

IMMERSED IN  
THE ART OF FICTION  
Algonkian Competitive Fiction Guide



I'm told, I forget.  
I see, I remember.  
I do, I understand.

– Algonkian Proverb



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*As certain young people practice the piano or the violin four and five hours a day, so I played with my papers and pens ... My literary tasks kept me fully occupied; my apprenticeship at the altar of technique, craft; the devilish intricacies of paragraphing, punctuation, dialogue placement. Not to mention the grand overall design, the great demanding arc of middle-beginning-end. One had to learn so much, and from so many sources ...*

*- Truman Capote*



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## MORE THAN A PREFACE

The primary goal of Algonkian is to provide you with the knowledge it takes to intelligently approach the planning and writing of a first novel. Over the years, we've found that writers who fail to publish all manifest the same self-defeating behaviors (see the back of this book for a list of reasons why writers can't get published—find yourself there?) At the opposite pole, writers who succeed also share a few things in common: they understand the market, the art of fiction craft, and just as importantly, their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Also, more often than not, they possess credentials the market is looking for, i.e., they have published short fiction in respected journals, or else their career background provides them with the kind of validity publishers are comfortable with.

If you are tenacious, able to balance heart with mind, and willing to learn, you have a darn good chance of succeeding—because the good news is, agents and editors are starving for new work. Which brings us around to the secondary goal of Algonkian Writer Conferences. The more first-time authors we can get represented by quality agents, and subsequently published, the better it is for us.

By the way, Algonkian method does not support a “feel good” workshop philosophy—it is irrelevant. We all start at ground zero in this business. Algonkian is here to help you understand what will work, and what will not. For an aspiring writer, periods of disappointment are necessary steps leading to productive change. The best antidote is to accept the inevitability, get over it, and move forward.

The purpose of this manual, “Immersed in The Art of Fiction,” is to provide you with considerable craft knowledge, as well as reference material you can use long after the event is finished. We immerse into drama and structure, work our way into an understanding of “The Art of Fiction,” and then finally, explore the nuances of narrative. If you cannot connect the word dots in the right way, or if your narrative waxes insipid from lack of imagination, emotion, or intellectual content, you've lost your reader.

In the creation of this manual, we've endeavored to use authors and works considered by most critics to be classic in their brilliance. Our authors are immediately recognizable, and as a bonus, prove the points we're trying to make.

And one more thing. While we're discussing what it takes to get published, let's not forget a little thing called PASSION. Keep in mind that tens of thousands of writers are working right now to get a first novel published (how many discarded manuscripts in 20 years?). Only a few hundred of them have any chance whatsoever. They are the best of the best, and the core emotion that separates them from the mob is passion.



## WHAT THE SUCCESSFUL AUTHOR MUST POSSESS

### Purpose

BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING A NOVEL YOU MUST ANSWER THIS QUESTION:

*Why are you writing a novel?*

For reasons of ambition, ego? Well, why not? Most of us, in one way or another, tend the ego. We want recognition, to prove our ability to others, rise above. We might simply need to prove something to ourselves. Also, a few of us desire independence from an unsatisfactory mode of existence, e.g., “the grind.” We may need purpose, to fill our lives with an activity that restores and validates us with mission—and what better way to achieve than by writing the novel? Then, of course, there is the desire to create, the godlike urge shared by all true artists. Or perhaps your particular need to write the novel results from all the above working in synergy.

Regardless, please consider your answers, get it clear in your mind, and then pause to consider writing a novel because **you have something of value you want to say**.

It’s a potent concept, alien to many. You might desire to expose a social injustice, restore an unusual footnote of history, or reveal a new world of experience. Whatever your subject or genre, the realization that it must be said, and only you can say it, gives you passion.

### Knowledge

THE AUTHOR-IN-EMBRYO MUST REALIZE:

- The Art of Fiction must be satisfied. Passionate writers fail to get published either because they do not sufficiently understand The Art, or are **unwilling to make those compromises** necessary to satisfy it.
- The most powerful novels focus, at their core, on human beings in conflict with one another. Regardless of window dressing, the most powerful characters are defined by their **actions in the context of a powerful story**.
- A novel, especially a first novel, must contain **copious amounts of narrative energy** derived from various sources and by various means.
- In order to be published, a first novel must demonstrate **a high degree of prose mastery** suitable to the chosen genre. If the writer is not an accomplished prose stylist, then she or he must substitute with potent subject matter, character, and devices as appropriate.



## A Plan

Certain foundational elements must be grasped and traced prior to writing the first word of the novel. The author must ponder, complicate, and plot beforehand, and yet also realize fluidity as a given, i.e., alterations to be made as appropriate to the story and fond passages of narrative discarded as necessary. Elements as follows.

1. **MAJOR COMPLICATION + THEME:** The author decides on the major complication/conflict/focus-of-tension for the novel and generates a flow of its evolution and resolution. Ideally, the author should also develop theme at this point.
2. **STORYBOARDS:** Though it might go without saying, an original story is realized first. Insofar as possible, major parts and chain of events (causal or otherwise) are included in a synopsis/proto-synopsis of the novel. Ideally, the flow should include all significant events/scenes from the standpoint of major complication, exposition, theme, character portrayal, etc.
3. **LOG LINE/QUERY HOOK/SUMMARY:** The author ruminates on protagonist, major complication, and original storyline before writing a capsule summary of the story, using not more than one or two sentences. This forces the author to focus on the core of the story (while also providing a query letter hook). For example:

As an elderly woman living with her abusive children sinks further into Alzheimer's, she struggles for the sake of her favorite granddaughter to write a journal of her life before the disease can overcome her.

4. **ANIMATION SKETCHES:** Sketching of major characters (at minimum), the purpose being to animate the characters even before they populate the novel.
5. **RESEARCH:** Before beginning the novel, the author should possess research notes as appropriate. For example, if the environs of the story are alien to the author, *National Geographic*, travel guides, and Internet come into play. The author collects as many tidbits, details, color, social customs/mores, weather, photos, and landscapery as necessary.

## The Single Best Author Tool

The best tool in the author's kit is a good reader. One good reader is worth at least three novel drafts or two years of work, minimum. If the reader is also a writer with the above qualifications, so much the better, but not necessary. The reader should be unafraid to tell you what you don't want to hear, and be completely trustworthy. Regardless, reader or no, before sending your ms to an agent, **be sure and get a professional fiction editor to once it over and give you a detailed evaluation.** This will be invaluable and an eye opener. Few authors, even published ones, can see the forest.



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## DRAMA'S MOST POWERFUL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVEL: ENTER THE MAJOR COMPLICATION

Ancient dramatists understood the requirements of a good tale, one in which willful human beings engaged in major conflict, the goal being to possess or achieve something of value. A designated character, by virtue of position and personality, became the antagonist, naturally defying the efforts of the protagonist, or hero, to overcome. This basic conflict scenario resurfaces again and again in a myriad of forms, not only in life, but in novels, short stories, and of course, film and television. What makes true dramatic conflict so universally effective is not only its ability to create tension, suspense, and powerful characters, but its unique method for portraying the need for value in human existence.

Fortunately, a potent means exists for structuring conflict in the novel so as to achieve maximum dramatic effect. We will examine this below. First, however, some general notes and quotes on the drama.

### PART 1: EUROPEAN THEORIES OF THE DRAMA

The following excerpts were taken from the collection of essays entitled, *European Theories of The Drama*. They are worth reflecting upon, not only because they illustrate important elements of drama, but because the insight they provide may also be applied to structuring conflict in the novel.

#### J.W. Krutch:

"Its action is usually, if not always, calamitous, because it is only in calamity that the human spirit has the opportunity to reveal itself triumphant over the outward universe which fails to conquer it."

"Tragedy reveals value in human life ... The death of a loved character, for example, reveals a value, something worth cherishing about life or humanity."

"Art should, at least in part, satisfy the universal human desire to find in the world some justice, some meaning, or at the very least, some recognizable order."

"The highest dramatic art is not achieved by pitting the most gigantic will against the most absolute necessity. The agonized struggle of a weak will, seeking to adjust itself to an inhospitable environment, may contain elements of poignant drama."

"The essential character of drama is social conflict in which the conscious will, exerted for the accomplishment of specific and understandable aims, is sufficiently strong to bring the conflict to a point of crisis."



"[Drama] should lead up to and away from a central crisis, and this crisis should consist in a discovery by the protagonist which has an indelible effect on his or her thought and emotion and completely alters his or her course of action."

## **Arthur Miller:**

For Arthur Miller, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his or her "rightful" position in society.

"Sometimes he is the one who has been displaced from it, sometimes one who seeks to attain it for the first time, but the wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity."

It is this "tragic flaw," this unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what she or he conceives to be a challenge to personal dignity, that causes the protagonist to initiate the action of the tale, i.e., the rising drama.

If the struggle of the protagonist is just, if she or he contests for a fair evaluation, then those conditions which deny this reveal a wrong, or an "evil" in the world. Thus, the "enlightenment of tragedy."

Pathos is achieved in struggling for a goal that cannot possibly be won, however possible it seemed in the beginning.

## **John Dryden**

Insofar as the protagonist is concerned, the primary emotional reactions on the part of the reader are fear and pity. Fear during the course of the drama that the protagonist will meet a tragic fate, and pity for the protagonist at such time this occurs.

Pity, or sympathy, cannot occur unless the character is ennobled, liked, respected. Thus, it is true concern for the protagonist that produces the highest emotion.





## **Part 2: Structuring Major Complication in The Novel**

Major complication refers to the primary and pervasive conflict or focus of tension in the novel. The major complication structure defines and provides momentum to the primary conflict, thus allowing for the tragic construction of drama's most powerful elements. Major complication may be expressed in its most basic form as a "statement of conflict": A vs B in a struggle for social domination; A vs B,C,& D for the goal of love; A vs B for the control of C environs, etc.

The evolution of the major complication and consequent reader emotional response may be delineated as follows, crucial stages noted in order of appearance in the novel (NOTE: this flow is derived in most part from "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" by Ken Kesey. It represents the best example in existence of drama adapted successfully into the novel. This does not mean, however, that each writer must repeat this exact sequence. Each story is different, therefore requiring different treatment. Keep in mind the aim is to create a degree of drama by whatever means necessary, i.e., a sympathetic character striving against the odds for a worthy goal.)

1. **ANTAGONIST PORTRAYED**
2. **THE DESIRABLE AND/OR WORTHY GOAL PORTRAYED**
3. **ANTAGONIST IN POSSESSION OF GOAL (THUS DIFFICULT TO ACHIEVE)**
4. **PROTAGONIST PORTRAYED/READER LIKES PROTAGONIST**
5. **THE POTENTIAL FATE OF THE PROTAGONIST IS FORESHADOWED**
6. **RISING ACTION BEGINS: PROTAGONIST INITIATES THE CONFLICT BY BEGINNING THE STRUGGLE FOR GOAL SHE OR HE HAS A CHANCE TO WIN**
7. **READER CONCERNED BUT HOPEFUL, SYMPATHETIC WITH PROTAGONIST'S AIMS**
8. **THE CONFLICT INCREASES: PROTAGONIST USES VARIOUS METHODS TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES OR CHALLENGES, WINS MINOR VICTORIES**
9. **READER FEARS FOR THE PROTAGONIST/PROTAGONIST ENNOBLED**
10. **PROTAGONIST APPEARS TO FORSAKE THE GOAL OR BECOMES DISLIKABLE IN SOME MANNER**
11. **READER EXPERIENCES DISLIKE OF THE PROTAGONIST**
12. **PIVOTAL POINT: PROTAGONIST IS FINALLY REMOTIVATED TO RETURN TO THE STRUGGLE (POTENTIAL EPIPHANY)/SYMPATHY REESTABLISHED**
13. **CLIMAX ACHIEVED: ANTAGONIST WINS, OR AT LEAST THE PROTAGONIST IS PREVENTED, THE GOAL UNREACHABLE, OR REACHABLE AT A PRICE**
14. **READER FEELS PITY FOR PROTAGONIST, ANGER AT THE SITUATION, THE "ENLIGHTENMENT OF TRAGEDY" OCCURS**



## Major Complication Notes:

A robust and well defined major complication maximizes the possibilities for conflict-driven suspense as well as reader involvement with story and character. Its role in the success and power of the novel cannot be overstated.

As noted in the above flow, the evolution of major complication evolves in such a manner as to produce these emotional states within the reader: CONCERN ---> HOPE ---> FEAR ---> PITY. **CONCERN** for the protagonist (and perhaps the goal itself), **HOPE** that she or he will succeed, **FEAR** for the physical/mental state of the protagonist as the conflict increases, **PITY** (and perhaps anger) at such time the protagonist fails.

The protagonist entwines so deeply with the goal which creates the major complication that she or he may appear obsessed by schemes, dreams, vows, rages, and even preternatural manias (portrayed in scenes which the plot must allow for). The author must remember, however, that the protagonist obsession must seem natural given the circumstances of setting, situation, and personality.

Possession and control of an object/social condition (the goal) is the source of conflict between protag and antag. Also, the goal in question is already possessed by the antagonist at such time as the protag announces the struggle to wrest it away.

To view major complication from the rising action standpoint:

### **PROLOGUE TO RISING ACTION:**

1. The reader understands the situation and realizes the goal.
2. The reader is introduced to the antagonist.
3. The reader is introduced to the protagonist.

### **RISING ACTION BEGINS WHEN:**

1. The reader knows the willful and motivated protagonist will struggle for the goal;
2. The reader realizes the antagonist, already in possession of the goal (or capable of preventing its possession), is formidable, well suited by temper and circumstance to resist;
3. The reader wants the protagonist to succeed, against the odds - because the protagonist is likable, an underdog who encourages sympathy, is pitiable, and because the goal itself is worthy/likable and/or possibly in danger.



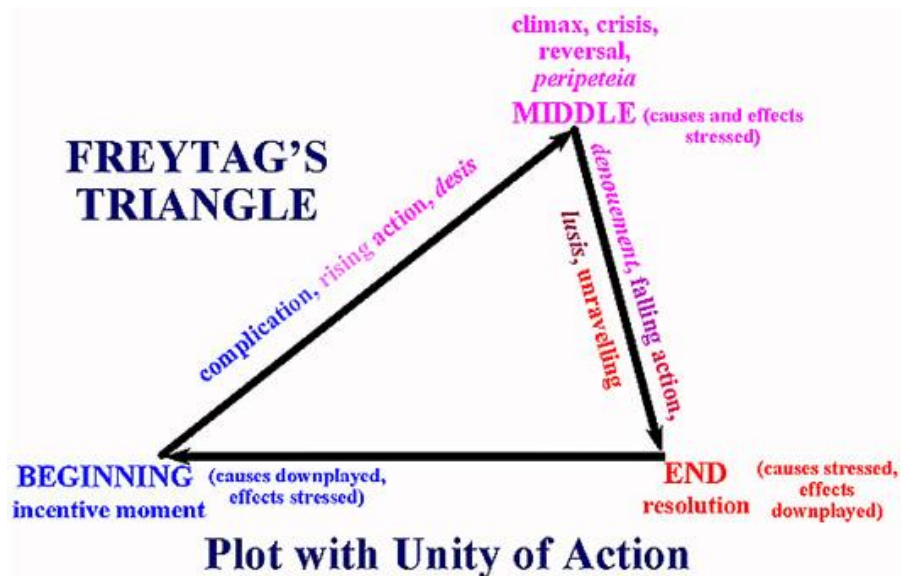
In summary, the coming storm is inevitable, and the reader must be **concerned** as to the outcome.

Ideally, the goal being struggled for should be ennobled in some fashion and/or should appear to be the “right” of the protagonist to possess: For examples, J. Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* for a lovely innocent who deserves to be protected and saved; and McMurphy, from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, for the rights and the dignity of the inmates.

Methods employed by the protagonist to achieve goal often portray the extent of the protagonist’s “obsession” to win the goal: preplanned, methodical, sudden, intense, awkward, and perhaps even sinister. Methods employed reflect the nature of the obstacles involved. For example, in the case of Gatsby, the overcoming of the obstacles was not unlike climbing a steep staircase: first he had to become wealthy, then get in proximity to strike, slowly regain his love’s affection, and finally, cure her of her husband.

Given the protagonist striving to overcome an obstacle, the following results: The protagonist wins the conflict, loses it, and as appropriate, epiphanizes, i.e., realizes a significant fact about reality, their own psyche, or someone else’s.

Freytag’s Pyramid (or triangle). This illustrates what we’ve been reading about here. Gustav Freytag developed a diagrammatic outline of the structure of a five act tragedy in *Technik des Dramas* [1863]. This proved useful in generally speaking about dramatic structure for tragedy or comedy, for novels, short stories, cinema or television.





## Part 3: Major Complication in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*

Of all novels ever written, none better exemplifies drama's most powerful elements integrated successfully (indeed, a forward to the novel was written by Arthur Miller) than *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.

### The Story

To summarize, an Irish brawl named McMurphy is injected by the court system into a strictly controlled asylum environment. The asylum administration, from orderlies on up to doctor staff, prove themselves for the most part to be callous and ignorant, infected with Freudian therapy concepts that are not only useless but actually dehumanizing. Authority in McMurphy's ward is wielded by "The Big Nurse" who symbolizes, on behalf of the asylum, the ultimate force for conformity. The story itself is told by Chief Bromden, a patient who believes in an implacable entity known as "The Combine," a mythical mental construct which he believes exists to crush human spirit and demand conformity.

NOTE: the novel can be divided into two basic parts: those scenes which advance the major complication, usually in fictive present, and those that involve fantasies and interior anecdotes on the part of Chief Bromden, the narrator. The latter serve to push the theme forward on their own level (i.e., "The Combine") separate from the major complication. The inclusion of this narrator interjection not only strengthens the work significantly, but lengthens it and distracts so that the focus on the major complication is not overly obvious.

### The Conflict

The conflict between the protagonist, McMurphy, and the antagonist, "The Big Nurse," actually occurs on three levels. First, a personality clash: the cold and bitter personality of the antagonist vs. the carefree, rambunctious character of the protagonist; a philosophical clash: obedience to rules and conformity vs. desire for freedom and nonconformity; a struggle for control: (this forms the core of the "major complication" and renders the struggle a just one) an ongoing competition to assert authority and maintain control over the inmates in the asylum, i.e., a struggle to control the social environment.

Per major complication requirements, the first two scenes of the novel characterize the antagonist and the protagonist. Kesey vividly portrays the traits and qualities of the two. The reader understands on an instinctive level that a major clash is inevitable. The temper and surreal power of the antagonist are captured by the narrator, Chief Bromden, as he watches and reports, while the protagonist, McMurphy is pictured as the epitome of n'er do wellness and raucous disruption.



Note how the reader rides an emotional rollercoaster throughout the novel, getting hopes up, having them dashed, restored, and so on. Note also the use of foreshadow throughout.

## Scene 7,

### Portrait of The Antagonist

"Under her rule the ward Inside is almost completely adjusted to surroundings ... Working alongside others like her who I call "The Combine" which is a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she has the Inside ... And I've watched her get more and more skillful over the years ... What she dreams of there in the center of those wires is a world of precision efficiency and tidiness like a pocket watch with a glass back, a place where the schedule is unbreakable and all the patients who aren't Outside, obedient under her beam, are wheelchair Chronicles ... "

Chief Bromden traits The Big Nurse into a being of absolute precision and control, one who will brook not even the slightest minim of disruption.

## Scene 8

The reader is treated to a dose of what happens when even the mildest of disruptions take place. Mr. Taber, an inmate, is assaulted and held down to be injected with chemicals because he dared to ask what was in the medication he was being forced to take:

"They push him face down on the mattress. One sits on his head, and the other rips his pants open in back and peels the cloth until Taber's peach-colored rear is framed by the ragged lettuce-green ... "

It becomes apparent that the goal the protagonist wishes to achieve will be very difficult, considering the circumstance, will, attitude, and power of the antagonist.

## Scene 10

Foreshadowing of the conflict to come. It is the first time the two opposing characters come into contact. They immediately begin to passive aggressively spar during a group therapy session. The Big Nurse repeatedly mispronounces McMurphy's name and attempts to make him appear psychotic as she reads his case history. McMurphy counters by telling his version of past events to the doctor who is present, and by acting comical regarding his "condition."

NOTE: due to Kesey's character foundation and the setting, the author has practically assured that the reader will be anxious for the conflict to begin even before the first word is uttered.



## Scene 11

### Antagonist Power:

The reader once again learns what happens when you buck "The Combine." One of the patients, Old Pete, rises up to defy the system, triumphs for a few minutes, then begins to falter:

"He started to cry. He couldn't make the words come out right anymore; he opened an closed his mouth to talk but he couldn't sort the words into sentences any more ... "I can't help it. I was born a miscarriage. I had so many insults I died. I was born dead. I can't help it. I'm tired. I'm give out trying. You got chances. I had so many insults I was born dead. You got it easy ..."

