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Unreliable Narrators; Origins and Impacts

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UNRELIABLE NARRATORS; ORIGINS AND IMPACT

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Introduction

Unreliable narrators can be found in every source of information. They mediate the text for the reader and raise our perceptions of stories, news articles, and forms of receiving facts. While they can be seen in a variety of different genres and forms of literature over the span of many decades, the understanding and acceptance of unreliable narrators have shifted over time. During the late nineteenth century, many authors utilized neutral narrators, intended to be without opinions or bias, when discussing social issues. In Stephen Crane's 1893 novella *Maggie: a Girl of the Streets* the narrator is not the main character Maggie, it is an omniscient narrator. The use of an omniscient narrator creates an all-knowing yet removed narrator, allowing social issues such as poverty and solitude to be told without emotional bias from Maggie, in an attempt to narrate the story as neutrally as possible. Similarly, Upton Sinclair's 1905 novel *The Jungle* tells a story of corruption within tenements and a factory town from an omniscient, third-person narrator. With the release of both of these stories, it was assumed that the narrators were neutral and speaking from an entirely factual perspective. When authors like Mark Twain used an unreliable narrator to explore social issues, as, for example, Twain does with Huck Finn in his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, they drew attention to the presence and importance of point of view in these types of literature. The societal issues and solutions within the stories were created by authors with particular points of view, therefore a neutral narrator can rarely exist. The presence of unreliable narrators and the lack of neutrality is important to analyze because of how commonly used they are in literature, intentionally and unintentionally.

As literary critics and authors have formed their own opinions of what an unreliable narrator is, the definitions and necessary elements to achieve that concept have continued to

change. To accurately analyze the usage of unreliable narrators in select fictional texts, I used various definitions from critics like Wayne C. Booth and Jakob Lothe, in order to find what I believed are the most accurate theories and opinions. Then, I was able to take these and apply them to pieces of fictional literature that employ unreliable narrators. Drawing on foundational critics Wayne C. Booth and Jakob Lothe, as well as more recent critics, I have considered how unreliable narrators open up insights into the psychology of characters and the social structures within which they act. I specifically chose to focus on four texts commonly read in secondary schools and familiar to most readers, because I want readers to connect with my analysis and to find this perspective of unreliable narration illuminating within the literature, and elements of our real world. In addition, I selected these texts because they utilize different types of unreliable narrators. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe uses a narrator unreliable through his suppression of his insanity and differing value system from the implied author. John Cheever's "The Swimmer" is similarly told from a narrator unreliable because of his suppression, but the suppression of memories, causing an incorrect telling of not only his interpretation but also of the events themselves. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger is narrated by Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old boy unreliable because of his naivety and attempt to alter the reader's view of himself. Finally, the narrator in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" uses unreliability in a complex way. Her stream-of-consciousness narration instead encourages the reader to question her telling of events, resulting in a uniquely reliable and honest interpretation. A proficient reader has to be aware of unreliable narrators, like those I've selected to analyze, to fully grasp the meaning of texts. Without recognizing a narrator's unreliability, readers may incorrectly interpret information given to them by the narrator or clues about the characters themselves.

Literature Review

In 1961 Wayne C. Booth coined the original definition for the concept of the unreliable narrator in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth has an opinion that "in the face of inherent limitations in dramatized reliable narrators" it is no surprise that authors began experimenting with unreliable narrators and narrators that changed over the course of a work (156). Unreliability in narrators was created from experimentation with the third-person reflector and their transformations. Through Booth's analysis and critique of fictional techniques, he uses the terms "reliable" and "unreliable" in order to explain when a narrator "speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work" (158). He explains that unreliable narrators "differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their author's norms" (159). Narrators can depart from the author's norms intellectually or physically, but can also depart from the other characters and the reader's own norms physically, emotionally, and morally (156). He creates this terminology in order to adequately depict the distance between the narrator and the implied author, another term coined by Booth meaning the author's second self, "who carries the reader with him in judging the narrator" (158) Booth believes that the reader is carried by the implied author because he describes the experience of reading as being told information by the author that "we must accept without question if we are to grasp the story that is to follow" (3). He explains that "we could never trust even the most reliable of witnesses as completely as we trust the author" because the author is the mode in which we receive any information (4). Booth is describing why and how the unreliable narrator is able to exist, even when their unreliability is known by the reader. Although we can grasp the idea of unreliability, he believes that it is necessary to accept the author's information in order to be an effective reader. Booth also claims that generally speaking, the deeper the inside view a narrator provides,

the more unreliable (163-164). Consequently, Booth believes stream-of-consciousness style narrators should be perceived as very unreliable, because of the depth the reader is brought into their view of a situation. With a stream-of-consciousness style narrator, the reader is being pulled along by the narrator to experience the mental path they are taking. With this close relationship between the reader and the narrator, there is little room for unbiased and trustworthy information. Although all of these elements constitute Booth's opinion of what an unreliable narrator is and how they affect a piece of fiction, he limits his claim by saying "difficult irony is not sufficient to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying" (159). When a narrator lies, it is more often unconsciousness of their qualities or being mistaken during a situation. Because of this, it depends how, and how far the narrator departs from the author's norms.

