

Shaping Readers: The Moral Impact of Narrators

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## Abstract

Readers who consume stories have the potential to be changed and impacted by the content of narratives. The authors of stories hold a good deal of the influence when it comes to stories, and the characters of the stories—the ones the readers fall in love with or root for or dread—also play a part in reader development. The narrators of the stories, however, are the voices that are presenting the stories, and it is through their worldviews that the readers are most fundamentally shaped. The narrators of *The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening*, *The Things They Carried*, and the *Harry Potter* series craft worlds, tell histories, and expose cultural problems that are understood and wholly accepted by the narratee—an ideal audience for the individual story, also created by the author. However, the real readers who dive into their stories' worlds are the ones affected by the morality presented. Each of these four narrators relay stories rich with content and moral implications, and it is the voice of the narrator and how closely the reader aligns with the narratee that impacts and challenges the audiences' views of morality.

### Shaping Readers: The Moral Impact of Narrators

Stories powerfully impact readers. In every corner of the world, from the richest inhabitants of a first world country to those living in huts in a war-torn nation, stories influence how a person grows to understand the world around him or her. The authors of stories, from the great literary epics to the children's books that a child hears before bedtime, shape readers through the characters in the stories, creating a power over the reader. However, an unseen and often forgotten contributor in stories impacts the readers most significantly: the narrator.

Whether given a name in a story or an omniscient role, a narrator is foundational to the reader's experience. In fictional stories specifically, narrators have an important role in engaging the audience for the sake of creating an impact. Considering the influence of stories, the moral weight on readers must be considered. A narrator presents a story through a worldview unique to that piece of literature, and a reader's perception of morality may change because of the version of morality presented. Each story told is freighted with its own understanding of what is right and what is wrong, and the reader's understanding of that difference varies with each new moral perspective a narrator provides. Narratives such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening*, *The Things They Carried*, and the *Harry Potter* series offer a wide range of moral perceptions, and the narrator for each of those books holds a position of influence over the reader, presenting new understandings of right and wrong and shifting the audiences' views of morality.

#### **The True Voice: A Narrator's Presence and Control in Storytelling**

Stories have more than one contributor determining their overall meaning and scope of influence: the author, the various characters, and the narrator all create the

perceived morality in each story. While all three are necessary, the narrator holds the greatest amount of power over a story and over a reader yet is often the forgotten influencer. It is easy to assume the author and the narrator are one in the same—and they do go hand in hand in an inseparable way—but they cannot simply be considered a single voice. The author and the narrator are reliant on each other, but they both have separate roles within a story; the author creates the text, but the narrator tells the story.

The narrator of a story has direct contact with the readers, and because it is the narrator's voice relaying the events of the story, the author can quickly be forgotten. Jonathan Culler discusses narratology in his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Regarding narrators, he says that “readers try to infer from the text a narrator, a voice which speaks” (87). The author himself is not the voice within the story, as an author can create a voice that is outside of himself; rather, the author “creates a text which is read by the readers” through the voice of the narrator (Culler 87). For example, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the author is F. Scott Fitzgerald, but the voice is Nick Carraway. Searching for textual meanings in the story must be sought through the voice of Nick Carraway, as only his voice, musings, and interactions are given as a basis for the story, and his voice presents a type of morality for the reader to evaluate. Fitzgerald may have created Carraway, but they are not one and the same.

Narrators cannot be fully removed from their authors, however, as they are not merely self-existent. Because a narrator is the brain-child of an author, the story told is in some way a reflection of the author, but the author may not agree completely with the presented morality in his story. Therefore, the most significant influence made on the reader still lies in the hands of the narrator. To use *The Great Gatsby* again, the narrator

Nick Carraway reveres Jay Gatsby and his lifestyle—a lifestyle of debauchery, partying, and mystery. This adulation reveals much about Nick Carraway as a character and a narrator and creates a moral compass within the realm of *The Great Gatsby* by presenting and praising characters who hold to particular moral standards; the morals presented through Nick Carraway’s voice most powerfully mold the reader’s understanding of morality. Never in the story does Fitzgerald actually speak. The author himself offers no explicit stance on the morality or absence of virtue in the story; only Carraway takes a stance, making the narrator the greatest influencer in the story.

Narrators holding the greatest level of influence over the audience then give the authors a degree of liberty when writing stories. Aristotle (384-322 BC) was one of the first philosophers to truly comment on an author’s place in a piece of art. He uses the genre of poetry in *Poetica* (335 BC) to determine the amount of freedom authors have when composing a work; Aristotle’s evaluation considers the way in which a poet marshals artistic language for the sake of aesthetics. Often, the language an author produces in poetry is not necessarily the language of the common man, yet the poet will also not consistently speak in the jargon and metaphors of poetry outside of his art. The voice in the poem does not always line up with the voice of the poet. Aristotle contends that “the critics, therefore, are in error who censure these licenses of speech, and hold the author up to ridicule” (XXII). While this conclusion is primarily focused on authors choosing language they do not regularly use, it also applies to the concept of storytelling and the understood morality found within those stories. A good poet can write words beyond his or her normal vocabulary, just as a good author can write narrators who hold to different moral standings than his or her own. This ability to write morals that they do

not hold to themselves is what takes the major influence away from the authors of stories and gives it to the narrators through whom the readers experience the story.

