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The Problematic "You" in Lorrie Moore's *Self Help* Stories

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Abstract

You narrative is a mode of story-telling in which the second-person personal pronoun "you" is used to identify and directly or indirectly address a protagonist. This paper looks at the functions and effects of the second-person pronoun inLorrie Moore's Self Help stories.Lorrie Moore uses second-person point of view in six of the nine Self Help stories. The paper analyses the second-person point of view which dominates the narratives of Moore, how it satisfies her needs as a storyteller, and at the same time how it allows her the opportunity to insert her own thoughts and opinions.

Key words: Second Person narration, second person point of view,narrator, narratee, narrative audience.

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. Richardson defines second-person fiction as "any narration that designates its protagonist by a second-person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sole focalizer, and is generally the work's narratee as well" (311). Second person narration makes the reader feel as if s/he is one of the characters in the literary work. Unlike texts that are narrated in either the first or thirdperson, second-person texts are more concerned with who is listening rather than who is speaking (DelConte 1).Second-person narration in fiction is common for modern and post-modern literary works, but it is not possible to see many examples in second person narration before 20th century.

Uri Margolin approaches the problem of defining the "second person" by listing a number of typical characteristics that he describes as necessary in defining "second-person narrative as a distinct variety of narrative discourse" (Margolin 6).

• The presence of a single global narrator on the highest level of textual embedding, such that the whole (fictional) discourse originates with him or her;

• The presence of numerous instances of "you" in his or her discourse, oral or written;

• The majority of these "you" instances refer to a narrated rather than communicative "you;"

• The speech acts of the narrator concerning the "you" thus go beyond apostrophes, questions, orders, etc. and tend toward the representative, that is, reporting .

• The narrated you is a central agent in the sequence of events being recounted;

• The events/actions/states involving this "you" are specific and individual as regards their time and space, as opposed to the purely typical or recurrent (generic you, "you" as equivalent to "one" or "everyone"). (Margolin 6)

Second-person narration has become almost synonymous with the American writer Lorrie Moore, as we see in her famous collection of short fiction, *Self Help* Stories. Lorrie Moore uses second-person point of view in six of the nine Self Help stories.Lorrie Moore's short stories have been selected because they reveal the complex relationships between narrator, narratee, narrative audience and ideal narrative audience in second-person fiction. This paper deals with some specific second-person texts of Lorrie Moore and concentrates on the close reading of these texts and an analysis of the functions of the second-person pronoun in the narratives.

It is not common to use second-person narration in a literary text because giving the aimed message may be risky with this narrative technique. However, Lorrie Moore catches an important artistic success with her narrative choice. Moore imitates advice columns with short guides to specific situations as conveyed by her titles, "How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)," "How to Be an Other Woman," "How"and "How to become a Writer".In her stories Moore blurs the boundary between actual audience – the one who holds the book – and the audience that is addressed in the story.In Moore's Self Help 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.

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.Each model showcases a

different relationship, such as a narrative where all three parts function on the same line together (like Jay McInerney's*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).As perDelConte classification, in Lorrie Moore's stories the relationshipbetween narrator, reader, and protagonist is a Completely Coincident Narration as it simultaneously houses the narrator, reader, and protagonist.

In "*How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)"* a daughter recollects her lifetime with and without her mother in a timeline starting after her mother's death and working backward to her own birth. In each year of her lifetime, the narrator highlights parts of her life that are influential to her character. The story covers her mother's death, the sickness of her mother, her father's death, the narrator's few suitors, and her childhood. Readers follow the narrator on a personal level, allowing insight into who she is as a person and the events that made her that way, ultimately leading to the beginning of the woman's life.

