
# THE RETROSPECTIVE PLOT AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE IN PROSE.

**Xushmanova Gulshod Ibragimovna**
University of Economics and Pedagogy
Department of Russian language and literature.
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**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the retrospective plot as a narrative device in prose, focusing on its structural and psychological functions. Retrospection allows authors to reconstruct the past, reveal the inner world of characters, and establish a deeper connection between temporal layers of the narrative. The study explores how the use of flashbacks and memory sequences contributes to the unity of composition, character development, and the reader's perception of time. Special attention is given to the role of retrospection in shaping the artistic integrity and emotional depth of modern prose.*

The plot of a story defines the sequence of events that propels the reader from beginning to end. Storytellers have experimented with the plot of a story since the dawn of literature. No matter what genre you write, understanding the possibilities of plot structure, as well as the different types of plot, will help bring your stories to life.

The plot of a story is the sequence of events that shape a broader narrative, with every event causing or affecting each other. In other words, story plot is a series of causes-and-effects which shape the story as a whole. Plot *is not* merely a story summary: it must include causation. The novelist E. M. Forster sums it up perfectly:

"The king died and then the queen died is a story. The king died, and then the queen died of grief, is a plot." —E. M. Forster

In other words, the premise doesn't become a plot until the words "of grief" adds causality. Without including "of grief" in the sentence, the queen could have died for any number of reasons, like assassination or suicide. Grief not only provides plot structure to the story, it also introduces what the story's theme might be.

A retrospective plot usually: attempts to retell the story from another character's perspective. uses a parallel plot to provide perspective on the story. is only possible when the story is told through first-person narration. tells of past events from the perspective of the present or future.

We always have the choice, when telling an imagined or real experience from the past, to relate it from then or from now. Real time narration, which takes place as the event is happening, is the best choice if you want the most electricity on the page. Telling the story of a train accident that happened years ago, from the retrospective view of now, is less intense than

putting us into it as it's happening. But retrospective narration can lend perspective to such events, and many memoir writers use it. Many novelists too. One classic example of retrospective narration is Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, a story told by Scout, as an adult, looking back on her life as a young girl. You can tell immediately the narrative point of view in Lee's first pages. Scout says something like "those were the years when they were told they had nothing to fear but fear itself." We're not hearing that slogan as it comes across the radio airwaves; we getting it in summary as a description of that era.

Retrospective narration has many benefits. It allows a bigger perspective. Scout, at eight, wouldn't understand the deeper meaning and irony of that slogan, so in real time narration, she couldn't use it as Lee does in her opening pages.

Retrospective, or looking back, gives us a more sophisticated vocabulary, too, with bigger concepts, that our younger narrator might not know.

This is the cool thing: Within retrospective narration, the writer can still show the young girl of eight. How? By making her dialogue and action age-appropriate. Anytime Scout appears in a scene, she is doing and saying things that an eight-year-old girl would do, not a forty-year-old adult. But the writing will be more electric, more emotionally charged, if we choose to write from real time.

Real time narration is harder, more in-your-face as a reader.

Retrospective narration is often easier on the reader and writer, both. It's easier to write, in my opinion, because you have the ability to move around in time, to show the young person via their dialogue and action choices, tempered by the older person looking back and retrospectively considering what happened.

It's a useful decision to think about, play with, as you develop your fiction or nonfiction. For instance, if you are writing difficult memories for a memoir piece, using retrospective narration--your viewpoint from now, rather than then--can help you successfully negotiate with an internal critic who is reluctant to let bad memories surface. Retrospective also allows in the "triad of healing writing" that Louse DeSalvo speaks of in her book, Writing as a Way of Healing: how we feel now, as well as how we felt then, and what happened

Written using past-tense, first-person narration, a retrospective narrative is told from the point of view of a character looking back on past events. The character narrating the story is sometimes an older person recalling when they were younger, while other retrospective narrators may be relating events from the recent past. No matter who the narrator is, the distance between the fictional character's past and present can make for a challenging, complex reading experience.

One function of retrospective narratives is to add layers to a character by revealing a contrast between their past and present selves. Much like reflective essays, these stories clearly demonstrate how the events they recall changed them or led to personal growth. Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" provides a key example, as Scout Finch narrates the story of her childhood from a present-day vantage point. The narrative reveals how the trial of Tom Robinson and her encounter with Boo Radley showed her the importance of having empathy for others.

Retrospective narrators often speak directly to readers to offer their side of the story or explain the reasons for their actions, creating a confessional tone. While Ian McEwan's "Atonement" begins as a third-person story, its protagonist, Briony Tallis, emerges in the book's

epilogue to speak in first-person and identify herself as its author. Briony, who falsely accused a man of rape as a child, confesses her mistake and explains that she's created the book as a way to rewrite history and atone for her mistake. Rather than having him die in World War II as he did in real life, Briony's story has him reunited with the woman he loves.

Unreliable narrators, narrators who can't be trusted due to some flaw in their perception, are a typical characteristic of retrospective narratives because memory itself tends to be selective. Kazuo Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go," a novel about a society where children are raised for organ donations, directly addresses this concept through its narrator, Cathy. Having delayed her donations to care for her peers, Cathy will soon begin the process herself, and attempts to find comfort by revisiting memories in the face of her imminent death. Throughout the book, Cathy admits that she isn't sure of the exact timeline or details of some events, making her account unreliable.

Retrospective narratives often appear in metafiction, stories that either contain another story or comment on the act of writing. The book may be a fictional character's memoir, or, like "Atonement," a creation of the narrator herself. Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" presents one of the clearest examples, as the book itself is the manuscript of its narrator, Humbert Humbert, who had an affair with a 12-year-old girl and is writing while awaiting trial for murder. The novel contains a foreword written by a fictional psychologist commenting on Humbert's case and giving details about where the people who figured in the story are now.

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