Gilda Pacheco
Kari Meyers

The Telling and the Tale

An Introductory Guide to Short, Creative Prose

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Chapter I

Introduction: Shaping Human Experience through Stories

Defining the Title: A Critical Dilemma

By all logic, naming the subject of this book should have been both easy and obvious. What could be more basic than identifying the very subject matter to be discussed? However, somewhat to our surprise and very much to our consternation, we discovered that choosing the title and naming the topic was not only challenging, but also perhaps the most crucial decision to be made in constructing this text. In other words, we found ourselves in the midst of a truly critical dilemma. It was critical, first of all, because the choice of the title is at the very heart of the project. It was also critical because it implied taking a theoretical stance within the huge gamut of possibilities encompassed within the term "literary criticism." Making our choice essentially demanded and simultaneously became a declaration of our own personal position on the subject of "story."

Choosing a title requires taking into account different aspects. For example, the title should reflect the subject of the book accurately, be as original and creative as possible, and be appealing to the public. Misleading, prosaic or boring titles could lose readers, which is why the choice of a title should be approached carefully by the author. When choosing a label for the subject at hand, all aspects should be conscientiously considered because there are as many ramifications as there are options.

We began with the premise that we wanted this book to be a concise guide to narrative, which seemed simple enough. However, it was not. The first part of our title, "The Telling and the Tale," came fluently, and we were pleased with the combination of these two terms that encompass the nature

of literature as a process and as a product. Ironically, it was the second part of our title, the part that supposedly clarifies the subject of this work, which presented problems. The introductory nature of our book needed to be apparent within its title, but defining the subject matter was difficult due to problems of literary terminology. An introduction to what? "Narrative" was our original choice, but that term was problematic both because it includes poetry and because it is so frequently used as a synonym for "short story." Narrative is a word commonly used to designate anything relating to story, and the word "story" immediately brought to light three different critical dilemmas or problems.

The first dilemma is the definition of story. Once again, a decision had to be made. A story clearly is something which implies the action of communicating a happening. This automatically has additional repercussions. If a story is a form of communication, then it necessarily involves a teller, a listener (reader), a channel, and a code, as well as the most obvious aspect, content. The code is the easiest to define, since for our purposes, the story is expressed through the use of language—language in the traditional sense of words following a linguistic system, rather than in a broader sense of any kind of communication system (such as music, kinesics, art). The teller of the story is not particularly problematic, either, although it can become somewhat complicated in the separation of author and narrator, as will be discussed later. The reader is also quite readily identified, although there is no consensus on the role of the reader and its importance and impact upon the story. (Is the reader a passive receiver, or does the reader influence the "actual" story in significant ways?) The issue of the channel, however, is less obvious. In general terms, it is quite easy to simply call the channel "literature," since we are essentially interested in artistic renditions of story. By "artistic" we mean having to do with literary aesthetics, with molding language conscientiously in ways which are both original and pleasing to the ear (literally, if spoken, and metaphorically, if written) and to the intellect.

But this brought us to the second serious dilemma: what kind of stories were we talking about? The earliest poetry was narrative, and the earliest literary narratives were written as poetry, telling the tales of the heroes and histories of different peoples. (Not all poetry is narrative, of course, and certainly most narrative is not poetry.) Drama also relates a story (aside from the issue of whether the drama is to be considered the written version or the version as performed), and the essay is yet another means of examining

human experience in prose, as are letters and journals. Most of us associate narrative with stories, by which we mean a tale told through prose. Prose comes closer to the oral tradition of storytelling, which has even been considered a fundamental mental schemata or form for structuring human experience. From this perspective, stories, with their format (beginning, middle, and end) and content (human experience), are a manifestation of the very essence of the human condition, and the oral or written form is one means of communicating that essence. Most of us can readily accept that there is a close relationship between story and prose, which frequently leads to associating these two concepts, or even equating them.

