

## TEACHING FICTION: CRAFT, COMPOSITION THEORY, AND A LIE

By Luke Daly

My first magic trick as a new lecturer of creative writing was reappearing three days per week. I disappeared too, at the end of every class, but the students didn't seem to impart this with the same mystique.

"Daly!" sometimes they would shout, or I would imagine them shouting, as I entered. In my younger life, I was always running, always late, so I may have encouraged them to see this as a magical act. And then I'd say, "Today we're going to talk about Point of View," or something like that. And we would. Not only would we talk about it: identify it, discuss its concealing and revealing qualities in selected works, practice it during writing heuristics, and in general start to build it into our lexicon, but the students would come to class having read the right chapter from Janet Burroway's **Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft**. Or maybe that day it was the chapter on character. By all accounts, they would be ready to wring every drop out of **Character** into their own writing. But this was not the slam dunk case, as many educators will understand. One goal of this essay is to discuss why this gap occurs and how to work through it.

The funny thing about Burroway's text is that it is--or seems to me--unarguable in most regards. She says everything about character in fiction. And yet something is not there, something that can't be measured at room temperature, as if the ghost in the machine rode out through a hidden door that opened only when the scientist-writer entered with her stethoscope and implements of vivisection. And I mean by this not to criticize her book, which I find brilliant, generous, and full. Plus, she's smarter than me, so I would be a fool to go like that. Rather, I want to contribute to the conversation about teaching craft and form in undergraduate creative writing classes, particularly at the college introductory level, in a way which will run against the guidebook mentality of some creative writing teachers. This, even though I still find great use for guidebooks in my class. My experience thus far leads me to suggest that teaching creative writing with aspects of composition theory works best for a broader base of beginning writers; and that as an integrated act of form and craft rather than an as the collection and deployment of a series of formalist qualities in sequence (i.e. chapter after chapter), students may both grow their analytical abilities for literature and improve their own writing through intuitive production and revision.

Having taught with Burroway's and Jerome Stern's (**Making Shapely Fiction**) seminal fiction guides, I find that the problem is not in the texts. It's in me and the students. If I presume to set them up with a text and ask them to read about craft elements separately (Chapter 2: Showing vs. Telling, Chapter 3: Character, etc.), they will usually read the elements of fiction as separate entities, no matter how many times I or Janet Burroway say that the elements are always woven together. Sequence plays a role as well; I can only ask them to read so much at a time, and in a multi-genre intro class, the timeline shrinks further. In this way, I believe an exhaustive text such as Burroway's can be a mistake for the instructor of an intro class, preambles and forewords valuable as they are. Stern's book has been somewhat better, and it poses its own risks, chiefly that it requires independent voyaging through a forest of cross-references if it is to make a dent on one's thoughts about their own writing. Great for the self-starter, but difficult for someone who wants definition in their reading assignments. I created a structure for that which I can write about next issue, if anyone's interested.

In an intro class environment composed mainly of students earning general education credits toward the arts, acts of reflection and metacognition are a dicey sell to an audience who may or may not have been hoping for an easy time, some poem and story writing, for example. I imagine they see it something like a curricular version of pork-barrel spending, or a bait-and-switch, or any sort of con, but these types of concepts are exactly what I aim to help the students discover in order to cross the gap between guidebook information and their own prose. I witness often students taking meager, riskless steps in their writing. These are the same students who think that whatever they write is a transcription of thought to paper, with no room for discovery or growth inheriting from one clause to the next and back. My thought is that if they can see that **\*\*every piece of writing has the craft elements we discuss, that it is born into language to use metaphor, surprise, syntax, style, etc., and that if each one of them can find what craft they are using unconsciously in their work and where it is in conflict with other factors of craft and narrative, then they can find their voice, so to speak, and dive into writing fresh prose.** What I've seen in the students is impressive under this approach, and my course-teacher evaluations have become terrifically positive, a fact which I take as Exhibit A that I was wrong about students wanting an easy walk-over course.

