Theatre of the Mind  Splotting  Character
Mood  Seduction  Story Time  THEORY OF STORY
Obsession
Want/Don’t Want  Perspective  Tone

Choreography  Sense of the Senses
THEATRE OF THE MIND  Evoking
Significant Detail  Thingness  Generosity

Character Want/Don’t Want  Writer Want/Don’t Want

WANT/DON’T WANT
Reader

Want/Don’t Want  Reader Character
You Are Your Choices  CHARACTER  Story Character
Writer Character

Page Turnability
PLOD, PLOT, PLOTZ, SLPOT
Hope vs. Fear  Profluence

Space Break  Iterative
STORY TIME  Compression  THIS INK BLACK MAGIC
Scene  Elongation  Summary
Scroll Back  Costly To Break This Contract

Thought  Authorial Distance

PERSPECTIVE/POV
Writer Obsession  First, Second, Third, OM
Passion  OBSESSION  Theme
Character Obsession  Competition  Negative Capability
Lit of Illumination  WHAT  Heart
Reading Talent  Inner Dialect  Which Story to Write

Advanced Word Working, UG1555-001 Spring 2013
Tuesdays 6:20-9:00, 1Washington Place, #601

Office hours: Tuesdays 5-6, 1 Washington Place, #613

Spain’s e-mail: clspain@msn.com

Required materials:

Opn mind, obsession to learn, humbleness mixed with arrogance (it takes a certain arrogance to imagine anyone would want to give up part of their life to read what you have written), a sense to be humored.

Workshop objectives:

My objective is to teach you everything I can about the craft of fiction, and to help you write at least one compelling draft of a short fiction.

At our first class meeting you will write down your own objectives, read them aloud to class, turn them in.

Requirements:

Submit 3 fictions (one a constraint story, more on later), double-spaced and numbered, up to 12 pages long, with a mistspelling in the first sentence of each. If it is part of a larger word work you must accompany the submission with a summary of the project. Be sure x copies arrive in class one week before your work is up for discussion. Extra stories to be left in my box from which any absent workshop member—with great shame, and in danger of lowering their grade—will pick them up.

Fill out story questionnaires for your peers’ fictions. Accompanying each questionnaire should be a written critique of 150-200 words. Each of these are brought to class in duplicate—hand one to author, one to me.

Choose an “almost favorite” published story, bring in 15 copies. Participate in in-class exercises.

Fill out a Constraint Story Questionnaire. Meet with story editor (me) to discuss. Write constraint story (this one of your three fiction submissions).

Grading:

Turn in copies of 3 fictions, numbered and double-spaced, on time: 25/25

Complete all Story Questionnaires, in duplicate: 25/25
Written critiques of the work of your peers (150-200 words), in duplicate: 25/25

Bring in copies of an almost favorite story: 5/5

Participate in workshop discussions: Talk way too much you get 0/10, talk none at all you get 0/10, talk just right you get 10/10.

Don’t be a jerk (this means you are respectful of your peers and their work), don’t be offensive: 10/10

Whether I like your fictions or not: 0/0

Attendance:

Be here. Workshops work because of synergy; if you can't commit to going shoulder to shoulder for a semester you should bail now. One excused absence will not effect your grade. Excused means you email me by noon on the day you expect to miss to let me know you will not be coming because you accidentally chopped off your arm, foot, nose. Two excused absences and your grade will be dropped one letter grade. Any unexcused absence will result in the lowering of your grade. If you do miss class you must email your story questionnaires and written critiques to each author and cc me by Wednesday noon after Tuesday class you miss. Don’t be late to class. We already don’t have enough time to do all we need to do. If you have a job or any other regular commitment that you know will make you regularly late, bail now. Anyone coming in after 6:30 will be humiliated and if that happens twice it will affect your grade.

Incompletes:

Only given to students who suffer compound fractures or similarly catastrophic fates.

*All subject to confusion, delusion, fickle whims and moods of prototypefessor.

