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John Ashmead  
*Haverford College*

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Teaching the Writing of Fiction

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# Teaching the Writing of Fiction

JOHN ASHMEAD

A STUDENT who had been in my creative writing class a year ago came to my office recently and asked me to look at a story he had written this fall.

"Why?" I asked.

"I want you to see how much progress I've made since I took your course," he replied.

"Suppose I tell you that you've made no progress," I said. "Will you believe me?"

"Of course not," he said. He was honestly shocked.

To be sure, one wants a gifted young writer to have egotism, but one doesn't want him to have the kind of egotism he almost invariably has got.

And creative writing can't even begin until the student has got rid of what I call commercial egotism, the belief that writers, after a few years but a great many mistresses, hunt big game in Africa and drive *gran turismo* automobiles and receive affectionate monthly statements from the Book-of-the-Month. All they need to make this cake is the recipe, and their teacher had better supply the Ready-Mix or else. The world is a circular plotto, an Aristotelian fall from high degree, or how we learned something noble while killing the salesman. In its Ivy League form this plot most commonly goes, "Boy meets girl, boy gets girl into bed, boy meets another girl." A friend of mine who teaches at one of the Big Three once wistfully

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*Mr. Ashmead's first novel, The Mountain and the Feather, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1961 has just been issued in paperback form by the Popular Library.*

asked his class, "Doesn't the boy ever fail?"

Two students approached me last week. They were writing, in consultation, a commercial short story—as distinct from the kind I teach. No doubt each intends to supply the deficiencies the other lacks. I was to correct their story, on my own time, just enough to make it saleable. There was no mention of a fee, but perhaps I can win their gratitude—if it sells. "Have you read the magazine you'll submit it to?" I asked. "Why should we do that?" they wondered. "Well," I said, in my most reasonable manner, "if the magazine doesn't have enough readers, how can it afford to buy your story?"

With all the zest of the Platonic hero who attempts to shave a lion, I told my class that they could expect to write short stories only for love of the craft; what money they made would come from their wives, or from those substitute wives—the Foundations, or from their jobs. My students shook their heads, more in pity than in anger. I, their teacher, old grape nuts for guts, had gone and flubbed it again.

As Hemingway once said, every prostitute has her price. I can't recall a single prostitute who became a great writer. No matter what writers' handbooks advise, it was Defoe who wrote *Moll Flanders* and not the other way around.

The gifted student writer with what I have called commercial egotism may perhaps cure himself by eating his first pound of rejection slips. But I wonder at times if there is any cure for social reformer egotism. I asked a white student

writer why he wrote a story about a persecuted Negro. "Do you know Negroes pretty well?" I asked, "Did you ever have one to your house for dinner?"

"No," he said, "but it's a problem we've got to solve."

A Negro student author wrote of a Negro lad running down the street, snarling and cursing, punching a drunk white bystander in the face. "Couldn't you at least make the drunk the hero's step-father?" I said, "like in Greek tragedy?" Every week we send enough messages in my class to give Western Union a dividend.

The social reformer plot goes like this: "Student meets teacher (or any similar authority figure such as college dean, parent, or date's mother), student gets message into teacher, student repeats message to reader." A common enough exercise in creative writing courses, I believe, is the assignment to write about two characters reacting to each other. One of my student writers wrote of a delinquent student reacting to the dean of students. "Why don't you get rid of these mere rules," said the delinquent student hero to the dean, "so we can talk person to person?"

Aside from the fact that I don't like buying a prig in a poke, I don't object so much to social reformer egotism except for the absence of sensuous delight. In these sociological fables there are no smells, sounds, tastes, or touches—and hardly anything to see.

One kind of egotism which I hardly ever find, but always cherish, is real individuality in the young and gifted writer. Anything the writer sees or says that no one else has seen or said. This egotism of individuality is the student writer's one chance for style—and the writer's special name for self. We only know a writer through his words, and if his words are as like as one pea pod is to another, his commercially salable technique, his sociological rightness and

whatever talents and skills he has might as well stay out on the peapatch.