For students of literature, however, this expands rather than resolves the dilemma because we traditionally insist on labeling a story either "fiction" or "nonfiction." "Fiction" is generally defined as a creative, invented type of story, as opposed to "nonfiction," which is perceived as factual, true and real. Fiction may be a very realistic representation of human experience to which we can easily relate and accept as possible, or even probable, but it is not expected to recount something which actually happened to a "real" person. "Nonfiction" is assumed to be an account of real events involving real people, however artistically it may be described. The difference between these two categories might appear to be as "clear" as it is "obvious," but that is not the case. Have you ever listened to two people give their versions of a fight they had? They report on the same event, but their perspectives, assumptions, and conclusions are different, which converts the two stories into versions of the same happening. Which one "really" happened? Which story is "true"? The line dividing fact (nonfiction) and imagination (fiction) is more ambiguous than it might first seem. In fact, contemporary narratology (the study of narrative) has created new categories to encompass this ambiguity. For example, "creative nonfiction" is used to designate "true" anecdotes or stories which are told in ways that utilize the artistic techniques of literature in the telling. Previously unquestioned concepts of authorship and objectivity are challenged by twentieth-century critical approaches to literature, such as new historicism, reader-response, and deconstruction, which invite us to view all "telling" as human and therefore both open to interpretation and unavoidably subjective.

Another dilemma revolves around the category known as "short story." What constitutes short? How do we determine the criteria for differentiating between a novel and a short story? As terms such as *novella* and short-short

story suggest, there is no consensus for defining the meaning of "short" as applied to story. Another issue is that of the nature of "short story": as a component of literature, it is assumed to be fictional, just as it is assumed to be prose. But contemporary experiments with this genre regularly put our assumptions to the test and force us to reconsider previously excluded possibilities both in terms of form and content. Is it possible to have a story without any apparent plot? Must grammatical guidelines and prose format and punctuation be used for it to be considered a story? Who has the last word on what a story "means": the author, the critic, or the reader? Clearly, whatever else it might be, "story" is unquestionably a dynamic form of literature which is constantly evolving in new directions.

These are the most challenging of the critical dilemmas involved in choosing a title for this book. A title such as "An Introduction to Prose" would prove misleading, while "An Introduction to Narrative" is too broad and "An Introduction to Short Story and Other Literary Forms" too vague. We are definitely interested in close examination of prose forms of narrative, which for our purposes eliminates both drama and poetry. We are also intent upon analyzing those forms traditionally designated as literature, which means we are not including history, for example. In addition, we are eliminating essays as being more of an intellectual exercise designed to persuade or communicate an idea or a feeling in explicit, precise fashion, rather than creatively, although this comes dangerously close to certain contemporary forms of creative nonfiction.

Thus, through a very difficult but enriching process of elimination and differentiation, we are left with a category of creative storytelling in prose form, which is the "short, creative prose" referred to in the title of this book. This should by no means be understood as implying that other classic prose forms, such as drama and essay, are not creative; rather, it reflects our conviction that the emphasis in drama is more on the performance than on the written "telling" and the emphasis in essay is on the intellectual impact. Both of these forms tend to use language more pragmatically than evocatively. All communication, literary or otherwise, "tells" in a sense, but we are concerned with that special type of literary expression which exploits language aesthetically and succinctly as a means for manifesting and evoking human experience. Our critical dilemma is thus resolved for the present, if not totally or definitively: this text will be an introductory guide to "short, creative prose."

A Brief History of Prose Narrative: The Origins and Development of the Short Story

The history of the short story is a history of paradoxes (Peden 3). The first paradox is seen in its origins. Although for many literary critics this prose narrative starts at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, stories are, in fact, the oldest form of literature. First in oral tradition and then perpetuated in written form, stories have been present from the beginnings of the human race.

There are different early forms of the short story, such as tribal creation myths, animal fables and religious parables and accounts. In fact, some of the oldest written tales are found in *The Egyptian Tales of the Magicians*, dated 4000 B.C. (Peden 1). Aesop's fables, written approximately 600 B.C., are well known and are still read today. And even though they were not intended as fiction, the descriptive accounts of the Old Testament and the parables of the New Testament are also examples of early forms of narration. Stories are, in fact, one of the most ancient manifestations of human creativity in the shape of legends, fables and folk tales.

No single place can claim to be the origin of storytelling. In the classical literature of Greece and Rome, for example, Petronious' "Satyricon" and Apuleius' "Metamorphoses" are examples of brief tales included in larger narrative forms (Charters 1600). During this same period, tales from Asian cultures were brought to Europe from the East. In fact, storytelling goes back to the remote past of all peoples, cultures, and societies. There are no privileged geographical zones in its development: storytelling is concomitant with the evolution of humankind.

During the Medieval Age, heroic accounts and humorous and secular tales were the stories that recorded the values, concerns and views of that time. Boccaccio's tales in *Decameron* and Chaucer's narratives in *The Canterbury Tales* serve as perfect examples. In the Renaissance, stories continued to be concerned with religious and moral issues, preserving the didactical function of these accounts. However, an important change is seen in the following century.

