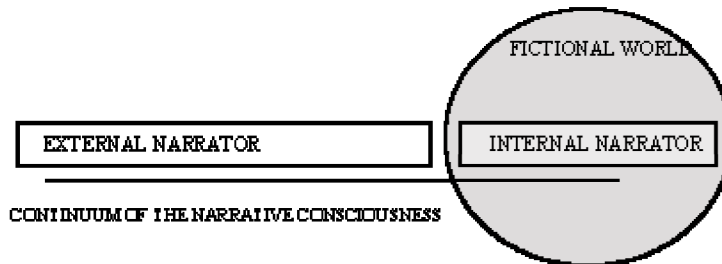
WHEN - The narrative consciousness decides the order in which the events will be reported. The events of fabula are in chronological order, but the events of the story may not be in the same order. The narrative consciousness can report events from the past as if they were happening in the present, and may report events from the future in the same way.

HOW - The narrative consciousness decides how judgmental it will be on the events, characters and setting of the fictional world. Some narrators will decide to remain as objective or transparent as possible. Others elect to color almost every report with their own judgments. (The degree to which this occurs is called *narrative presence* - how aware we are of the narrative voice).

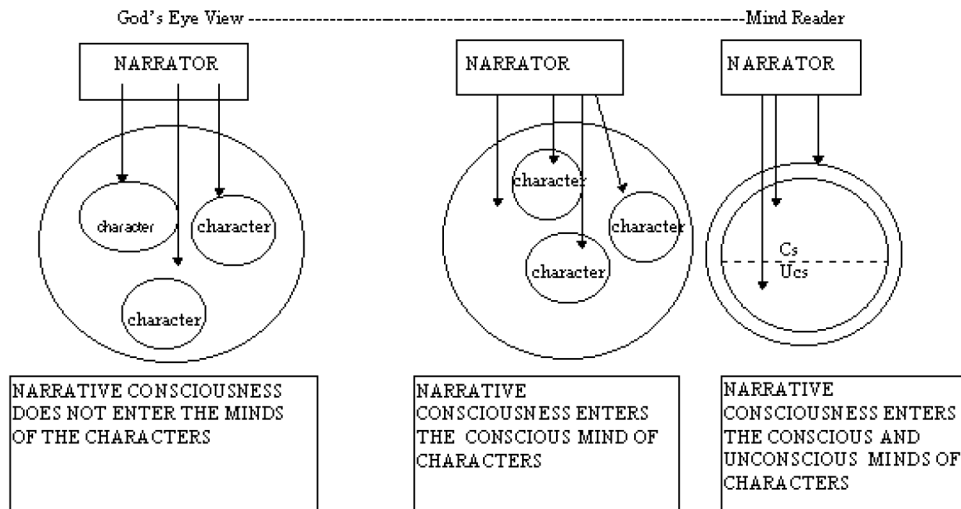
***NOTE: since the narrator is a creation of the author, essentially the narrative consciousness is all based on the author's decisions. The narrator, like any character, is NOT a real person with choices!**

Having considered narrative consciousness now brings us to the various options for narration. What follows is a brief laundry list of types with minimal explanation. Refer to the website for extended details.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL NARRATORS - narrative consciousness lies on a continuum in relation to the fictional world. Narrators can be internal or external in relation to said fabula. Note: When an author elects to place his narrative consciousness within the fictional world, said consciousness becomes restricted in what it can report as we will see below.



