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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. Often an all-knowing character, the distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Maltese Falcon employs a third-person objective point of view. The narrator is not a character and does not participate in the events of the novel. Instead, the narrator simply tells what happens without stating more than can be inferred from the story’s action and dialogue. Using this device, the narrator never discloses anything about what the characters think or feel and remains a detached observer.

Discussion Activities

While the objective point of view relies heavily on action and dialogue, Hammett gives us clues to the characters’ thoughts and feelings by describing their body language and facial expressions. Examine the scene in Chapter 6 where Sam tells Brigid that Joel Cairo offered him money for the falcon.

“He offered me five thousand dollars for the black bird.”

She started, her teeth tore at the end of her cigarette, and her eyes, after a swift alarmed glance at Spade, turned away from him.

“You’re not going to go around poking at the fire and straightening up the room again, are you?” he asked lazily.

She laughed a clear merry laugh, dropped the mangled cigarette into a tray, and looked at him with clear merry eyes (p. 56).

How does Hammett’s description of Spade and Brigid’s reactions to one another help the reader infer the characters’ feelings? Why might Hammett have chosen to limit the reader’s access to the characters’ private thoughts and emotions? How does the emotional distance it creates contribute to the overall tone of the novel?

Writing Exercise

First-person point of view allows the reader to observe the private thoughts and emotions of the narrator. Ask students to rewrite the scene above in first-person point of view from Sam Spade’s or Brigid O’Shaughnessy’s perspective. How does the use of first person change the tone of the scene?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 7-9 (pp. 61-89). Make a list of all the new characters in this chapter. Can we discern the inner motivations of these characters?