Nine tenths of writing is finding, and creating, the right words for just one paragraph — the first. As Ford Madox Ford said of the brilliant yet simple first paragraph of Lawrence's *Odour of Chrysanthemums*, the editor (or teacher) needs to read only so far, and he can tell whether or not the story belongs in his IN basket. All too often the young gifted writer begins:

I was living in an incredibly small room on the East side of 116th St., which, though dirty and unfurnished, did have a fire escape which I had grown quite used to using in order to avoid the landlady, who was not the least of my creditors.

Leaving aside the awkward rhythm of the double which's, what are we to say about "incredibly small room" and "not the least of my creditors"? The honest individuality of this writer vanishes behind such verbiage.

Or take another beginning (here somewhat condensed):

John slumped into the only unoccupied aisle seat on the bus. He had been waiting in the terminal for three hours and was looking forward to a quiet trip. He reached into his coat pocket and took out a paperback edition of the *Aeneid*. His seat-mate, a big man with heavy-set features, leaned over to him and asked:

"Hey kid, you ever seen anything like this before?" He displayed a large signet ring on his right hand, jerked his hand slightly and two small blades snapped out of the ring. "I cut a guy's cheek wide open with this once."

"Very interesting," John replied, looking hopefully for another seat.

What are we to say about the key phrase here, "Very interesting"? Now I want to use harsh words about the phrases I have singled out in these two passages. I am talking only about the language and not about the person behind the language. As strongly as I can I want to say that such language is not

simply slovenly, or inaccurate, it is dishonest, and it is part of a general dishonesty we find widespread in American English.

My first writer knows that he shouldn't have lived like that, and so he uses flossy language to obfuscate the hard reality that is, in fact, his life. The second writer wants to hide from the reader his genuine fascination with the masochist who has sat down beside him, and he too wants to indicate to the reader that he—and his reader—know better than to be attracted to a wrong way of life. You can't cure this kind of language by calling it careless—it is dishonest English. Again and again the young gifted writer must learn to use his language with absolute honesty.

But honesty is never enough. Power must be there. And power comes only when the line sings. Let us watch Franklin rework a commonplace line and make it sing. Don't be surprised at my taking Franklin, by the way. He was a very great writer of fiction, as in his one novel which he titled his *Autobiography*. A number of Franklin's proverbs came from George Saville, Lord Halifax. Where Halifax had written, "To understand the world, and to like it, are two things not easily reconciled—" Franklin wrote "He that best understands the World, least likes it." There is a powerful whip to the inverted phrase "least likes it" that is not to be found in the blander English of Halifax. Thanks to the new linguistics, we can analyze these two versions in terms of the four pitches, the four stresses and the four junctures of our highly phonetic modern grammar. And yet I know of no handbook, whether of the short story or of more general English, which has applied the discoveries of the new linguistics to style.

The student writer with power in his style is rare, and often enough, since I know I will figure—really figure—in some of his stories, I feel when I find such a

student as if I've taken a wolf by the ears. But what a pleasure it is as we discover that writers have fangs, and writers' words have bite.

Here I must stop to simultaneously praise and kick *Webster's Third International Dictionary*. As a scientific *description* of the language it is far superior to *Webster's Second*. But as a *guide* to the language—and whether its editors admit it or not it is a guide—it is far inferior. A great many of the entries should read, after the name of the source, SS, for "said by a slob." A friend of mine at MIT is teaching a computer to write English, as a test of commonly accepted principles of English grammar. Its wild, compulsive sentences, whenever printed, as they usually are, must, I suppose, be faithfully recorded in *Webster's Fourth*. After all, some one, or more accurately, some thing, has said them. If our highways were planned on the model of *Webster's Third*, every time a car hit a telephone pole it would be called a new traffic pattern. A recent computer sentence, by the way, was "You are wasting your time."

So far it will appear that I have said only that the writer must preserve, and even exalt his own individuality, and he must use honest and powerful language. But I have said nothing yet of the short story itself.

