

First-Person vs. Third-Person

By Katie Gallant and Alison Eagles

Introduction

Works of fiction can be told through different points of view. This is known as narrative voice. A book that is written in “third-person” narrative, is told from the perspective of a narrator who is not involved in the story. On the other hand, a book written in the “first-person” is told from the perspective of a participant in the story, usually the main character (Hallett, n.d.). Often the third-person narrator is “omniscient”, meaning they ‘know’ everything, the characters thoughts and feelings, past etc. The third-person voice can also be “objective”, meaning the narrator does not have more knowledge than the reader - think of a camera just recording what it sees as the story unfolds (Hallett, n.d.).

To date, there has been limited research conducted on the influence that narrative voice has on the ability of the reader to feel empathy for the characters in a story; however, some research has suggested that difference in narrative voice can have varying effects of the amount and type of empathy inspired in the reader. Which is best for encouraging empathy in readers?

First-Person

Reading a story told directly from the perspective of the protagonist in their voice can have certain influence in the empathy felt by the reader. Younger readers in particular tend to automatically identify with protagonists, especially a present tense first-person narrator/protagonist (Nikolajeva, 2014) and may need more guidance to reflect on the character from a distance. In one experiment, conducted to examine whether readers would be more likely “trust and empathize” with a protagonist if they were the narrator of their own story, participants were given sections of a story to read, with only the narrative voice changed for half of them (van Lissa, Caracciolo, van Duuren, & van Leuven, 2016). They measured: empathic concern for the character, perspective-taking for the character, and trust of the character, finding that only trust was affected by differences in narrative voice; third-person was found to significantly increase trust for the character (van Lissa et al., 2016).

While traditionally, young adult literature has often been heavily first-person centered, recent studies show this trend is shifting toward more multiple-perspective narratives

(Koss, 2009). One advantage of this is the opportunity for readers to experience the points of view of different characters in the same story. Ideally, readers should be able to 'engage empathically' with a character without sharing their literal point of view, but a first-person keeps a story in the "here and now" and doesn't allow for enough critical distance (Nikolajeva, 2014).

Third-Person

It may seem that getting inside the mind of a character and experiencing a story from their perspective would produce higher levels empathy, yet this is not always the case. Stories told from a third-person perspective may allow the reader to take on a more omnipresent role than a first-person narrative. This may seem like third-person narratives will lessen the chance of fostering empathy with the reader, but O'Connell (2011) argues that a third-person narration may actually advance a reader's empathy. Instead of reading a self-centered story, third-person narratives may offer the reader a variety of character perspectives, furthering their chance to develop empathy.

Stories told in third-person allow the reader to learn more about the world outside of the confines of a first-person perspective. There are different ways for an author to use a third-person narrative. One type is third-person omniscient, in which the story is told from many different character perspectives. Another is third-person limited, also known as third-person limited omniscience, in which the story is told from the point of view of one character (Hallett, n.d.). Both of these perspectives can produce empathy within a reader in different ways. A story told in third-person omniscient can provide the reader with a wide range of perspectives, whereas a story told in third-person limited can really dig into the character's actions and allow the reader to empathize with the character. Describing the emotional state of a character from a third-person perspective can create affective empathy as effectively as a first-person perspective (Keen, 2006, p. 218).

Combining Perspectives

Both first-person and third-person narratives can help teen readers develop empathy. Some authors write first-person narratives with different characters, other authors may alternate between different characters in third-person narratives, and some books combine first-person and third-person storytelling to create a dichotomy between the characters. For instance, *Forget me not: The story of one family's voyage on the Titanic* alternates between the third-person perspective for Thomas and the first-person perspective of his younger sister Eve (Lawson, 2012). The combination of different perspectives allows the reader to gain a first-hand account of Eve's personal feelings, while also learning about Thomas's actions and emotions.

Conclusion

It is difficult to say that one type of narrative can produce more empathy than another. It may come down to the reader's personal preference – some readers may enjoy getting into the head of a character and really understanding their thoughts, whereas other readers may gain empathy by reading *about* other characters. One thing remains true: novels written in different perspectives can provide teens with more understanding of characters within different circumstances, which can encourage them to examine and understand different identities (Koss, 2009). When considering reading material for young adults with the intention of helping them develop their skills in empathy, narrative voice is something that should be taken into consideration. Additionally, reflecting on the narrative perspective(s) used should be incorporated into book talks and discussions.

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