Structuring The Plot's Vital Interest

by
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For professionals and students alike the urge to write creatively often derives from the same source: strange and complex stirrings of emotion, image, and thought. While the professional has learned how to sort, focus, and structure, the student is likely to feel overwhelmed by these stirrings.

Young fiction writers are especially likely to be confused about how to translate these stirrings into a story having a "plot." Either they try to tell their story "just as it really happened in real life," thereby missing the opportunities creative manipulation of plot offers and reducing their story to an expedient and often flatly generic "realism" lacking the life of the original experience, or they fail to provide their fiction with any significant movement at all, reducing it to a series of descriptive segments in which plot, ordinarily the prime mover in fine fiction, is dormant. "Inspiration" sometimes cures these ills in its own inimitable ways. Even if it doesn't, good teachers will always think twice before intruding on the wonderful ways of the Muse. But when the Muse fails and a student looks up blankly from the blank page, then the teacher should step forward with a process that at once opens doors for student writers to discover the vital interests lurking in their stirrings, and allows them to translate these interests into well-structured stories.

The process I wish to recommend here has four stages, each allowing the student the free play necessary to creative invention while requiring some consideration of options necessary to the successful structuring of plot. It is assumed here that good plot bears some organic relationship to what is of vital interest in a story—its themes, emotional thrust, and basic human values—and that the search for a sound plot structure will help the student discover this vital interest. It also goes without saying that the good teacher will present this process as one that will open doors of creative invention and broaden the range of fiction's possibilities rather than function as a necessary prescription.

Stage One: Discovery and Delineation of Time Line

The vague stirrings of emotion, image, and thought in which a story lurks and out of which story must eventually emerge must first be "discovered," at least in rough form. Teachers should employ any number of writing methods to liberate the complexes of imagery, fact, and event that are the raw materials of a story taking shape. Students should be encouraged to jot down impressions, character sketches, descriptions of setting, pieces of dialogue, ideas, or any other bits or stretches of information that may (or may not, eventually) be used in the finished story. It is very important that when students begin mining the raw materials of a story, they be on special alert for impressions that strike them as especially visual or emotionally intense rather than

being preoccupied with developing a chronology of events. Only one rule may be invoked to govern this process of discovery: that all raw materials have some relationship to the intended story, even if the connecting thread is no stronger than a strand of cobweb. But even this rule may be waived if the teacher is convinced that all that emerges from this process may have some potential relationship, perhaps prompted by unconscious forces, to the story taking shape.

Once writers have a mass of material in the form of written notes from which to fashion a fiction, they should be asked to make a list of the characters that have emerged as a result of their brainstorming. Then, for the purpose of plot structuring, they should establish a rough chronological sequence for the material in hand. Any materials that can be assigned a temporal value should be identified, located in as specific a chronological context as possible, and numbered sequentially. Material not inherently temporal—that, for example, which constitutes mainly imagery rather than action—should be assigned a parenthetical position in proximity to the chronological. From this process a number of clearly defined episodes should emerge. In this way the first requirement of a plot—a "time line" made up of discernible episodes—is established.

A simple example may illustrate:

1. Morning: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. (The wall is mossy and broad. Humpty reminds us of a recent Secretary of State, etc.)

2. Later that same morning: Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. (Humpty's thoughts during the fall, especially his regrets about not making a strong choice. The expression on his face. His fear, etc.)

3. Afternoon of the same day: All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again. ("That's what comes of sitting on the fence." "He tried to be good to everyone." Humpty's mangled body, etc.)

So far writers are still in the discovery stage, but they have moved beyond the swirl of their creative impulses to give these impulses a location in time. At this point they face their first option in the structuring of plot: they get to choose between telling their story in chronological or in any number of nonchronological ways. Teachers should get students to consider the different implications inherent in telling the Humpty Dumpty story chronologically (1-2-3), nonchronologically (2-3-1, or 1-3-2, or 3-1-2, or 2-1-3, for example), or with reverse chronology (3-2-1).

