Narratology: A Narrator's Perspective

Harry Frost, Narrator



A story isn’t one thing, but only one thing happens at a time.

- Screenplay
- Scene setting (audio description!)
- Stage directions
- Chronology
- Philosophy





Narrative is rhetorical

The author is aiming for an effect based on some idea of their audience.

They're writing to an 'ideal reader' that they imagine; someone that likes the book and gets all their references.

"Narrative is not just story but also action, the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose"

James Phelan

What's the occasion?

"The telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose."

The 'somebodies':

1. The author.
    1. Real, but not present
2. The ideal reader they're writing for.
    1. Imaginary, and not present
3. The narrator.
    1. The one reading it.

Occasion and purpose:

This is THE reading of the book aloud, to make the book sound good; to make all its points land with the audience it was written for.

'You're the book's defense lawyer',
Harry Frost 2026.

"Imagine you're talking to a friend"
❌ (not actually applicable)



"Imagine you're writing in a diary" (much better, but where's the third person?)



"Imagine you and a friend are reading a mutual friend's book".
✅ Just right.



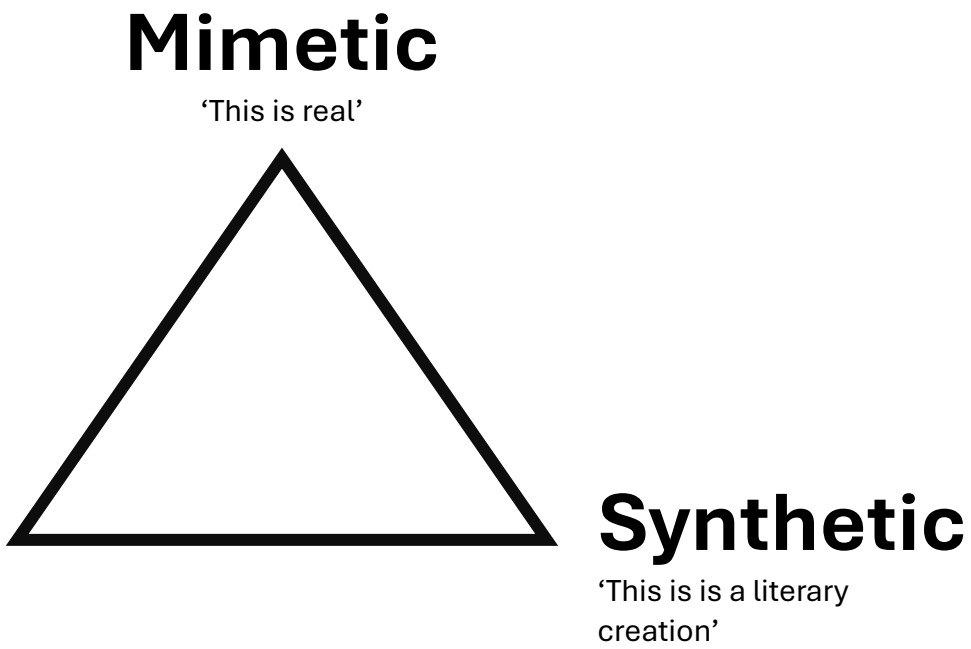


What does the story ‘want’, when?

Jame’s Phelan’s MTS framework offers an excellent way to think about what certain passages are trying to do; what they are asking from you, the reader.

At any one time, the author is writing to convince you rhetorically of one of these things:

1) That these people and events are literally real: **Mimetic**
2) That something from the world outside the story alters its meaning: **Thematic**
3) That you’re reading a literary creation: **Synthetic**