One way I incorporate reflection and metacognition is by designing writing activities that accelerate one's experience of threshold concepts of writing (see Wardle and Downs, **Writing about Writing**, 2nd Ed., 2014) in a creative genre. One such concept is that writing is a technology for creating new thoughts (Miller and Jurecic, **Habits of the Creative Mind**, 2016) . The simple explanation is that when you write a line of language (or code, perhaps), it changes your thinking literally and gives birth to new possibilities for further thinking and language. You can accomplish a demonstration of this quickly in the classroom by asking each student to write a passage of dialogue between their parents before the student was born. My undergraduate professor asked us to write a poem about our parents on the day of our conception. Let them go on for about five or ten minutes so they have some time to roll around with it, perhaps painfully. After they finish, ask them to read it to themselves, searching for aspects of their product that surprise them in some way, minor (fireworks on the horizon) or major (warehouse fire next door). Then, ask who is willing to share (a matter for another discussion). After a few brave souls share, I share my own experience with this prompt, in which I found myself surprised by writing a poem questioning my parents' love for each other: a far cry from the horror of imagining them in embrace and a significant surprise to me as a writer. I had certainly not set out to do this. In fact, the poem had begun with a simple image of them on a rowboat in the lake I grew up beside.

In my experience teaching with this prompt, many students find that they're surprised by the mood between their parents, or the way they speak to each other in the imagined world, or some level of tension they didn't anticipate, or the way they operated on a task together. We should not underestimate this moment. As I will have included some brief mention of the threshold concept on the course syllabus (again, using composition theory as a pedagogical framework for my creative writing course), I can quickly produce that on projection for the students to see. Then I ask, **What happened between the first line and the lines following that made you create that surprising aspect?** If students are sufficiently impressed by their own mental action, I'll go a little deeper, asking if anyone feels like the writing had a role in creating itself. If students go boneless, I ask them to journal about it for three-four minutes. Things can get a little spooky here. Often, you can see scales dropping from people's eyes. New luster swirls into the corneas. Other times, nothing but fatigue and stress. But by building in moments like this in each class session (30-40 approx. per term), my students, I'd suggest nearly all of them, experience the concept that

what you write changes what you write next. But to execute such an intensive practice requires creative instruction and is a topic for another essay.

I want to get back to the deeper impetus here: how to teach form and craft in creative writing. More specifically, how to use reflection and metacognition to help the reader see their own aspects of form and craft at work. My structure for incorporating the varied terms for elements (POV, plot, scene, character, setting, etc.) this semester is very loose. To wit, students write and workshop original fiction, read short stories, and perform and track structured (i.e. in time and depth) readings of Stern's book. Whatever formalist terms stick to the wall are what they'll keep. There are no quizzes, and the expressed advantage of knowing the terms is that it helps one discuss the workings of a story. I bring up passages of texts in discussion that can produce a ground-level understanding of the terms, and only then do we label them as such. In a recent discussion about "The Banks of the Vistula," a story from Rebecca Lee's book **Bobcat**, I isolated a paragraph for my students and asked them to talk about the style of language (a term, **style**, which we had played with a lot during the preceding eight weeks of poetry workshops). Here is the passage from Lee's book:

And then the rain was upon us. We could hear it on the tiny ledges of leaves above us more than feel it. "Let's go," Hans said, grabbing my hand with his left, damaged hand. The way his hand held mine was alluring; his hand had the nimbus of an idea about it, as if the gene that had sprung this hand had a different world in mind, a better world, where hands had more torque when they grasped each other, and people held things differently, like hooks--a world where all objects were shaped something like lanterns, and were passed on and on.

I typically describe style to students as something like a thumbprint, or brushstroke, or hairdo: a distinctive thing made of a common material. I also pass out a multi-page list of adjectives that can be used to describe the style of different works, so that they can have the strange experience of describing something as urbane or subjective for the first time. I'm really interested in style, both because it seems to be something truly observable about someone's writing, and because I witness in myself the tendency to derive sentence length and syntactical skulduggery into my own writing play each time I begin reading a new book. Mark of an amateur? I am an amateur. And so, when a student offered that the passage seems lyrical and "almost like an ode to Hans' hand," I was delighted. When another student followed up by saying that the style was "dreamlike," I was delighted. When one person pointed out the irony in the imaginative and lyrical styling in this passage--as the protagonist believes herself to be dull and amateurish--I was over the dead planet Pluto. Here were the students defining the style of language in a passage and making it count in terms of the fabric of the story, as craft that is integrated rather than segregated from other elements of craft. Students often stop at identifying an element. When this other thing happens, it brings me back to the thick thrill of my graduate school workshops with Richard Robbins, Candace Black, and Diana Joseph, where everybody around me was good at this way of seeing and discussing fiction and poetry at their integrative cores.

