

# And Eyes to See: The Art of Third Person

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We've all had it: the small flash that signals the beginning of fiction. It's a snatch of dialogue overheard in a Chinese restaurant: "I'm not kidding; ten years we've been married, and he thinks intimacy is eating dim sum." It's the sour cherry taste of the last red lollipop left in the bowl at Halloween, a newspaper photo of a six-year-old girl alone on a seesaw, a shoplifter calmly stuffing a grapefruit into his book bag at Kroger. It's an old memory, a just-seen image, an idea that pops into our heads with no known provenance. But something about it makes us say, "That's a story," and in that wonderful moment of declaration—of *naming* as a story what is still only a moment, a circumstance, a single image—we're opening ourselves to the rest of the process, to *making* a story, whole and complete. But how do we get from story "trigger" to story draft, from impulse to understanding, from beginning to end?

A major part of the answer is deciding on the work's point of view, which is nothing less than the choice of perspective (or perspectives) from which the reader will see the action unfold. But as important as the choice of point of view ultimately will be to how the story is read, it is key, too, to how the writer begins to locate the story that exists for him or her within the first glimmerings of an idea. Once a point-of-view decision is made, the writer creating the story can begin to find his or her own way *into* the developing narrative; point-of-view choice influences virtually every other decision to be made in constructing a story, but its first importance may be how it draws us, as writers, deeper and deeper into the material, making us see the possibilities.

Consider the snippet of dialogue quoted above, in which a wife jokes about her husband's idea of intimacy. Make the story first

person, and the construction of the wife's voice almost certainly will assume center stage. The exploratory question, *Who is this woman?* becomes bound up in how she speaks. The writer's first understanding of the character and situation comes through the act of giving her speech.

Robert and I are taking a year-long Intimacy in Marriage seminar at the little shingled box of a YMCA out on Mansfield Highway. The first time we drove into the parking lot, all I could think about was that it looked like a place parole violators would be comfortable going for a swim.

Make the point of view second person, and establishing the tone of the piece becomes key. Stories in the second-person point of view typically take full advantage of a kind of observational commentary, as well as wry humor. So getting into a second-person "mind-set" in the first stages of story development requires coming up with an entry point into the material: some way to make the most of the possibilities for observation. In our Chinese food/intimacy example, we could decide to begin by asking the question, *Where is this woman?* The answer, Manny's Egg Roll Palace inside the Great Mall of China, suggests a number of observations that might be made by the "you" of the story; exploring those possibilities can contribute to our understanding not just of the character and the situation but to *her* (and thus our) understanding of the truth about her marriage.

At Manny's Egg Roll Palace, you watch as Robert makes googly eyes at the little Chinese girl toting a tray of fortune cookies around the dining room. When you can't stand to watch anymore, you switch to wondering where Manny, the emperor of egg rolls, was introduced to red Naugahyde. You haven't noticed before, but every surface in the restaurant—chairs, tables, even one wall—is covered with it. You are not proud of this, but suddenly you wish the little girl was covered in it, too; your husband, Nature Boy, might think twice about coveting a child upholstered in a synthetic material.

But what if we begin our exploration of the woman at Manny's from a third-person point of view? What happens then? First things first: The woman sitting at a corner table picking apart a vegetarian egg roll becomes a "she." And knowing that, if we're aware of the

possibilities of this point of view, we can immediately enter the lunch-time scene with *her* perspective, one that prompts us to ask not just, *Who is this woman?* but, *What does she see?* And with that second question, we've entered the real territory of third person in contemporary fiction, in which sight is one of the primary means of developing the consciousness of the character and thus, ultimately, of developing the story.

### THIRD-PERSON UNIFIED

Third person is an enormously flexible point of view, so we have a number of choices available to us in deciding how the point of view in our fledgling story will work. (Valerie Miner's essay discusses the third-person omniscient point of view.) For now, let's explore a point of view sometimes called third-person unified, because that term suggests the "single vision" that distinguishes this kind of third person. Simply put, in third-person unified, the point-of-view character is the consciousness of the story: We have access to that character's eyes, and mind, and only hers. The narrowing of vision brings us closer to the character in this type of third person than in any other. Unlike third-person limited, which will be discussed later, third-person unified does not take advantage of the possibilities of objective narration. In this point of view, everything, even the "telling" that goes on in exposition, is filtered through the point-of-view character's consciousness.

So back to the Chinese restaurant. In beginning to think about what our character and story might be in this instance, when we position ourselves *with* the "she," seeing what she sees, every detail we invent can add to our knowledge of the character and point us toward the real story. Suppose as she (let's call her Ellen) and her best friend sit down to lunch, Ellen takes in the faux-leather menus, which are the size and thickness of a Dr. Seuss storybook, and the teenage boys waiting tables, and the little Chinese girl racing from table to table with a plate of fortune cookies. In our imagining of her, the woman who sees these details will be different from one who would notice where the fire exits are, that the cloth napkins smell like nail polish remover, that the health certificate framed on the wall has a plastic rose hiding the inspection score. And as the details accumulate—as *her* vision takes hold in *our* imagination—what she sees suggests paths for the story to take: For example, notice that the details she notices

first all have to do with children. This pattern suggests a number of avenues to explore: What's behind the jokes about her husband's definition of intimacy? Are they childless? Possibly considering adoption? Is she afraid her husband thinks everything in life is too easy? If he thinks intimacy is eating dinner together, what does she think his notions of parenting will be? When she tries to picture him with a child, what memories come to her? The Chinese meal they ate on their honeymoon? What happens when the little girl with the fortune cookies stops at her table?

The questions above, suggested by what our point-of-view character sees, also suggest lines of inquiry, ways in which the "thread" of the story can be unraveled. Answering that first question may require coming up with answers to all the others, which may be what's needed to establish what the story is really about. Some of the other questions above speak to a need for information about the couple's life together in the "now" of the story. Another suggests the possibility of a flashback. And dealing with the final question posed above, a "What happens when?" question, moves us naturally into the writing of a scene in which we'll see the point-of-view character talk to the little girl. That dialogue exchange, even at a very early stage in the story's development, can go a long way toward helping to establish what's important here, what most needs to be explored further. If we write that scene, we'll almost certainly hear not only Ellen speak but other characters as well: the girl with the fortune cookies, perhaps one of the waiters, or the girl's father as he comes out from the kitchen to check on her, or our point-of-view character's best friend at the table. But as the characters talk, we'll keep the angle of vision firmly rooted in our point-of-view character's perspective, making any understanding she gains from the encounter our own. With the little girl standing at the table, what does our point-of-view character notice about her? What connections does Ellen make between what she sees and her own experience of children? With what she knows of her husband's experience? If the girl's father comes out of the kitchen, what does our point-of-view character look for in him? Is she any closer after that scene to understanding the nature of intimacy between parents and children, husbands and wives?

From a bit of overheard dialogue, we've begun to fashion a character both from what she sees and what she makes of it. What's required of the writer now is the closest kind of attention, as we continue to

*work* the character's point of view—using her different levels of vision—to get at the truth of this character, this story. As fiction writers, what's asked of us may itself be a new kind of seeing, as we try to represent truthfully the set of eyes we've created and positioned within our developing story idea.

Robert Browning, in his poem “Fra Lippo Lippi,” has the Renaissance painter remark on how often we come to love something we've seen a hundred times only when we see it painted on a canvas. Something of the same sort of transformation can take place when we create a character's third-person unified point of view. This is the moment in story development when we should find ourselves slowing down, weighing the value of everything seen, trying to assess what it means, what use can be made of it.

In that process, we may find ourselves in closer and closer communion with the point-of-view character. Browning's “Fra Lippo Lippi” again: “Art was given for that; / God uses us to help each other so, / Lending our minds out.” If we keep at it, those lines can describe what happens in our understanding of the “she” in the Chinese restaurant: For the length of our story, her mind is lent to us for the purposes of art.

In this kind of union, we can achieve such closeness that, even though the story is cast in third person, we arrive at something very like the voices that distinguish first person. In this example, our point-of-view character is watching one of the teenage waiters deliver a platter of dim sum two tables over.

The boy put the platter down with a slight flourish, and one of the dim sum—a fat one—slid off onto the table. It lay, beached, between the salt and pepper shakers, and in the orangey fluorescent light, she imagined she saw tiny fins, fish whiskers, gills opening and closing. Ellen felt her hand rising to her mouth and, quick, conjured up a cheeseburger. It was no good, though: the cheese melted over her fingers, and then she was staring at Cheese Pond. Cheese Pond, where fish lived in families. She hated fish; she hated food that looked like fish; she hated anything small, anything defenseless, anything that couldn't make its own way in the world.

