

## The Unreliable Narrator in Postmodern Fiction

A look at *The New York Trilogy*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*

In 1961, film critic Wayne C Booth coined the term “unreliable narrator,” but the concept was nothing new. Early examples reach back hundreds of years. Geoffrey Chaucer’s fourteenth century *Canterbury Tales* featured The Wife of Bath who, despite her feminist ideals, was categorically unreliable. She contradicted herself and misused scriptures to get what she wanted. Two hundred years later, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the eponymous narrator is also unreliable in that he manipulates the truth and has, at best, a tenuous grip on his sanity. Further examples can be found up through Modern and Postmodern literature. In the latter, an unreliable narrator poses epistemic problems, for both the unreliable character and the reader. In Modernist works, there is typically a clear narrative. Even deep explorations into a character’s state of mind are seated in a place. Through the character’s thoughts and observations, they come to know what is happening, as does the reader. In Postmodernism, however, there is no anchor, no grand narrative, and with an unreliable narrator, not only does the character not have or portray a clear picture for themselves, but the reader is left asking what is actually going on in the story. Neither reader nor narrator can articulate a cohesive account of events or develop a sound epistemology of the work.

An unreliable narrator has a compromised credibility which casts doubt on the truth of their account. They may mislead readers, either deliberately or unintentionally, and their

unreliability may arise from circumstances, character flaws, or psychological difficulties. As such, there are several different types of unreliable narrators which are important to explore:

The Deliberately Unreliable Narrator misleads and may even openly lie. Their intention is deception and manipulation. If Serena Joy narrated in first person *The Handmaid's Tale*, it's likely that she would lie to make herself seem right-minded and magnanimous.

The Interactively Unreliable Narrator interacts with other characters who challenge or contradict their version of events, leading to uncertainty about the truth and doubt that their account is reliable. To again use *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is an example of this type of narrator. She herself reminds the reader that her telling is a reconstruction and only her version of events.

The Unintentionally Unreliable Narrator is not deliberately misleading but may be mistaken due to memory lapses, mental illness, trauma, or other factors. In Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's trauma is her growing paranoia, and her account, through no fault of her own, is unreliable.

The Naïve Narrator lacks understanding or awareness, often due to age or limited experience, and they may misinterpret events or have a biased perspective. To cite a Modernist example, Huck Finn is a great example of a Naïve Narrator as his story is told through the eyes of a child.

The Crazy Narrator is mentally unstable or psychologically disturbed, leading to a distorted or fragmented narrative that is detached from reality. Daniel Quinn of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the first story in *The New York Trilogy*, goes mad. His confusion about his identities leads to insanity, and he moves from having many different selves to none.

Writers use unreliable narrators to create suspense, explore subjectivity, explore biases, enhance narrative depths, and draw attention to specific themes. They delve into complexities of perception, memory, and perspective that a reliable narrator cannot. Consider Jim in *My Ántonia*. While it could be argued that he is somewhat unreliable as certainly possible in a first-person narration, on the grand spectrum of unreliable narrators he doesn't rate terribly high. As a reader, one would accept his account of the events in the book, and his emotions surrounding those events, as a fair representation of the actual events. Such is not true of the narrators in *The New York Trilogy*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Their accounts are colored through the lens of unreliability.

The four narrators in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* grapple with their own existential crises and attempt to navigate through seemingly complex narratives, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Daniel Quinn, the narrator of "City of Glass" is a writer who assumes the identity of a private detective named Paul Auster. Quinn becomes entangled in a mysterious case involving a man named Peter Stillman and his son. As the story unfolds, Quinn's identity becomes increasingly uncertain as he wrestles with questions of language, identity, and

the nature of reality. He is a man wracked with grief at the loss of his wife and young son. His withdrawal from the world, both physically and emotionally, coupled with his obsession for Stillman, make Quinn an unreliable narrator. Right away, in the first chapter, “he had, of course, long ago stopped thinking of himself as real” (9). Later, upon seeing himself in a mirror and thinking that he had turned into a bum “...for the fact was that he did not recognize the person he saw there as himself” (117). He is growing detached from his reality, which the reader has difficulty in envisioning because the description they receive in the text may be suspect.

Daniel Quinn is a Crazy Narrator at the end of the novella and an Unintentionally Unreliable Narrator in the beginning. In either case, the reader has no way of knowing the truth. The narrator’s responsibility to engage the reader in the story is off the table, and without an intelligible story, the reader, like the narrator, is on shaky epistemological ground.

Earlier in the story, Quinn irresistibly bought a red notebook which he then carried around with him everywhere. He records many things in this notebook, including his actions and everything surrounding his surveillance of Stillman. He recorded, “Not only did he take note of Stillman’s gestures, describe each object he selected or rejected for his bag, and keep an accurate timetable for all events, but he also set down with meticulous care an exact itinerary of Stillman’s divagations . . . ” (62) and further, “The red notebook, of course, is only half the story, as any sensitive reader will understand” (130). He is clearly obsessed, as will be noted about Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* a little later in this paper.

The second novella in the trilogy is “Ghosts,” which centers on Blue, a private detective hired by a man named White to surveil his father, Black. As with Quinn in “City of Glass,” Blue becomes obsessed with following Black and begins to lose his sense of identity in the process,

questioning the nature of his reality: "He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself" (141). Blue's narration is marked by uncertainty as he becomes enmeshed in a web of paranoia. He even discovers that making up stories can be pleasurable: "As the days go on, Blue realizes there is no end to the stories he can tell" (143). When he discovers that Black's papers are "nothing more than his own reports" (185), he sees that his existence has become circular, and this triggers a rage within him that leads to his fatal bludgeoning of Black. It's as if the circularity of it was more than Blue could stand; the evidence of his own unreliable narration got the better of him.

The narrator of "The Locked Room," the final in the trilogy, remains unnamed throughout. He is a writer who is asked to research the disappearance of his childhood friend, Fanshawe, who has left behind a cache of unpublished manuscripts. As the narrator delves deeper into Fanshawe's life and work, he contends with questions of authorship, betrayal, and the boundaries of personal and artistic identity. It is significant that the narrator is unnamed, and the reader only learns the last name, Fanshawe, with whom the narrator is obsessed. This adds to the overall air of ambiguousness in the novel and the sense that the narrator is unreliable.

The narrator realizes that Fanshawe is not dead but is indeed alive and had faked his death. The narrator's reality, that Fanshawe was deceased and Fanshawe's wife was now his wife is completely flipped upside down. His ability to acquire knowledge about the world is compromised. The effect is brilliantly confusing because readers are generally primed to look for meaning, however, through Auster's narrators' view, sense cannot be made of the story of

anyone's life. He writes: "...but in the end we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence" (243).

Each of Auster's narrators is characterized by a sense of isolation, existential angst, and a search for meaning in the complexities of life, particularly urban life. These are very postmodernist characteristics. The three novellas, taken together, paint a vivid picture of perceived meaning gone wrong. The narrators that Auster employs, even the brief first person narration at the end of "City of Glass," struggle to find significance and a constant, understandable thread in the experience that they either court or is thrust upon them. They fail every time. Even the readers fail because there is too much uncertainty in events, and the narrators' assessment of events is unreliable. Narrator and reader alike are unable to form a sound epistemology.

Then in steps Thomas Pynchon... his *The Crying of Lot 49* is known for its complex narrative and oddball characters, as is all of Pynchon's fiction. The protagonist of the novel, Oedipa Maas, experiences strange, surreal events throughout the novel which challenge her sense of self and whether she is able to determine what is the truth of her world. Her perception of reality is mountinglly unreliable as she digs deeper into the mystery surrounding the secretive Tristero organization. Oedipa's confusion and uncertainty about what is real and what is imagined make her an unreliable narrator: At times she seeks connection with others, but her obsession with Tristero isolates and, in some instances, alienates her. The disconnect in her marriage to Mucho is evidence of this.

Early in the novel, before she knew of Tristero, Oedipa thinks about the story of Rapunzel, and she wonders if Rapunzel's act of letting down her hair to the world outside was a metaphor for attempting to connect with others through barriers of isolation and meaningful communication. Oedipa draws parallels between Rapunzel's situation and her own experiences of feeling disconnected and seeking validating communication with others: "Such a captive maiden . . . soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego, only incidental . . . If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else?" (12). This quote reflects Oedipa's feelings of isolation, and she asks herself what the point is of navigating the blurred boundaries between truth and illusion if they will always remain inscrutable.

Metzger, whose first name is never mentioned, and Mike Fallopian accompany Oedipa on her journey to discover meaning and provide her with information about the Tristero system, its history, and the historical and cultural phenomena linked to it. However, they are not necessarily trustworthy sources of information, as they have their own agendas and may manipulate Oedipa for their own purposes. The same can be said of her psychiatrist, Dr. Hilarius, and her husband Mucho, who effectively function as agitators of an already murky pond, stirring up muck and clouding vision.