Like many literary critics, Jakob Lothe continues with Booth's ideas of what makes a narrator unreliable, and how he believes their effect is possible on the reader. Similar to Booth, Lothe claims that we must accept information from the author if we are to grasp the story. He states that the reader's "attitude to narrative texts is influenced by conventions, i.e. customary notions and expectations that are so ingrained that we do not (or only to a partial extent) think about them" (Lothe 25). Elements of the reader's preformed beliefs and expectations shape how we understand and trust a narrator, and can explain why some readers discern unreliability more easily than others. It also explains why readers naturally see a narrator as having "artificial authority." Lothe claims that in many situations, when the narrator has "artificial authority," readers "so directly and without reservation" accept the narrator's perspective and observations about the narrator (25). We want to believe the narrator and will, "unless the text at some point gives us a signal *not* to do so" (25). Lothe differs from Booth and others when he states that a

narrator becomes unreliable if the text signals to not believe the narrator, and in that case "the narrator's authority may be undermined" (26). His idea of unreliability centers around the authority we give them as readers, and the author's deliberate signals. Included in this claim, Lothe provides more context and describes three characteristics that may indicate a narrator's unreliability while reading a narrative. The first is "The narrator has limited knowledge of or insight into what he is narrating" (26) meaning they are not omniscient or able to obtain the reader's knowledge if the story is in the limited third person perspective instead of first person. The second indication is "The narrator has a strong personal involvement (in a way that makes both his narrative presentation and evaluation strikingly subjective)" (26). By being closely involved, the narrator has difficulty speaking without opinions or biases. The third indication of unreliability by Lothe is that "The narrator appears to represent something that comes into conflict with the system of values that the discourse as a whole presents" (26). By "value system" he means the textual intention regarding the implied author. An example of this is in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, when Scout tells her uncle about the insults being said to Atticus in town. She says he's being called "A n-word-lover. I ain't very sure what it means, but the way Francis said it—tell you one thing right now, Uncle Jack, I'll be—I swear before God if I'll sit there and let him say somethin' about Atticus" (Lee 98). Lee does not share Scout's naivety, and fully understands the implications of the insults the town is using. The book itself is intended to demonstrate the brutal consequences of racism and prejudice, so Scout's perspective is intended to show the innocence and lack of racism through her conflict with the system of values in the novel. This final indication from Lothe is very similar to Booth's original idea, that unreliability depends on how the narrator departs from the author's norms. These three indicators influence and affect one another, yet they leave out Lothe's earlier point, that unreliability stems

from their ascribed authority, and the author's signals that they provide to the reader. In the three examples he provides, according to his theory, the author would have to make the indications clear and deliberate, so the reader can acknowledge the signal being provided.

In H. Porter Abbott's book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, he shares similarities to both Booth and Lothe, but adds to their concepts. Abbott begins by stating that "Without our collaboration, there is no narrative to begin with. And if it is true that we allow ourselves to be manipulated by narrative, it is also true that we do manipulating of our own" (xii). By recognizing personal influence on a narrative and exploring how that affects our analysis of a narrator, the reader is taking an active part in the "interplay of audiences and narratives in the process of interpretation" and altering how the unreliable narrator functions (xii). If readers play an active role in the function of an unreliable narrator, then it becomes important to understand how to discover their unreliability. Abbott explains reliability with the questions: "To what extent can we rely on the narrator to give us an accurate rendering of the facts? To what extent, once we have ascertained the facts, are we meant to respect the narrator's opinions when she offers an interpretation?" (69). He claims that "in order to interpret a narrative, we must have as fine a sense as we can of where a narrator fits on this broad spectrum of reliability" (69). In contribution to Booth's concept that narrators differ depending on how they differ from the author's norms, Abbott believes there is a spectrum, and analysis of a narrative depends on where the narrator falls within the spectrum. One reason Abbott believes unreliable narrators are an advantage in a narrative is because the "narrative itself – its difficulties, its liability to be subverted by one's own interests and prejudices and blindness – becomes part of the subject" (69). He also accepts Booth's original concept, which Lothe also includes in his book, that implied authors have a large role in the function of an unreliable

narrator. Since the real author is “a complex, continually changing individual of whom we may never have any secure knowledge” the implied author is who we construct to “account for” the narrative (77). As readers, we utilize the implied author’s intended meaning and view of the narrative in order to understand when and how a narrator differs.

