

Point of View in "Cora Unashamed"

By Dr. Lynda Thompson

Overview

This lesson covers the point of view of the narrator in "Cora Unashamed." Students will explore the perspective of the narrator in the short story, in addition to considering the points of view of various characters in the piece. In their consideration, students will analyze how things might be presented depending on the perspective of selected characters. For example, how might the outcome of the story change depending on the point of view of the narrator? This lesson is designed for high school students, and it provides opportunities for them to analyze devices authors use to convey meaning. The lesson hones reading, critical thinking, oral discussion, and writing skills.

Objectives

Students will:

- Read "Cora Unashamed" by Langston Hughes
- Demonstrate knowledge of the literary element, point of view, and how it affects the development of a literary work
- Analyze the short story from perspectives other than the narrator's
- Demonstrate the ability to shift perspectives in responding to literature by rewriting the story from a different point of view
- Evaluate the point of view of the narrator (i.e., determine if the narrator is believable/reliable)

Skills Attained

- Identification of the narrator and interpretation of the narrator's perspective (e.g., omniscient, limited omniscient, first person, etc.)
- Evaluation of the influence of point of view to the interpretation of events and circumstances in a literary piece
- Writing and presenting of facts and events in sequence
- Critical thinking skills through examining other perspectives in a literary piece
- Responding empathically to literary characters and their experiences
- Analysis of the characteristics of the narrator (i.e., reliable, unreliable) in a literary piece
- Evaluation of the perspective of the narrator when compared to other characters

Lesson Outline

I. Anticipatory Set

Before students read the story "Cora Unashamed" have them reflect on a past event when the facts of that event were reported differently by witnesses and/or participants. Perhaps something happened at school and the teachers' perspective was not the same as the students; maybe their parents interpreted some event one way and the student interpreted it differently. One of their peers may even have had a different interpretation or reaction to something. You may want to use a national event that had differing opinions among eyewitnesses. If students need help, you could have them consider how they would describe a rock concert, a dance, or a party, and then consider how their parents or teachers might describe the same event. Ask students to discuss possible reasons for differing perspectives. Use this dialogue as your segue to discussing the point of view of the short story "Cora Unashamed." Have students read the short story and keep in mind the point of view as they read.

II. The Lesson

1. After reading "Cora Unashamed," discuss the point of view of the story. Who tells the story? Does the point of view of the narrator influence the reader? Is the narrator biased or more sympathetic to some characters in the story than to others? Have students work in groups and locate places in the story that help them determine who the narrator is, and the narrator's perspective on the things he or she relays to the reader. Students should identify passages that provide insight into the narrator. Assign a person in each group to serve as the recorder.

One passage that is of particular importance to this assignment is in paragraph nine where the narrator says, "Cora was the oldest of a family of eight children—the Jenkins niggers. The only Negroes in Melton, thank God! Where they came from originally—that is, the old folks—God knows."

2. Let each group share their information about the narrator with the class. You may want to record the information on the board so that you can compare the findings of each group. Guide students to the conclusion that the narrator is a white member of the town, Melton. Use the information provided by your students to discuss the objectivity of the narrator and to determine which character has the narrator's sympathy.
3. In class discussion, determine how other people in the piece might tell the story. Would certain details be different? Would the perspective of other people in the story change the reader's view of the people and the events? Have students select another character and retell the story from that person's point of view. They may select Ma or Pa Jenkins, Cora, Mr. or Mrs. Studevart, Jessie, or the Reverend Dr. McElroy. Remind students to use details from the story to keep the story accurate; they may not change the facts of the story.
4. After students have rewritten the story, have them share their stories with the class. Have students determine whose point of view is presented, based on the information provided in each of their stories. Compare the varying perspectives (point of view) of the characters selected. Determine if the reader's sympathy changes depending on who tells the story. Depending on the narrator, does one character, more than others, elicit the sympathy of the reader? Depending on the narrator, does one character, more than others, elicit unfavorable feelings from the reader?
5. As a culminating activity, have the students share either orally, or in written form in a writing journal, the process of retelling the story from another perspective. Was it difficult to tell the story from another viewpoint? Could they retell the story with accuracy from the viewpoint of the character they selected? Did sympathy for one character change after considering the events from another perspective? Does the point of view matter? Does it change the reaction of the reader?

