

Miriam Glassman, Semester 2  
Margaret Bechard  
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Critical Essay

### The Omniscient Narrator

Whenever an author sets out to write a story, one of her primary decisions concerns the story's point of view. This decision determines the story's voice, tone, as well as the psychic distance between the text and the reader. According to Janet Burroway in Writing Fiction, if an author chooses the omniscient or unlimited point of view, that author "has total knowledge and tells us directly what we are supposed to think" (257). The omniscient author can "objectively report what is happening," dip in and out of the mind of any character, and "interpret for us that character's appearance, speech, actions, and thoughts, even if the character cannot do so;..." (257). This point of view can move about freely in time and space, as well as "provide general reflections, judgments and truths" (257). When using the unlimited point of view, the voice of the narrator can vary greatly. As Sherri Szeman points out in Mastering Point of View, this voice can "serve the same purpose as the eighteenth century's so-called 'intrusive' personae, who interrupted the story to make commentary..."(22). In this function, the author provides a strong, narrative presence, even to the point of becoming another character in the book, as in Roald Dahl's Matilda. Throughout this story, the reader is accompanied by an adult narrator whose sharp, humorous observations and moral

judgments flavor the story and shape the reader's perceptions of his characters. In Natalie Babbitt's Tuck Everlasting, the author creates a narrative voice that possesses a less intrusive, but more formal presence. In both stories, however, the first few pages signal the reader as to what role the omniscient narrator will play.

In the opening lines of Matilda, Roald Dahl quickly establishes the omniscient narrator as an opinionated, humorous storyteller: "It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful"(7). Wading into his story at a leisurely pace, Dahl plays with the notion of overly dotting parents, sympathizing with school teachers who must "suffer a good deal from having to listen to...twaddle from proud parents"(8). For the first three pages, the omniscient narrator is the only character in the story, rolling out his long list of "scorchers" and allowing his audience to acclimate to the *Uncle Roald will tell you a story* atmosphere that permeates the story. Tickling his readers with witty, excoriating descriptions of unexceptional children, Dahl's use of the unlimited viewpoint establishes that it is the narrator with his arched eyebrow who is in control of this story. And just as a storyteller who goes off an amusing tangent realizes that he must return to his story or risk losing his audience, Dahl comments at the end of his musings, "But enough of that. We have to get on." And so we do. For the rest of the book the narrator restrains himself, for the most part, from interrupting the story's momentum, although his sharp, subversive voice remains throughout.

Introducing Matilda's parents the Wormwoods, the omniscient narrator states that they "were both so gormless and so wrapped up in their silly little lives." This moral judgment on the Wormwoods is typical of the omniscient narrator, as it clearly does not

come through the eyes of the main character. Yet the judgment is qualified when Matilda's father addresses her directly as "an ignorant little twit,..."(22). The narrator's description in conjunction with Mr. Wormwood's dialogue reinforces the reader's trust in the narrator as reliable, and lessens the psychic distance between the reader and the text. Similarly, when the omniscient narrator pronounces Miss Trunchbull, headmistress of Matilda's school, as "a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike..." (67) the description comes before Matilda has ever encountered her. Yet, later when Miss Trunchbull enters the classroom and wreaks "holy terror" on the group of students she refers to as "nauseating little warts," (141), the action and dialogue together serve to underscore the narrator's judgment while offering the reader a more active experience of the character.

By posing as a strong moral presence in the story, the narrator in Matilda also serves as an ally to the reader. He presents the innocent and the good characters sympathetically, while sticking it to the abusive and uncompassionate characters, all of whom happen to be adults. Despite the fact that the story is filtered through the narrator and not Matilda, the psychic distance and commenting adult voice also serve an important purpose by allowing for an expansive humorous overlay which, in a story filled with repugnant authority figures, feels necessary. The neglectful, unloving parents, the principal as ogre, and Matilda's profound loneliness before she meets Miss Honey (with the exception of the librarian, Mrs. Plunkett), conjure up a contemporary Dickensian world in its scathing, adult attitudes towards children. By employing a humorous, subversive omniscient narrator, Dahl makes the heart-breaking and horrific circumstances of his young characters palatable to young readers. Even when child characters are

catapulted out of windows, left to fend for themselves, or closed up in a coffin-like closet full of nails, the sympathetic narrator is always close by to temper these events with slapstick and humorous jabs that give the young reader the last laugh.

In Tuck Everlasting, author Natalie Babbitt also plays the role of the storyteller, though hers has a more sober, authoritative presence. “The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning.” (3). These opening lines are commanding, opinionated, and share the declarative, dramatic feel of Dicken’s opening to A Tale of Two Cities (though Babbitt is more concise): “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...”(1). Unlike Dahl who creates a cozy, giggling intimacy with the reader, Babbitt’s use of the unlimited viewpoint creates greater psychic distance which serves her story in several ways.

First, it allows the author to lace her tale with imagery: the wheel of life, the sun as the seat of a Ferris wheel, the river water that symbolizes the constant flux of life. Another strong symbolic connection is made between the climactic summer storm and the emotional storm that eventually lets loose inside Winnie Foster. As the temperature rises in Treegap, so does Winnie’s intolerance for the restrictive bounds her family has imposed upon her. At the story’s climax, the literal storm that aids the Tuck’s’ escape symbolically allows Winnie to free herself from the safe, but somewhat repressed child she’s always been.

While Dahl and Babbitt both pose as storytellers, Dahl’s omniscient narrator feels descended from the tradition of oral storytelling, while Babbitt’s narrator assumes the more distant, formal voice of fairy tales: “One day at that time, not so very long ago,

three things happened and at first there appeared to be no connection between them” (3).

The indistinct, once-upon-a-time setting for her story, combined with the use of the number three closely follow the structure of a fairy tale. Unlike the anonymous voice of fairy tales, however, Babbitt’s narrator is more present, and often acts the part of the teacher-philosopher. Concluding her prologue by hinting at the collision of three seemingly unrelated events, the narrator intrudes to sympathize with the confused reader: “No connection, you would agree. But things can come together in strange ways.” (4). And the narrator-as-teacher eagerly takes up the challenge to illuminate this connection to her readers.

While Babbitt’s academic pose creates a sense of authority and control over her story, the role occasionally falters, mostly at the beginning, when it stops the forward movement of the story. Describing the woods of Tregap, the narrator pauses to contemplate a philosophical notion: “The ownership of land is an odd thing when you come to think of it. How deep, after all, can it go?” (7) And a little later, “And what is interesting, anyway, about a slim few acres of trees?” (7). This musing goes on for some time, and while it underscores the philosophical spirit of the book, it slows the story down to no clear purpose, and greatly increases the psychic distance.

Like Dahl, Babbitt shapes her reader’s opinions by the language she uses to describe her characters. The man in the yellow suit possesses a “kind of grace” yet ominously reminds Winnie of “black ribbons” hung on the door for her grandfather’s funeral (18). Mae Tuck is “a great potato of a woman with a round, sensible face, and calm brown eyes” (10). Without telling us anything about the inhabitants of the Foster household, Babbitt clearly conveys her judgment upon the family in their “touch-me-not

cottage” surrounded by “grass cut painfully to the quick,” and the iron fence that confines Winnie and “clearly said, “Move on—we don’t want you here”(6). Indoors, the house undergoes the “pitiless double assaults of her mother and grandmother” who “mopped and swept and scoured [the cottage] into limp submission” (50).

In a 2005 lecture given by Marion Dane Bauer on point of view, she states that one of the disadvantages of using the omniscient narrator is the “risk of sacrificing intimacy and connection with the character.” To compensate for the possibility of too much psychic distance, “the external perspective has to provide emotional resonance.” In both Matilda and Tuck Everlasting, the authors succeed in providing that emotional resonance, though in very different ways.

In Matilda, the author champions the cause of the neglected child through his skillful use of hyperbole. Matilda is a sweet, humble child whose brilliance is unrecognized by her own parents, and whose basic humanity they completely ignore. Though most young readers cannot identify with Matilda specifically, most can sympathize to some degree with her loneliness, and her simple longing to be known and loved for who she is. Just as Matilda is an exaggeration of a truly special child, the two important female characters in the book who frame Matilda are oppositional caricatures: the fierce, tyrannical headmistress whose role model is the abusive Mr. Squeers of Nicholas Nickleby; and the tender, sweet teacher who takes a lesson from her brave, young disciple and learns to stand up for herself. These women represent the two worlds Matilda can potentially inhabit, and it is the reader’s longing for Matilda to triumph over the abusive adult and flourish beside the nurturing Miss Honey that drives the story, and engages the reader emotionally.

In Tuck Everlasting, Babbitt presents a similar triad: the overprotective Fosters, the restless-but-untested Winnie Foster, and the Tucks, a simple but loving family who offers Winnie the kind of freedom and affection she craves. Here, the reader anxiously roots for Winnie to follow her heart, and cheers her on as she helps the Tucks gain their freedom. The philosophical question of whether Winnie should drink the water that grants eternal life ultimately becomes less important than the story's timeless truths about the ways in which love can both imprison and free us; and combined with Babbitt's rich use of language, the trip to Treegap is an emotionally satisfying and memorable journey.

Whether through blistering humorous observation or a more traditional narrative style, Dahl and Babbitt use the omniscient point of view with great success, achieving what all writers hope to accomplish with their chosen point of view: "to inhabit the voice so that the characters pass through [the writer] and onto the page." (MDB).

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