Certain responses will be predictable and sensible. Some students will opt for straight chronology, "because it's simpler and easier to fo11ow." Others will find one of the nonchronological schemes more "interesting," especially if character rather than action is most important to their story. A few may discover that psychological interest is sometimes best developed by stories that use reverse chronology, in effect extending the past into the story in order to account for an action suspended in a "present" time. Once they begin inventing reasons why actions should be ordered in time one way rather than another, they are on their way to understanding the difference between action, the events that happen in a story, and plot, the forces that conspire to make the action occur.

Stage Two: Determining Dramatic Potential and Placement of Events.

The second stage, which takes the problem of plotting beyond the determination of whether to establish a chronological or nonchronological line of action, will require students to make sometimes difficult distinctions between two modes of fictional representation: narrative vs. dramatic style, or what is more commonly called "telling" vs. "showing." In short, compounding the options posed by Stage One are options about what parts of the story are to be given narrative treatment ("told") and which dramatic treatment ("shown"). Other terms that may be useful in drawing the distinction between the two modes are "summary" and "scene" respectively.

Consider the difference between the following two examples of fictional technique.:

Joey was smoking a cigarette when the phone rang. A low voice spoke in hushed tones on the other end, telling him that if he cared at all to continue living, he should be sure to see that the package was delivered on time.

When the phone rang Joey looked up like a startled bird, his hand quivering as he reached over to pick it up.

"Joey," said a deep-throated voice on the other end. "Get the stuff here."

Joey took a deep drag from his cigarette and held the smoke in until it began to burn.

"Get it there on time, Joey,—or else."

In these examples the difference between "telling" and "showing" should be easy for most students to see. In narrative (or "summary") passages subject matter is distanced from the reader (and from its concrete self) by a narrative presence rendering the subject matter in relatively abstract or generalized terms. The dramatic (or "scenic") version, on the other hand, takes us in close and provides us the specific and concrete details that make up the experience being represented. The next example should make clear how fiction writers may move gracefully from one mode to the other. The second paragraph, functioning as a transition, moves us from summary into a scene which we, as readers, share with a sense of dramatic immediacy.

Robert Cohn was a member, through his father, of one of the richest Jewish families in New York, and through his mother of one of the oldest. At the military school where he prepped for Princeton, and played a very good end on the football team, no one had made him race-conscious. No one had ever made him feel he was a Jew, and hence any different from anybody else, until he went to Princeton. He was a nice boy, a friendly boy, and very shy, and it made him bitter. He took it out in boxing, and he came out of Princeton with a painful self-consciousness and the flattened nose, and was married by the first girl who was nice to him. He was married five years, had three children, lost most of the fifty thousand dollars his father left him, the balance of the estate having gone to his mother, hardened into a rather unattractive mould under domestic unhappiness with a rich wife; and just when he had made up his mind to leave his wife she left him and went off with a miniature-painter. . .

We had several *fines* after the coffee, and I said I must be going. Cohn had been talking about the two of us going off somewhere on a weekend trip. He wanted to

get out of town and get in a good walk. I suggested we fly to Strasbourg and walk up to Saint Odile, or somewhere or other in Alsace. "I know a girl in Strasbourg who can show us the town," I said.

Somebody kicked me under the table. I thought it was accidental and went on: "She's been there two years and knows everything there is to know about the town. She's a swell girl."

I was kicked again under the table and, looking, saw Frances, Robert's lady, her chin lifting and her face hardening.

"Hell," I said, "why go to Strasbourg? We could go up to Bruges, or to the Ardennes."

Cohn looked relieved. I was not kicked again. I said good night and went out. Cohn said he wanted to buy a paper and would walk to the corner with me. "For God's sake," he said, "why did you say that about that girl in Strasbourg for? Didn't you see Frances?"

