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UNDERSTANDING SECOND-PERSON

POINT OF VIEW IN FICTION

by

Anastasia L. Hawke

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Charles Waugh, Ph.D.  
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2015

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding Second-Person

Point of View in Fiction

by

Anastasia L. Hawke, Master of Art

Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Charles Waugh  
Department: English

This thesis consists of a critical introduction followed by a short story and reflection. The critical introduction introduces and analyzes second-person point of view. The first section establishes a working definition for second-person narrative and maps out its unique relationship between narrator, protagonist, and reader. The second section explores the way second-person point of view is taught. The third and last section of the critical introduction focuses on the effects second-person point of view has on fiction narratives.

The short fiction “Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions” following the critical introduction demonstrates a narrative effectively using second-person point of view. It follows the experience of a disillusioned thirty-year-old woman in her attempt to control her situation and make herself a family. The second-person point of view illustrates how control is an illusion, and only once she loses control and gives up her expectations does

she find happiness. Then I reflect on the successes and challenges of writing a story in the second-person point of view.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## Understanding Second-Person

## Point of View in Fiction

by Anastasia L. Hawke

Point of view is often the first choice an author makes, whether conscious or unconscious, when writing fiction. It is also one of the most important decisions an author will make. Point of view affects a number of fiction elements, but most importantly, it affects the reader's experience and relationship with the narrative. Of the points of view, second person is the most peculiar, underused, and underexplored.

This thesis consists of a critical introduction followed by a short narrative and reflection. The critical introduction introduces and analyzes second-person point of view. The first section establishes a working definition for second-person narrative and maps out its unique relationship between narrator, protagonist, and reader. The second section explores the way second-person point of view is taught. The third and last section of the critical introduction focuses on the effects second-person point of view has on fiction narratives.

The short fiction, "Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions," following the critical introduction, demonstrates a narrative effectively using second-person point of view. It follows the experience of a disillusioned thirty-year-old woman in her attempt to control her situation and make herself a family. The second-person point of view illustrates how

control is an illusion, and only once she loses control and gives up her expectations does she find happiness. Then I reflect on the successes and challenges of writing a story in the second-person point of view. The goal of this project is to share my knowledge and experience with writing second-person narratives and to encourage writers to use second-person more frequently in fiction writing, so that the second-person point of view might be normalized in the world of fiction narrative.

For my Dad, who taught me the importance of the written word.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project might never have been completed without the support of a few very important people who never gave up on pushing me to my best. First I owe gratitude to Charles Waugh, who never held back when it came to helping me improve my writing, both creative and academic. I would not have made it this far without his guidance. I would like to thank my committee members, Ben Gunsberg and Christine Cooper-Rompato, for their kindness and support throughout the entire process. I would also like to thank Anne Stark, who first introduced me to writing short fiction.

And finally, I would like to thank my family for their support and encouragement: my husband, who reminds me that happiness is found in the little things, and for his patience when my graduate degree took me away from home; my parents for inspiring me to keep going; all my sisters for giving me the creative space to pretend; and a special thanks to Emily for lending me her personal experiences and putting up with my probing questions.

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Anastasia L. Hawke

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## INTRODUCTION TO SECOND-PERSON

### POINT OF VIEW

Point of view is one of the most important and complex choices presented to fiction writers. It affects narrative elements such as tone, theme, and tension, but, most importantly, it affects the relationship between narrator, reader, and protagonist. Second-person point of view creates a unique relationship between narrator, reader, and protagonist that first- and third-person do not share. Despite this, discussions of point of view have only recently begun to take second-person point of view seriously.

For the purpose of this thesis, second-person narrative is defined as a text that uses the second-person pronoun as the main source of point of view, where “you” functions as a main character, and excludes texts that occasionally address the reader. I will examine how second-person narrative is discussed, taught, and used. In my thesis I first determine criteria to write effective second-person narrative, then present my own second-person narrative, “Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions,” and lastly a reflection on the challenges I encountered while writing that story.

