

Tuesday, week 2

Fiction Workshop

Form & Content

As a group answer the following questions.

How did the “What if” questions affect the form of your writing for yesterday?

How did the “What if” questions affect the content of your writing for yesterday?

As a group, generate (below) a list of “elements of form in fiction.” For example, an element of the form of fiction is that it is written work. A less basic element is that it might have *characters* and *themes*.

Now generate a list (below) of “elements of fictional content.” For example, fiction often contains a *story*, and is often about *people* and *relationships*.

Study your list to be sure there is a clear between the items in the two lists. The list of formal elements should look something like a terminology for a discourse, while the elements of contents will remain more open-ended—it could be about fiction, or life itself, or psychology, or painting, or....

As a group, choose a movie you’ve all seen or a book you’ve all read. Discuss all that you can of what the work is “ABOUT.”

How does the film/book treat its formal elements?

For instance, how (in a sense technically) are characters presented? How are places described or used? How is it paced? etc etc.

How does the film/book’s formal elements enhance or correspond to what it is ABOUT ?

Content,
or, the illusion
of a world

Form, or, the
material of
fiction

Content, or, the illusion of the world is that sense of a novel or story that we imagine corresponding exactly to aspects of our lives.

To think in terms of content is to pretend: to think of the story as a real world or a part of our world that works the way our world works.

Form, or, the material of fiction is that sense of a novel or a story that understand as artificial, crafted.

To think in terms of Form is to see the workings of a novel in the terms of the craft of fiction, rather than those of the world the fiction creates; in this sense it works only the way fiction works, based on conventions of genre and style.

Typically, the literary art is imagined as a fusion of form and content—that is, the writer’s skill is dependent on her ability to choose a fitting form for her content. This schema does seem to reflect the experience we have, at times, in the writing process, but, under scrutiny, it can become difficult to say what’s what...

A quick exercise

My name is Arthur Gordon Pym. My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born. My maternal grandfather was an attorney in good practice. He was fortunate in every thing, and had speculated very successfully in stocks of the Edgerton New Bank, as it was formerly called. By these and other means he had managed to lay by a tolerable sum of money. He was more attached to myself, I believe, than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit the most of his property at his death. He sent me, at six years of age, to the school of old Mr. Ricketts, a gentleman with only one arm and of eccentric manners—he is well known to almost every person who has visited New Bedford. I stayed at his school until I was sixteen, when I left him for Mr. E. Ronald’s academy on the hill. Here I became intimate with the son of Mr. Barnard, a sea-captain, who generally sailed in the employ of Lloyd and Vredenburg—Mr. Barnard is also very well known in New Bedford, and has many relations, I am certain, in Edgerton. His son was named Augustus, and he was nearly two years older than myself. He had been on a whaling voyage with his father in the John Donaldson, and was always talking to me of his adventures in the South Pacific Ocean. I used frequently to go home with him, and remain all day, and sometimes all night. We occupied the same bed, and he would be sure to keep me awake until almost light, telling me stories of the natives of the Island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels. At last I could not help being interested in what he said, and by degrees I felt the greatest desire to go to sea. I owned a sailboat called the Ariel, and worth about seventy-five dollars. She had a half-deck or cuddy, and was rigged sloop-fashion— I forget her tonnage, but she would hold ten persons without much crowding. In this boat we were in the habit of going on some of the maddest freaks in the world; and, when I now think of them, it appears to me a thousand wonders that I am alive to-day.

fuse these 2 passages into one, keeping only the content of “Electra” and only the form of “Pym.”

My Name is Electra. I am a very lucky girl and my family is the nicest in the world. Mummy and Daddy are important of course and when we’re out we have to behave properly but when we’re at home we play and laugh and have lots of fun. “You spoil them!” Mummy says, and she frowns and folds her arms in front of her but then she laughs and kisses him so I know she’s not really serious. We have all sorts of games like the one where the hall is the world and the tables and chairs are different countries. Then Daddy tells us all about his travels, but he says the best thing was when he met Mummy and fell in love with her. “Now that’s a happy ending,” he says.

He’s a wonderful Daddy and is always nice and funny. When Mummy sighs and says she’s getting lots of white hairs he laughs and says, “I’ll be getting them soon and then we’ll be two little old people nodding off on the terrace together” then he hugs her till she cheers up. And he lets me ride on his back and gallops round the room making horse noises, then rolls on the floor. Or sometimes we play Hide and Seek or Blind Man’s Buff, even if Daddy doesn’t really like it. “I want to see everything all the time,” he says, “Just look at my beautiful wife and fine children!” but then he laughs and plays it anyway, so he really is a good Daddy.

Nobody is as nice as my Daddy and when I was little I wanted to marry him. Well, I was just little. When I told him he said, “What about Mummy? You don’t want me make Mummy unhappy, do you?” Of course I didn’t, and he said that I would always be his best and favourite girl and that we would always be special friends, but really special like brother and sister, even if I’ve got a brother but he is very serious - lots more serious than Daddy.

Writing Piece #2

Due (Wednesday) of Week 3
(because of holiday)

The novel we've just read, *A Void*, would seem to have stemmed from a purely formal premise: the lipogram in e. In the spirit of Oulipian axiomatic thinking, Perec uses this single formal choice to motivate much of the content of the novel; you might say he derives the novel from it.

How did he do this?

What rules of logic or artistry does one follow to make the trip from form to content?

How do we know what it takes to match form to content?

Perhaps in Perec's case, it's a simple matter of equivocation, but not always.

In this piece, you might find your own answer to these questions, but you'll do the reverse from what Perec has done: you'll move from content toward form.

Begin with your group by choosing a word or two that will be your group's theme. You might choose something akin to Perec's own—absence, missing, loss, mystery—or something entirely new. In any case, choose a theme that works for all of you, that interests you somehow.

Next, try to work out how your theme could affect the way you think about the form of your work.

You might ask, how can my theme "echo" or "resonate" or "resound" in the formal elements of my writing. You must be explicit about the possibilities BEFORE you begin writing (that is, today, if there is time), though things may adjust in the process.

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