

‘You’ and ‘I’ in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*

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Abstract

This paper examines the alternative point of view, represented through the second-person pronoun ‘you’, in Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979). Through Simpson’s (1993) stylistic framework of narrative point of view and the discussion of Leech and Short’s (1981) discourse representation, it concludes—despite the prominent interpretation of the novel as a second-person narrative—that ‘you’ is simply a character in the novel and that the identity of the narrator is more elusive.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้คือภาษาที่มุ่งมองแบบบุรุษที่สองในนิยายของคาลวิโน เรื่อง *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979) โดยใช้ทฤษฎีวัจนะลีลาศาสตร์เกี่ยวกับมุมมองของเรื่องเล่าของซิมสัน และทฤษฎีการนำเสนอวิธีการของลีชและชอร์ท และได้บทสรุปขัดแย้งกับการตีความนิยายเรื่องนี้ที่ว่าวนิยายเรื่องนี้เล่าจากมุมมองของผู้เล่าบุรุษที่สอง กล่าวคือ “คุณ” ในที่นี่เป็นเพียงตัวละครตัวหนึ่งในนิยาย แต่ทว่าการค้นอัตลักษณ์และบทบาทของผู้เล่าเรื่องนั้นเป็นเรื่องที่ซับซ้อนกว่า

Introduction

If on a Winter's Night a Traveller is a meta-story, in which the main character ‘you’ is pursuing a novel of the same name. At the story level, ‘you’, an addictive reader just bought a book. After reading the first chapter, he discovered that the book was bound with blank pages alternating with the first 32 pages he had read. Determined to finish the novel, he hunted for the rest of the book only to find several other chapters of unrelated stories which feature in the titled chapters of the novel interrupted by the description of ‘you’ seeking the next part of the novel. At the discourse level, the narrative of ‘you’ is interrupted by the stories he reads, which are as intriguing as the main narrative. Real readers experience the same frustration as ‘you’, as both levels of the narrative are intertwined, interrupted and incomplete.

The novel poses interesting questions to narratological discussion of point of view and narrative roles. Is ‘you’ just a character in the novel? Or is it the case that the novel is addressed to the real readers, and that the narrative is told from the ‘second-person’ point of view? Although critiques of the novel claim that, with an extensive use of the pronoun ‘you’, this novel is a narrative told in the ‘second-person’ point of view, this paper argues that *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is mainly told from the point of view of an external narrator, or a ‘third-person’ narrative. It derives this conclusion mainly through employing Simpson’s (1993) framework on point of view and Leech’s and Short’s (1981) model of discourse representation.

The examples drawn are mostly from the first two chapters of the novel since this is when readers start forming opinions and

judgment. Also, from a practical viewpoint, the paper would exceed a manageable size to analyze the whole extent of such a hybrid novel as *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

The first main section briefly summarizes the notion of second-person point of view in literature, followed by a review of stylistic approaches to point of view. The second section applies the narrative framework to the novel, and the paper concludes with the discussion of distance between the author and narrator.

Point of View: General Frameworks

The second-person point of view is not as prevalent in literature as the first- and third-person points of view; it is rather more common in guidebooks and advertisements. A second-person narrative uses the personal pronoun ‘you’ to identify and address the protagonist. Prince assumes ‘you’-protagonist to be the narratee (1982: 84). The definition of this type of narration may appear vague and negotiable, but ‘Its fluidity and non-conventionality have ensured that more exclusive, categorical definitions are difficult to formulate’ (Schofield, 2003). It allows close identification between a character and the readers, creating a sense that the readers is part of the story.

Bal (1985), Genette (1980),¹ Rimmon-Kenan (1983), Fowler (1986) and Simpson (1993) agree on the distinction between internal and external narrator; however, this distinction does not lie only in the physical presence of the narrator in a story but also in the level of intervention of the narrating voice.

Fowler (1986), drawing explicitly on textual features particularly modality and *verba sentiendi*, categorizes point of view, according to the narrator’s psychological access to any participating

characters, as internal and external. An Internal *Type A* narrator narrates from a particular character's consciousness, conveying his/her subjective narration of thoughts and feelings.² An internal *Type B* narrator does not participate in the events told but is an 'omniscient' narrator who claims knowledge of what is going on in character's minds.³ An external narrator is outside the consciousness of any character, but he may (*Type D*)⁴ or may not offer his evaluations or interpretations (*Type C*).⁵ The external *Type C* is marked as the most impersonal form of third person narration.

