Distinctive Narrative Voice in "The Catcher in the Rye," "The Underground Railroad"and "Lincoln in the Bardo": A Comparative study

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Abstract

The experience that the reader has in reading coeval literature is primarily shaped by the narrative voices present in it. This research paper investigates the concept and evolution of distinctive narrative voice to shed light on the thematic and stylistic decisions made by the authors of three well-known novels: J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1946), Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad (2016), and George Saunders's Lincoln in the Bardo (2017) whose author's clear vernacular voices and distinctive role as outsiders in the adult world serve as valuable tools for social critique. These novels have garnered significant critical acclaim to create immersive and compelling narratives that shape the reader's understanding of the story. This research investigates how narrative voice influences the construction of interpersonal growth, thematic exploration, and holistic reader experience in these works by analyzing the narrative maneuvers that intrigue readers on multiple levels through a comparative analysis.

Keywords: Comparative, Distinctive, Narrative, Coeval Literature and Holistic.

Introduction

We frequently use the word "narrative" without thinking about, and sometimes even without noticing, its ambiguity, which may cause some of the challenges in narratology. In order to start seeing this domain properly, we must clearly distinguish between three ideas that fall under the phrase.

"A first meaning, the one nowadays most evident and most central in common usage—has narrative refer to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events" (Genette, G. 1978, 25). The first sense of the word/term depends on that telling activity, as any narrative discourse is formed by telling in the same way that any statement is produced by enunciating.

"A second meaning, less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of narrative content, has narrative refer to the succession of events, real

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or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc." (Genette, G. 1978, 25) In the second sense, a less standard but contemporary definition of narrative refers to the series of events, real or imagined, that are the focus of this discourse and their many relationships to one another, such as links, opposition, recurrence, etc.

"A third meaning, apparently the oldest, has narrative refer once more to an event: not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself" (Genette, G. 1978, 26). The third and oldest definition of narrative refers to an event once more, but this time, not the one that is retold but the one that is comprised of someone telling a story: the narration process as a whole.

Contemporary literature often employs distinctive narrative voices to encounter traditional storytelling conventions. Authors may experiment with unreliable, non-linear, or even multiple narrators to subvert readers' expectations and provide a fresh perspective on the story. "It is the centerpiece of the study of narrative, for in attempting to define the forms and figures of narrative discourse, he must deal with all the complex relations between the narrative and the story it tells" (Genette, G. 1978, 33).

A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof (Bal, M. 1998, 5). Describing a text as narrative implies that the text and its plot are not entirely identical. If two terms are undeniably synonymous, we could drop one of them. Different points of view can create vastly different experiences for the reader. For example, a first-person narrative voice can provide a more intimate and personal view of the story. In contrast, a third-person omniscient narrative voice can give a broader and more objective perspective.

Diverse Characters' Voices: Various features of distinct narrative voices:

The novels "The Catcher in the Rye," "The Underground Railroad," and "Lincoln in the Bardo" are widely regarded as masterpieces of literature. A notable aspect that makes these novels stand out is their distinctive narrative voices, which have garnered significant critical acclaim and captivated readers internationally. For several reasons, understanding the unique narrative voices employed in these novels is essential. Firstly, the narrative voice plays a crucial role in shaping the reader's experience and interpretation of the story. By analyzing these novels' narrative techniques and stylistic choices, we can gain insights into how the authors use voice to evoke emotions, create empathy, and engage readers on a profound level. Secondly, these novels represent different periods and explore diverse themes. "The Catcher in the Rye" delves into the disillusionment and alienation of a teenage protagonist in the post-World War II (1945) era, while "The Underground Railroad" examines the brutal history of slavery in America and "Lincoln in the Bardo" explores grief and the afterlife through the lens of President Abraham Lincoln's tragedy. By comparing the narrative voices in these works, we can uncover how distinct voices contribute to portraying these themes and the overall impact of the narratives.

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In "The Catcher in the Rye," J.D. Salinger presents different narrative voices through the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, and the various characters he encounters. These different voices serve several purposes, including providing contrast, highlighting societal issues, and emphasizing individuality. This questions how the novel presents different narrative voices and why. As we know, Holden's narrative voice is central to the novel. He speaks in a distinctive, colloquial, and often cynical tone, reflecting his rebellious nature and disillusionment with society.