"No, why should I? If I know an American girl that lives in Strasbourg what the hell is it to Frances?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Any girl. I couldn't go, that would be all."[1]

The difference between "telling" and "showing", however, is not always sharp and clear and may indeed be relative to a particular context, as this example from Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* shows:.

. . .Walking toward the Ladies she was afraid to bump against anything because her skin felt hard and brittle, and she knew it was possible, in this condition, to fall apart at the slightest touch. She locked herself in the bathroom stall and remembered his hand, thumbing back the transparent skin and crackling blue peel. Her clothing itched. The pink shell was sweaty and hitched up too far under her arms but she couldn't take off her jacket, the white vinyl her son King had given her, because the pink top was ripped across the stomach. But as she sat there, something happened. All of a sudden she seemed to drift out of her clothes and skin with no help from anyone. Sitting, she leaned down and rested her forehead on the top of the metal toilet-roll dispenser. She felt that underneath it all her body was pure and naked—only the skins were stiff and old. Even if he was no different, she would get throught this again.

Her purse dropped out of her hand, spilling. She sat up straight. The doorknob rolled out of her open purse and beneath the stall. She had to take that doorknob with her every time she left her room. There was no other way of locking the battered door. Now she picked up the knob and held it by the shank. The round grip has porcelain, smooth and white.[2]

It is important that students not get bogged down in trying to draw small and precise lines between the two modes, crucial that they understand that within large scenes some summary may be used, and vice versa. They should be made to understand that as a general rule scenic treatment of subject matter tends to create a sense of immediacy and that they should strive for this in their writing.

Plot structuring depends on how these two modes appear as segments in a story. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to visualize, or revisualize, the episodes they

have delineated at Stage One. Once they have learned to identify the difference between the scenic and summary modes, they can begin choosing which approach mainly to apply in the individual episodes of their story. In the case of our Humpty Dumpty story we now ask which, of that story's three main episodes, should be given scenic vs. summary treatment. The possible configurations are many (with □ = summary and O = scenic mode of treatment):
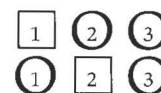
EPISODES CHRONOLOGICAL
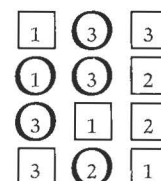
EPISODES

NONCHRONOLOGICAL

ETC.

Faced with this many options (especially given the problem that most stories are likely to have more than three episodes), students are again likely to feel confused. But this stage is crucial to plot development. Students may be guided through this difficult stage by being asked to establish their scene-summary plot configuration based on three factors.

Firstly, "inspiration" should be respected and encouraged. In general, students will do their best writing when they are most inspired, and it is likely that this writing will also be their most scenic. When writers feel an imaginative experience intensely, they will "get into it," write it from the inside, as it were, and thereby endow it with the sense of drama and concrete detail that create a sense of immediacy. Students, in short, should be encouraged to determine what their scenes are "naturally."

Secondly, once students have established a time line they should be encouraged to consider the dramatic potential of episodes on that line. Some actions are potentially, perhaps inherently, more dramatic than others. Consider Humpty Dumpty again. Is not Humpty's fall more potentially dramatic than his sitting on the fence? There are no absolutes to be insisted on at this point, for a creative imagination (such as Henry James') may find drama in a character sitting still. But as a rule episodes full of physical activity and conflict are likely to lend themselves to dramatic treatment whereas those that cover large stretches of time and passive subject matter are likely to require summary treatment.

Thirdly, students should be asked to ask themselves where the vital interest of their story resides—what specific episodes best capture the complex of thought and feeling

that moved them to write. By determining which episodes are vital, secondary, or perhaps expendable, students are on their way to achieving the focus necessary to artistic unity.

