

Writing Workshop  
Week 5  
- Narrative  
Triangles  
Translations

This morning, your workshop is in three sections. One section will be an hour with Meghan or Tyler doing a writing activity that explores creative interpretation.

In the big room, you'll do some work with concepts from the *Literary Theory* Text (Chapter 6, "Narrative") and some work on the process of orienting oneself to new or strange texts using some ideas from the "Rigorous Geometry" excerpt that was in your mathematical fiction packet.

Please read all instructions carefully, and take your own workshop notes, as usual. Please do not have your computer on the table unless you *need* it for note taking—I'd much rather you transfer your notes to computer later.

Brian and I will be checking in with each of you to discuss your progress in the program.

## THE OVAL PORTRAIT

by Edgar Allan Poe

THE CHATEAU into which my valet had ventured to make forcible entrance, rather than permit me, in my desperately wounded condition, to pass a night in the open air, was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Appennines, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe. To all appearance it had been temporarily and very lately abandoned. We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments. It lay in a remote turret of the building. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with manifold and multiform armorial trophies, together with an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque. In these paintings, which depended from the walls not only in their main surfaces, but in very many nooks which the bizarre architecture of the chateau rendered necessary- in these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take deep interest; so that I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room- since it was already night- to light the tongues of a tall candelabrum which stood by the head of my bed- and to throw open far and wide the fringed curtains of black velvet which enveloped the bed itself. I wished all this done that I might resign myself, if not to sleep, at least alternately to the contemplation of these pictures, and the perusal of a small volume which had been found upon the pillow, and which purported to criticise and describe them.

Long- long I read- and devoutly, devotedly I gazed. Rapidly and gloriously the hours flew by and the deep midnight came. The position of the candelabrum displeased me, and outreaching my hand with difficulty, rather than disturb my slumbering valet, I placed it so as to throw its rays more fully upon the book.

But the action produced an effect altogether unanticipated. The rays of the numerous candles (for there were many) now fell within a niche of the room which had hitherto been thrown into deep shade by one of the bed-posts. I thus saw in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before. It was the portrait of a young girl just

**You'll have about an hour and half to complete the tasks in this packet. Budget your time. Don't get stuck on a single question for too long. Ask for help if you're not sure about what is being asked or what might constitute a good answer.**

We'll begin with some questions that get at some of the ideas in the *Theory* text, then switch to the "Triangles" exercise.

### 1. What is "narrative competence"?

Find passages in the chapter to anchor your thoughts on the subject and reflect on ways that narrative competence comes into play in *your* reading experiences.

- a. How do authors exploit or take advantage of our narrative competence (in a good way)?
- b. What happens when, in relation to a specific text, we feel "incompetent"?

2. Culler presents the dynamic between *events and plot / story and discourse* as the fundamental basis for recognizing and describing narrative; in some ways, those terms may constitute our definition of narrative: "events related in the form of a plot" or "a story related through a particular discourse."

At the bottom of 85, though, Culler shows how slippery these terms are. No matter which term we choose, we can see each aspect of narrative, plot, event, story, discourse, as something that is inferred from the text, not given, not absolute: each is *determined* by another. This is one reason that the terminology used to discuss literature varies so greatly from time to time and from theorists to theorist—definitions don't easily stick.

- a. What are the limits or problems that might exist if we subscribe fully to the "plotted events" way of thinking about narrative?
- b. Can you think of another description of our basic sensibility for what narrative is made of?

### 3. Read "The Oval Portrait," by Edgar Allen Poe

ripening into womanhood. I glanced at the painting hurriedly, and then closed my eyes. Why I did this was not at first apparent even to my own perception. But while my lids remained thus shut, I ran over in my mind my reason for so shutting them. It was an impulsive movement to gain time for thought- to make sure that my vision had not deceived me- to calm and subdue my fancy for a more sober and more certain gaze. In a very few moments I again looked fixedly at the painting.

That I now saw aright I could not and would not doubt; for the first flashing of the candles upon that canvas had seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over my senses, and to startle me at once into waking life.

The portrait, I have already said, was that of a young girl. It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a vignette manner; much in the style of the favorite heads of Sully. The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole. The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in Moresque. As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance, which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me. Least of all, could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person. I saw at once that the peculiarities of the design, of the vignetting, and of the frame, must have instantly dispelled such idea- must have prevented even its momentary entertainment. Thinking earnestly upon these points, I remained, for an hour perhaps, half sitting, half reclining, with my vision riveted upon the portrait. At length, satisfied with the true secret of its effect, I fell back within the bed. I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute life-likeness of expression, which, at first startling, finally confounded, subdued, and appalled me. With deep and reverent awe I replaced the candelabrum in its former position. The cause of my deep agitation being thus shut from view, I sought eagerly the volume which discussed the paintings and their histories. Turning to the number which designated the oval portrait, I there read the vague and quaint words which follow:

“She was a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee. And evil was the hour when she saw, and loved, and wedded the painter. He, passionate, studious, austere, and having already a bride in his Art; she a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee; all light and smiles, and frolicsome as the young fawn; loving and cherishing all things; hating only the Art which was her rival; dreading only the pallet and brushes and other untoward instruments which deprived her of the countenance of her lover. It was thus a terrible thing for this lady to hear the painter speak of his desire to portray even his young bride. But she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead. But he, the painter, took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day. And he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. Yet she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter (who had high renown) took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak. And in sooth some who beheld the portrait spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well. But at length, as the labor drew nearer to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from canvas merely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, ‘This is indeed Life itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved:- She was dead!

