

# Analysis of Focalization: A Case of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath"

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## Abstract

Modern studies in narratology provide some fine models to study the structure of novels and stories. The modern narratological approaches divide books and stories into story, narrative, and narration. There is also a further division of these units, the focalization of which is very important. Focalization gives the idea of the center of perception, which means who the focalizer is and what is being focalized. The important advancement in this study is that this approach distinguishes between the narrator and the focalizer and states that the narrator is not always the focalizer. *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of John Steinbeck's best novels, and it won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

**Keywords:** Narratology, Focalization, Narrator, John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

## Introduction

Focalization in a novel or story refers to the 'prism,' 'point of view,' or angle of vision through which the story is presented. This can be understood in terms of "Who sees?" and "Who speaks?" in the story (Rimmon, 2011). Although the narrating agent can see and speak simultaneously, there may be a situation where the narrator says, "What other person sees or has seen" (Rimmon, 2011). This way, narrating and focalization may be attributed to a single agent in the story. However, it is not always that the narrator is also the focalizer. This is a special case when the story's narration takes place in the first person and is narrated in the past tense. Let us take the example of Dickens's *Great Expectation*. In this novel, Pip is the narrator, and he describes the events in the past tense.

*You are to wait here, you boy,' said Estella, disappearing and closing the door. I was alone in the courtyard to look at my coarse hands and common boots. My opinion of those accessories was not favorable. They had never troubled me before, but they troubled me now as vulgar appendages (Dickens, 1978).*

In this case, the narrator is the grow-up Pip, but what he narrates is of childhood memory. However, this narration presents the focalization of child Pip.

This way, focalization, and narration are two different story modes. This can also be in first-person narration, specifically in narration that takes place in the past tense. However, in some cases, the agent of both focalization and narration may be the same.

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Furthermore, in the context of focalization, there is the vocalizer, the subject of focalization, and an object that may be called focalized. In the case of the focalized, it may be something or someone on which focalization occurs. Bal (1985) explains focalization using two key terms: focalizer and focalized. The focalizer is the character whose perspective shapes what the reader experiences in the story. The focalized, on the other hand, refers to what the focalizer perceives – the events, objects, and characters that make up the story world (p. 33).

There are two types of focalization based on its position in the story. There may be external focalization or internal focalization. In the case of external focalization, it is rather very close to the narrator. Therefore, it may be called "narrator-focalized" (Bal, 1985, p. 37). This type of focalization can be found in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* or Hardy's *Tess of d'Urbervilles*. However, there may be a case when external focalization takes place in the first-person narration. Another type of focalization is internal focalization, which occurs "inside the represented events" (Rimmon, 2011). In this case, the character in the story is the focalizer, as it happens in Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Furthermore, the degree of persistence of focalization may be fixed, variable, or multiple.

Moreover, in terms of space of focalization, it may be panoramic, simultaneous, or limited. Panoramic refers to the bird's eye view. The panoramic focalization mainly occurs at the beginning, at the end of the story, or sometimes in specific scenes. However, in the case of simultaneous focalization, more than two things are happening at the same time. This focalization takes place in "the description of Sulaco in the beginning of Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904) and that of Chandrapore in the opening of Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924)" (Rimmon, 2011). In the focalization, where the character is the focalizer, the panoramic and simultaneous focalization is impossible. For example, if the character is sitting in his or her house, it would not be possible for him/her to see what is going on outside unless the character comes out or there is an outlet through which the character can see the outside world (Shah & Khan, 7).

In the case of limited focalization, the focalizer presents a limited view of the world; however, there may be a change from a panoramic view to a limited view. Similarly, the limited focalization may also switch from one focalizer to another focalizer.

Another factor that is very important in focalization is time. In this regard, it may be panchronic or retrospective. It may be panchronic when the focalizer is not personified; however, when the focalizer is a character and focalizes his or her past, then it is retrospective. Furthermore, it may also be synchronous, where the focalization and narration go hand in hand.

John Steinbeck was a great American writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962. His novels are considered classics in American literature. His novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939. This novel was an immediate success and was awarded the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, America's most prestigious literary award.

### Research Questions

1. Who is the focalizer in *The Grapes of Wrath*?
2. What type of focalization is used in *The Grapes of Wrath*?

### Literature Review

A literature review explores prior research to understand how your current study fits into the bigger picture (Jalbani et al., 2023; Amin et al., 2023). The literature review acts as a map, charting the existing research on the specific theme (Maitlo et al., 2024; Maitlo et al., 2023). In the field of

narratology, a host of studies have been conducted to analyze the factor of focalization in novels and stories.

In this context, Hashemi and Hasebi (2016) analyzed the shift in the focalization in Joyce's *Ulysses*. For this analysis, the researchers employed Genette's (1983) and Mieke Bal's (1985) theory that distinguished between narrator and focalizer.