The Big Nurse injects him with a chemical and he slumps. Bromden comments:

"He had come to life for maybe a minute to try and tell us something, something none of us cared to listen to or tried to understand, and the effort had drained him dry . ... Pete never tried anything like that again, and he never will. Now, when he starts acting up during a meeting and they try to hush him, he always hushes ... [he is] like an old clock that won't tell time but won't stop neither, with the hands bent out of shape and the face bare of numbers and the alarm bell rusted silent, an old worthless clock that just keeps ticking and cuckooing without meaning nothing."

Like Mr. Taber, this is a foreshadowing of the fate that awaits McMurphy. The Combine wants only mechanicals to serve its cause. But a tragic end does not seem inevitable in the beginning. The protagonist has a chance of winning. It was revealed that McMurphy led an escape from prison during the war.

## Scene 12

A conversation between McMurphy and Harding--one of the more intelligent patients--delivers exposition on the insidious workings of the asylum. It boils down to one thing: if one doesn't cooperate with the therapy sessions, for example, and provide answers to questions in the manner in which they are expected, the patient is labeled an uncooperative, perhaps even potentially dangerous if irritation is demonstrated, relabeled "Potential Assaultive" and carried off to the "Disturbed" ward where a final fate of electro-shock awaits if cooperation isn't achieved:

*"And, my friend, if you continue to demonstrate such hostile tendencies, such as telling people to go to hell, you get lined up to go the Shock Shop, perhaps even on to greater things, an operation ... The Shock Shop, Mr. McMurphy, is jargon for the EST machine, the Electro Shock Therapy. A device that might be said to do the work of the sleeping pill ... You are strapped to a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns ... Enough of these treatments and you could turn out like Mr. Ellis you see over there against the wall. A drooling, pants-wetting idiot at thirty-five ..."*



Therefore, the goal is rendered not only difficult, but absolutely dangerous to attempt. A protagonist who threatens this environment will certainly be considered by the reader to be brave, and thus, ennobled by the struggle. Once again, however, the reader senses the far off cry of tragedy, the fate of the protagonist foreshadowed.

Harding continues, and in discussing the fate of Chief Bromden, finally states the threat plainly:

*"I've heard that the Chief, years ago, received more than two hundred shock treatments when they were really the vogue ... Look at him: a giant janitor. There's your Vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow. That, my friend, is what we can be threatened with."*

Despite all this, McMurphy makes it clear he will struggle for the goal (Note: the goal is not fully realized till later on—just a game in the beginning.) He gets an understanding that he won't be sent to the Shock Shop or worse if he simply keeps his cool. Once he believes this, he makes gambling wagers with the inmates on whether or not he can sufficiently shake things up in the ward.

**NOTE:** Regarding verisimilitude, Kesey's protagonist is portrayed as a willful, energetic, and shrewd operator who "gambles" with the patients over his prospects for success; ergo, the protagonist's launch into a potentially dangerous situation appears believable. Again, the protagonist appears to have a chance of winning the goal.

As Chief Bromden notes:

*"I could have watched McMurphy at that blackjack table all night, the way he dealt and talked and roped them in and led them ... He picks up the deck, zips his thumb over it, knocks the edge of it against the table top, licks his thumb and finger ... And what I decide you marks need is a big fat pot to temptate you ... Hey-yah, comin' at you ..."*

## **Scene 13**

### Antagonist Redux

Immediately following the protagonist's declaration, the author once again reveals the antagonist to be a being of power. At this point, the author has used the narrator to relate three surreal anecdotes which, in synergy, serve to make the antagonist appear preternaturally powerful. The reader is not allowed to forget what the protagonist is up against.

### **Scenes 16 to 20: Obstacles and Methods**

Obstacle: one of the orderlies won't allow McMurphy to get toothpaste.

Method: McMurphy rankles the orderly and brushes his teeth with soap powder.



Obstacle: The Big Nurse angers at McMurphy's singing.

Method: He counters by showing off loud underwear, doing a jig, speaking in a child-like voice.

Obstacle: Insufferably loud music is played each day in the ward.

Method: McMurphy ingratiates himself with one of the doctors to get it softened.

## Scene 19

The author inserts a single line to increase rising action and affirm the major complication:

"Everyone on the ward can feel that it's started."

## Scene 20

The narrator reaffirms the power of the antagonist, despite the small victories:

"One by one the patients are sneaking looks at her to see how she's taking the way McMurphy is dominating the meeting, and they see the same thing. She's too big to be beaten ... She's lost a little battle here today, but it's a minor battle in a big war that she's been winning and that she'll go on winning, just like The Combine, because she has all the power of The Combine behind her."

Chief Bromden senses inevitable doom. Once the power of the antagonist is reaffirmed at this point, it appears inexhaustible.

The sense of upcoming tragedy grows inside the reader.

## Scene 21

Opens with the patients happily playing a game of monopoly.

NOTE: the futility-of-striving (portrayed by the narrator's despondency at the end of Scene 20), to the fun and carefree monopoly game, results in an undercurrent of poignancy. Tragedy is rising like the night, only the patients are too happy to notice. However, the reader and Chief Bromden realize the truth.

## Scene 22

The war continues. The narrator comments on the dehumanizing aspect of the ward and McMurphy's reactions: "He keeps up his high class manners in spite of every trick they pull to get him to lose his temper. A couple of times some stupid rule gets him mad, but he just makes himself act more polite and mannerly than ever till he begins to see how funny the whole thing is-- the rules, the disapproving looks they use to enforce the rules, the ways of talking to you like





you're nothing but a three year old--and when he sees how funny it is he goes to laughing, and this aggravates them no end. He's safe as long as he can laugh, he thinks, and it works pretty fair."

## Scene 22 through 26

Despite obstacles, it appears once again that the protagonist might actually achieve the goal.(OBSTACLE/METHOD) McMurphy attempts to get the patients to vote to watch the World Series on television but they are frightened of displeasing The Big Nurse. McMurphy sours on them. Harding sums it up:

"It's still a risk, my friend. She always has the capacity to make things worse for us. A baseball game isn't worth the risk."

McMurphy attempts again to persuade the patients to vote on watching the World Series, but The Big Nurse defeats it with a technicality and uses the opportunity to paint McMurphy as a disruptive who is bad for the patients. At Series time, McMurphy turns on the television anyway and The Big Nurse threatens McMurphy:

"You're committed, you realize. You are ... under the jurisdiction of me ... the staff. Under jurisdiction, and *control*."

Upon hearing this threat, the patients gravitate gradually to McMurphy's side to sit down and watch a blank television screen, all of them rebelling.

The protagonist appears to be winning.

## Scene 27

Antagonist Power Reaffirmed.

Chief Bromden sounds a warning once again:

"I'm just getting the full force of the dangers we let ourselves in for when we let McMurphy lure us out of the fog"

The Big Nurse attends a staff meeting with the doctors and all of them go along with her diagnosis of McMurphy due to their fear of her. It was made known previously that her best friend is the director of the asylum, ergo, she can pull strings to get nurses or staff doctors removed if they displease her. Regardless, one of the interns dares to suggest McMurphy isn't really ill. The resulting rebuke of the staff demonstrates the true influence of The Big Nurse, and by implication, her power:



"And the third boy mutters, *Of course, the very nature of this plan would indicate that he is simply a shrewd con man, and not mentally ill at all ...* the rest of the staff sits there glaring at him like he's said some awful vulgar thing. He sees how he's stepped way out of bounds and tries to bring it off as a joke ... but it's too late."

For the benefit of the others present, one of the other interns slices and dices him and attempts to win favor by exaggerating McMurphy's condition even further:

*"Frankly, Alvin, I'm disappointed in you. Even if one hadn't read his history all one should need to do is pay attention to his behavior on the ward to realize how absurd the suggestion is. This man is not only very very sick, but I believe he is definitely a Potential Assaultive ... Don't you recognize the arch type of psychopath?"*

The staff wishes to commit him to the Disturbed Ward based on the World Series incident, posturing and making ever more absurd Freudian conjecture for the benefit of each other and The Big Nurse, however, SURPRISE TWIST: she wants to keep him right where he is, not wanting to make a martyr of him. (Kesey must keep McMurphy on the ward for the sake of the story) She notes:

*"As a psychopath, he's much too fond of a Mr. Randle Patrick McMurphy to subject him to any needless danger ... If we just wait for a while, our hero will--what is it you college boys say? Give up his bit? Yes?"*

Once this scene is completed, reader concern and fear for McMurphy is heightened considerably. The reader realizes that of the entire hospital staff, there is not one individual sane or courageous enough to see reality. Once again, the goal appears more difficult than ever. It is made clear that further struggle by the protagonist is necessary. The strong scent of tragedy reaffirms itself.

NOTE: THE NOVEL IS AT MID-POINT HERE, RISING ACTION STRONGER THAN EVER.

### Scene 30

Protagonist temporarily forsakes struggle for the goal. McMurphy learns from one of the patients that he could actually be incarcerated there for years and this gives him pause. Suddenly, he no longer defends the patients. As a consequence, one of the patients suicides. This is motivation for the protagonist to return to the struggle. Chief Bromden notes that things are getting back to "normal." The goal appears out of reach.

As the novel progresses, the protagonist receives new evidence of the need for his resumption of goal struggle. Motivation is given to him: he observes further psychic degeneration of the patients within the environment. McMurphy explodes at one point and asks everyone to leave him alone. He struggles inwardly, fighting with his own fear and furious at himself for becoming



what he hated. SURPRISE: McMurphy and the reader discover that all the other patients are there voluntarily. He questions them one at a time and they reveal themselves to be fragile, pitiable (further motivation).

FIRST EPIPHANY: McMurphy acts perplexed and pensive, realizing how weak and needful they are, how lacking in confidence and beaten they are by both society and the hospital system. The goal becomes even more worthy at this point, because the reader, and McMurphy, finally realize the true human suffering inherent in the situation.

## Scene 36

The pivotal point: the protagonist is redeemed, enobled, returning to the struggle for the goal. Reader once again finds the protagonist worthy of sympathy. McMurphy pushes his hand through the glass into the nurses station, as if by accident, reaching for his cigarettes, apologizing profusely for his clumsiness. The Big Nurse is shocked by his behavior. The patients and the reader realize McMurphy is back in the game. The protagonist directly scorned the power of the antagonist, but in doing so, set in motion his own demise. The danger is evident, yet the protagonist advances regardless, betting on his own wits and ingenuity to triumph.

NOTE: The protagonist can't seem overly self-destructive or verisimilitude is threatened. The scent of tragedy lingers, nonetheless.

NOTE: The inner struggle of the protagonist is portrayed in fictive present, and anecdotally, as he progresses through emotional and cognitive states, changing, growing. At the same time, the narrator is phasing also, from depression to hope to concern to defeat to hope, taking the reader along for the ride.

## Scene 37:

Pre-scene narrative in which Chief Bromden summarizes the situation. The reader is firmly anchored and oriented, realizes the fight isn't over, the antagonist in control despite minor setbacks:

"After that, McMurphy had things his way for a good long while. The nurse was biding her time till another idea come to her that would put her on top again. She knew she'd lost one big round and was losing another, but she wasn't in any hurry. For one thing, she wasn't about to recommend release; the fight could go on as long as she wanted, till he made a mistake or till he just gave out, or until she could come up with some new tactic that would put her back on top in everybody's eyes."



### Scene 38 through 48

A mixture of fictive present and anecdotal narrative, Chief Bromden relates a series of events, most of it McMurphy triumphs: he organizes a basketball team, plays soccer in the asylum, and finally organizes a fishing trip for the patients, having finally convinced one of the doctors that outside activities were of therapeutic value.

*"Hit the deck, mateys, hit the deck or I keehaul the lot of ye from stock to stern!"*

NOTE: Like everything else, the fishing trip is not easy. Each foray is marked by resistance, minor complication. Simply going to the fishing boat and boarding to leave is an adventure. McMurphy has to cut the rope and pirate the boat because the captain won't take it out to sea. The minor complication makes the story more interesting and less smooth, more lifelike.

As a consequence of escaping the Freudian therapeutic community, the patients show marked signs of improvement in mood and confidence, their happiness and dignity returning to them a bit at a time. During this time, however, the Chief warns McMurphy about the agents of "The Combine" and their power to enforce conformity:

"That's why you shouldn't of broke that window. They see you're big now. Now they got to bust you. ... They work on you ways you can't fight! They put things in! They install things. They start as quick as they see you're gonna be big and go to working and installing their filthy machinery when you're little, and keep on and on till you're fixed!"

Tone foreshadowing the demise of the protagonist: despite the gloriousness of the fishing trip, the tone of the novel darkens immediately afterwards. McMurphy drives the patients past the house he lived in as a child and the memories stirred by that have a debilitating effect on him.

SECOND EPIPHANY: After the brief visit, Chief Bromden notes the expression on McMurphy's face: "... dreadfully tired and strained and frantic, like there wasn't enough time left for something he had to do ...". The clarity of his childhood revisited had made him realize the brevity of his life: so many years gone, and yet so vivid, so suddenly near.

### Scene 49:

It gets around the ward that McMurphy is really fleecing everyone and that's why he's so nice and arranging things all the time, so he can just take the patients' money. McMurphy doesn't deny it, of course, but admits it, even brags about it his prowess at gambling and earning dollars from the patients. McMurphy's character therefore appears somewhat flawed by all this, but this makes him appear more human prior to his demise. Reader Dislike: the reader is annoyed with McMurphy after he dupes Chief Bromden into helping him fleece the patients. Afterwards, Chief Bromden says to an astonished McMurphy:



"You're always ... winning things!"

"Winning things! You damned moose, what are you accusin' me of? All I do is hold up my end of the deal. Now what's so all fired--"

"We thought it wasn't to be *winning* things ..."

THIRD EPIPHANY: McMurphy realizes that he had wronged the patients. Three epiphanies later and the protagonist is compelled to take dangerous risks for the sake of the goal.

## Scene 50

Reader Respect and Like Reestablished.

McMurphy, in defense of a helpless patient, is forced to fight with one of the orderlies. Chief Bromden comments (foreshadowing McMurphy's demise): " ... right at that time we all had a good idea about everything that was going to happen ... and why we'd all been wrong."

## Scene 51

The Big Nurse tells McMurphy that shock treatment may be necessary for him, but if he apologizes for what he did, the apology will indicate rationality and the shock treatment will be suspended. McMurphy naturally refuses to apologize and is escorted to the Shock Shop for "treatments." Later, during a group session with the patients and one of the doctors, the antagonist foreshadows the final end of the protagonist by telling McMurphy she wants to lobotomize him:

*"I was suggesting that we consider an operation. Very simple, really. And we've had a history of past successes eliminating aggressive tendencies in certain hostile cases."*

## Scene 52 to End

McMurphy, in a final act of defiance, throws a party in the ward at night, planning an escape also. The next day, one of the patients, Billy Bibbit commits suicide after The Big Nurse threatens him. McMurphy loses it and attacks The Big Nurse after she blames him for Billy's death. Chief Bromden comments (giving McMurphy extra motivation):

CLIMAX: "We couldn't stop him because we were the ones making him do it. It wasn't the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need that was making him push himself slowly up from sitting ... rising and standing like one of those moving-picture zombies, obeying orders beamed at him from forty masters ..."

Following this incident, McMurphy is lobotomized. Once done, his body is rolled onto the ward for everyone to see:



"They pushed it into the day room and left it standing against the wall, along next to the Vegetables. We stood at the foot of the gurney, reading the chart, then looked up to the other end at the head dented into the pillow, a swirl of red hair over a face milk-white except for the heavy purple bruises around the eyes."

The patients, meanwhile, show signs of recovery, self-determination, due to the efforts of McMurphy. So the goal was achieved after all. Chief Bromden, however, soon escapes from the asylum, to seek once more his ancestral land, the river beneath the sun.



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## THE INTELLECTUAL TRACE OF THEME

Discussions concerning the meaning of "Theme" and its place in the novel can be lively and go absolutely nowhere. For our purposes, however, the ideal theme may be defined as:

A true and valuable statement on human existence that pervades the novel and is made known to the reader by means of the major novel elements.

Below, we'll examine four works which exemplify to varying degree, the correct portrayal and interweaving of theme in the novel.

### Part 1: Cuckoos, Rhinoceri, and Malraux

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* the primary theme may be expressed by the following statement:

**All human beings possesses a right to freedom and dignity, but they must struggle for this right in a society which relentlessly seeks conformity.**

Theme is represented in more than one powerful way and can be found in nearly all elements. The characters are constructed to symbolize the extremes of freedom and conformity, especially the protagonist, McMurphy, and the antagonist, The Big Nurse. Each have followers as well. The nurse has her orderlies and McMurphy has the patients. The major complication of the novel pits the two extremes against one another in a struggle for control of the social sphere in which they inhabit, and for the very souls of the patients themselves.

The protagonist, McMurphy, a "n'er do well" of sorts, is arrested and rather than go to prison opts for a mild mental hospital he believes will go easy on him. The ward he inhabits at the institution is operated efficiently and mercilessly by The Big Nurse and her staff. The nurse and staff absolutely dominate the inhabitants of the ward. McMurphy, being a raucous personality, conflicts with the regime almost immediately. As the story progresses, McMurphy earns the respect of the inmates and struggles daily to recapture their lost dignity and humanity. The story is told by Chief Bromden, a mute inmate pressed into broom service by the hospital.

The narrator, Chief Bromden, supports the theme on his own level, which runs parallel to the major complication and manifests itself throughout the novel. He has a fantasy of an enormous and powerful controlling force he refers to as "The Combine," and he reacts to the environment in such a manner as to instill the evidence of domination, e.g., he imagines a fog rolling in at the proper time to cloud things, to obscure the truth, a device of The Combine.

Another strong example of theme can be found in Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Though a stage play, it vividly illustrates the point. Ionesco lived in Vichy France during WW II and witnessed Nazi infiltration into



the minds and culture of the French people. In his play, *Rhinoceros*, the characters transmogrify one by one into a rhinoceros, the world itself climaxing into a storm of poundings and herd-like groans.

The transmogrification of human into beast was a surreal metaphor Ionesco chose to reveal his bewildering and frightening experience in Vichy France. Many of those he knew, some of them friends, and despite their initial opposition, gravitated towards accepting the fascist point of view, till finally they lost all sense and value, even betrayed their country in many cases. Ionesco's theme can be stated as follows:

**Given the necessary social circumstance and stimulus, most human beings will eventually adopt a new set of beliefs or way of defining reality, even if this means ignoring obvious injustice and harm done to others.**

Quite the subject of intellectual speculation, no?

It might go without saying, but keep in mind that when you compose your theme, it must not only be a value or a conclusion concerning human existence that you firmly believe in, but it must be supportable, demonstrated throughout the novel, by the major complication, the characters, and all else.

"Man's Fate" by Andre Malraux, illustrates further.

## ***Man's Fate*, by Andre Malraux**

The theme of *Man's Fate* is expressed by means of third person narration which delves into the mind of the main character, Kyo Gisors. He is an individual unable to define his true nature, "what" he really is. Once the "self" is searched for, it is discovered to be indescribable, alien. The theme may be stated as follows:

**To achieve a state of self-knowing, the individual must attempt to define the essence of their own being and identity, regardless of how difficult or even frightening the task may be. Secondly, having accomplished the former, the individual must then come to a cognizance of "self-in-the-world," i.e., of how "self" should properly relate and orient to the world about it.**

Free will, motivation, reality perception—these are all issues of concern, depicted against the backdrop of The Chinese Revolution. The long chain of reflection on "self" and identity is triggered at such time as Kyo hears a recording of his own voice, a raspy unrecognizable sound which induces the realization of how alien he sounds to his own ears.

After this incident, the theme reasserts itself in various forms again and again:





**P. 42:** a character states:

"I've had the experience of finding myself unexpectedly before a mirror and not recognizing myself ..."

**P. 42:** Kyo has insomnia:

"It was not 'he' who was thinking of the insurrection, it was the insurrection, living in so many brains like sleep in so many others ... "

**P.50:** a woman familiar to Kyo suddenly acquires the aspect of something alien:

"And now this body was being invested with the poignant mystery of a familiar person suddenly transformed - the mystery one feels before a mute, blind, or mad being ..."

**P.52:** an observation made on the same woman:

"A while ago she seemed to me like a mad or blind woman. I don't know her. I know her only to the extent that I love, in the sense in which I love her."

**P.53:** Kyo wonders about himself:

"But I, to myself, to my throat, what am I? A kind of absolute, the affirmation of an idiot: an intensity greater than that of all the rest. To others, I am what I have done."

**P. 61:** Kyo's father, Ch'en, ponders his son

"For the first time, the phrase he had so often repeated, *There is no knowledge of beings*, attached itself in his mind to the face of his son."

"As for Ch'en, did he really know him? He did not at all believe that memories enable one to understand men."

**P.67:** Kyo's father contemplates "self":

"He had thought once, ages ago, that he imagined himself a hero. No. This force, this furious subterranean imagination which was in him ... was ready to assume every form, like light. Like Kyo, and almost for the same reasons, he thought of the records of which the latter has spoken to him ... Just as Kyo had not recognized his own voice because he had heard it with his throat, so he - Gisors - probably could not reduce his consciousness of himself to that which he could have of another person, because it was not acquired by the same means. It owed nothing to the senses. He felt himself penetrating into a domain which belonged to him more than any other. With his intruding consciousness he was anxiously treading a forbidden solitude where no one would ever join him."



