

Telling More Than You Should: Narrative, Narratology, and Character Narration

Robert LeBlanc- University of Lethbridge

“Now remember,” Ms. Jolie said to the puzzled faces of her twelfth-grade ELA students, “You’re writing this in the voice of Blanche DuBois. This is her diary you’re imagining. So, you’ll have to make up what she’s saying and thinking. But also, be sure to include lots of quotes from the play. And be sure to show me you understand the character.”

Liya chewed her pencil, eyebrow raised. Aaron and Ahmed shrugged at one another from across the room. Corey slowly pulled the play from his bag and furrowed his brow (all names are pseudonyms). I could see they had questions.

For the last three weeks, students had been wrestling with the big ideas of Tennessee Williams’ 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Observing from the back of the room as a researcher, it struck me that the challenge of their task was a challenge of *narratology*. Narratology is a discipline concerned with the structure and elements of a story—narrators, perspectives, representations of time, “the mechanisms of the text” (Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 8)—as well as their effects on readers. It’s from narratology that we get familiar terms like “unreliable narrator,” “flat and round characters” and “point of view.” When we pay attention to the forms stories take and to the different functions those forms take on, we’re doing the work of a narratologist. As I peered over the shoulders of student writers, I wondered: how would they sort out these various elements in crafting their first-person narratives?

By asking students to embody, think, and write in different voices, we help them consider different perspectives. While we have to caution students against the potential for stereotypes or mockery, these genres can help students break away from singular or stale interpretations of

characters. Teachers can use first-person narrations to “complement and ultimately enrich formal analysis” (Knoeller 42), because they require purposeful re-reading and close attention to narrative perspective.

Ms. Jolie asked students to construct an “imaginative response”: writing creatively “in a character’s voice” (Knoeller 44) to explore the literature from inside the mind of a different person. Pressured by state and provincial exams, as well as long histories of narrowed writing instruction in high schools, teachers often overlook imaginative writing to privilege the formal analytic essay. However, many scholars (Knoeller; LeBlanc; Medina and Campano; Nichols et al.) have advocated for a broader and more creative range of writing genres and responses to literature. Imaginative responses can provide complexity to students’ understandings of texts and characters.

Tensions of Character Narration

But genres of imaginative response to literature—diary entries, rewritten endings, new narratives from the perspective of peripheral characters—are also about *craft*. A critical tenet of narratology is that authors make narrative choices that determine how the story plays out. Authors use different literary *techniques* to draw readers into the world and the perspectives of characters such as Blanche DuBois. Consequently, first-person stories where the narrator is a character, what narratologists refer to as “character narration” (Phelan, *Living* 214), are filled with tensions and choices for authors.

In this article, I invite teachers to consider how the tools of narratology (see Table 1) can support students in reading and writing *character narration*: stories that ask them to get inside the hearts and minds of literary characters. Focusing on the *craft* of narrative—both in their

reading of literature and their imaginative responses to it—helps students understand the choices authors make. Looking closely at the imagined diary entries of the students in Ms. Jolie’s classroom, I consider one pressing demand put on authors in crafting character narratives: how much information to share from the perspective of the narrator and how much to withhold to avoid breaking the story frame. This is an important demand when considering the craft of exposition, a key pillar of narrative.

The narratologist James Phelan calls this dilemma the tension between the Narrator Function and the Disclosure Function (“Implausibilities”). Writing *as* a character inside the lived world of the text in a way that feels like a real person is the Narrative Function; demonstrating to the reader knowledge about the world of the story is the Disclosure Function. Authors writing character narration are simultaneously pulled between these two dynamics, and understanding them can help teachers support writers in their narrative craft.

For ELA teachers, the tools of narratology are useful to (1) help us see the writing strategies students use to construct first-person narrative, and (2) promote a better understanding of the techniques used to create texts in the voices of different narrators and characters. Brian Evenson argues that “[n]arrative theory gives aspiring writers a terminology that allows them to understand how contemporary writers create particular narrative effects. This understanding in turn allows student writers to use the techniques that bring about these effects in their own fiction” (71). By focusing on narrative techniques in ELA classrooms, we help students see that writing is about making choices—selecting the strategies and resources of narrative to accomplish different purposes.

