

**The Firing Squad or the Sea**  
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At the heart of every story, one might easily argue, lies the author's choice of narrative point of view. Whether first or third person, omniscient or limited, point-of-view informs every aspect of a work, driving plot, creating character, and setting the overall theme and tone. How we, as readers, view a particular story often depends on the eyes through which it is viewed and the voice with which it is told. Point of view can establish how readers react by personalizing a story or by distancing us from it. Such is the case in both Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation" and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," where narration is used to either isolate or connect us and where point of view underlines everything the author has attempted to say.

In "Guests of the Nation," O'Connor's use of first person narration is meant, ultimately, to personalize the unfolding story and emotionally tie the reader to its characters. By telling that story directly through one of those characters, O'Connor forces us to empathize, at least in part, with Belcher and Hawkins, as well as with the two Irish soldiers who will eventually kill them. By creating a first person eyewitness in the figure of Bonaparte, an actual participant in what is to come, O'Connor establishes early the reader's own involvement, making the fate of the two Englishmen even more chilling and tragic.

"They were handed to us," writes O'Connor's narrator of the prisoners, "by the Second Battalion when the search for them became too hot, and Noble and myself, being young, took over with a natural feeling of responsibility, but Hawkins made us look like fools when he showed that he knew the country better than we did."

Such a passage is important not only for what it tells us about these soldiers, but because it is Bonaparte himself who reveals it. We see the world of O'Connor's story through this man's eyes and can better understand his situation, and his response to what happens, because it is told in his own words. His own simple humanity and persona seep through, weaving a story the reader can almost imagine shared by good friends over a campfire or long game of cards. The bond that forms between Bonaparte and his two "captives," therefore, reflects this intimacy and is rendered all the more real. As readers, we care what happens to Hawkins and Belcher because Bonaparte quite clearly does as well.

"So whatever privileges Belcher and Hawkins had with the Second," O'Connor's narrator continues, "they just naturally took with us, and after the first day or two we gave up all pretence of keeping a close eye on them....But it's my belief that they never had any idea of escaping and were quite content to be where they were."

If spoken by a detached, third person narrator, these observations would most likely seem hollow or disconnected to the rest of the story. At the very least, we would question this budding friendship and Bonaparte's motives in entertaining these English prisoners of war. We would be ready to discount anything he says rather than accept him as a sincere and likeable man thrust into an abominable situation, a man who genuinely cares for Belcher and Hawkins and thinks it (as Noble says) "great cruelty to put the wind to them now."

Yet in "Guests of the Nation," O'Connor allows his readers to accept this and, through the first person narration, understand the dilemma facing Bonaparte. "I couldn't tell him, because I knew he wouldn't understand," he says when he learns that the two soldiers must die. "If it was only an old dog that was going to the vet's, you'd try and not get too fond of him, but Jeremiah Donovan wasn't a man that would ever be in danger of that."

With these words, the reader can almost feel the man's heart break or see the tears flow down his cheeks. Though not told in so many words, we know that these are his friends. We know from the details he reveals and from his interaction with the men. And we can therefore understand why at the end, with the

two Englishmen dead, Bonaparte feels "somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow."

Narrative point of view is used to very different effect in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," yet its role is equally important to the developing story. Whereas "Guests of the Nation" is concerned primarily with the cruelties of war and their repercussions on a personal scale, the focus of Crane's short story is nature's indifference to man. The use of a detached, third person narrator, therefore, serves only to further emphasize and underline this point.

Although in real life Crane did in fact experience these events, was shipwrecked and left for dead at sea, there is no "I" or persona that emerges clearly from the text. There are only vague sketches of men, titles like "the correspondent" or "the cook" that tell us what these four men *do* but not who they *are*. The only name, Billie, belongs to the oiler who will be drowned by the uncaring waves, who will lay face down in the shallows despite being the strongest and best swimmer of the four. Nature is not cruel, merely indifferent, and this fact is reflected in the narrative voice which does not care about these men but merely records their story.

When Crane writes that "None of them knew the color of the sky. Their eyes glanced level and were fastened upon the waves that swept toward them." the reader is struck dumb by this omnipresent covering of water that drowns the men even as they sit inside their small boat. It does not care if they drown, and neither therefore does Crane's narrator. It is detached and precise and does not miss details. It is uncaring, unflinching, and as adamant as the sea. And though there are personal details revealed, thoughts of the men scattered throughout, none give us a reason to view any of the four as a complete whole or individual. Nature does not see them as such and so Crane refuses to let the reader do so.

"Shipwrecks," writes the narrator, "are *apropos* of nothing." There is no warning, no reason, and no compassion in the waves. The narrator is exact but not excited, thorough but not thoughtful, and though it records what transpires, it hardly touches on any meaning. Crane's narrator, like his sea, has neither time nor need for meanings. They are both indifferent.

Both "The Open Boat" and "Guests of the Nation" rely heavily on narrative point of view, as do our interpretations of each work. While O'Connor's Bonaparte is a limited narrator who can still draw us emotionally and connect us to his plight, Crane's omniscient presence, although all-knowing, can tell us nothing about these characters except that Nature doesn't care. Were these narrators reversed, we would have to sympathize with those men in the boat, giving each of them names. It would become a story about struggle, a victory over Nature, rather than of Nature's indifference toward us. O'Connor's story, if told in the third person, would lose its meaning and emotional backbone. We might be told that these men were friends, but we would not *know* it. Both stories, clearly, depend on the narrative voice their authors have chosen, and both use that point of view to shape our response.