Randolph Driblette, a filmmaker working on a production of *The Courier's Tragedy*, a play that Oedipa obsesses on as she digs ever deeper into Tristero. The play shows elements that parallel Oedipa's own experiences, and she comes to believe it holds clues to understanding the Tristero conspiracy. Driblette's cryptic personality has an effect on Oedipa because she thinks he

is connected to the mystery of Tristero and could provide useful information, but he is as the secondary characters are in this novel. Ambiguous.

Pynchon's use of unreliable narration adds to the novel's ambiguity and mystery, keeping readers guessing, wondering what is really happening. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, both characters and reader struggle to gain knowledge, as it's often presented in a fragmented and elusive manner. Their quest for knowledge is hindered by confusion, misinterpretation, and the unreliable nature of the information they do encounter. Characters may believe they have gained insights or discovered truths, only to have their understanding called into question later.

As for the reader, they progress through the novel and piece together clues, interpretations, and theories alongside the characters, yet Pynchon deliberately presents information in a fractured and ambiguous manner, making it challenging for readers to form a clear understanding of the narrative. Readers may need to navigate through layers of symbolism, intertextuality, and unreliable narration to construct their own interpretations of the story and its themes.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood makes use of an unreliable narrator but in a slightly different way. In both *The New York Trilogy* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, the unreliable narrators are wrestling with questions of identity and the validity of their interpretations. *The Handmaid's Tale* protagonist, Offred, is unreliable in the sense that she is a product of her environment and subject to the propaganda and indoctrination of the oppressive regime. Her perceptions and interpretations of events are shaped by her limited perspective and the constraints of her circumstances. Her telling is filtered through her subjective experiences, emotions, and memories, which in turn are influenced by the extreme oppression, isolation,



and psychological torment she finds herself in. She says, "It isn't a story I'm telling. It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. I need to believe it. I must believe it" (39). In the first two mentioned books, there is a focus on the interiority of the narrator. While there certainly are events and situations, that are extremely difficult for those characters, Offred's world is another category entirely. What the reader perceives as her reality is something that feels entirely possible the reader, particularly if the reader is female.

Her perspective, as captive, is limited, and she often questions her own perceptions and interpretations of events. In addition, her narrative is shaped by her need for survival and her attempts to navigate the dangerous world of Gilead. This subjectivity and uncertainty make her narration unreliable in the sense that readers must consider the possibility of bias, distortion, or gaps in her account of events. At times she deliberately misrepresents things, such as her recounting of the first night she was with Nick. First, she tells a no-nonsense, very businesslike version of events and then says, "I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened" (261). This is followed by a more companionable, albeit vague, exchange, and finally, confesses again, "It didn't happen that way either. I'm not sure how it happened, not exactly" (261). Here, Offred is baffled by her own reality, and as she is the reader's only window to it, the reader is baffled as well.

In Gilead, women's access to education, and thereby knowledge, is heavily restricted, and they are considered subservient to the ruling class and are denied many basic rights and freedoms in order for the government to maintain the established order and keep control. This included reading and writing. When the Commander wishes to play Scrabble with Offred, she was baffled and, rightfully, afraid. His choice of game is meaningful because the purpose of

Scrabble is to find and make meaning out of chaos. The Commander's decision to play reflects his desire for companionship and intellectual stimulation, however, it also serves to reinforce the power dynamics and control exerted by the Commander over Offred.

Unreliable narrators can significantly impact a reader's understanding of events in a story by distorting or manipulating the presentation of information. They blur the line between truth and fiction. Readers may question the accuracy of what is being described, and this could lead to a more critical examination with the text. This is important to understanding because many novels do not employ an unreliable narrator, and when one reads such a book, the requirement to decipher is absent.

Unreliable narrators often present events from a perspective that is biased or distorted. This subjectivity shapes the reader's understanding of characters, conflicts, and themes, and readers may need to suss out hidden motives or mine for underlying truths. Even more challenging is the narrator who purposefully misleads readers by omitting critical details, manipulating the timeline, or providing outright false information. As a result, readers may form incorrect assumptions or interpretations about the narrative, only to have their interpretations challenged later.

So, what is one to make of a narrative that's composed of uncertainties? First, enjoy it. Second, take it apart to see what can be learned epistemically from the text. The use of an unreliable narrator adds layers of complexity and intrigue to a narrative, encouraging readers to actively engage and interpret the events in the text in multiple ways. This is the challenge to a reader of postmodern fiction, particularly those narratives that employ an unreliable narrator. Not only is the narrator trying to suss out her narrative and her role as an agent in an

environment, but the reader is too. Narration and reading are rendered completely subjective which, in many novels, works just beautifully.

#### Works Cited

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