

Tacitus 1: Point of View Study Questions

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General Discussion Questions (David Silverman, Reed College):

1. What does Tacitus conceive of as the underlying stuff of history? In other words, does he see historical processes as part of an overarching pattern or chain of causality? If so, what is the overarching pattern?
2. Find examples of Tacitus' thoughts on the subjects of power and slavery. Does he regard the Romans as enslaved under Augustus and Tiberius? All the Romans or only certain groups? What in Tacitus' view would constitute the right and/or best way for a Roman of senatorial class to conduct himself under the principate?
3. Compare the performances by Drusus and Germanicus in suppressing discontent among the soldiers in Pannonia and in Germany with each other and with Tiberius' reaction (pages 43-60 Book 1 16-48). Who is to blame? How do the three leaders come off? Bring in Tacitus' description of the last chapter in Germanicus's life (pages 104-128). How is Tacitus using Germanicus as a foil for Tiberius?

Point of View:

In its most basic form, point of view is a way of characterizing the narrator (and sometimes audience) of the text: is the narrator a participant or not in the story being told? This handout is designed to provide you with information about point of view that can lay the groundwork for our own more complex readings. As you read through the "types and terms," I would encourage you to think of examples for each category from our readings either this semester of last and suggest the importance of that choice of viewpoint for the text.

Types & Terms:

- A. **Third-Person Narrator:** narrator is not a participant (No "I").
1. **Omniscient narrator:** one who knows everything that is going on and can tell us the inner thoughts of all the characters (Barnet 127)
 2. **Selective Omniscient:** one who reveals the thoughts of one of the characters but (for the most part) sees the rest of the characters from the outside only (Barnet 128)
 3. **Effaced narrator.** no evident figure is speaking, and consequently does not comment in his or her own voice and doesn't enter the minds of the characters (may make the story seem "cold," "scientific," or "reportorial.") (Barnet 129)
- B. **First-Person Narrators:** the "I" who narrates the story participates in it to varying degrees.
1. **Innocent Eye:** emphasizes the narrator's imperfect awareness and the audience's superior awareness (Barnet 130)
 2. **Observer:** The first-person version of an effaced narrator. One should pay attention to how the "before introducing the narrator with special self-evident characteristics such as honesty, perceptiveness, et cetera, the author persuades the reader that the narrator is worthy of his attention and trust" (Leaska 258).
 3. **Participant:** the narrator's own behavior affects his interpretation of events (Leaska 260-61).
 4. **Thinly-veiled ("Implied") Author:** often unnamed and deceptive since it implies that the author and the narrator are identical. What sorts of questions might we ask in this situation to distinguish the author and narrator in this situation--e.g. in the *Res Gestae*? (Barnet 131-34)
- C. **Dramatized Narrators:** narrator is explicitly dramatized as a character (Booth 176)
- D. **Undramatized Narrators:** character of the narrator isn't extensively developed (Booth 176) What are the advantages of an undramatized narrator?

Basic P.O.V. Questions:

1. What type of narrator does the author use? What is the advantage of this choice?
2. Do we trust the narrator? What are his/her biases? How does the author (subtly) relay these biases?
3. What is the relationship between the narrator and audience? (e.g. see B1 above)
4. Compare the narrator in Tacitus' *Annals of Imperial Rome* and Robert Graves' *I Claudius*.

Resources/Bibliography:

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing About Lit*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1985.
Booth, Wayne, "Distance and Point of View," *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction* 170-189.
Golemba, Henry, "Thoreau's Working Audience," *Essays in Literature* XIII (1) Spring 1986.
Leaska, Mitchell, "The Concept of Point of View" *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction* 251-266.

