

Godin's Use of Narrative Technique in 'My Dead Brother Comes to America'

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Abstract: In literature, the point of view used by authors is a technique that plays an important role. When we read any piece, we wonder who is telling the story or controlling the events in the story. A story or novel can be written using a first-person, second-person, or third-person point of view. Writers have several options when deciding from which perspective to tell a story and choose the POV, keeping in mind its impact on the readers and to what extent it will be credible. They use different styles to tell their stories and also decide the role of the narrator. Choosing the narrator is essential because the readers see the events presented by him. This paper seeks to analyze the narrative technique used by Alexander Godin (1909-1970) in his short story 'My Dead Brother Comes to America' (1934). Godin writes the story using the first-person narrative point of view. The story is told from the point of view of a thirteen-year-old boy, who is the protagonist. Through his narration, the readers get to know the events and get an insight into the minds of the characters presented in the story.

Keywords: *Immigrants; inform; narrative technique; short story.*

1. Introduction

Writers have several options when deciding from which perspective to tell a story. When we read a story, novel or any piece of literature, the first question which comes to our mind is who is narrating the events or controlling the events in the story. In other words, from whose perspective the readers are supposed to view the incidents. Readers can understand the characters' feelings and emotions because of the use of the narrative technique chosen by the writers. Each character will have his/her perspective. Whoever tells the story will indeed impact the reader's opinion of other characters and events. This viewpoint gives the narrator a partial or whole view of events as they happen. In many stories, the protagonist tells the story, and the story is read based on his point of view; while in some stories, the narrator might not be a character in the story. Godin's story "My Dead Brother Comes to America" is told using the first-person point of view.

Alexander Godin, the pen name of Joseph Katz (1909-1970), was a Ukrainian who immigrated to the United States with his family in 1922. We don't know much about his life. His short story "My Dead Brother Comes to America" was published in 1934. During this period, many changes were taking place in America, especially because Europeans were leaving their homeland and trying to shift to America with the hope of a second chance. In his short story, Godin shows the plight of the immigrants who had come from Ukraine, namely the thirteen-year-old boy, the protagonist in the story with his mother, two sisters, and his dead brother. They are forced to leave their homeland, come to America, and are reunited with their father.

Throughout the story, the dead brother plays a pivotal role as he dominates the emotions of the family members. His presence is felt from the beginning till the end. The little brother must have died due to the sufferings and the hardships faced by their family in their homeland. But his untimely death shapes the boy's feelings and attitude toward his father, who had left them to move to America eight years back. In the story, Godin never mentions why the father left his family or under what circumstances he had to move to America. But through the boy's attitude, the writer makes it evident that the boy feels that his father had abandoned his family and that he holds a strong grievance against him for losing his younger brother in their father's absence.

Abrams (p. 231) states that the question of point of view has always been a 'practical concern' for authors. Point of view refers to how a story gets told and the mode in which the author chooses to present the characters,

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dialogues, action, settings, and events. Hence this brings us to the question that who is telling the story or from whose perspective is the story told? A story can be told in several ways depending on who narrates the story's events. As Abrams says, writers develop various ways to tell a story (p. 231). According to Diasamidze (2014), when we talk about narrative voice, we mean the method of narration that determines the position, or angle of vision, from which the story is told. In other words, the nature of the relationship between the teller and the tale is always crucial to the art of fiction. It is seen that the narrator can be first, second, or third person and if he is a third-person narrator, the point of view can be limited, omniscient, or even limited omniscient. Therefore, it is seen that each person's perspectives differ from the others and their emotions and experiences are also different to a large extent. As a result, various interpretations of the same text depend on the contextual difference.

In the story 'My Dead Brother Comes to America,' the characters are nameless, presented as the boy sees them and presents them to the readers. The way he controls the events and shows the characters shapes the readers' perspective about them. Hence the readers get a glimpse into the boy's world as he sees it.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Abrams (p. 168), Postmodernism is often applied to literature and art after World War II (1939-45). It moved away from the modernist forms and the conventional ways. Post-modernists rejected the elitist of the modernist 'high art' and took recourse to the models of 'mass culture' in films, television newspapers, cartoons, and popular music. Postmodernism had spread its wings in literature as well, and its influence was seen in the works of James Joyce, Dorris Lessing, Donald Barthelme, George Saunders, and many others. In a study by Abootalebi, it is mentioned that the modes of narration in post-modernist fiction are very different from modernists and realists. (2015). The writers relied heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, etc. One such example is seen in James Joyce's most famous short story *Eveline* (1904), in which Joyce used the technique of 'stream of consciousness' to narrate the story through which the working of the protagonist's mind is shown. Sandamali (2015).