### **Contradicting Ears: The Narratee and the Reader**

Every story is directed towards someone; in literature, narrators tell stories to an audience, to readers. However, the term “readers” has too many meanings to satisfactorily describe the narrator’s audience. Every story being told has an intended audience, an implied reader. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* deems the implied reader as “sympathetic and receptive to the text’s strategies” and, “in contrast to the actual reader”, the implied reader has “no ideological baggage that may interfere with the text’s schemes” (Buchanan). The implied reader is the one whom the author created in his mind along with the narrator; the one who will completely understand the authorial intent behind the story and grasp all of the facets of the text as they were envisioned by the author.

Just as the author creates the narrator, he also imaginatively creates the one with whom the narrator will ideally share. Literary critic Gerald Prince calls this component of literature the narratee. In “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee”, Prince proposes that the narratee is “without personality or social characteristics.” The narratee is ignorant of all things, save those presented by the narrator; “without the assistance of the narrator, without his explanations and information supplied by him, the narratee is able neither to interpret the value of an action nor grasp its repercussions” (193). The narratee is neutral, the perfect audience for the specified narrator, both created by the author. The narratee knows only what the narrator tells him, and is influenced only in the exact way the author intends.



However, the actual readers of stories are not created by the author so the authorial intent is potentially lost to them, giving the narrator room to influence and change a reader's perspective based on the story he or she tells. The actual reader of every story told will vary, and can never be wholly predicted by any author. The intended influence on the narratee is all an author can control, but every reader has the potential to interpret and understand the story in a different or even opposing manner. Examining the cultural reactions to and changes surrounding various works may reveal the impact of the narrators' moral perceptions as well as the gap between the narratees' understanding and that of the actual readers.

### **A Misguided Moral High Ground: Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby***

F. Scott Fitzgerald may represent the pen behind *The Great Gatsby* (1925), but Nick Carraway is the voice. Carraway's tale of his life during the Jazz Age with Jay Gatsby highlights a society in which "gin was the national drink and sex the national obsession" ("Scott Fitzgerald"). However, Carraway makes it clear early on in his story that he does not endorse the obsessions of the age, that is, until he meets Jay Gatsby: "Only Gatsby... was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 2). Nick Carraway begins his story by placing himself on a moral high ground above those whose lifestyles he disdains. Nick Carraway claims himself to be moral simply because he thinks himself better than those who participated in the debauchery of the 1920s. Fitzgerald's narratee is one who understands the culture of the 1920s and who heeds Jay Gatsby's life as a warning, regardless of Nick Carraway's romanticizing of Gatsby. However, Nick's claim to morality influences the trajectory of the novel, and in doing so, impacts the reader's

moral perception of the story, creating a potential gap between the narratee and the reader.

Before beginning his story, Carraway claims that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” (1), yet, as he begins interacting with the elite New York society during the 1920s, most of whom he meets through interactions at Jay Gatsby’s parties, he withholds his judgements only verbally; internally, he is quick to make assumptions about nearly every character with whom he interacts. Scott Donaldson berates Carraway in “The Trouble with Nick”, saying, “He dislikes people in general and denigrates them in particular...Neither his ethical code nor his behavior is exemplary: propriety rather than morality guides him” (131). This characteristic of Nick Carraway is essential to the overall story and moral direction of *The Great Gatsby* as it sets the tone of the story; Carraway wants to take the “moral” high ground, yet Jay Gatsby, “a walking compendium of social gaucheries” (Donaldson 131), the epitome of everything Carraway scorns, is the great exception to his judgement and stance on propriety.

Jay Gatsby’s exception to Nick Carraway’s scorn is foundational to the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick’s time in New York is highlighted by multiple encounters with those who are living the kind of life he disdains—his cousin Daisy, her husband Tom, Daisy’s friend Jordan, and Gatsby. Yet only Gatsby is the complete exception in Nick’s eyes. Jerome Thale discusses the importance of the other characters in Nick Carraway’s life in his essay “The Narrator as Hero.” He states that “the sentimentality of Tom helps make Gatsby’s romanticism credible; the irresponsible Tom and Daisy are contrasted with dedicated Gatsby, and the dishonest Jordan with the faithful Gatsby”

(72). The juxtaposition of these characters with Gatsby only romanticizes him more in Nick's eyes, making Gatsby the exception to the narrator's moral scorn.

Thale's comments on the foils in *The Great Gatsby* are ironic, as Gatsby's good characteristics are only good when compared to someone worse. Gatsby's romanticism is overtly foolish when it comes to Daisy, but it seems lovely when looked at in contrast with Tom; when Tom crassly confronts Gatsby about his relationship with Daisy, Gatsby proclaims his love for her: "She never loved you, do you hear? he cried. She only married you because I was poor...it was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!" (Fitzgerald 130). Gatsby seems dedicated when contrasted with Tom and Daisy, but without those two characters who starkly oppose his thoughts and behaviors, he would be seen as obsessive; when Nick first learns of Gatsby and Daisy's past relationship, Jordan reveals to him that Gatsby has waited five years and "bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (78). And he appears faithful in contrast with Jordan, but he is by no means honest; Gatsby originally tells Nick he was "educated at Oxford", but later reveals that he "can't really call himself an Oxford man" as he only attended the school for five months (65, 129). Gatsby's redeemable qualities are only seen as such when juxtaposed with those who are slightly worse than he is in the eyes of Nick, and Nick's blatant acceptance of Gatsby's flaws is important because it establishes an exception for the readers who are also experiencing Jay Gatsby and his morals for the first time, as Nick Carraway is.