Consider a more complex example, the story of Joe Brown and the radar tower, as its plot may be evolved from the episodes listed on the time line worked out at the discovery stage:

Characters:
1. Joe Brown, farmers, disillusioned radical, hangs himself in 1975.
2. Sara Brown, wife, dies in 1950, worn, lonely.
3. Elmer Brown, their son, moved to the big city to become an accountant, rather than stay on his father's farm, only child.
4. Tom, bored hitch-hiker who discusses girls and his pet pig.
5. Elvis, bored hitch-hiker who discusses motorcycles.

Events:
1. Spring, 1933: Joe Brown hitchhikes to St. Paul to march with striking truckers for a fair wage—the strikers win.
2. 1933-1965: Joe Brown tries to organize farmers and laborers in the small town and rural area near his farm—he fails.
3. Fall, 1950: Sara Brown threatens to leave her husband if he doesn't cease his political activities—she dies a month later.
4. June, 1965: Joe Brown chops down a steel radar tower the government erected on his farm—he uses an axe.
5. July, 1965-1975: Joe Brown retires from farming, moves to town and writes radical essays.
6. May 1975: the government erects Intercontinental Ballistic Missile "silos" in Polleywog Valley, near Joe Brown's town.
7. June 10, 1975, 3 p.m.: Joe Brown picks up two bored hitchhikers on his way to a visit to his old homestead farm.
8. June 10, 1975, 5 p.m.: Joe Brown hangs himself in his barn.

Episodes #2 and #4 most obviously lend themselves to summary treatment, in part because they cover so much time but also because the subject matter they deal with is manifestly less dramatic than that in the other episodes. This is not to say, of course, that moments within each of these two episodes could not be treated dramatically, or that any other episode should not be in summary treatment. The story might be effectively written with only one main scene, Sara Brown's death, with everything before and after that event summarized; or the story could center on the dramatic encounter with the bored hitchhikers, with all other events, including the actual hanging, foretold. The vital interest the writer has in writing the story will determine what plot structure emerges. In asking students to consider which episodes they

consider most dramatic, teachers give students the opportunity to discover for themselves what the thematic and emotional centers of their stories are. Thematic and emotional unity, the factors so often lacking in weak creative writing, should grow out of and be connected to the scenes having the greatest vital interest.

Stage Three: Determining the Value of Plot Episodes

At this point in the writing process students should be developing a clearer sense of how plot differs from action. Action is merely what happens in a story, the events that move through time by way of a story's episodes. Plot is what causes the actions to move, gives them purpose. Plot is the motive of a story, its "cause," and therefore the vehicle for carrying its thematic weight. It is useful to identify "plot" with its synonym "conspiracy." A story may have action but no significant plot moving it. In a good story actions conspire to bring about desired thematic and emotional ends, and writers, as sole proprietors of the inner significance of their stories, should control the conspiracy.

But to do this students need to determine the value of plot episodes, the weight each is to be assigned to carry in the story, and their length. In determining the value of plot episodes students first need to be made aware of whether passages in their stories are alive or lifeless, and whether scenes and summaries are doing justice to their subject matter. A good approach to use is to ask writers to conduct a self-evaluation of their own work to determine how "interesting" or relatively "flat" they themselves think sections (indeed individual sentences) are. They can do this marginally, perhaps using serrated lines to block off passages of high interest and straight lines to indicate passages that seem relatively lifeless and prosaic. Other students should be asked to contribute, so the writer of a story may compare his reactions with the reactions of his readers. Patterns of consensus normally emerge. Obviously, flat passages in a story become eligible for revision or deletion. But more importantly they are symptomatic of weak plotting.

What is the nature of these symptoms? In some cases writers inexpediently move their plots forward by giving scenic value to matters that should be quickly summarized. Consider this scene from "The Man Who Hated Cats," by Michael and Mollie Hardwick.

The door was opened to him by the Vaughan's butler. The butler admitted him deferentially, taking his hat, coat and bag. Behind him, Jack Vaughan was emerging from the drawing room.