In reading those lines, we can see how the merger of language and vision supports a sense of both her character and her situation. The

point-of-view character is the only consciousness present in that paragraph, and in the story. She's our ticket: Her movement through the story is our own. Developing her point of view—honoring, and exploring, its possibilities—is a major step in moving the story forward.

Third-person unified is a standard in contemporary short fiction; it's less common in novels, where a greater range of perspectives may be necessary for us to get at the real story. J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* casts no less a personage than Fyodor Dostoevsky as the point-of-view character. The story has Dostoevsky grappling not only with the death of his stepson but with the sometimes warring obligations of art and life. At one point, Dostoevsky asks, "What am I to do?" and then, "If I were only in touch with my heart, might it be given me to know?" That second question is well worth remembering when working with the third-person unified point of view. It demands that we do the work necessary to be in touch with our characters' hearts; in building that closeness, the heart of the story can reveal itself to us.

### THIRD-PERSON LIMITED

But what if, in developing Ellen's story, the close-in quality of third-person unified begins to seem a little too close? What if, in working with the material, we begin to feel we need some breathing room, some moments when we're not anchored in the point-of-view character's consciousness? If that's the case, the answer may be a shift to a third-person limited point of view. It may seem very similar to the point of view discussed above, since Ellen will continue to be our angle of vision on events, and we'll still have access to her thoughts. But in this use of third person, we'll also be able to take advantage of objective narration; that is, neutral exposition that is not tied to the character's consciousness.

Manny's was inside the Great Mall of China, which was just an open-air food court surrounded on three sides by a video store, a discount shoe warehouse, and two martial arts establishments. In past lives, Manny's had been a spareribs place, and a pizza place, and once, years before, an all-night wedding chapel. But now it was an egg roll palace, and two giant egg rolls, with stick legs and tap shoes, danced a welcome on the plateglass window out in front.

It's not hard to see how, in third-person unified, Ellen's perception of the dancing egg rolls in tap shoes could be used to further develop the character. In third-person limited, Manny's location and history can be presented in a "neutral" gear, free of any characterization by Ellen. Physical descriptions, background, summary, anything we need to know but don't need cast in the point-of-view character's perception, can be given to us through this kind of objective exposition.

One way of determining whether this type of third person is suitable for a developing story is to consider whether only providing a unified point of view has resulted in a kind of fictional claustrophobia. The addition of objective narration can sometimes act in the same way as throwing open a window does on a stifling hot day; it gives us some breathing room that may not be available if everything is funneled through one character.

Point-of-view decisions, like other decisions in fiction, are often a question of balance. Ask yourself what the potential benefits of a particular point of view are, and then what the costs might be. When using third-person limited, it may be the case that the addition of objective narration provided a much needed counterweight to the point-of-view character's perspective. Or it may be that sticking to one point of view, even in the use of exposition, establishes a more powerful connection to the character—and thus is worth a little claustrophobia. But to make those kinds of costs versus benefits decisions for one story, as opposed to another (and for second person versus first, or between the kinds of third person), requires a thorough understanding of the ways in which different points of view operate.

## SHIFTING POINT OF VIEW

So far our focus has been developing that initial bit of overheard dialogue from the point of view of one character. With short stories, the wisdom traditionally had been that one point of view is sufficient, that to employ multiple points of view almost guarantees a short-changing of *all* the points of view. But what if we find that one perspective simply isn't enough? Making that determination involves thinking through the obligations of point of view in fiction: Can we see the action unfold satisfactorily from one perspective? If not, then what other perspective is necessary? For example, we may, in working with

Ellen's point of view, begin to suspect that the perspective of the little girl's father is somehow important to the story. Perhaps when he comes out from the kitchen to check on his daughter, Ellen begins to romanticize him as the perfect father, seeing in the small actions of his hands, working to straighten the little girl's collar and smooth her hair, a blend of love and duty she fears won't ever be present in her own husband. The story could work the possibilities inherent in this situation solely from Ellen's point of view. The decision to shift point of view to the father would require us to believe that *his perspective*—not just his character, but his eyes—offers something the story must have. We can hear his voice in dialogue, without switching to his point of view. But to actually see what he sees requires a shift in point of view.

