

TWO SELVES:

CRAFTING EFFECTIVE FIRST-PERSON RETROSPECTIVE NARRATORS

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First-person retrospective narrators look to the past, but they narrate from a distinct present time. When a narrator's present-time perspective differs from his or her past perspective, a sense of duality emerges as the narrator seems to split into two separate selves. A narrator in the *Bildungsroman* tradition engages in retrospection for the purpose of tracing his or her own coming-of-age process, so *Bildungsroman* novels hinge on the narrator's presentation and examination of his or her own duality. This lecture will explore several duality-building craft techniques commonly found in *Bildungsroman*-type novels, ways writers can use these techniques to create and manipulate duality in all kinds of retrospective first-person narrators, and the compelling narrative effects these methods can produce.

❖ INTRODUCTION

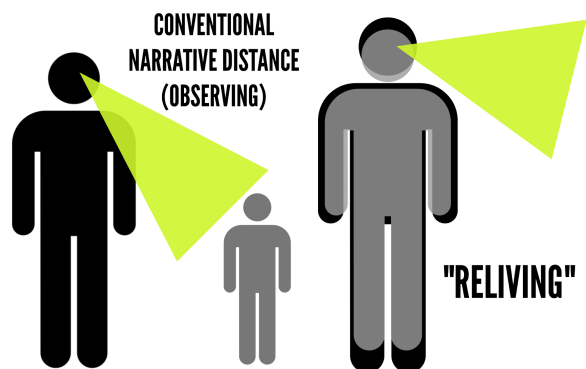
1. **FIRST-PERSON RETROSPECTIVE NARRATOR:** A FIRST-PERSON NARRATOR WHO TELLS A STORY ABOUT HIS OR HER OWN PAST EXPERIENCES.

- A. The first-person retrospective narrator is “split into two different manifestations of the same self, one who narrates and one who experiences” (Nicol 195).



2. **NARRATORIAL DUALITY:** THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND TEMPORAL SEPARATION BETWEEN A NARRATOR'S PRESENT (NARRATING) SELF AND HIS PAST (EXPERIENCING) SELF.

- A. First-person retrospective narrators “may recount their childhood experiences from a number of different vantage points” and “may ‘enter into’ his or her lived experience as a child to a greater or lesser degree, from a ‘reliving’...to a conventional narrative distance” (Galbraith 123).
- B. There can be “an interplay between these two perspectives, which can be juxtaposed, superimposed, or contrasted to varying effects” (Morini 601).



3. **DEICTIC SHIFT THEORY**

- A. DEIXIS (LINGUISTICS): words that indicate *who*, *where*, and *when*.
- B. DEIXIS (NARRATOLOGY): any kind of reference to the two planes of existence in a retrospective narrative (the *here-and-now* and the *there-and-then*).



- C. DEICTIC SHIFT *THEORY*: HOW A NARRATOR INDICATES THAT SHE IS SHIFTING BETWEEN THE PLANE OF THE HERE-AND-NOW AND THAT OF THE THERE-AND-THEN.
- D. Indications of a shift between planes:
 - I. Signpost phrases (“back then,” “nowadays,” etc.)
 - II. References to the act of remembering or of narrating
 - III. Changes in verb tense
 - IV. Changes in diction and tone
 - V. Explicit or implicit narratorial judgement of past experiences
- E. PUSH: A shift from the *here-and-now* to the *there-and-then*
- F. POP: A shift in the opposite direction



- G. BLENDING: Presence of *both* deictic planes at once:



- 4. **BILDUNGSROMAN**: A FIRST-PERSON RETROSPECTIVE NOVEL THAT NARRATES THE COMING-OF-AGE PROCESS.
 - A. This genre “narrates the process of *becoming*” (Karafilis 64).

❖ CHARLES DICKENS: *DAVID COPPERFIELD*

1. TECHNIQUES DICKENS USES *MOST* TO CRAFT DAVID’S DUALITY
 - A. Deictic POPs
 - B. Deictic PUSHes
 - C. Self-reference
2. “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born...” (Dickens 13).
3. “I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy” (Dickens 24).

4. David “makes a determined effort to re-enter faithfully his earlier self as child and to relive his early life” (Galbraith 123).
 5. “Here is a long passage—what an enormous perspective I make of it!—leading from Peggoty’s kitchen to the front-door. A dark store-room opens out of it, and that is a place to be run past at night; for I don’t know what may be among those tubs and jars and old tea-chests, when there is nobody in there with a dimly-burning light, letting a mouldy air come out at the door, in which there is the smell of soap, pickles, pepper, candles, and coffee all at one whiff” (Dickens 25).
 6. “My school-days! The silent gliding of my life—from childhood up to youth! Let me think, as I look back upon that flowing water, now a dry channel overgrown with leaves, whether there are any marks along its course, by which I can remember how it ran.
“A moment, and I occupy my place in the Cathedral, where we all went together, every Sunday morning” (Dickens 274).
 7. “And now my written story ends. I look back, once more—for the last time—before I close these leaves.
“I see myself, with Agnes by my side, journeying along the road of life” (Dickens 878).
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❖ HARPER LEE: TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

