

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Session 6: Character

Character is the center of story (usually – LeGuin/Atwood are experimental stories that challenge this assumption)

Character is the window – **identification for the reader**. The reader must be able to identify with the character on some level and experience **with** the character as the character goes through the “now” moment.

There are two questions—how to CREATE character and how to REVEAL character.

To CREATE character you must start with a notion that is inside yourself. In some way every character is part of the writer, but changes as the story shapes the character away from the writer.

Name your character. The name is important. Do not ever name your character for yourself (or the person the character might be based on.) Let the character have his or her own name—this is the beginning of that character separating from you the writer and having his/her own existence. Sometimes you may need to spend time to find the right name—the right name is important.

Sometimes you will create a character through voice. How that character talks, what language s/he uses, what details s/he notices or thinks important (and which are not) are all part of what makes that character unique and interesting. (Think of “Everyday Use” for voice expressing character.)

How character is revealed:

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other people say about the character
- What the author says about the character

Some of these are more reliable than others. Which of the methods of revelation do you consider the most reliable? Why might a writer choose to reveal character through what others say about her/him? When a character speaks, is that always reliable? (People lie. Sometimes people think they know the truth when they don't, so they're not lying, they're just mistaken. Sometimes people have reasons that they can't really express who they are.)

“Telltale Heart”—WHO will tell you they are not insane? (Only people who think about such things. Most of us do not go around introducing ourselves, “Hello, my name is Bill and I'm not insane.”) And then what does this tell us?

Villains:

Nobody sets out to be a villain. Nobody thinks of themselves as a bad guy. Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, “Today I will be evil.”

Villains have reasons for what they do. They think they are good guys, doing the right thing, making the best decisions they can under the circumstances. They also come out of you, out of the same place as all your characters. (This is a place where you need courage—both to acknowledge these pieces of yourself and to express them through character.)

Villain exercise:

Think of a James Bond film, where the main villain has an army of cannon fodder who do his will. Think of one of those people, who exists from the film point of view just to be killed.

This one person wearing a black quasi-uniform holding a semi-automatic weapon guarding the villain's stronghold--**why is s/he there???** What is the person's name? Background? Age? Family? Why did s/he take this job? (How apply or find it?) What is this person's story?

What characters want:

What a character wants defines the character. While people in real life and novels want many things and these things can be in conflict with each other (which is very interesting) the short story does not have the scope to encompass that much conflict (**unless** that is the central conflict of the story that leads to the "now" moment.)

In a short story, the character must want something. What is it?

What is the character willing to do to get what s/he wants?

Wanting is central to every character—if you have a character and you cannot immediately identify what she or he wants, you do not yet have a character.

Delineation – Miss Brill – point of view – what she sees, how she is seen.

If a story is about change or understanding then WHO changes and makes a decision becomes important – “where are you going?”

“Everyday Use”

3 characters all perfectly delineated, history, relationships

How character is revealed?

Where are you going? Where have you been? by Joyce Carol Oates

Think about Arnold—how does Oates show us this complex villain? Is he a bad guy? How do we know? How does he think of himself?

Why does Connie go with him? What do we understand about Connie's decision? What is the “now” moment?

- Gogol – **the anti-hero** – everyman
 - the idea of the normal person as a protagonist
 - why *this* person and not *that* person
 - interesting
 - can identify
 - how does Gogol **reveal** Akaky Akakievich?

- How does Oates reveal Connie and Arnold?

Alice Walker – Maggie, Mama, Dee/Wangero

Build sympathy/identification for reader

What do the details tell you??

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