

palgrave▶pivot

**PRESENT-TENSE
NARRATION IN
CONTEMPORARY
FICTION**

A Narratological Overview

Irmtraud Huber



Present-tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction

Irmtraud Huber

Present-tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction

A Narratological Overview

palgrave
macmillan

Irmtraud Huber
English Department
Universität Bern
Berne, Switzerland

ISBN 978-1-137-56212-8 ISBN 978-1-137-56213-5 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56213-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016949257

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2016

The author(s) has/have asserted their right(s) to be identified as the author(s) of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Cover illustration: Abstract Bricks and Shadows © Stephen Bonk/Fotolia.co.uk

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Past and Present of Present-Tense Narration	5
3	Narrative Deictic Narration	23
4	Retrospective Narration	39
5	Interior Monologue	55
6	Simultaneous Narration	69
7	Mixed Cases	87
	Conclusion	101
	Appendix	111

Works Cited	113
--------------------	-----

Index	119
--------------	-----

Introduction

Abstract A brief introduction remarks on the prevalence and contentiousness of present tense today and points to the need to recognise the heterogeneity of present-tense usage in contemporary fiction.

Keywords present-tense narration • Man Booker Prize • chapter overview

When the jury of the Man Booker Prize 2010 chose three novels for their short-list that were written in the present tense, they received harsh criticism. To some, like author Philipp Pullman, present-tense narration seemed to be no more than an annoying fad, ‘a silly affectation,’ which he criticised as a limitation to narrative possibility (Roberts). While not entirely recent, (the trend has been noticed as early as 1987 by William H. Gass, who is similarly dismissive in his article ‘A Failing Grade for the Present Tense’), the prevalence of present-tense narration in the literature of the new millennium is conspicuous. In his guidebook for aspiring writers, *On Writing Fiction*, published in 2011, David Jauss even predicts that ‘[w]hen the literary historians of 3000 write about the fiction of our time, I believe they will consider our use of the present tense to be its most distinctive—and, perhaps, problematic—feature’ (86). While Jauss lists advantages as well as disadvantages of present-tense narration, he, like Gass, seems to be hoping for an end to the trend: ‘If we’re lucky,’ he says,

‘those of us who are still boxed in the present tense, if not in the present, will discover ways out of it, and into a future full of the possibilities of the past’ (119).

In spite of such critical voices, present-tense narration is spreading fast. If the Booker-Prize nominees are any indication, the trend continues unbroken, with a considerable number of present-tense novels on the long- and shortlist every year. Indeed, present-tense usage has become so common and so familiar that it hardly seems to draw much attention anymore. Only a few among the reviewers of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012), for instance, have so far found her use of present-tense narration worth much comment. This may be even more surprising in view of the fact that we are dealing here with historical novels, set in the time of the Tudors. Present-tense narration is thus used by Mantel to depict events which are emphatically past, and not in order to evoke the contemporary moment, which Jauss and Gass for their part seem to assume to be the main justification of the tense’s usage. As this book will serve to show, present-tense usage in contemporary fiction is much more heterogeneous in its rationale and effects.

In fact, Mantel’s use of the present tense thoroughly exemplifies the conditions and complexities of contemporary present-tense narration. While it has become so widespread that it hardly registers as a defamiliarising and experimental move any longer, it has also become highly diversified and has spread into numerous different genres and narrative styles, some of which, like the historical novel, may seem a surprising and even somewhat counterintuitive choice. In fact, present-tense narration has apparently become a narrative option almost on par with the more traditional choice of past-tense narration. At the same time, it still causes occasional umbrage with some readers, critics and authors, for whom it may ‘jar[...] on the reader’s nerves like a razorblade’ (Fludernik, *Natural Narratology* 249) and who lament its rise to literary respectability.

What could be the reasons for this rise? Where are the historical roots of present-tense narration and how does contemporary usage relate to former occurrences? And even more importantly: To what effect do contemporary authors employ the present tense? It is to these questions that this book is addressed.

Chapter 2 will draw extensively on valuable prior work by German scholars Armen Avanesian and Anke Hennig to offer a brief historical overview of the development of present-tense narration, identifying major trends and differences in its usage over time. Contemporary fiction takes

up these prior usages and develops them further in very heterogeneous ways. In order to structure my subsequent observations about contemporary literature, I identify four main types of present-tense narration and employ a narratological framework, ordering novels according to similarities in their narrative structure. This approach allows me to highlight the ways in which the conditions for present-tense narration change depending on the narrative perspective taken in a novel (first-person present-tense narration faces different challenges and can be used to different effect as third-person or authorial narration), as well as to showcase the diversity of usages and effects to be found in contemporary present-tense narration.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 will provide ample examples of present-tense usage in contemporary novels, and discuss its respective functions in the texts. In the hope that the texts I discuss will be familiar to my readers, I have chosen my examples for the most part from the longlists of the Man Booker Prize since 2000. While this selection admittedly comes with a certain bias, arguably authors who have gained literary prestige in the media and academia also have a realistic chance to influence the present and future development of literary styles and trends. With present-tense narration being as widely used as it is today there could be no question of making this study comprehensive. Rather, my examples were chosen to illustrate the breadth of different usages, while suggesting some common aspects and themes. My conclusion offers a necessarily partial list of common usages and effects of present-tense narration in contemporary, mainly British and Commonwealth fiction and combines these findings with a critical discussion of various possible causes for the current popularity of the present tense.