"If you want to hear about it, the first thing you will probably want to know is where I was born, what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I do not feel like going into it if you want to know the truth" (Salinger,2001). These words introduce the book, presenting Holden's voice to the reader. Holden is intelligent, as the reader can tell right away. His allusion to David Copperfield (1850) by Charles Dickens is particularly notable. David Copperfield is a coming-of-age novel with a protagonist who also serves as the first-person narrator, similar to The Catcher in the Rye. However, Holden's dismissal of the Dickens book as "crap" suggests that his narrator role will shun the conventions of the classic coming-of-age tale. His voice is characterized by his use of slang, digressions, and stream-of-consciousness style. At the same time, Colson Whitehead presents different narrative voices to provide varied perspectives and experiences within the narrative.

"They erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before. That was Sea Island cotton the slaver had ordered for his rows, but scattered among the seeds were those of violence and death, and that crop grew fast. The whites were right to be afraid. One day, the system would collapse in blood" (Whitehead, 2016). Cora considers North Carolina's framework to address their concern about slave uprising. She concludes that their violence is motivated by fear. In a nearly biblical interpretation, Cora's words foretell a terrible future in which violence will breed more violence. The system is not stable.

Through diverse perspectives, Whitehead wants to utilize different narrative voices, allowing readers to experience the story through the eyes of various characters. Each character brings their unique background, motivations, and challenges to the forefront, giving voice to different narrative aspects. This variety of viewpoints contributes to the development of a more thorough and complex depiction of the experiences of enslaved people and the complex reality of the time, which accomplishes various goals. On the other hand, Salinger uses Holden's voice to immerse readers in his perspective and to convey his alienation, angst, and struggle to find authenticity in a superficial world. Regarding phonies and authenticity, Holden frequently criticizes what he perceives as "phoniness" in others. He uses this phrase to represent individuals who are inauthentic or counterfeit. By presenting the narrative voices of characters who embody phoniness, such as the hypocritical adults or the "fake" and shallow classmates, Salinger emphasizes the contrast between Holden's authentic voice and the artificiality of the society he criticizes.

Holden's narrative voice also highlights his unreliability as a narrator. He frequently admits to lying or withholding information, suggesting his perspective

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may need tountrmorey. This unreliability adds complexity to the narrative and encourages readers to engage with Holden's experiences and interpretations critically. It presents different narrative voices to showcase the contrast between Holden's authentic voice and the phoniness he perceives in society. Through these voices, Salinger explores themes of authenticity, alienation, and individuality, inviting readers to question societal norms and expectations while empathizing with the struggles of adolescence.

The present paper also analyzes the significant features ofization and empathy. Whitehead uses multiple narrative voices to humanize the characters and foster empathy in readers. Each voice offers a personal account of the characters' struggles, hopes, and fears, enabling readers to connect with them more profoundly. This Humanization helps to counteract the dehumanizing effects of slavery and promotes a greater understanding of the characters' experiences. Using different narrative voices, Whitehead sheds light on the stories and perspectives that have been historically marginalized or overlooked. The novel features characters from various backgrounds, including enslaved individuals, slave catchers, and abolitionists. By giving voice to these diverse perspectives, Whitehead challenges the dominant historical narratives and provides a more inclusive portrayal of the complexities of the Underground Railroad era. The use of multiple narrative voices allows the representation of collective experiences within the novel. The characters' narratives intertwine and intersect, showcasing the interconnections of their stories and highlighting the broader social and historical contexts in which they exist. This representation of collective experiences emphasizes enslaved individuals' shared struggles and resilience and the significance of society and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Whitehead did a literary experimentation of different narrative voices, which served as a literary device and allowed for experimentation with style and storytelling techniques. Each narrative voice has its distinct tone, language, and structure, contributing to the richness and complexity of the novel. This experimentation adds depth and variety to the storytelling, enhancing the reading experience. "The Underground Railroad" presents different narrative voices to offer diverse perspectives, humanize the characters, counteract historical erasure, represent collective experiences, and engage in literary experimentation. In the third book, George Saunders presents a unique and complex narrative structure that incorporates multiple narrative voices and explores the experiences of various living and dead characters in a liminal space known as the bardo. The novel employs a polyphonic approach, featuring many voices from different characters, including historical figures, fictional characters, and even excerpts from historical documents and newspapers. Each character has a distinct voice reflecting their personality, perspective, and history. Saunders presents fragmented and collaged narratives through contradictory voices with brief snippets, monologues, dialogues, and quotations, all woven together to create a tapestry of perspectives. The leading narrative voices in the book come from the ghosts inhabiting the cemetery where Willie Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln's deceased son, is laid to rest. These ghosts, stuck