The Fowler's categorization of his *Type D* narrator is most problematic, as it may overlap with *Type A* narration in that, despite its externality, the *Type D* narrator controls the telling of the story and has definite views on the characters and events in the story. A narrator in the *Types A* and *B* may choose to conceal some information and appear to be *Type D*. Therefore, there is an overlap between internal and external point of view (Cf. Simpson, 1993: 41-43).

Building upon Fowler's work, Simpson (1993) categorizes narrative point of view according to the presence of the narrator into two types: *participating* (A) and *non-participating narrator* (B). The B category can be divided into two subcategories of *narratorial mode* (N), in which 'the narrative is related from a position outside the consciousness of any character', and *reflector mode* (R), in which the narrative is 'mediated through the consciousness of a particular character' (62). He also introduces subcategories of positive, negative and neutral narrators according to the shading of attitude presented in the text, making nine types of narrative voices.

In the positive shading, the deontic⁶ and boulomaic⁷ modalities

are prominent. The narrator is conscious of the character's duty and desire. In the negative shading, where epistemic modality⁸ is prominent, the narrator shows degrees (or lack of) of knowledge, confidence, cognition and perception. No modality is present in the neutral shading.

Types	Shading	Linguistic Features	Examples
Participating Narrator (A)	Positive	First-person narration, deontic and boulomaic modalities and <i>verba sentiendi</i> present.	Jane Eyre
	Negative	Less-cooperative first-person narration, epistemic and perceptive modalities present.	Molloy
	Neutral	Unreflective and objective first-person narration, unmodalised and few evaluatives	Detective fictions
Non-Participating Narrator (B) Narratorial Mode (N)	Positive	Disembodied narrator offering opinions and judgments, deontic and boulomaic modalities and <i>verba sentiendi</i> present.	Fielding's and Joyce's works

Types	Shading	Linguistic Features	Examples
	Negative	Disembodied narrator trying to 'make sense' of characters and situations	The Trial
	Neutral	External narrator refusing access to character's thoughts and feelings	Hemingway's works
Non-Participating Narrator (B) Reflector Mode (R)	Positive	Character's offering their opinion and judgments, deontic and boulomaic modalities and verba sentiendi present.	The Ambassadors
	Negative	'estrangement' situated in mind of character, epistemic and perceptive modalities	Kafka's works
	Neutral	Action situated in viewing position of passive character, unmodalised and evaluatives withheld	Flaubert's works

Simpson's categorization of narrative point of view abstracted his 1993 autograph (47-76).

This categorization of narrative point of view will be used in the discussion of the narrator and narratee in *If on a Winter's Night*

a Traveller. Though its complexity, it is by far the most superior framework in the study of narrative point of view as it adheres systematically to textual evidence rather than broad impressionistic categorization of first- and third-person narration. The ad hoc ‘omniscience’ is linguistically expressed through various modes of modalities. Simpson acknowledge its exceptions, flaws and shortcomings (1993: 83) and demonstrates that, even when the categorization is unclear, interpretation can be reached based on the analysis of shift of narrative modes and unidentifiable narrator (60-61).

Simpson’s omission of second-person narration does not pose a problem. To scrutinize the usage of terms, from a grammatical point of view, the narrator is always a ‘first-person’ whether or not ‘I’ is present in the narrative. The term ‘third-person narrator’ is absurd since a narrator is never a ‘he’ or ‘she’ (Bal, 1985).

Application to Text: Who is ‘I’?

Complication arises as the answer to ‘who sees?’ is not the same as that to ‘who tells?’ especially in this embedded text. ‘You’ perceives everything that happens in the novel through the narrator, who both sees and tells. The story is not told from you’s perspective, but from the perspective of one who *claims* to be inside you’s consciousness. This falls into the category of Fowler’s *Type B* and Simpson’s category B(R).

So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to *recognize* the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don’t *recognize* it at all. But now that you *think* about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is *known* as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you *recognize* him as himself. Here,

however, he *seems* to have *absolutely* no connection with all the rest he has written, *at least as far as* you can *recall*. Are you disappointed? Let's see. *Perhaps* at first you *feel a bit lost*, as when a person *appears* who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work. But then you go on and *realize* that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you *expected* of the author, it's the book itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you *prefer* it this way, confronting something and not quite *knowing* yet what it is (Calvino, 1979: 9, my italics).

However, it is not as straightforward to apply any shading to the quotation above. This paragraph is full of perception modality such as *recognize*, *know*, *recall*, *think*, and *feel* and epistemic modality such as *seem* and *perhaps*. Therefore, it falls under B (R)-ve narrative. However, the narrator uses the cognitive verbs as if they are action verbs. Although he has access to the character's thoughts and feelings, the narration resembles predictions and factual presentation. It has the tone of neutral shading, where the narrator narrates matter-of-factly.

In fact, the novel begins with B(N) neutral narration before shifting to B(R)-ve.

You are at the wheel of your car, waiting at a traffic light, you take the book out of the bag, rip off the transparent wrapping, start reading the first lines. A storm of honking breaks over you; the light is green, you're blocking traffic (Calvino, 1979: 7).

This shift is subtle and almost unperceivable, so the negative shading gives the same feeling as the neutral. According to Simpson (1993), the 'two-level point of view': the shift from B(N)-ve to B (R)-ve signals bewilderment or alienation (61-62). However, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, bewilderment is throughout the text and belongs to the readers and 'you'. The shift in the novel is from B(N) neutral to B(R)-ve. Readers accept the factual-report-style narrative

(Type B(N) neutral) as fact and allow the narrator to lead them into the narrative without question. In fact, unless noticing the shift, they may carry the same impression throughout the text.

It is difficult to assign a particular point of view to *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* because there is a corruption of the boundary between story and discourse levels. In narratology, the studies set a clear distinction between the story and discourse and between the author and narrator; in other words, in the narrated reality and the presentation of a story. However, Calvino crosses all boundaries and his persona in all levels can interact outside their worlds.

I am called “I” and this is the only thing you know about me, but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger “I”. Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character “I” as if to conceal him, not having to name him or describe him, because any other name or attribute would define him more than this stark pronoun; still, by the very fact of writing “I” the author feels driven to put into this “I” a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels. Nothing could be easier for him than to identify himself with me... (Calvino, 1979: 15).

In the above extract, the narrator in ‘If on a winter’s night a traveller,’⁹ which is the second narrative in the first titled chapter, addresses ‘you’. He interrupts his narration with comments about his audience and his creator. The author becomes a (third person) character in his own work, mentioned by his invented character. The narrator tells us that the author has the intention to distance himself from the narration and employs ‘I’ as a narrator. The irony is that by having the narrator speak in such a way, the author reveals his intention and craft. Genette (1980) calls this integration of author, narrator and character a ‘complete dissociation of the instances’ (249). The author

has to detach himself from himself in referring to himself in the third-person in order to create the new identity of ‘I’. ‘The conquest of the *I* here is not a return to and attendance on himself, not a setting into the comfort of “subjectivity”, but perhaps exactly the opposite: the difficult experience of relating to oneself with (slight) distance and off-centering—a relationship wonderfully symbolized by that barely suggested, seemingly accidental semihomonymy of the narrator-hero and the signatory’ (*ibid*).

In the second narrative, ‘I’ is sometimes a type A (+ve) narrator: ‘*I would like to* erase the consequences of certain events and restore an initial condition’ (Calvino, 1979: 13, with my italic of boulomiac modality), but other times a type A (-ve):

Something *must have* gone wrong for me: some misinformation, a delay, a missed connection; *perhaps* on arriving *I should have* found a contact, *probably* linked with this suitcase that *seems* to worry me so much, though whether because I am afraid of losing it or because I can’t wait to be rid of it is *not clear* (*ibid*).

By borrowing the point of view of the narratee in the first narrative of the numbered chapters, the narrator conceals information about ‘I’ to create suspense. This creates a sense of alienation within the narrator himself and that between the readers and the text. This alienation is also presented through the contradiction between the effects of Free Direct Speech (close and immediate) and the cold and distant point of view (See below).

Who is ‘You’?

At the beginning of the novel, readers are tricked into believing that the novel is addressed to them. Through the use of ‘you’ and imperatives, the narrator and narratee are simultaneously present. Moreover, the

character ‘you’ and the readers share some of the same reading experiences: ‘you are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel...you turn the book over in your hands, you scan the sentences on the back of the jacket’ (Calvino, 1979: 3).