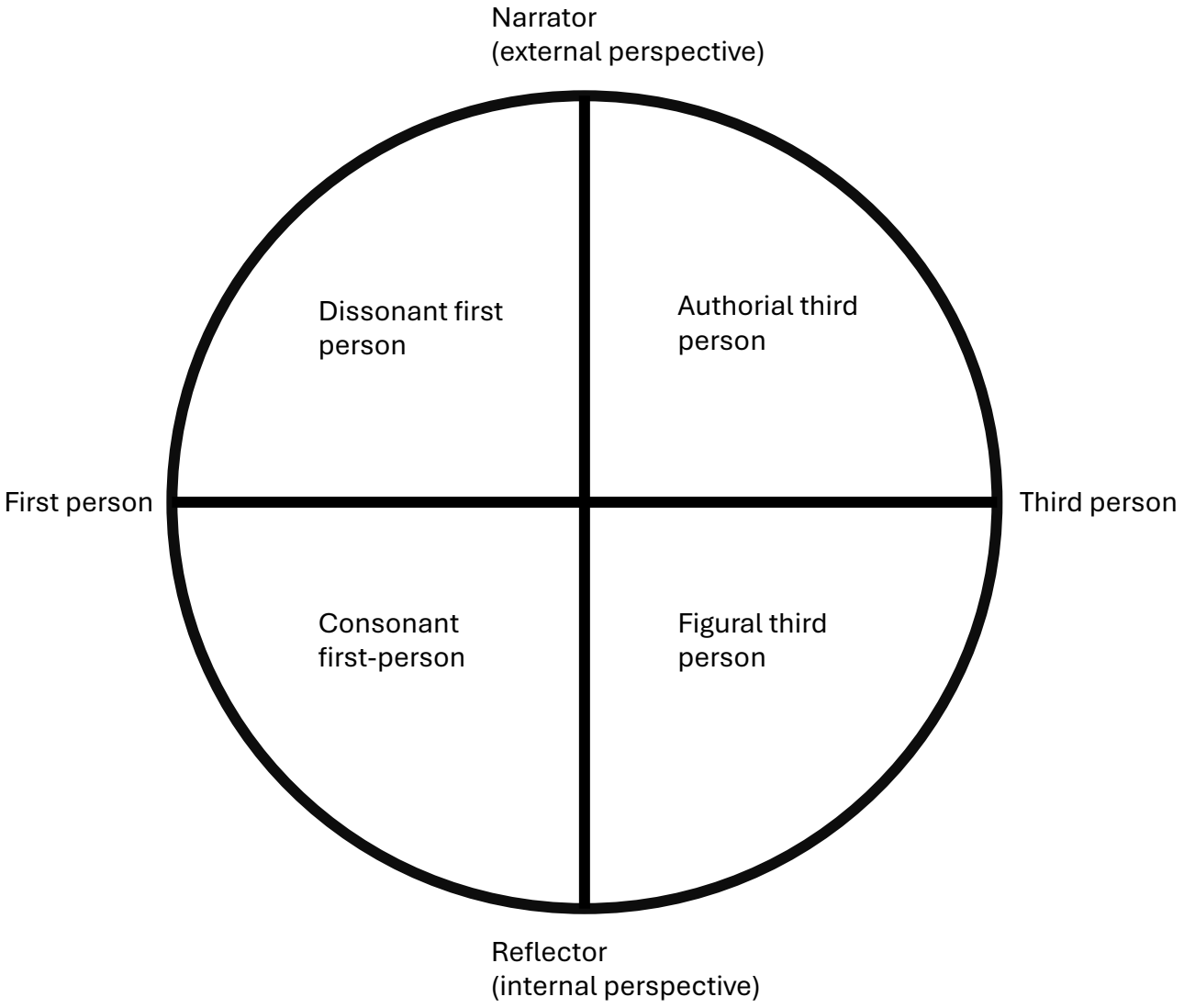
Who sees? Who speaks?

This is the second useful tool that comprises my ‘quick toolkit’ for narration.

This is Cohn’s re-drawing of F. K. Stanzel’s typological wheel.

I think of it as ‘camera motion’

- Tight to character
- POV
- Wide shot
- Lingering shot on murder weapon/unopened letter/cake.

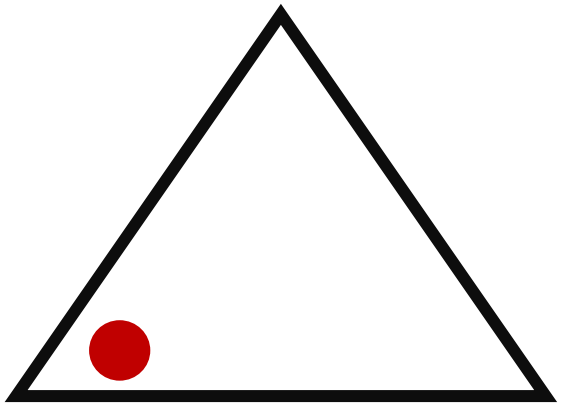


Example 1

"Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year."