In "*How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)",* Lorrie Moore implements an unconventional style that provides a unique perspective for the familiar topic of mother-daughter relationships.Moore starts the story in the 1980s and slowly travels back in time to the 1930s, recounting events that have happened in the interim. This deviation from the traditional, linear story forces the reader to think about events in a new way. It shows where the narrator is and then proceeds to reveal the path that leads her there.The choice of second person narrative by Mooremakes particular sense when coupled with this unique organization of "*How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes).*"

> 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. (p.240)

This organizing pattern creates a story that reads like advice or commands instead of traditional story being told.It mimics a How-to Guide that might be feature in a magazine or advice column. At the end of the entry for 1975 it says, "March, like Stella Dallas, spine

straight, through the melodrama of street lamps, phone posts, toward the green house past Borealis Avenue, toward the rear apartment with the tilt and the squash on the stove. Your horoscope says: Be kind, be brief. You are pregnant again. Decide what you must do." (p 242).In 1978 it says, "Bury her in the cold south sideyard of that Halloweenish house. Your brother and his kids are there. Hug." (p. 241) This comes across as a command on how to properly bury your mother and interact with your family.

Margolin writes about "You" narrative's propensity for being told in the present tense and for evoking and creating the story out of discourse material and this propensity ties in well with what Kacandes's view of second-person fiction's apostrophic quality.The protagonist in"How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)"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 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.

"*How to Be an Other Woman*" is another of the short stories of Lorrie Moore in second person dealing with a painful female crisis.Charlene and Jack meet at a bus stop, and after a few dates, they sleep with each other. Afterward, Jack tells Charlene that even though he has a wife, he's still interested in forming a relationship with her. Charlene agrees to pursue a relationship with him, but as the affair goes onCharlene begins to feel that she is losing her identity; she begins to feel intense anxiety and paranoia about confronting Jack's wife, and deep loneliness and longing when he isn't around. She even goes as far as to lie awake at night with her door unlocked, hoping that he will come over. As the affair continues, Charlene decides to confront Jack about how she lacks emotional support and comfort because he isn't with her enough. Jack confesses to Charlene that he has been separated from his wife; feeling betrayed, Charlene kicks him out of her apartment. Her love for him quickly dissolves, and even though her days become long and tedious, she doesn't let her love for him come back

"How to Be an Other Woman" is one of the commendable examples of contemporary American short stories written in second-person narration. The "you" in "How to Be an Other Woman" function as the main character and confirm Hantzis's theory of intersubjectivity, where "you" simultaneously houses the narrator, reader, and protagonist. In it, Moore adopts the language of the how-to manual, but she subverts it by turning the universal "you" into a specific protagonist.Its focus point is the main characterCharlene's struggles while becoming someone else: a mistress of a married man."All of Moore's second person stories in 'Self-Help' either touch on or revolve around self-alienation arising from romantic or sexual causes, a case in point being the opening story, 'How to Be an Other Woman' playing on a

double meaning of 'other woman', that is, 'mistress' or 'woman other than oneself" (Kelly,29). Through the second person narration, Moore gets the chance to create an intensity and sincerity between the narrator and the reader, to make the reader participate in the work directly by announcing him/her 'you'.The story surprises the reader with its immediate penetration into the reader's mind.

Told in the second person as a series of imperatives, the story is framed as a step-by-step guide on how to be a mistress.The reader is conducted through the story as Charlene, a young woman, college graduate yet menial secretary, who fall in love with and have an affair with a married man. The story is replete with references to the insecurity of an "other woman's" identity. You "philosophize," declaring, "You are a mistress… part of a great historical tradition" that normalizes your degradation and even esteems it (p.16). You "wonder who you are," "gaz[ing] into the mirror at a face that looks too puffy to be yours," "then look quickly away, like a woman, some other woman, who is losing her mind" (p.8, 12).

In passages such as these, frequently described in terms of "the narrator" being referred to as "you" (Bonheim 74) the protagonist's experience is narrated from her own perspective and the pronoun you consistently refers to the protagonist. There is no traceable narrator's / or narrative "voice" nor is there an intrafictional you in the here and now ofthe act of narration: that is, a listener to whom the story is being told. As soon as the protagonist becomes too specific a personality, becomes, that is, a fictional character, the quality of the presumed address to an extradiegetic reader in such texts evaporates. In both cases the text renders what must be the perceptions and impressions of the protagonist.With the second person narrative and utilizing rhetorical imperative sentences Moore allows readers to examine main character's identity in detail. The 'you' character in the story is named as Charlene and individualized, but a simultaneous impression is created of her generic misused mistress.Through her unique writing style, Moore shows the reader more than just a mistress, but a full-bodied character that is slowly trying to figure out her life and the things she has to do.