The researchers stated that the technique of stream of consciousness has often been used in this novel, along with the multiplicity of focalization. The researchers explored that this novel involves both external and internal focalization. This way, the facet of focalization keeps on shifting among the characters, and in some cases, even the minor characters also become focalizers.

The researchers concluded that this novel employs external and internal focalization and sometimes jumbles over both types, making it difficult to separate one from the other. Further, there is a constant shift in focalization from one character to another, sometimes making it difficult to recognize the actual focalizer.

Soomro et al. (2023) examine the correlation between temporality and focalization in *The Old and The Sea* by Hemingway and conclude that time and focalization contribute to generating suspense in the story and depict the protagonist's battle against the natural world. They argue that the study of focalization helps build the readers' perception of the story. Similarly, Burioro et al. (2021) discuss the magical realism in the novel *Alchemist* and argue that the study of focalization manifests the intricacies of the story and readers can understand narratives well when focalization is properly examined in any work of fiction.

Danish (2014) studied the factor of focalization in *When We Leave*. According to the researcher, Gerard Genette, as a theorist, has played a vital role in transforming the 'point of view.' Following the theory of Gerard (1983) and Bal (1985), the researchers studied the type of focalization in *When We Leave*. The researcher concluded that there is a single focalizer in *When We Leave*, and that focalizer is the character Umay.

Bal (1985) analyzed Moniru Ravanipur's novel "Kanizu" to understand how the author uses focalization to shape meaning. They applied Gerard model (1983) in their study. Their primary focus was how different elements of focalization interact to create the narrative's meaning (p. 59). They identified three aspects of focalization in the novel: perception, psychology, and ideology. One key aspect they explored is the perceptual limitations caused by time. Since the story is told through the eyes of a young, inexperienced village girl navigating a complex city environment, the reader does not need a broad, all-encompassing view (panoramic view). Despite the seemingly omniscient narrator, the information presented is ultimately limited by the girl's observations. The researchers conclude that "what is narrated" is restricted to the experiences of this young protagonist (p. 72).

## Methodology

This research study is qualitative, which, according to Flick (2009), is the appropriate method. Gay (2009) argues that qualitative research involves collecting data on various aspects within a natural environment. This approach emphasizes studying ideas and objects in their authentic state without manipulation (p. 55).

Qualitative research uses various methods to analyze literary texts, but the interpretive method is closely related to this type of analysis. Therefore, this study will involve the interpretive method, which, according to Silverman (2005), is a reliable method of interpreting the text; therefore, he termed it hermeneutics. Furthermore, Bryman (2004) also suggests this method to analyze the texts, specifically when the research objective is to find new meanings.

## Theoretical Framework

The present study is qualitative and analyses the type of focalization in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Different scholars and theorists have put forward different opinions about focalization. The researcher's approach to analyzing narratives draws on two key sources: the model developed by Herman and Vervaeck (2005) in "Handbook of Narrative Analysis" and the ideas presented by Rimmon (2011) in "Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics." This model involves the following notions in the study of focalization.

In storytelling, focalization is how the writer chooses what the reader experiences (characters, actions, objects). It depends on who is "seeing" the story (the focalizers), which limits what the reader knows (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005, p. 70). There are different ways this is achieved, which we will explore next.

Focalization may be external or internal. If it is external, the focalizer remains outside the fictional world; if it is internal, it means the focalizer belongs to the fictional world. Furthermore, it may be fixed, variable, or multiple. In the case of fixed, there is only one focalizer. In contrast, in variable focalization, there are more than two focalizers; in the case of multiple focalization, there are more than two focalizers.

In the context of properties of focalization, three factors are involved: space, time, and cognition. Regarding space, focalization may have a panoramic, simultaneous, or limited view. In a panoramic view, the focalizer controls the entire space simultaneously, and the focalizer gives the perception of different locations. In a limited view, there is mostly a character focalizer whose perception is limited.

In the context of time, the focalization may be panchronic, retrospective, or synchronic. In panchronic, it surveys all periods, whereas in retrospect, the focalization looks back to the past; synchronic focalization, however, means the characters experience and the reader learns about events at the same time. The characters doing the experience (the vocalizers) can be all-knowing (omniscient) or have a limited perspective, just like in real life. Focalizer is omniscient if it knows everything, whereas it is limited if it has limited knowledge.

## Analysis and Interpretation

The study identifies both external and internal focalization, which can be found in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

*To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray and dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May, the sky grew pale, and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared and went away, and after a while, they did not try anymore. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves and did not spread any more. The earth's surface crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country (p. 3).*

This is an example of external focalization where the focalizer is an external agent and perceives the objects as outside the fictional world. This external focalizer also narrates the story. This type

of focalizer can be termed narrator-focalizer. There is another example where it can be observed that the focalizer is external and remains outside the fictional world.

*A gentle wind followed the rain clouds, driving them northward, a wind that softly clashed with the drying corn. A day went by, and the wind increased steadily, unbroken by gusts. The dust from the roads fluffed up and spread out, and it fell on the weeds beside the fields and fell into the fields a little way. The wind grew strong and hard, working on the rain crust in the corn fields. Little by little, the sky was darkened by the mixing dust, and the wind fell over the earth, loosened the dust, and carried it away. The wind grew stronger. The rain crust broke, and the dust lifted up out of the fields, driving gray plumes into the air like sluggish smoke. The corn threshed the wind and made a dry, rushing sound. The finest dust did not settle back to earth now but disappeared into the darkening sky (p. 4-5).*

This is another example of external focalization, in which the perception of an external agent is presented in the novel. This novel is full of such examples where external focalization takes place. However, there are some segments in the novel where the internal focalization takes place. "You been a good guy. You give me a lift. Well, hell! I done time. So what! You want to know what I done time for, don't you?" (p. 18).

In this specific segment, there is internal focalization and the character Joad perceives the focalized objects. This type of internal focalization can also be found in the following example. "I use to think it was just me. Finally, it give me such pain I quit and went off by myself and give her a damn good thinkin' about" (p. 31).

In this specific example, the focalizer is the novel's character, Casy. Therefore, it is also internal focalization. The novel has many more examples where the characters are the localizers, and the focalization is internal.

In the next level of focalization, whether the focalization is fixed, variable, or multiple is studied. If a single agent perceives the events, it is fixed focalization; if two agents perceive them, it is variable. If more than two focalizers perceive the fictional world, it is multiple focalizations. In the novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the focalization is multiple because there are more than two focalizers in the narrative. The first focalizer is the narrator, external to the fictional world. However, the characters, such as Joad and Casy, are also agents of focalization.

In terms of properties of focalization, the first property is the space of focalization. In this regard, the focalizer may have a panoramic, simultaneous, or limited view. In a panoramic view, the focalizer covers the entire space. In contrast, the perception of different places is presented simultaneously in a simultaneous view. In a limited view in which the character is mostly the focalizer, there is a limited perception of the focalized world.

In terms of space of focalization, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, there is limited focalization as there are many focalizers, and each has a limited space to move on. The external focalizer, the narrator, also has a limited view of the space. Nonetheless, there are some segments in the narrative where the focalization is simultaneous. However, some examples of panoramic views can also be found.

*And now a light truck approached, and as it came near, the driver saw the turtle and swerved to hit it. His front wheel struck the edge of the shell, flipped the turtle like a tiddly-wink, spun it like a coin, and rolled it off the highway (p. 22).*

*When Joad heard the truck get underway, gear climbing up to gear and the ground throbbing under the rubber beating of the tires, he stopped and turned about and watched it until it disappeared (p. 23).*



This is a specific example of simultaneous focalization because the perception of two different places is given at the same time.

*When June was half gone, the big clouds moved up out of Texas and the Gulf, high heavy clouds, rain-heads. The men in the fields looked up at the clouds, sniffed at them, and held wet fingers up to sense the wind. Moreover, the horses were nervous while the clouds were up. The rain-heads dropped a little spattering and hurried on to some other country. Behind them, the sky was pale again, and the sun flared. In the dust, there were drop craters where the rain had fallen, and there were clean splashes on the corn, and that was all (p. 4).*

This is an example of a panoramic view where a bird's eye view is present, and the perception controls the wide area. The second level in terms of properties of focalization is time. In this regard, it can be panchronic, retrospective, or synchronic. In the panchronic time of focalization, the focalizer controls all the periods, whereas in retrospect, the agent looks back to the past; however, in synchronic focalization, it goes along with the events. In this novel, there are two main ways stories handle time. In some stories, the narrator recounts events that already happened (retrospective). In others, the story unfolds as the events happen (synchronic).

In stories, the narrator's awareness of the characters' thoughts can be unlimited (omniscient) or restricted (limited). In the case of omniscient, the focalizer knows everything; however, in the case of limited, the focalizer has limited knowledge. In this novel, cognition is limited because all the focalizers, including the narrator-focalizer, have limited knowledge.

## Conclusion

This research finds that in *The Grapes of Wrath*, both external and internal focalizations have been found. Furthermore, it has more than two localizers, so it has multiple agents of focalization. In terms of space of focalization, this novel has a panoramic, simultaneous, and limited view. In relation to the time of the focalization, *The Grapes of Wrath* has both retrospective and synchronic focalization. However, in cognition, the focalization is limited. This research study concludes that the multiple focalizations in *The Grapes of Wrath* present us with multiple perspectives of persons as well as of objects. This way, we don't rely on a single perspective that may be unreliable.

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