Mimetic

‘This is real’

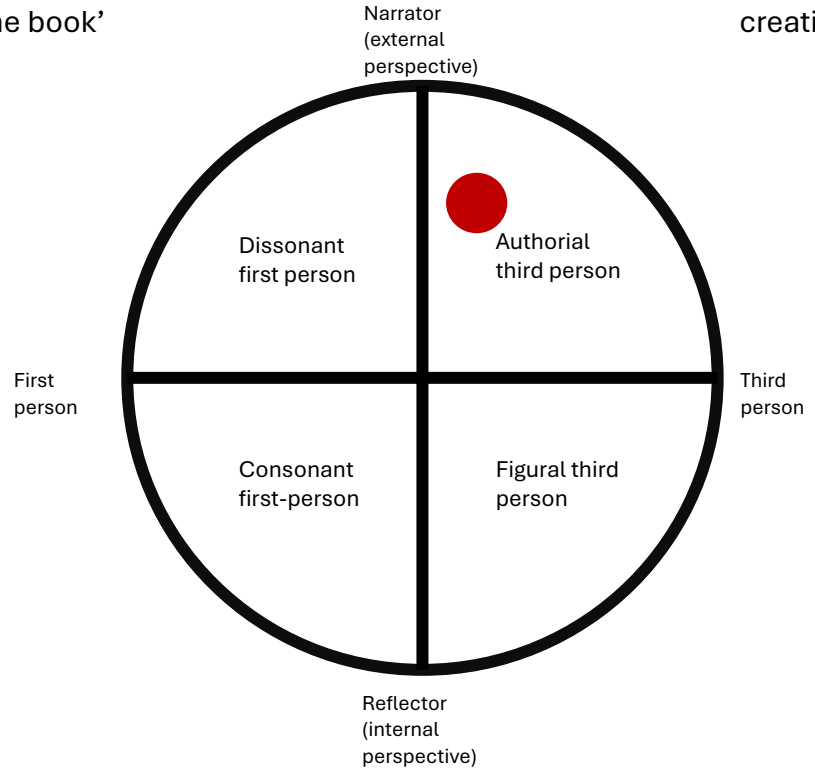


Thematic

‘This touches on life outside the book’

Synthetic

‘This is is a literary creation’

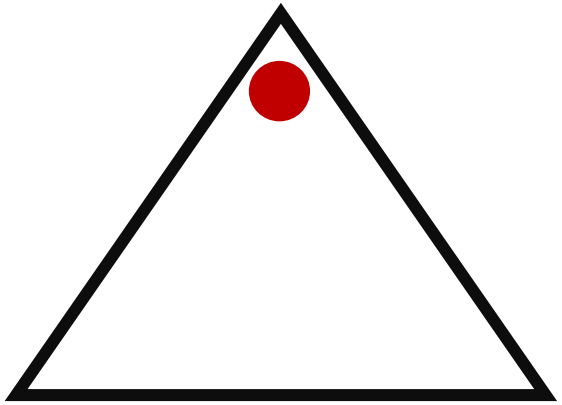


Example 2

"Their eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of both were overspread with the deepest blush. He absolutely started, and for a moment seemed immovable from surprise; but shortly recovering himself, advanced towards the party, and spoke to Elizabeth, if not in terms of perfect composure, at least of perfect civility."

Mimetic

'This is real'



