

The use of multiple
voices in extremely
loud and incredibly
close



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In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer uses three different narrative voices to bring life to his story. The first and most prominent, as well as the one used to narrate the ongoings of the present day, is that of Oskar Schell. The other two, which serve mainly to buoy Oskar's story and explain the past, are the voices of the boy's Grandmother and Grandfather. These different narrators each respond to the story's integral tragedy, and express themselves- both to the reader and to the other characters- in very different ways.

Oskar's grandfather, Thomas Schell Sr, is likely the most perplexing character in the book, who is truly characterized by his inability to speak and the highly apparent fact that his mind is stuck in the past. His lack of human communication embodies and defines how he express himself in the book. His narration seems quite normal at first, however it soon becomes apparent that this complex, flowing train of thought is being laid down in the form of a letter to his son. This is how the reader gains insight in to Thomas's thoughts. These letters are the only time that the he communicates his true feelings and articulates thoughts about his life. Yet, as the reader sees, he is never able to send them, and thus his thoughts are stuck forever inside his head, never to be shared with another human. In communication with others, his day book notes are rarely longer than 5 words, which means he is able to avoid any meaningful conversation. Even in written "talking" with his wife, he only discusses factual information, and never touches on his past or his feelings. It seems that Thomas can only accommodate one-way communication: letters to his son, never to be read; short, impersonal written commands, and factual communications which need no response.

This lack of human connection characterizes Oskar's grandfather, making him truly appear as a broken man who cannot maintain a relationship with anyone in the present. This, it is revealed, is because he is a man living in his tragic past.

The loss of his parents, his first love, and his son are the events that define Thomas' life. After those childhood deaths, he closes up to the outside world, isolates himself from those near to him, and avoids meaningfulness in interactions with other humans. Even as the rest of the world moves on, Thomas lives perpetually in the past, leaving a dysfunctional shell in the present. His mind is so stuck in Dresden that he cannot think anything of the present or future. When he arrives back in New York after his 40 year absence, he has no plan and a complete inability to react to his new surroundings. Later, after gaining some form of closure by buying his letters in his son's grave, he tries to leave but realizes he is incapable to making decisions in the present, and as such is neither able to stay nor leave. His withdrawing reaction to these scarring losses exposes the empty, dead character of a man who can no longer live because of how removed he is from the world around him.

Though she commands a large amount of "screen time," we seem to know the least about Oskar's Grandmother. Because of her complete lack of deep expression to anyone, including the reader, and the fact that she holds her pain inside and away from other characters, she appears in the book almost oblivious to the happenings around her, seeming conspicuously normal in very abnormal circumstances. Even in her own personal letters to future

Oskar, she reveals virtually none of her deep thoughts about her past or <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-multiple-voices-in-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close/>

present situations, purposefully avoiding any discussion of the tragedy that has surrounded her life. As Oskar noted, he knows very little about her, despite spending much time in her company. Instead of dwelling on her past losses like Thomas, she does the opposite and expresses herself through love and time with the people she does still have- namely Oskar- while avoiding the past altogether. Because she avoids expressing any feeling at all, it is harder to see how she has responded to the tragedy in her life. But upon further examination, we see that it is just this lack of willingness to face the past that defines her self-expression and her relationship with personal tragedy. She appears to have buried her sorrows so deep within her, she does not even recognize that they exist. She shields Oskar, the reader, and herself from the loss she has experienced, affecting her from within yet showing very little on the outside. This is what creates the loving yet distant grandmother Oskar knows, and the broken soul fixed patched with band-aids that tied Thomas to reality.

Finally, the voice of Oskar rings the loudest and most fully throughout the novel. Our best ways of understanding his character, and how he expresses himself most strongly, are through his actions and thoughts, rather than through his words. His response to his father's death is the creation of a void within himself which needs to be filled by his thoughts and actions in order that he may be whole again- or at least closer to it. This need and the things he does to fulfill it are what bring his character to life. Oskar's wide emotional spectrum and jumping thoughts are most directly expressed through his actions- going through his Dad's belongings to strengthen his memories, searching for the lock to bring him solace, giving himself bruises

when he was disappointed in his actions, or yelling at his mother for not grieving the way he did. His honesty, longing for connection, and hopeful, childish mind were also exposed through his conversation with the Blacks, expressing himself far more freely with them than with his own family. Lastly, he expressed himself to the reader in the emotional outpouring he experienced, whether in thought, language, or action. In this way, we gained a fuller picture of Oskar than we did of his grandmother and grandfather.

Oskar's response to the loss of his father was far more unique than that of his grandparents. He neither lived in the past nor blocked it out- instead, he actively sought to continue his relationship with his father and his father's memory through his actions. We see that through his search for the lock, his compulsive letter writing, his emotional withdrawal from his family, and his active, often self-inflicted depression, he is trying to grow closer to his father, or complete his memory of him as a person to gain closure. Oskar needed to become closer to his Dad in order to let him go and accept death. Once he felt as though he had done his father right in death, Oskar was ready to face life once more with the memory of his father whole and cemented firmly in his heart.