The shifting nature of Nick Carraway's opinion of Jay Gatsby is matched by the shifting morality presented within the novel. Nick cannot make up his mind concerning Gatsby and his crowd in the novel. After a lively night with Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and

Jordan, Nick finds himself musing over their lifestyle: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (Fitzgerald 35). Nick loves their lifestyle, and he hates it; he wants desperately to be a part of it while still condemning the impact of their actions on others. This indecisiveness is a trademark of the voice of the novel itself. W. J. Harvey discusses Nick Carraway’s voice in his essay “Theme and Texture in *The Great Gatsby*.” He credits the voice of the novel to Nick, stating that it is through Nick that the “delicately poised ambiguity of moral vision” is achieved (76).

The moral ambiguity is of the utmost importance when considering how this novel has impacted culture. In the case of *The Great Gatsby*, more than just the original audience of the Jazz Age was influenced. Many have credited *The Great Gatsby* as the great American novel, meaning that the culture it shapes stretches much further, and the unclear morals presented within the novel have a greater effect, as the gap between the narratee and reader widens with time. Nick’s exception for Gatsby’s actions creates an unclear moral picture for the readers, widening the gap between the narratee—who would see past Nick’s unreliability—and the reader whose understanding of the novel’s morality and presentation of immoral behavior may be shifted by the narrator’s presentation.

The morals exhibited by Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* are wholly romanticized by Nick Carraway as he grows fond of his friend, and because of this, the readers impacted by this great American novel have been seemingly taught, through the voice of Nick Carraway, that the romanticizing of actions such as Jay Gatsby’s is acceptable. Anthony Larson argues that *The Great Gatsby* should be understood as one of the great pieces of American fiction since “*Gatsby* is read as a moral lesson on the excesses and

failures of a certain America and—perhaps—the American dream itself” (qtd. in Batchelor 136). Jay Gatsby stands as the epitome of what so many consider the American dream: a rags to riches story where Jay Gatsby starts at the bottom and works his way up to being one of the social elite, living a lavish and expensive lifestyle with little thought of consequences. As Nick learns more about Gatsby, and therefore communicates to the audience more about the novel’s namesake, he finds more ways to justify every action that Gatsby takes, seeing Gatsby as better than the rest of the elite crowd, saying Jay is “worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 154). Yet Jay Gatsby’s actions are not morally exemplary; he throws lavish parties, encourages and participates in debauchery, lusts after a married woman, and cheats his way to the top of the business world. But regardless of Gatsby’s choices, in Nick’s eyes Gatsby does little wrong and all his actions are justifiable and romanticized.

Because of the justification and romanticizing of Jay Gatsby by Nick Carraway, Gatsby has become a celebrated and exalted literary character, influencing the moral perception of a wide range of audiences since the novel’s publication. Bob Batchelor comments on this in his essay “The Enduring Influence of *The Great Gatsby*,” saying, “We all have a bit of Gatsby in us, because we certainly have Gatsby all around us. Fitzgerald’s masterpiece is essential in our [American] cultural world and foundational in understanding what it means to be American and formulating ideas about our past, present, and future” (125). *The Great Gatsby* was written in the 1920s for the Jazz Age, but its impact does not stop there. *The Great Gatsby* has become a timeless classic because it “grants the readers the ability to discern for themselves what its themes mean in their own times” (Batchelor 168). The scope of influence from *The Great Gatsby*

comes from the broad range of interpretations—many are predisposed to sympathize with Carraway’s view of Gatsby, but there are also those readers who are disenchanted by Carraway’s romanticizing of Gatsby, and perhaps partially bridge the gap between narratee and reader.

Since *The Great Gatsby* has been deemed a great American novel by so many, it is read—and more accurately evaluated—in countless high school classrooms. Though the characters in the novel are older and established, Maureen Corrigan comments on the fact that *The Great Gatsby* appeals to “the young and reckless” (286). In her book *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came To Be and Why it Endures*, Corrigan takes the novel to a high school classroom as a part of a study on *The Great Gatsby*’s enduring influence and reports that the students “didn’t care much for Nick”; the high schoolers reading this novel for class are the very ones who see through Nick’s romanticizing of Jay, calling Nick a not too impressive “sellout” (286). Despite Nick’s questionable portrayal of Jay’s morals, the high school aged participants in this study were able to see that he is not a voice to be trusted with the power of influence; some, particularly young, readers of the novel are able to look beyond the voice and see the message the narrator intends for the narratee—that is, the dangers of living like Jay Gatsby.

While some audiences, specifically young readers not yet “rueful[ly]” tainted by age (Corrigan 286), heed the consequences of Jay Gatsby’s lavish lifestyle and ignore Nick Carraway’s romanticizing of his friend’s immoral ways, other readers do not. The “Party Like Gatsby” Spectacle Extraordinaire exemplifies Jay Gatsby as a “visionary” and throws lavish parties in honor of a literary character with questionable morals made attractive through the voice of Nick Carraway (“Party Like Gatsby”). Such readers

entirely lose sight of the warnings presented by the novel's themes, and instead focus on the moral vantage point from which the story is told. These readers only widen the gap between reader and narratee, giving the narrator a power over the readers through the morals supposedly presented in the novel. As Nick Carraway finds "a scornful solidarity between Gatsby" and himself against the world (Fitzgerald 165), so do audiences who hear only Nick's voice praising Jay Gatsby. Gatsby climbs the ladder of the American dream, gains power with his wealth, and quickly wins Nick over with his charm.