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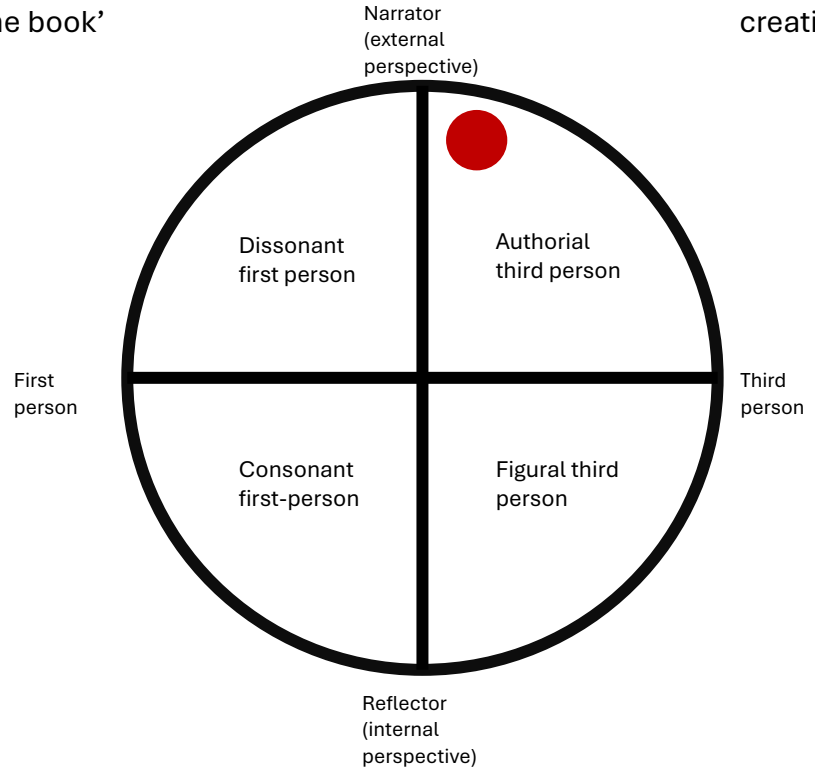
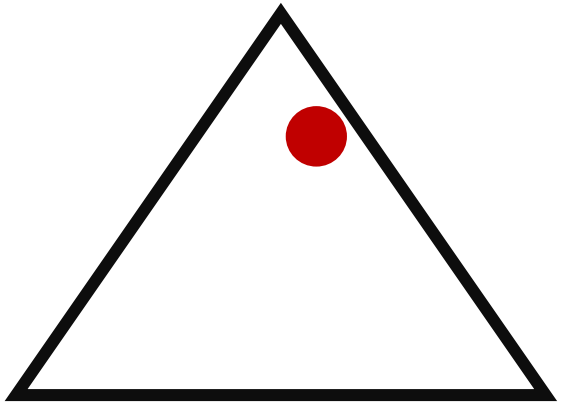


Example 3

"She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. 'How despicably I have acted!' she cried; 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment!'"

Mimetic

'This is real'



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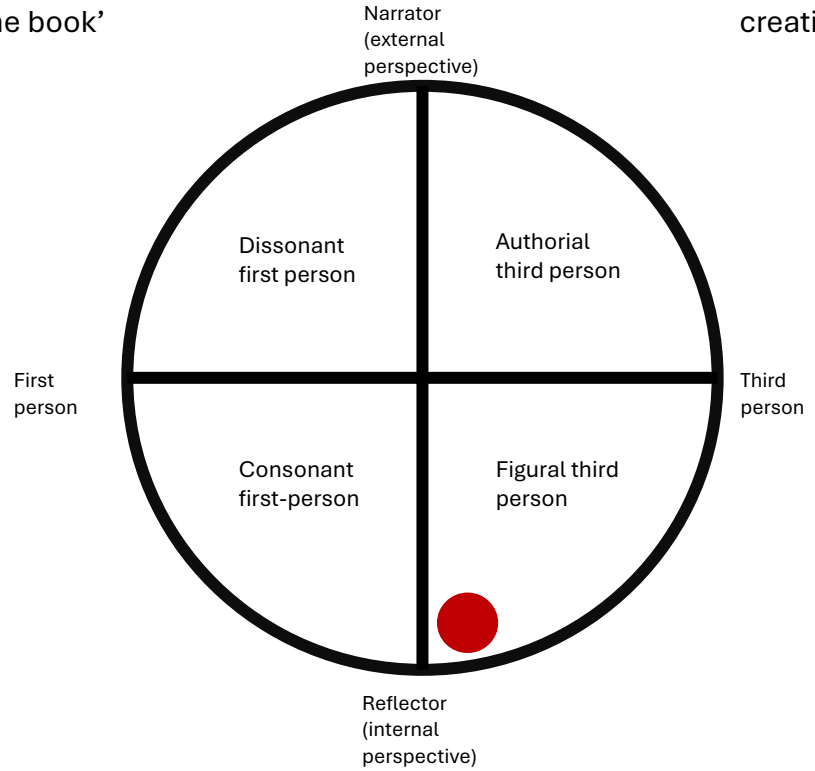

Example 4

"Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest."

