

Week Thirteen: Your Story

Reading: Flannery O'Connor, The Nature and Aim of Fiction

Theme: What is your story really about?

Fiction often has a theme—a common idea the story keeps expounding, whether overtly or subconsciously. It's the story's heartbeat.

Theme is a slippery concept. The prevailing wisdom among writers is that if you apply any deliberate force to your theme, you will end up with a heavy-handed Aesop's fable. On the other hand, a story without a theme is shallow escapism at best and an unrealistic flop at worst. Theme is arguably the single most important facet of a memorable story. Vivid characters, witty dialogue, and killer plot twists can certainly carry a story by themselves, but without theme they will never deliver their full potential. And yet, no theme at all is often far better than a poorly delivered theme.

If you concentrate too much on theme, you risk alienating your audience through moralizing. But if you squelch all thoughts of theme, you are likely to rob your story of its central life force, its heartbeat, its meaning. So what is a writer to do?

The key to theme lies entirely in the hands of your characters. As with almost every other aspect of story, character once again is the vital key to making your theme come to unforgettable life. Ultimately, theme is the lesson your characters will have learned (or have failed to learn) by the end of the story. Theme is inherent in your characters' struggles and, therefore, to the story itself. The best of themes well up effortlessly and even unconsciously from the heart of the characters' actions and reactions.

The key to strong theme is strong character progression. The changes your character undergoes in the chapters between the inciting incident and the climax will define your theme. But these changes must flow naturally from the characters.

- What is the main character's internal conflict? (For most stories, this question gets answered early, since it will drive the entirety of the story.)
- Which of the main character's views will change as a result of the story's events? How and why? (This is where you will find the underlying force of your theme. Your character's views will define his actions and his actions will define the story.)
- How will the main character demonstrate his respective views and attitudes at the beginning and end of the story? (This is an extension of the previous question, but it is vital because its answer will demonstrate the changes to the reader.)
- Is there any particular symbols that can reinforce the theme and the character's attitude toward it? (Like theme itself, symbology is often overstated and therefore generally better when culled organically from your own unconscious mind. For example, sometimes you'll find yourself using a particular colour or image to represent something; if the symbol proves effective, you can later go back and strengthen it throughout the story.)
- How can you use the subtext (the unstated) to exemplify the theme, so that you won't have to spell it out for the reader? (When it comes to theme, the unstated is almost always more powerful than the direct. Often, in real life, when we find ourselves learning lessons and changing views, we can't immediately define the changes in precise language.)

In-class exercise: Everyone gets a sheet of paper and free writes for 10 minutes, answering questions about the meaning of their story. What about your story is important to you? What do

you think your story means? What lesson does it impart? What do you want people to feel after reading it? What do you want them to think? Then write, in one line, the theme of your story.

Choose your words carefully

After you have written the first draft of your story, you now have the opportunity to go back and improve your story—strengthen plot points, develop characters, deepen descriptions.

In-class exercise: Find a painting or picture (a still life—something simple). Have each student describe it in one sentence as descriptively and beautifully as they can. Give them five minutes. Discuss the answers, what words they used, what this highlighted, and how the descriptions could be improved. Show how different words create different feelings (e.g. annoyance vs. rage). Highlight the point that everyone sees something different. They see the world through their own eyes, so they must describe it that way. They have a responsibility to make things as real, clear, personal, and beautiful as possible to their readers (and, really, themselves as writers).

Proofreading, Editing, Feedback

1. **Time.** Give yourself some mental and emotional distance to see the story objectively.
2. **Proofreading:** fix technical errors (spelling, punctuation, grammar).
 - a. Print a hard copy of your story. It is often easier to catch mistakes when looking at things on paper.
 - b. Read your story out loud. Likewise, you will sometimes be able to *hear* errors better than you can *see* them.
 - c. Mark errors with a pen. Don't expect to remember them all!
 - d. Repeat steps (a) through (c) a couple times.
 - e. Give your story to someone else to proofread; specify what you want them to do.
3. **Editing:** Fix the big problems (plot, character, dialogue, structure) and strengthen the story. What can you strengthen? Where are the plot holes? What characters are behaving unrealistically?
4. **Objective feedback.** Send your story to someone you trust. It helps if this person has experience in creative writing, or at least likes to read a lot. They should have a good sense of story and a good eye for detail.
5. **Remember why you love your story.** You might be tempted to chuck your whole story in the trashcan. But take a moment to remember why you started writing it in the first place. Try to recapture that original spark of inspiration.

Homework

Compile all of your previous assignments into one document. If you haven't already, please input the corrections (and perhaps develop the suggestions) from your past assignments.