<Insert Table 1 (terms) about here.>

Table 1. Key Narratology Terms

Literary Term	Definition
Character Narration	A story where a character is also the narrator
Mimetic	An imitation of the real world or a real person—the process by which a story or a character mirrors reality
Narrator Function	The needs of the narrator to communicate to the narratee in the world of the story
Disclosure Function	The needs of the author to communicate key details of the story to the reader through the narrator
Redundant Telling	A narrator sharing information with a narratee which the narratee already knows
Paralepsis	A character narrator sharing information which, in the world of the story and the logic of the narrative, they should not be able to know (i.e., describing a scene for which they weren't present or sharing the internal thoughts of another character)

Tools for Understanding Character Narration

Every work of character narration is a story told *to* someone: a narrator (the teller) reporting something to a narratee—“the often-invisible character in a text to whom the narrator talks, writes, or references” (Thein and Sulzer 48). Phelan describes narration as “the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose” (*Narrative* 8). Sometimes the narrator is sharing their story with a specific locatable narratee. For example, in the novel *The Remains of the Day*, the character Stevens writes letters to a fellow butler, reporting on the events of his journey across England; it is in his telling and through his perspective that the story unfolds for the reader. In other novels, such as *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the

narrators share a story to a generic “unnamed reader” narratee, and we can only speculate to whom they are telling their stories. In the science fiction novel *Z for Zachariah*, the character Ann Burden doubles as narrator and narratee, writing diary entries to herself in a post-apocalyptic world. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, an unnamed first-person narrator tells the story—to an unnamed narratee—of the character Marlow telling his story to the crew of a ship (of which the unnamed narrator is a member). Each of these works of fiction demonstrates the complicated dynamics of author, narrator, and narratee in any story, which writers must sort out in their prose (see Table 2).

For an author, using character narration has a number of advantages. It limits the perspective of the reader, asking them to consider events and other characters through the storytelling voice of the narrator. It brings to the fore questions of reliability and the subjectivity of stories. Finally, character narration forces readers to make ethical decisions: if we believe a narrator, if we empathize with them, if we agree with their worldview. For these reasons, character narration can be a potent writing form for students.

Table 2. Novels Using Character Narration

Title	Author	Narrator	Narratee
<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	F. Scott Fitzgerald	Nick Carraway	Unnamed reader
<i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i>	Stephen Chbosky	Charlie	“Dear friend”
<i>The Remains of the Day</i>	Kazuo Ishiguro	Stevens	Fellow butler
<i>The Color Purple</i>	Alice Walker	Celie and Nettie	God
<i>Z for Zachariah</i>	Robert O’Brien	Ann Burden	Ann Burden
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Joseph Conrad	Charles Marlow→ Unnamed Narrator	Fellow sailors→ Unnamed reader

Narrative and Disclosure Functions

But character narration also puts authors into a bind. Writing from the perspective of a character who is inside the story means the narration is constrained by conventions. For example, a first-person character narrator typically shouldn't know the internal thoughts and feelings of another character (unless they're God or have superpowers). They shouldn't be able to report accurately on an event for which they were not present. When this does happen, it breaks the mimetic frame, as the story no longer seems to mirror reality. Narratologists call this "paralepsis" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse*): characters telling more than they should. Equally, character narrators shouldn't be sharing information that their audience already knows. For example, it would break convention for a character to tell her own sister her given name ("Stella, my name is Blanche") or for someone writing a diary entry to tell themselves their hometown ("I grew up in Laurel, Mississippi"). In the world of the story, the narratee knows this information. Narratologists call this "redundant telling" (Phelan, *Living* 11). These sorts of strains to the mimetic frame are not uncommon, however. In the pages of a well-crafted novel like *The Great Gatsby*, they happen so smoothly that we may not even notice (Phelan, "Implausibilities"). In other stories, these moments of *telling more than you should* pull us as readers out of the world of the narrative—we can see the clunky machinery of the text at work.

Phelan refers to this disjuncture as the dynamic between the Narrator Function and the Disclosure Function. The Narrator Function is concerned with the world of the story, keeping up the illusion of the narrative as a tale told by a specific narrator to a specific narratee (for example, Stevens writing to his fellow butler in *The Remains of the Day*). The Disclosure Function is the author's need to communicate critical details about the story to the reader—to share information about character, setting, or plot details even though some of this information

may be redundant inside the world of the story. Here we might think of a Bond villain saying to his henchmen, “Of course, you already know my secret plan to rule the world” before narrating his secret plan to rule the world. To communicate necessary information to readers, authors might foreground the Disclosure Function over the Narrative Function.

These two “telling functions” (Phelan, *Living* 214) are continually in tension with each other. Erring too much on the side of the Narrator Function may leave the reader in the dark about key plot and character details. Erring too much on the side of the Disclosure Function may mean abandoning the mimetic frame of character narration so that it no longer sounds like a real story told by a real person. Consequently, character narration is the “art of indirection” because the author must “use the narrator to communicate with the authorial audience” while “the narrator is unaware of that audience” (Phelan, *Living* 215). One text communicates simultaneously with two different audiences—the narrator communicates with the narratee (inside the story), and the author communicates with the reader (outside the story).

It was this tricky balance between the Narrator Function and the Disclosure Function that Ms. Jolie tacitly asked students to maintain in the diary assignment—to invent the words of Blanche DuBois and craft them in a first-person character narration, but also to demonstrate understanding of the text and the character. The student/author, consequently, had a tall task: to use Blanche, narrating to herself in her diary, to communicate with their teacher, the reader of the text. Ms. Jolie gave little explicit instruction about the construction of the imagined diary—simply that the students use direct quotes from the play and that the entry reflect Blanche’s thoughts and state of mind. Looking at their diary entries, then, allows us to understand students’ nascent understandings of narratology and to find places where we might mobilize those understandings for further classroom learning.

Inside the Classroom: Students' Strategies for Character Narration

Ms. Jolie's class spent four weeks studying *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The play is set in the French Quarter of 1940s New Orleans and follows Blanche DuBois, a down-on-her-luck "Southern Belle" from Mississippi and her descent into madness after moving into the tenement of her sister Stella and her violent, scheming brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. Ms. Jolie's diary writing assignment took place immediately after the class finished reading scenes that narrate the evening of Blanche's birthday—a confrontation between Blanche and Stanley over her scandalous past, and then another confrontation between Blanche and her suitor Mitch. Students were invited to write diary entries from the perspective of Blanche, as though she sat down after the night's tumultuous events.

Examining students' diary entries provides insights into their narrative craft. Three different narrative strategies came to the fore: 1) refusing the Narrator Function, 2) redundant telling, and 3) double-voiced discourse. Each strategy demonstrates the inherent tension in walking the line between the Narrator and the Disclosure Function and the challenge of writing character narration in a classroom for a teacher audience.

Refusing the Narrator Function

One narrative strategy was to simply refuse the fiction of character narration. Some students, unwilling to strike the tricky balance between the Narrator and Disclosure Function, broke the mimetic frame completely. Rather than creating character narrative, they wrote descriptive prose. For example, Aaron crafted his diary entry in the third person, writing a character sketch with an interpretive commentary:

In the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* one of the main characters is a woman named Blanche Dubois and she is not a normal person. She's out of place both mentally and temporally she is living in the wrong time [...] Blanche is lost, confused, conflicted.

Ahmed, in a similar style, incorporated quotes from the play (as per the assignment), alongside his own analytic prose (still in the third-person):

“I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I want to try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth. And it that's sinful, then let me be damned for it!” This quote tells everything about Blanche it tells that she does not always tell the truth, hides her personal life and acts like she is rich.

Phelan argues that when the Narrator Function and the Disclosure Function come into conflict, the Disclosure Function usually prevails (*Living*)—authors would rather give the reader necessary information than stick to the limitations of character narration. For student authors like Aaron and Ahmed, the Disclosure Function became the only function in their writing, as the ruse of character narration was abandoned in service of demonstrating to their teacher their knowledge of the text and its central character. Students feeling the pressure of the genre and the pressure of forthcoming grading may take this route when confronted with imaginative writing tasks: erring on the side of the Disclosure Function to be sure the teacher sees what they know about the literary work. This is an argument for more clarity about the craft of writing character narration. One strategy would be to ask students to translate their work, sentence-by-sentence, between their abstract analytic prose and first-person narrative using a two-column graphic organizer. This approach allows students to see how the core of their writing—demonstrating literary understanding for the teacher—can be rewritten for a new genre in a new voice.

Redundant Telling

Other students elected to maintain the Narrator Function but foreground the Disclosure Function. In doing so, they included a good deal of redundant telling. Examples of redundant telling typically came in the opening lines of the diary entry: setting the context for the teacher/reader by orienting them to the time and the place of the literature. Here, the Disclosure Function masqueraded as the Narrator Function, with the narrator Blanche writing to herself (the narratee) while simultaneously sharing key details about the plot and setting of the play with the reader: “I came here in June and it’s been three months and it hasn’t been the greatest time because Stanley has it out for me” (Corey) or “The only reason I came to New Orleans was to visit my little sister” (Liya). At other times, students incorporated redundant telling by including moments of character narration where Blanche told herself what she did that day or made declaratory statements about herself: “Today is my birthday and it’s the day that filthy animal Stanley decided that he could just kick me out. I rushed out of the house and came back in the evening” (Li Jie) or “I always take a bath to calm my nerves” (Liya).

