

The Wright Word – by Ray

As I see it ...

Hi. Welcome back! I hope you've all had a wonderful summer.

I didn't get as much writing done as I'd planned (When do we ever?), because I was busy (finally) putting up my own website. But I did work up the courage to discuss a kind of complicated subject. Here goes:

We've all read discussions — and pondered on — *Narrator Point Of View* issues. First-person, Second-Person, Third-Person, Omniscient, Limited Omniscient, on and on.

I think we can agree that Third-Person Omniscient is probably the most common (this is the one we use when telling fairy tales to children). But is it that simple? Take a look at this:

The inside of the church was a welcome relief from the summer heat outside. He sat in solitude, smelling the sweet floral scent of incense. Along the walls, dimly illuminated by banks of votive candles, statues of Saints kept a protective vigil. The Nave, where he sat, was warmed by the glow of sunlight from the Rose Window behind the High Altar.

Now, look at this:

The inside of the church was abandoned — cold, dank. Statues of long-dead Saints, partly revealed by rows of timid candles, glowered like gargoyles in the gloom that lurked along the walls. Light from the Rose Window behind the High Altar only served to highlight the wisps of cloying incense smoke that hung in the air like the pall from a funeral pyre.

Obviously, these are both descriptions of the same place. Here are “the facts”:

The inside of the church was dim, cool and unoccupied. It was illuminated by the light from a window, and flickering candles. Statues stood against the wall. He could smell incense.

But the first two are very different in ‘color.’ Why did the writer choose one over the other? Why did he choose either?

Well, obviously, the narrator is portraying a mood, an *impression*. But wait! I thought the narrator was Third-Person Omniscient. Isn't he supposed to be objective

— “above the fray?” Whose mood is this? Whose impression? These are presented as objective “facts.”

The narrator has adopted the CHARACTER'S perceptions.

In the process, the writer has transformed this brief description of a location into an exposition on the inner state of his character. In addition, he has set the mood and expectations of what is to follow.

Objectively, the emptiness is neither “solitude” nor “abandonment.” It is simply the absence of other people. The temperature, the statues, the incense, the light, are only neutral things. It is the character's perception that colors them: The emptiness becomes “solitude” or “desertion.” The temperature is “a relief” vs. “dank.” The statues “protect” or “glower.” The incense is either “sweet” or “cloying.” The sunlight either “warms the room” or “highlights the ... pall from a funeral pyre.”

It is all “in the eye of the beholder.” And the beholder is not the narrator; it is the character!

Here's another example (Charles is Jessica Nelson's lover. Ronnie is the 7-year-old who lives next door.):

The first thing Charles saw as he entered the kitchen was Jess, standing over the stove.

as opposed to:

When Ronnie went in, Mrs. Nelson was standing over the stove.

The narrator has adopted the relationship of the characters. To Charles, she is “Jess”; to Ronnie, “Mrs. Nelson.” In doing this, the writer has instantly established their relationship: Charles and Jessica are intimate peers. Ronnie is a little boy who is respectful of his elders.

Not bad for a single sentence!

Granted, things can get complicated when multiple characters are interacting, and which character's perception to adopt is a matter of taste and skill. The reader can easily get confused by the narrator's jumping around too much. But, as an omniscient narrator, you are God, and “with much power comes much responsibility!”

Using this technique is one of the great joys of writing narrative fiction. It is often called *Impressionism* — although if you try to research it, you will no doubt end up confused and discouraged. The “experts” don't seem to agree on what to call it.

I call it a “damned fine idea!” —rjm—