Batchelor comments on the effect of Jay Gatsby in his book *Gatsby: The Cultural History of the Great American Novel*. He says that "Nick's restraint [in telling Gatsby's secrets]" and "Gatsby's greatness" paint the overall picture of "everyone...bending to the will of the wealthy" (220-221). Nick Carraway allows Gatsby's status to affect him, and in doing so, shapes readers and the perceived influence of the wealthy and those with a high status through exalting Jay Gatsby, his actions, and those like him; this in turn creates an impact different than that imagined from the narratee.

### **The Self-made Heroine: The Voice of *The Awakening***

Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening* (1898), written by Kate Chopin, is told by a third-person, unnamed narrator who follows the life of Mrs. Edna Pontellier as she undergoes an awakening of her personal identity, her sexuality, and her social roles. The story is meant for a female narratee, one who is also seeking liberation and is open to and encouraged by Edna's radical means of achieving her own freedom. The narrator of *The Awakening* supports Edna's journey and makes this affirmation clear through the language used to describe Edna and her choices. The narrator's support is important to note, because as this narrator lays out the choices being made in the novel, she also

inspires readers to support Edna's choices as well—choices that do not fall under a traditional moral category but create an understood morality nonetheless, especially to female readers. Edna Pontellier is exemplified by the narrator as a feminist hero to readers—both from the time of the original audience and future readers that followed—of *The Awakening*.

Edna's feminist tendencies begin early in the novel; from the opening scene at the vacation home all the way through to Edna's suicide in the ocean, the narrator details a character who is unwilling to be tied down by her culturally expected roles as a woman. Veeramankai Staina Yoharatnam considers Edna Pontellier and *The Awakening* in her essay "A Woman's Achievement of Liberating Triumph from Worldly Bondages: A Critical Analysis of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." Yoharatnam claims, "*The Awakening* is a compellingly prescient story of a woman unfulfilled by the mundane yet highly feminine role" and the restraint her sex places on the "ability to continue a more gratifying life" (Section 1). The narrator recounts a time when Edna tries to explain to a female friend that Edna is unwilling to "sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone." The friend cannot understand, as if Edna is talking a different language. The narrator endorses Edna's position by lightly berating the friend, saying that Edna "appeased" her and "laughed" at the woman's acceptance of the mother-role (Chopin 67). Edna cannot fully embrace the expected role of the mother-woman, and the narrator of the novel does not condemn her for seeking a different lifestyle than what is expected; rather, the narrator uses Edna's story to encourage the narratee, meant to be other female readers, to seek their own liberation from the ties that seek to bind them.



As Edna begins her journey to awakening, her husband must decide how to handle her sudden change; no matter how her husband reacts; however, he is still bound to be condemned by the narrator because he represents the patriarchal society from which Edna seeks escape. When Edna makes the decision to move into the pigeon-house and does so without awaiting the approval of Mr. Pontellier, he is appalled and deeply worried about “what people would say.” He thinks only of his business, and the narrator states that he is “unwilling to acknowledge” Edna’s reasons as “adequate” (Chopin 114). Despite Mr. Pontellier doing nothing to force Edna to stay in the house and taking steps to redirect the public’s opinion of the matter, he is still painted as the enemy, as it is his house, his money, and his furnishings that Edna feels she must escape from in order to fully understand the emotional and sexual changes that she is undergoing.

Any support Mr. Pontellier offers his wife is overshadowed by his connection to the patriarchy, making him part of what Edna seeks to escape. Michael Gilmore comments on Edna’s changes in “Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of *The Awakening*.” As Edna moves away from home to find herself apart from her husband, she threatens normal social standards as she revolts against the notion of “belonging” to her husband as a piece of property (62). An Englishwoman under the signature “Maryland” wrote on the condition of the American married woman in 1898, the year of *The Awakening*’s publication, and states that she does not envy the American wife, as she is “less free”, has a “less free social life”, and a “far less lovely time.” The American wife in 1898 was given a “path of duty” and could not expect to “eat her cake and have it too” but rather to “sink gracefully into the background as soon as the Wedding March is over” (“Status of Married Women” 13). The narrator of *The*

*Awakening* does not describe Edna's choices as revolting or disturbing of her wifely duty, but rather explains them with reverence, as Edna is rising higher on "the spiritual" scale of self-discovery (Chopin 115). This language on the narrator's part is notable, as Edna's actions are unprecedented and controversial and had consequences for many characters beyond Edna, yet her actions are described as necessary to spiritual ascension. The narratee of this novel would follow the pattern of the narrator's language to see Edna's transformation as needed and heroic. The narrator's language shifts the mindset of the narratee, a female who would also be seeking freedom as Edna was. Through shifting the mindset of the narratee, a feminist foundation is created for the original audience which was dominated by patriarchal ideas and this foundation reoriented them in the direction of the feminist thought which mostly holds sway today.

*The Awakening* was first published in 1898 when the Victorian idea of the "Angel in the House"—the "selflessly devoted and submissive wife and mother" (Hoffman 264)—was still the assumed picture of the ideal woman, wife, and mother. The narrator of *The Awakening* spends the novel revealing how Edna boldly shatters that image of the Angel in the House and acts as a role model for other women to follow her. In Joyce Dyer's book, *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, the author recognizes the importance of the novel in reshaping the mindset of the audiences, specifically women who were also bound by the Angel in the House ideal. She states, "as modern as Edna seems at times, she has deeply absorbed many of the attitudes of her century and her culture and cannot step lightly or unencumbered into a new age" (16). The narrator follows Edna as she must first become aware of the cultural requirements placed upon her, and then praises Edna for being bold and brave enough to strip her mind of those

expectations and stipulations, regardless of who is adversely affected by the consequences of her actions. As Edna moves out of her house and leaves her husband alone and her children to be cared for by another, the narrator makes it clear that Edna feels no remorse and is in no way “indulging in sentimental tears” (Chopin 105). The narrator paints Edna as strong through the descriptive language provided, and this culminates in the final scene of the novel, when Edna escapes for good the expectations placed on her through suicide.

As Edna steps naked into the ocean to seek liberation through death, the narrator proudly describes her as “a new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known” (Chopin 136). Yoharatnam observes that Edna sees “the inevitability of her fate as a male-defined creature” and was brought to a “state of despair” from which she “frees herself in the sea” (Section 2). Edna has a sensuous experience with the sea, and as she takes her final breathes, the narrator notes that the “old terror” Edna knew sinks away (Chopin 137). Finally, through her death, Edna finds the “delicious!” (136) liberation she desired and through the language of the narrator, she earns herself a spot as a feminist heroine, bravely stepping beyond the restrictions of the male-dominated culture from which she originated and escapes. Edna goes from being the Angel in the House to the New Woman, and the narrator’s praise for that shift creates a new perception of the patriarchy and its dominance over the minds of the both the narratee and the readers.

The narrator of *The Awakening* fails to address any moral complications to the actions of the protagonist. Edna frees herself from her children and husband, both of whom were “antagonists who had overcome her” (Chopin 136). The narratee would fail

to recognize the entire premise of the novel as one appearing deeply selfish, one that is focused solely on the feelings and experiences of Edna, with no regard for how her actions will impact those around her. Rick Altman would consider *The Awakening* a single-focus narrative and claims, then, that Edna's "desire for the opposite sex represents thinly veiled narcissism, a thinly masked desire for selfhood and transcendence" (120). The single-focus narrative allows the narrator to paint a more vivid picture of what life was like for the married woman in 1898; however, Edna's actions are still based solely on selfish gain, and she has no regard for the impact her decision will have on those around her.

Unlike *The Great Gatsby* where the readers and the narratee separate over Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Awakening* presents a morality for the narratee that is quickly accepted by many female readers. As the narrator follows only Edna and shows none of the repercussions of the protagonist's actions on anyone else in the novel, the narrator supports Edna's wholly selfish morals and tells of a narcissistic heroine who becomes an example for "millions of other women, real and fictional, who would follow her" (Dyer 13). The readers of this story, particularly the women, are potentially gravely impacted by Edna's life and journey, since the narrator presents the story to a narratee of oppressed women, offering Edna as a feminist champion and celebrating her narcissism and self-centered goals.

#### **The Weight of War: Tim O'Brien's Morals in *The Things They Carried***

*The Things They Carried* (1990), offers another narrative perspective, unique from both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Awakening*. The narrator is a character in the story, similar to Nick Carraway, but different in the fact that the fictional narrator carries the

name of the author, Tim O'Brien, and also shares his age and his profession. Janis Haswell comments on this narrative quality in her article "The Craft of the Short Story in Retelling the Vietnam War: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." She observes that the "demarcation between author and narrator is problematized by the fluid interaction between fiction and memoir...[the narrator's] stories are clearly rooted in the author's real-life experiences" (96). The narrator, Tim O'Brien, (subsequently referred to as simply O'Brien), does not share everything with the author, making him exclusive to the story, and making the narrative O'Brien the one who interacts directly with the reader as well as the voice from whom the reader understands the story. *The Things They Carried* is distinct from *The Great Gatsby* and *The Awakening* not only because of the narrator's relationship to the author, but also because the narrator is unreliable and gives that own designation to himself: "It's time to be blunt...Almost everything else is invented" (O'Brien 171).

Aside from the few biographical similarities drawn between the author and the narrator, the novel *The Things They Carried* is fictional; this genre classification creates a tension since so much of the novel is based on the author's real-life experiences, and the stories are told as truth and then retracted as fiction. O'Brien says "by telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others" (O'Brien 152). Yet, O'Brien continues to tell his fictional stories in the shape of a memoir, creating an unreliability to his storytelling. Wayne Booth states that "if [the narrator] is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed" (qtd. in Olson 96). *The Things They Carried* can easily be read as a memoir of the Vietnam War but is written as a fictional account

based loosely on one man's experience, one man who claims through his narrator that "you can't tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling" (O'Brien 68). This unreliability created by the mouth of the man telling the story affects the credibility of the book and adjusts its impact on the actual reader drastically.

Had the narrator's credibility not been affected by his unreliability, the narratee and the reader may have had an equal understanding of the story's moral framework; the unreliability, however, creates the potential for a gap between the two. The narrator conveys stories laced with moral principles about a war whose conflict he did not understand. He was drafted to fight a war in which "certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons." He tells of a war Americans had "a thousand" issues with and questions about (38). The narratee of *The Things They Carried* is an American living in a post-Vietnam War era who shares the same questions as O'Brien. The male narratee has some experience with either war or war stories and is seeking to better understand the Vietnam War; this narratee will acknowledge the unreliability and seek to understand why the narrator tells the story in that way.