1. TECHNIQUE LEE USES *MOST* TO CRAFT SCOUT’S DUALITY
 - A. *Deictic blending*—where there is no clear POP or PUSH, but Scout’s narrating *and* experiencing selves often seem to exist simultaneously, which allows Lee to build *and* manipulate the sense of Scout’s duality.
 2. HOW LEE INDICATES, WHEN THEY AREN’T BLENDED, THE TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF SCOUT
 - A. *Narrator-Scout*: heightened diction, narratorial judgement and interpretation, and a dry, knowing sense of humor.
 - B. *Character-Scout*: simpler diction, lack of judgement/interpretation, “relives” experiences.
 3. “When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that” (Lee 3).
 4. “He had asked me earlier in the summer to marry him, then he promptly forgot about it. He staked me out, marked as his property, said I was the only girl he would ever love, then he neglected me. I beat him up twice but it did no good” (Lee 46).
 5. “I mumbled that I was sorry and retired meditating upon my crime. I never deliberately learned to read, but somehow I had been wallowing illicitly in the daily papers” (Lee 19).
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❖ KAYE GIBBONS: *ELLEN FOSTER*

1. TECHNIQUES GIBBONS USES *MOST* TO CRAFT ELLEN'S DUALITY
 - A. Structural duality
 - B. Deictic POPs
 - C. Deictic PUSHes
 - D. Narrative immediacy

 2. **NARRATIVE IMMEDIACY:** occurs in "situations in which little gap exists (or is communicated to the reader) between the protagonist and the narrator" (Sandefur 1).
 - A. Here, *protagonist = character = the there-and-then/experiencing/past version of a first-person retrospective narrator.*

 3. Using narrative immediacy in a coming-of-age novel, writers can "present the protagonist's interpretations as they occur and change," which helps to "re-create...the *process* of identity development" (Sandefur 7).

 4. WITHIN FIRST FOUR PAGES:
 - A. "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy" (Gibbons 1).
 - B. "I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive" (Gibbons 1).
 - C. "Two years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. My stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the grass green and the hedge bushes square" (Gibbons 2).
 - D. "I might get a little nervous but I am never scared" (Gibbons 2).
 - E. "Oh but I do remember when I was scared. Everything was so wrong like somebody had knocked something loose and my family was shaking itself to death" (Gibbons 2).
 - F. "Even my mama's skin looked tired of holding in her weak self" (Gibbons 2).
 - G. "She comes home from the hospital sometimes. If I was her I would stay there. All laid up in the air conditioning with folks patting your head and bringing you fruit baskets" (Gibbons 3).
 - H. "Nobody yells after anybody to do this or that here. My new mama lays out the food and we all take a turn to dish out. Then we eat and have a good time" (Gibbons 4).*
**If you'd like a copy of the book page images, let me know and I can email them to you.*

 5. The adolescent search for identity "involves progressions and regressions," so "Gibbons' narrative style is appropriately fluid" (Sandefur 53).

 6. "Dora asks her mama if she plans to put some old tacky paper frame on their wall and her mama says she should be nice to me because **this** is all so cute.
 "But it is not cute and it is not a game I want to say. I wanted to scoop the cats and the colored frames up and burn them and forget I had tried to appeal to somebody and look at them **now** making fun of me.
 "But I left it all there on the floor and walked away" (Gibbons 109).
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❖ JULIAN BARNES: THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

1. TECHNIQUES BARNES USES *MOST* TO CRAFT TONY'S DUALITY
 - A. References to narrative act and act of remembering
 - B. Frequent narratorial judgement/interpretation
 - C. Deictic POPs
 - D. Structural duality
 2. "I'm not very interested in my schooldays, and don't feel any kind of nostalgia for them. But school is where it all began, so I need to return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty. If I can't be sure of the actual events any more, I can at least be true to the impressions those facts left. That's the best I can manage" (Barnes 3).
 3. "Again, I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time" (Barnes 45).
 4. "...we were book-hungry, sex-hungry, meritocratic, anarchistic. All political and social systems appeared to us corrupt, yet we declined to consider an alternative other than hedonistic chaos" (Barnes 10).
 5. "You can probably guess that I'm putting off telling you the next bit" (Barnes 44).
 6. "Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange" (Barnes 20).
 7. "...when you are young, you think you can predict the likely pains and bleaknesses that age might bring. ...What you fail to do is look ahead, and then imagine yourself looking back from that future point. Learning the new emotions that time brings. Discovering, for example, that as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been" (Barnes 65).
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❖ CONCLUSION

I hope that looking at these four very different novels, which all participate in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, has demonstrated how much complexity can come from creating and manipulating narratorial duality. And I hope the stylistic flexibility offered by the techniques we've discussed is also evident. The tools that create and alter duality are, I think, a versatile and important addition to any writerly tool box.

❖ FURTHER READING (FICTION)

Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*.
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 Sandefur, Amy Faulds. *Narrative Immediacy and First-Person Voice in Contemporary American Novels*. 2003. Louisiana State University, PhD dissertation. [\[http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0602103-145436/unrestricted/Sandefur_dis.pdf\]](http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0602103-145436/unrestricted/Sandefur_dis.pdf)

❖ FURTHER READING (LITERARY THEORY & CRITICISM)

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 ⇒ **Mary Galbraith's Academia.edu site is awesome—she's so generous to share her work for free!**
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