**Understanding Point of View in Literature**

Literature provides a lens through which readers look at the world. Point of view is the way the author allows you to "see" and "hear" what's going on. Skillful authors can fix their readers' attention on exactly the detail, opinion, or emotion the author wants to emphasize by manipulating the point of view of the story.

Point of view comes in three varieties, which the English scholars have handily numbered for your convenience:

* **First-person** point of view is in use when a character narrates the story with *I-me-my-mine* in his or her speech. The advantage of this point of view is that you get to hear the thoughts of the narrator and see the world depicted in the story through his or her eyes. However, remember that no narrator, like no human being, has complete self-knowledge or, for that matter, complete knowledge of anything. Therefore, the reader's role is to go beyond what the narrator says.

For example, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from the point of view of Scout, a young child. She doesn't grasp the complex racial and socioeconomic relations of her town — but the reader does, because Scout gives information that the reader can interpret. Also, Scout's innocence reminds the reader of a simple, "it's-not-fair" attitude that contrasts with the rationalizations of other characters.

* **Second-person** point of view, in which the author uses *you* and *your*, is rare; authors seldom speak directly to the reader. When you encounter this point of view, pay attention. Why? The author has made a daring choice, probably with a specific purpose in mind. Most times, second-person point of view draws the reader into the story, almost making the reader a participant in the action.

Here's an example: Jay McInerney's best-selling *Bright Lights, Big City* was written in second person to make the experiences and tribulations of the unnamed main character more personal and intimate for the reader.

* **Third-person** point of view is that of an outsider looking at the action. The writer may choose *third-person omniscient,* in which the thoughts of every character are open to the reader, or *third-person limited,* in which the reader enters only one character's mind, either throughout the entire work or in a specific section. Third-person limited differs from first-person because the author's voice, not the character's voice, is what you hear in the descriptive passages.

In Virginia Woolf's wonderful novel *Mrs. Dalloway,* you're in one character's mind at a time. You know the title character's thoughts about Peter, the great love of her youth, for example, and then a few pages later, you hear Peter's thoughts about Mrs. Dalloway. Fascinating! When you're reading a third-person selection, either limited or omniscient, you're watching the story unfold as an outsider. Remember that most writers choose this point of view.

Reaction Annotation: