

CRWR 539: Me, Myself, or I? Techniques in Non-fictional Point of View

Winter 2011 • Wednesdays 5:30-10 p.m. • SAC 26
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The literary term *Point of View* refers to the dominant pronoun (I, You, He/She, etc.) used in any piece of work. In nonfiction prose, the POV is often First Person Singular (even in pieces which are not about the author), and the verb form is usually Past Tense, but by no means does this indicate that one writer's works will all "read" similarly. The art of nonfiction is an acting job, and, like an actor, the essayist performs a character role each time he or she starts a new piece. The author's theater is the page, and his/her persona is a function of textual, rather than physical or audible, "gestures." This course will examine those gestures in minute detail, and students will spend the term analyzing and practicing them.

TEXTS:

- Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. ISBN: 978-0374528584
- Sven Birkerts, *Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2007. ISBN: 978-1555974893
- Photocopied readings as assigned.

METHODOLOGY, IN BRIEF:

Much of our class time will involve discussion and dissection of the reading assignments, and will include oral presentations/analyses by students. We will also engage in writing practice both inside and outside of classroom hours, and make heavy use of the course's Blackboard website. A culminating written project will be due at term's end.

ASSIGNMENTS, AT LENGTH:

1. Maximum Enjoyment Requirement. You are exhorted to take pleasure in this course, its participants, and its mind-expanding lessons on craft. To that end, you will be depending on everyone, and everyone will be depending on you, to come to class prepared with a head full of homework and thoughts, a backpack full of readings and writing implements, and a desktop's worth of whatever food and stimulating beverages will help you remain alert and happy during a 4.5-hour class. Anyone caught without these accoutrements will be summarily caned.

2. Technique Journals, online. For each week's readings, you will upload to Blackboard (before class) **A**) a summary of major points made in our craft readings, and **B**) a 500-word analysis of the POV/Persona used in our creative readings. Your analysis should begin with the following tasks, and move forward from there:

- Name the grammatical and literary terms for this POV.
- Identify where, on a timeline, the author-at-the-desk stands in relation to his/her character on the page. Cite specific textual signals from which you draw this conclusion. If the author is present only as the desk persona (as in pieces which are more research-based), examine his/her temporal relationship to the *circumstances* on the page.
- Because the POV and voice of the piece belong to the author's *desk-self*, pick apart the persona through which the author is speaking. Define this voice, this personality. What elements of the text "create" this character? How does it matter to the essay's *subject* (not just the situation, but what the situation is *about*) that the author

speaks from this particular persona? How would the subject be different if the author had chosen a different self as the speaker?

3. Oral Presentation: Each of you will be responsible for presenting a sort of extended Technique Journal on one week's readings. This 15- to 30-minute analysis should include a handout noting salient points. In addition to giving detailed thoughts from your Technique Journal, you should consider the following, among other tasks of your choosing:

- Invent a term to distinguish this particular POV from all others of the same type (unless by chance one already exists). That is, ask yourself what separates, say, *this* first-person-past-tense narrator from others. Justify your new terminology.
- Find an excerpt from a work with similar POV, in which the persona of the author performs a different function. (Define "different," of course, in your own way.)

4. Weekly Persona-Tasting Mini-Writes: Having used your technique journal to analyze thoroughly the persona in that week's reading, you should be equipped to dredge up a similar persona from within yourself. On two single-spaced, typed pages (500 to 600 words), try out the authorial character you examined, by applying it to a subject you believe that persona will serve well. Upload to Blackboard before class, and bring in a hard copy to read aloud.

Obviously, an essay's subject helps shape its appropriate persona, so yours will not match your model perfectly. Be prepared to identify where and why your persona diverged from the one you emulated.

5. Final Project: Write a five- to ten-page essay in a voice which differs significantly from your best-known public persona, but which, as Gornick says, is "something genuine that [you] pull from [yourself], and then shape to [your] writer's purpose" (17). Upload it to Blackboard by the due date.

SCHEDULE:

- Jan. 6:** Introduction, Scheduling.
In-class reading:
Roger Ebert, "John Lennon, 1940-1980" and "The Pot and How to Use It"
- Jan. 13:** Gornick introduction, pp. 3-26.
Paul Rudnick, "Good Enough to Eat"
Introducer: _____
- Jan. 20:** Gornick pp. 29-58.
Joan Didion, "Miami"
Introducer: _____
- Jan. 27:** Gornick pp. 58-85.
Ursula LeGuin, "A Very Warm Mountain"
Introducer: _____
- Feb. 3:** Gornick pp. 89-117.
Birkerts pp. 3-24.
Garret Keizer, "And Such Small Deer"
Introducer: _____
- Feb. 10:** Gornick pp. 117-143.
Birkerts pp. 25-49.
Stanley Elkin, "Pieces of Soap"
Introducer: _____
- Feb. 17:** Gornick pp. 143-165.
Birkerts pp. 51-79.
Tom Wolfe, "The Woman Who Has Everything"
Introducer: _____
- Feb. 24:** Birkerts pp. 81-115.
James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"
Introducer: _____
- Mar. 3:** Birkerts pp. 117-143.
Vivian Gornick, excerpt from *Fierce Attachments* (pp. 3-40)
Introducer: _____
- Mar. 10:** Birkerts pp. 145-191.
Hunter S. Thompson, "The Rum Diary"
Introducer: _____
- March 14 (Monday):** Final essay due on Blackboard before noon.

University Statements

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STATEMENT

No person shall, on the basis of age, race, religion, color, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin or disability, be excluded from participation in, or be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity of Eastern Washington University.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION STATEMENT

Eastern Washington University adheres to affirmative action policies to promote diversity and equal opportunity for all faculty and students.

ADA STATEMENT

Eastern Washington University is committed to providing support for students with disabilities. If you are a student with physical, learning, emotional, or psychological disabilities needing an accommodation, you are encouraged to stop by Disability Support Services (DSS), TAW 124 and speak with Kevin Hills, the Manager DSS or call 509-359-6871.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Any question of Academic Integrity will be handled as stated in the EWU Academic Integrity Policy. This policy is on the EWU web site. Violations will result in a course grade of X.X.