Assessment

Students should be evaluated on their thoroughness and accuracy in retelling the story from another perspective. Possible criteria for grading their stories include the following:

- Retells the story using major details from the text to maintain accuracy
- Retells the story in proper sequence
- Tells the story using another point of view with consistency—follows the requirements of the assignment
- Correctness (punctuation, mechanics, spelling, etc.)
- Evidence of thought and insight

Suggested Related Works

Pieces that have a town person telling the story include:

- "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner
- "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula LaGuin
- The poem "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Other stories that lend themselves well to consideration of point of view include:

- "Why I Live at the P.O." by Eudora Welty
- "I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen
- "The Red Convertible: Lyman Lamartine" by Louise Erdrich

Definition of Terms

Point of View

Point of view refers to who tells us a story and how it is told. What we know and how we feel about the events in a work are shaped by the author's choice of point of view. The teller of the story, the narrator, inevitably affects our understanding of the characters' actions by filtering what is told through his or her own perspective. The various points of view that writers draw upon can be grouped into two broad categories:

1. The third-person narrator uses "he," "she," or "they" to tell the story and does not participate in the action.
2. The first-person narrator uses "I" and is a major or minor participant in the action.

In addition, a second-person narrator, "you," is also possible, but is rarely used because of the awkwardness of thrusting the reader into the story. For example,

"You are minding your own business on a park bench when a drunk steps out and demands your lunch bag."

An objective point of view employs a third-person narrator who does not see into the mind of any character. From this detached and impersonal perspective, the narrator reports action and dialogue without telling us directly what the characters think and feel. Since no analysis or interpretation is provided by the narrator, this point of view places a premium on dialogue, actions, and details to reveal character to the reader.

Narrator

Not to be confused with the author's voice, the narrator is the voice of the person telling the story. With a first-person narrator, the "I" in the story presents the point of view of only one character. The reader is restricted to the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of that single character. For example, in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the lawyer is the first-person narrator of the story. First-person narrators can play either a major or a minor role in the story they are telling.

An unreliable narrator reveals an interpretation of events that is somehow different from the author's own interpretation of those events. Often, the unreliable narrator's perception of plot, characters, and setting becomes the actual subject of the story, as in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Narrators can be unreliable for a number of reasons: they might lack self-knowledge (like Melville's lawyer), they might be inexperienced, or they might even be insane. Naive narrators are usually characterized by youthful innocence, such as Mark Twain's Huck Finn or J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield.

An omniscient narrator is an all-knowing narrator who is not a character in the story, and who can move from place to place and pass back and forth through time, slipping into and out of characters as no human being possibly could in real life. Omniscient narrators can report the thoughts and feelings of the characters, as well as their words and actions. For example, the narrator of **The Scarlet Letter** is an omniscient narrator. Editorial omniscience refers to an intrusion by the narrator in order to evaluate a character for a reader, as when the narrator of **The Scarlet Letter** describes Hester's relationship to the Puritan community. Narration that allows the characters' actions and thoughts to speak for themselves is called neutral omniscience. Most modern writers use neutral omniscience so that readers can reach their own conclusions. Limited omniscience occurs when an author restricts a narrator to the single perspective of either a major or minor character. The way people, places, and events appear to that character is the way they appear to the reader. Sometimes a limited omniscient narrator can see into more than one character, particularly in a work that focuses on two characters alternately from one chapter to the next. Short stories, however, are frequently limited to a single character's point of view.

This lesson was submitted by Dr. Lynda Thompson, assistant professor at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma.