

# The blurred line between first and third person narrative in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*

Adrian Paterson

## Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the way that Winton blurs the usual distinction between first and third person narrative. The narrator frequently switches from third person to first person, which lends weight to Saito's argument that, in fiction writing, a third person narrator is really a potential first person "I-narrator". A so-called third person narrator is created by the author as a tool to communicate with the reader, and as such, is in effect a character. The absence of the pronoun 'I' does not make the narrator less of a character than any other character mentioned more explicitly in the story. This suggests that the generally accepted division based on pronominal use, or more specifically the presence or absence of the pronoun 'I', is not so useful for describing narrative style.

Narrative point of view is a complex concept to define, and one that is often oversimplified. A first person narrator is usually defined as a character in the story, and a third person narrator as an observer outside the story. This way of making the distinction generally boils down to the use of personal pronouns in the text, in other words, whether the narrator uses 'I' for one of the characters, or not. Hence, the use of the terms first and third person, taken from the grammatical terms used for personal pronouns. In this initial part of my discussion on the meaning of the two terms, I will briefly summarise the generally accepted definition of narrative point of view as exemplified in Abrams (1988).

First of all, it is important to remember that the voice of the narrator is not the

voice of the author, it is a persona created by the author for the purpose of telling the story, and the character of narrators frequently varies between works by the same author. Furthermore, the author can control how much information the narrator has access to and gives the reader, and when they will give it to the reader.

In the case of a first person narrator, the flow of information is limited to what the narrator's character experiences, either directly or through hearsay. The author can control the narrator's ability to interpret the events that occur around them, Groom's *Forrest Gump* is an example of such a fallible or unreliable narrator. The author can also control how close the narrator is to the central action, namely, a central character or more of an observer or reporter, such as Dr Watson in Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* series.

In the case of a third person narrator, the narrator's voice can be intrusive, in other words, intrudes on the narrative by commenting or editorialising on the events of the story, for example Fielding's narrator in *Tom Jones*. They can also be omniscient or limited to greater or lesser degrees: An omniscient narrator can move around the events of the story as required, reporting on separate events that occur concurrently in various locations, and also has access to various characters' thoughts and feelings. A limited narrator focuses on events centred on one character.

*Cloudstreet* presents several problems for someone wanting to classify the narrative point of view. Firstly, the narrator is the soul of Samson (Fish) Lamb, who drowned at the age of 9 when he was trapped in a fishing net, but was revived. However, his soul or spirit did not return to his body. The entire story is told as a flashback at the moment of his suicide by drowning a second time 20 years later and the two parts of him are reunited.

I'm a man for that long, I feel my manhood, I recognise myself whole and human, know my story for just that long, long enough to see how we've come, how we've all battled in the same corridor that time makes for us, and

I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this, and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me. (p. 424)

As such, the narrator is a character in the book, Fish, and he refers to himself in the first person. However, he is also outside the action and unable to interact with the other characters or influence events in any way. In order to make a distinction between the two characters, I will refer to them as 'Fish' and 'the narrator' respectively.

Being a character in the story makes him a first person narrator. We often hear him refer to himself as 'I', as in the following examples.

Oh, I remember. Mesh against the face, the cage of down and up and the faint idea of light as the cold comes quicker now out of the tunnel, that strange cold feeling that's no longer a stranger. Fish feels death coming unstuck from him with a pain like his guts are being torn from him. (p. 30)

The tarp flaps, the junk rattles, and it goes on and on, me in Oriel's arms, smelling her lemon scent, seeing the flickers in their heads, knowing them like the dead know the living, getting used to the idea, having the drool wiped from my lip.

There we are.

The lambs of God. (p. 47)

I can feel it even on this side of the mirror, that's how intense it is, so strong I can sense it this far away, as far as light from a lamp, as time from a clock. Quick's calling out like a wounded bird, seeing, seeing. (p. 219)

This being the case, we could neatly put him into the category of first person narrator, because we can see him referring to himself in the first person. However, a closer look at the passages where this occurs shows that they are very different from the rest of the book. Most of them occur when he editorialises, or directly addresses one of the characters, in particular his older brother, Quick, however, they are not aware of this and cannot respond. In this way he shares a characteristic of the intrusive narrator, which is a kind of third person narrator.

The narrator is the soul of Fish that left his body when he drowned. However, during time span that the story covers the two are separated; we have the earthly Fish who interacts with the other characters and has physical form, and the narrator who is outside of the action and is separated from the other characters by metaphorical barriers referred to in the form of reflective surfaces, such as water, mirrors, and metal.