R. F. Dietrich and Rodger H. Sundell provide questions for how a reader might explore this, and how we can determine the reliability of the narrator in their book *The Art of Fiction*. They question “do we find evidence (for example bias, contradictions, inconsistency, confusion, incomplete understanding) that casts doubt on the narrator’s insights, judgments, and self-knowledge?” (172). By determining this, it allows the reader to understand their position and their relationship with the unreliable narrator. Similar to Lothe’s idea, Dietrich and Sundell claim that despite the reader’s ability or desire to recognize when a narrator is unreliable, readers naturally want to trust the narrator, and often do, unless they are given a reason not to, but even in that case the reader will find themself trusting the narrator when they are not consciously thinking about their unreliability. They claim that inaccurate and mistaken interpretations of short stories “occur when a reader trusts an unreliable narrator and identifies that narrator with the author” (171). As the previous literary critics have agreed, there is a distance and a difference between the narrator and the author, although Dietrich and Sundell do not acknowledge the idea of an implied author.

A possible explanation for a reader’s desire and unconscious ability to trust an unreliable narrator can be explained with human empathy. In her article “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions,” Amy Coplan claims that the connection formed between the reader and the narrator comes from a place of empathy, as readers “often adopt the perspective of one or more of the characters in fictional narratives” (1). Coplan explains that studies conducted by Black,

Turner, and Bower showed that “if readers adopt the point of view of a particular character early on in a narrative, then sentences describing subsequent events from that character’s point of view will be more easily processed and remembered” than those of other points of view (1-2). The natural human ability to connect with others results in giving power to narrators and helps them in their ability to create their own desired narrative. While empathizing with a narrator, the reader is still able to “simultaneously experience his or her own separate thoughts, emotions, and desires” (4). Carroll adds that the reader does not replicate or simulate a character’s mental state, “we respond emotionally to fiction from the outside” (Carroll 311). As readers we observe, rather than participate, which allows for an outside analysis of the elements necessary in forming an unreliable narrator.

Throughout all of the literature I reviewed, one element that stands out as necessary for creating an unreliable narrator is that a narrator differs from the implied author, and their unreliability stems from the method in which they differ. Narrators can differ through their knowledge on the situation, age, emotions, and morals. I also believe that an unreliable narrator can be unreliable unintentionally. Booth originally believed it takes more than a lie to be unreliable, that a narrator must intentionally misconstrue the truth in order to be unreliable, but I disagree with this belief. I believe unconscious lying can be a type of unreliable narration, and that unreliability can come from a lack of knowledge or age, like Lothe claims in his definition. I also agree with Lothe’s addition to the concept, that a narrator can be unreliable through their conflict with the discourse as a whole, or the implied author's intentions, but also if the narrator has limited knowledge or is strongly personally involved. This addition adds many more examples that can be analyzed and explained through the unreliable narrator's perspective. I will use key concepts from the literature review in my analysis of texts to create a spectrum in which

I will measure the effect of the unreliable narrator. The key concepts include: the way an unreliable narrator departs from the author's norms, the distance between the narrator and the implied author, and the value system of the implied author. These three framing concepts allow for a narrator to be analyzed in the context of consciousness and subjectivity. Through these analyses of the structure and understanding of the unreliable narrator, they present necessary pieces that can be applied when exploring individual examples of narrators in short stories and novels.

Selection of Literary Texts

The unreliable narrator can be found in countless short fiction pieces and novels alike. I selected a variety of fictional pieces in order to accurately represent the spectrum of unreliability within narrators. I also focused on selecting works that are familiar and would be recognizable by a large portion of readers. I chose Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," John Cheever's "The Swimmer," Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," and J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Each of these texts, especially "The Tell-Tale Heart" and *The Catcher in the Rye*, are commonly taught in schools and known by most students. It was important to me to select familiar texts, because I want readers to connect with my analysis, and to find this unreliable narration perspective illuminating within the literature, and elements of our real world. There has been discourse about these works for many years, but I believe unreliable narrators are a main element to their success, and the message they are able to convey to their readers.

Analysis

In one of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous works, "The Tell-Tale Heart," the story depicts an unnamed narrator defending his sanity after murdering an old man through first-person narration. He questions us, "I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?" (245). Immediately, he makes us aware of his mental state, and we are drawn to question the very sanity he defends. As the narrator continues, he states "You fancy me mad." before attempting to prove to the reader, but more so himself, how "wisely" he proceeded with the crime (245). On the first page of the story, the reader is made aware that the narrator is defensive of his sanity, and his clarity of the situation. His defensiveness provides evidence that casts doubt on the narrator's insights and indicates multiple signs at the beginning of the short story to cause speculation of reliability. As stated before, the implied author is deliberately signaling to us to think about the narrator's reliability. This signal allows the reader to become immersed in the story from the beginning by sharing the main idea of the text. By recognizing the narrator's sanity and reliability, the reader can then enjoy the text while understanding the perspective of the events.

As the implied author signals to the reader to be aware of the narrator's mental instability, it is also made evident that the narrator is directly involved in the situation, causing personal biases and fears to influence the telling of the story. Despite the clear signs, as readers trying to gain information, we must accept what the narrator has to say because while we are relying on the narrator to provide necessary information about the murder of the old man, we are also consciously thinking about where on the spectrum of unreliability the narrator would fall. It is clear the narrator comes into conflict with the implied author's value systems. The implied author is not a murderer or insane, assumedly, therefore he does not share the narrator's

inhumane value of the old man's life. This creates a distance between the narrator and the implied author, because the narrator differs from the implied author's norms intellectually, emotionally, and morally.

