A psycholinguistic examination of the literary use of referring expressions in narrative

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In psycholinguistics, much effort has been put into investigating the factors that determine speakers' use of referring expressions and comprehenders' processing thereof [1-4]. This study focuses on two nuanced phenomena related to referring expressions and the manner of narration, occurrences of which have been consistently observed across literary narratives, though empirical evidence remains scarce — the phenomena are the pronominalisation of the centre of consciousness and the reflexivisation of the pronoun designating the centre of consciousness [5-8]. Despite their varying details, current theoretical works in both literary studies and linguistics converge upon two generalisations: (i) pronominalising the centre of consciousness should generally be preferred (compared to proper names) in an immediate rendering of that consciousness, i.e., when the rendering is not mediated by the narrator; (ii) the likelihood of reflexivisation of pronouns should increase in an immediate rendering of the centre of consciousness [5,6]. These two phenomena partly overlap ongoing psycholinguistic investigations into the use of pronouns and exempt reflexives (reflexives which are not in complementary distribution with their pronominal counterpart) [1-4]. However, to date, they still remain underexplored and thus represent a case in which manner of narration might interact with perspective-taking in influencing the salience status of intended pronoun referents, and in creating possible contexts for the licensing of exempt reflexives.

To test whether readers' expectations about the suitable linguistic realisation of the character are sensitive to the manner of narration, or more precisely, the degree of immediacy involved in presenting the character's consciousness, we conducted 4 experiments using two types of narratives (see Table 1) which manipulated the presence vs. absence of typical literary devices that signal immediacy of consciousness presentation (e.g., exclamations; [7-8]). For example, both (a) and (b) convey Percy's inner turmoil and may be read from Percy's perspective. However, in (a), the absence of literary devices associated with immediacy inevitably increases the control of the narrator in narration and induces readers to perceive the narrative as the narrator's summary/analysis of Percy's inner turmoil. In contrast, in (b), the employment of the highlighted literary devices is expected to obscure the presence of the narrator and create an illusion of witnessing Percy's consciousness in an unmediated manner. In the first pair of experiments, participants were presented with two options in the critical sentence (e.g., Percy/him in Experiment 1; himself/him in Experiment 2); participants were asked to click on the word that felt more natural in the context. The results were consistent with the literary patterns discussed above: in Experiment 1, readers were more inclined to choose the pronoun over the proper name in (b), when compared to (a) ($z = 8.42$, $p < .001$; see Fig.1); likewise, in Experiment 2, readers chose the reflexive over the pronoun more often in (b) than in (a) ($z = 2.56$, $p = .011$; see Fig.3). In two follow-up experiments, we examined whether our manipulation had indeed elicited a difference in the level of immediacy as perceived by readers. The same materials were adopted respectively, with the critical final sentence removed from both conditions (Experiment 3 & 4). Participants rated on a scale (from 1 to 7) the extent to which they felt they were inside the character's vs. narrator's mind when reading the narrative. In both follow-up experiments, the results showed that participants tended to feel that they were deeper inside the character's mind in (b), when compared to (a) (Experiment 3: $z = 18.04$, $p < .001$; see Fig.2; Experiment 4: $z = 10.05$, $p < .001$; see Fig.4).

Our findings demonstrate readers' sensitivity towards the relation between the use of referring expressions and the manner in which a given fictional consciousness is presented. We put forward that current metrics of salience in psycholinguistics should be expanded to include the dimension of the manner of consciousness presentation. We further argue that the present study not only supports the relationship between perspective-taking and referring expressions [4], but also emphasises the need to conceive perspective-taking in narrative as fluid and existing on a spectrum, susceptible to various textual and contextual factors.

Table 1. Example stimuli (literary devices highlighted). All experiments were preregistered. Exp.1: 100 participants; 52 sets of stimuli; 60 fillers; Follow-up: the same. Exp.2: 100 participants (follow-up: 96); 30 sets of stimuli; 42 fillers. Due to space constraints, we provide only a sample from Exp.2; however, both experiments share a similar design (with different stimuli). In their respective follow-up experiments, the critical sentence (underlined) containing the options for referring expressions (e.g., **Percy/him** in Exp.1; **himself/him** in Exp.2) was removed, while everything else remained identical.