#### **Critical Approaches to Second-Person Point of View**

Darlene Hantzis’s study, “‘You are about to begin reading’: The Nature and Function of Second Person Point of View in Narrative,” focuses on how second-person narratives are distinct from first- and third-person narratives that occasionally address the reader as “you.” She defines “second person” as a point of view that “constitutes a

particular use of the pronoun ‘you’ in narrative texts” (2). She borrows further definitions from both Morrissette’s “Narrative ‘You’ in Contemporary Literature” and Hopkins’ and Perkins’ study, “Second Person Point of View in Narrative,” where “the ‘you’ must refer to a character (as opposed to a reader, or to a general ‘one’) for a second person text to exist” (Hantzis 3). Hantzis directly opposes Wayne Booth’s argument in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* that, “Efforts to use the second person have never been very successful, but it is astonishing to see how little real difference even this choice makes” (150). Instead Hantzis argues second-person point of view is a choice with distinct narrative features (1).

One of these distinct features is the intersubjectivity generated between narrator, reader, and protagonist (2). She argues second-person point of view “generates an alternating pattern of identification and displacement” (iv) that separates it from first- and third-person narratives. This alternating pattern “continually places [the reader] in and continually displaces [the reader] from the ‘you’ while simultaneously placing and displacing others in and from the ‘you’” (69). The second-person point of view draws the readers into the text while simultaneously expelling them, which causes an exchanging of subjects within a text that is unattainable with first- and third-person points of view.

Dennis Schofield’s argument from “The Second Person: A Point of View?” agrees with Hantzis’s theory of intersubjectivity and posits second-person point of view as distinct from first- and third-person. However, he argues that second-person point of view does not offer the “next development in the tradition of point of view analysis...[but instead] a critique of the very assumptions inherent in that tradition” (67). He argues that

critics should classify a narrative by its relationship between narrator, reader, and protagonist instead of point of view.

Schofield's study focuses on mapping the second-person point of view's narrative functions, arguing they will help critics examine the success and intention of second-person narratives (67). His definition is similar to Hantzis's, wherein a second-person narrative "may be defined as a narrative in which the 'second-person' personal pronoun 'you', is used by a narrator to identify and directly or indirectly address a character" (68). However, when mapping the narrative functions, he discusses other uses of second-person point of view such as direct addresses and instances where "you" replaces "one."

According to Schofield, most critics find it difficult to identify the "you" pronoun between narrator, reader, and protagonist because the relationship is "complicated by matters of 'distance,' involvement in the story, and so on." Schofield's maps ignore these complicating factors and focus on the "recipient of address as the model's primary term" (69). He repeats Brian Richardson's theory from "The Poetics and Politics of Second Person Narrative," that second-person narration has this "irreducible oscillation between first and third person narration that is typical of second person texts, texts that simultaneously invite and preclude identification with the other pronominal voices" (313). Schofield argues the narrator of a second-person narrative becomes unstable, as it can "no longer guarantee the truth of its own statements...[nor] its own identity" (80). He suggests that further identification of terms and descriptions, as Hantzis and Hopkins and Perkins have done, is only the first step to understand second-person fiction. By following Hantzis's theory of subjectivity, critics might "explain the often deeply unsettling effects of 'second-person' narrative quite differently." He argues that cultural

backgrounds interfere with the identification of the ‘self,’ and this, in turn, interferes with identification of “you”; therefore, a future approach should reexamine the notion of self/subjectivity in point of view analysis altogether (83).

Similarly, in “Why You Can’t Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative,” Matt DelConte creates new models for examining narratives that focus on the relationship between narrator, reader, and protagonist instead of point of view. He examines how second-person narration relates to first- and third-person narratives, repeating the earlier arguments that second-person narration is distinct from the other points of view. However, he also argues this distinction from other points of view is because second-person narration is always also either first- or third-person: “This overlap occurs because these modes are defined along different axes: whereas first- and third-person narrations...are defined along the axis of narrator, second-person narration is defined along the axis of narratee” (204). The very term “narration” suggests that the narrator determines the point of view; however, the narratee determines the second-person point of view instead. Therefore, the distance of “you” in second-person narratives will act similarly to either first- or third-person point of view. Despite this fundamental difference in axis, he argues that second-person narration “deserves its own place in typologies of narration because of its particular rhetorical effects.” Second-person narrative becomes problematic to categorize because current models of narration center on the voice of the narrator, whereas second-person narration “is defined not by who is speaking but by who is listening (the narratee)” (204). DelConte’s study explores the deficiency of voice-based models of narration and

constructs a new model that better employs the relationship among narrator, reader, and protagonist.

Part of the problem with defining second-person narratives is that there is no consensus on what second-person fiction includes. DelConte offers a more inclusive definition that still excludes direct address:

Second-person narration is a narrative mode in which a narrator tells a story to a (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) narratee---delineated by *you*---who is also the (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) principal actant in that story. (208)

He then creates five new models to examine fiction that transcend labeling point of view. He focuses on the relationship shared among narrator, narratee (or reader), and protagonist. Each model showcases a different relationship, such as a narrative where all three parts function on the same line together (like *Bright Lights, Big City*), or where the narratee and protagonist function together but are distinct from the narrator (like Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*) (212). He labels these models Completely-Coincident Narration and Partially-Coincident Narration (of Narratee/Protagonist) respectively. His other models include Non-Coincident Narration, where all subjects operate independently; Partially-Coincident Narration (of Narrator/Protagonist), where narrator and protagonist operate together; and Partially-Coincident Narration (of Narrator/Narratee), where narrator and narratee operate together (211). He admits the scope of his paper prevents a complete test of his theory and suggests that a larger study could adjust and expand on his models (215).

All of the scholars discussed here agree that second-person point of view has distinct effects on narratives. Hantzis's article offers an in-depth examination of the

intersubjectivity between narrator, reader, and protagonist. The other scholars use her examination, and both Schofield and DelConte agree that the current models of point of view analysis are inadequate and ill prepared to discuss second-person point of view. Overall, in the last two decades, scholars are just beginning to understand the depth of second-person point of view in fiction, and it can be better understood with an overhaul of the way scholars discuss point of view in narratives.

### **Craft Approaches to Second-Person Point of View**

Many fiction-writing textbooks only describe second-person point of view briefly before they move on to first- or third-person; however, as more second-person narratives are published, textbooks have begun to include closer examinations of second-person point of view. Janet Burroway's book, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, is "one of the most widely used textbooks on the writing of fiction" (Tempone), but it only includes a small passage on second-person point of view, whereas Sherri Szeman's textbook, *Mastering Point of View*, provides a much more comprehensive treatment of all three pronominal choices.

Burroway defines second-person narrative as "the basic mode of the story *only when a character* is referred to as *you*" and excludes direct addresses and "you" replacing the generalized "one" (original emphasis 304). Here she explains some advantages and disadvantages of second-person point of view:

Here the author assigns you, the reader, specific characteristics and reactions, and thereby...pulls you deeper and more intimately into the story...[However,] unlike third or first person, second person draws



attention to itself, and...some readers may resist second person because they don't identify with the character. (304)

Even with the disadvantages, she argues that second-person point of view works well to depict trauma, "as its slight sense of detachment mutes possible melodrama and mirrors the sense of shock," and to make a "highly individual experience feel more universal." Nonetheless, she concludes the section with predicting, "it is unlikely that the second person will ever become a major mode of narration" (304).

Szeman's, *Mastering Point of View*, offers more practical advice:

It is not an exaggeration to say that a novel *is* its point of view, for point of view determines the readers' responses, controls the readers' sympathies or empathies for the characters, and engages or distances the readers' emotional involvement in the fictional world. (original emphasis 4)

In her book, second-person narration is the focus of an entire chapter instead of a small passage. She defines second-person point of view to include direct address to the reader, humanity in general, and actual or implied characters (19). Like Burroway, she discusses the advantages and disadvantages:

The advantages of using second person point of view are that your audience may feel directly connected to you as the author and may feel more intimately involved with the characters and the action in the novel when directly addressed...The disadvantages...especially if writing an entire novel in this style, is that as soon as your readers no longer feel that the 'you' being addressed and described applies to them, you may lose the readers' interest in your work. (67)

She mentions a contradiction to the disadvantage of novel-length narratives in second-person point of view is the success of Jay McInerney's novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, which I will discuss more fully in the next section. She notes that some critics believe his novel's point of view keeps his audience "at an emotional distance because it prevents them from identifying with the character" (68). Despite what other critics have suggested,

she argues a different point of view would have been less shocking and refreshing: “The relatively jarring and unusual choice of second person point of view throughout McInerney’s entire novel...may have been the very thing that contributed to its success” (74). Regardless, McInerney proved second-person point of view could be used for an entire novel.