Moore's "How" is another second person narrative told from the point of view of a girl in a struggling relationship.Similar to other stories in "Self-help" the speaker's tone is that of a mentor or expert providing advice on how to do something. In the case of 'How' the speaker is telling us how to act in relationships. After dating her boyfriend for a while, she begins to grow bored of him and contemplates the good and bad aspects of the relationship. Her unhappiness persists, which leads her to have a short affair. She also starts lashing out at her boyfriend because everything he does gets on her nerves. He wants to have kids and start a family, but she is not ready to take that step with him. After planning her get away she attempts to break up with him, but news of him being sick keeps her from leaving. Going to

doctor appointments, and doing what she can to help him get well, she still wants to leave but it never feels like the right time. Another long term affair ensues; she sneaks around and lies to her boyfriend about what she is doing even though he knows the truth. Finally, she takes him to dinner and tells him she wants to break up. She moves out, and after having time to heal, feels nothing but indifference towards leaving him.

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. The instructional future tense creates hypothetical scenarios 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" (p.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" (p.55), and furthermore, the options appear to have no effect on the 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. (p.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 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.Instead of offering the reader advice (as in traditional forms of self-help literature), Moore's stories guide the narratee through hypothetical situations that often end negatively (Phelan 2).

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.

"How to Become a Writer",another of Moore's second person narrative, is written to guide the narratee along the path necessary to become a writer. However, as withMoore's other stories, these instructions expose the inevitable difficulties that the protagonist/narratee will face. "*How to Become a Writer*" presents a determined girl named Francie and her constant struggle with wanting to have a career in writing. She fails often. However, she continues to follow her dream of becoming a writer despite the many difficulties that come her way. We follow the writer through several stages of her life where failure has impacted her becoming a writer, from unsuccessful short stories to her literary demise. The story ends with Francie finding tedious things to do to pass time because she has altogether failed and has severed nearly all personal connections. Still, she is convinced she took the right path and is glad she isn't like everyone else whose lives go "always in the same direction".

In "*How to Become a Writer"*Moore's narrator seems to oscillate between two kinds of second-person narration: (1) the imperative in which the narrative is a set of instructions or commands for example "Decide to experiment with fiction. Here you don't have to count syllables"; and (2) the descriptive, in which specific events are relayed, for example "When you get [the story] back, he has written on it: 'Some of your images are quite nice, but you have no sense of plot.'"

> "The next semester the writing professor is obsessed with writing from personal experience. You must write from what you know, from what has happened to you. He wants deaths, he wants camping trips. Think about what has happened to you. In three years there have been three things: You lost your virginity, your parents got divorced, and your brother came home from a forest 10 miles from the Cambodian border with only half a thigh, a permanent smirk nestled into one corner of his mouth."

First, Francie repeatedly receives feedback on her work that intermingles various positive comments ("Some of your images are quite nice," "Much of your writing is smooth and energetic," etc.) with one huge critique: Francie has no understanding of how plot functions. This problem mirrors the construction of the story itself, which has no particular sense of plot. The narrative voice modulating between a generalized second person imperative and a richly detailed indicative: second-person, suits the ironic "how-to" tone of the text.

Moore creates words and sentences in a way that forces a new experience with language while keeping the reader firmly within the experience of character and story.In her second person narratives, readers fluctuate between identifying with the narrator and differentiating ourselves from her through the use of specific and more general lines. The second-person

point of view helps to create multiple meanings for narrator and reader. Presenting readers with scenarios and experiences that they can relate to/identify with allows readers to vacillate between assuming the role of narratee and narrative audience.The second person becomes a surprisingly flexible and effective device in Moore's hands and exposes the narrator's need to apostrophise.

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