

Character and Subtext: The Vital Engine of Fiction and Drama with Bob Curry

Our behavior – everything we do and say – is instigated by what is going on inside us. Our actions and words are reactions to whatever we are feeling or thinking. Same with the characters in our fiction and drama. This 24/7 inner life can be as still as an August pond or a roiling sea of emotions, prejudices, worries, fears, obsessions, conflict, identity markers, neuroses, defense mechanisms, and so on. Within each person is the emotional turbine of character and the very impetus to write fiction and drama.

How this ever-changing inner life plays out in behavior is the stuff of stories. Our characters react to fear or greed or jealousy or any number of inner lusts and torments and threats and make the crucial mistakes that upset the status quo and start our stories off and flying. Knowing what occupies the secret center of our characters – the hidden motivation, the radioactive secret, the silent addiction, the ancient wound, the psychological aberration – that drives their outward behavior, how deep or far they will go, is crucial to understanding our fictional creations whether we are writing genre or literary fiction, plays or movies.

Subtext, though, involves more than what lurks within our characters. It is what lurks beneath your text. It is the resonance and purpose beneath the description of a room, a gesture, an action. It is the unspoken behind the speech. It is the contradiction between spoken words and the accompanying expression or tone or posture or action. It is the specificity of your textual choices, how they are presented, and what they can be perceived as representing subtextually that give your stories added dimensions.

Working against our accomplishing any of this is the fear that our readers won't get it, but instead of honing the specific details of the physical, sensory world we take the lazier path and *tell* the story from inside our heads. We indulge in intrusive narration and abstract modifiers and other bloodsuckers of fiction that rob our writing of its power and the reader of pleasure. Readers don't want to be coddled. They like to read carefully, interpret, discover their own meanings. We've all been in a book group that wrestles with this stuff. Asking more questions than you answer turns the pages. It's pleasurable and intriguing, and it makes your writing something people will buy, read and talk about.

Fun homework to do before you arrive in class on June 15

Two old but excellent films I tend to refer to often in class are *The Wizard of Oz* and *Witness*. Watching them ahead of time will put us all on the same page during discussions.

Optional: Send material in ahead of time—deadline May 18

All participants are welcome to email 3-4 pages of a piece they are currently working on for group response early in the week. Please email your pages to our program assistant, Laura Kahl, by May 18, lkahl@dcs.wisc.edu. Laura will share your pages with all participants in our section before the program. Your material should be double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman, and one-inch margins. Please put your name in the header to the left and a page numeral upper right.

Monday: What is subtext? Where is it? Why is it the magic ingredient? Today we:

- Explore how subtext is used in different kinds of scenes and stories: comedic, dramatic, tragic, romantic, etc.
- Decode the character behavior in those scenes to determine objectives, motivations, fears, underlying psychological and emotional states.
- Watch some film scenes to establish common references for the week's discussion.
- Writing exercise, feedback sessions.

Tuesday: They talk, they walk, they move. But where do they really live? Today we will:

- Look at how our characters present themselves: dress, grooming, manners, speech, possessions, and ask what it says. Are we making the right choices? Could we be more effective?
- Find the emotional/psychological centers of our own fictional characters within the context of our stories. What do they fear? Keep secret? What is their fatal flaw?
- Look at the dual lives of characters. Develop their inner lives and work outward to choose logical, detailed, idiosyncratic surface behavior that hides, justifies, betrays these inner lives.
- Writing exercise, feedback sessions.

Wednesday: Who's the boss? Who's the skunk? Today we will:

- Look at the myriad clues good writers employ to convey hierarchy, power, status, courage, cowardice, honor, evil, love, hatred ... who has the money, the gun, secret information, the royal flush, the dead body in the trunk.
- Look at the specific behavior and vernacular of social networks (friend, family, colleague, partner) especially those of our characters.
- Throw away the crutch of telling and show the subtext of relationships through description, action, behavior and dialogue.

Thursday: How do we say "I love you" when we're talking about the weather? Today we will:

- Explore why and how writers disguise complicated subtextual emotional lives with dialogue and even narrative.
- Look at the technical aspects of dialogue in fiction and drama to see what is really going on beneath the conversation.
- Experiment with the nuances of language, syntax, word order and rhythm to see how these technical things can convey and clarify what is really going on.
- Write dialogue scenes that give readers subtle, but specific, clues to your characters' motivations, intentions and emotional/psychological states.
- Go one step deeper. How keen are your characters to subtext? If they are human, they read subtext, interpret, misunderstand, use the wrong words, say things they didn't mean, and worry about all of it.

- Writing exercise/ feedback session.

Friday: Personal baggage, wild cards and loose ends. Today we will:

- Look at how writers establish and repeat conventions to efficiently convey character traits and patterns of subtext to streamline the reading experience.
- Gauge the necessity, placement and duration of these techniques in our fiction. Are they moving the story along or bogging it down? This is fiction, not Freud.
- Cut, clarify and refine. Excessive character detail can have the unintended consequence of gumming up the story. Why create a maze of micro details that the reader just skips over, anyway? Less is often more. Your talent is in your choices.
- Writing, editing, feedback session.

Bring a pen/notebook and roll up your sleeves. We'll do a lot of in-class writing, and each night a fun, challenging writing exercise with a friendly, penetrating feedback session the following day. We'll touch on all participants' work several times during the week.

This is a very packed week, but the tools you take away from this workshop will make your characters and relationships more complex, intriguing and memorable to the reader, your writing more subtle, sophisticated and focused.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.