Looking closer at the speech pattern, we see that Free Direct Discourse, such as ‘Relax. Concentrate.’ is used to eliminate the distance between the narrator, the narratee and the narrated. A narrative voice directly addresses ‘you’ without any authorial clue. According to Simpson (1993), the use of Free Direct Speech (henceforth FDS) usually results in liberation from narrative control. In this case, however, the intimacy between the narrator and narratee makes it easier for the former to exercise his narrative control, being aware and taking account of the reader’s thoughts and feelings. What remains true of this FDS is that the narrative becomes vivid, immediate and spontaneous. The use of FDS reduces the narrative distance in that it sounds as if the narrator at the fictional level could speak to the readers, who are in fact outside the narrative.

The discourse representation makes the novel elusive. While most of the primary narrative is presented in FDS, Free Indirect Discourse (FID) reflects the thoughts of ‘you’. For instance: ‘Are you disappointed? Let’s see. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost’ from one of the previous quotations can be classified as both FDS and Free Indirect Thought (FIT). The voice cannot be identified: it can be either the narrator’s directly addressing ‘you’ or a report of ‘you’s thought.

Since the narration is inside the consciousness of ‘you’, the thought presentation is interesting and varied. The patterns of FDT, DT, FIT and IT¹⁰ are knitted together. For instance:

FDT: ‘Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn!’ (25).

DT: ‘At a certain point you remark: “This sentence sounds somehow familiar. In fact, this whole passage reads like something I’ve read before”’ (25).

IT ‘You are not sure what you like most to read’ (12).

FIT ‘What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author’s part is simply a printer’s mistake’ (25).

Some problems arise in identifying thought presentations, and this leads to an uncertainty in interpreting the text. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish between IT and FIT and between DT and IT since thoughts are never vocalized. It is ironic that DT presentation is more fictional and unrealistic than IT presentation. Since the distinction between the thought presentations is not clear, the distinction between fiction and reality is blurred.

However intimate the narration is, the narrator is not omniscient and omnipotent. There are certain realms he has no knowledge of and no control over. However, he tries to cover all possibilities to make his narrative as realistic as possible:

Perhaps you started leafing through the book already in the shop. Or were you unable to, because it was wrapped in its cocoon of cellophane? [...] Or perhaps the bookseller didn’t wrap the volume; he gave it to you in a bag (Calvino, 1979: 7, my italics).

Another technique, used to create reality of the text and to reduce the ontological distance between the text and the readers resulting in readers’ believing that the text is addressed to them, is the resemblances in the narrative at both levels. The narratee at both story and discourse levels share the same experience and frustration. ‘You’ in the story and the readers have to deal with the same interrupted stories, and both experience frustration. Calvino aims at creating a ‘mirror-text’, the term Bal (1985) uses to denote a text that normally gives suspense and prediction in the primary text. However, when both

texts take place at the same time, it results in immediacy and (appearance of) reality of the text.

In later chapters of the novel, ‘you’ takes a diverted course of actions--meeting and falling in love with another reader and visiting a publisher--, and the real readers can separate themselves from this character though they may still identify with him. Therefore, ‘you’ is just a character, and the narrative is not a ‘second-person’ narrative.

‘You’ in this novel is not what Prince (1982) calls ‘narratee-character’, a character who may or may not participate in the events recounted to him. Prince gives the example of ‘You eat meat’, in which you are the character eating the meat and you are told about the eating. In, for instance, ‘You derive a special pleasure from a just-published book’ (Calvino, 1979: 6), ‘you’ is a character who enjoys reading. The readers might share the same attitude and experience as this character and believe that the novel addresses them. In this case, ‘you’ are two different persons and cannot be defined as one narratee-character.

However, from another perspective, ‘you’ is the main character in the narrative in the numbered chapters of the novel and a narratee to the intermittent narratives. Although the second narratives are not intended for ‘you’ and he does not participate in the actual stories recounted to him, he is a ‘narratee-character’ in this level of narrative.

Levels and Distance

The first narration, the story of ‘you’ which features in the numbered chapters of the novel, is narrated by an external narrator, while the embedded narrations, the titled chapters, are presented from the point of view of internal narrators. In general, the intentions of the external

and internal narrators are different. The former may aim at presenting stories about others as true or may suggest fictionality while the latter proclaims recounting true facts about itself (Bal, 1985). Reliability of the text is of paramount interest. Since in this novel we cannot easily locate the narrator, it is difficult to judge its reliability.