The tremendous impact of secularization in eighteenth-century Europe facilitated the production of fictional narratives (Charters 1601). Capitalism and the rise of commerce and manufacturing helped develop a strong middle class "hungry for culture and possessed with just enough money, leisure and education to pursue and enjoy [literature]" (Pickering 59). Poetry and drama were preferred by the aristocracy, while the middle class turned to the novel and later to the short story as literary means of expression as well as sources of education and entertainment.

Another paradox is seen in the development of fiction. People in the Medieval Age and part of the Renaissance distrusted fiction and imagination (Charters 1600), while paradoxically, the Age of Reason (1660-1780) with its pragmatic, scientific view, let fictional narrative flourish. One main channel for this kind of literature was the periodical, which emerged from the middle class. Fiction writers took advantage of this kind of communication and included their creative works in the periodicals. Thus, as Charters asserts, gothic tales, adventure stories and satires populate the periodicals from the emerging middle class in the eighteenth century (1601).

The paradoxes of the origin and development of the short story also vary, for some historians designated the Romantic period (1780-1830), when imagination and originality were highly praised, as the moment when the short story originated and developed as a literary genre. In the first half of the nineteenth century, many writers contributed to the consolidation of this narrative form, for example, Gogol and Chekhov in Russia; Balzac, Mérimée and Maupassant in France; Hoffman, Goethe and Tieck in Germany; and Irving, Hawthorne and Poe in the United States. Their stories exhibit a fascination with psychology, with the human mind, and with eccentric behavior. These themes were developed by means of detailed descriptions, rich characterization and original prose. For instance, horror tales and detective stories were two of the most representative types

of narrative of that time. Another paradox, this time in the reception of the short story, is seen in this century. In spite of the popularity of stories in magazines or newspapers, "short stories in book form tend to be ignored by the general public" (Peden 3).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, realism provoked a change of subject, content and form in the stories. Flaubert and Tolstoy were among the first to develop realistic fictional representations of their respective societies. In the United States, realism is seen in local color stories written, for instance, by Twain and Chopin. Cases of extreme realism, in authors such as Crane, Wharton and James, show a naturalistic tendency in their narratives. By the end of the nineteenth century, the genre of the short story was consolidated by means of writers' innovations in form and in content. In fact, the history of the short story reveals how the short story has changed and evolved according to the pressure of the times and the literary movements or trends in vogue.

Modernism emerged in the twentieth century and conferred new traits upon the short story. The modernists challenged norms and rules in society and conventions in life as well as in literature. In Europe, modernist writers included Isaac Babel, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, among others. In the United States, writers such as Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Richard Wright presented modernist views, discourses and techniques. The twentieth century was definitely a time of exploration of new forms and new means of expression. Writers exploited the psychological aspect of characterization, developing innovative narrative techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and flashbacks. They experimented with narrative elements such as plot and point of view. They altered the line of action and valued its disruptions. Thematically speaking, their main concern was the individual, the human mind. After the modernists, exploration of form was an undeniable part of fiction. So new generations of writers continued to explore innovative patterns of narration, while others remained traditional in terms of structure and form.

Variety and individuality are the key elements in contemporary fiction. Traditionally literary movements have determined the form and content of short stories, but now this genre is characterized by diversity. Readers

find a mosaic of different voices with unique styles, particular concerns and different ways of expression. The great variety of innovative writers of this time includes, in the United States, Leslie Marmon Silko, John Barth, Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Bernard Malamud, Hisaye Yamamoto and Amy Tan, among others. The vividness and variety of the short story is seen in writers in other countries as well, for instance, Gabriel García Márquez, Nadine Gordimer, Octavio Paz, Bessie Head, Rosario Castellanos, Isabel Allende, Naguib Mahfouz, Carlos Fuentes, and Yukio Mishima, among many. In fact, the list would be almost endless if one takes into account that the diversity of contemporary fiction is present in every national literature. As Ann Charters affirms, "The significant differences among contemporary short stories are not historical or geographical but are in the attitudes toward life that govern an author's sense of reality" (Charters 1606). This is also true of the literary techniques that different writers use to express those different attitudes. The "sense of reality" mentioned by Charters presents another paradox of the short story: the fictitious is used to depict the sense of reality that each writer has.

As Charters affirms, "[t]he history of the short story is open-ended" (1607). This narrative form will never perish, for it is nourished by humankind. We all tell stories, and we all love to listen to them. In fact, storytelling is a basic human activity. However, we do not all write stories, and those who do are not all able to publish them. Even though it seems deceptively simple to write a story, this literary genre demands strict control and precision. Storytelling is true craftsmanship. It is time now to explore the genre itself.

Offering a definition is always somewhat uncomfortable and limiting, even more so in this case, since we are dealing with a literary genre, the short story, that has been ignored and underestimated for so long. Seen by some as a smaller, simpler and less important form of the novel, the "Cinderella" of the literary genres, the short story has been undervalued and misjudged. In its earlier states, "writing fiction was considered undignified, and reading it vulgar" (Hogins 67). In comparison to other literary genres, prose was considered a less significant and less artistic form. And within the narrative forms, the novel was seen to be superior, while the short story was considered an appendix to the novel. There were even critics who saw the short story as merely an exercise in writing.

Contemporary critics confirm this disparagement. Norman Friedman, who sees the issue of length as a basic problem of the short story genre and as another source of paradox, affirms, "Although the short story as a literary type gets a fair share of attention in classroom texts and writer's handbooks, it is still—tainted by commercialism and damned by condescension—running a poor fourth to poetry, drama, and novel-length fiction in the books and journals devoted to serious theoretical criticism" (100-101). Even writers themselves have sometimes belittled its importance. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, wrote stories for financial support, so he could continue experimenting with the form of the novel. Perhaps it is here, with its own creators, the writers, where we can find a definition.

Edgar Allan Poe sees the short story as "the fairest field in prose for the exercise of a highest genius" (Peden 5). In addition, Poe is always concerned with the coherent, structured writing of the whole work that he visualizes in his famous "single effect." Katherine Ann Porter shares this idea of a unified whole when she affirms, "Now and again thousands of memories converge, harmonize, arrange themselves around a central idea in a coherent whole, and I write a story" (Miller 346). And Sandra Cisneros embraces this unity through the use of a metaphor, calling her collection of stories "a pearl necklace."

For Anton Chekhov, the story is a "slice of life," a view shared and exemplified in Katherine Mansfield's stories. James Joyce frequently presents climactic moments of realization of life at the end of his stories; these psychological revelations, called epiphanies, constitute moments of heightened awareness which foment reflection on the part of both the character and the readers, as well as introduce an element of surprise. French author Guy de Maupassant is also concerned about the surprise element at the end of the story, and Julio Cortázar seems to agree when, through a boxing analogy, he says, "La novela se gana por puntos, el cuento por *knock out*" ["The novel wins by points and the short story by knockout"].

It is also productive to examine critics' views on the short story. Some have created complex theories relating narrative to discourse, framing, the essence of storyness and the relation between genres and subgenres. Let's review some simpler definitions of this genre. William Peden starts by saying that "a short story is a piece of prose fiction in which a character or a group of characters gets from here to there" (5). It seems this critic is concerned with

the changes that take place in characterization, emphasizing the dynamism of the short story as a literary genre; however, "from here to there" is rather imprecise. Brander Matthews asserts that "a Short-story is nothing at all if it has no plot" (Peden 10). One wonders how this critic would respond to the "plotless" stories of contemporary fiction. For Austin Wright the story is "a prose narrative dealing with a fictional world" (50). The presence of the fictitious element seems to be the most important part of the story for this critic. Finally, H.E. Bates declares, "the short-story can be anything the author decides it shall be" (Peden 12). Bates' definition is less descriptive, but more realistic, for it proclaims the flexibility of this genre.

The issue of length that some critics use to distinguish stories from novels is also flexible and debatable since there are short short-stories of less than five hundred words and long short-stories of more than fifteen thousand words. Besides, different literary movements influence the form and content of writers' views and readers' tastes and provoke a variety of opinions in regards to the short story, its place and its value. In summary, we can say that the short story is a literary form that has shown flexibility, diversity and dynamism in the face of paradox, condescension and dissent.

Perhaps it is preferable to present a standard definition of the short story as "a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose" (Holman 469). With such a definition, no single narrative element is emphasized over others, while "relatively brief" gives room for extension, and the rest of the sentence, "fictional narrative in prose," comprises the three terms that are almost always used in short story definitions. Holman's definition is valid but still vague. It is time to analyze the basic elements of the short story to have a clearer view of this narrative form and of its potential, strength, and versatility.

The Fundamentals of Prose Narrative

Introduction

The ability to read and enjoy a literary text does not depend on having acquired special tools to be employed in reading. As we know from our own childhood reading experiences, one can comprehend and thoroughly enjoy reading a story based on a very personal, subjective response, known as a "pre-critical" response because it is essentially emotional rather than intellectual. However, the strategies and reading instruments used in literary analysis are rich tools for enhancing the reading process and opening the literary text to fuller exploitation of its unlimited potential. It goes without saying that there are many different ways to approach a narrative text, each with its own particular concerns, methods, and emphases. The advantage of this for the reader is that s/he has a gamut of reading lenses from which to choose in reading a literary text (or any other text, for that matter) and a legion of possible strategies for enhancing the reading.

Even more importantly, these options make it totally impossible for there to be only one "correct" reading of a text. Rather, they open up a text to multiple interpretations, each of which is simultaneously made possible through and limited by the type of approach employed, as well as by other factors (to be discussed later in this chapter) related to the reader. All narrative texts, however, share three fundamental aspects: the tale, the teller, and the reader (or listener). A fourth element, the context, may be added to them in the sense that all three of these essential elements

are inevitably a product, as well as a manifestation, of their context. Let's examine each of these aspects more fully.

The Tale

As discussed previously, every narrative is essentially a story. This story, or tale, can take many forms. Stories may also vary in terms of their length, purpose, style, content, and other intrinsic aspects. Every narrative, however, includes three key aspects: someone (character) doing something (plot) someplace and sometime (setting). The "something" is made up of an event or events, an action or series of actions. These events may be physical, as in specific actions, or psychological, in the sense of a change of attitude or mindset. They may also be explicit—stated literally within the text—or implicit, present only through inference or reference. Together they constitute what is generally referred to as the plot, or organized sequence of events. The events may be given in chronological order, the order in which they "actually" occurred, as is usually the case in traditional narrative. However, they may also be presented out of sequence, almost as a puzzle for the reader to put together in a more logical order. Sometimes an important piece of the puzzle is provided through a flashback, an interruption of the present by the recollection or telling of a past event.

The basic events of a story constitute its framework, the structure upon which the rest of the story is built. It is crucial to keep in mind that both the content and the organization of the plot—what is told and the order in which events are arranged—are always intentional choices made by the narrator, rather than merely happenchance.

The plot generally evolves around some kind of conflict, or struggle. It may be internal (within a single character), for example, a personal struggle to choose between loyalty to a friend and professional advancement when a given situation makes the two incompatible. The conflict may also be external, for example, a struggle between two individuals or groups or forces. When the individuals represent intangible forces, such as Batman versus the Joker representing the forces of good and evil respectively, the story is an allegory. (Allegories are invariably didactic, although they frequently use humor or entertainment to make their point.) An external conflict may

confront an individual against an institution, for example, Robin Hood versus the laws (and their enforcers) of England. Whatever the conflict, it is generally established near the beginning of the story and constitutes the fuel for the development of the events that follow, which means the story essentially ends when it becomes clear how that conflict will be resolved. It should be noted, however, that in contemporary narrative, the conflict itself may be much less obvious than in traditional narrative.

In a formalistic approach to narrative, which emphasizes the different parts of a story and how they work both separately and jointly to create an effective narrative whole, the conflict is analyzed in terms of its introduction (the appearance of contrasting elements or characters), development (details and events which exacerbate the opposition), climax (the point of greatest tension between the opposing elements), and resolution (when usually one element either triumphs over the other or appears to be about to do so). It is worth noting, however, that the more traditional the narrative, the more clearly—often very explicitly—the conflict is resolved, while more contemporary narrative frequently ends without any definitive resolution of the conflict, leaving it even more subject to interpretation on the part of the readers. This is known as an open ending.

Because every narrative is essentially a representation of a version or segment of human experience, another major element of every story is character, the actor(s) responsible for developing the plot. The main characters are usually people, but they can also be animals (such as Moby Dick), forces (such as luck, evil, supernatural entities), or even nature (a storm, the sea). The principal character is called the protagonist; if there is a character opposing the protagonist in some major way, which creates the basic conflict of the story, that character is known as the antagonist.

Generally speaking, the shorter the narrative, the fewer the number of secondary characters it will include. Secondary characters frequently serve to provide additional information about the main character(s) in some way, often by emphasizing an important characteristic of a main character either through reinforcement (sharing it) or contrast (opposing it). When a secondary character serves as contrast, s/he is known as a foil. (A story may have several foils or none at all.) There may also be other characters in the story who are essentially insignificant in terms of the plot or the main characters and, because of this, they are developed little, if at all. The reader

is not given a basis for knowing what kind of people they are—how they think, or what they value, or how they might act in a given situation. These characters are known as flat characters, while those who are fundamental to the story and are developed more fully are known as round characters. Round characters are generally more complex, and the reader is provided with multiple opportunities for understanding them. Another way of differentiating characters is by designating them as static (characters who do not change during the course of the story) or dynamic (characters who do change). Characters whose type is frequently used, easily recognizable, and predictable are called stock characters.

The final major aspect of the tale itself is the setting, which constitutes the place(s) and time(s) of the plot. These may vary radically from story to story. In one instance, the action might take place in a single place (a room, a town, a country) during a very limited amount of time (a winter evening, for example, or a week-end in spring), while in others there may be a several substantially different contexts covering a more much extensive period of time. Often the time and/or place are not stated explicitly, but rather can be inferred from clues such as descriptions of clothing or manners, modes of transportation, daily activities, speaking styles, and so on.

It is essential to keep in mind that "setting" also encompasses less tangible aspects of time and place, such as social values and norms, roles and expectations, historical-political-economic tendencies, religious beliefs, philosophies, and lifestyles, among others. The term psychological setting is used to refer to a character's mindset—the perspective, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of that character. The importance of this becomes clear when one contemplates, for example, the huge differences between being a twenty-year-old aristocrat in Elizabethan times in England and being a twenty-year-old sheik in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Thus, setting refers to a myriad of factors, both tangible and intangible, related to the physical place and specific time of a particular narrative.

These three—plot, character, and setting—constitute the main elements of the story itself (to the extent that it is possible to separate the tale from the telling). Together they provide the basic building blocks which the teller of the tale then combines and molds in sharing the story with the reader.

The Telling

A narrative, by its very definition, entails both a storyteller and a listener or reader; it is a means of communicating and reflecting upon human experience. In other words, every tale must have a narrator, the telling agent of the story. "Telling" or "narrating" is a very dynamic act, as well as one which implies a series of choices being made in its execution. When discussing literature, the reader is confronted with written words on a page which it may be tempting to perceive as stationary or static. However, as "fixed" as they may appear to be because of their format, the words of the story are really a sort of intermediate state, the result of a series of narrative choices which, although already made by the time the reader sees them, await the infusion of what the reader brings to them as well, as will be discussed later.

It is essential not to confuse the narrative voice with the author. One of the crucial choices an author makes in writing a story is precisely that of which narrative voice, or point of view, to use. Once that choice is made, the narrative voice determines how the tale is structured, the vocabulary choices, what information is presented (and omitted) and how, and all other decisions relating to the telling of the story. It is possible for a combination of narrative perspectives or voices to be used in a single story, but this is much more common in novels than in short fiction.

The concept of point of view encompasses a combination of voice, action, and perspective. The gerund form, voicing, is perhaps a more accurate way of imagining the narrating, the storytelling, which is taking place. The story must be told to be communicated, and every telling implies an activated consciousness, a personal position or perspective from which that telling springs. Just as in real life, the identity of the speaker/teller influences both what is told and how it is told; the narrative voice has that same effect on the tale.

Traditional narratology differentiates among basic types of point-of-view, based on both the quality and quantity of the information provided and the perspective(s) from which it is told. Different types of narrators create varying degrees of distance from the reader and have different effects on the reader. An experienced reader takes careful note of who is speaking in order to evaluate the given information effectively.

One type of telling is "first person," when the narrator tells the story from the perspective of an identifiable "I." Usually this "I" is a participant in the events. When this happens, the telling seems very personal and transparent. One advantage of this type of narrator is that readers tend to relate or identify easily with it and thus trust it as they would a fellow human being. However, the reader should keep in mind that this "I" may be concealing information from the reader, inventing information for the reader, or otherwise distorting the information, whether consciously or unconsciously. In first person narration, the information to which the narrator (and therefore the reader) has access is limited to what the narrator knows, sees, hears, and believes.

Another type of telling is labeled "omniscient" because it presents itself as a disembodied consciousness that knows everything that has happened and is happening, both within and beyond the characters. This narrative perspective appears to be objective, which lends it credibility. However, once again, the reader needs to keep in mind that how much information is given and how it is given is determined by the narrator. The omniscient narrator, like all other narrative voices, speaks from a position and should not be assumed to be impersonal or objective, even though that is the image it attempts to project. Sometimes this kind of narrator will interject clearly judgmental comments or words, or even address the reader directly.

Another less common type of telling is that of a narrator which is also omniscient but refrains from including any extraneous commentary on the characters or the situation. This is called a "dramatic" (or "scenic") narrator because it attempts to present the story with very little or no description, judgment, or direct intervention, similar to theatrical presentations. As in drama performances, there are no explicit explanatory details or comments from the narrative voice. Its aim is to be as objective as possible, in an almost journalistic style, but since total objectivity is unattainable, the reader must still consider the role of the narrative voice in this type of telling.

One commonly used point of view is known as a "third person" or "limited omniscient" narrator. It is similar to first person narration in the sense that the tale is told in terms of what a single, selected character (usually one of the characters from the story) knows, sees, and believes; however, in this case, the narrator is speaking about someone else, rather than from a strictly personal perspective. In other words, the information given to the reader

is essentially limited to what the narrator's chosen character experiences and/or observes. The only internal information (thoughts and feelings) provided refers to that chosen character, with the possible exception of what is explicitly stated in the dialogue of one or more other characters. For example, the narration may read as follows: "Judith's heart pounded as her mother's footsteps drew nearer and nearer. She wondered how much her mother had heard of the conversation."

In this type of narration, the reader only has access to the information to which the chosen character, in this case Judith, has access, and the telling of the tale revolves around her perspective, which is why it is called "third person" or "limited." Nevertheless, while emphasis is given to the chosen character from whose perspective the tale is presented, there is still a degree of mediation from a narrator who is telling us what that character sees, does, and knows. In other words, this type of telling consists of a narrative voice filtering the story through the perspective of a third party.

A very special kind of narrating, which can be done in either first person or third person, is "stream-of-consciousness." As the name suggests, the content of this technique is limited to the thoughts running through a character's mind. It is sometimes called "interior monologue" for that reason. Not surprisingly, because it is a representation or re-creation of someone's thoughts, which are usually quite disorganized and jump from topic to topic, the logical order is frequently disrupted and difficult to follow.

The choice of a narrative voice has major repercussions in terms of both the style and the content of the narration. Just as in real life, different narrators construct significantly different versions of the same basic tale. For example, if a person were to narrate the tale of an experience in which s/he felt victimized, that person would structure the events, explanations, and vocabulary choices in a way designed to induce the reader to perceive him/her as a victim and to empathize with his/her situation. A first person or third person narrator would be an effective way to do this, but other types could also be manipulated toward that end by the way in which the events are presented and the vocabulary choices.

The attitude taken by the narrator in the telling of a tale is called the tone. For the purposes of literary analysis, tone is generally described through carefully chosen adjectives, for example, "defiant," "sarcastic,"

"nostalgic," which identify the position the narrative voice takes towards the subject matter. Any given situation can be presented in radically different manners—for example, sympathetically, derisively, or angrily—depending upon how it is viewed by the narrator and the desired impact on the reader. The tone is rarely explicit, but rather must be inferred from how the subject matter is handled by the narrator. Tone may also be examined in terms of the feeling the narrator seems to have towards the readers of the literary text, such as "patronizing," "pleading," or "conspiratorial."

Tone is closely related to yet another basic element of narrative, atmosphere, which is the general mood established in the literary text. This is usually most apparent in the vocabulary choices the narrator makes. For example, a story in which vocabulary relating to darkness, fear, and danger predominates will create a somber, even ominous, atmosphere, while a story with many references to sunlight, bright colors, laughter and springtime will create a happy, or perhaps hopeful, atmosphere. Setting and atmosphere are usually closely intertwined and can be manipulated to make evident the tone.

Yet another important aspect of the telling of a tale is its style. Style is the name given to the way in which the narrative voice expresses itself. It includes technical elements such as sentence length and syntax, language register, paragraph length, and punctuation. Sociolinguists have demonstrated over and over again that how a person structures and verbalizes his/her thoughts not only unconsciously reveals a great deal of information about the speaker, but also influences the impact on the listener. For example, a story told in very ornate, multisyllabic vocabulary, long, complex sentences, and multiple references to classical mythology suggests a very educated narrator whose credibility might be better than that of a narrator who tells a story full of nonstandard grammatical structures, short, unfinished sentences, and trite vocabulary. Style also encompasses what is frequently referred to as "literary language": the conscientious employment of figurative language, rhythm, imagery, and other linguistic devices used to enhance aesthetic enjoyment and open up the text to multiple meanings.

All of the above aspects lead to a final consideration in the telling of a story: purpose. It seems that because we see narrative as both a means of expression and a means of communication, there is a tendency to assume

that every narrative has a purpose. If that purpose is perceived as teaching some sort of lesson or serving as an illustration of an ethical point, we say the narrative is didactic. However, the purpose may be as uncomplicated as simple entertainment or aesthetic pleasure. In a formalistic approach, purpose is discussed in terms of the "single effect" or intended impact on the reader. In many critical approaches to literature, it is discussed in terms of "theme," or controlling idea. In very traditional criticism, it is sometimes even called "the meaning" of the literary text.

Meaning, however, can never be fixed or static, as more contemporary theories of literary criticism readily acknowledge. To understand this more fully, let's look at the third major element of narrative: the reader.

The Reader

As stated earlier, each critical approach to literature has its own way of focusing on a text by means of the elements it chooses to emphasize and the questions it chooses to ask. It therefore comes as no surprise that different approaches arrive at different conclusions in terms of the meanings a text might have. The very plurality of approaches guarantees a corresponding multiplicity of potential meanings. Although traditional narrative theories give little or no importance to the reader, except as an essentially passive receiver of the work, contemporary narrative theories tend to support the idea that a literary text cannot be considered complete without the participation of the reader. Some even go so far as to consider the reader a co-author of the text.

The logic at work behind these premises which acknowledge the crucial role of the reader is that language is a dynamic system, which means that linguistic meaning can never be fixed or absolute. For example, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which traces word etymologies, has determined that the word "nice" was once a synonym for "shy," "coy," and "ignorant," radically different meanings from its present day significance. In addition, all of us can easily recall an ample number of instances in which something which we said was understood in a significantly different manner from that which we intended. Because language is always open both to changes in conventional meanings and to interpretation, meaning cannot be fixed.

This is not to say that a story may "mean" absolutely anything, but rather that language, as communication theories remind us, is a medium which requires input from both the sender (in this case, the narrator) and the receiver (the reader). Thus, meaning is what the reader constructs from the building blocks the story provides. While the author surely has both a purpose and a meaning in mind when creating the original text, it is impossible to know what they might have been, unless the author has explicitly stated it at some point. The reader may be inclined to hypothesize concerning the author's, or even the narrator's, intended meaning, but in the final analysis, it is ultimately the reader who ascribes meaning to the text. This is what not only allows a multiplicity of potential meanings for the text, but actually makes them inevitable.

Thus, the reader's role is a crucial one in the reading process. There are many factors which can and do affect that process. Each reader brings to the text a plethora of individual input in the form of past experiences, personality, socially learned norms, patterns, mentalities, and personal ethics, among other factors, all of which contribute to the significance ascribed to a text. Academic formation is another important factor affecting the reading process. For example, literature classes are one way in which we are taught to read certain kinds of writing in special ways, as well as to think analytically. Personal conditions such as age, gender, social class, religion, and so forth, may also be factors in constructing meaning. Each reader brings both a personal and a socialized perspective to the reading of a text which influences the significance s/he ascribes to it (the way in which the text is understood) and the impact the text has on her/him.

These, then, are the basic components of narrative. Understanding the major elements of narrative—the tale, the telling, and the reader—serves as a foundation for reading, analyzing, appreciating, and enjoying the stories of our lives in all their many forms.

Notes on the Authors

Kari Meyers Skredsvig, co-author of *The Perceptive Process: An Introductory Guide to Literary Criticism*, is a native of Minnesota, U.S.A., and a graduate of the University of Minnesota with a B.A. in English and Spanish literature. A resident of Costa Rica since 1970, she earned *Licenciatura* and M.A. degrees in English literature from the University of Costa Rica, where she did research, taught as a full professor of the School of Modern Languages, and coordinated the M.A. Program in English Literature until her retirement in 2002.

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The Telling and the Tale initiates readers into the world of literary narrative. This text examines fundamental questions of literary narrative as it delves into its principal areas. What is fiction? What are the roles of the author and the reader? How do basic narrative elements interact? How does length affect the content and the reader? What is the importance of the teller and teller's effect on the tale itself and on the reader? How does the very concept of "story" constitute a primary mode of knowledge and communication? In searching for answers to these questions, this text guides readers through basic narrative aspects in order to familiarize them with the fundamental elements found in all types of prose narratives, followed by more detailed explorations of basic types of short, contemporary prose narrative: short story, novella, short-short story, and creative nonfiction. It offers ample illustrations, a glossary and a brief guide to written responses to narrative to help readers understand the art and science of writing and analyzing narrative. In so doing, it encourages students to articulate and defend personal views. Thus, this guide functions as an introduction to understanding and enjoying the rich world of short, creative prose.

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