In a study by Sharma & Chaudhary (2011), it is said that modernism and postmodernism literature tend to break from the trends of 19th-century literature. To be more precise, Akter (2017) states that postmodernism resists all philosophies and ideologies related to power and grand narratives. The use of a first person, second person, or third person (limited or omniscient) has been a common trend among writers. In postmodernism, individual experience is more important for history. According to Cox (p. 44), every writer has a particular and unmistakable signature which is shown in his writing. Godin's work is no exception. Hence when we look into his short story, we find that it is the experience of a single person narrating the incidents from his perspective. He has used the first-person narrator in the story to guide the readers through the incidents instead of using the second person or the third person point of view. This gives the narrator the authority to present things as he has seen or experienced them as they are told from a very subjective standpoint. Though this technique is nothing new in a short story, it greatly impacts the readers' perspectives. There are no other sources where the readers can verify the authenticity of the narrated incidents. This also brings us to the question of how far the narrator is reliable.

3. Literature Review

Few studies have been carried out regarding the point of view chosen by Godin in his story 'My Dead Brother Comes to America.' The first-person narrative point of view is not new in literature. Numerous writers have chosen this technique to write their stories. Authors must decide on selecting the point of view in telling their stories, and they do so to fulfil the effect it will have on the readers and to convey the message successfully. For example, writer Edgar Allan Poe explored the technique of the use of the first-person point of view in his literary pieces. Poe's first-person narrative point of view is extensively used and has drawn the interest of many critics (Guo, 2021). Poe's perfect command of first-person narrative and proper use of dialogues in his stories increases the story's intensity greatly, making the story sound more attractive to readers. In the study, it is stated that for the readers, the reference to 'I' seems that the narrator is trustworthy, and the readers tend to believe more about what they are reading.

As Cynthia Tucker puts it, the narrator is a major participant in the story, which is told using the first-person point of view, so pronouns like 'I, me, we, us' are used (2017). Moreover, she highlights what the narrators can comment on and what they cannot comment on. According to Tucker, in a first-person- narrative technique, the narrator cannot comment about anything he does not personally witness. Whatever he experiences, he gives an account of that. He must have a first-hand experience of whatever he narrates to make the narrative credible. He cannot relate anything which he has not seen or heard. Therefore, this technique has some limitations. He can only talk about what he has seen directly or heard from someone, which limits his reach to a great extent. On the other hand, according to a study by Diasamidze (2014), a third-person omniscient narrator who is all-knowing is not involved in the story or a character in the story. This gives him immense access to move freely about the plot. Similarly, in the other technique, the limited omniscient narrative point of view, the narrator can only enter the characters' minds. To do this, he has to select a single character to act as the centre of discourse.

Writers employ different styles to tell their stories, depending on what role the narrator plays in the story. According to Diasamidze (2014), the choice of point of view always depends on the appropriateness of the story.

Godin chooses the first-person point of view for his story because it narrates incidents in which the boy had first-hand experience. Shen Dan (1998) stated that story elements such as the character's words, activities, appearance, and background are conveyed to the reader through the character's mind. This point of view directly presents the character's thoughts and feelings. Godin's story is told through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old narrator who expresses his grief over the dead brother and the father's disappointment. At the same time, the mother's reactions and other family members are detailed through his observation and comments. The narrator is seen to hold the status of the character in observation.

It is to be mentioned that the characters in the story remain nameless and are presented to the readers in the way the narrator wants them to present. Yousuf (2017), in his study, writes that the readers know about his brother and sisters because he mentions their ages who seem younger than their real ages because of the sufferings in their homeland. Even the feelings and emotions of the parents about their dead son are presented through the eyes of the narrator. Moreover, as Don Rey puts it, the narrator's feelings regarding the account of their welcome and treatment in America are very strong. He gives a clear picture of it when he describes how they are treated on the ship when he writes, 'after breakfast we were all herded together like sheep' (p. 155). This shows that he feels they were treated like animals, which gives evidence of his first-hand experience. There is no sign or indication in the story which tells the readers that the immigrants are welcome to the new land.

4. Objectives of the Present Study

However, these studies do not focus on the effect the readers feel because of the use of the first-person point of view. Hence the present study seeks to explore mainly two aspects:

- What are the effects of using the first-person narrative point of view on the readers?
- What are the limitations of using the first-person point of view?