Szeman’s advantages and disadvantages are similar to Burroway’s, but Szeman offers more clarification and advice to master its use. Szeman concludes the chapter with advice on how to use second-person point of view successfully, regardless of the narrative’s length. She suggests: “As long as you are clear about the relationship of the ‘you’ to the other characters in the novel and to your own audience...your readers will be able to understand what you’re doing” (77-78). By immediately identifying the relationship with the reader, the author establishes the reader’s role for the story.

### **Second-Person Point of View in Fiction**

Lorrie Moore, Jay McInerney, and Italo Calvino have all been widely praised for writing successful second-person narratives. Moore’s collection of short fiction, *Self-Help Stories*, uses second-person point of view in six of the nine stories. Moore imitates advice columns with short guides to specific situations as conveyed by her titles, “How to Be an Other Woman,” “How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes),” and “How.” McInerney’s novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* uses a second-person point of view throughout the entire novel. And finally, Calvino’s novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, uses second-person point of view in a distinctive way from the other two

authors. This portion of my thesis will discuss the unique and often problematic aspects of second-person point of view.

Like many of Moore's short stories, "How to Be an Other Woman" and "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)" are written in the present tense, as most second-person narratives are, and largely consist of imperatives to direct the reader through the actions of the protagonist. The "you" in these stories function as the main characters and confirms Hantzis's theory of intersubjectivity, where "you" simultaneously houses the narrator, reader, and protagonist. DelConte classifies this relationship as a Completely-Coincident Narration (211). Neither of these stories offer options common to second-person narratives. This choice makes particular sense when coupled with the unique organization of "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)."

"How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)" works backwards, starting at 1982 and going back to 1939 when the main character emerges through the birth canal:

*1967. Your mother is sick and comes to live with you. There is no place else for her to go. You feel many different emptinesses. The first successful heart transplant is performed in South Africa.*

*1966. You confuse lovers, mix up who had what scar, what car, what mother.*

*1965. Smoke marijuana. Try to figure out what has made your life go wrong. (original emphasis 90)*

The protagonist looks back at her life through these entries, which creates a reflective tone. Due to the nature of retrospective narrative, past tense seems like a natural choice; however, past tense is rarely used for second-person narratives because it separates the reader from the character too drastically. Moore organizes her story in journal entries to circumvent this issue. The reverse chronology sets the tone as

retrospective and allows her to continue to use the present tense without pushing the reader out of the story.

In both of these stories, the main characters experience very problematic situations. Moore uses the second-person point of view to imitate an advice column where the narrator advises individuals like these characters on how to improve their situations. However, the narrator offering advice and the character receiving it are simultaneously housed within the 'you,' which criticizes society's tendencies to read self-help books on issues they are capable of fixing themselves.

Similar to the previous two stories, in Moore's "How" the "you" functions as a specific character, but unlike the others, this story is primarily written in future tense and provides her readers with some options for the main character and how she will interact with other characters: "Begin by meeting him in a class, in a bar, at a rummage sale...Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory" (55). These options work well with the future tense because nothing has actually happened yet. "This focus on the possible future constitutes the text as a potential text offering a potential experience" (Hantzis 104). The options imply there are other paths, even if we only see one. Still, there are other details that do not have options: "He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes" (55), and furthermore, the options appear to have no affect on outcome of the story as seen here:

[You] meet an actor. From Vassar or Yale. He can quote Coriolanus's mother. This will seem good. Sleep with him once and ride home at 5 a.m. crying in a taxicab. Or: don't sleep with him. Kiss him good night at Union Square and run for your life. 56

Whether the actor is from Vassar or Yale, he is still an actor, and when the reader is given the choice to sleep with him or run away (one of the more meaningful options presented in the story) the end result remains the same: the main character still idealizes the actor and begins to reject her boyfriend, then, even later in the story, she has an affair anyway. It mimics a “Choose Your Own Adventure” story with the options presented but still anchors the story with one plot and one outcome.