There are many admirable short story texts today. Some of these texts favor close argument about technical rules. Some stress the pleasure that a good short story must give. Some see each short story as a unique event for which rules are impossible. And yet, whether the text is that of Kenneth Kempton, Sean O'Faolain, or Wallace Stegner these books are strikingly similar in two things: (1) they favor one kind of short story, that of Chekhov, above all others, and (2) they hardly ever go earlier than the 19th century for their models. I believe that the reign of Chekhov is drawing to

a close, but in any event I think it unwise to present the young writer with such a narrow choice of models. I prefer, and am now preparing, a chronological text that offers a wider range, from the twelfth century to the present. Here I wish to mention only the basic issue, which applies to any kind of short story, and that is dramatization.

By dramatization we mean that any ideas in the story, as George Eliot once put it, must take on flesh. And we mean that the people in the story must be deeply involved with each other.

There is an admirable story by Albert Camus called "The Guest." In it a French teacher in Algeria unwillingly accepts from a French policeman the custody of an Arab prisoner; because of a shortage of police he must direct the Arab to a prison. During a night's stay together, the Arab and the Frenchman establish a deeply human sympathy for one another, and the Arab suggests that the Frenchman should help the Arab side. But in the morning the liberal French teacher falters, and does not help the Arab to escape. Soon the teacher receives a note promising revenge from the Arabs against himself.

Now I do not wish to suggest that the young gifted writer has no virtues. His slang is almost always of interest, he has a fresh and even impudent view of life, and of his elders, and he is keenly aware of the demands of love and passion. But ninety percent of his training at college has been to the effect that analysis is good, and sensuousness is bad, that generalizations about literature (sometimes called new criticism) are preferable to literature itself. Should he think of a plot like that of Camus, he will invariably write it in this way.

He will reduce and narrow the story to the mind (hardly ever the body) of one character, the sensitive young teacher. The policeman, if needed, will cease to be a person, the very idea of official-

dom become flesh, and will turn into an errand boy, if he is allowed a separate existence at all. The Arab may be permitted a more tangible existence, but he will not undergo any emotional involvement with the schoolteacher. One of the two characters will be allowed to hate another, but the hated person will not react. All the characters will lose their ears, noses, tastebuds, and fingers, though they will be permitted a certain amount of myopia (they will suffer from color blindness); once in a while they may be given sex organs. All the stereoscopic objectivity of the sensual world, all the dramatization, in short, of the story, will be flooded under the amorphous rolling tide of a misty and vague central consciousness. We will not be lost, however, because the author will from time to time put his own words into the mouths of the characters and repeat the message. The reader will say such a story lacks life, but what he will mean is that it lacks art, the art of dramatization.

Rather than a summary of what I have been saying, let me present an actual story. What should we say to its author, or authoress—you may guess for yourselves which sex the writer was.

A boy takes a girl out for a quarrelsome ride in his car. He stops the car in front of an American Indian whorehouse (a superb addition to erotic folklore by the way) and goes inside in order to insult the girl. The discriminating Indians throw him out, he gets back in the car, and, driving it at a judiciously slow speed so that the girl is not hurt, rams the car into a telephone pole. Most of the language in the story is expert enough, but clever and cute. Where shall we start?

In such a story I am always looking for the place, often no more than a paragraph in length, where the writing turns simple and powerful, where the uniqueness of the writer suddenly shines

through, where the narrative in a flash turns stereoscopic. There was such a place in this story, where the boy and girl drove slowly through the Indian section of town. For a paragraph the writing and the words came to life, was in focus; we had forgotten about Chekhov and had moved into a unique, semi-Indian midwestern town. There lay the

secret strength of that young writer, momentarily revealed. As he begins to understand and trust his uniqueness, as he sees the power it inevitably gives to his language, he will want to dramatize, clothe ideas in flesh, and take that giant stride from the amateur to the professional teller of tales.



Saw a finetoothed wind  
Sieve the crisp field  
Where dogs crossed  
With white nozzles

And the fox dove.  
Thought it meant  
Walk in shards this day  
When tooth digs the sweet  
Pocket under the bark,  
But slow,  
With one wrong foot  
Under the left fruit.

The cockcrier,  
The bellyskin, the long  
Sawgrass point the wind;  
The black winds  
A ratchet of ice gears

In the water.  
Now,  
Say,  
Say now,  
Where you will fall,  
Veins backlashed,  
Before the sieve,  
The scythe, the winnow.

JOHN WOODS  
Western Michigan University