in the "bardo" (a Tibetan Buddhist term for the intermediate state between death and rebirth), provide various perspectives on death, loss, and the afterlife. They each have distinct voices, reflecting their personalities, backgrounds, and experiences. This research paper expresses the concept of dialogue between the ghosts and between the ghosts and the living characters. These conversations reveal the characters' thoughts, emotions, and interactions. The dialogue often reveals contrasting viewpoints and conflicting opinions, contributing to the richness of the narrative. Saunders employs a collage-like structure, incorporating snippets of different voices and perspectives. These fragments can be quotes, observations, or thoughts from historical figures and fictional characters. The variety of these voices makes a tapestry of experiences and viewpoints, presenting a multi-layered narrative. Third-Person Narration: Alongside the ghostly voices and historical documents, third-person narration sections provide a more traditional storytelling perspective. These sections offer a broader view of the events and often focus on Abraham Lincoln's experiences and emotions. "By narrative, we mean all those literary works which are distinguished by two characteristics: the presence of a story and a story-teller" (Scholes and Kellogg 1966) In "The Catcher in the Rye," J.D. Salinger uses a first-person narrative voice to tell the story of Holden Caulfield, a teenage boy who has been removed from his prep school and is roaming around New York City. "The Catcher in the Rye opens with Holden Caulfield, the narrator, saying that he will tell what happened when he was expelled from boarding school. He is a likable and imaginative young man. However, he is also unreliable and judgmental, and he tends to let his alienation, depression, and various traumatic memories cloud his ability to enter the adult world fully" (Rostani, 2012). In this work, the narrative voice is first-person and belongs to the novel's protagonist, Holden Caulfield. The entire story is told from his perspective, and the language and tone of the narrative reflect his thoughts, feelings, and experiences. "The narrative voice is distinctive because it captures Holden's voice in all its angst and alienation, giving the reader a sense of his personality, emotions, and worldview" (Laser and Fruman, 1963). The voice is also introspective and self-critical as Holden reflects on his shortcomings and struggles to find his place in the world. One of the critical features of the narrative voice in "The Catcher in the Rye" is its authenticity. "Holden's voice sounds like that of a real teenage boy, with all the contradictions and inconsistencies that come with that" (Rannals and Sciences, 2011). He can be crude and immature in one moment and insightful and sensitive in the next. The authenticity of the voice makes Holden a compelling and relatable character, even if the reader does not necessarily agree with his actions or worldview. The first-person narrative voice also allows the reader to see the world through Holden's eyes and experience his journey in a profoundly personal way. We feel his pain, confusion, and frustration as he navigates the adult world and struggles to make sense of his feelings and identity. The narrative voice is essential to creating this immersive reading experience and is a key reason "The Catcher in the Rye" has endured as a classic of modern literature. "Holden's voice is distinctive and memorable, characterized by his use of colloquial language, sarcasm, and cynicism" (Graham,

2007). His narration is filled with digressions, tangents, and asides, reflecting his scattered and often chaotic thought processes.

One of the most notable aspects of Holden's narrative voice is its authenticity. "Salinger effectively captures the voice of a disaffected, alienated teenager, allowing readers to fully immerse themselves in Holden's world and empathize with his struggles" (Ohmann and Ohmann, 1976). Overall, the narrative voice in "The Catcher in the Rye" plays a crucial role in shaping the novel's tone and themes, highlighting the struggles of adolescence and the difficulties of navigating the complex world of adulthood. Holden's narrative voice is distinctive and highly individual, characterized by its colloquial and informal tone, its frequent use of slang and profanity, and its often bitter and cynical perspective on the world around him. Salinger created a literary masterpiece that resounds with readers of all generations and backgrounds by capturing the voice of a troubled and disaffected teenager powerfully and authentically.