Despite the inconsequential and sporadic choices found throughout the text, they have an important purpose. The author presents options to develop a distinguishable narrator that reveals the story to the protagonist/reader. The narrator now operates individually from the other two, which creates a Partially-Coincident Narration (of Narratee/Protagonist) (DelConte 211). Furthermore, the options help situate the reader as the main character because if you are, say, not the kind of person to meet him in a bar, then you can meet him in a class instead. This approach accepts the readers’ individuality and allows them wiggle room to fit parts of the character and actions to themselves. Overall, the choices help the reader overcome the feeling of being pushed out of the story.

The intersubjectivity of McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* is similar to Moore’s “How to Be an Other Woman” and “How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)” where narrator, reader, and protagonist function simultaneously and make it a Completely-Coincident Narration (DelConte 211), as shown in the following example:

You know for a fact that if you go out into the morning alone, without even your sunglasses—which you have neglected to bring, because who, after all, plans on these travesties?—the harsh, angling light with turn you to flesh and bone. (6)

Here the narrator, reader, and protagonist are all housed within the “you.” However, unlike Moore, McInerney also uses second-person point of view to affect the tension. Here, second-person point of view forces the reader directly into the experiences of the character, and unlike the short story “How,” *Bright Lights, Big City* presents the reader with no options.

When the protagonist, hung-over from the night before, learns his boss plans to fire him, he sees her watching him from the door:

She gives you a look that could break glass, and then steps out. She’s going to let you suffer for a while. You dig into your desk and pull out a Vicks inhaler. Try to plow a path through some of the crusted snow in your head. (19)

The point of view forces the reader into the experience and this time there are no alternate choices or hypothetical possibilities. Instead of acting in the story, the experience is imposed upon you and forces you down a path you cannot escape. Both DelConte and Hantzis argue the alienating tactic underscores thematic concerns of a homogenizing society that dictates his readers’ actions for them and creates a displacement between the reader and the character that feels akin to being held hostage (205; 105).

This approach to second-person narration carefully balances the reader-alienation and ambiguity to keep from pushing the reader too far out of the story. It is in the first line that saves this story from over-alienating: “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning” (1). Any reader can easily agree with this statement. As Hantzis points out, this line is ambiguous enough for even a female reader to accept: “The female reader joins the subjectivity by identifying with the initial “You.” She displaces from the gender specification in the remainder of the sentence and

thereby agrees with the sentence. She is not that kind of guy” (105). However, the second line, “But here you are,” reaffirms the lack of choice and the forceful nature of the narrative. It does not matter if you are not the kind of guy to be there, you are. McInerney makes a statement that this story is going to happen to you, regardless of whether you like it.

DelConte discusses the thematic purposes of such displacement by pointing out:

[T]he experience of the 80s is one imposed from the outside, an ambiguous presence of media/culture prescribing your desires and expectations; the novel exposes that in the 80s free choice was illusory. Second-person narration exemplifies this cultural climate, for it manifests in narrative technique the notion that someone or something outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions. (205)

The reader then becomes a victim to this narrative, as Americans are victims to consumerism. The second-person point of view’s aggressive nature in this text sweeps away the readers illusion of free choice and forces them down a path of fast-paced consumerism. This example further proves Hantzis’s theory that second-person narratives function as a “distinct device that produces distinct effects and constructs a unique textual world” (1). This effect would be lessened if McInerney used first- or third-person point of view, which validates its use in this text.

Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* uses the second-person pronoun differently from the previously discussed texts. Here the reader does not become the main character, rather the main character is made into the reader. The book begins with the reader sitting down to start the book: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought.