Impact on the readers of the first-person narrative point of view

When the readers see the action that occurs in a story through the eyes of the person who tells the story, this is known as the first-person point of view. When the first-person narration is used, the reader is led on a journey through the story, complete with personal biases and feelings, by a character in the story. As it has been already mentioned, the author's point of view is decided according to its appropriateness. The first-person narrator is chosen because it is simple and direct, so the readers know what the narrator knows and tells them. The readers feel they can directly interact with the narrator. The voice telling the story plays a pivotal role because it shapes the readers' perspectives. It even has its hold on what the readers see and controls the information the reader has about events taking place in the story. According to Guo (2021), in a first-person narrative point of view, the "I" is used in the story as the storyteller and protagonist. For readers, it seems that they are listening face to face to the 'I' who is telling his story or something he experienced.

When the first-person narrative is used in a story, it immediately puts the reader inside the narrator's head, allowing for an intimate portrayal of thoughts and emotions. Godin chooses the first-person narrative point of view as the story revolves around the sufferings, misery, and hardships of the immigrants who were forced to leave their homeland and come to America. It focuses on one particular family but also gives a general picture of the sufferings of all immigrants. The story's beginning description on the board when he says 'We could feel the vomit and the ammonia smell of the sea in our nostrils' (p. 155), shows the strong feeling of all those people who had arrived there unwelcome. A first-person narrator can show his reactions to situations and can create a strong sense of empathy in the reader.

In the story, the narrator describes themselves as 'hovering between two worlds' (p. 155), showing the uncertainty they all faced and felt. They had left their homeland, and the new country offered them nothing more than a second chance. They do not even know if they can survive there for long. The boy observes his family and the people around him very keenly. The way he presents them and their miserable condition makes the readers sympathize with them. He gives a vivid description of the expression of the clerks when he says, 'all of them smiled the same sour way into their sheets...' (p. 156). At another point, he gives an image of the 'vast fields of Ukraine', which provides evidence of his first-hand experience. The readers feel his full involvement in the story.

According to Jahn (2021), a reader hears a textual voice with his/her 'mind's ears'. Similarly, he/she will hear the story with his/her 'mind's eyes'. A writer can use the narrator's voice to deliver the entire story by writing in first-person. As a result, he gives the text a clear identity and engages the readers in the world he is creating. The first-person narrator only relates what he has seen or experienced and imparts them to the readers. The readers have no other way to get access to the information. In the story, all the incidents are viewed from the narrator's point of view. The readers have no option but to trust the narrator. Throughout the story, the way the family mourns the loss of the dead member is expressed from the boy's perspective. The narrator says that the father had brought four caps for the children, but he did not have time to hide the spare one. Their mother 'grew hysterical, and father gazed at her helplessly with twitching lips' (p. 157). The extent of the sadness experienced by the parents is conveyed to the readers from the boy's perspective. Towards the end of the story in one way or the other, the family members feel the presence of the dead member as when he says that the cap lay on the table and 'for some reason, the eyes of all were turned towards it' (p. 158). Moreover, in silence, they all feel the presence of the dead boy among them in the new 'dark and airless flat.'

Hence the narrative viewpoint chosen by any author is determined by how the author wants to convey the story and the information to the readers. The title itself, starting with "My" tells the readers that it will be subjective, so it is obvious that the author has decided on the narrative technique based on the appropriateness of the story. It strongly impacts the readers as they get to see and feel the incidents through the eyes of the protagonist narrator, which makes the story more credible.

Limitations of using the first-person narrative point of view

According to a study by Lissa et al. (2016), narrative perspectives affect readers' responses. In a story like 'My Dead Brother Comes to America', which is very subjective, it is obvious that the readers' perspectives will be shaped according to the narrator's views. The problem with a very subjective narrative is that it can seem a little claustrophobic, as if readers are stuck in a character's head with no possibility of escape. The readers do not get to see anything outside the narrator's perspective. There is a risk the narrator can become biased and indulgent in his emotions. In Godin's story, we learn about the rest of the family members through the boy's observation. He mentions that their father had left them eight years back and that his mother had never shared the news of his younger brother's death with him. The readers never get the reasons for these decisions. They do not come to know why the father had left them or why the mother never reveals the death of their younger son till they meet. He writes that 'either through negligence or fear,' she had never informed her husband of his death. There is no way the readers can access the information beyond the narrator's revelation. The father also does not ask anything about the son's death upon meeting the family.

Moreover, the narrator makes it clear from the beginning that he has distanced himself from his father. He says, 'I did not like my father; he meant less than a stranger to me' (p. 155). The way he describes the painful death of his younger brother gives the readers the impression that he partially holds their father responsible for the death, as when he says, 'I felt as if I was more entitled to grieve for my brother than he' (p. 155). The readers never know why he has developed such feelings of indifference towards his father, who was not with them for eight years. It is to be mentioned that among the children, he is the only one with such feelings of hatred towards the father. In contrast to his feelings, his two sisters are overwhelmed meeting their father.