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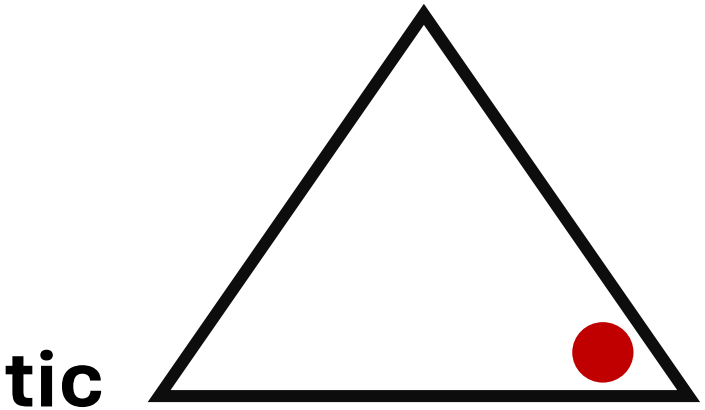
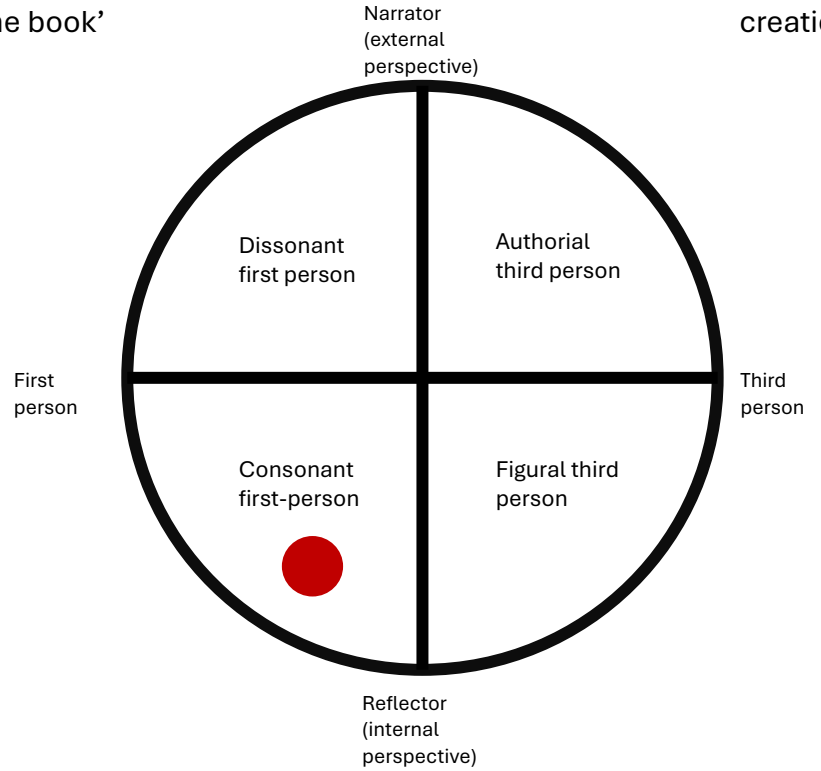


