Worksheet 7.4: Chapter 7 – narrative voice in literary texts

Throughout this Language and Literature course you have been learning about how a text is written and read:

- the ‘context of composition’ concerns the author’s circumstances
- the ‘context of interpretation’ concerns our ways of making meaning, as readers.

A third ‘player’ in this textual relationship is the narrator. This worksheet will focus on the voice of the narrator.

Narrative choices

Sometimes we know who the narrator is and sometimes we do not. Pages 176–8 of the coursebook remind us that an author must first consider how to relay the story: from a first-person, second-person or third-person point-of-view.

Many examples in Chapter 7 are drawn from Text 7.1, an extract from Ian McEwan’s novel Enduring Love, beginning on page 161. McEwan delivers this story in the first-person, but consider the matter more closely:

- Is McEwan speaking for himself, as if he is Joe Rose?
- Does the plural ‘we’ affect the narration? The second sentence begins ‘We were in sunlight’ and the second paragraph begins ‘I see us from’ …
- Does the narrator’s imagination ‘through the eyes of the buzzard’ make him more or less ‘reliable’?
- How do questions such as ‘What were we running toward?’ affect the reader?

Use the space below to write out a short portion of the extract from an alternative narrative point-of-view – perhaps that of the buzzard. You can use the following launch as your own, or start at a different point in the extract.

A couple sat in the sunlight under a turkey oak, partly protected from a strong, gusty wind. The man knelt on the grass with a corkscrew in his hand, while the woman passed him a bottle for him to open …
In trying out this kind of exercise, you’ll need to consider more than just the point-of-view. You’ll need to think about verb tense (McEwan fluctuates between past and present tense), about whether or not to use *stream of consciousness* (as McEwan does with the narrator’s questioning reflections), and about how to represent *speech* (which McEwan does through ‘reported’ speech).

Try this exercise with a passage from one of your part 3 or 4 texts. Then write a couple of short paragraphs to justify your choices by using terms such as those shown in bold in the above paragraph.

**Third-person point-of-view**

Figure 7.9 on page 179 of the coursebook (reproduced below) provides a helpful way to determine the type and tone of the third-person narration in a literary text.

Read over the definitions of key terms in the margin on page 178 and then try out Activity 7.9 starting on page 179. Give specific evidence of why a version of the *Cinderella* story would fit a particular box on this grid.

![Grid for determining third-person point-of-view](image)

The literary texts from your own part 3 or 4 studies may fit into one or two of the boxes, but be sure you understand all the different combinations on this grid.

Now select another text that is already written in third-person. Other good examples in the coursebook include:

- Text 7.2 *Untouchable* on pages 169–70
- Text 7.3 *Hills Like White Elephants* on pages 170–1
- Text 7.8 *Changes* on page 183
- Text 7.9 *Disgrace* on pages 186–7
- Text 5.1 *The Metamorphosis* on pages 121–2
- Text 5.4 *Sitting* on page 127
- Text 6.1 *Fahrenheit 451* on pages 139–40
- Text 6.4 *The Collector* on page 145
- Text 6.5 *The Stranger* on page 146.

**Applying ‘tone’**

Whether or not you were aware of the tone(s) you’ve just drafted above, you can now re-read your texts to identify the tone(s) you have used. We define tone as ‘the language used by a speaker or writer to instigate an emotional effect on the listener or reader’ (see page 224 of the coursebook); another abbreviated definition is an author’s attitude about the focus of a text.
An author may adopt a particular attitude of mind when drafting and revising a piece of fiction. But be careful: the attitude of mind must be evident in the actual text. Authors of children’s books may not always be as optimistic in real life as their books would suggest. Similarly, authors of thrillers or horror fiction may be rather calm and content people in their real lives!

Read Text 7.3 (Hills Like White Elephants) on page 170. Perhaps this is the text you decided to ‘re-write’ in the previous exercise? Using the following table, what adjectives can you use to describe the ‘tone’ of Hemingway’s original text? Justify your response for each adjective with textual evidence.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone (adjective)</th>
<th>Yes?</th>
<th>No?</th>
<th>Textual evidence</th>
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<td>bored</td>
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<td>ironic</td>
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<td>nervous</td>
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<td>at-ease</td>
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<td>familiar</td>
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<td>romantic</td>
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</table>
Remember that these adjectives will be distinct from ‘mood’, which is defined as ‘the atmosphere that is created for an audience through the tone of the text’ (see page 223 of the coursebook). An easy way to remember the difference is that:

**an author’s attitude (tone) may affect an audience’s emotional reception (mood).**

Finally, make a list of the terms you have learned in this worksheet to begin an analysis that you may be able to apply to your part 3 or 4 assessments.

The example below, giving one student’s description of the tone of Hemingway’s original text, is deliberately short to encourage your own thoughts – perhaps you may disagree with this student’s interpretive launch:

Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ is written in a stark indirect narration, whereby the ‘fly on the wall’ narrator presents what little action there is in an objective style. The tone is distant and familiar at the same time: the man and the woman are apparently attached to each other (‘that’s all we do, isn’t it – look at things and try new drinks’) yet at the same time, they are unaware of each other’s perspective: ‘I just meant the colouring of their skin,’ the woman says, to clarify why the hills look like white elephants. And in this title, Hemingway provides us a symbolic clue about their conflict ...