So this is where I am as a teacher: I need to figure out how to get the students to identify aspects of craft in their own writing instead of passively assenting to their fascinating gestalt maneuvers for avoiding self-criticism. And the only way I can do that is if I try it myself. So I wrote a flash fiction. Then I wrote another. Then I wrote this essay, then three more flash pieces, then two poems, all revolving around the same character. Partly because I thought it would be an interesting exercise in style as it relates to form

(how does supershort fiction magnify style and shrink character?), but also because it seems quicker. Perhaps also because I could use a fiction by-line on my resume. Definitely a non-fiction pedagogy. Is it mercenary if I admit it in print? I was in conversation at the time that I began these flash pieces with students about how forms that occupy borderlands between poetry and fiction (hybrid, lyrical essay, etc.) challenge traditional elements of craft. Another smart student pointed out that a reader can't get to know a character very well if a story occurs in less than 300 words. What a great point! So something can be lost, but does that loss open the door for another treasure? So I decided to begin writing a traumatic scene through the lens of style, eschewing character development in favor of a pliable syntax and grammar straddling both colloquial and elevated speech patterns. The goal here became, as I ventured forth, to create natural talking points at the intersection of style, character, point of view, and form. Maybe I'm inventing a new form called the microfiction tetraptych.

And now, I see that I've lied to you. You sensed that, I bet. I could go back and revise, or I could let it be part of my message. What lie? I began the flash fiction only as an exercise in style. I wanted to write one very long sentence. I just remembered. All the other stuff, P.O.V. and Character concerns, came after the ball began rolling downhill. But the conversation in this essay led me to remembering it as a purposeful plan. The truth is, I wanted to play with style, but I couldn't do just that, because style doesn't exist in isolation, just as no element of craft or form does. And what's more interesting, is that I couldn't recall this, the origin of the short series of flashes and poems, without trying to understand and explain it. The lie revealed the truth, and the truth would have remained hidden from me without first telling the lie. It is genuinely difficult to reflect honestly. I need to remember that when I ask students to do it. Language is a tool for thinking new thoughts.

What I suggest is a model for teaching fiction craft that includes, as a starting point, discussion of passages from outside stories in context of their stories. To make this count, we must pay attention to when students cross the tracks in discussion and begin talking about a different element of craft than the one that began the conversation. E.g., if I ask students to discuss style in a paragraph, and the student begins talking inadvertently about characterization, I ought to recognize that the student is seeing the complexity of part of the story, and I should call it that, and we should relate style to characterization. Many times this happens under the radar, as an aside comment or something that the student conceals in some way. Take advantage of these moments by questioning the student about the discrepancy and letting them try to articulate how style can't be extracted from P.O.V., for example. The next step is to try to bridge the gap into their own writing. I suggest taking an emphasis off of finished stories (and poems even) in beginning weeks of intro classes. With an emphasis on working with passages, some pressure is released, and students may be willing to look at their work critically in ways that mirrors their discussion of passages by established writers. Reflection on their own writing would be the keystone of this structure: Write a story or lengthy passage, extract a paragraph for deeper examination, analyze it through a lens of one craft element (I suggest style because it seems most observable to me), then journal about how that element operates in the passage among other craft elements, and how they interact and change, limit, and expand each other.

The logical next step for this discussion is revision, though I've also mentioned other possible steps throughout this essay. Revision is tied deeply to reflective and metacognitive practices in writing, as well as into the imperfectible nature of writing (Miller and Jurecic), and it asks students to be able to spot check themselves as they work and also to review their impulses after they work. If you take my little fib

above as a corroborative example, you may see how students may begin to treat completed stories that they feel badly about differently, as reflections of impulse through language, as things to be worked with rather than filed away. I remember feeling as a student like nothing I ever wrote was really any good. That was because I loved reading good fiction and good poetry, and mine was not living up to them. We can take students from this blind dissatisfaction to seeing their work at its roots and knowing which nutrients to fold into the soil. At some point, the student writes something with quality that shocks even them, and everybody better watch out.