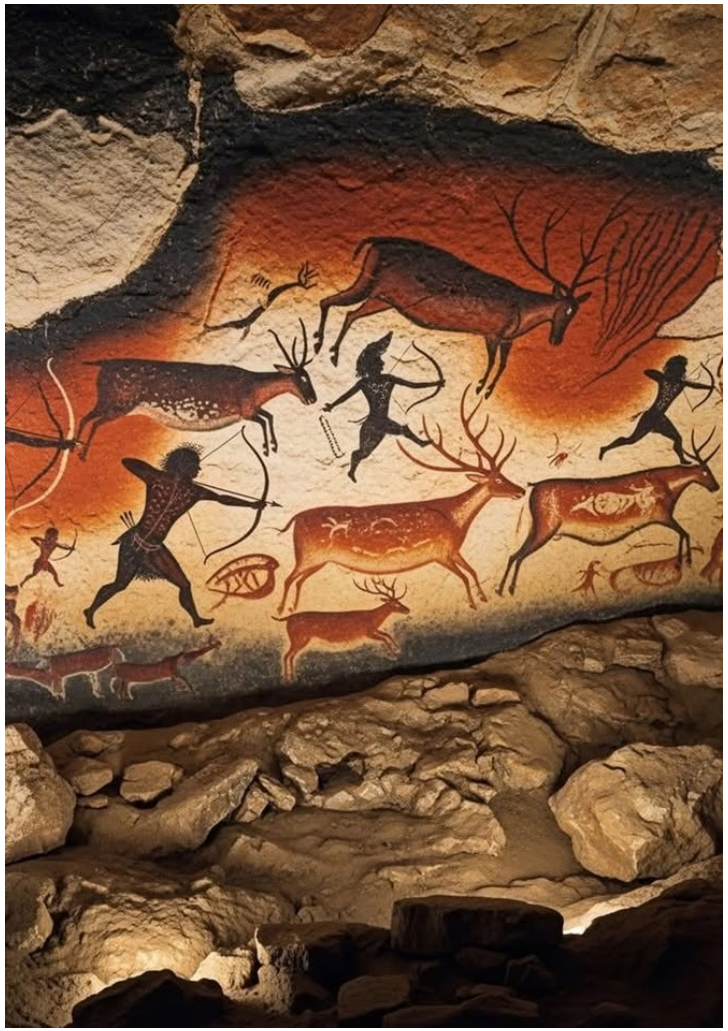


Interesting reflection on ‘Why we read’

Another branch of narratology called ‘cognitive narratology’.

Argument that we read as a sort of evolutionary training substrate to do with our social brains:

1. Tracking the relative status of characters
2. Monitoring the source for trustworthiness
3. Creating, monitoring and updating models of characters’ minds





Example 5 - Status tracking

"She entered the room with an air more than usually ungracious, made no other reply to Elizabeth's salutation than a slight inclination of the head, and sat down without saying a word."

Mimetic

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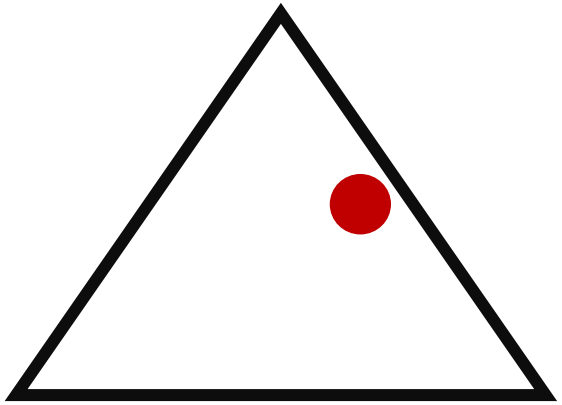

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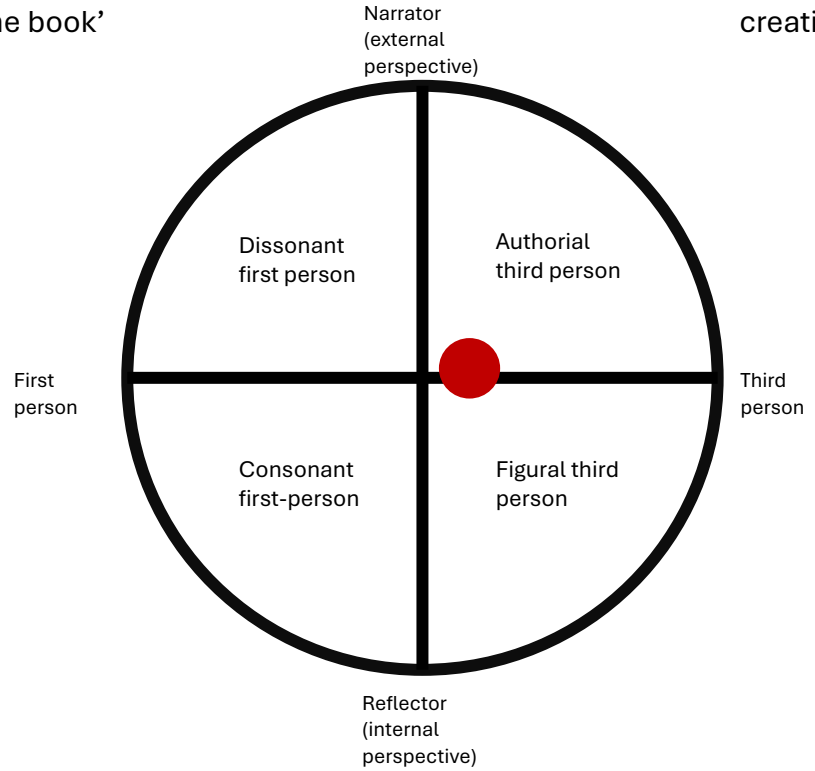
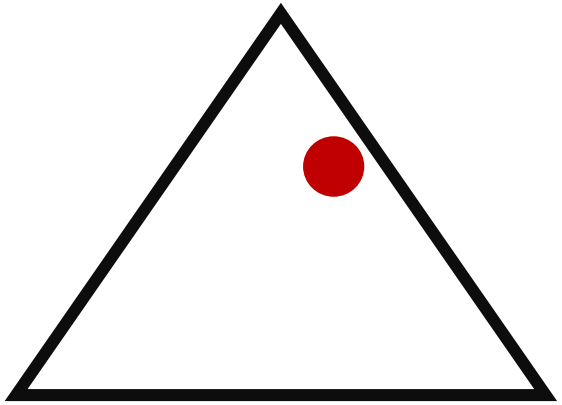


