

Before we look at the story, let's ask: *What is Creative Writing?*

Here are some of my thoughts:

In the first place, creative writing is not about the expression of self, it's about the discovery of self. Being creative is about going beyond who we are. It's about engaging with what we might be.

More mundanely:

(These are notes I wrote for a PhD student whose work is journalism rather than creative writing and I've been finding it very difficult to get him to understand this)

Let's say that CW brings us to deeper realities and truths through the use of the imagination. One might say, factual, academic writing can offer us truths. But CW has an emotional dimension – it's this that connects us to those deeper realities and truths which are not always factually definable. Unlike in non-creative writing we are not simply told certain facts and truths that we passively accept; through our emotional journey with the text via our relationship with character(s) we actually share the human journey into those indefinable deeper truths. This is an active, creative journey. We share the complexity of the journey in which our advance towards the truth is qualified by all the human foibles and failings that give truth its validity. That empowers us and produces in us something like a moral engagement as reader/audience. The drive on the journey into this mysterious world of the living truth and moral engagement is that of the *imagination*. This isn't a moral engagement caused by our adherence to codes we've been told, it's a moral engagement caused by our sharing characters' dilemmas and struggles. It's active not passive. It's what makes Creative Writing, ultimately, part of a democratic process. For me, if a work that presents itself as a creative work doesn't meet these imperatives, then it's not creative.

They say you can't teach writing. But of course you can. It's taught from one's earliest days in school. And it's taught in university to enable students to write academically. Because you can teach technique and structure and how these things work.

But it must be true to say that you can't teach *creative* writing. Why? What makes creative writing different from just writing?

The *imagination*. You can't teach the imagination.

The full extent of the imagination exists in the unconscious. The imagination grows in the unconscious though we may not know it. The writer visits her unconscious to discover the wonderful worlds that swim around there. the imagination is like a great lake or a sea. Or the universe. It's like the internet. Limitless. You can't teach it but you can encourage people to visit it. Their own. In workshops we facilitate the visiting of the imagination.

There is the tool that's writing and there is the artistic wonder of fully realised creative writing.

Before we go any further i'd like to share with you a pattern of structure.

This is based on the word *FOCUS*.

(Go to *FOCUS* in resources)

Read *Heat*

After reading the story:

In her short story *Heat*, Joyce Carol Oates writes about the double murder of twins Rhea and Rhoda. The story could be written as a brief news article, accompanied by a sentimental obituary: "The mutilated bodies of eleven-year-old twins Rhea and Rhoda Kunkel were found near Whipple's Ice on Main Street. Charges of sexual assault and murder will not be pressed against the assused, Roger Whipple, because of his alleged diminished capacity. Schoolmates recall Rhea and Rhoda as being lovely girls, full of fun, will always give you a smile."

But she doesn't do that. She said in a brief introduction to the story as anthologized in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*: "For the author, the formal challenge of "Heat" was to present a narrative in a seemingly acausal manner, analogous to the playing of a piano sans pedal; as if each paragraph, or chord, were separate from the rest. For how otherwise can we speak of the unspeakable, except through the prism of technique?"

I think the story is less about the Kunkle sisters and the chronology and more about the narrator. Oates has imagined the story as the narrator remembers it so the chronology of events is less important than what happened to her. Despite the apparent haphazard nature of the account, her mastery has enabled her to create a structure for it that meets all the rules of story construction. And she gives it to us in a way that causes us to use our imagination - our own creativity - to put the picture together. *Critical to the notion of creative writing is that it causes the reader/audience also to be creative.* (This is something we'll come back to).

I believe all creative writing has **sub-text**. That's one of the things that distinguishes it. Sub text, in a way, embodies the mystery Hemingway talked about. It's what the piece is really about. It's created by the interface between facts and imagination. A factual news article doesn't have sub-text. Subtext is tied to theme. We know that *Heat* is about the murder of the two girls - on the surface anyway. But what's it really about. What about the narrator? What do you think the subtext is? (Can you know what it is? Or is it that thing that itches away at you and won't allow you to let the story go. That in order to dig into its deepest mystery you have to find out a few more things about life.) Whatever the answer is, I believe that it's in the subtext that the meaning lies. It's in the sub-text that creativity is fully realised.

Do we understand the story through the sub-text?

What is sub-text?

Do we simply want to experience a story passively; do we want to be *told* what it's about, what it means? Or do we want to be authorised to interpret the story for ourselves and find its meaning for ourselves? Do we want to be given the opportunity to use our own imagination in the search for the meaning of the story? Or do we not

want meaning but only facts – that it's enough to be told that the Whipple boy killed the Kunkel girls. Well, a straightforward newspaper article would give us that.

And that's not what Joyce Carol Oates has given us in *Heat*. Very few facts; very few details but rather an account of the event through the memory of someone who knew the girls; who once stripped off entirely because the girls asked her to show their power over her. (And then they stripped off too. Something we don't need to know to get the story of the murder of the girls.)

For me, Joyce Carol Oates' story is about the killing but because of the acausal structure she's used (at least acausal in terms of relating the facts of the story) it's about much more. And that "much more" is the subtext. It's because in life we don't experience things in a strictly causal way, we experience events by involving ourselves with them and I think that's what the subtext is doing here. It's showing us how troubled the narrator is by the killings - almost as if she had been involved - and long after they happened.

If I say *for me*, that's important – that's how creative writing should work: for me. If the suggestion is that the purpose of a story is simply to give you an account of something that happened then it will either leave you cold and unfulfilled or it will pretend a significance by presenting quasi facts masquerading as the truth. And one would expect the response to be pretty similar from whoever reads it. (What is ever the truth? The truth is not an abstract – it's about how we engage morally with the world and empower ourselves responsibly through that engagement.) What creative writing does is to expose us to the truth which lies in the response the reader has to the text; a relationship found in the subtext. We are empowered in the subtext.

Heat, is not written as a factual account of something that happened but in the way what happened is remembered by the narrator and memory doesn't work like a conventionally focused, conventionally structured narrative. In one, overarching sense, the story is about the death of the girls but in a deeper sense it's about the narrator's relationship with the girls through her relationship with her memory. For me, the story is about the narrator. A significant passage is:

I never dream about actual things, only things I don't know. Places I've never seen. Sometimes the person I am isn't me. Who it is I don't know.

I think this passage directs us towards the subtext. That world in which death was coming for the girls; the girls the other children were jealous of; who made the narrator both scared and happy under the veranda. It's about how the extraordinary girls were secured in the memory of the narrator by their extraordinary death. It's about how lives are lived beyond the facts and beyond the silence that comes once the waves of the wake settle. And about the trauma the narrator has experienced.

In particular it's about the narrator's life. What convinces me that the story is really about the narrator is that extraordinary paragraph which begins "After I'd been married some years...." She tells us: "I was crazy for this guy, I mean crazy like I could hardly think of anybody but him or anything but the two of us making love the way we did..." and then we get the lines that unequivocally connect us to the narrator

as the vital character in the story: “with him deep inside me I wanted it never to stop. Just fuck and fuck and fuck, I’d whisper to him...”