O'Brien created for himself a platform to tell an important story that his original audience and his narratee wanted and needed to hear. *The Things They Carried* thus became a "mainstay of the canon of the American Vietnam war" (Haswell 94). O'Brien tells a story that is powerful and moving and true and untrue all at once; he tells a story that is wanted and dreaded. Ramtin Noor-Tehrani Mahini states that O'Brien "gives us a long list of reasons why the mighty, supreme United States of America lost the war in Vietnam, one of the poorest third-world countries on earth" (Section I). O'Brien tells the truth and shrouds it in fiction, making himself into an unreliable narrator telling a story

laced with questions about its veracity, and in doing so, creates a realistic picture of what the Vietnam war was truly like for the soldiers.

War stories are a unique brand of narrative, as they try to relay events that can never be wholly understood unless experienced. O'Brien has his work cut out for him before he begins, and makes his task of storytelling more difficult by muddling the truth and fiction of the war. Michael Smith discusses the warning signs of unreliable narrators in his book *Understanding Unreliable Narrators: Reading between the Lines in the Literature Classroom*. Of the six warning signs of an unreliable narrator—overly self-interested, emotional, or inconsistent, lacking in experience, knowledge, or morals (16)—O'Brien fits completely with only one of those categories: too emotional. Yet the deep emotion that is translated by the narrative potentially manifests as self-obsession and inconsistency, a lack of experience, of knowledge, and of morals: the narratee will understand the emotion, the reader may not be able to see past it.

The narrator's emotion in *The Things They Carried* is raw and affects the narrator's countenance. O'Brien tells readers that the war changed him, because “[r]ight spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery... You can't tell... why you're there” (78). O'Brien is unprepared for war, and even while deployed, he is not completely knowledgeable of what is happening and what is the most moral course of action; the “old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true” (78). The emotion of the narrator creates an unreliability that is repeatedly acknowledged by O'Brien; however, this emotion becomes his greatest tool in telling a war story, despite possibly registering as unreliability.

O'Brien's emotion fuels an unreliable story, and per Booth's standards, this impacts the entirety of the book and calls the truthfulness of the novel. O'Brien's acknowledgement of the unreliability in his story invites scrutiny, but it also works to move the readers closer to the narratee. By telling an openly inconsistent and unreliable story, O'Brien gives the readers a true picture of the confusion of war; he acknowledges the flaws readers may have with his storytelling and by doing this, potentially controls the readers' understanding more and attempts to bring them closer to the narratee. He vulnerably shares the horrors of the Vietnam War, not attempting to adjust them for the sake of a more consistent story, and this narrative tactic impacts readers in a unique and profound way.

As O'Brien talks candidly of war, he shifts from a first-person narration to a second-person narration, drawing the reader in as if he is having a personal conversation with each reader. He says, "[a]lmost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that the proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life." He tells the readers what "you" want in war: how decency and justice and courtesy is sought by everyone, and the reader would want it too (77). Alex Vernon comments on the importance of this narrative move in his essay, "A Kinetoscope of War: The Cinematic Effects on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*." He says that O'Brien tells a war story by expressing "the disconcerting sense of simultaneously being in the moment and watching the spectacle of it" and while doing this, O'Brien "extends the sense to the readers" through the second-person narration and "insert[s] them into the scene as well as presenting it to them" (195). By bringing the readers by name ("you")



into the story, O'Brien swings his narration from unreliable to influential by bridging the gap between narratee and reader, therefore affecting the reader's understanding of the uncertainty and inconsistency of morality in war.

War is a messy affair; O'Brien acknowledges this fact quickly, attempting to bring the readers closer to the narratee—who would quickly sympathize with horrors that occurred to each soldier in the Vietnam War. O'Brien advises that “you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (65-66). O'Brien does not attempt to mask the horrible things that the soldiers did in Vietnam, whether the soldier was fighting for America or against. He does not attempt to paint himself as a “secret hero” in light of a “moral emergency” (37). The fact that he does not shy away from the atrocities committed on Asian soil enables him to impact his actual readers—not just a hoped-for narratee—and to create an understanding of the ambiguous morality of war that his original audience in the 1990s craved, an audience that, like the narrator prior to deployment, “hated” the war and saw only “moral confusion” (38). Michael Clark explains why *The Things They Carried* impacted readers in his essay “I Feel Close to Myself: Solipsism and US Imperialism in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.” Clark asserts that the story's “persistent investigation of the dynamics of truth-making and its relation to the culturally informed individual perspective” gives the novel a unique and powerful platform (134). O'Brien takes a moral stance while actively admitting that he has no right to, and this tactic affects the American readers who had no way of understanding the “moral confusion” (O'Brien 38) of the Vietnam War without experiencing it firsthand. O'Brien brings the war to his readers while they remain on the comfort of America soil, and in doing so the reader nears the narratee's perception and

has the potential to more accurately understand the uncertain morality of war that O'Brien presents.

