Lecture # 7
Narratology: voice and vision

1. Narratology

A novel or a short story is a narrative construction which follows a number of rules—rules which nobody knew about until they were discovered and studied by a discipline invented in Russia narratology, though it was not thus called then.


NARRATOLOGY deals with the structural aspects of the narrative. It is the theory of the structures of narrative. It aims at presenting a “structural description” of the text, and at classifying the different functions and their relations in the text.

The word was coined by Tzvetan Todorov and developed by Todorov (*Poétique de la prose, Introduction à la literature fantastique…*) and Gérard Genette (see for example *Figures III*).

One of the interesting classifications initiated by Genette concerns narrative voice.
2. The heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators

- **Heterodiegetic**

The heterodiegetic narrator may be a simple reporting eye and not a narrative voice.

“The Killers” and “Hills Like White Elephants” are the illustration of radical the heterodiegetic mode of narrating:

> Outside it was getting dark. The street-lights came on outside the window. The two men at the counter and read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in. (“The Killers” 264)

Here, narrative voice sounds utterly objective, neutral, indifferent.

**Heterodiegetic** is the opposite of **Homodiegetic**.

- **Homodiegetic**

When the narrator is a participant in the tale he relates, he is homodiegetic.

A homodiegetic narrator plays an active role in the narrative. He may or may not be the protagonist (or main character).

“In Another Country”, “Now I Lay Me” the homodiegetic narrator is the protagonist.
3. Focalization

Narratology also deals with the question of "who sees?" and "who speaks?" in the narrative.

Both questions are about the angle of vision through which the story is focused; this refers to the question of focalisation (a complex question, for it may not be the same person who sees and who speaks).

Gérard Genette (in Figures III) has distinguished between three types of focalization:

- **zero focalization**, when the narrator is omniscient, i.e. knows more than any of the characters. \( N > C \) (example “Indian Camp”)

- **internal focalization**, when the perspective is limited to what only one character can see or say. \( N = C \) (in first-person stories: “Now I Lay Me”, “In Another Country”…)

- **external focalization**, when the narrator knows or says less than what the characters know. \( N > C \).

In “Banal Story” space is revealed through the eyes of the protagonist, who becomes then a focalizer as the following excerpt shows:

So he ate an orange, slowly spitting out the seeds. Outside, the
snow was turning to rain. **Inside**, the electric stove seemed to give no heat and rising from his writing-table, he sat down upon the stove. How good it felt! Here, at last, was life.

The two adverbs “outside” and “inside” define the scope of the protagonist’s perception, whose gaze shifts from the external, neutral world, to the intimate one. The visual field of the protagonist corresponds to the visual field of the story.

So is also the case in “**A Canary for One**”, where the interplay of outside and inside signals the subjective presence of the narrator in the text, a narrator who is quite discreet / keeps a low profile throughout the story.

See page 318 and the way the implied gaze of the silent and discreet narrator functions in “A Canary”.

Hence the pun on Eye / I.

The opening scene of “**Big Two-Hearted River**”: “There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country” (197).

From the time he had gotten down off the train and the baggage man had thrown his pack out of the open car door things had been different. Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. *It* could not all be burned. He knew that. (“Big Two-Hearted River”, 198)
Conclusion

If you don’t take into consideration the structural and strategic role of voice and vision in the story, you miss completely the point.

Finally, the language of fiction should be clearly analyzed, not indistinctly, but through the identification of the different types of discourses that structure it.

See Monika Gehlawat, “Painterly Ambitions: Hemingway, Cézanne, and the Short Story” Journal of the Short Story in English:

Online edition: http://jsse.revues.org/index120.html