4. Discuss the Poe story in relation to Culler's concept of "focalization."

#### FOCALIZATION

Who sees? / Who speaks?

Temporal ~

Distance & Speed ~

Limitations of Knowledge~

Read Culler's commentary on the bottom of page 90.

Consider how the narrative would differ if each aspect of focalization were something *different*. Don't just consider the difference in form, but the possible differences in *meaning*.

What Stories Do

I. What does Poe's story tell us about pleasure and desire in Art? (see Culler, p 91)

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## Triangles and Then Some . . .

In the excerpt in the mathematical fiction packet titled "Rigorous Geometry," Turchi considers the possibility of "mapping" aspects of story using points and lines. The result in his examples is something like a triangle:

If X is involved in a romance A and with B, these points form the vertices of a triangle. XA and XB are two "existing" sides of the triangle.

Turchi proposes that our sense of the possible triangle formed when A and B find out about each other is what creates *tension* (is this tension synonymous with "narrative?"): the expectation generated by the partial construction of a familiar form.

He notes that such expectations are often built up in order to lure us through a story that then *actually* produces a new shape or a different-but-also-familiar shape.

This seems a useful analogy in part because, like an axiomatic system for "narrative dynamics," we can play with the rules and forms of geometry all day without thinking about narrative and then consider what aspects of what we create might be isomorphic with narrative dynamics. That is, we have here a handy abstraction that can be completely separated from the world of literature and then "tested." (in this model, we are not concerned with "testing" works of literature *in* the world: the *work* is the *test* of the diagram's capacity to suggest literary forms).

**Do this:** choose two or three common geometric forms.

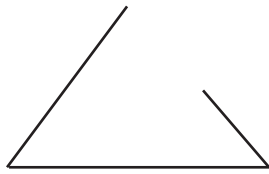
Take these as the "givens," the familiar forms, the forms that we would tend to see even when only partially described.

**What sort of narrative dynamics do each of your chosen shapes suggest?** (don't limit yourself to romantic affairs, please, or to each "point" simply representing a person)

#### FRAGMENTS

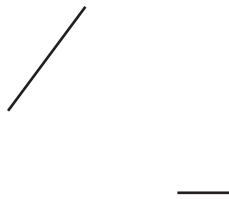
Each group has a packet of fragments of text, usually from the very beginning of some different works. Generally I've chosen texts with somewhat unfamiliar uses of language and/or narrative.

Part of the point of the triangles that Turchi describes is that narratives must appeal to *some* familiar forms (not necessarily geometric) or common conventions in order for there to be narrative tension. That is, the reader must be able to understand what's going on enough to form expectations & assumptions, to wonder what is next, and experience some sort of tension because of unresolved problems or unanswered questions that the text has generated. All of these desires are analagous, he suggests, to our desire to see, for instance, a whole triangle when only parts of a triangle are suggested:



Our eyes & minds “fill in” what’s missing, *and* we want to have it filled in for us in order to have a sense of “resolution.”

Similarly, we also know that “too little information” or too much of the unfamiliar only produces disinterest or confusion, not mystery, so:



But wait.

We know that our understanding of a text can change. We even have a sense of it as improving sometimes. We have all experienced something unfamiliar becoming more and more comprehensible the more we attend to it. In some sense, every time we read, we might need time to figure out *what might be familiar about it*. Put another way, we need to shuffle through our various **models** for what makes something meaningful, to know what kinds of questions to ask, to perceive what kinds of mysteries might exist. Put another way, not all texts are triangles. Many texts might not even be Euclidean! So we ask ourselves, “Do we have all of the models we might need in order to experience the tensions and patterns of a given text?”

One of our hopes (indeed, one of our discoveries) in this program, is that mathematical knowledge expands our capacity to recognize patterns, and therefore our capacity to see the available meanings in a text. Not all of these need to be geometric shapes, of course.

With the packet of texts you have before you, work as a group to come up with descriptions of these unfamiliar texts in an attempt to figure out how to develop a set of expectations, in essence, describe how you develop a sense of “knowing” something about the text.

**Begin with your intuitions and with simple observations and descriptions. As it seems possible and useful, diagram your impressions of the text.**

Notice that you have only small parts of each text, not enough to conceive of complex plot dynamics. In fact, each of these works might have very conventional shapes when read through. You’re working instead on a “microcosm” or aspect of that larger system.

**Once you feel you have some sense of a text, write a brief “characterization” of it.**

These characterizations should be as simple as you can make them, but they should be different for each text. It’s something like trying to determine the genre of a text, but far more rich and complex, I hope. Simply stating a presumption about the genre of any of these pieces, using some predefined set of genre categories, won’t get you very far.

**Record your observations and your characterization of each text in your notes.**