

Writing Critique 1 —week 2

Short Story *from* Sassoon's Diaries

January 11, 2005

In random groups.

*don't forget
the terms & principles
from last wednesday!!*

FIRST: everyone in your small group should take 15 minutes to write an "author's note" on their manuscript and answer the "meta-questions" on the back of this sheet.

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Try different approaches to each manuscript you critique.

Here are a few approaches:

1. The Beginning. Everyone reads silently the first paragraph only. Discuss. This starting point forces readers to think very carefully about a small portion of the work. And beginnings, as we all know, are very important.

How has the author created an opening for the story? What kind of opening is it? What expectations have they established for readers? Look carefully at the writer's use of language. How are sentences put together? Which words or images are most striking? Does it have a rhythm? When you're finished, continue as you like — you may want to try reading & discussing paragraph by paragraph or page by page. When you've read the whole, discuss the relationship between an identified "beginning" section, "middle," and "end."

2. Show Don't Tell. This approach takes a basic "rule" of writing and uses it to discuss the range between exposition and image in the story. Show Don't Tell is a vague rule. One person's tell is another person's show. What's at stake is how well the language generates the appropriate effect on the reader. The following sentence could easily be found faulty: "I felt really sad and expressed it verbally to everyone I met." The trouble here is that the words seem to be standing in the way of what's happening in the story. Of course, things

The beginning of every short story is ridiculous at first. There seems to be no hope that this newborn thing, still incomplete and tender in every joint, will be able to keep alive in the complicated organization of the world, which, like every complicated organization, strives to close itself off. However, one should not forget that the story, if it has any justification to exist, bears its complete organization within itself even before it has been fully formed; for this reason despair over the beginning of a story is unwarranted; in a like case parents should have to despair of their suckling infant, for they had no intention of bringing this pathetic and ridiculous being into the world.

-Franz Kafka.

aren't always *happening* in stories. Sometimes characters really do think about emotions, and sometimes the "level of action" needs to be somewhat abstracted from the visceral. A rewrite of that sentence could sprawl into a whole paragraph, an entire scene of the narrator weeping, pale with swollen eyes, blubbing pitifully to anonymous passersby, who, understandably, back away. Perhaps the sentiment and the detachment of the original is just what the writer needs. So, when you scrutinize the "show don't tell factor" of someone's work, you are tracing the movement from sensory appeals and direct images to expository, abstract movements in the work and discussing the effectiveness of each. Another way of thinking about these movements is to call one the "narrator's exposition" (telling) and the other "scenes" (showing).

3. The trinity. The third approach uses the basic terms *narrator*, *character*, and *plot* as entry point. What does the narrator do? What kind of narrator is it? What would the story be like with a different kind of narrator? How are the characters introduced? Which ones do we care about and why? Are they appropriately developed and complex? Where is the first suggestion of some kind of plot? How is the plot structured? Is it believable, meaningful? Can you list the "plot points"? If you can say what they are, can you also play with them -- move them around, take some out, reverse the outcomes? Are these three major terms of the fiction all working together in some cohesive or meaningful way? Which of the three seems to be the strongest element, the most important? Would the piece improve if any of these elements were emphasized, de-emphasized, if all were equally important; if only one were?

meta-questions

1. What are some aspects of the Sassoon diaries that struck you?
2. What was the most difficult thing about moving from the diaries to your own story?
3. What's the relationship between the diaries and your work — how did you use the diaries?
4. Is your work “historical”? Is it historically accurate in any way? Why or why not? What kind of “crab” have you made?
5. How does your work differ from Sassoon's *because of* the demands of writing a good story (and not just diary entries)?
6. Other notes on the creative process:
7. Questions for readers: