

I-Narration: Revealing Narrator's Selfhood

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The notion that a narrative literary text can be interpreted as an act of communication seems to be firmly established nowadays. The task of constructing a typology of narrative texts on the basis of this parallelism, one of the most important tasks of semiotics, has been successfully carried out.

According to the narrative mode – the set of methods that the author of a literary text uses to relate the plot to the addressee – different types of texts can be distinguished, the most common being the first- and third-person modes of narration.

The *first-person narrative* is used as a means to directly communicate the internal – and otherwise invisible – thoughts of the narrator to the reader.

The *third-person narration* can be *objective* and *subjective*. The former uses a narrator who tells a story without conveying the characters' thoughts or feelings, and giving an impartial point of view instead. Besides fiction, this mode of narration, sometimes described as a “fly on the wall” or “camera lens” approach (since it can only record the observable actions) is commonly made use of by newspaper articles, biographical documents, and scientific journals.

In the *third-person subjective narrative* mode, also called the “over the shoulder” perspective, the narrator, almost always the protagonist, describes only the events perceived by a character.

In this article we are going to discuss the correlation between the first- and third-person narrative modes and the semantics of the pronoun “I” as opposed to that of the third-person pronoun. Jerome David Salinger's short story *For Esmé – with Love and Squalor*, one of the most brilliant short stories in world literature, has served as material for our analysis since it contains I-narrative and he-narrative alternating with each other, and the variation of the narrative modes proves to be critical for its poetics and philosophy.

While it is obvious that the first- and third-person objective narrations differ fundamentally, the first-person mode of narration seems close to the third-person subjective narration, since both relate the subject's inner thoughts and feelings. However, as we will see, there is an important difference between these two types of story-telling. As Paul Ricoeur says, “When the state of consciousness is ascribed to oneself, it is *felt*, when it is ascribed to another, it is *observed*” (Ricoeur 2008:58). Therefore, even when the subject's perception is related, provided that this is done in the third person, it is not *felt* (as it would be the case with an I-narrator), it is *observed*.

Starting with Émile Benveniste, the first-person pronoun has been characterized as presenting its referent as a “subject”, thus “bringing out subjectivity in language”: “The ‘subjectivity’ we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to post himself as ‘subject’.[...] ‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego’” (Benveniste 1974:287).

Olga Seliverstova introduced a dimension of individualization which is similar to Benveniste's approach: “The meaning of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’ contains information that the participant of the situation is characterized as an individuality, a personality,

while the features of this individuality remain unrevealed” (Seliverstova 1988:33). The individualized description of the referent does not present the individual as a member of a certain class, but as a totality of his/her personal characteristics. In his book “Oneself as Another”, Ricoeur states: “On the whole, individualization can be characterized as a process, opposite to the process of classification, which rejects singularities in favour of a notion” (Ricoeur 2008:45). Logicians and semanticists combine under the general term of *operation of individualization* such diverse operations as definite descriptions – “the first man to walk on the Moon”, “the inventor of printing”, proper names – “Socrates”, “Paris”, “Moon”, and shifters – “I”, “you”, “this”, “here”, “now”. Ricoeur suggests that the problem of personal identity is the point of intersection between two basic meanings. This notion implies that two things are correlated: “...identity is seen, on the one hand, as *sameness* (Latin: *idem*, German: *Gleichheit*), on the other hand, as *selfhood* (Latin: *ipse*, German: *Selbstheit*)” (Ricoeur 2008:145).

We will examine the development of the narrator’s identity in the story *For Esme – with Love and Squalor* in terms of the category of selfhood. We will try to show that by switching from the pronoun “I” to “he”, the author presents the narrator as someone who has lost his sense of selfhood.

J.D. Salinger’s short story *For Esme – with Love and Squalor* was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1950, and was included in Salinger’s anthology *Nine Stories* two years later. The story was referred to by Salinger’s biographer Paul Alexander as a “minor masterpiece,” and *Time* has called it “the warmest and best of the *Nine Stories*.”

If we look at the sheer facts of this story, it is very simple. According to the mode of narration, the text can roughly be divided into three parts. The first contains I-narration in which the narrator is assumed to be writing at the present moment, as if talking to the reader. In it we are told that the narrator has received an invitation to Esmé’s wedding, and that after deciding that he cannot go, he makes up his mind to write down some notes for her and the groom.

The second part also contains I-narration, only this time the narrator is transferred to a period prior to the narrative time of the first part. The events related are as follows: the story-teller, then an American soldier, is in a secret training program in England, and before being sent into combat, he meets a rather extraordinary girl, thirteen-year-old Esmé and her five-year-old brother Charles. He chats with Esmé about the war, her deceased parents, and her plans for the future. They part after exchanging addresses, and Esmé wishes him luck in the war.

The last part is in a third-person narrative mode: some time later, Sergeant X (this is how the narrator now refers to himself) is recovering from the war; he is close to a nervous breakdown, and does not seem to be coping with reality. His friend tries to talk him out of his depression but fails to do that. Only after reading a letter from Esmé, does X feel pacified; he eventually is able to relax – he falls asleep with a feeling that he will be able to recuperate.

There are styles of writing in which I-narration and he-narration do not differ significantly as regards the choice of words denoting properties and actions characterizing the subject of consciousness. There are yet other styles in which there is a most important difference

between things that are *performed* by the subject of consciousness and those which are *perceived* by him/her. The short story under consideration belongs to the latter category.

I-narration is comparable to a dialogue in which the narrator is the addresser/speaker and the potential reader is the addressee/hearer. This being the case, speech is organized so that in this or that way there is reference to the main parameters of the act of speech – the speaker, the hearer, the place and the time of speaking, and the message itself.

In the introductory part, the I-narration is similar to a dialogue between the writer and the potential reader. Moreover, the narrator does not conceal the fact that he is going to write something to be read later on. In other words, there is an open device of “metanarration” – narration about narration. Who is the text intended for? First of all, it is addressed to Esmé, to whom the story is dedicated:

[Esmé]: “I’d be extremely flattered if you’d write a story exclusively for me sometime. I’m an avid reader.”
I told her I certainly would, if I could.
[Esmé]: “...I prefer stories about squalor.”
“About what?” I said, leaning forward. [Esmé]: “Squalor. I’m extremely interested in squalor. (p.100)

The second addressee is Esmé’s bridegroom: “If my notes should cause the groom, whom I haven’t met, an uneasy moment or two, so much the better”. However, these notes are not intended exclusively for those characters – there exists an extratextual addressee, namely the reader of the story.

The next part of the text contains reference to the events that took place six years before the story was written:

In April of 1944, I was among some sixty American enlisted men who took a rather specialized Invasion training course, directed by British Intelligence, in Devon, England. And as I look back, it seems to me that we were fairly unique, the sixty of us, in that there wasn’t one good mixer in the bunch. We were all essentially letter-writing types, and when we spoke to each other out of the line of duty, it was usually to ask somebody if he had any ink he wasn’t using. (p.88)

Similarly to “I”, the pronoun “we” characterizes its referent as an individual, a personality. It is a well-known fact that “we” is not the plural of “I”: since the individual is unique, he/she cannot be pluralized. As John Lyons, says, “we” does not refer to “I” in the same way as “boys” refer to “boy”, or “cows” refer to “cow”. “We” should be understood as “I plus one or more persons”, and these other people can include or exclude the hearer (Lyons 1972:293). This pronoun shows that there exists a kind of in-group around the speaker, and the members of the group are of the speaker’s type. Consequently, the concept of individualization is preserved, and the resulting tone of narration is intimate.

In the third part Salinger shifts to he-narration:

This is the squalid, or moving part of the story, and the scene changes. The people change, too. I'm still around, but from here on in, for reasons I'm not at liberty to disclose, I've disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me.

It was about ten-thirty at night in Gaufurt, Bavaria, several weeks after V-E Day. Staff Sergeant X was in his room on the second floor of the civilian home in which he and nine other American soldiers had been quartered, even before the armistice. (p.103)

Not only does the third person pronoun replace “I” in this part, but the narrator is given an obviously anonymous status, and is referred to as “Sergeant X”. The deictic “I” transforms into anaphoric “he”, and “he” stands for “Sergeant X”. The noun “sergeant” puts him in a certain class, and “X” deprives him of his individual name.

As mentioned above, individualization is realized not only through the personal pronoun “I”, but also by means of proper names. According to Ricoeur, “The advantage of proper names, which are given to people, depends on their further roles – to confirm the identity as well as the *sameness-ipse* of these people. [...] their role is to denote one individual – excluding all the others from the class being analyzed” (Ricoeur 2008:47). So, by giving the character a sign as a name, Salinger openly declares the writing method of detachment from the narrator’s ego. Besides, instead of the individualizing pronoun “we”, he uses the collective noun “people”: the young man is now one of many soldiers, impersonal figures frustrated by the war:

But he was a young man who had not come through the war with all his faculties intact,.... (p.104)

By using the third-person pronoun (instead of “I”), a common noun and the depersonalizing “X” (instead of the proper name), Salinger shows the splitting of the young man’s identity into someone who is feeling and into another one who is watching the suffering person, as if at a distance.

The use of the third-person narrative mode in this part is justified by yet another important circumstance. Only by recounting the situation as an observable one, can the narrator dwell on the body language of the character, and describe another person’s reaction to it (on body language in the story see Corte 1997:105). In the story’s third part, Corporal Clay repeatedly draws attention to the symptoms of Sergeant X’s nervous condition while the two are talking:

Undarkened, Clay watched X trying to get a cigarette lit. “Jesus,” he said, with spectator’s enthusiasm, “you oughta see your goddam hands. Boy, have you got the shakes. Ya know that?”
X got his cigarette lit, nodded, and said Clay had a real eye for detail. (p.107)

Thus, the detachment from the personality of the character makes it possible to speak about the outside signs of his inner condition, only possible in the third-person narrative mode.

Finally, the last part of the he-narration has several linguistic elements suggesting return to I-narration, which in its turn signals the possible revival of the young man's psychological completeness. First, the young man is not "X" any more, because by addressing Esmé by her name, he regains his own name – in the world where the girl was called "Esmé", the narrator also had a name. Second, by using the second-person pronoun to address Esmé, the narrator naturally takes up the position of the speaker denoted by the first person pronoun, which means that he is getting back the ability of referring to himself as a personality. And lastly, there is a direct statement that he is regaining spiritual health, becoming a "man with all his faculties intact".

To sum up, the alternating techniques in Salinger's story show the interrelation between the semantics of personal pronouns, and the poetics of the given literary text. The egocentric "I" and "we" make the narrator's personality visible. The use of the third-person narration demonstrates loss of sense of selfhood. The final sentence, in which the personal pronoun "you" is employed, prepares return to the individually characterized narrator.

References:

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Առաջին դեմքով գրված պատում՝ պատմողի ինքնության բացահայտումը

Առաջին և երրորդ դեմքով գրված պատումը տարբեր ձևով է դրսևորում պատմողի ինքնությունը: Եթե առաջին դեպքում պատմողը ներկայանում է որպես անհատականություն, ապա երկրորդի պարագայում նրա անհատականությունը մնում է ստվերում: Այդ տարբերության հիմքում ընկած են անձնական դերանունների իմաստաբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Նույն տեքստում երկու պատումների փոփոխվող տեխնիկան ստեղծում է տվյալ կերպարի բարդ հոգեբանական պատկեր: