

CSCW7009: APPROACHES TO CREATIVE WRITING

WEEK 5: CHARACTERISATION IN FICTION

1. Our survival mechanism orders the world into cause-effect-conclusion. Children jump around at the end of the day to expend the last of that day's energy, the adult equivalent, when the sun goes down, is to create or witness drama – which is to say to order the universe into a comprehensible form. Our sundown play/film/gossip is the day's last exercise of that survival mechanism. In it we attempt to discharge any residual perceptive energies in order to sleep. We will have drama in that spot, and if it's not forthcoming we will cobble it together out of nothing.

We live in an extraordinarily debauched, interesting, savage world where things really don't come out even. The purpose of true drama is to help remind us of that. Perhaps this does have an accidental, a cumulative social effect - to remind us to be a little more humble, or a little more grateful, or a little more ruminative.

David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, Methuen, 2002

2. You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here:

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.

So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with.

That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what.

Now try How and Why

(the wonderful) Margaret Atwood, 'Happy Endings' 1983

3. To comfort ourselves in the dark nights, we tell stories round the campfire like our ancestors did for thousands of years. What if in the telling we say "This is about anyone at all who one day happened to find a rare stone..."? Why does that seem so weak? Because we obviously need to talk about a character, a specific person whose actions give us courage in the dark, provide inspiration, or scare the pants off us. In the long run it doesn't matter if he found a rare stone, swept out a stable, or even cut throats for revenge and culinary processing. What matters is that we enter this world and understand it through another human being.

Michael Wright, *Playwriting in Process*, Heinemann, 1997

If, as Mamet, Atwood and Wright agree, the telling of stories is a way of shaping and thus making sense of the formlessness and inexplicableness of everyday existence, then character provides our way into a patterned world that may closely resemble our own or stand as an alternative to it. And character, as Atwood and Wright agree is defined through motivation ('a How and a Why'; 'we enter this world and understand it through another human being') Character is the beating heart of fiction and no matter how good the plot (dismissed by Atwood as 'a What and a What and a What') the writing will fall flat unless it teases and seduces its readers into reading on... Writing above all is about desire, desire for the unattainable, for something *different* from the habitual, for surprise and delight or horror...

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TASK:

Contrast and difference lie at the heart of clear characterisation. There are many ways of writing character depending on the kind of text that is being written. This task seeks to widen your conscious choices and enable you to attempt some that you may not have considered in the past, it also seeks to draw attention to a range of different approaches you may not have considered before – above all to the *writerliness* of writing

- Draw consciously on at least one of the approaches outlined in this class to write a passage/ short story developing a dynamic character. (c. 500-1000 words)
- Critically comment on what you have done and why explaining what you have learnt from the task.

Consider SOME of the following when creating your character. It is often exciting to make unusual groupings (eg 50 year old cook/ Envy/ Bullying/ Careful / Wilderness etc)

Social place/ definition

- Class
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Profession
- Education

- Inside /Outside
- Urban/Rural
- Animal Obsessed/ Animal Phobic
- Irresponsible / Reliable
- Exacting/ Careful

Motivation/ Emotions

- Fear
- Passion
- Hatred
- Desire
- Envy
- Anger
- Naivety

Space

- Workplace
- Home
- Urban Space
- Wilderness

Time/ Season

- Dawn
- Dusk
- Midday
- Midnight
- Spring
- Summer
- Autumn
- Winter

Social interaction

- Solitary
- Independent
- Thoughtful
- Popular
- Gang mentality
- Bullying
- Nervous
- Victimised

Senses

- Taste
- Touch
- Smell
- Hearing
- Sight

Heightened Contrasts

- Linguistic ability
- Confidence/ Timidity

Email your piece to me: I will look at and give feedback on ONE draft