Past and Present of Present-tense Narration

Abstract This chapter provides a concise discussion of the historical development of present-tense narration against the background of which contemporary developments have to be understood. It goes on to identify four main types of contemporary present-tense narration, which will be discussed and illustrated by examples in the following chapters. They are narrative deictic, retrospective and simultaneous narration and interior monologue. The discussion in each of the following chapters in turn considers the use of these types of present-tense narration in the case of first-person, figural and authorial narratives, since each narrative situation entails different challenges and potentials for present-tense narration.

Keywords present-tense narration • historical development • narrative situation

When Ian Watt wrote his highly influential study *The Rise of the Novel*, he chose to discuss three major early novelists who stand for three different solutions to the challenge of novelistic narration. Daniel Defoe favours the first-person autobiographical voice in which a protagonist looks back on his or her life. Henry Fielding develops an overt authorial narrator who does not hide his control over the story. Lastly, Samuel Richardson excels in what Gérard Genette calls ‘interpolated’ narration (217). Richardson chose the epistolary form, with its temporal proximity of event and narration, as a way of writing ‘to the *Moment*, while the Heart is agitated by

Hopes and Fears, on Events undecided' (*Grandison* 4; original emphasis), and thus keeping the interest of his readers engaged by the illusion that they are witnessing the story as it unfolds. Nevertheless, and even though Richardson lets Lovelace commend his own 'lively present-tense manner' of narration in *Clarissa* (882), all of these three different approaches to novelistic narration predominantly employ the past tense.

This should not be a surprise. After all, for all their differences, a common element of these early novels was what Watt calls their 'formal realism': 'the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience' using 'a more largely referential language than is common in other literary forms' (32). Such a mimetic bias favoured believable and realistic narrative situations and thus abetted the use of the past tense. After all, in real life, we cannot experience and narrate both at the same time. It is only ever possible to tell of events that happened to us in retrospect, since we need time and leisure to narrate them or write them down. Even Richardson's protagonists thus inevitably use the past tense for most of their relation, as they sit down to write a report of what has just recently happened to them. In fact, Richardson's attempt to approximate simultaneous narration gave his contemporaries cause for some ridicule. Fielding, for example, derives comic effect from the implausibility of simultaneous narration in *Shamela*, his parody of Richardson's *Pamela*. In a part of a letter dated 'Thursday Night, Twelve o'Clock', Shamela uses the present-tense to describe a near-rape: 'Mrs. Jervis and I are just in Bed, and the Door unlocked; if my Master should come—Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. You see I write in the present Tense, as Parson *Williams* says. Well, he is in Bed between us, we both shamming a Sleep' (318: original italics). Even while Fielding is making fun of this style of writing, he nevertheless eventually recuperates the mimetic narrative situation by marking Shamela's usage of the present tense as a conscious rhetorical move, and the narrative soon returns to the more conventional past tense. Meanwhile, the additional difficulty that writing an account of an event may take much longer than the event itself is the famous central conundrum faced by Lawrence Sterne's eponymous hero of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, whose autobiographical project becomes quixotic with his realisation that 'at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write—It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write' (234). In a mimetic framework which is based on the conditions of real-life communication, simultaneous first-person narration seems to be all but impossible.

Third-person present-tense narration faces a different, but analogous problem. As Avanesian and Hennig point out: ‘[W]hile the first-person narrator of a present-tense text has no time in which she could report on her synchronous experiences, the third-person narrator has no place from which he could narrate the experiences of a character’ (*Present Tense* 40). Since, by definition, third-person narrators take no part in the story they relate, a present-tense narration turns the narrator into a disembodied entity who perceives the story as it unfolds without being present to the other characters. It has been pointed out by others that third-person and omniscient authorial narration is already to some extent ‘unnatural’, that is, mimetically speaking impossible, since in such narration the narrator usually has an impossible insight into the characters’ thoughts (see Alber 88–102). The conventionalised use of the past tense, however, permits the maintenance of at least the semblance of a mimetic illusion by opting for a retrospective narration of events that have already happened and are subsequently faithfully reported by the narrator. The narrator thus follows the ideal of the historian (albeit one with an improbably detailed insight) who accurately portrays the past.¹

However, the meaning of the present tense is not entirely restricted to contemporaneity. It is grammatically the most flexible of all tenses and can also be used to refer to the past, to the future, and to temporally unmarked or atemporal events (see Fleischman 34–5). Thus, even within the largely past-tense context of classical narrative fiction, the present tense is used in various ways. In the classical novel, the present tense mainly occurs in two forms, which Monika Fludernik has called ‘(a) the deictic use of the present tense to refer to the narrator’s and/or reader’s here-and-now’ and ‘(b) the intermittent use of the present tense in a past tense context’ (‘Chronology’ 124).

The deictic use refers to all such instances of present-tense narration in which a narrator evokes the act of narrating, directly addressing the reader or the audience. In such moments, the narrator ‘seems to bring his armchair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English’, as George Eliot once put it (137). One of many instances of such direct reader address to be found in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* serves as an illustration:

Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out,—bear with me,—and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:—or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don’t fly off. (11)