Let the world around you fade” (3). This approach is more like a guided meditation than the introduction to the protagonist.

The difference between styles is obvious when compared to Moore’s first line in “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce,” “Put extra salt on the popcorn because your mom’ll say that she needs it because the part where Inger Berman [sic] almost dies and the camera does tricks to elongate her torso sure gets her every time” (49). Here, the readers immediately have a sense of the character’s voice, and it is clear they are acting as this child in the story. Unlike Moore’s style, Calvino’s first line reveals nothing about the protagonist other than he is about to read Calvino’s book. The ambiguity is similar to McInerney’s approach and makes assimilation into the character’s role effortless, but Calvino’s narrator and protagonist interact in a different way from Moore’s and McInerney’s fiction. As Thomas Breene discusses in his article, “You: A Study of Second-person Narrative in Two Postmodern Novels,” Calvino’s style demands a larger suspension of disbelief from other fiction:

Whereas fiction often asks us to accept on faith the internal world portrayed in a narrative, a world which may include dragons or ghosts or giants, *If on a winter’s night a traveler* seems to be asking us to accept something quite different: the idea that there is no boundary between fiction’s world and ours. (29)

The second-person narrative functions differently in that the pronoun only signifies a reader. This character is not named, nor is he described in any physical or emotional capacity. Breene argues, “What Calvino is addressing, then, is not a particular person, but a potential person, a representative of a class, and this is reflected in the generality of his language” (30). Therefore, the protagonist of this story is not a specific person, but a collective type of person Calvino imagines would read his book. Traditionally, with



reader-addressed use of the second-person pronoun, the reader is still a bystander to the action and not a participating character; however, Calvino works this collective character into an actual protagonist that interacts with the fictional world and plot.

Many times throughout the text the narrator addresses the reader directly:

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. (3)

The hammock is only an option if the reader has one, which is different from McInerney's and Moore's narrative style where they would establish that a hammock is available and either give the choice to use it or direct its use. Regardless, the narrator would establish that the protagonist is the kind of person to have a hammock available.

The distance between narrator, reader, and protagonist becomes even more apparent when later on that page the narrator asks, "Well what are you waiting for?" This direct address implies that, as the reader, you are not doing as instructed. The direct address distances the reader from the collective character because the narrator tells you what you should or could do, but he does not actually tell you what you *are* doing. The story is no longer about the reader acting as the character, but instead it becomes a narrator directing a hypothetical reader's actions, which separates the reader from the action.

The various options coupled with the direct addresses make the narrator more apparent and separate it from the reader and protagonist. DelConte classifies Calvino's novel under the same model as "How": a Partially-Coincident Narration (of Narratee/Protagonist), where the reader and protagonist operate together and the narrator

functions separately (211). This model fits with the novel's intersubjectivity, but I would add that the distance between the narrator and the reader and protagonist is greater here than the narrator's distance in "How." The direct addresses are absent in "How," and they further distance the narrator's relationship with the other two.

Even though second-person point of view has been underestimated and underexplored, by applying the principles and techniques from the first and second sections, it is clear how these authors use second-person narration successfully and how it functions with effects distinct from first- and third-person narratives. As more authors use the peculiar effects of second-person narration, scholars will further their examinations and help streamline what is considered little more than an experiment. Perhaps with a new look on how point of view is analyzed and a consensus on definitions, critics can better understand second-person narratives in the world of fiction.

In the sections that follow, I present my own second-person narrative "Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions" and a reflection that considers my challenges and successes as a writer of second-person fiction. The goal of this project is to share my knowledge and experience with writing second-person narratives and, most importantly, to encourage other writers to do what I work to do: tell a story and tell it well, all while using a point of view that is often discouraged among students for its unpredictable effects.

## CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES OF WRITING

### SECOND-PERSON FICTION

After writing “Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions,” I now have a better understanding of the unique features that come from second-person point of view. This project highlighted ways second-person point of view could be used to tell a unique story. I use second-person point of view similarly to first-person, where the narrator focuses solely on the perspective of “you.” With this distance, the point of view could be defined as second-person limited. The “you” even proves to be an unreliable narrator when the protagonist goes into shock on page 33 and 34. Furthermore, the second-person point of view flourishes during the hospital scene because of the sense of detachment second-person point of view inhabits so well, and it brings an interesting perspective to the traumatic experience. This detachment also works well with the way the protagonist distances herself from other characters during her pregnancy. However, second-person point of view presented many challenges as well, mainly involving tense, hypothetical options, and imperatives.

I experimented with several tenses before settling on present tense. I found that present and future tenses works well with second-person but past tense is awkward. This awkwardness is apparent when I change a passage from “Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions” into past tense:

The loading bar on your computer screen inched forward, and you tapped your fingernails against your desk in a rapid tempo. “Ten Quick-and-Easy Gluten Free Recipes” didn’t write itself, but you were forced to improve your fingernail solo while your Office Suite installed another update. (17)

The verbs draw attention to themselves, pushing the reader out of the story as the readers is forced to reconcile what they are being told and their own recent past. The identification and displacement of the reader into the “you” is unbalanced by past tense, displacing the readers more often than drawing them in.

Despite the displacement of past tense, there is one scene where the protagonist slips into past tense on page 27,

But your husband has asked you to behave. “She doesn’t have a daughter,” he explained in the taxi on the way over. He stared at you until you agreed, and now, even in the face of such discomfort, you cannot bring yourself to slap her hand away.

The line “But your husband has asked you” is the main character reminiscing on a conversation that happened earlier, but on the third line I guide the reader back out of past tense with the “and now” that signifies moving into the present. This line does not push the reader out of the story because it is brief and primarily involves a character other than “you.” In this line *he asked* and *he explained*, which does not involve “you” doing anything other than listening. Once “you” moves back into the action, present tense has been reestablished. I chose present tense over future perfect because I did not want to focus on hypothetical characters or potential outcomes.

Although, my first draft of this story did include options and imperatives similar to “How,” I removed them by the final draft. When I first started writing, I mimicked the style of “How” and found the options and imperatives did not work with my story. The options function towards a specific goal emphasizing possibility, and “Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions” tells a singular experience with specific characters. At first, I used

the options to help ease the reader into the story, but instead they made my writing vague and worked against the specificity of the situations.

In addition to the hypothetical options, I also struggled with imperatives. Unlike many of Moore's stories, the imperatives pulled the reader out of my story and became awkward to read, which was in part from using present tense. The imperatives pushed the present tense into future perfect and caused my writing to feel inconsistent. Furthermore, the imperatives are earned in Moore's short stories through the self-help theme. Nothing about "Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions" suggests imperatives belong. After several drafts of struggling with them, I concluded that I had to choose between changing the tense to accommodate the imperatives or removing them. Since the imperatives are not a crucial part of the theme of my story, I decided to remove them from the final draft.

Alienating male readers was one issue I expected would present more of a challenge. When I started writing about a protagonist who gets pregnant, I worried that using second-person point of view would alienate male readers. However, I found early on in my story's development that the female protagonist did not alienate male readers. The title sets the readers up to the content, and when they first see the "you" they assume the main character is female. Furthermore, while reading *Bright Lights, Big City*, I was never alienated by the male protagonist despite being female myself. I assumed early on that the readers would accept the gender as effortlessly as I did.

Throughout this project I learned the importance of point of view in fiction. In the beginning, I thought of point of view as a personal preference best for working with varying perspectives: if a story is told through one perspective, first-person is appropriate, whereas multiple perspectives would call for third-person. This project opened my eyes

to the faults in this oversimplification as point of view holds incredible power over a narrative's tone, theme, tension, and, of course, the distance between the reader, character, and narrator.

The purpose of this project, besides giving me a better understanding of second-person point of view, is to help normalize second person as a common point of view. I have learned from the fiction I read for this project that second-person point of view has peculiar and useful qualities to offer fiction, and the way many modern fiction writers avoid using and discussing its merits is disappointing. My hope is that "Pregnancy and Other Dysfunctions" will add awareness to the useful and peculiar properties second-person point of view has to offer the world of fiction.

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