

## Trying to Make It Real

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Back when I was a graduate student, it seemed like there was no more serious mistake a writer could make than to commit a point of view violation. Maybe it came with a jail sentence, or at least a fine. Point of view violations were a crime against what, though? A crime against realism, I suppose. And of all the -isms that have driven modern fiction, none has been stronger or has had so much sway over writers as realism.

Consistent point of view is a notion that never seemed to trouble Homer or Cervantes or Apuleius. They just rared back and told their tales. Nobody seemed to mind. Few people who aren't writers seem to mind too much to this day. Owen Wister's The Virginian is a mess as far as point of view goes, jumping all over the place. I've never met a fan of The Virginian who objected. (I do like this novel, and everybody seeking to know the true American temperament should read it.)

But some people would suggest that the rise of the novel as the most popular literary form is connected to realism. The argument goes something like this: As the eighteenth century went forward, the growing middle class was producing more readers, and those readers wanted to read about people more like themselves than the kings and queens, subjects of tragedies, and buffoons and clowns, subjects of comedy. People's normal lives might swing across a narrower emotional arc, but what these new readers wanted were stories featuring people that more closely resembled them. Real people.

Early novels went so far as to try to mask fiction as reality. Robinson Crusoe posed as a found diary. Clarissa was presented as a collection of exchanged letters. In some respects, our current infatuation with memoir is the latest manifestation of a desire to see our fellows, our real fellows who come from the same middle class as we do, presented on the page. And some of these memoirs do fudge the facts to make a better story, turning fact into a bizarre form of realistic fiction. Would we call that realism?

What's this got to do with point of view? Mostly, it's realism that drives the notion that in the real world, the world realists would like to copy as closely as possible on the page, we cannot know everybody's thoughts. (Often, we don't seem to know our own thoughts, but that is another matter.) So a realistic story or novel, then, would find a narrower point of view, a more plausible, perhaps more real, point of view, and stick to it.

Of the various modern writers, Henry James may be the person most responsible for the insistence on a consistent and narrow point of view. He called his preferred point of view, central intelligence. People also call it limited third person. Unlike the writers who'd come before him, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain,

James would not allow his narrator to roam from head to head as he told his story. Instead, his narrator would settle in behind one figure and see the world beyond in so far as possible through the eyes of this single character. The narrator would speak on behalf of his central character, but would use the third person pronoun. So there would be a distance created between the reader and the character thanks to that buffering narrator.

Now we modern participating readers must step up and do our jobs. We are allowed into that buffered zone between narrator and character and invited to pass judgment on what we witness.

A Henry James short story, "The Beast in the Jungle" is a good test case for the idea of central intelligence as a point of view. We are introduced to John Marcher, a self-involved sort of guy who feels he's destined for something special in his life. He confesses this conviction to a patient woman, May Bartram. They meet again through the years and each time the question comes up, has this special thing happened to or for Marcher? No, no. Doesn't seem like it will. But of course in its odd way, the special thing has happened to Marcher since May has been in love with him over all these years. I know, I know, how obtuse can a guy be? And why doesn't May go off and find somebody more interesting and more interested in her? The narrow point of view choice cuts May's thoughts out of this story completely, though. And Marcher? Even his psychiatrist must have grown sick of his nattering.

I don't believe in spoiler alerts. Go ahead and read "The Beast in the Jungle." Now that you know where it's going, you can better pay attention to how you get there. Through limiting the point of view, James does create some suspense through Marcher's quest. And he creates tension, too, through the well-mannered exchanges between Marcher and May. In fact, it's good manners, probably too good, that sustain this story.

There are lots of things for a writer to chew on when it comes to point of view. How much does it matter to the effect of the story? For a writer like Henry James, the answer is, everything. Without the constricted point of view, there's no story here. But to writers as diverse as Homer and Jane Austen, the wide aperture of point of view seems to do no harm, and in fact contributes to a fuller understanding of their stories.

How much does and did realism matter to readers? The Virginian came out in 1902. I'm guessing over the years it's attracted more readers than any Henry James novel. So, then, how much does realism as an -ism matter to us as writers anymore? Henry James published "The Beast in the Jungle" in 1903. I was in grad school in the 1970s. We're in a whole new century now. Maybe realism and its concerns are old school thinking.

Still, it can be useful to think of the various points of view available to us writers as tools. Like any tool, they may be put to good use or abused. So for the next little

while, I want to consider different points of view and what might be gained or lost by using any of them.

I'll let Les McCann channeling Gene McDaniels' lyrics have the final words and give us all something to think about:

“Looks like we always wind up in a rut  
Trying to make it real—compared to what?”