In "The Underground Railroad," Colson Whitehead uses a third-person narrative voice to tell the story of Cora, a young enslaved person who runs from a Georgia farm and embarks on a risky journey to freedom. In this work, Colson Whitehead uses a third-person narrative voice to tell the story of Cora, a young enslaved person who runs from a Georgia farm and embarks on a perilous journey to freedom. "The third-person narrative voice is objective and detached, allowing the reader to view the story's events from a distance while also gaining insight into Cora's thoughts and feelings" (Melle, 2017). Through the use of this narrative voice, Whitehead can make a rich and complicated picture of the antebellum South, including the horrors of slavery and the various forms of oppression and violence that were used to maintain the institution. At the same time, the third-person narrative voice allows the reader to witness Cora's journey with a degree of emotional detachment, creating a sense of suspense and tension as she makes her way through a series of dangerous and unpredictable situations. Despite the objective nature of the third-person narrative voice, Whitehead can still convey a deep sense of empathy and humanity in his portrayal of Cora and the other characters in the novel. Through her thoughts and actions, we understand Cora's hopes, fears, struggles, and the complex social and historical forces that shape her experiences. "The third person narrative voice in "The Underground Railroad" serves as a powerful tool for exploring the complex and often painful history of slavery and oppression in America while also creating a compelling and emotionally resonant story of survival and resistance" (Simpson, 2017) In "The Underground Railroad," narrative voice refers to how the story of Cora's escape from slavery is presented to the reader. Unlike "The Catcher in the Rye," which uses a first-person narrative voice, Colson Whitehead employs a third-person narrative voice to tell Cora's story. Despite this objective tone, Whitehead still creates strong empathy and connection with Cora and the other characters she encounters. Through his vivid descriptions of their experiences and emotions, he can bring the reader into the novel's world and create a powerful sense of urgency and suspense.

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The experimental book "Lincoln in the Bardo" by George Saunders uses a range of narrative voices, including a chorus of ghosts, to tell the story of Abraham Lincoln and his grief over the death of his son. In this novel, narrative voice is a central element of the novel's innovative and experimental structure. "The book uses a range of different narrative voices to tell the story of Abraham Lincoln and his grief over the death of his son Willie, who becomes trapped in the "bardo," a kind of purgatory between life and death" (Saunders, 2017). One of the most distinctive narrative voices in the novel is a chorus of ghosts who inhabit the bardo and serve as a Greek chorus, commenting on the story's action and providing additional layers of meaning and interpretation. "These ghostly voices are varied and diverse, ranging from former slaves to Confederate soldiers to young children, and they often speak in a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style that reflects their state of being in the bardo" (Farsi, 2020). In addition to the ghostly chorus, the novel incorporates a range of other narrative voices, including excerpts from historical documents, letters, and diaries, as well as the voices of individual characters who interact with Lincoln and Willie in the bardo. Through these various voices, Saunders can create a complex and multifaceted portrait of Lincoln's grief and the social and political landscape of the time.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the narrative voice is a critical element of storytelling in literature, shaping how a story is told and providing insight into the characters and their experiences. The main finding of this research paper is that the different authors use different narrative voices to achieve specific effects, ranging from a first-person perspective to create intimacy and immediacy to a detached, omniscient perspective to create a sense of objectivity and distance. In contemporary literature, authors often experiment with narrative voices to push the boundaries of traditional storytelling and create new and innovative forms of literature. For example, Colson Whitehead uses a detached third-person perspective in "The Underground Railroad" to comprehensively view slavery-era America. In contrast, George Saunders uses multiple, fragmented voices in "Lincoln in the Bardo" to create a surreal and otherworldly portrait of grief and loss. Ultimately, the narrative voice is a powerful tool in the hands of skilled writers, allowing them to shape the reader's experience and create a deep connection with their characters and stories. As literature evolves, it will be fascinating to see how authors continue experimenting with narrative voices and using them to push the boundaries of what is possible in storytelling. Using narrative voice in books is a critical element that can significantly impact the reader's story experience. The examples provided show how authors use narrative voices to create various effects and convey various emotions. In "The Catcher in the Rye," J.D. Salinger's use of Holden Caulfield's first-person narrative voice creates a personal and robust relationship between the reader and the protagonist, allowing us to experience his sense of alienation and disillusionment firsthand. Overall, the use of narrative voice is a vital tool that can be used to create a range of effects and emotions, depending on the author's intentions and the story's needs. By understanding how different authors use narrative voices in their work, we can gain a deeper appreciation

for the art of storytelling and the methods by which it can influence how we perceive the world around us.

BIO-NOTE:

Soham Chaudhary is an interdisciplinary research educator and assistant professor of English literature at GLA University with 6 years of teaching experience, the author of two books, and holds a Ph.D. in Modern Indian Drama from SHUATS, Allahabad. I have authored numerous articles in peer-reviewed, UGC-approved publications nationally and internationally, offering significant perspectives on modern English drama and the latest advancements in cultural literary studies.

I am now studying how marginalized voices are perceived and represented in international literary landscapes, focusing on feminist narratives and postcolonial literature.

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