"Lionel, my dear fellow! Come in. We'd no idea you were catching the early train, or we'd have sent the car."

"I couldn't be sure of catching it. Besides, there are always plenty of cabs. How are you? All well, I hope?"

"Absolutely top-hole. Eve's just seeing about dinner arrangements—she'll be delighted to see you so early. What about a drink?"

"Think I'll freshen up first, Jack."[3]

In this story, which occupies only a half-dozen printed pages, the authors have wasted a third of a page on a scene composed of matters of no real consequence to the development of plot, character, theme, or drama. Lionel should get into the house and on his way to dinner at the Vaughans in the space of a sentence or two. Writers should be encouraged to make swift summary work of routine information important only to the background against which the story's plot is to be played, and to concentrate instead on developing their story's vital interest.

In other instances writers may fail to arrest an action and thereby fail to expand and concentrate matters deserving dramatic development. Consider again a passage from "The Man Who Hated Cats."

It was a sharp pain somewhere in the region of his heart which brought him fully awake. He clapped his hand to his side, to meet something warm and soft, like a large hot-water bottle in a velvet cover. But last night he had not asked for a hot-water bottle. He realized with unspeakable revulsion that the object lying so close and warm against him was the cat. It was purring loudly, almost stertorously.

Half rising in the bed, he made a frantic effort to push it away, though the contact of his hand with its fur almost turned him sick. It clung like a burr, and he realized that it was licking the jacket of his pajamas, just below his left arm. He was disgusted to feel a large wet patch on the material. The sandpaper tongue of the feline vampire had penetrated the cloth and his flesh. His pajamas were soaked, and the sheets stained bright scarlet.

Somehow he managed to get out of the bed, half-jumping, half-falling, casting the cat from him. It retreated, startled, and crouched on the floor at the end of the bed. He began to scream abuse at it, and to throw article after article from the bedside table in its direction—a book, a tumbler, his cigarette case, a camphorated-oil bottle. The cat took cover under the dressing-table and huddled there spitting at him, its eyes enormous with fear. He picked up the bedside lamp, wrenched it from the socket, and advanced on the cat. If he had reached it he would have battered it to death. But one of its nine lives came to the rescue: before the blow could fall Earnshaw had collapsed across the blood-stained bed, unconscious.[4]

This passage, which appears almost exactly at the midpoint of the story, presents in summary form the potentially most active and dramatic events in the story. Yet the power of these events as portrayed is not equal to the potential implied by them. Hence the cat attack seems lifeless, flat, "too told." Here is a missed opportunity, the authors failing to expand the material by bringing the narrative eye in close so that the reader may experience the drama of the scene. The most dramatic encounter the scene has to offer is written off in three prosaic paragraphs. Because this part of the story falls not only flat but short, and because no subject matter following it has as much dramatic potential, the entire story disappoints.

The value of plot, then, is determined in part by how scenes and summaries are proportioned. Summaries can establish a mood or pace and convey information important to the development of plot, character, and theme, but they should not overwhelm scenes. Scenes on the other hand, should be equal to their subject matter and thematic value, growing out of summaries naturally in order to bring themselves into dramatic focus. Thus a new set of options presents itself to the writer. How largely written will scenes and summaries be? Consider again the options Humpty Dumpty presents. Our circles and squares will again represent scenes and summaries, but their relative size will suggest the proportional value we wish to give each:
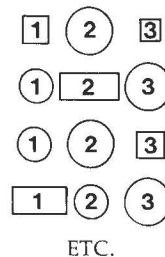
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PLOT DEVELOPMENT
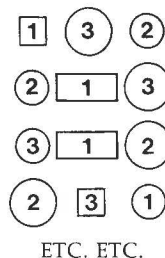
NONCHRONOLOGICAL

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The Humpty Dumpty example should serve to illustrate how many are the options that exist for plot structuring; students therefore are likely to want some guidance about how to make choices. One type of guidance the teacher can provide is practical. Decisions about plot can be made in light of the anticipated length of a story. Certain lengths will bear certain reasonable numbers of scenes and summaries. It might serve some purpose here to mention that length is often a factor affecting publishability—that stories longer than thirty typed pages, for example, have slim chance of being published in most literary journals. It might be useful for students to aim at a particular length and to revise accordingly, contracting a scene or summary at the beginning so that a major scene can be developed nearer the end.