Following the murder of the man, after being driven to madness with the "eye of a vulture" the narrator hears the heartbeat of the old man underneath the floor boards, "a low, dull, quick sound" (245, 251). The repetitive beating causes the narrator to descend into madness. As the beating continues louder and louder, the narrator shows his mental state by allowing us to hear the questioning occurring within his mind. He says, "Why would they not be gone? … Oh God! what could I do? … Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no!" (251). Confidence turns into fear as he believes the police officers present in the room are aware of his crime, hearing the very beating consuming the narrator within his own mind. Fearful of the police's knowledge, the narrator allows himself to be consumed by the beating, exclaiming "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! here, here!" (251). Despite his instability, the reader can rely, to an extent, on the narrator to give us an accurate rendering of the facts. The reader can conclude that the events themselves are true, because there is clear evidence. There was a murder, the body was placed under the floorboards, the police investigated, and the narrator admitted to the crime. While the events are seemingly true, the narrator's interpretation is misleading. The scenes of sneaking into the old man's room every night, and sitting with the police officers happened, but we don't know what they were like because the narrator's interpretation is specific and biased by his involvement. We can respect his opinions in order to analyze the narrator himself, but we are not to take them as truth. The narrator causes unreliability through his suppression of his insanity. The guilt and clarity he feels

following the crime alters his view of the situation and causes his narration to be seen through the narrator's mentally altered viewpoint from the beginning.

In the case of "The Tell-Tale Heart", unreliability is simple to spot. The implied author gives a clear signal in the beginning, and there are multiple signs to indicate unreliability. In other examples of unreliable narrators, the unreliability is not as simple because we are not given indications until later in the story. John Cheever's "The Swimmer" utilizes this method of unreliability through a third-person narrative voice. Throughout his journey in time and in swimming "across the country," Neddy is confused and has very limited knowledge of his past, although this is unknown until the story begins to unfold (Prescott 431-441). In the beginning of the story, we are introduced to Neddy, a seemingly normal man experiencing a light-hearted pool day during midsummer. We are given details about Neddy and his life, such as he "slid down his banister that morning and given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack, as he jogged toward the smell of coffee in his dining room" (Prescott 432). From the beginning, it is clear he has a family, and a nice home that "stood in Bullet Park, eight miles to the south" where his four daughters lived (432). The opening of the story gives the reader no reason to question Neddy's reliability, mental stability, or the status of his life. He is married and has his wife with him at his starting location, he states "When Lucinda asked where he was going, he said he was going to swim home" (432). He seems to be perceived as a respectable man who is well-liked, as he says "he stopped to kiss eight or ten other women and shake the hands of as many men. A smiling bartender he had seen at a hundred parties gave him a gin-and-tonic" (434). The implied author has given no signals to question Neddy's reliability, and he is acting in accordance with the norms of the work.

The slow-building climax begins when Neddy realizes “he could reach his home by water” thus beginning his long journey to his home and through time (432). A while after this realization, there are signs that the events are not occurring as they seem. Neddy conveys his confusion as time doesn’t seem linear and real. Neddy “wondered what time it had gotten to be. Four? Five?” (434). His confusion of time and difficulty with his memory are the first indicators that Neddy is not reliable with his information. He says, “He seemed to remember having heard something about the Pasterns and their horses, but the memory was unclear” (435). This acts as an indicator from the implied author, that simple facts that contribute to the clarity of the story, like time and observations, are forgotten by Neddy. His confusion causes the reader to cast doubts on Neddy’s insights, judgments, and self-knowledge moving forward. Neddy then comes to find that the Welcher’s pool is dry, and he reflects “It was common enough to go away for the summer, but people never drained their pools” (435). Neddy is providing enough information for us to know that his interpretation is skewed, but it is unclear at this point what is causing it. Why were the Welcher’s gone, and selling their house when Neddy had recently spoken to them? Why is Neddy unaware of the events happening around him? Neddy goes on to question “Was his memory failing, or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?” (435). Finally, the implied author has provided a possible explanation for the confusion thus far. Neddy represses negative memories, and his unreliability comes from his avoidance of the truth. The implied author does not want the story to be so recalcitrant or too difficult to read, so they provide an explanation for unreliability to keep the reader enjoying it. This explanation becomes clearer and more obviously signaled as the story progresses, especially in his conversation with Mrs. Halloran. Upon seeing Neddy swimming through her yard, she offers sympathy saying “We’ve been terribly sorry to hear about all your