He's so close to the water. A great, gobbling laugh pours out of him. No hand on his trouser belt. The water all to himself. The silver skinned river. (p. 2)

Those who've gone before do not lose their feelings, only their bodies. I stare out from behind the sideboard mirror and see you there, Fish. I don't forget. (p. 164)

I'm behind the water, Fish, . . . . (p. 178)

The water.

And the mirror it makes.

Ah, the water, the water, the water. (p. 423)

What can you tell him, Fish? Right now, while you're down there on that side of the water with your strange brain and your black, wide eyes. What do you understand enough to say? You stand there in the morning and the afternoon and see Quick all closed, white and hard. Motes rain down. The sun is alive. The whole house is shaking with sound. Why won't he look you? How do you bear it? How can you just stand at the end of his bed like that, with the patience of an animal? It's like you're someone else down there, Fish. Or does it just hurt me to think so? (p. 92)

This sense of separatedness is again characteristic of third person narrative. In fact the vast majority of the book is told from the point of view of an omniscient, third person narrator. If the sections where the narrator interrupts the narrative in the first person, were removed, the reader would be totally unaware of the connection between Fish and the narrator, and it could be read from a purely omniscient, third person narrative point of view, as in the following examples.

Rose Pickles knew that something bad was going to happen. Something really bad, this time. She itched in her awful woollen bathing suit and watched her brothers and a whole mob of other kids chucking bombies off the end of the jetty in the bronze evening light. (p. 7)

The boat is a good sixteen foot, clinker built and heavy as hell. A big skiff sort of boat, and it takes about an hour and a half for it to be obvious that it'll never fit across the tray of the truck. The man who's just sold the boat laughs and slaps his legs. He's fat and red and his scalp is flaky. He's not mean about it, he's just a good humoured sort of bloke. Everyone stands around and looks at everyone else-except Fish who's looking at the

water, and the old girl who's looking at absolutely nothing and no one, and in a moment the old man turns to Quick and says :

What about you row it home, boy ? (p. 109)

An interesting thing to note in the second passage is that the narrator refers to Fish in the third person, signifying the separation of the two.

The narrator is not only omniscient, but even though he the spirit of a boy who died at age 9, he displays an adult level of expression and maturity. So he is aware of who the serial murderer and rapist is and can see into his mind and understand how he thinks, which one would not usually expect of a nine year-old, but he is also powerless to stop him or help Quick to arrest him. Again, this omniscience is characteristic of a third person narrator.

In the heat of the night with his barrel still reeking, the man with the hare lip and the cleft palate shifts through the dry night grass in someone's backyard and comes across a sleeper behind insect wire. . . . In the big country town that wants so much to be a city, there's another sleeper and I can't stop this. I'm behind the mirror and in different spaces, I'm long gone and long here but there's nothing I can do to stop this. Every time it happens, on and on in memory, I flinch as that brow flinches with the cool barrel suddenly upon it. The sound goes on and on and matter flies like the constellations through the great gaps in the heavens, and I haven't stopped it again. Lester, Rose, Red-I can't stop it for you. When I'm Fish down there I just don't know, and now that I'm what he became beyond it's all too late. I see it, I see it, all of history, and it sets me hard as spirit. (p. 364-5)

So, how should we categorise this narrator? He displays characteristics of both

first person narrators and third person narrators. Saito (2002 and 2003) suggests that such an arbitrary division oversimplifies the issue, and argues there is, in fact, "no such thing as third person narration" (Saito, 2003, p. 24). He states that "narration by definition is done in the first person: there always must be someone who functions as an agent of storytelling. The type of narration wrongly understood as a 'third-person narration' simply is a way of telling the story without revealing the identity of the potential I-narrator" (Saito, 2002, p. 22). His main argument is that any narrator is an intermediary between the story and the reader, either as one of the characters in the story, or as some unidentified observer. In this way, he argues that all narration is therefore first person. A so-called third person narrator, whether omniscient or limited, moves around the story telling, obscuring, or withholding information as required. As creations of the author with characteristics that make them unique, they are in effect characters. Just because they do not refer to themselves in the first person does not mean they are not present in the action itself.

The fact that writers like Winton are able to create narrators that so completely blur the line between first and third person narration, shows that such arbitrary classifications are at best problematic, and at worst misleading.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abrams, M. H. (1988). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Orlando, Florida : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, Inc.
- Saito, Y. (2002). Fiction as historical discourse : Diachronic analysis of the narrative structures of English fiction. *Poetica : An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies*. 58. pp. 21-31. Japan : Eikoh Institute of Culture and Education.
- Saito, Y. (2003). There is no such thing as third-person narration. *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Speech, Writing and Context*. Osaka, Japan : International Research Institute, Kansai Gaidai University.
- Winton, T. (1991). *Cloudstreet*. New York : Simon & Schuster, Inc.