Example 6 – Source monitoring

"Elizabeth, happening to see the countenance of both as they looked at each other, was all astonishment at the effect of the meeting. Both changed colour; one looked white, the other red. Mr. Wickham, after a few moments, touched his hat—a salutation which Mr. Darcy just deigned to return. What could be the meaning of it?—It was impossible to imagine; it was impossible not to long to know."

Mimetic

'This is real'



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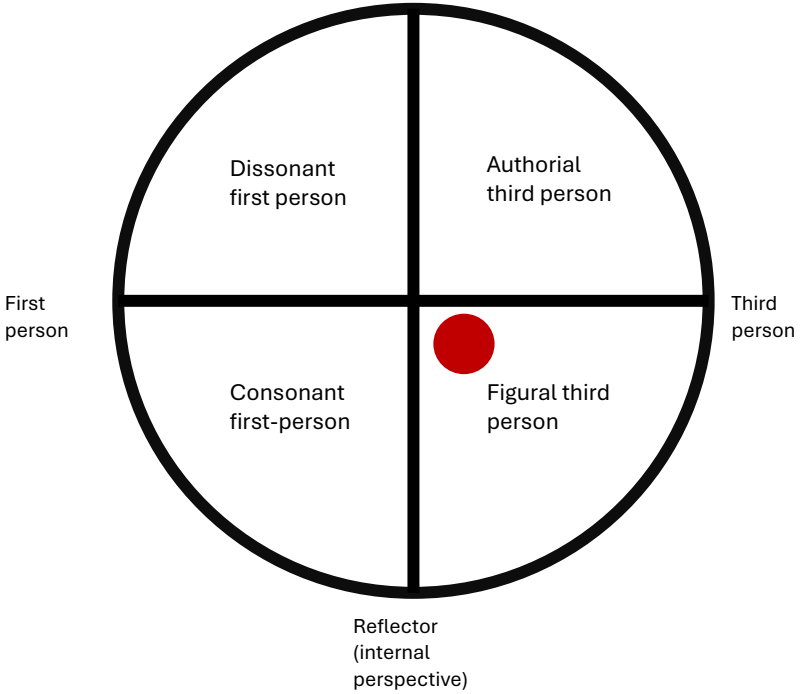

Example 7 – Updating theory of mind

"She had ventured only one glance at Darcy. He looked serious, as usual; and, she thought, more as he had been used to look in Hertfordshire, than as she had seen him at Pemberley."

Mimetic

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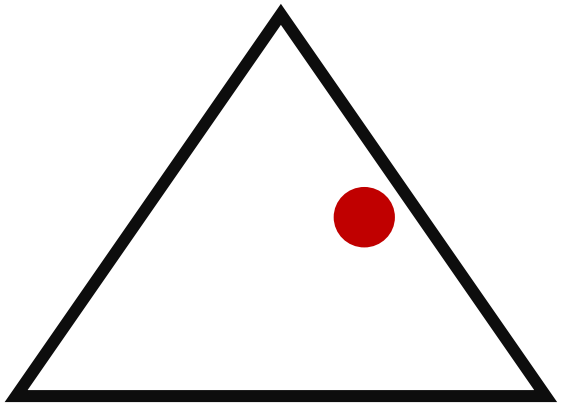

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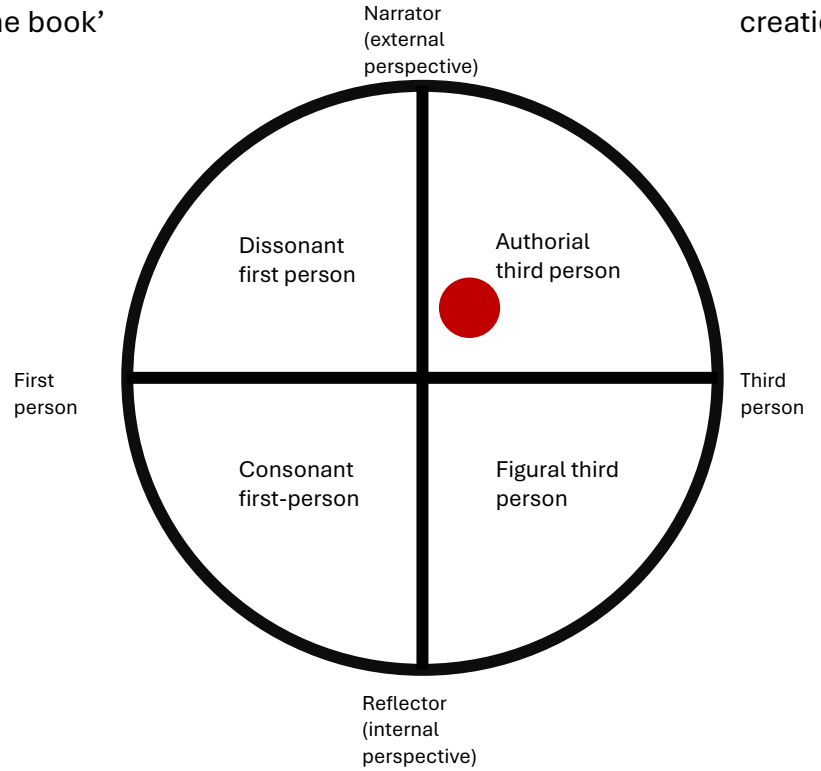

It’s not that AI voice couldn’t do this, it’s that it wouldn’t.

Narrative thought is fundamentally about, and requires extensive lived experience of:

1) Society
2) Embodiment
3) Being in a body…in society.

Good narration experiences the book with you in good faith.



Further Reading



Rhetorical Narratology (Purpose, Audience & MTS)

- **James Phelan**, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (1996): Examines how technique, voice, and ethics interact when a teller shapes a story for a specific purpose.
- **James Phelan**, *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989): Introduces the Mimetic, Thematic, and Synthetic (MTS) framework for tracking character and plot progression.
- **James Phelan**, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (2017): Synthesizes rhetorical narratology around the feedback loop between author, narrator, and audience.
- **Wayne C. Booth**, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961): Foundational Chicago School work on the implied author, unreliable narration, and moral distance.
- **Peter J. Rabinowitz**, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (1987): Coined the "Authorial Audience" and mapped the rules of notice that guide emphasis.

Focalization & The Typological Wheel

- **Franz K. Stanzel**, *A Theory of Narrative* (1979; trans. 1984): Maps the original Typological Circle across Authorial, Figural, and First-Person narrative situations.
- **Dorrit Cohn**, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978): Rendering internal thought via psycho-narration and narrated monologue.
- **Dorrit Cohn**, *"The Encirclement of Narrative"* (*Poetics Today*, 1981): Cohn streamlines Stanzel's circle into her simplified focalization wheel.
- **Gérard Genette**, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972; trans. 1980): Establishes the French structuralist taxonomy of Zero, Internal, and External focalization.

Cognitive Narratology & Accessible Gateways

- **Lisa Zunshine**, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006): Explores how reading exercise our cognitive need for Theory of Mind, status tracking, and source monitoring.
- **Monika Fludernik**, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996): Bridges Stanzel's typology with cognitive science, showing how listeners map literary frames onto real-life schemas.
- **Monika Fludernik**, *An Introduction to Narratology* (2009): A clear, practical textbook that translates German and French structuralist models into everyday analysis.
- **H. Porter Abbott**, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (3rd ed., 2020): The most approachable general primer for authors and readers new to narrative theory.