NARRATIVE DISTANCE - is a term used to represent the "closeness" of the narrator (whose presence may be strong or minimal) to the subject he is describing. Again, think about it in terms of a continuum. At one end of the continuum is the closest possible distance - the narrator reports on the thoughts and feeling (*even unconscious thoughts and feelings*) of the character even to the point of speaking the character's unspoken thoughts in the character's style. It is interesting to note that despite common sense, first person narration is not the closest distance, for a first person narrator may be unaware of his own feelings and motives which are open to non-first person narrator. Note that some narrators report on their earlier selves to achieve the insight that third person narrator does (retrospective narration – *The Great Gatsby*). At the other end of the continuum is the narrator who assumes a "God's eye view" of the fictional world he is reporting to his implied reader. This narrator reports only actions and situations. He is an observer and commentator on characters' action only. **All narrators are positioned somewhere along this continuum.**



NARRATIVE PRESENCE: MINIMAL TO MAXIMAL NARRATOR-MEDIATION

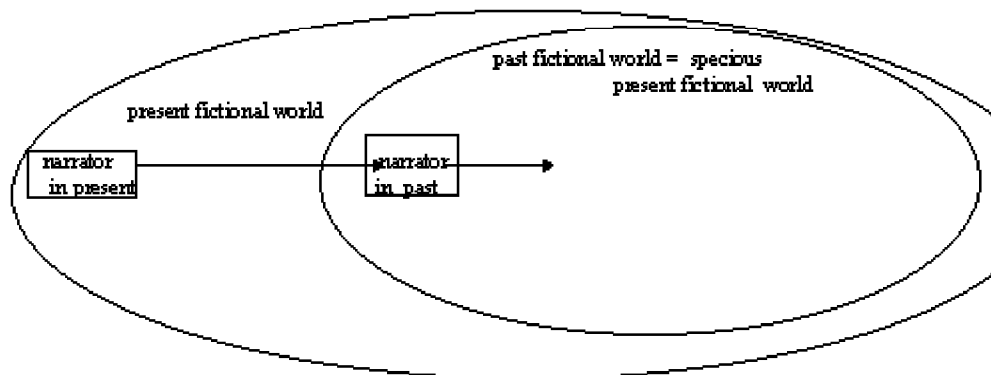
The Epistolary Narrative - letters and diaries
Pure Speech Transcriptions
Interior Monologue
Stream of Consciousness
Narrated monologue
Description
Internal Narrator

NARRATIVE SCOPE – Simply put it's the scope the narrator takes. When the narrative consciousness chooses a wide scope, it will report on several events and characters, even those that may not be connected to each other. When the narrative consciousness chooses to limit its scope, it will report only on specific characters, even a single specific character, and only those other characters connected to it. It will report only events in which that character is involved.

EMBEDDED INTERNAL NARRATION - In this situation, one internal narrator reports the fictional world, a part of which is a story told by another character who becomes himself a narrator for a second story which may or may not be about himself. This second or inner narrative is embedded in the first or outer narrative. When the embedded story begins, the narrator of that story becomes the primary narrator for the duration of the story and the narrator of the outer story becomes the secondary narrator (**Frankenstein**). Note: The second fabula is not accessible by the first narrator.

THE FRAME NARRATIVE - When the second story occupies more text than the first story, then we call the narrative architecture a *frame story* and the narrator of the *outer story* becomes the *secondary narrator* while the narrator of the *inner story* becomes the primary narrator.

RETROSPECTIVE NARRATIVE – This is special type of narration **which seems to be a type of frame story**. In this narrative there is only one internal narrator, but he appears in both his present character and as himself in the past. In other words, he narrates a story about himself. This narrative usually begins with some events in the present which set the stage for the story of the past. The narrative usually returns to the present by the end. What happens here is that although the narrator in the present is talking at all times, we come to feel that we are listening to that same character recount events in the past as if they were happening now. In other words, the fictional past becomes a sort of fictional present (called a *specious present*), and we follow the narrative as if it were happening now. *The Great Gatsby* is such a retrospective narrative as is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.



Note: In single internal narration told retrospectively (*Gatsby*) the reader should be careful and observant because we often forget that we are "hearing" a story being told by a narrator so watching for subtle judgments and comments by the internal narrator is especially important. In *The Great Gatsby* there is only one internal narrator (and the implied reader is his narratee), but there is a "preface" in which the narrator makes sure we know that he is about to tell a story about himself.