**Black and White Morality in a Sorcerous World: The Narrator in The *Harry Potter* Series**

An examination of morally influential narratives would be wholly incomplete without considering children's literature: the narrators who interact with children have the opportunity for a direct influence on an entire rising generation. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series includes seven books composed of explicit moral messaging, and the narrator telling these stories has a platform of effect on an entire generation of children who grew up awaiting the newest installment in the adventures of Harry Potter. From the opening novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), to the epic conclusion of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), the narratee to whom the narrator spoke was a generation of children who grew up alongside Harry Potter and matured as the characters did, in both age and moral understanding of the world. Perry Glanzer calls Harry Potter an "exciting moral world" in his essay "Harry Potter's Provocative Moral World: Is There a Place for Good and Evil in Moral Education?" He explains the importance of Harry Potter on an audience of school-age students saying "[c]learly, one attraction of the Potter series is that it enlists students on the side of good in a cosmic battle against evil. Within the Potter story, the struggle between good and evil gives meaning and excitement to everything that happens at school" (526). The *Harry Potter* series is clearly directed towards an audience of young people, and the narration of the series matures as the narratee does, following school-aged children and attempting to

guide an entire rising generation in understanding the difference between right and wrong.

One of the reasons that *Harry Potter* has the influence that it does is because of the nature of the narrative. Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly Schonert-Reichl comment on the importance of the narration of the series in their article “Harry Potter and Moral Development in Pre-adolescent Children.” They state that “the expression of morality is so simplistic that Harry Potter, a boy of 11 years of age, displays little difficulty judging right from wrong.” The narrator tells of a universe that is “black and white” where “good and evil co-exist and are always in competition to reign over the school he attends” (197). The enchanting story is impactful as it is told to children yet does not shy away from the implications of good versus evil. The narrator of the series, a third-person unnamed storyteller, shares a story that creates a divide between good and evil and uses it as an opportunity to present morality to the audience of children reading the books.

Presenting stories with clear moral implications to an audience of children carries a certain weight regarding the proper development of those children. The narrator of *Harry Potter* adheres to the advice of Samuel Johnson offered in “Rambler No. 4.” Johnson warns against the mingling of good and evil in stories for youths and deems it the “fatal error” in storytelling, as it causes the loss of “abhorrence” for the evil in the world; the “highest degree of reverence should be paid to youth” by narrators as they must “secure [youth] from unjust prejudices, perverse opinions, and incongruous combinations of images” (368, 370). The narrator of the *Harry Potter* series makes clear distinctions between good and evil for a narratee who would look past the witchcraft and sorcery constructing the *Harry Potter* universe.

While the narratee of the *Harry Potter* series accepts the morality presented as one clearly supporting good by challenging and overcoming evil, the actual audiences may not fall directly into that mindset. The narrator tells the adventures of Harry, a child who is learning right versus wrong, yet a child who is also a wizard. Alan Jacobs argues against the potential contradiction of Harry, a sorcerer, exemplifying good in his article, “Harry Potter’s Magic.” He claims that the potential “Christian” understanding of the *Harry Potter* series is one that does not find magic “funny” or “charming” but rather sees the danger of encouraging children to tolerate “the New Age view of witchcraft” (Jacobs). The narrator’s influence on the actual audience has the potential to be lost immediately by the mention of witchcraft—the narratee will not care, but conservatives may. Jacques Ellul suggests that when evaluating *Harry Potter* the “technique” of moral presentation must be looked past in a “search for justice before God” (qtd. in Jacobs). For the reader to rectify with the narratee, an acceptance of witchcraft is necessary so that the presented morality, from the first novel to the last, can be evaluated.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the narrator follows an eleven-year-old Harry Potter through his first experiences with the wizarding world. Harry learns something new nearly daily, and through this, the wizarding world is created by the narrator artfully telling the story. At the conclusion of the first installment of the series, Harry is faced with a clear moral dilemma. He is alone as an eleven-year-old, facing the greatest Dark wizard of all time and the epitome of evil in the series, Lord Voldemort. Harry has just been told by Voldemort that the ideas of good and evil are “ridiculous” as “there is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it” (Rowling 291). The black and white morality painted in the book by the narrator prior to this

chapter is challenged and Harry must “screw up his courage” to boldly deny entering into evil (292). Eleven-year-old Harry Potter shouts “NEVER!” to Lord Voldemort’s offers of power in exchange for Harry’s morals: “save your own life and join me...” (294). Jerry Walls explains the moral dilemma presented here in his essay “Heaven, Hell, and Harry Potter.” Harry is placed in a moral dilemma because he is forced to act either morally or in his own “self-interest” (75). As Harry chooses the path that is not in his own self-interest, the stage is set for the narrator to tell six more stories following Harry’s journey in choosing good over evil.

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the seventh and final book in the series, finds Harry on the run from Lord Voldemort, who now has total control over the Wizarding world, save a small resistance, seemingly too weak to overcome him. Yet, despite the odds being stacked greatly against him, Harry Potter does not waver in fear of Lord Voldemort, nor does he run in search of a life outside of Voldemort’s reach. Harry resolutely acknowledges the evil in Lord Voldemort, or as David and Catherine Deavel point out “a lacking of what is good” in Voldemort’s character (132). Voldemort has taken the idea of evil to a new level with the splitting of his soul in seven different ways. Each piece of Voldemort’s soul holds a piece of evil, and as long as they exist, Voldemort cannot die. Harry learns that the prophecy regarding himself and Voldemort has a deeper meaning: Harry himself holds a piece of Voldemort’s soul and its evil and is therefore keeping Lord Voldemort alive with Harry’s own survival. Harry understands once more that the moral choice runs completely against his own self-interest. The narrator says “[Harry’s] job was to walk calmly into Death’s welcoming arms...Neither would live, neither could survive” (Rowling 691). Once again, the narrator’s language in

a pivotal moment of the story is essential to its implications on the readers—readers who must accept the witchcraft in the story to close the gap with the narratee.