Another type of guidance should be aesthetic. Students should come to see their work as imaginative but formal in the same way a sonata or symphony is, made up not only of words (like notes) but of movements working together to fulfill its composer's imaginative dream. Like good music good fiction waxes and wanes, normally building

toward a culminating conclusion. Normally stories benefit from a rising action that carries reader attention forward with increasing intensity toward a climax in which the full power of plot's influence on character and theme is felt. Many stories are also marked by a dramatic opening scene in which central characters and conflicts expose themselves. Hence a classic paradigm for the Humpty Dumpty tale would look like this (with circles and squares again representing scenes and summaries respectively:

RISING ACTION

Obviously, to reverse the paradigm would create an anti-climatic structure, as would other possible configurations such as these:
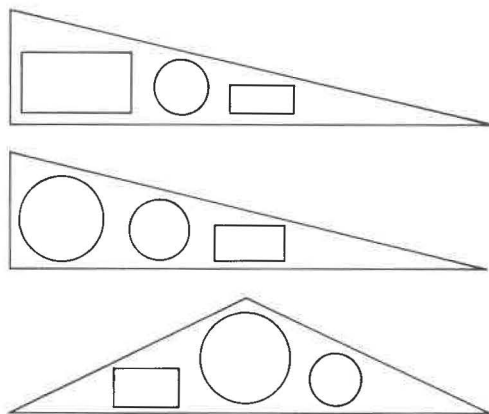
These structures, while atypical, might be appropriate to elicit certain responses, if these responses are the ones desired. Again, it is important that students be encouraged to consider the appropriateness of the dramatic structures they invent to the responses they wish to elicit. No structure should be ruled out *per se*.

After they have arrived at a configuration of scenes and summaries, students should be asked one final question: Do vital connections between scenes and summaries exist? This, of course, is the most vital question of all, for it requires them to consider whether their choices about plot structuring reflect the vital interest that has moved them to write. When writers are satisfied that all episodes in a plot serve the story's vital interest by keeping it in focus and moving it forward, they have served the stirrings of their imagination by giving them artistic form.

In the final analysis, the responses students seek to elicit from their work will depend on the human values to which they subscribe or toward which their art is inclining them. If creative processes are worthwhile means by which to discover and give expression to these values, they should be asked to consider how they consciously may best give these values form. "Inspiration" seeks to marry form and human values

"naturally," and sometimes it does so successfully. But too often "inspired" students don't know what their stories "mean," how they "work," or what values they express, even (and often especially) if they've reduced their art to didacticism. Moreover, it is fashionable, even within schools and universities, to justify muddling through the mysteries of creative expression; teachers who themselves are muddled about creative processes often lead the way. Still, there is no good reason for students to stop asking what good art, especially their own, "means," and they should get well-considered answers about the relationships between content and form. As stories take shape, and as plots are conjured to conspire, students should have questions about values—"vital interest"—placed squarely before them. And in learning to give expression to their creative selves, students should be challenged by teachers who have developed appropriate methodologies for helping students discover these values.

Notes

[1] Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York, 1925), pp. 4, 6. This example is also used by Leon Surmelian in *Techniques of Fiction Writing: Measure and Madness* (New York, 1969.) Chapters One and Two of Surmelian's book are particularly useful to an understanding of scene and summary.

[2] Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York, 1984), p. 4.

[3] John Canning, ed., *50 Great Horror Stories* (New York, 1973), p. 280.

[4] Ibid., pp. 283-4.