If we can get the complete story from Ellen's point of view, then the answer is simple: Don't give us any other point of view. The decision to shift point of view must be based on the conviction that we cannot see the story unfold properly from a single perspective. We know that Ellen wants children. What does this father of this little girl see when he looks at his daughter, and again when he takes in Ellen at her table staring at the child? What's his point of view, as opposed to Ellen's, and how can they combine to make one story?

When Lee didn't come back to the kitchen for more fortune cookies, he pulled off his apron and went into the dining room after her. He didn't see her at first, and he made a fist with his left hand, to balance the sudden tightness in his chest. She was never where she was supposed to be, but he looked again, and there she was, spinning through the center of the dining room with the red lacquer tray above her head. The customers in her path ducked to avoid the cellophane-wrapped fortune cookies, flying at them from the tray. It was like this all the time now; it was as if she had shaken off gravity with her baby teeth. He stooped to retrieve a fortune cookie and, slowly, in his own time, moved toward his daughter.

The story has a new dimension now; not only can the father's point of view be explored, but the tension between his and Ellen's different points of view can be exploited for dramatic effect. I should say that it seems unlikely that this story, as talked about here, actually would require more than one point of view. The decision to use multiple



points of view should be based on the conviction that only by providing more than one perspective on the action can we actually get at truth of the story.

Ernest Hemingway confronted the question, How many perspectives does this story require? in the short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” and came up with four perspectives, plus “descriptive” narration. One of those points of view belongs to the lion that Francis Macomber runs away from in terror. It’s no small undertaking to provide access to a lion’s perspective, but it’s necessary to the story.

Still, stories needing point-of-view shifts are rarer than those that do not. Again, it’s a question of benefits versus costs. In novels, when there’s a landscape of some length to be filled in, the benefits are usually clear. The “bigger” the story, the more natural it may seem to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on it. We may end up with multiple “takes” on one event, or introduce different narrators while moving the story forward. Even though it’s much more common to employ point-of-view shifts in novels, the risks, in one sense, are much the same as they are in short fiction: If too many points of view are offered, we may be undercutting, and underdeveloping, the one or two points of view that are most necessary to tell of the story. In both genres (but especially in short fiction), if we switch point of view too often, and for reasons that aren’t compelling, we may sever the readers’ connection to the characters and, eventually, the story.

Overall, it’s important to be prepared to shift point of view when it’s called for; a rigid adherence to the “old” rules about only employing single points of view in short fiction, for example, may shortchange a particular story. But, and this may be the case more often, it’s good to be a little wary of an initial enthusiasm for shifting point of view. Sometimes it may seem easier to switch than to fight; that is, to stand our ground and work through the process of fully understanding one character’s heart and mind—one character’s story.

Whether we’re committed to developing one point of view in third person or more than one, though, using sight as a way into both character and story can open a new world of possibilities. In biblical language, the “light of the body is the eye,” and, as we develop our story, a character’s vision, literally and figuratively, can light our way.

## EXERCISES

1. Think of a story you tell often: the time your sister climbed onto the roof in her sleep, say, or the day you chased a robed monk down Michigan Avenue to return an umbrella. Now make yourself the point-of-view character in that story, but in a third-person unified point of view. In writing the story, concentrate on re-creating what you saw in as complete detail as possible. Use other senses as well: hearing, taste, touch, smell. Don't rush this; take your time, and focus on providing as much concrete, physical detail as possible. Don't worry for now if everything you're seeing belongs in the scene.

2. Write a dialogue exchange between two characters, grounded in the third-person point of view of one of those characters. This is an exercise in providing a context for dialogue; set the physical and emotional scene for us from the character's point of view as the conversation takes place.

3. Write a passage in which the third-person unified point of view is so close to the character that it reads like first person. Render both the point-of-view character's thoughts and the exposition in his or her language. Try to get so close to the character that tag lines like "he thought" seem unnecessary.

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*Lynna Williams'* short fiction has been published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Lear's*, and a number of literary magazines; five of her stories have made the annual 100 Best Stories list in *The Best American Short Stories*. Her first collection, *Things Not Seen and Other Stories*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. She is at work on a novel, *The Faith of Gazelles*. A former reporter and political speechwriter in Texas and Minnesota, she is now an associate professor of English/Creative Writing at Emory University.