misfortunes, Neddy…Why, we heard that you'd sold the house, and that your poor children . . ." (437). In response, Neddy explains "I don't know what you mean…I don't recall having sold the house…and the girls are at home" (437). At the start of the story, Neddy was with his wife and had a home about eight miles away, but the apparent misfortunes in Neddy's life, like selling his home, indicate that more time has gone by than he has told us. Neddy's interpretation is that it's still the same day as the pool party in midsummer. His suppression of memories has caused an incorrect telling of not only his interpretation but also of the events themselves. As his journey nears its end, characters from the beginning of the story return, treating Neddy vastly differently. The bartender who once smiled and seemed like a friend, now "served him, but rudely" (439). Hosts are not excited to see him show up, and do not offer Neddy a drink. It's at this party with the Biswangers that the reader is able to uncover the truth of what happened to Neddy and his family. He overhears Grace Biswanger tell guests "They went broke overnight—nothing but income—and he showed up drunk one Sunday and asked us to loan him five thousand dollars" (439). Although Neddy does not understand the information he overhears because of his suppression of painful memories, the reader can gather enough clues to know the information is about him. His journey swimming across the country ends as Neddy arrives home, but "looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty" (441). The events from the singular day in Neddy's mind, in actuality, took place over the course of multiple years.

Unlike Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" where the narrator is unreliable in his interpretation of events but trustworthy in telling the events that took place, Neddy is unreliable in both interpretation and telling of events because of his avoidance of the truth and his suppression of memories. Additionally, the reader feels little sympathy for the narrator in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and doesn't share his fearful emotions. The gravity of his crime and his

blatant insanity causes a disconnect emotionally in addition to the lack of trust already established. The narrator in Cheever's "The Swimmer" creates an entirely different experience for the reader. Neddy's confusion about the events themselves causes the reader to share his confusion alongside him, impacting the reader's view of Neddy's unreliability. He is not seen as a deceitful narrator, misleading the reader as a result of insanity or in an attempt to prove himself like Poe's narrator, he is viewed with sympathy. Neddy is not trying to influence the opinions of the reader in any way, he is simply a confused man that is unable to tell a truthful interpretation. Despite this, the two narrators share the element of unintentional unreliability, as it is a result of their own mental state in relation to the event that occurred. As a consequence of the unintentional and completely skewed nature of Neddy's narration, we are not able to respect his opinions in his interpretation of his journey swimming across the country as a trustworthy narration. Neddy differs from the implied author, but also the other characters in the story intellectually. His knowledge differs from the information had by the characters he comes into contact with, and the knowledge and information the implied author shares gradually throughout his journey. Neddy's intellectual norms also differ from the readers' but less than the implied author, because the reader shares his lack of information for a majority of the story, until the implied author begins sharing pieces of necessary information. Once the reader has an explanation, they begin to differ more from Neddy.

In the classic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, the entirety of Holden Caulfield's first-person narration is filled with unreliable opinions and observations of his time at Pencey Prep, and his days in New York after leaving. As both the narrator and the protagonist, there are already signs that Holden is too personally involved to be able to provide a truthful and trustworthy story. In many cases, first-person narrators are reliable in telling the reader about

their own lives, but their unreliability comes from inaccurate and emotionally influenced retellings of events that have shaped their experiences. Holden is a sixteen-year-old boy, causing much of his unreliability to stem from his naivety and a negative outlook on his situation. As a narrator, Holden differs from the implied author through his age, his emotions, and his lack of knowledge of the world around him that comes with being a teenager. Similar to the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Holden is signaled immediately to the reader to not be trusted in his interpretation of events. On the first page of the first chapter, while telling us about his life, Holden says "I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages a piece if I told anything pretty personal about them" (3). Holden is warning that there will be information that he leaves out, but also that he will be honest when he doesn't want to talk about something. Although the lack of information can cause an unreliable retelling of events, in this moment Holden's norms are possibly aligning with the readers'. There is a shared value of privacy and withholding family information that is shared between the two. The reader may also share his value of candor, as he very honestly explains why he will not be telling the reader everything. These shared norms cause Holden and the reader to align, despite the unreliability. He also refers to the reader as "you" throughout the entire novel, causing the reader to feel like a companion that Holden is entrusting with his story. A common theme throughout the story is his loneliness and failure to connect with those around him, so by including the reader as "you", it causes the reader to sympathize and not want to immediately flag him as unreliable. He establishes this by stating "One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window" (17). He creates an image that everyone else is against him, and is deserving of the criticism he

provides as the story goes on. He feels alienated by the boys and girls at his school, and this feeling only grows throughout his experience in New York. Holden often talks negatively about anyone and everyone he dislikes. While introducing Robert Ackley, a student that roomed next to Holden, he described him as “a very peculiar guy…with lousy teeth. The whole time he roomed next to me, I never even once saw him brush his teeth. They always looked mossy and awful, and he damn near made you sick if you saw him in the dining room with his mouth full…Besides that he had a lot of pimples…And not only that, he had a terrible personality. He was also sort of a nasty guy. I wasn’t too crazy about him, to tell you the truth” (22-23). At the end of his introduction, Holden reveals that he doesn’t like Ackley, which influenced the way he explained him to the reader. Holden picks out every negative trait about Ackley in order to influence the reader to think the same way he does. Part of his unreliability comes from trying to get the reader to be on the same page as he is with his opinions, rather than providing the facts and allowing readers to figure it out for themselves. In addition to his very opinionated and biased narration of secondary characters that casts doubt on his insights, judgments, and self-knowledge, he is also very clear about his ability to deceive. As Holden delves further into his story, he begins chapter three by claiming “I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It's awful. If I'm on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I'm going, I'm liable to say I'm going to the opera. It's terrible” (19). In the clearest way possible, the implied author is signaling that not only does Holden lie, but he’s aware of his ability to do so at any moment. Similar to how he expressed his likelihood to leave out details in chapter one, he is honestly expressing that some details are purposely incorrect. Since we have ascertained this fact, we still hope that Holden will not lie to us, especially because he has been seemingly honest about his thoughts and opinions, but it casts serious doubts over everything he’s already told us

and will continue to in the rest of the novel. In addition to Holden's struggles to connect with those around him, he believes that he knows people very well, while his interactions show the opposite. After his roommate Stradlater returned home from a date, Holden states "The thing is, you didn't know Stradlater. I knew him" (55). This is part of an effort to prove to us his opinionated observations are trustworthy. Immediately prior to this thought, in Holden's actual interactions with Stradlater, he thinks multiple times "God, how I hated him" and even begins a physical altercation (48). Holden explains, "This next part I don't remember so hot…I was going down to the can or something, and then I tried to sock him, with all my might" (49). For someone who "knew" Stradlater, he doesn't seem to like him at all, and they behave like roommates with little characteristics of friendship. In a similar situation, Holden says "I know old Jane like a book" (85). Holden claims he and Jane spent a summer together a few years prior, but most of Holden's descriptions of Jane reflect the age they were when they knew one another. She loved to play checkers and tennis, often losing balls while golfing, and he insists that "I knew she wouldn't let him [Stradlater] get to first base with her" based on the fact that she didn't let Holden kiss her on the mouth during their summer together (89). Everything that Holden knows about Jane is from years prior, which fogs his judgment of her now. The true nature of their relationship becomes clear in his multiple attempts to call her. The first instance, after leaving a record store in New York, Holden decides to call her up but states "her mother answered the phone, so I had to hang up" (129). The second attempt to call Jane, she doesn't answer, but we learn more about the time between their summer and now. Jane had dated "this terrible guy, Al Pike" which led to a disagreement between the two after Holden asked her "how come she could date a show-off bastard like Al Pike" (150). She disagrees with his question, showing how she has changed since Holden knew her. His negative opinions of both Al Pike and

Stradlater in their relations with Jane come from a place of jealousy, and confusion on why Jane chose the other two boys instead of Holden. Jane didn't let Holden kiss her during their summer together, yet she kisses boys Holden believes are "phony". Once again, he feels disconnected from those around him, and can't seem to form true relationships. While explaining these relationships to the reader, Holden is consciously trying to alter our perception of him in order to view him positively, which impacts his interpretation of every event. I believe a main reason for Holden wanting to control our perception of him stems from his lack of self-knowledge and self-analysis.

Holden's lack of self-analysis causes him to have emotional reactions without accurate explanations, influencing his interpretation of events. After getting drunk at a bar, he says "I was crying and all. I don't know why, but I was. I guess it was because I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome" (169). Holden speculates why he feels the emotions he's experiencing, but he rarely practices introspection. His self-analysis comes after already experiencing the emotions, reacting to the situation, and telling the reader his opinions. He paints a picture of the type of person he believes to be, but without introspection he doesn't realize how different he really is. For example, Holden likes Jane and dislikes the other men she is interested in, which distorts his ability to judge and understand Jane. This causes him to misjudge her boyfriends, and to react negatively as a way of forestalling more direct forms of rejection. Holden struggles to recognize his role in distorting his view of others and acting out as a reaction. In order to understand himself, he needs a type of guide, for example a therapist or counselor, who will question the unreliable judgments he makes, and can help him to see the patterns in his behavior. Holden accurately depicts a narrator both intentionally and unintentionally unreliable. He is mostly unintentionally unreliable because of his naivety and lack of knowledge of the world, not

because of intentional deceit. Nearly all of his biased opinions and untrue interpretations are a result of his age and close relation to the events. Despite this, he is intentionally trying to control how we view him, which contributes to our lack of trust in his telling of the entire story.

Tillie Olsen uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative style in “I Stand Here Ironing” to foreground the narrator’s ambivalent feelings about her parenting. Unlike any of the previous first-person examples, the story allows the reader into the mother’s head to follow her stream of non-linear thoughts. Throughout her narration, the mother tends to “reveal candidly” her own “weaknesses and failings” (Dietrich and Sundell 173). She is being honest to herself, but is unreliable because of her direct position in the conflict and memories within the narrative. The entire story is centered around the mother and her relationship with her daughter as she reflects on the years she spent raising her, after a school employee says “She’s a youngster who needs help and whom I’m deeply interested in helping” (Prescott 441). The mother then begins a battle with herself, setting the stage for her entire stream of consciousness when she says “I will become engulfed with all I did or did not do, with what should have been and what cannot be helped” (442). The mother is consumed by thoughts of what she did wrong in raising her daughter, and the regrets she has towards some of her actions.

The mother’s thoughts are shared with the reader throughout her retelling of events. The first pieces she gives us to bring the reader deeper into her mind are that she breastfed her children, but she “did like the books then said” and was feeding Emily on a schedule, not when she was hungry (442). At a later moment, she recalls “She [Emily] was two. Old enough for nursery school they said, and I did not know then what I know now” (442). The mother tried her best to listen to the advice of those around her, who she believed knew better than she did, yet time and time again it caused more harm than good. On a separate occasion, the mother says

"They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to a convalescent home in the country" in order to provide her food and care that the mother cannot give (444). Again, her daughter returned to her mother worse than when she left. The guilt of listening to those she thought would bring her daughter help is placed on herself, a nineteen-year-old trying to figure things out alone, rather than those who were in the wrong.

The narrator in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" is self-conscious of her own influence on her daughter, and as a result creates an unreliable narration that paints her as the one at fault for Emily's life. Other readers, with their own set of values and beliefs, believe that the narrator is creating excuses for her bad decisions by placing the blame on others. In multiple situations she attempts to explain her reasoning by saying things like "They persuaded me" and "they said" which removes the blame from her (442, 444). Regardless of the readers' beliefs of the mother's motives, the narration focuses on her failures, yet key details reveal that the situation might not have been as detrimental as she is making them out to be. While her daughter, Emily, is at the convalescent home, the mother says that they wrote to each other every other day. A neglectful, unloving mother would not take the time to write to her child every other day, and would not have sent her to a place that promised to help. Additionally, at the end of the story Emily asks "Aren't you ever going to finish the ironing, Mother?" and kisses her on her forehead before returning upstairs (447). The way Emily behaves towards her mother may have signs of the way she was raised, but she does not seem to hold the same grudge against her mother as her mother does to herself. The narrator even describes Emily in a positive way by saying "She is so lovely" (447). In the end, Emily has grown up to be healthy and to still have affection for her mother. The difference in possible realities casts doubts on the mother's critical view of the situation, but also illuminates how individuals are often overly critical of themselves. It's human nature to pick

apart your own actions, especially when it has an effect on another person, which contributes to the natural unreliability in all people. We don't know how representative these memories are of the factors weighing on Emily, but we get a vivid understanding of the mother's point of view as she reveals exactly where the holes are in her specific judgments.

It is simple to say that the mother's direct involvement in the topic of her daughter causes her interpretation to be very unreliable, yet there are multiple points where she directly calls us to question her motives along with her. While discussing her mistakes with breastfeeding, she questions "Why do I put that first?" (442). The narrator is drawing our attention to her own questioning, and creating a type of disclaimer. She is pointing out that we should analyze this, because she isn't sure why she's thinking this way either. If the unreliable narrator is directly asking us to analyze her, and to look through her unreliability, is she still unreliable? Later in the story, she questions herself again asking "What do I mean? What did I start to gather together, to try and make coherent?" (446). By consistently checking in on the reader to ensure we are also questioning her and holding her accountable, she creates a gray area between unreliable, and reliable.

The mother calls into question what theorists have claimed is the most unreliable type of narration. Booth claimed that the deeper the inside view a narrator provides, the more unreliable, but the mother is more open and honest than Neddy, and therefore more reliable (Booth 163-164). Since the narrator is helping us to question her ordering of the narration and her reasons for explaining as she does, she is giving a deeper view, but is proving Booth's claim to be wrong because she is more reliable than Neddy, Holden, or the narrator from Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" who repressed information. Indeed, the narrator has a strong personal involvement with the events she is explaining, which Lothe agrees is a sign of unreliability, but both theorists

ignore the possibility of attention being drawn to the unreliability by the narrators themselves. Questioning and attention from the narrator cuts through the theorists' negative beliefs regarding stream-of-consciousness style narration, because reliability is created in a different way.

Conclusions and Speculations

By looking at examples of unreliable narrators within well-known works of fiction, their characteristics and motives can be analyzed to explore their level of unreliability, but also the type, intentional or unintentional. A narrator who is unintentionally, or unconsciously misleading to the reader, opens up an even deeper view of unreliability in the world. An unintentional unreliable narrator can be portrayed in multiple ways, but more commonly as either unconsciously unreliable, their subconscious influencing their opinions and actions, or naïve, with a genuine lack of knowledge on the world. This type of narrator can be connected to the study of psychoanalysis, which describes thoughts, memories, and feelings that unconsciously influence all actions. Formulated by Sigmund Freud, he wanted to better explain unconscious mental processes and impulses. This can be applied to unreliable narrators because unintentional unreliability is a direct cause of their subconscious decisions. When an unreliable narrator tells a lie or misconstrued interpretation of an event unintentionally, it is a reflection of their past experiences that makes up their subconscious, not an external cause or deliberate thought.

The influence of the subconscious mind contributes to the importance of self-analysis and constant introspection. In the case of Holden Caulfield, his lack of self-knowledge and effort to analyze his reactions causes unreliability through his interpretation of both people and events. On the other hand, the mother in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" constantly self-analyzes and questions her reliability. Her honesty and ability to look into herself create an honest retelling,

because the stream-of-consciousness narration invites the reader to question the narrator's interpretation of events and to draw conclusions. The vulnerability within the stream-of-consciousness narration causes it to be completely honest, regardless of the influence of bias and opinions. The thoughts are coming straight from the narrator's mind, unable to be shaped and altered before reaching the reader. Her interpretation of events is distorted, but still honest to the narrator and her unique point of view. Often seen as the most neutral, unbiased form of narration, the omniscient perspective is not limited to one character, but instead is knowing of all characters and events. Stream of consciousness, however, incorporates all-knowing information but it is restricted to the mind of one character and all of their thoughts and feelings. Holden's selective questioning of his actions and reliability is entirely self-serving. He questions when it works in his favor for the version of himself he is trying to convey. The mother is questioning herself in an entirely yielding way. She allows herself to be analyzed because she is genuinely unsure as well. While they both open themselves up to the reader to be investigated, the effect is entirely different.

Out of the four texts I selected, each uses unreliability differently and causes unique effects on the reader. One way the texts differ is how close we feel to the narrator. The relationship we have with the narrator is very personal, and depends on their honesty and personality. Feeling close to a narrator like Poe's from "The Tell-Tale Heart" is off putting, because we do not want to feel close to someone capable of his crimes. His character is concerning and unrelatable for most people, so closeness only causes the reader to be more skeptical of his reliability. On the other hand, feeling close to a narrator like the mother in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" or Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, draws us in. The closeness evokes sympathy and understanding, making it difficult to believe they are

being misleading. Sympathy causes skepticism to take up less of our mental process while reading. Booth said that the depth the reader is brought into the narrator's view of a situation, the more unreliable. Indeed this is the case for "The Tell-Tale Heart," but moments of *The Catcher in the Rye* and a majority of "I Stand Here Ironing" proves that closeness can also bring honesty and a distraction from our skepticism.

A major part of unreliable narrators that Booth and Lothe discuss in their theories is that the narrator comes into conflict with the value systems of the work, or the textual intention regarding the implied author. Differing value systems are clear in "The Tell-Tale Heart" as the narrator is a murderer struggling with his insanity, and we can assume the implied author, or Poe, is neither of those things. This is also seen in *The Catcher in the Rye* because Holden's values are aligned with a sixteen-year-old boy, not the values of J. D. Salinger or the implied author. Despite these examples, it is important to note that unreliable narrators don't have to have different values. Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" is an example of the values not completely differing. The mother tells her story of raising a young child alone and feeling like all that happened to Emily is her fault. The mother values her children and her role in their lives, similarly to Tillie Olsen. At the time of writing this story, Olsen was busy taking care of her young children and found time to write after all of her duties as a mother. It can be assumed that much of the mother's thoughts and worries are inspired by thoughts had by Olsen, or at least inspired by her experience as a mother. While it is not necessary for an unreliable narrator to have differing values, it does draw our attention more clearly to their unreliability when they do.

Neddy from John Cheever's "The Swimmer" has a close relationship with the reader for part of the story, but this shifts to give distance when we leave his consciousness. Neddy's awareness and sense of reality differ from the implied author, but we share that with him. Once

the confusion begins to wear off for the reader, we are left with pieces of information and a distanced relationship from Neddy. In his conversation with Mrs. Halloran, she says “We’ve been terribly sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy…Why, we heard that you’d sold the house, and that your poor children . . .” (Prescott 437). As the reader we are eager to hear more about what has happened, but instead Neddy says “Thank you for the swim.” and heads on his way (437). In this moment we are kicked out of Neddy’s consciousness because we get an idea that something is occurring, but Neddy won't help us to see. Cheever uses an unreliable narrator to encourage us to experience what he experiences and to figure out what has happened alongside him.

Unreliable narrators have a variety of relationships with the reader, as seen across the works of Poe, Cheever, Salinger, and Olsen. Their characteristics determine the effect they will have on the text and on the reader’s understanding of the story. Poe tells us exactly what is happening so we can form our own judgments. Cheever mystifies the reader from the beginning by withholding crucial information, to encourage us to experience what Neddy is experiencing. Salinger presents us with the task of deciding when we trust Holden and when we can’t. Olsen draws on our sympathy and asks us to solve the problem of the mother’s interpretation with her. All four of these texts use elements of unreliability described by Wayne C. Booth, Jakob Lothe, and more recent critics, but all of them should be read independently to analyze how that author chooses to use it. A major mistake readers make is not identifying when a narrator is being unreliable. The reason why so many of these pieces work to connect with the reader and convey a message, is because the narrator is human and makes human mistakes while giving their interpretation. Unreliability is everywhere in literature, which is why texts should be analyzed from the lens of the narrator to understand its message.

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