Generally, in the presence of embedded texts, the primary story is usually forgotten. But in this case, the focus is never shifted away from the primary text. ‘You’ is forever in search of the ending of the stories that he starts reading, and his frustrations along with that of the readers persist throughout the second narratives. The parallelism between ‘you’ seeking out the author in order to finish the story he started reading and the real reader’s uncertainty of the identification of the narrator and the character ‘you’ foregrounds the relationship between the narrator, the narratee and the narrated.

According to Toolan (2001), the two basic components of a narrative are the tale and teller, and part of reading is ‘scrutinizing the character of the teller’ (1). Calvino seems to stress on the role of a reader more than that of a teller, and we can hardly locate the narrator, let alone scrutinize his character.

Calvino also explores the notion of distance in the novel. As discussed in the previous sections, through the discourse representation of FDS there seems to be no narrative distance between the narrator and the narratee in first narration. However, in the second narration (for instance in *‘If on a winter’s night a traveller’* in the titled chapter), the narrator addresses the author in the third person, creating a distance between the author and narrator and between the level of story and discourse. This manipulates the idea that a narrative ‘entails making what is distant and absent uncommonly present’

(Toolan, 2001: 2). Calvino brings the story closer to the audience by the use of ‘you’, but then creates a big distance by preventing ‘you’ and the readers from finishing the narratives, which become both distant and absent.

In conclusion, this paper is not an attempt to suggest flaws in narrative theories discussed. On the contrary, those theories are cited as reliable authorities in this field of studies. This paper attempts at demonstrating how the author manipulates those narrative theories and reader’s prefabrication of narratives in general. His craft results in frustration and intrigue which captivate the readers. The story of ‘you’ becomes *your* story. Through Calvino’s techniques to challenge and fascinate readers, reading becomes an activity in which readers actively participate and feel mentally involved.

There are other possible approaches to *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. This versatile novel can be read as a science fiction novel where time applies differently from what we know. It can be an existential novel in which the notions of ‘I’ and ‘You’ and ‘non-I’ are questioned. However, the fact that the story closely mimics the discourse level is a compelling directly presents a challenge for studies of point of view, if not specifically narratology.

Notes

¹ Upholding the basic narratological distinction of story and discourse (See page 197), Genette (1980) in his influential work categorizes the narrator’s status into four types, taking into account its relationship with the story whether the narrator participates in the story: *heterodiegetic* or *homodiegetic* narrator.

² An example of Fowler’s *Type A* narration is Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a first-person narrative confined within a participating character’s consciousness (1986: 135-136)..

³ Fowler gives Mervyn Peake’s *Titus Groan* as an example of Type B narration (1986: 138).

⁴ Fowler cites the example of Hemingway's *The Killers* as an example of Type C narration which exhibits neither modality nor *verba sentiendi*, resulting in an objective and impersonal style (1986: 141).

⁵ Arnold Benette's *Riceyman Steps* is an example of Fowler's Type D narrative (1986: 142-143).

⁶ Deontic modality expresses degrees of commitment, obligation, requirement and permission. It may be expressed through modal auxiliaries such as 'may', 'should', or 'must' and adjective and participial phrases such as 'it is necessary that...', and 'you are obliged/forbidden to...'.⁶

⁷ Boulmaic modality is such expressions of desire as 'hope' 'wish', 'want', 'hopefully', 'regrettably', 'it is hoped that...', and 'it is good that...'.⁷

⁸ Epistemic modality is concerned with the speaker's confidence, or lack of, in a proposition expressed. It can be expressed through perceptive verbs, such as 'think', 'see', 'feel', 'believe', 'suppose' and 'realise', or through modal auxiliaries such as 'may', 'must', 'should'. Expressions such as 'it is doubtful/ certain/ obvious/ apparent that...', 'maybe', 'perhaps', 'possibly', 'definitely', 'arguably', 'clearly' and 'obviously' also express the speaker's perception, commitment and confidence in the proposition uttered.⁸

⁹ The title of the second chapter of the book is '*If on a winter's night a traveller*', similar to that of the novel. This article retains its foregrounded use of small case in place of capital letter.

¹⁰ Cf. Simpson (1993), chapters 2 and 3 for a brief discussion of discourse representation.

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