Another crucial point the readers think about is that the boy's attitude and feelings change throughout the narrative. He makes it evident that he doesn't like his father, but at the same time, he observes that 'His face was lined with weariness and his eyes were red' (p. 157). At another point, he says, 'He looked very helpless and broken' (p. 157). The readers are left to wonder if he doesn't like his father, how could he notice his helplessness and that he was broken?

These observations show that he sympathizes with his father's condition. Being a thirteen-year-old boy, he wavers in his feelings toward his father. When they reach home, he notices that his father sobs helplessly. This brings the readers to question how far he is a reliable narrator. Besides, the readers wonder why he is the only one to detest his father and not the other siblings when he has an older sister whose memory of their father's presence in their lives might have been stronger than the boy's. The readers are unable to get any proper explanation. They have no way to know how far his observations are reliable and justified. It seems as if the narrator is holding back some information as it happens in a piece written from the first-person narrative point of view. Therefore, the readers must pay attention to a narrator's personality, built-in biases, values, and beliefs to measure his reliability.

It is also seen that the narrator has no direct interaction with any of the characters in the story. As Ailsa Cox says, the stories which are read are often incomplete and suggestive. There is more to what the readers only read. To understand the stories, readers sometimes have to refer to social narrative or background, such as historical or political knowledge (p. 14). In this case, we get a glimpse of the historical and political background of the story as we know why these people had come to America. However, we notice that no direct voice of the author is used in the text. Brenner (p. 3) says that the writer's voice reflects the 'author's personality within the manuscript.' It is composed of diction, syntax, sentence variety, sentence structure, and paragraph structure which he uses. The voice also depends on the perspective of the writing. It can be either from the subjective self, meaning the author's view, or the objective other, meaning a neutral third-party perspective (p. 3). First-person point-of-view requires readers to understand both how the character talks and thinks and the differences between these two.

We notice in the story that the narrator's voice is not given anywhere through dialogues. As seen in most pieces, the readers can form an opinion of the narrator through the way he speaks, body gestures, or any particular expression. As in Poe's short story 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' the narrator says, 'How, then, am I mad?' (p. 382). It is unclear if the narrator is speaking to anyone, but the way he poses the question shows the instability of his mental condition. But in the story 'My Dead Brother Comes to America,' the story is unfolded mostly on what the narrator observes and his past experiences. His feelings, emotions, and inner conflict are only conveyed through how he narrates them. Since he does not interact with any of the characters, it is impossible to understand his personality or nature based on how he speaks.

The above observation and discussion show that the use of the first-person point of view in the short story 'My Dead Brother Comes to America' makes the readers see the first-hand experiences of the narrator. He gives an insight into his mind and, simultaneously, into the other characters' minds. His observation and the narration throughout hook the attention of the readers. The readers indeed get to see only a partial view of the incidents

described by the narrator. There is no other source of information based on which the readers can perceive the situation.

Moreover, the absence of dialogue on the narrator's part does not let the readers form an opinion about the narrator except that he is frustrated and disillusioned because of the miserable condition in which they are. The point why he detests his father is also not clearly explained or justified. Hence, the readers are left with many unanswered questions, but there is no way of verifying them due to the writer's technique of first-person point of view. The writer leaves no chance to explore other sources of information.

5. Conclusion

It can be said that the narrative technique in a literary piece plays a vital role as it determines how the incidents in a story or a novel will be told and how the readers will perceive them. A storyteller is an important element for any story: a narrative voice, real or implied, guides the readers through the story. Each writer will employ his/her technique according to the appropriateness of the story and present it in a unique style. The way a writer uses the narrator to tell the story gives life to the story. Through this, the incidents and the characters come to life and leave a mark on the reader's mind. The chosen point of view establishes a relationship with the other essential elements between the readers and the literary texts. In his story, Godin chooses the first-person point of view and gives the responsibility to a thirteen-year-old boy to narrate the incidents. The readers get a glimpse into their sufferings through his perspectives. At times the readers feel unsure about how far the narrator is reliable as he is only thirteen years old. Sometimes he is not constant in his feelings and attitude towards his family member. In addition, many questions remain unanswered. Yet, it has to be admitted that Godin successfully uses the craft of the first-person narrative technique as the readers are fully engaged in the story through the eyes of the narrator. It thoroughly hooks the attention of the readers. His descriptions and narrations leave a poignant feeling in the readers' minds about the misery and sufferings of the European immigrants in America.

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