These examples may not initially strike us as redundant telling—we might imagine plausible reasons why Blanche is telling herself what month she arrived in New Orleans or that she enjoys baths. Phelan (“Implausibilities”) makes the point that as readers, we’re prone to overlook examples of redundant telling because they add value to our experience of the text. When redundant telling enhances our reading of the story by providing important information, we may not even notice the character narration set-up has been strained. Readers, Phelan suggests, are willing to make allowances for these moments because “we are so dependent on narrators for their visions of narrative worlds” (*Living*, 204). Redundant telling is not always a mistake. It is a technique authors can use to great effect.

In Ms. Jolie's class, student authors, much like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Kazuo Ishiguro, threaded the needle between the Disclosure and Narrator Function. Using their prose as exemplars could be valuable to introduce the notion of redundant telling to the whole class. These student writing samples can be particularly powerful when paired with other instances of telling more than you should (for example, Chapter 8 of *The Great Gatsby*) or those which focus on the challenges of realistic exposition—how to share details about the story without breaking the mimetic frame, which are often notable in the opening lines and paragraphs of a story. In my classroom, I have used the first chapter of Chandler's detective story *The Long Goodbye*, which is a master class in immersing readers in a world: establishing setting, theme, central characters, and narrator tone in just a few short pages.

Double-Voiced Discourse

Some students took advantage of the character narration genre to include what Bakhtin calls "double-voiced" discourse (40). These are moments when a sentence is meant to be heard as both the voice of the narrator and the voice of the author: a character speaking and the author making commentary on the speaker in the same act. For example, the author may be parodying the character narrator or undermining their reliability through that character's own dialogue and narration.

In Ms. Jolie's classroom, several critical themes about *Streetcar* built up over weeks of conversation. One major point of discussion was that Blanche was oblivious to her faults—she was unable to see her pattern of falling, over and over again, for the wrong men (her departed husband, the paperboy, her suitor Mitch). As the character narrator in the diary assignment, Blanche and the class's interpretation of her obliviousness made her ripe for double-voiced

discourse. Several students made this a part of their diary entries, slyly commenting on the character in-and-through Blanche's voice: "I've experienced a lot of different kinds of men in my life, but I never thought I'd encounter a man like Stanley in my life. He is truly an animal, I can always tell when I see one it is a gift of mine" (Liya) or "Such a flawless woman like me living in a poor home makes me look bad. These darn apes bossing me around, drinking and playing poker. It is oh so terrible" (Jonathan).

When we as readers hear Blanche's claim that she has a "gift" for telling who is a bad man or that she is a "flawless woman," we simultaneously hear the voice of Blanche and the student authors commenting on her character. In these instances, character narration is a moment of collusion between the author and the reader, going on behind the back of the character. The author and reader, who know more than the narrator of the story, can see the irony. Double-voiced discourse is an affordance of character narration, and savvy writers use this technique to creative ends. Students can be introduced to double-voiced discourse, first through their classmates' prose and then through other examples of irony (either in the focal text or from elsewhere). I have found a simple three-column chart to be most useful—asking "What does the narrator say?"; "What do I know about the narrator?"; and "What does the author want me to know about the narrator?"—in showing students how writers comment on characters through their characters' voices.

<Insert sidebar ("Teaching Students") about here.>

Using Narratology to Advance Student Writers

Character narration asks us to empathize and think with others by writing in and through their voices. But character narration is only accomplished through narrative techniques and by working through narrative tensions. Authors have to make choices about what narrative strategies to use and what effect they may have on the reader.

In this article, I offer teachers the concepts of narratology as a way of looking at students reading and writing first-person stories and foregrounding the craft of producing these. Where educators have urged us to include more imaginative writing in our classrooms to speak and learn through different characters' voices, a focus on the techniques of this sort of writing is vital (Knoeller; LeBlanc; Medina and Campano; Nichols et al.).

For teachers, this can mean putting analytic pressure on familiar texts to discuss moments when authors break the mimetic frame or to understand why authors may wish to foreground the Disclosure Function over the Narrative Function. We can also make character narration an act of creative license for writers, for example, inviting students to write small narratives using peripheral characters from focal texts that purposefully break the mimetic frame (such as addressing the reader directly or commenting on themselves as characters in a story). Inviting students to imaginatively respond to literature is a step toward cultivating empathy and understanding of others. Focusing on the *narrative craft* by which authors construct imaginative response is the next step. By making these writerly conversations explicit and using the tools of narratology, we help students see some of the critical architecture of stories: how narratives are put together, how narratives put writers into various binds, and how stories can put the act of storytelling itself into question.

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