## Part 2: Theme and Flow in *Miss Lonelyhearts*

Must you be in awe of the novel's size? No. Of course, the novel is potentially unwieldy and difficult to fathom at one time, to visualize from end to end, yet an understanding of the novel as a whole, as a synergy viewable in its parts, must be realized. This is extremely important not only to developing theme, but everything else. The plot or storyboard flow is an effective method for aiding the author with orientation and perspective (later utilized to form the basis of a novel synopsis). The flow should be divided into the primary units of scene, first, and chapter or other narrative block, second—containing sidebar notes as appropriate regarding major complication, theme, characters, etc.—and related in anecdotal fashion, thus enabling the author to get a sense of the work as a whole. Prior to writing the novel, the author must delineate the flow parts, storyboarding insofar as possible, updating periodically as the novel evolves.

Below we will examine a flow of all major and minor events as they occur in the novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathaniel West. West's theme in *Miss Lonelyhearts* may be summarized as follows:

**There exists a level of human suffering that is both incurable and pervasive, and the individual, in the midst of this suffering, can only find happiness by remaining ignorant of it.**

The novel "Miss Lonelyhearts" concerns the life of a ghost writer newspaper columnist, Miss Lonelyhearts. Each day, letters of detailed human suffering are written to the ML column. ML, in struggling to cope with the substance of the letters in a meaningful way, not only fails but succeeds in progressively ruining his own life. His antagonist, Editor Shrike, attempts at every turn to demoralize and defeat ML.

(NOTE: It becomes apparent from reading this particular story flow that it supports West's overriding theme at nearly every turn. Chapter designations are included for reference purposes only.)

### ***Miss Lonelyhearts*, by Nathaniel West**

#### **Ch 1**

ML appears despondent/ML letters are read. His inner conflict at inability to solve the suffering of others is evident.

“The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York *Post-Dispatch* (Are you in trouble?-Do you need advice? Write to Miss Lonelyhearts and she will help you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard. On it a prayer had been printed by Shrike, the feature editor.

"Soul of Miss L, glorify me.  
Body of Miss L, nourish me.  
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.  
Tears of Miss L, wash me.  
Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea.  
And hide me in your heart.



And defend me from mine enemies.  
Help me, Miss L, help me, help me .  
In saecula saeculorum. Amen."

Although the deadline was less than a quarter of an hour away, he was still working on his leader. He had done as far as: "Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar. " But he found it impossible to continue. The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heartshaped cookie knife.

On his desk were piled those he has received this morning. He started through them again, searching for some clue to a sincere answer.

*Dear Miss Lonelyhearts--*

*I am in such pain I don't know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much. My husband thinks no woman can be a good catholic and not have children irregardless of the pain. I was married honorable from our church but I never knew what married life meant as I never was told about man and wife. My grandmother never told me and she was the only mother I had but made a big mistake by not telling me as it don't pay to be innocent and is only a big disappointment. I have 7 children in 12 years and ever since the last 2 I have been so sick. I was operated on twice and my husband promised no more children on the doctors advice as he said I might die but when I got back from the hospital he broke his promise and now I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurts so much. I am so sick and scared because I can't have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don't know what to do.*

*Yoursrespectfully,  
Sick of it all"*

The cynical and abusive editor, Shrike, is introduced. He suggests ML respond to a particular letter by noting that, "Art is a way out."

## **Ch 2**

ML strolls outside and muses in a park. He begins his slide towards breakdown by appearing disillusioned with religious belief (the sky held no angels).

ML enters a bar and meets Shrike, who personifies the opposite of ML, i.e., an antagonist character who energetically and methodically destroys any hopes for redemption or salvation from human suffering that ML may entertain.

## **Ch 3**

ML goes home and has a long dream--in it, he symbolically destroys the lamb of Jesus.



## Ch 4

ML exhibits symptoms of dislocation, angst, madness. He fixates on notions of order and balance, but discovers the existence of chaos and its agents won't let him rest.

In a panic, ML goes to his girlfriend's house and then behaves abusively towards her. As he does so, he reveals the source of his fury: "... all the broken bastards."

## Ch 5

ML sits in a bar and listens to the comments of cynical comrades, including brutal anecdotes illustrating the abuse of independent women.

ML and friend stumble drunken in the snow, discover an ML letter in the flesh: a homeless old man.

ML physically attacks the man, furious that the individual made him feel pity.

## Ch 6

In a dreamlike state, ML calls Shrike's wife, takes her to a restaurant and tells her that sex will make him happy.

The two return to her apartment and he attempts to seduce her but fails, tearing at her dress as she recites her own "ML letter" to him.

## Ch 7

Next day, ML in office again, reads another ML letter, despairs, and attempts to throw the letter away, but returns to it, and out of curiosity and sexual frustration, decides to call the woman who wrote the letter. She is a living example of an ML letter. He goes to her apartment and they have sex and she tells him the story of her life with her crippled husband.

## Ch 8

ML's girlfriend, Betty, comes to see him, suggests that his problems are "city problems," ready to vanish if he would only retire to the country.

Shrike overhears and bursts into the room to deliver his own sermon, decrying every potential avenue of escape as futile. Even suicide is useless.

## Ch 9



Despite Shrike's cynicism, ML's girlfriend takes ML to a farm to rest and frolic a bit.

#### **Ch 10**

ML returns to his job, realizes he can never forget the letters of suffering, they are too overwhelming (i.e, to be happy one must remain ignorant of suffering) and encounters a particularly hopeless letter from the crippled husband of the woman he had sex with.

#### **Ch 11**

ML goes to a bar and meets the crippled husband. The man gives ML yet another letter to read, concerning his life. ML feels such compassion for the man that he holds the man's hand underneath the table.

#### **Ch 12**

ML accompanies the husband to the apartment he and his wife share. The wife fixes dinner for all of them and begins to flirt openly with ML.

They converse and ML attempts to honestly advise them on their situation; however, his advice is wasted on them and ML is embarrassed.

Husband leaves the room and the wife sexually assaults ML, but ML recoils and leaves immediately.

#### **Ch 13**

ML at his apartment, Shrike storms in.

Shrike drags ML to a party and installs ML as the "guest of honor" and plays a strange game in which various past ML letters are distributed to each guest for comment. ML is portrayed as "the rock," impervious to any further suffering.

After ML leaves the party, Shrike produces a new letter. It is from the husband, reviling ML for raping his wife!

#### **Ch 14**

ML takes his girlfriend out, appears to want to accept her "party dress" vision of how life should be, appears to be willing to accept a blindfold and asks her to marry him.

#### **Ch 15**

ML, feeling ill, has a religious dream that God approves of his actions. The husband of the wife



appears and shoots ML. ML is killed by those he tried to save, thus becoming a Christ-like figure, but there is no redemption, it was all for nothing.

### **More Miss Lonelyhearts Theme Matter from SPARKNOTES.COM:**

**The Failure of Christian Faith and Miss Lonelyhearts's Christ Complex** - Miss Lonelyhearts openly admits he has a "Christ complex." He hangs a figure of Christ up on his walls, Shrike constantly makes mocking comparisons of Miss Lonelyhearts to Christ, and, as the guidance counselor to his many readers, Miss Lonelyhearts is given Christ-like authority to dictate spiritual commands to his audience. He even looks like a minister. But he tragically fails to live up to this Christian potential—he admits he has never allowed the "hysteria" of religion to overtake him, and even goes so far as to say at one point that he does not believe in Christ. The primary cause of his failure is outside Miss Lonelyhearts's control, however. The modern world is filled with sacrilegious cynicism (as epitomized by Shrike), unrelenting, inescapable misery (as his readers' letters attest), and abusive men (evident in the letters, Miss Lonelyhearts's friends, and even Mrs. Doyle ). As a result, religion becomes either an afterthought, as with Miss Lonelyhearts's "decorative" Christ figure, or self-destructs, as in Miss Lonelyhearts's botched sacrifice of a lamb.

Christ observed similar problems in his time, yet still preached universal love. Miss Lonelyhearts's main problem is that he perceives misery with Christ-like acuity, but never integrates unconditional Christian love into his personal life. Rather, he intellectualizes the problems of his readers and those around him, never connecting with them on the guttural level of the letters he reads. Moreover, whenever he encounters the "grotesques"—emotional cripples whose interior disarray is often projected into physical disfigurement, as with the nose-less girl and Peter Doyle— or anyone else who suffers, his inability to rescue them only enrages him. While he kills the sacrificial lamb in his youth out of mercy, over the course of the novel he also mistreats and verbally abuses Betty and violently injures an old man.

Miss Lonelyhearts finally does have a religious awakening by the end of the novel, uniting with God. He even goes through a series of events—three days of virtual death, a Last Supper, a resurrection— that approximate the end of Christ's life, though slightly out of order. Miss Lonelyhearts decides to use his column for his long-desired purpose, as a mouthpiece for earnest spirituality and love. When Doyle, the ultimate and universal grotesque, returns to kill him, thus avenging all the grotesques Miss Lonelyhearts has abused, Miss Lonelyhearts embraces the disabled man with love. But just as Miss Lonelyhearts practices what he preaches, Doyle's gun explodes and kills Miss Lonelyhearts. Miss Lonelyhearts dies for Doyle's lack of faith in him, much as Jesus was crucified for man's sins. The novel ends, then, on profoundly optimistic and pessimistic notes. West seems to say that one can potentially become a messiah, but that the rest of the cynical, faithless, and selfish world will never accept it.



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## CHARACTER ANIMATION SKETCHING

First of all, various opinions exist regarding author control over the impulsiveness of character. Some say characters should be saddled to carry the story forward, the final destination dependent on the characters themselves, i.e., throw the character dice and the story must follow. The effective author, however, fleshes characters with strength of story and nature while assuming the role of chessmaster, major and minor characters moving according to a greater scheme or plan, checking and mating one another as the story progresses, fitting seamlessly into the flow.

### Part 1: Basics of Animation, and Sherwood

In the context of the novel, the animation of character occurs in two basic ways. It is either author-provoked or story/complication provoked, secondary or primary, superficial or core, momentary or long term. The latter makes by far the strongest impression, for true depth of character is revealed only at such time the characters, narrator, antagonist or protagonist react to the major and minor complications, calamity, and difficult circumstance introduced by the story itself. In the *The Great Gatsby*, e.g., Gatsby reacted to the manslaughter of Myrtle Wilson by accepting blame to protect Daisy, meeting his death because of it, while his nemesis, Tom Buchanan, reacted with cowardice and falseness. By their actions shall ye know them!

What we mean here by secondary, or author-provoked characterization, refers to that complex of manner, voice, appearance, and other characteristics the author applies to the character, and the techniques the author uses to portray same. Though we refer to this as a "secondary" method, it shouldn't be downplayed, and we'll see why below.

(NOTE: If a character is a stereotype of sorts, the characterization is made easier since the average reader is able to pick up on it quickly, however, caution must be exercised not to lapse into cliché.)

Sherwood Anderson was a master at quick and lively character animations of the secondary kind, not only choosing unique characters but involving them in anecdotes, social relationships, and other-character reactions which aided greatly in portraying the character. Using these methods, Anderson was effectively able to render a character memorable despite the lack of powerful complication, e.g., from *Winesburg Ohio*, we have JOE, portrayed by Anderson using the following methods:

#### **General background and description of what makes Joe special:**

Lived with his mother, location of the house, father's occupation, a physical description, then an illustration of Joe's physical problem: "... one who walks upon his fellow men, inspiring fear because a fit may come upon him suddenly and blow him away into a strange uncanny physical state in which his eyes roll and his legs and arms jerk." Additionally, Joe would be "seized" with ideas, a need to change things for the better (\*\*thus engaging reader sympathy and concern)



**Physical aspects:**

**Hands:** "running a thin, nervous hand through his hair."

**Eyes:** wide, rolling "with a strange absorbed light ..."

**Gait:** rapid

**Smile:** peculiar, glistening gold teeth

**Manner:** would excitedly pounce on people with his ideas and plans

**Body:** small of body

**Anecdote in fictive present:**

Men are standing about discussing a local horse race when Joe bursts in on the scene and commences ranting on the subject of the local creek water. He finishes, turns around and goes about his business as if nothing had happened.

**Anecdote in fictive past:**

Anderson moves back in time to recall an incident in which Joe had cornered George (the main character of Winesburg Ohio) and ranted and thrashed about the newspaper and how he could improve it if given the chance.

**Social Relationships:**

(which balance out his eccentricity, make him well rounded for the reader's approval): Joe wanted to be a baseball coach, and the town approved. A baseball game is described, the excitable Joe urging his players on.

**Character revealed based on the reaction of others:**

Joe also has a love affair and must go to meet his girlfriend's relatives. The author notes their mean nature and the reader fears for Joe, suspense is inherent at anticipation of the meeting; however, the relatives laugh, mesmerized by Joe's antics.

Joe, being a minor grotesque of sorts, i.e., eccentric and odd, thus made his portrayal easier, more memorable. Like Anderson, if you choose a character that maximizes the methods you use to portray them, you're ahead of the game, however, learning the methods utilized here is what matters. They can be applied again and again, towards fleshing any character, regardless of inherent oddity, or lack thereof.





## Part 2: Sometimes a Great Notion: Psychological Concepts That Assist With Defining Character Interaction and Motivation

A lesson and sample here regarding affect and cognition can go a long way towards helping you sculpt a character's psyche profile, and as you'll see, their reactions to others.

### The Reciprocal Relation Between AFFECT and COGNITION:

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| (COGNITION) | A attributes C's appearance at the luncheon as a sinister presagement.             |
| (AFFECT)    | A becomes angered as a result  |
| (AFFECT)    | B in a putrid mood due to argument with his ex-wife                                |
| (COGNITION) | B therefore misinterprets A's show of hostile emotion as a resentment against him. |
| (AFFECT)    | B walks over to C and begins to speak ill of A.                                    |

**Cognitive dissimilarity and conflict occurs** whenever A and B perceive "X" and yet respond, usually overtly, in differing manner.

### MISCELLANEOUS QUESTIONS AND ISSUES:

How do **self-serving biases or beliefs** of the individual relate to motivation? E.G., character "A" often manifests himself to others as a sanctimonious bore. What motivates this behavior? Does "A" delude himself in some manner? Has "A" constructed an inner image of himself that somehow supports his boorish behavior?

The motivation of the human organism to seek the most reward and avoid the most punishment (in their varying forms) is itself defined as self-serving. This is a cognitive process, i.e., **the self measures and weighs chances of success and chances of punishment before acting**. In establishing character, the author might ask of the character: what "reward" do you seek? How and where will you find it? And, what do you wish to avoid at all costs?

Given **the person-situation controversy**: which trait, attitude, or bias in the person interacts with an object/person/situation in the environment? In other words, what psychological aspect of the character reacts in what manner with a something she or he observes in the environment? How does the interaction manifest itself? Outwardly? Inwardly? In many cases, different characters will perceive the same stimulus and react in opposition. The author will understand this intuitively while writing the novel, however, it might be beneficial to ruminate on beforehand, or when animation sketching.

Important: What of the issue of **conflicting motivations within the individual**? What are their identity, source, and what of the cognitive process which seeks to resolve them? McMurphy, the protagonist of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was a perfect example of conflicting motivations. On one hand, he wanted to help the patients, but on the other, he wanted to increase his chances of being released from the asylum.



### Part 3: Character Development Notes and Musts

**TAGS:** Characters frequently come with "tags" or certain characteristics which repeat throughout the novel, as appropriate, and which serve to reveal the psychology of the character. For example, in *The Sun Also Rises* by Hemingway, Brett, the hub of conflict, states to the narrator from time to time: "Oh, darling, I've been so miserable." In the final analysis, this tag reveals a degree of self-absorption so severe that it ultimately damages those around her.

**CHARACTER-WITNESS REACTION:** A MUST-USE-TECHNIQUE for establishing validity of a character is to portray, in fictive present, other characters witnessing the behavior of that character and reacting to it—preferably in the midst of some embroilment or vital or unusual task. The behavioral response of one character to another hones reader response to that character. Reactions to Robert Cohn, e.g., in "The Sun Also Rises" render him more repugnant than would otherwise have been possible. Various characters appear and revile or taunt him. In the same novel, Bill, a friend of the narrator, Jake, appears and chums with Jake, convincing the reader, via his opinions of Jake, of what a good guy Jake is. Meanwhile, Brett, the source of all conflict, is visualized not by author/narrator description, but almost exclusively by the reactions of others, especially men, to her presence.

**PSYCHIC TRANSFORMATION:** Major characters, esp the protagonist, should undergo emotional/psychic transformations during the course of the novel. For example, Miss Lonelyhearts transforms as he attempts, one letter at a time, one person at a time, to resolve his anxiety and helplessness in the face of human suffering. His varying states of being, in reaction to this major complication, determine his actions and reactions. One could actually divide the novel of ML into these fluctuating states of being. They are as follows: frustration ---> anxiety ---> dislocation ---> neurosis ---> cruelty ---> passivity ---> compassion ---> frustration ---> stoicism --> madness

NOTE: During times of emotional duress, narrators invariably experience reality in altered ways, such as slow motion dream states.

**PITIABLE QUALITIES:** In *Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway provides each character with at least one characteristic that renders them pitiable, and therefore, more human: Bill is an alcoholic, Jake the narrator is impotent and shredded by his love for Brett, Cohn is often abused and cries to his girlfriend, Brett has a shaky hand, Mike is bankrupt. In synergy with their other qualities, this "flip side" of unkind life gives them balance.

**EMOTIONAL CLIMAX:** In character interaction (e.g., *Great Gatsby*, *Cuckoo's Nest*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Sun Also Rises*) occurs at such time as the characters humiliate, taunt, argue, insult, rebuke, and/or become violent with one another. It had been building, building, then voila, all hell.



NOTE: All authors introduce **new minor characters** well past midpoint. These usually provide verve and suspense simply by their appearance. For example, in *Gatsby*, the Jewish mafia figure, Meyer Wolfsheim, associate of Gatsby.

**CHARACTERS AS METAPHOR OR SYMBOL:** Frequently, characters may be embodied with a specific collection of traits designed to support the complication, theme, or other. For example, Shrike, the editor boss of *Miss Lonelyhearts* in the novel by Nathaniel West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, reveals himself through his speeches and verbal reactions to be the embodiment of pessimism, an anti-Miss Lonelyhearts of sorts, and thus, becomes an antagonist figure. Tom Buchanan, the antagonist in *The Great Gatsby*, is the embodiment of arrogance and ignorance, demonstrated by his opinions, attitude, and various reactions to other characters. The author must be careful, however, not to render the characters too extreme, too one-sided. Their viability must not become an issue.

**CHARACTERS IN CONTRAST:** Both Emily Bronte and Fitzgerald **contrast certain characters** in a very marked fashion, but for differing reasons: **Bronte's contrast support a central theme**, i.e., good vs bad, whereas the latter **contrasts to heighten reader desire for the protagonist to achieve his goal** (i.e., you want J. Gatz to succeed in getting Daisy partly because Tom is such a cretin, and, also because Daisy stands in marked contrast to her brute of a husband).

## Part 4: The Power of "Animation Sketching"

Once the foundational elements of the novel are decided upon, the author retrieves the notebook, takes out a pad or opens the word processor to begin sketching the main and secondary characters. Each must possess a set of characteristics and a history, an emotional and spiritual profile, needs and goals that animate their imagined flesh. The author's goal is to animate the character in his or her mind, prior to the beginning of the novel. The more animate the character, the more passion the author has for them, for their problems, their needs and struggles.

NOTE: PRIOR TO SKETCHING YOU MUST DEFINE THE ROLES OF THE MAJOR CHARACTERS VIS-À-VIS THE MAJOR COMPLICATION. In other words, it makes no sense to sketch and flesh if results will later be out of synch with the novel.

AS steps as follows:

- **PHOTOS AND PHYSICAL:** You clip out pictures or photos of those you believe exemplify the physical form/attitude of the characters, tape them onto your pages. Next, jot down the physical facets a bullet at a time, one page for pics and bullets.
- **BIO HISTORY:** You provide the character with a bio, a history, which lends itself to the story at hand. If necessary, you research occupations, real bios, using the Internet or the library, whatever it takes to flesh this person out.



- **ORIENTATION:** You orient this person in time and space, i.e., you give them a job, a reason for being, a place they inhabit, people they know, activities they participate in.
- **GOALS:** What does this person wants most in life: peace? power? freedom? dignity? love?
- **PSYCHE PROFILE:** You work up a psychological profile: strongest desire(s)/dislike(s), intelligence level, emotional profile (dark or light as a whole, easy or slow to anger), attitudinal qualities (e.g., biases towards objects/people in the environment that create cognitive issues), belief system (atheist, Hindu, Republican).
- **SOCIAL REACTION PROFILE:** You do a social reaction profile: How do they react to others in social situations? You sketch a short anecdote that reveals this person by demonstrating how she or he behaves/reacts to a defined stimulus in the context of a social situation. Something has happened, something is said that creates tension, desire, confusion, ergo the anecdote portrays this person at their best or worst. HINT: USE CONFLICT!
- **CHARACTER ARC:** (for major characters, esp protagonist) Given your knowledge of the major complication and story, you flow-sketch the emotional and cognitive evolution of the character from beginning to end. If she or he starts off as a ignorant louse, where to go from there? **Will they epiphanize, change, require motivation?** All major characters evolve as the story progresses. It's mandatory, whether in fiction or film.

(NOTE: It's worth mentioning that writers get character ideas from several sources—magazine and newspaper articles, for example, that expound on one person's life and history. Depressing as it may seem, obituaries in the local paper are great place to gather information for brief bio sketches. You should keep a character source notebook and/or pocket folder and fill them with clips you deem interesting.)

## Part 5: Sympathy Factors In The Hook

If you've won a Pulitzer you might consider disregarding the advice in this section, but it's not advisable. Look at the percentage of fiction novels on the shelves right now that concentrate on creating a character the reader will like immediately and without hesitation. Quite a few, yes? A novel hook with an interesting, unique, and sympathetic character will make agents sit up and take notice. This is what they're looking for! It's a MUST HAVE.

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon**

Christopher John Francis Boone



- A first-person narrative from an autistic 15-year-old protagonist: "My name is Christopher John Francis Boone. I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057."
- He finds a dead dog with a garden fork sticking out of it and describes the scene in a detached, emotionless manner, until: "I had been hugging the dog for four minutes when I heard screaming." So this autistic child has an unautistic and therefore heroic capacity for caring and sympathy. He tells us he likes dogs because they "are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk." This gives us a sense that the character is moral--Which becomes all the more poignant and sympathetic when he is unjustly accused by police of killing the dog.
- He decides charmingly to write a murder mystery about the incident – the book we are reading – and when his teacher Siobhan suggests that a murder mystery about a human might be more compelling, the boy protests that "some dogs are cleverer and more interesting than some people – Steve, for example, who comes to the school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food and could not even fetch a stick. Siobhan asked me not to say this to Steve's mother." Thus the protagonist is revealed as a keen and objective observer of the world around him, and in hilarious fashion.

## Summary

- Talented and unique
- Possesses a handicap
- Shows compassion towards others
- Possesses a moral sense
- Undertakes a challenging task that requires brains and bravery

## ***The First Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom**

Eddie

Eddie is a wounded war veteran, an old man who has lived, in his mind, an uninspired life. His job is fixing rides at a seaside amusement park. The protagonist is old and infirm, yet polite and optimistic.

- As a kid, he fought to protect his older brother. Scrappy, brave, and protective.
- He likes kids, and they like him. He gives them candy and makes animal figures for them from pipe cleaners. These children are not the offspring of relatives or friends. They are kids that know him from the amusement park where he works. It is hard not to be sympathetic toward someone who likes kids and is kind to them.
- He is generous. He gives his last two \$20 bills to a dishwasher so the man can buy something for his wife.
- On his 83rd birthday, a tragic accident kills him as he tries to save a girl from a falling cart.

**Summary**

- Possesses a handicap
  - Protects the weak/shows courage
  - Generosity and compassion towards others
  - Brave and self-sacrificing
- 

***The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd***

Lily Owen

Anecdote in fictive past: When Lily was four, she witnessed a fight between her mother and her father and intervened when she saw a gun in her mother's hand. In the scuffle of the fight, the gun went off; Lily was blamed for her mother's death.

Anecdote in fictive present: Lily awakens her father to see the spectacle of swarming bees in her room. When they arrive in her room the bees have vanished and her father, a mean and uncaring man, threatens to severely punish her if she ever again awakens him to anything less than finding the house in flames.

Physical descriptions: Lily's hair is black, like her mother's, but is cowlicky and she looks unkempt because she's never had a woman in her life who could guide her in how to take proper care of herself. She's a fourteen-year old white girl, has almost no chin, but does have Sophia Loren eyes, even though this attribute isn't enough to get her noticed by even the loser-guys. She wears ill-fitting clothes she makes for herself in home ec. class at school because her father won't let her buy any new clothes.

Personal Attributes: She's clever, imaginative and bright. The swarm of bees fascinates, rather than frightens her. One of her teachers tells her that she's very intelligent and she shouldn't settle for any career short of being a professor or writer. This sets her to reevaluating possibilities in her life because, prior to this, her highest aspiration had been to attend beauty school and become a hairdresser.

**Summary**

- Brave and self-sacrificing
  - Victim of an antagonistic personality
  - Pitiable due to struggle to compensate for abusive antagonist
  - Possesses special gifts
-



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***The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel**

Piscine Molitor Patel

General Background: He was raised in Pondicherry, India, the small, formerly French-occupied section of India, at a zoo where his father was “founder, owner, director, head of a staff of fifty-three,” and which Piscine viewed as “paradise on earth.” He was educated at the University of Toronto where he double-majored in religious studies and zoology.

General Concern: The first two lines in the book, bring instant concern for him: “My suffering left me sad and gloomy,” he begins and goes on to say, “Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life.”

Attitude toward Life: He has “suffered a great deal in life,” he reports and he has learned to adjust to the pain of being alive by accepting both the folly of success and the slight one feels when success slips from reach. He concludes that the reason death always hovers nearby is because of its love for life and we get the sense he loves life. He appreciates the abundance of resources he has access to and we’re to assume this is a love cultivated through great deprivation.

Personal Attributes: He’s a hard-working, determined person who is very bright, very observant, and infinitely patient. He was the only one in his family who learned how to swim, but he was determined to learn because of his great respect for the man who wanted to teach him and who was responsible for his name, which he shares with a famous Paris swimming pool. He excelled in school and while gathering data for his degree in zoology, he concentrated on observing the sloth in its natural habitat because, Pi reflects, “its demeanour—calm, quiet and introspective—did something to soothe my shattered self.”

**Summary**

- Victim of "suffering"
  - He's a fighter
  - Introspective/observant/wise
  - Unique personality
- 

***Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett**

Roxane Coss

Special Attributes: Roxane is a gifted opera diva. She possesses a voice of crystalline clarity so richly textured everyone who hears her sing can instantly appreciate the wonder and beauty of her vocal talent. It matters little the background of the listener. They may have come to her performance with a well-trained ear or they may have no more understanding of music than can be gathered from a life spent slogging through the mud of a harsh jungle environment; they may have



been listening to music all their long-lived lives, or they may be young children staying up past their bedtimes; they may be women, men or adolescents—no matter, gratitude for having heard her is universal among those who have had the privilege of hearing her perform.

Reactions of Others: Men desire her. All of the men in attendance at the concert long to be included in the kiss given her in the dark by her accompanist. One of the most powerful businessmen in Japan has flown half-way around the world to be in her presence even as he dislikes traveling, dislikes celebrating his birthday and the occasion is his birthday, and dislikes being with large groups of people he doesn't know, which is the current venue. Over the five years that he's been aware of her talent, he has sought out her performances around the world. She obviously has a magnetic pull on people. Her accompanist willingly places himself as a shield between her and the invading guerillas. Not until he is poked with guns does he relinquish his protective covering of her body.

Physical Attributes: On the floor, her hair spread out around her in such a wondrous array, each terrorist makes a point of walking past her just to look at her beautiful hair. Her perfume is delicate yet intoxicating, again noticeable by the guerilla soldiers even on this night when the air is pungent with the near-presence of death.

Personal Attributes: She is generous with her talent and offers to sing in the dark before the assembled audience becomes aware of the horror of the circumstance they're in. As she lies on the floor, she removes the hairpins from her hair and places them on her stomach in case others can use them as weapons, giving us a sense that she is also a bit brave, another sympathetic character trait.

## **Summary**

- Unique talent/accomplished
- Magnetic presence
- Cherished by Others
- Generous
- Courageous

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## ***Third Degree* by Patterson and Gross**

San Francisco Homicide Lieutenant Lindsay Boxer

- The protagonist is a successful woman in a traditionally male occupation (homicide detective), and she has earned the respect of her male colleagues.
- She owns a dog and talks to it as if it were a roommate. She uses her body to shield the dog from harm in a dangerous situation.
- She is brave; she goes into a burning building to save strangers. She risks her life to save a young child.





- She is fragile and scared in the burning building, yet she preserves. Her fragility makes her more human.

### **Summary**

- Uniquely accomplished
  - Deserving of respect
  - Self-sacrificing and brave
  - Pitiable due to her "fragility"
-



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## PLOTTING AND STORY DEVICES

For our purposes here, we define the novel as a long and interesting story that must make sense, no room for artifice or clunkiness, only phenomenal yet natural flow. During the course of pathing plot and story, the crafty author employs a variety of devices to smooth the flow, deliver necessary information, create a pause in the action, and more. Having knowledge of these methods in advance allows the author to storyboard with more creative flexibility, to push forward past problems that would otherwise confound and frustrate the inexperienced writer.

### No Verisimilitude Without “Masking”: Foreshadow, Aftermath, Discussion, and Repercussion Application

Certain events must take place to move the novel forward, and often the author must use skillful storytelling technique to produce verisimilitude, i.e., to make the occurrence of the event seem natural rather than too convenient or contrived. “Masking” refers to the sum of this technique, the cumulative effect rendering a necessary yet potentially awkward event believable. Proper utilization of this indispensable technique allows the author more freedom to explore the introduction of unusual and/or surprising events and/or endings.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, the wife of Humbert conveniently dies so that Humbert can proceed with his plans to seclude himself with Lolita:

First, the event is **foreshadowed** - Humbert receives a phone call from a neighbor stating that something has happened to his wife. Next, (beginning a new chapter) Humbert goes outside and witnesses the aftermath carnage of the accident - the scene is complex with objects and nearly surreal in portrayal. The police show him the body, he observes the details of it, etc. All of this lends credibility to the event. A few pages later, as a repercussion of the event occurs: a discussion ensues with a man who arrives to hash over accident details with Humbert—the question of the event's verisimilitude is settled.

In "The Great Gatsby," Myrtle Wilson, the mistress of Tom Buchanan (Daisy's husband and Gatsby's enemy), is struck dead very coincidentally out of nowhere by Gatsby's own car, thus setting in motion the events which would later culminate in Gatsby's death.

First, the event is **foreshadowed** - Tom Buchannan (who had been following Gatsby's car) sees the crowd and confusion gathering in the distance before he arrives at the scene. Next, the aftermath of the scene is viewed, i.e., Myrtle's dead body, the crowd, the despairing husband. It is learned that she was drunk and fighting with her husband before it happened (the foreshadowing of this accomplished earlier). Someone in the crowd mentions the color and style of the car that performed the deed - this hints it was Gatsby's car. Later, Nick accidentally discovers Gatsby watching Daisy's house and, Surprise!, in the ensuing discussion, Daisy is revealed as having driven the death car. Repercussions of the event include the mad husband's killing of Gatsby. Thus, verisimilitude is achieved.



In *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, the author decides the fate of a major character, Phineas, by means of a bizarre mock court trial held in secret somewhere in a secluded spot of the school, and the unfolding of the event seems perfectly reasonable.

Several separate and distinct instances of foreshadowing precede the event: First, an event of this type was spoken of by one of the characters; second, talk of a secret society within the school (the org. that would conduct the event); and the remainder involved inward glimpses of the peculiar character who would conduct the trial and engineer it to such a climax. In the case of the latter, it was therefore not unbelievable that this person would conduct such an event.

### **The Theater of Character: One Stage at a Time**

In these next two examples, Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren demonstrate how to properly transform or transmogrify a character, if the story demands, into one capable of executing a major event or action that otherwise would have seemed almost impossible. This technique gives the author the flexibility of using nearly any character to either resolve or initiate a chain of events.

In "Wise Blood" by Flannery O'Connor, the character, Enoch Emery, would not seem capable of conjuring a violent scheme to steal a costume ape suit in order to realize his strange needs before the eyes of the community; yet by the time the master novel crafter, F. O'Connor, finishes with him, you realize Enoch capable of any madness.

He refuses inwardly to go and see a movie, refuses several times, but then, as if affected by magic: "Two doors flew open and he found himself moving down a long red foyer and then up a darker tunnel ..." The character suffers an apparent loss of will.

As Enoch watches a film about a gentle heroic animal, he hopes the animal will meet a grisly end. His responses are portrayed as abnormal, malefic. The reader begins to wonder.

Afterwards, Enoch runs outside the theater and collapses "as soon as the air hit him." He appears to suffer an odd psycho-physical reaction.

Suddenly, as if possessed with a determined purpose, "as if he were led by a silent melody or by one of those whistles that only dogs hear," he is fixated, obsessed by something.

In "All the King's Men" R.P. Warren transfigures a timid scarecrow, Willie Stark, into a powerful orator.

Willie, new to politics, must give a speech before a throng of people. He begins weakly, as expected, but within a short space of time, erupts into a force of one:

When introduced to the massed gathering he first suffers "an enveloping wave of nausea and his bowels seemed to turn coldly within him." (initial unpleasant physical reaction)



Next, he begins to speak before a huge crowd and his words are "worn and sterile." (what you would expect)

As he plods uneasily he notices a particular man in the crowd ("a lanky stooped man of about fifty"), focuses intently on him, and achieves an epiphany as a result, realizing the man to be "an individual person, not like anybody else in the world." Instead of speaking to the mob, Stark realizes he must speak to this man instead. Ergo, a trigger in the environment produces an epiphany, a succession of thought that results in a transformation.

To summarize: TRIGGER ---> EPIPHANY ---> TRANSFORMATION

In the next paragraph the reader listens to the actual words of Willie Stark's speech, and the words swell with force and conviction. A vivid portrayal of the transformed character occurs.

TIMESIM (simulation of time passing) occurs as Willie Stark steps to the front of the stage and looks out over the crowd. During this lull in which he gains in strength, he feels "... the tremendous emptiness of the crowd, like the emptiness of the sky when he fixes his steady gaze upon its depth, drawing him as though against his will." The author intimates that a preternatural force has taken over and will now do what is necessary to carry things to climax.

Stark's next words to the crowd are shocking and provocative. The subject matter of the speech thus aids in "masking" the incredible transformation by distracting the reader into paying more attention to the narrative itself than to the transfiguration of Willie Stark.

In the next paragraph, a spatial-temporal transition narrative immediately kicks in and transports the reader into some indeterminate future in which the character can recollect the situation as if it had just happened: "And afterward he could never remember precisely what he had said ... [recalled] the face of the man in the faded blue overalls ... [but] he could remember how the speech had welled up powerfully in him ... and how incredibly brilliant and empty had been the sky."

Another time jump and the reader is back in fictive present. Willie Stark stops and sits down and feels as if in a dream world. Aftermath follows: "... the rising sound of the shouts and applause bringing him back to reality."

Brief discussion afterwards: A man stands up and comes over to him and shouts, "By God, you got the bastards told!" Confirmation of his successful transformation is received from another character. The reader is left with no doubt!



## Scorn-then-Embrace

**Technique in which a character rejects a course of action before accepting it.** The character's acceptance is necessary to the forward movement of the story, however, to accept immediately runs the risk of appearing too contrived, artificial; therefore, the character is able to proceed only after being convinced by sufficient inner or outer stimuli of some type, whatever overcomes the necessary resistance.

For example, in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the story requires the protagonist to strike up a relationship with a living example of a Miss Lonelyhearts letter, Mrs. Doyle; however, in order that this turn of events seem natural (ML had read plenty of letters, i.e., so why should he behave differently with this one?), West makes the process of coming to final decision a circuitous one. Also, ML experiences a sexual attraction after reading the letter. The author must take care not to make ML appear too vice-ridden, ergo, a second reason for delaying ML's reaction.

First, ML reads a letter from the character but trashes it. The letter, portrays a wife unhappily married to a crippled husband. A fellow worker advises him not to trash the letter. ML, to rid himself of the man, begins to type, pretending a response to a painful life, a kind of generic "best things in life are free" response; but he soon stops and fantasizes: "He could not go on with it and turned again to the imagined desert where Desperate, Broken-hearted and the others were still building his name. They had run out of sea shells and were using faded photographs, soiled fans, time-tables, playing cards, broken toys ..." Next, ML "killed his great understanding heart by laughing, then reached into the waste paper basket for Mrs. Doyle's letter." ML uses his surreal imagination once more, this time to imagine the letter as a tent and the woman herself as one also:

"Like a pink tent [the letter] he set it over the desert. Against the dark mahogany desk top, the cheap paper took on rich flesh tones. He thought of Ms. Doyle as a tent ... and of himself as the skeleton in the water closet, the skull and cross-bones on a scholar's bookplate. When he made the skeleton enter the flesh tent, it flowered at every joint."

ML then ruminates, "trying to discover a moral reason for not calling Mrs. Doyle ... If only he could believe in Christ." Finally, the trigger: "the completeness of his failure drove him to the telephone."

A combination of outside stimulus (the fellow employee), some imaginative digressions which distract the reader, plus an inner rumination, finally culminate in a trigger allowing the protagonist to act. In summary, the protagonist, rather than walk a straight line, must zig-zag to move forward.



## Exposition: What the Reader Must Know

Exposition is that information which must be delivered to the reader to enable she or he to fully understand the story. The skilled and experienced author delivers exposition at the right time and place, fusing it within the fictive and/or anecdotal flow of the story so as to avoid the appearance of artifice.

Generally speaking, the reader learns exposition in the same manner as life teaches it, e.g., upon moving into a new neighborhood, you learn the background history of the neighbors a bit at a time. They tell you about themselves, and others, as circumstances and conditions permit. By collaging those fragments, you are finally able to perceive the entire picture of neighborhood society.

Below are character and narrative techniques for delivering exposition.

*From "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald*

**Scene 25:** Nick, the narrator and friend of Gatsby, has been dating Jordon Baker, a friend of Daisy. Using Jordon, the author conjures up Daisy's past by means of dialogue and narrative, thus revealing that Gatsby was a former boyfriend of Daisy's (surprise) and further exposing Daisy's marriage to Tom, including notes on his infidelity (making the goal seem attainable), and more. The past of the major characters is revealed, thereby, the present given orientation, and as a bonus, the major complication is further advanced (i.e., Gatsby's attempt to recapture Daisy is delineated), suspense increased thereby.

NOTE: F. Scott uses anecdotal recollection and dialogue with a minor character to deliver exposition on the major characters. It seems natural, of course, since Jordon is involved with Nick, the narrator, and at the same time involved in the lives of Tom and Daisy. She serves F. Scott as the perfect vehicle for delivering expo, arguably existing in the novel solely for this purpose.

*From Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor*

During the course of narrative in the beginning of the novel, a triggering device subtly begins an associative process in the mind of the character that redirects the narrative flow towards exposition of his life:

"He crawled into the dark narrow space of the berth. In his halfsleep he thought where he was lying was like a coffin. The first coffin he had seen with someone in it was his grandfather's ..."

The character's past can now be discussed via berth to coffin to grandfather to past life.

A further obscuring of the author's purpose occurs when the exposition is partially "masked." In this particular case, a form of masking is accomplished by fixating the reader's attention with narrative so engaging that nothing but the subject at hand matters. For example, no sooner is the grandfather recalled in the coffin than Flannery O'Connor animates the corpse, making it appear as though it will suddenly rear



up and prevent death from closing down on it. The author seeds the exposition with a provocative image to counterbalance.

To resume the non-expositional narrative, another triggering device may be used to transit the reader back to the fictive spatial present. For example, the character finds himself going to sleep in an old house. His thoughts conjure the image of his mother in a coffin, and then, himself in the coffin in her stead: "From inside he saw it closing." Abruptly he awakens, frightened, but safe in his berth on the train. The character has left the "expositional dream" and returned to novel reality.

## The Necessity of SURPRISE!

The best novels, even dramatic plays, contain surprises, usually appearing past mid-point and often into the denouement. The reader is informed of something unsettling or unusual concerning one or more of the other characters. These usually consist of revelations about a character's background and/or the truth behind a past event. The author, however, must use skill not to make the surprise appear too unbelievable. In other words, the surprise must still make sense in the context of the story, the environment, and/or the character's personality/history. Surprises are particularly effective in the denouement, for the major complication has achieved climax and the portion of novel which follows must be re-energized. However, the surprises must never be gratuitous, they must either advance the story in some manner or resolve matters left unresolved.

In the dramatic work, *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen, you come to accept the status quo regarding the interrelationships between the various characters until such time Ibsen jolts your assumptions by revealing these relationships are not what they seem. In the past, things had been quite different. Pastor Manders (the vessel of sanctimony and hypocrisy) reveals, e.g., that one of the town's citizens, Mrs. Alving, had at one time thrown herself at him shouting "Take me! Take me!" NOTE: though jarring, this particular surprise had been foreshadowed earlier by Pastor Manders making mention of Mrs. Alving coming to see him in a distraught and desperate condition.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the reader learns in the denouement following Gatsby's death (via a gangster, Meyer Wolfsheim) that Gatsby had made his fortune in the criminal trade—not due to the good fortune of Dan Cody (Gatsby's imaginary benefactor) as he had pretended. This comes as a surprise, but had been foreshadowed to a small degree by the earlier appearance of Wolfsheim linked to Gatsby, as well as by the appearance of shady characters milling about Gatsby's house .

A second surprise in the denouement of the above novel occurs as Nick, the narrator, learns it was a vengeful, arrogant Tom Buchanan who sent Myrtle Wilson's maddened husband over to Gatsby's place. Prior to this, it was not known how Wilson had been directly steered to Gatsby. Though a surprise, Tom Buchanan's personality makes the happening believable. NOTE: In both cases, each revelation also resolves questions, i.e., Gatsby's mysterious underworld connection, and the manner in which Wilson chose the unfortunate Gatsby.



## Minor Complications: When in Doubt, Insert Irritant

The following are examples of minor complications occurring in the novel. The basic definition: that which "complicates" the story, but is not directly related to the major complication. Minors may erupt as a result of the major complication, in the same way tornadoes spin off from hurricanes, or they may be unrelated: an event, a ripple, a dropped glass, the appearance of a bellicose salesman wearing a Prussian spike helmet, whatever irritates, surprises, provokes, or disturbs, and in usually such a way that it either advances the story, causes suspense, shoves the character into revealing a trait of personality, or some combination thereof. Regardless, the author must know that a minor complication occurs for a reason.

### *From "The Sun Also Rises" by Ernest Hemingway*

**Scene 8:** Robert Cohn, friend of the narrator, enters the scene while narrator is having a conversation with another character by the name of Harvey. Very soon, Harvey baits Cohn, insults him. As a result, Cohn behaves unsure of himself. Cohn's girlfriend enters scene and begins to expose Cohn, attempts to embarrass him badly, talks about him crying (thus rendering him pitiable).

NOTE:: the above scene is used also to deliver important exposition on Cohn's life, worked into the context of the fictive present social situation so as not to seem forced.

**Scene 27:** Later, another character, Brett's fiance Michael, insults Cohn, comparing him to a steer who is "always hanging about so." Rather than intelligently rebut his tormentor, Cohn becomes furious and leaves the scene.

### *From "Therese Raquin" by Emile Zola*

Laurent and Therese are having an affair and decide it will best serve their interest if they kill Therese's husband, Camille. As Laurent is throwing Camille from a boat into the Seine river, Camille savagely bites Laurent's neck. This is a strong minor complication, for the reader senses this bite mark will return to haunt Laurent. Suspense is created thereby.

### *From "The Great Gatsby" by F.Scott Fitzgerald*

**Scene 4:** Jordon Baker reveals to Nick the details of Buchanan's affair with Myrtle. This never develops to a real "subplot" status, but is a cause of tension and suspense. Unlike some minor complications, this one weaves skillfully into the storyline, for in the end, it is Myrtle who is killed by Daisy as she drives Gatsby's car. NOTE: this minor complication makes Gatsby's goal appear attainable, thus it supports the major comp.

**Scene 6:** Verbal fencing between Tom and Daisy put Nick on edge, enabling Nick to more thoroughly assess Tom Buchanan's personality.

**Scene 18:** Jordon Baker tells Nick that she heard something secret and amazing, but cannot tell him. However, she gives him the opening to call him later. This is F.Scott's preparation for setting Nick up with Jordon so she can relate to him the story of Daisy and Gatsby's past life: necessary exposition.





## STORY ENHANCEMENT À LA MR. GRAVES

### ANECDOTAL ASPECTS OF A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

No historical fiction writer living or dead can surpass Robert Graves in terms of sheer imagination and craft. The following excerpts from *Claudius The God* by Graves illustrate not only the fundamentals of good storytelling, but the extra it takes to render a tale believable, vivid, and memorable.

The anecdote itself focuses on a single event, a battle between the ancient Romans and British tribes. It is divided into pre-event, event proper, and post event narrative—the event proper composed of various sub-events and a climax. The proper amounts of detail, vivid and dynamic imagery, conflict, and unexpected complication are injected by Graves so that the story cannot help but be interesting and suspenseful throughout. The master crafter, Graves, uses the narrative enhancement technique of delayed cognition (similar to Flannery O'Connor) to achieve suspense within the narrative. Also, despite this being a first person POV tale, the author is able to switch point of view from the Romans to the British and back. This is possible because the narrator had been made privy to events that took place on both sides during the battle and is able to report them as if he were in more than one place. Thus, Graves effectively combines the immediacy of first person POV with the flexibility and vision of omniscient POV.

Graves works in details about the cultural aspects of the various groups so that he can use this knowledge to work twists and complications into the story. Graves also fills his pages with many objects peculiar to the time: camels, chariots, charms, ceremonies, gods, etc. Finally, Graves mixes in fundamental aspects of the human condition, i.e., tragedy, absurdity, comedy, uncertainty, as well as all the vigorous emotions.

#### From *Claudius The God*, by Robert Graves

##### **(minor complications of geography)**

"The occultist led them over three or four miles of rough, boggy country, until they reached the marsh proper. It stank, and the will-o-the-wisp darted about it, and to reach the beginning of the secret track the Guards had to wade thigh-deep after their guide through a slimy pool full of leeches ..."

##### **(a "minor complication" in environment requires innovation in order to overcome)**

"Each man had his shield slung across his back and a big chalk circle smudged on it. This was to keep touch in the dark without shouting to each other ... Aulus had observed that deer follow each other through dark forests guided by the gleam of the white fur patches on each other's rumps ..."

##### **(social activity prior to event)**

"... a fine breakfast (before the battle) and we all drank the right amount of wine ... and in the intervals of serious discussion we did a great deal of joking, mostly about camels ... my contribution was a quotation from a letter of Herod Agrippa's to my mother: 'The camel is one of the six wonders of nature. He shares this honor with the Rainbow, the Echo, the Cuckoo, the Volcano, and the Sirocco.'"

**(narrator's mental state)**

"I had not slept since midnight, and I suppose my face and gestures betrayed the strain I was under ...

**(a clever ruse: unusual sub-event and imagery, example of "delayed cognition")**

"A British outpost was stationed in the pine copse at the farther end, and as the moon rose these watchful men saw a sight and heard a sound which filled their hearts with the utmost dismay. A great bird with a long shining bill, a huge grey body and legs fifteen feet long suddenly rose through the mist a javelin's throw away and came stalking towards them, stopping every now and then to boom hoarsely, flap his wings, preen his feathers with his dreadful bill and boom again. The Heron King! They crouched in their bivouacs, terrified, hoping that this apparition would disappear, but it came slowly on and on. At last it seemed to notice their camp-fire. It jerked its head angrily and hurried towards them, with outspread wings, booming louder and louder. They sprang up and ran for their lives. The Heron King pursued them through the copse with a fearful chuckling laughter, then turned and slowly promenaded along the edge of the marsh, booming dully at intervals ... The Heron King was a French soldier from the great marshes which lie to the west of Marseille, where the shepherds are accustomed to walk on long stilts as a means of striding across soft patches too wide to jump. Posides had rigged this man up in a wicker-work basket ... head and bill improvised of stuff-covered lathes and fastened to his head. He knew the habits of herons and imitated the walk with his stilts ..."

**(environmental change, how it affects the participants; circumstantial mix of objects results in peculiar condition which in turn produces a minor complication)**

"The mist was pretty thick here. One could only see ten or fifteen paces ahead, and what a terrible stink of camel! ... but the mist seems to suck it up and hold it, so that you would have been astonished by the rankness of the air ... if it's one thing that horses hate, it is the smell of camel ..." (minor complication)

**(minor complication prior to event creates interpersonal conflict and threatens to change the outcome of the event even before it starts)**

"The two divisions draw up on either side of the central fort. Caractacus is angry and reproaches Cattigern, because he has just been told that the Trinovantian infantry posted at the Weald Brook have fallen back during the night. Cattigern is angry at being spoken to in this way in front of his whole tribe. He asks Caractacus haughtily whether he accuses the Trinovants of cowardice. Caractacus wishes to know what other excuse they have for deserting their posts."

**(anecdote of a sub-event, reason for minor complication revealed, spiritual beliefs complicate)**

Cattigern explains that they retired for religious reasons. Their commander had been coughing violently because of the mist and suddenly began to cough blood. They regarded this as a most unlucky sign and respect for the nymph of the brook did not allow them to stay. They therefore offered a propitiatory sacrifice - the chief's two ponies - and withdrew ..."

**(once again, environment creates complication, and uncertainty)**

"Dawn has broken ... with open ground shelving down towards the brook, but after three or four hundred yards the field of vision is obscured by a sea of mist. Caractacus cannot tell yet in which direction the Roman attack will develop ..."



**(unusual imagery, an unexpected sub-event, violent reaction to a minor complication)**

"A curious sight is seen. A company of immensely tall long-necked beasts with humps on their backs are being trotted up and down, in and out of the mist, on the flank which Cattigern has been told to attack. The Britons are alarmed at the sight and mutter charms against magic ... Cattigern signals the advance. And then a strange thing happens. As soon as the column of chariots sweeps down into the mist where the beasts have been seen, the ponies go quite mad. They squeal, buck, snort, balk and cannot be forced to go a step farther. It is clearly a magic mist. It has a peculiar and frightening odor."

**(Another unexpected sub-event, vivid imagery: "delayed cognition" technique)**

"His division is unaffected by the spell and sweeps down, three thousand strong, on the flank of the halted Roman mass, which seems unprovided with a flank-guard. But a more powerful charm than a stinking mist protects this flank. The column is going at full speed and is just out of javelin range when suddenly there come six terrific claps of thunder and six simultaneous flashes of lightning. Balls of burning pitch hurtle through the air. The terrified column swings away to the right, and as they go a shower of lead bolts comes whizzing at them from the Balearic slingers posted behind the thunder and lightning."

**(Cruel complication physics: catastrophe occurs! Bizarre imagery, unexpected event climax)**

"He is aiming at the Roman rear ... but a catastrophe follows. As the column, which has lost its formation and is now pressed together in a disorderly mass, rushes forward, chariot after chariot comes crashing to the ground as if halted by an invisible power. The chariots behind are bunched so close and the impetus of the downhill rush is so great that nobody can pull up or turn without colliding with a neighbor. The mass charges blindly on and the wreckage in front piles higher and higher. Above the crash of splintered chariots, the screams and groans, rises a dreadful noise of drums and up springs a horde of tall, naked black men brandishing white spears ... They laugh and crow and shout and no Briton dares defend himself against them, mistaking them for spirits."

**(slapstick)**

"... but he has been thrown clear (from a chariot). He runs to the right, stumbling as he goes over the tightly-stretched tent rope pegged knee-high in the grass..."

**(post-event: desires and baser instincts indulged and punished, ceremony enacted)**

"We piled a great trophy on the battlefield, of broken chariots and weapons, and burned it as a thank-offering to Mars. That night we camped on the farther side of the wood. The men had been roaming about in search of plunder. Gold chains and enameled breastplates and helmets were found in abundance. I had issued strict orders against the violation of captured women - for hundreds of women had been fighting in the wood beside their husbands - and three men of the Fourteenth were duly executed that evening for disobeying me."



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## **STRONG NARRATIVE THROUGH SYNERGY: HOW TO SATISFY THE ART OF FICTION**

To satisfy the Art of Fiction, the writer or author must produce powerful, energetic narrative, and not just occasionally, but throughout the novel. Each narrative block is the result of a synergetic effect, i.e., multiple elements working together to create a totality of vivid and absorbing impression.

We will compare contrast authors and styles below and your workshop editor/leader will demonstrate and discuss the manner in which each one satisfies the Art of Fiction in a unique way.

**NOTE: YOU DO NOT HAVE TO WRITE IN A POETIC MANNER IN ORDER TO WRITE WELL. YOU MUST, HOWEVER, DEVELOP A SPECIFIC STYLE AND SET OF CRAFT TECHNIQUES THAT SUIT YOUR ABILITIES AND GOALS AS A WRITER, THUS ENABLING YOU TO PROPERLY MASTER THE ART OF FICTION AND GET PUBLISHED.**

### **Aggressive Narrative Enhancement by Ralph Ellison**

**Below are examples of relatively passive situations ignited to heat by the powerful prose of Ralph Ellison. Note how the eye of his imagination captures detail, sees things ordinary humans cannot. Thus, the author is able to energize the narrative, preventing any potential of dull moment.**

*From Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison*

**(driving a car)**

“We were driving, the powerful motor purring and filling me with pride and anxiety. The car smelled of mints and cigar smoke. Students looked up and smiled in recognition as we rolled slowly past. I had just come from dinner and in bending forward to suppress a belch, I accidentally pressed the button on the wheel and the belch became a loud and shattering blast of horn. Folks on the road turned and stared.”

**(giving someone a drink)**

“I saw Halley tilt the bottle and the oily amber of brandy sloshing into the glass. Then tilting Mr. Norton’s head back, I put the glass to his lips and poured. A fine brown stream ran from the corner of his mouth, down his delicate chin. The room was suddenly quiet. I felt a slight movement against my hand, like a child’s breast when it whimpers at the end of a spell of crying. The fine-veiled eyelids flickered. He coughed. I saw a slow red flush creep, then spurt, up his neck, spreading over his face.”

**(a musical event)**

“Several terraces of student’s faces above them, the organist, his eyes glinting at the console, was waiting with his head turned over his shoulder, and I saw Dr. Bledsoe, his eyes roaming over the audience,



suddenly nod without turning his head. It was as though he had given a downbeat with an invisible baton. The organist turned and hunched his shoulders. A high cascade of sound bubbled from the organ, spreading, thick and clinging, over the chapel, slowly surging. The organist twisted and turned on his bench, with his feet flying beneath him as though dancing to rhythms totally unrelated to the decorous thunder of his organ.”

**(a street scene)**

“On Eighth Avenue, the market carts were parked hub to hub along the curb, improvised canopies shading the withering fruits and vegetables. I could smell the stench of decaying cabbage. A watermelon huckster stood in the shade beside his truck, holding up a long slice of orange-meated melon, crying his wares with hoarse appeals to nostalgia, memories of childhood, green shade and summer coolness ... Stale and wilted flowers, rejected downtown, blazed feverishly on a cart, like glamorous rags festering beneath a futile spray from a punctured fruit juice can. The crowd were boiling figures seen through steaming glass from inside a washing machine ...”

## **Choosing Subject Matter: The Painted Bird-ness of Jerzy Kosinski**

**Jerzy Kosinski wrote a powerful novel, *The Painted Bird*, which was the account of a small Gypsy boy forced to wander the surreal and cruel landscape of peasant Europe during World War II. By choosing this subject, circumstance, and setting, Kosinski is assured of plenty of provocative and startling subject matter. Thus, as a writer, he has an easier time of it, i.e., the power of the subject matter itself pushes the narrative forward.**

“Marta did not succumb to her sickness and pain. She waged a constant, wily battle against them. When her pains started bothering her, she would take a chunk of raw meat, chop it up finely, and place it in an earthenware jar. Then she would pour water over it that was drawn from a well just before sunrise. The jar was then buried deep in a corner of the hut. This would bring her relief from the aches for a few days, she said, until the meat decomposed. But later, when the pains returned, she went through the whole painstaking procedure once again.”

“Here and there I saw ax cuts on tree trunks. I remembered that Olga had told me that such cuts were made by peasants trying to cast evil spells on their enemies. Striking the juicy flesh of the tree with an ax, one had to utter the name of a hated person and visualize his face. The cut would then bring disease and death to the enemy. There were many such scars on the trees around me. People here must have had many enemies, and they were quite busy in their efforts to bring them disaster.”

“From time to time the blacksmith was visited by mysterious mounted guests, who carried rifles and revolvers. They would inspect the house and then sit down at a table with the blacksmith. In the kitchen the blacksmith’s wife and I would prepare bottles of home-brewed vodka, strings of spiced hunter’s



sausages, cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, and sides of roast pork. The armed men were partisans. They came to the village very often, without warning ... The village was also searched by German troops, who interrogated the peasants about the partisan visits and shot one or two to set an example ... Sometimes the partisan factions would attack and kill each other while visiting the village. The village then would become a battlefield; machine guns roared, grenades burst, huts flamed ... The peasants hid in cellars embracing their praying women. Half-blind, deaf, toothless old women, babbling prayers and crossing themselves with arthritic hands, walked directly into machine-gun fire, cursing the combatants and appealing to heaven for revenge.”

“From behind the cemetery appeared a mob of village women with rakes and shovels. It was led by several younger women who shouted and waved their hands ... The women held Ludmila down flat against the grass. They sat on her hands and legs and began beating her with the rakes, ripping her skin with their fingernails, tearing out her hair, spitting into her face. Lekh tried to push through, but they barred his way. He tried to fight, but they knocked him down and hit him brutally. He ceased to struggle and several women turned him over on his back and straddled him. Then the women killed Ludmila’s dog with vicious shovel blows.”

“One evening my face began to burn and I shook with uncontrollable tremors. Olga looked for a moment into my eyes and placed her cold hand on my brow. Then rapidly and wordlessly she dragged me toward a distant field. There she dug a deep pit, took off my clothes, and ordered me to jump in. While I stood at the bottom, trembling with fever and chill, Olga pushed the earth back into the pit until I was buried up to my neck. Then she trampled the soil around me and beat it with the shovel until the surface was very smooth. After making sure there were no anthills in the vicinity, she made three smoky fires of peat ... Like an abandoned head of cabbage, I became part of the great field ...”

## **Centaurisms: The Prose of John Updike**

**As an artful and meticulous recorder of the mundane, Updike can’t be surpassed. Quite the opposite from Kosinski, John Updike, in *The Centaur*, immerses himself in the minutiae of tame and ordinary life. Thus, Updike, as a writer, must use the power of experienced wordsmithing to achieve a literary effect, i.e, one that holds the reader’s attention. This involves not only creative description, but narrator interpretation of the world around him. Note that Updike includes more interpretation and pondering than Kosinski. Why?**

### **(making coffee)**

“The brown powder, Maxwell’s Instant, made a tiny terrain on the surface of steaming water, and then dissolved, dyeing the water black. My mother stirred with my spoon and a spiral of tan suds revolved in the cup.

**(mother angry, cogitation on this condition)**

“A glance at my mother’s mottled throat told me she was angry. Suddenly I wanted to get out: she had injected into the confusion a shrill heat that made everything cling. I rarely knew exactly why she was mad; it would come and go like weather. Was it really that my father and grandfather absurdly debating sounded to her like murder? Was it something I had done, my arrogant slowness? Anxious to exempt myself from her rage, I sat down in my stiff peat jacket and tried the coffee again. It was still too hot. A sip seared my sense of taste away.”

**(simple yet colorful)**

“My father was striding across the sandpaper lawn. I chased him. The little tummocks raised by moles in warm weather made it buckle in spots. The barn wall was full in the sun, a high dappled pentagon.”

**(lots of imagery, masterfully done)**

“I looked back: our home was a little set of buildings lodged on the fading side of the valley. The barn overhang and the chicken house were gentle red. The stuccoed cube where we had slept released like a last scrap of dreaming a twist of smoke that told blue against the purple woods. The road dipped again, our farm disappeared, and we were unpursued. Schoelkopf had a pond, and ducks the color of old piano keys were walking on the ice. On our left, Jess Flagler’s high whitewashed barn seemed to toss a mouthful of hay in our direction. I glimpsed the round brown eye of a breathing cow.”

**(only a shack, yet ...)**

“At a curve, a two-pump gasoline shack wrapped in tattered soft-drink posters limped into our path and fell away wheeling, reappearing in the rear-view mirror ludicrously shrunk, its splotched flying horse illegible and dwindling.”

**Between Kosinski and Updike: Barbara Kingsolver**

**In *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver places her strong-willed characters into the historical morass of the Congo’s struggle to free itself from Belgium. Choosing this setting enables Kingsolver to include many interesting characters and intense situations that otherwise would not have been possible in a more sedate environment. Thus, like Kosinski, energy is derived from the subject matter itself.**

“On each occasion he bought a gift: first, fresh antelope meat wrapped in a blood fold of cloth (how hungrily we swooned at the sight of that blood!). Day two: a neat spherical basket with a tight-fitting lid, filled with mangwansi beans. Third, a live grouse with its legs tied together; fourth, the soft, tanned pelt of an ant bear. And on the last day, a small carving of a pregnant woman made of pink ivory. Our Father eyed that little pink woman and became inspired to strike up a conversation with Tata Ndu on the subject of false idols. But up until day five—and ever afterward, on the whole—our Father was delighted with this new attention from the chief. The Reverend cockadoodled about the house, did he. “Our Christian charity has



come back to us sevenfold,” he declared, taking liberty with mathematics, gleefully slapping the thighs of his khaki pants. “

“Our Father, who now made a point of being home to receive Tata Ndu, would pull up one of the other chairs, sit backward with his arms draped over the back, and talk Scripture. Tata Ndu, would attempt to sway the conversation back around to village talk, or to the vague gossip we had all been hearing about the riots in Mataki and Stanleyville. But mainly he regaled Our Father with flattering observations, such as: “Tata Price, you have *trop de jolies filles*—too many pretty daughters,” or less pleasant but more truthful remarks such as: “You have much need of food, *n’est-ce-pas?*” For his esoteric amusement he commanded the *jolies filles* (and we obliged) to line up in front of him in order of height. The tallest being Rachel, at five feet six inches and the full benefit of Miss America posture; the shortest being myself, two inches less than my twin on account of crookedness ... Tata Ndu clucked his tongue and said we were all very thin. This caused Rachel to quiver with pride and stroll about the house preceded by her pelvis ...”

“Tata Ndu’s attention then lapsed for a number of days, during which time we went to church, swallowed our weekly malaria pill, killed another hen from our dwindling flock, and stole turns sneaking into our parents’ bedroom to examine the small carved woman’s genitalia. Then, after two Sundays had passed, he returned. This time his gifts were more personal: a pagne of beautifully dyed cloth, a carved wooden bracelet, and a small jar of smelly waxy substance, whose purpose we declined to speculate on or discuss with Tata Ndu. Mother accepted these gifts with both hands, as is the custom here, and put them away without a word.”

“Nelson, as usual, was the one who finally took pity upon our benighted stupidity and told us what was up: kukewela. Tata Ndu wanted a wife ... “A wife,” Mother said, staring at Nelson in the kitchen house exactly as I had seen her stare at the cobra that once turned up in there. I wondered whether she might actually grab a stick and whack Nelson behind the head, as she’d done to the snake.”

“At night the lizards run up the walls and upside down over the bed looking down at me. They stick up there with their toes. Mice, too. They can talk to me. They said Tata Undo wants to marry Rachel.”

### **Prose of *The Shipping News* by E. Annie Proulx**

**Like Updike and Ellison, E. Annie Proulx is a master stylist. Once again, the mundane is made interesting by her artful attention to details.**

**(note the overall impression)**

“A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face.”





**(interesting things, place names, plus a “deviated septum”)**

“Changed the talk to descriptions of places he had been, Strabane, South Amboy, Clark Fork. In Clark Fork had played pool with a man with a deviated septum. Wearing kangaroo gloves. Quoyle in the Adirondack chair, listened, covered his hand with his chin. There was olive oil on his interview suit, a tomato seed on his diamond-patterned tie.”

**(lots of things here, plus “hot, juggling music”)**

“The next evening, Quoyle was there, gripping paper bags. The front of Partridge’s house, the empty street drenched in amber light. A gilded hour. In the bags a packet of imported Swedish crackers, bottles of red, pink and white wine, foil-wrapped triangles of foreign cheeses. Some kind of hot, juggling music on the other side of Partridge’s door that thrilled Quoyle.”

**(“he smelled submission”)**

“Ed Punch talked out of the middle of his mouth. While he talked he examined Quoyle, noticed the cheap tweed jacket the size of a horse blanket, fingernails that looked regularly held to a grind stone. He smelled submission in Quoyle, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency.”

## **The Amazing Writings of Michael Chabon and Michael Neff**

**Below we have excerpts from the Pulitzer winning novel, “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay,” as well as a relatively obscure new novel by Michael B. Neff, “Year of The Rhinoceros.” You will see below that these narrative style falls on a scale somewhere between Kingsolver and Proulx.**

“Houdini was a hero to little men, city boys, and Jews: Samuel Louis Klayman was all three. He was seventeen when the adventures began: bigmouthed, perhaps not quite as quick on his feet as he liked to imagine, and tending to be, like many optimists, a little excitable. He was not, in any conventional way, handsome. His face was an inverted triangle, brow large, chin pointed, with pouting lips and a blunt, quarrelsome nose. He slouched and wore clothes badly: he always looked as though he had just been jumped for his lunch money. He went forward each morning with the hairless cheek of innocence itself, but by noon a clean shave was no more than a memory, a hoboish penumbra on the jaw not quite sufficient to make him look tough. He thought of himself as ugly, but this was because he had neer seen his face in repose ...”

“Manny Eden had never met a man like this. First of all, Mr. Basil R. Hunsecker acted and looked the stereotypical bad boss: a middle-aged prick in three-piece gray and tacky pink tie who disturbingly resembled Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* (narrow head and brooding Italian look), only an older version, with a thinner face, pock-marked cheeks, and big, protruding, blue-bone eyes that sucked in everything and contrasted in an irritating way with his sallow brown skin—as if he were the victim of one too many spray tans. His odor, somewhat unique, like cooked shellfish marinated in mildew. What Manny didn’t know was that Hunsecker remained the owner not only of a rare, painful, and mummifying disease that ate away the body fat between his skin and muscles, but also of more than one post-pubescent social trauma, his memory way to full of punky kids screeching at him: *Hey, pizzaaa face, you fucking shithead pizzaaa face!*”



“He wore suits of an outdated, pigeon-breasted, Valentino cut. Because his diet consisted in large part of tinned fish—anchovies, smelts, sardines, tunny—his breath often carried a rank marine tang. Although a staunch atheist, he nonetheless kept kosher, avoided work on Saturday, and kept a steel engraving of the Temple Mount on the east wall of his room. “

“As for the rest of his body, Manny stood out lanky and dish-white wherever he went, a six-foot-one-inch high chiaroscuro without meaning: hair and eyes of darkest brown against that pale Wisconsin skin. If he walked naked into a bare, sunlit room, he morphed into a smear of shadow. His real physical handicap though was what Kenosha elders, cosmeticians and convenience store clerks termed, “a punch-it face.” Even Mommy K said he sported a “smirky mug,” the kind people liked to hit, and that’s why Dr. Killany, chief therapist at St. E’s, and Manny’s biggest enemy, often imagined Manny to be dismissing him as a loathsome bureaucrat for deliberately falsifying Manny’s condition in order to keep him a political prisoner of Washington.”

“Then a hand as massive and hard as an elk’s horn, lashed by tough sinews to an arm like the limb of an oak, grabs the boy by the shoulder and drags him back to the wings ... “You know better, young man,” says the giant, well over eight feet tall, to whom the massive hand belongs. He has the brow of an ape and the posture of a bear and the accent of a Viennese professor of medicine. He can rip open a steel drum like a can of tobacco, lift a train carriage by one corner, play the violin like Paganini, and calculate the velocity of asteroids and comets, one of which bears his name.”

“Before the boss can utter another word, Manny lashes out. He starts with a simple frying pan. He imagines it hurtling out of the kitchen. It skims Hunsecker’s head and whirls across the dining room like a loose helicopter blade to knock one of the Washingtonians unconscious, ricocheting off his forehead with a loud *kuh-whang* before skidding to rest in a plate of Caesar salad. At the same time, the faux-plants in glass begin to squirm and seep loose into the walls. Some of them imbed snugly in the gypsum and crisp to fossils. Others slide like melting plates of wax to the floor, congealing there to fly-trap mouths that squeak like tortured mice and scurry around in search of toe prey.”

“The man known professionally as Misterioso has long lived, in a detail borrowed without apologies from Gaston Leroux, in secret apartments under the Empire Palace Theatre. They are gloomy and sumptuous. There is a bedroom for everyone—Miss Blosson has her own chambers, naturally, on the opposite side of the apartment from the Master’s—but when they are not traveling the world, the company prefers to hang around in the vast obligatory Organ Room, with its cathedral-like, eighty-pipe Helgenblatt, and it is here, twenty minutes after the bullet entered his rib cage and lodged near his heart, that Max Mayflower dies. Before doing so, however, he tells his ward, Tom Mayflower, the story of the golden key, in whose service—and not that of Thalia or Mammon—he and others circled the globe a thousand times.”



## The Ruminations of Gail Godwin

**Gail Godwin excels at observing and ruminating on the human condition. Much of the power of her narrative depends on her ability to create interesting characters whom she then dissects. The following excerpts are from her novel, *Evensong*, the story of Margaret Bonner, the pastor of a church in a small town, and how she interprets and reacts to the characters in her life.**

“Would Gus and Charles, as involved in their building and doctoring as Adrian and I were in our school mastering and pastoring, be able to live up to the words better than we were doing? I hoped so. I hoped so for their sakes. I sketched a Celtic cross in the left-hand corner of the card and began shading in the background. What had happened to Adrian and me? In my more pragmatic moods, I tried to settle for the practical explanation: our jobs were making so much of us that we had not time left to make much of each other. But by nature I wasn’t a pragmatist; I was a digger, a delver into complexities.”

“At the bottom of my father’s Slough of Despond, I now realized, had bubbled a dependable tiny wellspring of lugubrious self-love: somehow he had been at ease lolling in his melancholy. Whereas at the bottom of Adrian’s despondence, I had discovered, lay a flinty bedrock of self-hatred. But if my father had been something of a loller, my husband was a fighter: his whole history testified to this. He’d work hard and achieve a profession, then heed a call to a fuller use of his potential, bravely pull himself up by the roots, and expand his skills: from Chicago to Zurich, from Zurich to seminary, from seminary to the church, from church to this experimental school in the mountains of western North Carolina. “A falling short of your totality” was how he had defined sin on the day I met him in my father’s garden, and he was still at work trying to fill out his own totality. But then there’d be an emotional setback—the death of my father, the death of our unborn daughter, the death of Dr. Sandlin—and, whereas anyone would be plunged into grief, he plunged beyond grief, right back down to that hard, cold floor of self-hate.”

“As I laid aside the new sermon note card before I cluttered it with doodles, my gaze was arrested by old Farley’s moon painting, which hung between the two windows in my study: Every time I looked at it I of course thought of Madelyn and the changes she had wrought on our family simply by walking into our house and being Madelyn Farley and walking out again the next morning with my mother. But the painting itself remained a rich source of contemplation for me. That round white disk riding the night sky between its trail of bright clouds had been created on a dark, freezing porch by an ill-humored old man who in his last years had become fixated on the moon. Why? Because its fast-rising, elliptical variations were so hard to trap in pigment and water? Or were all his moonscapes (conscious or unconscious) an exercise in self-portraiture: obsessive studies of a cold, hard, cratered, dark thing, like himself, that nevertheless had been endowed with the capacity to reflect light and beauty?”



## Nabokov Weighs In

Nabokov's narrative pushes forward due to his gift for discerning meaning and detail in everyday life and then reporting it with the flair of a phenomenal writer. Basically, however, you can break Nabokov's categories into observations/ruminations, commentary, and fantasy, like so (as he wanders a department store looking for underwear for Lolita:

- Comments on the behavior of others and their quirks  
 "The painted girl in black who attended to all these poignant needs of mine turned parental scholarship and precise description into commercial euphemisms, such as '*petite*.' Another, much older woman in a white dress, with a pancake make-up, seemed to be oddly impressed by my knowledge of junior fashions; perhaps I had a midget for a mistress ..."
- Fantasy  
 "I sensed strange thoughts form in the minds of the languid ladies that escorted me from counter to counter, from rockledge to seaweed, and the belts and the bracelets I chose seemed to fall from siren hands into transparent water."
- Bits and bits, things upon things  
 "Goodness, what crazy purchases were prompted by the poignant predilection Humbert has in those days for check weaves, bright cottons, frills, puffed-out short sleeves, soft pleats, snug-fitting bodices ... Swimming suits? We have them in all shades. Dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve, tulip red, oolala black."
- Observations/Ruminations on the ability of objects and organizations to affect human life  
 "There is a touch of the mythological and the enchanted in those large stores where according to ads a career girl can get a complete desk-to-date wardrobe, and where little sister can dream of the day when her wool jersey will make the boys in the back row of the classroom drool."
- Surreal metaphor:  
 "Lifesize plastic figures of snubbed-nosed children with dun-colored, greenish, brown-dotted, faunish faces floated around me. I realized I was the only shopper in that rather eerie place where I moved about fish-like, in a glaucous aquarium."

NOTE: The type and quality of narrative here is obviously dependent to a large extent on the personality of narrator who is continuously engaged in filtering and interpreting the environs. The narrator chooses to focus on things which interest him, comments on behavior he finds odd or objectionable, reveals his fantasies, etc. **Therefore, by placing a specific character with well defined traits at an event, or in the presence of something which must be described or experienced, you render that event or object in such a way as to reflect the character's mindset, biases, emotion, beliefs, and perceptions.**



**Thus, different characters employed as cameras or interpreters will yield different results when placed in the same circumstance.** For example, in our exercise featuring the burial train of Mr. Ashong, we might render a scene within that story very differently in terms of tone and metaphor, depending on the character we chose. A superstitious individual might imagine a dark hand of God blotting the sun in anger, falling rain as tears; whereas the less superstitious, educated observer might focus on the sadness of a small child, her bright clothing soaked by rain, or the frantic motions of the staff attempting to clear food off the table before it is all spoiled by rainwater. The superstitious character might suffer more cognitive dysfunction, interpret smiles as wolfish or manipulative or death-like, the more educated character marveling at light and youthful appearance of the person smiling, the crinkles around the eyes, the cause of the light mood. Characters by virtue of their personalities will therefore interpret the same phenomenon differently.

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## DIALOGUE: NEVER A GRATUITOUS WORD

(HINT: UNDERSTAND THE CHARACTERS AND THE PURPOSE OF THE SCENE)

To begin with, dialogue should always have a reason for existence, never be gratuitous. For the most part, it should be written only within specific scenes and exist to serve the purpose of the scene. The author should always outline the goals of any particular dialogue (i.e., characterize, foreshadow, create suspense, etc.) ahead of time, also adjusting the tempo or type of dialogue for the characters involved, i.e., given various character profiles and roles vis-à-vis the major complication, dialogue tone or emotional quality will vary.

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### Dialogue's major functions:

- serve the major complication
- advance the story and provide it with verisimilitude
- characterize
- create minor complication
- deliver exposition.

Regardless of function, the author must take care whenever she or he writes dialogue to make sure **at least one of the following elements is included:**

- Suspense (who could they be? Where could they be going? What are they hiding? Etc.)
- Provocation (i.e., the reader is provoked by certain remarks, or characters are provoked.)
- Item(s) of interest (e.g., interesting exposition, details, facts about coffin-makers, etc.)
- Conflict (overt or beneath the surface, usually escalates)

**Fictional conversations, to satisfy the above requirements, may take the following forms.:**

- Expression of fear or apprehension over a potential event ("Did you see that? Did you? Oh, my guardian angel, we're finished! It will only be a matter of hours now!")
- Sexual mating play: posturing, advances, overt and covert
- Arguments of varying degree ignited by disagreements of viewpoint and/or personality clash
- Provocative topics presented in a provocative manner—may or may not lead to escalating argument (e.g., Dr. Yen heard the student's passionate remark and replied matter-of-factly, "The soul, the personality ... it's all a fraud, you see. These things really *don't* exist.").

The following are examples of dialogue that illustrate the above. Note varying degrees of narrative interjection from one to another.



***From Private Contentment by Reynolds Price:***

(this dialogue serves to characterize a bit and deliver a portion of exposition on the character's life)

"Let's don't stay here, please," she asked.

"Got homework to do?"

"Latin, but that's not why."

"Scared of Nazi bombers?"

"I used to be. When the war first started, I thought every plane passing over at night had me in the bombsight. Now I doubt even Germans would want this place."

"Seems nice to me."

"It's better right down by the creek."

"I could build a fire here—"

"I said I couldn't stay *here*."

"Lead the way, lady."

"Don't make fun. This is where I was miserable."

"What happened here?"

She walks over and kneels beside the creek bank, dips her right hand into the water.

"Is it cold?" he asked.

"No, warm for some reason. You can sit down here."

"Thank you. I'm tired."

"I knew you'd *complain*."

"I just told a simple truth."

"I used to love it here."

"You said you were miserable."

"That's why I loved it. I came here and talked to what couldn't talk back: rocks, leaves, lizards, frogs."

"What would you say?"

"I'd ask for things—a life like everybody else ..."

***From Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce***

(escalating conflict over a point of view regarding the clergy, has implications for the entire society)

"There's a tasty bit here we call the Pope's nose. If any lady or gentleman ..." He held a piece of fowl up on the prong of the carving fork ... "I'd better eat it myself because I'm not well in my health lately." He winked at Steven and, replacing the dish cover, began to eat.

There was silence while he ate. Then he said:

"Well now, the day kept up fine after all. There were plenty of strangers down too."

Nobody spoke. He said again:

"I think there were more strangers down than last Christmas." He said this then, receiving no reply, remarked bitterly: "Well, my Christmas dinner has been spoiled anyway."

"There could be neither luck nor grace," Dante said, "in a house where there is no respect for the pastors of the church."



Mr. Dedalus threw his knife and fork noisily on his plate.  
“Respect!” he shouted. “Is it for Billy with the lip or for the tub of guts up in Armagh. Respect!”  
“Princes of the Church,” said Mr. Casey with slow scorn.  
“Lord Leitrim’s coachman, yes,” said Mr. Dedalus.  
“They are the Lord’s anointed,” Dante said. “They are an honor to their country.”  
“Tub of guts,” said Mr. Dedalus coarsely. “He had a handsome face, mind you, in repose. You should see that fellow lapping up his bacon and cabbage on cold winter’s day!”  
He twisted his features into a grimace of heavy bestiality and made a lapping noise with his lips.  
“Really, Simon,” said Mrs. Dedalus, “you should not speak that way before Steven. It’s not right.”  
“Oh, he’ll remember all this when he grows up!” exclaimed Dante hotly. “The language he heard against God and religion and priests in his own house.”  
“Let him remember too,” furiously cried Mr. Casey to her from across the table, “the language with which the priests and the priest’s pawns broke Parnell’s heart and hounded him into his grave. Let him remember that too when he grows up!”  
“Sons of bitches!” cried Mr. Dedalus. “When he was down they turned on him to betray him and rend him like rats in a sewer. Lowlived dogs! And they look it! By Christ, they look it!”  
“They behaved rightly,” cried Dante. “Honor to them!”

### ***From The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams***

(the following dialogue creates suspense as it helps define the character Laura, and her relationship to her mother, Amanda; it also supports the major complication, i.e., the problem with the social environs)

“Laura, where have you been going when you’ve gone out pretending that you were going to business college?” Amanda asked.  
“I’ve just been going out walking.”  
That’s not true.” Amanda said.  
“It is. I just went walking.”  
“Walking? Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat? Where did you walk to, Laura?”  
“All sorts of places—mostly in the park.”  
“Even after you’d started catching that cold?”  
“It was the lesser of the two evils, Mother.”  
“From half past seven till after five every day you mean to tell me you walked around in the park, because you wanted to make me think that you were still going to Rubicam’s Business College?”  
“It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up.”  
“Inside where?”  
“I went in the art museum and the bird houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day. Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately, I’ve been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel Box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers.”  
“You did all this to deceive me, just for deception?”  
“Mother, when you’re disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus’ mother in the museum!”





### ***From The Sun Also Rises by Hemingway***

(Dialogue is used to effectively establish the one-sided love relationship between Jake and Brett early in the novel; also exposition told in a suspenseful manner: the reader wonders what Jake is referring to, i.e., his injury)

Our lips were tight together and then she turned away and pressed against the corner of the seat, as far away as she could get. Her head was down.

“Don’t touch me,” she said. “Please don’t touch me.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t stand it.”

“Oh, Brett.”

“You mustn’t. You must know. I can’t stand it, that’s all. Oh, darling, please understand!”

“Don’t you love me?”

“Love you? I simply turn to jelly when you touch me.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do about it?”

She was sitting up now. My arm was around her and she was leaning back against me, and we were quite calm. She was looking into my eyes with that way she had of looking ...

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t want to go through that hell again.”

“We’d better keep away from each other.”

“But darling, I have to see you. It isn’t all that you know.”

“No, but it always gets to be.”

“That’s my fault. Don’t we pay for all the things we do, though?”

She had been looking into my eyes all the time. Her eyes had different depths, sometimes they seemed perfectly flat. Now you could see all the way into them.

“When I think of the hell I’ve put chaps through. I’m paying for it all now.”

“Don’t talk like a fool,” I said. “Besides, what happened to me is supposed to be funny. I never think about it.”

“Oh, no. I’ll lay you don’t.”

“Well, let’s shut up about it.”

“I laughed about it too, myself, once.” She wasn’t looking at me. “A friend of my brother’s came home that way from Mons. It seemed like a hell of a joke. Chaps never know anything, do they?”

“No,” I said. “Nobody ever knows anything.”



### ***From The Sun Also Rises by Hemingway***

(later Jake meets up with Robert Cohn, a friend who becomes enamored with his love, Brett Ashley. The following dialogue, crackling with tension, delivers exposition on Brett and also aids in characterizing the narrator and Cohn, providing a foreshadow of Cohn's temper yet to come. NOTE: Hemingway uses few if any adverbs to stress the speech, rather relies on the situation to make the tension apparent.)

"What do you know about Lady Brett Ashley, Jake?"

"Her name is Lady Ashley. Brett's her own name. She's a nice girl," I said. "She's getting a divorce and she's going to marry Mike Campbell. He's over in Scotland now. Why?"