Though death is present in *The Awakening* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the narrator of *Harry Potter* creates a different morality surrounding it. Unlike the language used by the narrator in *The Awakening* who applauds the selfish actions of Edna Pontellier, the narrator of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* praises Harry as he calmly walks towards the action that is the least self-serving, telling of the “cold-blooded walk to [Harry’s] own destruction” and the “different kind of bravery” that was required of Harry (692). The narrator shares with the readers that Harry has at last seen the “bigger plan” and because of that Harry “would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it” (693). The narrator’s resolute tone while telling of the protagonist’s looming death permits for reader to fully understand the importance of Harry’s selflessness—by consistently telling the tales of a glorified and self-sacrificing protagonist, the narrator ensures that the reader receives the same message against selfishness as the narratee. Though both Edna Pontellier and Harry Potter die, Harry’s death serves no selfish purposes, as he concludes that he is unable to conquer evil fully while there is still evil living within him.

The narrator of the *Harry Potter* series defines good and evil for a narratee comprised of children learning to distinguish those moral realities, and draws the readers in with consistent presentation of that morality. The Deavels acknowledge the scary side of evil as defined in *Harry Potter* by arguing that “people can and do choose it. They choose the lie of evil instead of the truth of goodness” (142). The narrator of *Harry Potter* tells a story in which evil is a choice; no person is born evil and there is the chance

for redemption for every character, even characters like Severus Snape who are “portrayed as intrinsically immoral” and “described as physically repulsive” (Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 197). Snape is later described by Harry Potter as “the bravest man he ever knew” (Rowling 758). The *Harry Potter* series has a platform for influence because it “draws young readers into the books by connecting aspects of the world in which they live with a world that transcends reality” (Beach 103). The narrator of *Harry Potter* takes seven volumes to tell a story filled with the black and white morality of good versus evil to an audience of children. The narrator of the *Harry Potter* series relays a story with a clear commitment to morals, and this commitment bridges the gap between narratee and reader and attempts to remove outside assumptions surrounding witchcraft to shape the young reader’s understanding of morality.

### **Narrator, Narratee, Readers, and Morality**

*The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening*, *The Things They Carried*, and the *Harry Potter* series show that though narrators are speaking directly to a specific narratee, readers are also impacted and may have their perception of morality challenged. Narrators share a spot at the table with readers as the storytellers shape dreams, social standards, history, and, most importantly, an understanding of morality. Literary critic Wayne Booth states, “[Readers] agree that when we really engage with the characters we meet and the moral choices those characters face, moral changes occur in us, for good or for ill” (240). The characters in stories are often easy to identify: Jay Gatsby throws lavish parties, Edna Pontellier defies social norms, Tim O’Brien relives the Vietnam War, and Harry Potter saves the wizarding world from ultimate doom. Yet, however important these protagonists are, their stories would not be the same without the voices of the

narrators behind them. Moral changes can occur in readers as they engage in stories, and the storytellers—the narrators—are the ones who propel that change within each reader, for good or for bad. The author writes the morals of each story into existence, but with the morals come the narrators who must bridge the gap between narratee and reader and in doing so, present a standard of morality within the story as either acceptable or unacceptable.

Since the stories told are originally directed to an unbiased narratee, the impact that the morals presented in each story will have on individual readers is unpredictable. Nick Carraway recounts the lavish lifestyle of Jay Gatsby; some readers learn from Jay Gatsby's mistakes and see the flaws in Nick as a narrator, while others lose sight of the consequences of Gatsby's debauchery and seek the "American dream" Jay Gatsby pursues. Edna Pontellier is painted to be a heroine of feminism, one who exposes the opposition present in the lives of women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, the reader may instead see a woman kill herself and selfishly dismisses the consequences her choice has on those around her. Tim O'Brien tells a fictionalized war story, one that reveals the horrors of war, but shows the fluidity of right and wrong in combat zones, leaving room for a reader to misinterpret or get lost in his unreliability. Finally, the narrator who follows the life of Harry Potter paints a picture of a world of good versus evil, where black and white morality is clear in every situation, yet does so using witchcraft. The perception of morality by an actual reader cannot be predicted and that audience is impacted by who the author intends the narratee to be and how the narrator then tells the story.



Four completely different narratives with four completely different narrators reveal how clearly the relationship between reader and narratee affects the overall impact of the story. The storytellers are given a platform to change perspectives of the audiences that engage with the stories they tell. Regardless of the extent of the change, the readers' morality is impacted, meaning in some way or another, whether on a grand scale of a generation or even just in the life of one reader, the world is changed by the narrators' perceptions. Author James Baldwin said that "literature is indispensable to the world...The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter the way a person looks...at reality, then you can change it" (qtd. in Romano 1). Stories are foundational to the human experience and the narrators who tell those stories are essential to the development of audiences. Therefore, though the authors are writing the stories with a determined narratee in mind, the narrators share the stories with readers of all kinds, shaping understandings of morality and holding an undeniable influence over humanity.

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