(a) Mediated condition	(b) Immediate condition
Percy stopped and gazed at the painting. It seemed rather likely that he was not so different from the crowds of people walking round in a ring after all. As a matter of fact, all Percy had ever wanted was to return to his homeland. However, it was quite possible that the homeland, the very chalice in his lifelong quest, was already a different land that could never be returned to. It was also possible that the home in quest was already not the sweet home that he had so hastily forsaken that day, but an unattainable Arcadia standing amongst the untrodden paths. Unfortunately, if that was truly the case, it would also mean that the aching desire that had been so deeply rooted in **[himself/him]** was in fact never fated to be realised.	Percy stopped and gazed at the painting. Heavens, perhaps he was not so different from the crowds of people walking round in a ring after all! By God, all he had ever wanted was to return to his homeland! But... but what if that homeland, the very chalice in his lifelong quest, was already a different land that could never be returned to? What if... that home in quest... was already not the sweet home that he had so hastily forsaken that day, but an unattainable Arcadia standing amongst the untrodden paths? O the horror! And if, O God forfend, if that was truly the case, then alas, wouldn't that also mean that the aching desire that had been so deeply rooted in **[himself/him]** was in fact not, nay, never fated to be realised?

Fig.1 Readers' referential choice (pronoun). Error bars represent standard error of the mean
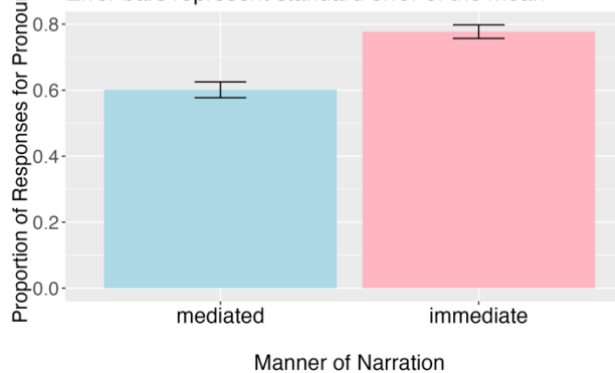

Fig.2 Effect of manner of narration on readers' ratings
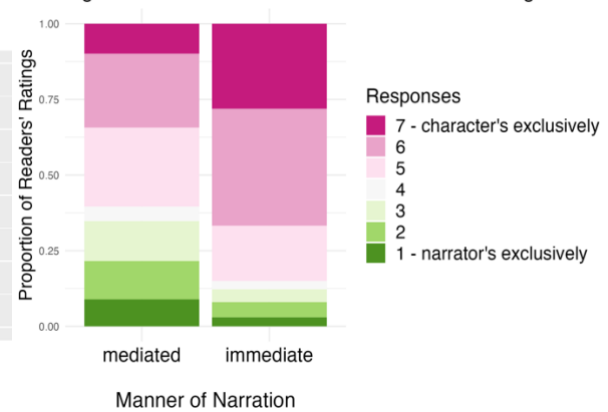

Fig.3 Readers' referential choice (reflexive). Error bars represent standard error of the mean
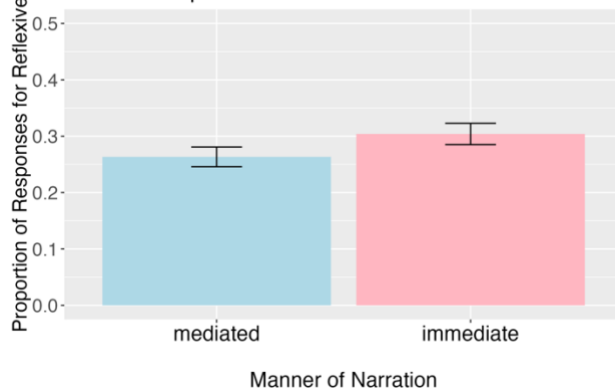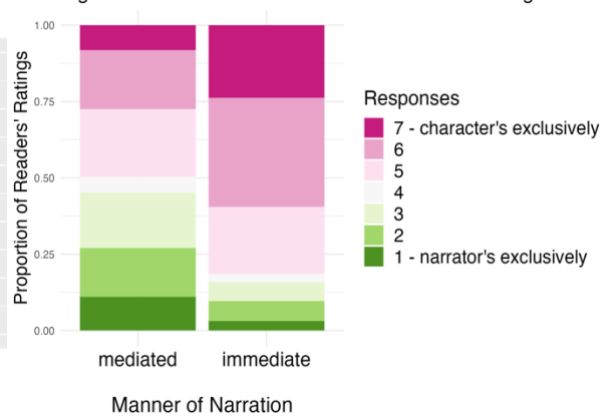

Fig.4 Effect of manner of narration on readers' ratings

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