"She's a remarkably attractive woman."

"Isn't she?"

"There's a certain quality about her, a certain fineness. She seems to be absolutely fine and straight."

"She's very nice."

"I don't know how to describe the quality," Cohn said. "I supposed it's breeding."

"You sound as though you liked her pretty well."

"I do. I shouldn't wonder if I were in love with her."

"She's a drunk," I said. "She's in love with Mike Campbell, and she's going to marry him. He's going to be rich as hell some day."

"I don't believe she'll ever marry him."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't believe it. Have you known her a long time?"

"Yes," I said. "She was a V.A.D. in a hospital I was in during the war."

"She must have been just a kid then."

"She's thirty-four now."

"When did she marry Ashley?"

"During the war. Her own true love had just kicked off with the dysentery."

"You talk sort of bitter."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just trying to give you the facts."

"I don't believe she would marry anybody she didn't love."

"Well," I said. "She's done it twice."

"I don't believe it."

"Well," I said, "don't ask me a lot of fool questions if you don't like the answers."

"I didn't ask you that."

"You asked me what I knew about Brett Ashley."

"I didn't ask you to insult her."

"Oh, go to hell."

He stood up from the table, his face white, and stood there white and angry behind the little plates of hors d'oeuvres.

"Sit down," I said. "Don't be a fool."

"You've got to take that back."

"Oh, cut out the prep-school stuff."



"Take it back."

"Sure. Anything. I never heard of Brett Ashley. How's that?"

"No, not that. About me going to hell."

"Oh, don't go to hell," I said. "Stick around. We're just starting lunch."

Cohn smiled again and sat down. He seemed glad to sit down. What the hell would he have done if he hadn't sat down? "You say such damned insulting things, Jake."

"I'm sorry. I've got a nasty tongue. I never mean it when I say nasty things."

"I know it," Cohn said. "You're really about the best friend I have, Jake."

God help you, I thought



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## MINIMS OF SUSPENSE

We've already examined rising action in the novel and how best to organize it to create inherent tension and suspense, but here we examine nearly every other suspense technique known to civilized society, and then some. If anyone can find a suspense method not mentioned here, please mention it! Like various other techniques and style devices, much of it comes naturally to the experienced fiction writer, but not so to the beginner. The writer new to fiction can make use of the following methods upon rewrite to energize the narrative. Always keep in mind that deployment of any narrative/story booster must not appear to be gratuitous! It must be natural given the tale at hand.

### Narrative and Story Techniques

Worth noting in the beginning: Borges excelled in using the first (or topic) sentence of a story or a paragraph to set the suspense pace for the entire paragraph, e.g., "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia."

**Pondering, display of curiosity, questioning the way of the world** all serve to pique suspense: "He wondered why .... " I was unable to determine.... " Here was something below explanation, a question mark..." For your purposes as an author, it makes more sense for the character to ask a question before answering than it does for the author to simply make a statement to the reader.

**Suggestion** piques suspense, the hint or suggestion that something vital is occurring or is about to occur, e.g., "She knew that something had happened, but he didn't know what until he heard a noise in her room."

**Irreal or Surreal Description** implies a fearful or mysterious quality, e.g., the tips of her fingers: "Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron."

**Provocative Statement** which predicts a future of danger, havoc, or peculiar event: "They're out there."

"You are at a nightclub talking to a woman with a shaved head."

**Unfamiliar Terms** which betoken power, fear, importance: e.g., The Combine.

**Brewing Storm. Perhaps a minor complication?** Suggestion that an unusual, dangerous, or dynamic event will soon occur: "A bum with wild eyes is threatening an old woman on the subway."

**Exceeding Expectations;** current situation appears more intense than predicted: "It's even worse than you expected."



**Teasing Pique:** a bygone event/condition is alluded to without a full explanation of why or what else:  
"Behind those windows is the apartment you shared with Amanda."

**The Goadng Motif:** occurrences in the narrative which become the focus of a growing tension within the reader. May be perceived by eye, nose, or ear: an indicator of threatening, not-yet-fully-realized phenomena, e.g., the distant rumbles or thunder or war?, moans coming through the wall, an unknown figure in the distance reappearing.

**Narrative Suggestion** that a character will potentially perform a provocative or harmful act of some sort:

"You know that she won't take defeat easily."

"You also think he is shallow and dangerous."

**Narrative Suggestion** that your narrator or a character will be adversely affected if a particular circumstance does or does not come about, e.g:

"You know for a fact that if you go out into the morning alone ... the harsh, angling light will turn you to flesh and bone."



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## THE ULTIMATE BLOCK BUSTER: THE PDQ

You are a writer. It is your job to faithfully explore and note the world of your fiction. You have here the perfect means for initiating this process: the PROSE DESCRIPTION QUESTIONNAIRE. When it comes to writing descriptive narrative, or simply generating conceptual thought regarding a specific object/person/place/event/condition in the novel, the questionnaire below is indispensable.

REMEMBER, EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS HAS VARIED "DIMENSION" AND FORM DEPENDING ON THE OBSERVER. Things exist in the mind as hazy memory, and in reality as measurable matter; things also exist in a place and time, betwixt and between, in dark and light. Things affect human beings in different ways. Imagine the difference between an object that is foreign to you and one that is familiar and sentimental—a child's toy, for example.

Even an object simple as a woman's dress possesses angles and facets you might never have imagined or thought to notice. Let's take a look. (Note: the below results are the result of pages of notes culled down and edited to a polished form.)

**Q: What is its origin?**

A: from the spume and spray of ancient worm, coaxed from the stomach of worm; woven by furrowed hands, brown hands, who, as they toil, dream of magazines and the privileged godling women who live there in worlds of gloss, amberdark, pink sherbert worlds of beach and sea.

**Q: What of appearance? How to describe?**

A: at a distance, a small cloud, one that the sun will soon dissolve; like a shadow of leaf on the bottom of a pond; like striking a match in a nightblack and windowless room, the flame thereof made nervous by breath; a soft attraction with feet to carry it, arms to straighten it; sometimes a bell or a letter of alphabet between the trees, only for a moment.

**Q: Where does it occur?**

A: Between the peaks of the Blue Ridge; on the banks of the Ohio; in my eyes; on a lake at night, between a short pine and a high moon; inside us; between Aberg & Bville.

**Q: Does it have an edge, a geometry, a form?**

A: amorphous, fluid flutter, as if wash on the line, three hours of cloud at once ...

**Q: A mass, texture? What is the composition?**

A: light as light, as breath, whitesoft; woven angel hair, etc.

**Q: What does it stand in contrast too? How?**

A: to the shadows of the valley, to the sky, to my gloom, to her discouragement, to the scowls and dark thoughts of those who envy it.



**Q: How does it bend and warp and effect the space about it?**

A: it obscures/hides the space, quiets it, as a giant step of dawn that dissolves the grey, pushes other space to the corner of the eye where it is quickly forgotten, blurring, dilution; or an energizing of the environs instead ...

**Q: What does it do? What is the effect?**

A: it yields to wind, colors her with youth, bestows her with a vivacity she could never have had otherwise, sheathes her in confidence, sprays outward, blooms, effloresces, bell-shaped; fuses a memory just long enough to be harbinger of a long regret, an enduring bitterness and despair later - whenever it should resurface.

**Q: What is the poetic purpose of it?**

A: to be flowed upon by shadows of leaves, a crumble of brown and sun-yellow moving across it; to create loss where no loss existed, to create a yearn for youth where it was once forgotten, to recall a time of happiness once unable to be recalled.

**Q: What are it's advantages and disadvantages, psychological and physical?**

A: It foster illusions which take hold and germinate, expand to become mythos, assure a future tragedy of realization of a truth of age and life more mundane and mean than could ever have been thought possible.

**Q: What is the ripple effect, i.e., what causal chain does it set into motion?**

A: The envy sets in motion a long term resentment which later manifests itself in pettiness or hatred. The wonder and symbolism causes an elation that soon finds the owner, on that particular day, lifting face to the sun and sky, giving thanks for life.

**Q: Who does it affect?**

A: Emile and the gang couldn't stop talking about it. They made undulating, downward motions with their hands, as if tracing a fall of water over stones. Ms. Eliza, well, you could only say that she was shocked by it. Beth Tillman searched through every store from Towson to Bellaville to find one just like it. The entire town quaked and thrilled and blustered to the shape of the dress, to the song of the dress.

**Q: It evolves to become? What is the climax/denouement? What condition, form will it assume at this time?**

A: snagged a bit at a time on dried winter, scattered in wasted lots like cold paper, scrubbed in black grease and squeezed by painful hands to a tiny knot; frayed to a hundred threads and snagging knots, to litter, to confetti, to jaundiced shreds like dying leaves, earthbound; singular and perspiring as memory from the skin, evaporating to the steam of dumbled beings, loosed to the wind, the memory breaking apart bit by bit or else dislodged into the blood, released as energy, a radioactive half-life decay of dress



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## NARRATIVE ENHANCEMENT I

### “The Burial Train of Mr. Ashong”

You are a foreign writer on vacation in Ghana and lucky enough to be able to observe the most fabulous “coffin parade” to ever take place in that country. You’ve learned that some Ghanans pay large sums of money to be buried in hand-carved coffins that come in a variety of forms—anything from a giant lobster to an Italian sportscar. You’ve seen one of them and you were amazed at how detailed and artistic the coffin appeared. Now, it just so happens that a very wealthy landowner in Ghana, Mr. Ashong, is dying and desires to travel to the next world in the most fabulous and unique coffin ever crafted in Ghana. He cannot make up his mind what kind of coffin he wants so he asks Ghana’s two most famous coffin-makers, Paa Joe and Dede Nunu, to compete for the honor of crafting his coffin. The winner of the competition will receive an enormous sum of money and great honor, the loser only the winner’s derision. At a specified date, both coffins will be displayed to Mr. Ashong. The coffin display will take place on Mr. Ashong’s estate and a celebratory party will be thrown to accompany the coffin judging.

Within days after making the decision, the entire country churns with the news of the competition and the celebration to come. Dede Nunu conceives a master construction with the help of 20 other coffin laborers from around Ghana. **In record time, he creates not a single elaborate coffin for Mr. Ashong, but an entire train of coffin cars, each car symbolizing a god or spirit of Mr. Ashong’s tribe.**

You position yourself to watch the spectacle: the train bumped and tugged along the road up to Mr. Ashong’s estate. People cheer and line the roads, many of them dumbstruck by the vision of it. It is truly the most spectacular coffin parade ever to grace Ghana. Later that evening, you decide to write about what you saw.

#### Primary objects to be described are as follows:

- the train itself (the cars and their shapes, texture, overall appearance, the interior, etc.)
- the onlookers (types, expressions, reactions)
- the setting

#### Procedure:

- First, use the PDQ to brainstorm the train itself.
- Apply the best of the PDQ results to the story.
- USE YOUR IMAGINATION! You want this story to be vivid, unusual, and exciting.
- Write this in FIRST PERSON point of view.





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## NARRATIVE ENHANCEMENT II

Given that the previous exercise is completed, you must now revise the narrative to make it more imagistic, energetic, thought provoking, and tonal. Refer to the Narrative Enhancement Checklist, (on the following page) and the PDQ again as necessary.

As follows:

- **The narrator is no longer a foreign writer. Choose either a young child or an elder as the narrator. Note that the choice of narrator will bring a radically different view point to the coffin parade event**—and you must write this in 3<sup>rd</sup> person POV. Also, the new narrator **MUST** create a specific **TONE** in the narrative. Consider the attitude, personality, and belief system of the narrator before you begin to write.
- Include at least two significant **RUMINATIONS** on the part of this new narrator, triggered by environs/parade. For example,

“Mbombo watched the coffin caboose shaped like the enormous mouth of Mr. Ashong and it frightened him. What would happen if it came alive? If his father was swallowed, his mother Nakuma would not respect Mbombo as the man of the house. All would fall apart, and the gods might cruelly taunt him. How could he live with that? “
- Create at least one **FANTASY** on the part of the narrator, a brief one triggered by something in the coffin parade.
- Add at least ten lines of **DIALOGUE** between the narrator and bystanders or heard by the narrator.
- Create at least one **MINOR COMPLICATION** to take place during the coffin parade—can be any type.
- Add in **SUSPENSE TECHNIQUES**, at least two of them! (see the chapter entitled “Minims of Suspense”)
- Include plenty of **NAMES OF THINGS** (make them up), necessary for local color!



## NARRATIVE ENHANCEMENT CHECKLIST:

When in doubt, or otherwise, use the following checklist to rework your narrative, keeping it vigorous and absorbing. Recall that your scene is outlined, you know where you are going. Use this as a reference to compare to your scene items such as characters, setting, etc., for the purpose of potential adjustment, e.g., the addition of a minor complication, a mild anomaly, more energetic setting items, rumination, etc. Also, take into account tone of the scene and the theme of the novel. Might not some of the below reflect or be derived from the theme in some manner?

- **Setting:** is it colorful, capable of supporting vitality, producing suitable objects and individuals, provocative or interesting imagery, potentiality for further activity or animation?
- **Imagery and Description:** Energy thru imagery; PDQ PDQ PDQ! Know too that choice of image to depict is all important. When you imagine your scene, imagine also what will be the most vital or provocative or stirring or unusual image in that scene.
- **Suspense:** Creating questions in the reader's mind. Have you used suspense techniques such a "brewing storm," "exceeding expectations," and "provocative statements"?
- **Minor Complications:** the energy of a good minor complication can't be overstated!
- **Ruminations:** does the narrator or character abstract, comment, muse, reach conclusions regarding the situation, the life that surrounds? Are there triggers for these musings?
- **Imaginings:** Is the narrator or character musing, flashbacking to the past, fantasizing a scenario that involves them, perhaps in the future? A sexual fantasy? A fantasy of revenge, a memory of a past love, a dream world? Fantasy may be able to enliven narrative locked within an insipid setting, e.g., an office full of partitioned cells.
- **Questions-To-Ask:** similar to PDQ. Given a social environ to describe, have you asked yourself enough questions to be able to portray the environ effectively?
- **Provocative Grains:** brief statements made by characters that startle or surprise.
- **Hyperbole:** the art of exaggerating (preferably in an original manner), building energy and potential impact into description of persons, places, or things.
- **Things, Things!:** how many and what things are present, objects in pose, milling about, numbers of them that add verisimilitude to the scene?
- **Anomaly:** An object or person, or perhaps event, whose nature and appearance is unreal or unusual, especially when in contrast to the surroundings or setting. Could be just a passerby on the street, or a mild dose of something unexpected.
- **Names:** of people and places, name dropping here and there as appropriate, perhaps mixed with the color of brief descriptions.
- **Event:** is there a defining or powerful event taking place, one capable of having impact on all who take part? Or perhaps even a small event on a street corner, a minor accident, e.g. Is the anomaly a metaphor derived from the theme of the novel?



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## SCENE/DIALOGUE EXERCISE

### Setting:

Georgetown, lunchtime

### Circumstance:

“A” works at LaSalle and Associates, a lobbying firm in Georgetown known for its powerful “influence” abilities on the Hill. “A” is having severe second thoughts about her job at LaSalle. She had only just been hired three months before, but a situation at the office has developed that is not only troubling her but actually threatening her paycheck. She can’t afford to lose a job right now, given her financial situation. She feels she must smooth things out at work, yet her egoistic director has assigned her to the Phillip Morris lobbying team and she has ethical problems when it comes to actively aiding the single largest maker of cancer on the planet. As soon as she had attempted to delicately note her dilemma with her new assignment, her director said to her, “Either you work for LaSalle, or you work for second best.” Now she must find a way to go forward, and all without suddenly losing her job. She believes the director does not like her, or trust her. She believes her days at LaSalle may be numbered regardless.

Needing to gather intelligence, she has decided to lunch with a co-worker, “B,” a woman who had seemed friendly to her and wise as regards the ways of LaSalle. Also, B’s boss is A’s boss. B has been at LaSalle a year. Technically, A is in a higher position than B, but this doesn’t impact A’s decision to seek B’s advice. Over lunch, A confides to B her feelings about the director without going into overmuch detail regarding the Phillip Morris account. Unknown to A, B knows all about the Phillip Morris issue, having heard the Director complaining about A, but attempts at first to dissuade A from reacting overmuch to the behavior of the director and to realize the prestige and benefit to working at LaSalle. B realizes half way, however, that A’s departure from LaSalle could very well mean a promotion for B. At this pivotal juncture, B switches tact and subtly begins to encourage A to leave. A, growing more and more suspicious, listens for a time, then realizes B is actually trying to get rid of her. At this second pivotal point, A confronts B with this fact and B, caught off guard, at first denies, but then becomes vehement about wanting A to resign. The two women can barely restrain their anger. The lunch crowd begins to take notice.

### Assignment:

Scene to open with narrative of character “A” leaving the office and walking through Georgetown to the restaurant. She ponders matters along the way, notices the sights of Georgetown, feels confused, anxious about her future.

- “A” enters restaurant; “B” is waiting at table.
- They greet, talk—light palaver at first.
- Narrative interjections during dialogue: restaurant distractions, physical aspects of characters, movements, tones of voice, etc.
- Dialogue evolves, two pivotal points, heats to climax.
- “A” gets up and leaves the restaurant, “B” fuming behind her.
- Narrative closes the scene as “A” is on the street once more, heading back to the office.



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## THE PERFECT SYNOPSIS

### RELAMPAGO (parallel plot, two protagonists)

Following a grisly series of murders and the abduction of a local waitress, a city councilman of a small desert community in Nevada attempts to protect an eccentric mystic named "Twink" from a zealous FBI investigator determined to arrest him for the crimes. Meanwhile, Twink, who witnessed the murders near his labyrinthine desert shrine, Relampago, believes he has accidentally invoked a homicidal demon and sets out to stop it.

### SYNOPSIS

Burt Leclair, an aging beekeeper who lives in Nevada, is a long time member of the community and has a position on the City Council. In his role as Councilman, he informally investigates a crime scene at Slab City, an abandoned army base on the outskirts of town. The body of a woman has been dumped at the scene and set on fire.

Gary Wolcott, a young and ruthless FBI agent, is assigned to the case. He draws Burt into the investigation, trying to capitalize on his apparent good nature and knowledge of the community. Evidence around the body points to an eccentric hermit named Twink who lives in the desert at an elaborate self-made shrine known as "Relampago." Burt fears Twink is a convenient scapegoat for Wolcott and tries to protect him by concealing evidence and leading Wolcott in the wrong direction. Eventually, however, Burt is forced to take Wolcott to Relampago. There they find articles of clothing from the murdered woman, but Twink is missing.

Burt attempts to disengage from the investigation. As he returns to work, strange things begin to happen that convince him he is being watched and followed. Then, he discovers that a local waitress he is fond of, Meche Obieta, is missing. He sets out to find Twink, convinced that he knows something about the situation. His quest is unsuccessful and later returns to find a corpse smoldering on his worktable.

The second body's appearance gives Wolcott the leverage he needs to coerce Burt into helping him. He sees Twink as the prime suspect and Burt as his unwitting accomplice. As he digs deeper into Burt's background, he begins to find confusing inconsistencies, especially relating to the death of Burt's older son, Wesley.

After digging, Wolcott discovers that three years earlier, Burt's oldest son, Wesley, disappeared in Mexico. Wesley and his wife, Erlene, were heroin addicts and frequently crossed the border for cheap and readily available prescription morphine. Erlene returned one night to say that Wesley had overdosed and in a panic she left him there. Burt tried to retrieve the body but it was never located. Erlene moved to Montana.

Wolcott hears different accounts of what happened to Wesley. People in town agree that he was "no good" and that Burt deserved better from his children, implying that there are also things about Will that don't add up. Wolcott finds different accounts of Wesley's story. Some report having seen Wesley in Mexicali after he was supposed to have died. There are rumors he was seen with Twink at Relampago. Wolcott becomes convinced that Burt and Twink are closely tied together. As he studies Burt's movements, hoping they will lead him to Twink, he begins to see a connection between the placement of Burt's beehives and several unsolved deaths in the region. Wolcott becomes convinced he has stumbled onto a major serial killer, but he's not sure if it's Burt or Twink. The discovery promises to make his career, so he pursues all angles with vigor.



Will, Burt's other son, arrives from Portland to give his father legal and emotional support. Burt finds himself evading everyone in his efforts to find Twink without leading others to him. Unexpectedly, Erlene shows up with her new fiancé, Louis Kemp, a retired dentist from Missoula.

Erlene claims to have found Jesus and wants to reconcile with her family. In reality, she seeks Wesley because she has heard rumors that he is alive and has pledged to hunt her down.

Meanwhile, Twink is stalking the murderer. Twink witnessed the first murder and the disposal of the body at Slab City. He believes the murderer is a demon that he accidentally invoked through his rituals at Relampago. Because he feels responsible for bringing this terror to earth, Twink is trying to atone by performing cleansing rituals for the victims at the same time that he tries to destroy the demon. Twink witnesses Meche's abduction and knows where she is being held. He wants desperately to help her but is also terrified of discovery and so leaves clues to draw Burt to Meche, trusting that he will know what to do.

Burt misreads the signs. Each clue seems to further implicate Twink in the killings and Burt becomes convinced that Twink has gone mad. He realizes that the messages are a map to Meche and believes he has to get there before Twink kills her, too. Following Twink's trail, Burt finds Meche in a motor home at Slab City, sedated, and trapped in a hive-like box with casket-sized cells. As he is about to free her, he is confronted by Erlene and Louis Kemp, and learns the truth of their partnership. To satisfy Kemp's sadistic appetites, Erlene attracts victims in return for a reliable supply of morphine and nitrous oxide.

With Erlene's help, Kemp overpowers Burt and prepares to torture and kill him. Erlene uses the opportunity to elicit information about Wesley's whereabouts. Under duress, Burt confesses to Erlene that after his own funeral, Wesley showed up at the house, deranged and violent. He attacked Will, demanding medicine and cash. Years of drug abuse had made his bones brittle and in the struggle Will accidentally killed him. There was chaos. Burt feared that Will's career would be derailed by the scandal. Since Wesley was officially dead, there was really no crime to report. Burt took Wesley's body to Relampago where Twink performed a funeral and created a tomb inside the mine for the body.

Sirens approaching the motor home interrupt the story. Kemp and Erlene knock Burt unconscious and hide him in the hive with Meche, thinking to kill him later. The sirens turn out to be Twink, who in desperation has conquered his fear and come to the rescue. Erlene and Kemp chase Twink into the desert where he tricks them, and then doubles back to free the two captives and take them to Relampago.

At Relampago, Twink performs a ceremony to send the demons home. When Erlene and Kemp arrive, he believes that his spell is working and draws them in to Relampago's labyrinth of tunnels and shafts. Kemp is separated and lost in the darkness. Twink pushes him down a shaft to his death. Erlene begins calling to Twink, pretending to mourn Wesley and asks Twink to tell her where he is. Twink admits that Wesley is at Relampago and leads her into a small, ornately decorated room and then traps her inside.

The room is filled with mannequins and plaster saints in different poses. In the center of the room is a row boat with a life-sized oarsman sitting at the bow. Twink tells Erlene that it is Wesley, embalmed and covered in adobe to make him look like a saint. Now, she can be with him forever.

Twink returns to the main chamber, elated that he has exorcised the demons and saved Meche, only to be arrested by Wolcott and charged with the murders. He tries to tell the story as he saw it, admitting he killed the demon and brought Erlene back to her husband forever. Wolcott takes this to mean that Erlene is dead, but Burt knows the truth. If he takes Wolcott to Erlene, she will tell him about Wesley. Now, he has to choose between betraying Twink and exposing his long-held secret, thereby betraying his son, Will. He keeps silent. Wolcott arrests Twink and takes him away.

Within a few hours, Meche begins to recover, but she is still confused. The only person she ever saw during her captivity was Twink and she assumes he was her attacker. Her statement seals his fate. Wolcott is promoted for his work. Burt returns to Relampago. Saddened and defeated by his betrayal, he tends to the shrine as Twink might, ignoring Erlene's pleading screams in the background.



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## NOVEL STRUCTURE CHECKLIST

### Questions

- Is your novel hook the best hook you can create?
- Do you have sufficient story for a whole novel?
- Is plot flow adequately mapped? Do you know where you are going and where you must arrive by the end of the novel? Also, have you composed a one-two sentence capsule of your story?
- Have you sketched out your major scenes or at least have a good idea how many and what type of major scenes you will need to portray the major novel elements and characters?
- Is the major complication/rising action structure of the novel complete in terms of schedule and elements?
- How does theme relate? Do you have a firm theme statement? Is it relevant to the major complication? How does it express itself throughout the novel?
- Have you used enhancement techniques and devices as necessary and appropriate given the scene, story, and relevant circumstance?
- Are suspense devices injected as appropriate and necessary, both on a macro and micro scale? (Remember the value of a good topic sentence, something even experienced writers sometimes forget! Ideal for setting suspense tone.)
- Have you satisfied the "Art of Fiction"? If your wordsmithing is less than Proulx-like, is your content original and dynamic enough to drive the narrative forward, to keep the reader reading?
- Are your most important events within the story crafted in fictive present?
- Is padding eliminated? Does every character, slice of dialogue, and scene serve a purpose?
- Have you sent your manuscript to a reliable and professional editor before submitting it to an agent?
- Is your story original for your genre market? If you're not sure, why not?



## PROSE DRILLS

If you are not Annie Proulx, you need to work on developing a powerful literary voice. All writer styles and voices are in large part a fusion of past immersions into good (or bad) literature. It's so true that you only write as well as you read. The writing of good authors soaks into you, becomes part of you, defines your ability to express.

The point of the following prose drills is to speed up that process by a hundred fold. The selection of writers is diverse, beginning with a little Shakespeare and on up to modern lit. The names of the writers are not important, only their prose.

Each of the following blocks of narrative is to be written in long hand, as many times as you can manage. During the writing of it, repeat the phrases and portions of the narrative to yourself, read them to yourself as you go. After each block is finished, reread the entire block to yourself. Feel the rhythm, the sense of word use, the flow of it. The more times you do this, the more it will become a part of you. Continue through till the end and then start over. Do this for a few weeks. You'll be astonished at the results.

See you at the National Book Awards!

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This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune - often the surfeit of our own behavior - we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and trechers, by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on - an admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star!

Our last king, whose image even now appeared to us, was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway, thereto picked on by a most emulate pride, dared to the combat, in which our valiant 'Hamlet - for so this side of our known world esteemed him - did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact, well ratified by law and heraldry, did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands which he stood seized of to the conqueror.



Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death, have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre, wherein we saw thee quietly inured, hath opened his ponderous and marble jaws to cast thee up again. What may this mean, that thou, dead corpse, again, in complete steel, revisit thus the glimpses of the moon, making night hideous, and we fools of nature so horribly to shade our disposition with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls?

Her clothes spread wide, and mermaid-like a while they bore her up - which time she chanted snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and imbued unto that element; but long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years - twenty years largely wasted, the years of the wars, trying to learn to use words, and every attempt is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure because one has only learnt to get the better of words for the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which one is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating in the general mess of imprecision of feeling, undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer by strength and submission, has already been discovered once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope to emulate - but there is no competition - there is only the fight to recover what has been lost and found and lost again and again. But perhaps neither gain nor loss, For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business,

I can only say, there we have been, but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time. This is concentration without elimination, both a new world and the old made explicit, understood in the completion of its partial ecstasy, the resolution of its partial horror, Time past and time future allow but a little consciousness, To be conscious is not to be in time but only in time can the moment in the rose garden, the moment in the arbor where the rain beat, the moment in the draughty church at smokefall be remembered, involved with past and future, Only





through time is time conquered. Only a flicker over the strained time-ridden faces distracted from distraction by distraction, filled with fancies and empty of meaning, tumid apathy with no concentration, men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind that blows before and after time, wind in and out of unwholesome lungs time before and time after.

In my beginning is my end. In succession houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended, are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass. In that open field on a summer midnight, if you do not come too close, you can hear the music of the weak pipe and the little drum; and we see them dancing around the bonfire, the association of man and woman in daunsinge, signifying matrimony - a dignified and commodious sacrament. Two and two, necessary conjunction, hold each other by the hand or the arm which betokens concord. Round and round the fire, leaping through the flames, or joined in circles, rustically solemn or in rustic laughter lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes, earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth, mirth of those long since under earth, nourishing the corn.

Trampling its granite; their red backs gleam under my window around the stone corners; nothing more graceful, nothing nimbler in the wind. Westward the wave-gleaners, the old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together, the northwest wind wakening their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance. Fresh as the air, salt as the foam, play birds in the bright wind, fly falcons forgetting the oak and the pinewood, come gulls from the Carmel sands and the sands at the rivermouth, from Lobos and out of the limitless power of the mass of the sea, for a poem requires multitude, multitudes of thoughts, all fierce, all flesh-eaters, musically clamorous bright hawks that hover and dart headlong, and ungainly grey hungers fledged with desire of transgression, salt slimed beaks, from the sharp rock-shores of the world and the secret waters.

You remembered a day in August when it was foggy and sleet struck the front of your jacket with little ringing sounds and then a blue hole in the clouds opened wider and wider, like the rainbow ring that you had seen around the sun on the day before the mist had poured down from the ridges like some cold-glaring white liquid; and now the



blue hole got bigger and sun came out and it was exactly 32 degrees F and you could see across the river valley again to the low brown ridge of gravel with the blue sky behind; and the wind was chilly and between the rocks grew green wet ribbons of tundra and the arctic was so beautiful that all at once you knew that you could live and die here. Snowdrifts lay steeply against that ridge, corrugated by wind rain, and the river flowed down the sand in dark blue braids. No bird sang; no sound of life was heard, but a black little spider crawled feebly in a warm spot on the mud.

The peacefulness is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them shutting their mouths on it, like a communion tablet. It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other. I am dragging my body quietly through the straw of the boxcars. I am stepping from this skin of old bandages, boredoms, old faces. The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, white as a knuckle and terribly upset. It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet with the 0-gape of complete despair.

They're out of the dark's ragbag, these two moles dead in the pebbled rut, shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart. One, by himself, seemed pitiable enough, little victim unearthed by some large creature from his orbit under the elm root. The sky's far dome is sane and clear. Leaves, undoing their yellow caves between the road and the lake water, bare no sinister spaces. Already the moles look neutral as the stones. Their corkscrew noses, their white hands uplifted, stiffen in a family pose. I enter the soft pelt of the mole. Light's death to them: they shrivel in it. They move through their mute rooms while I sleep, palming the earth aside, grubbers after the fat children of root and rock. By day, only the topsoil heaves.

I shall never get you put together entirely, pieced, glued, and properly jointed. Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles proceed from you great lips. It's worse than a barnyard. Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other. Thirty years now I have labored to dredge the silt from your throat. I am none the wiser. Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol I crawl like an ant in mourning over the weedy acres of your brow to mend the immense skull-plates and clear the bald, white tumuli of your eyes.



All morning, with smoking breath, the handyman has been draining the goldfish ponds. They collapse like lungs, the escaped water threading back, filament by filament, to the pure Platonic table where it lives. The baby carp litter the mud like orangepeel. Southbound cars flatten the doped snakes to ribbon.

I think of the lizards airing their tongues in the crevice of an extremely small shadow, and the toad guarding his heart's droplet. The desert is white as a blind man's eye, comfortless as salt. Snake and bird doze behind the old masks of fury. We swelter like firedogs in the wind. The sun puts its cinder out. Where we lie the heat-cracked crickets congregate in their black armorplate and cry.

In this country there is neither measure nor balance to redress the dominance of rocks and woods, the passage, say, of these man-shaming clouds. The horizons are too far off; the colors assert themselves with a sort of vengeance. Each day concludes in a huge splurge of vermilions and night arrives in one gigantic step. These rocks conceive a dynasty of perfect cold. In a month we'll wonder what plates and forks are for. I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here. The Pilgrims and Indians might never have happened. Planets pulse in the lake like bright amoebas, the pines blotting our voices up with the lightest breeze.

Despite her wild compulsion to talk and despite the frightened ravenous curiosity of her dormitory clique whom she awakened by sobbing over their beds, Melanie wasn't able to say clearly what finished happening half an hour ago. She remembered the Turk suddenly abandoned English and raved at her in furious Turkish ' and she told them about that and about the obscene tatoo flashing on his chest when she ripped his shirt open, and that he stopped the car on a country road, and there was a tall hedge, maples, sycamore, and a railroad track nearby, and a train was passing, passing, and passing, and beyond her moans, and later an animal trotting quickly on the gravel. a mysterious nightscreech, the sound of moon, and then, with no discontinuity, the motor starting it's cough and wretch and a cigarette waving at her mouth already lighted as if the worst were over and someone had started thinking of her in another way.



But Mrs. Gruenwald all this time was rising and sinking like a whale, she was in a sea of her own waves and perhaps of self-generated cold, out in the middle of the lake. She cared little that Morgana girls who learned to swim were getting a dollar from home. She had deserted them, no, she had never really been with them. Not only orphans had she deserted. In the water she kept so much to the profile that her single pushing-out eyeball looked like a little bottle of something. It was said she believed in evolution.

Nina stood and bent over from the waist. Calmly, she held her cup in the spring and watched it fill. They could all see how it spangled like a cold star in the curling water. The water tasted the silver cool of the rim it went over running to her lips, and at moments the cup gave her teeth a pang. Nina heard her own throat swallowing. She paused and threw a smile about her. After she had drunk she wiped the cup on her tie and collapsed it, and put the little top on, and its ring over her finger. With that, Easter, one arm tilted, charged against the green bank and mounted it. Nina felt her surveying the spring and all from above. Jinny love was down drinking like a chicken, kissing the water only.

It was the kind of hospital you'd walk into and see an old orderly mapping barefoot - with an Aztec face straight out of the Anthropology Museum - stringmop mopping the waiting room, and held stop to watch you all the way down the hall, even though you'd know they must see plenty of Americans in there. Then there'd be the woman in the business office - young and pretty but with one smaller arm, with maybe something wrong with it, dangling half-hidden under her sweater. She'd be wearing a crucifix just like Dona's - the old cook back at the house - and she'd look suddenly up at you in such a way that at first you'd think she was going to start wailing like Dona did, the night before when you arrived - wailing in Spanish, over and over again the same thing - saying, "Oh, when will you bury him, Senora, when will you bury him, for he wanders in this house and calls out to me every night like before!"

That pavement that had in it a little lump that went right across the middle, almost like a little small curb-type thing that would cause a something that was rolled over it to bump as it went over. I did not tell about that, and I also did not tell about the



sheet - white and thick and longer, it seemed to me, than the kind of sheets you would see on beds back at the house - and about the way that sheet hung down so limply - almost wetly - on all sides from the humanish shape with the sticking-straight-up-feet on one end that trembled as they pulled out the cart and rolled it toward where I was standing out there.

The orderlies pulled back that sheet at the same time they were rolling the cart along toward me both at once, in this long graceful motion - so that the cart was rolling forward at the same time that the sheet was being pulled back, so that the body seemed to be merging toward me like a something being pushed forward out one end of a something else sliding away all in one smooth motion.

The mouth is a permanent fixture in the back of my mind. But there is nothing I can think of to say that will convey to you the look of that thing that seemed impossible to have ever been a mouth - that made it seem to me unthinkable that this would be what a human mouth could ever be reduced to - that I couldn't help but feel made it absurd to think that mouths exist at all. That that mouth could have uttered that hoarse weeping we heard ... And right in that moment I was seeing that mouth-thing, that half-open scissors-cut in a faceless bag of salt, the thingness of that bag-thing - its blind cartoon X's for eyes - like a being that wanted to cry out.

As I think of it now, we talked about our weaknesses. We were clothed in the darkness and a little drunk and tired. How I hated being weak. That was my confession. We had tried to put up hay that day, and the bales were wet. I could lift them off the ground but couldn't muster enough strength to pitch them up onto the rack. Steve - Steve worried loneliness. It was a little puzzle. He only felt it after people had come to visit. After they were gone after a few days, he didn't notice he was alone again. But if friends visited because they thought he needed the company. He wanted them to come but hated the loneliness they brought with them and left behind. He found it curious that he didn't miss people more. That feeling frightened him.

It was a wonderful conversation that contained all kinds of emptiness. The



silences of one who really is getting out of the habit of speaking. The natural pauses. The silence of not knowing what to say. The desire to say nothing that will fill up the silence. It was the talk of people who knew they should be sleeping and say only enough to keep the conversation going. Above us, that night, I like to think the sky was expanding, is still expanding. Another vacuum.



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## **Why Do Passionate Writers Fail to Publish?**

Spend several years as an editor and/or workshop leader. Work and talk at length with scores of writers struggling to write and publish fiction, or their first novel. Do this and you will begin to discover why an enormous percentage of these writers (especially the first novel writers) are unable to get published. You will begin to see patterns: the same mistaken assumptions, almos, and detrimental psychological states repeated endlessly. At a conservative estimate, **upwards of 30,000 writers** in the U.S. are currently struggling to write and/or publish their first novel. Perhaps .001% of them will be published at some point.

Below are the top seven reasons why otherwise passionate writers join the 99.9% of writers who will never be published.

1. **INADEQUATE WRITING SKILLS OR STORYTELLING/ STRUCTURE PROBLEMS.**

In the case of the former, the writing itself does not display the energy, creativity, and polish necessary to convince an agent to go deeper. This is perhaps the number one cause of failure. Usually, the writer is not aware--or at least, not sufficiently aware to enable productive change. Perhaps this is a first stab at fiction, she or he not realizing that tech or law writing ill prepares one. Also, the writer does not know a good editor or reader, and therefore, has never received truly helpful crit. Or perhaps we're back to the ego obstacle. Also, we have **the "birthed baby" phenomenon**: the writer has produced a passage, a character, or scene they can't possibly do away with. It is sacred to them. So it remains, defacing the narrative like a major pothole, jolting agents and publishers alike each time they meet it.

In the case of the storytelling/structure issue, the writer may be very accomplished at connecting the word dots. The agent or publisher gives it a good read then backs off. Why? Well, the story goes nowhere. It is insufficiently interesting, or perhaps even confusing. Just recently a fine writer handed me sample of his ms. His prose skill kept me turning, but finally, I bogged down on characters who spun endlessly in place, who never really took action or engaged in any reaction worth noting.

2. **MISUNDERSTANDING THE MARKET.** Virtually every time I speak with a student (especially genre students) I discover that she or he has not sufficiently researched their market. In other words, they don't have a clue as to what types of first novels are currently being published in their genre. Why is this important? Because the first novels provide the writer with a concept of what the market is looking for. Also, it helps steer the writer away from starting a project that will be DOA on arrival due to being way way too deja-vu. Far too many writers make what I call the Sydney Sheldon mistake, i.e., they attempt to emulate a well published writer, falsely believing it will get them published. They don't understand that icons like Sheldon can get away with horrible crimes and still be published. The writer needs to examine what types of first novels have been published in their genre over the past five years: investigate story types, settings, protagonists, etc. The research always yields productive results.

3. **EGO TIMES TEN.** The writer is puffed, living in a state of I-know-better. She or he is therefore incapable of successfully editing their work. Friends, relatives, or bad agents have told them their writing is good, and their story interesting . . . Perhaps the writer is a big success in their other career--why shouldn't they also know-it-all when it comes to writing?



We once had a successful venture capitalist person hand us their 15 page synopsis and the first few pages of their novel. The synopsis was absurdly long and unable to summarize the story in any interesting way; and the first couple of novel pages needed a good line editing because the prose was inadequate and one tended to speedbump over at least one awkward sentence per paragraph. Of course, these facts were unknown to the venture capitalist. This person presented us the work with a grand TA DAH!, expecting a corroboration. Well, of course, irritation set in when we tactfully pointed out shortcomings. This person also did not believe us when we explained that the vast majority of agents would not, repeat NOT, read that 15 page synopsis regardless (and if they did, the novel ms was DOA).

4. **BAD ADVICE.** Whether the source is an article, a friend, or a writer's conference, the writer has been told something that steered them wrong, or built a false expectation, or made them believe a man-bites-dog story will happen to them. For example, a writer with a manuscript in need of a good final editing told me, "Not to worry. The publishing house editor or the agent will complete the edit for me." I explained that would not happen--not for a first novelist with zero track record (plus the story was uninspiring and loaded with *deja-vu*). The writer needed pragmatic advice.

**Another piece of incredibly bad advice** often heard from egoistic writers or agents: "Writers are born, not made." This is simply not true. A clever, determined writer who shelves the ego and seeks to research and learn their craft will succeed. Tenacity wins.

5. **MORALE LOSS.** The most common form of morale loss occurs at such time the writer finally realizes their writing is not nearly as good as they suspected. The writer returns to a favorite slice of writing, seeking to admire, build confidence, only to discover their favorite slice has gone stale and offensive. So what happened? Writers who fail to understand that such realizations are necessary watersheds (and they happen to all writers!) and indicators of growth, become disillusioned. They quit.

**The second biggest cause of morale loss** results from no success in selling the novel. It's been dragging on for years. The novel ms has been shopped around. No one is buying and feedback is confusing . . . Or perhaps the novel ms is resting like a one ton anchor on your desk (waiting for neck)--eight years later and still not ready despite several restarts and who knows how many total drafts!

6. **IMPATIENCE = LOST OPPORTUNITY.** The story is pretty good, fairly original, and the writing likewise, however, the writer is impatient and sends out the ms too soon. Agents and editors will stumble over the prose a few times before reaching for a rejection slip.
7. **NO EDGE.** The vast majority of first novel writers have not yet published work in viable short fiction markets. This makes it even more difficult to land a good agent. Many agents will not look twice at a writer whose cover letter does not demonstrate a track record of some type. A publishing record, even a meager one, helps convince publishers and agents that you have what it takes.