1/29  Ground Rules
      Teams Chosen: Team FK, Team KV, Team FO, Team VW

2/05  Theatre of the Mind I
      Submitting: Team FK

2/12  Theatre of the Mind II
      Covering: Team FK
      Submitting: Team KV
2/19  Story Time  
   Covering: Team KV  
   Submitting: Team FO

2/26  Perspective I  
   Covering: FO  
   Submitting: VW

3/5   Perspective II  
   Covering: VW  
   Submitting: FK

3/12  Nexus of Want (Mabley’s Big Gift)  
   Covering: FK  
   Submitting: KV

3/19  Spring Break

3/26  Story Character  
   Covering: KV  
   Submitting: FO

4/02  SLPOT  
   Covering: FO  
   Submitting: VW

4/09  Story Talk  
   Covering: VW  
   Submitting: Constraint Team FK

4/16  Story Thought  
   Covering: FK  
   Submitting: KV

4/23  The What (Carver’s Big Gift)  
   Covering: KV  
   Submitting: FO

4/30  Writer Character  
   Covering: FO  
   Submitting: VW

5/07  Rules, Contracts, Consistency, and the Kitchen Sink  
   Covering: VW
WORKSHOP RULES

For the writer:
--First off, don’t turn in anything that you think someone might find offensive or threatening. If you are wondering, clear with me first. That said, we should acknowledge how often interesting work makes us uncomfortable.
--Writer says everything writer has to say on the page. This means that while your story is discussed/dischorted you squirm/die a thousand deaths SILENTLY. At end of discussion Writer has a minute to ask any questions he/she felt were not already answered. This is not a time for the writer to explain what they meant to say.
--Try to hear everything you can.

For the reader:
--Assume it is A DRAFT, not a finished fiction, somewhere early on the arc of becoming what it will become. We WASTE TREMENDOUS ENERGY if we critique these DRAFTS as if the were published fictions.
--Remember it is a fiction.
--Be decent.
--Don’t address the writer as if they are a character in the story.
--Focus, as best you can, on THE HOW of the story, the WHY of effect, not the WHAT of what it is saying.
--be prepared to concisely make a “single-most-important comment” about each story. You can choose to highlight something you thought worked particularly well, or to focus on something you felt was particularly problematic.

A BRIEF NOTE ON MY NOTES

99.99 percent of biologists embrace THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION because it holds up under intense scrutiny. It holds up so well that if there wasn’t this thing called religion, evolution would be scientific law.

There is also a THEORY OF STORY, a set of ideas about what makes stories work--and, conversely, what makes them fail--and though different teachers (and practitioners) of story writing may have different names for these ideas, in execution they are the same.

Most storytellers haven’t bothered to (separately) write down their theory of story, but they honor the theory by using it over and over again in their work--thousands of novelists, playwrights, screenwriters, storytellers.

You can learn from them, those who have come before, or you can be a lonely creationist, living in WILLFUL BLINDNESS.

And, I am guessing, eventually, after watching enough of your stories die in the hands of your readers, you will arrive where THE THEORY OF STORY patiently awaits.
With enough persistence, perseverance, you will get there either way; it’s just easier if you look to the work of those that have gone before for guidance.

My notes (at least the notes you will get early in the semester) are an attempt to highlight the **VERIFIABLE AND REPEATABLE AND NEARLY NON-NEGOTIABLE** elements of The Theory of Story.

But be sure there are exceptions to every rule.

And be sure to be skeptical, always.

**A BRIEF NOTE ON WHAT AND HOW**

Yes, in this class we try to focus on THE HOW of story, not THE WHAT of what it is saying. You will have to train yourself to do this because, most likely, in the majority of the literature/writing classes you have taken, you focused on THE WHAT. (Is this true?) You will have to force yourself to read like an apprentice writer, force yourself to think of THE HOW not THE WHAT.

That doesn’t mean THE WHAT of what a writer writes is not important. There is nothing more important. The WHAT of what you write is what you are saying, is who you are, is the search you are on, is WHAT matters to you, is WHAT makes you you. But it’s not teachable, by teacher or peer. Is that true?

Hmmm.

Be sure that when I speak of WRITING FOR THE READER, of making adjustments to your writing for your reader, I am not talking about adjusting the WHAT, I am speaking of adjusting the HOW.

**CRITICS**

Nobody ever raised a statue to a critic. --said somebody, may they pardon me for mangling the quote.

Vladimir--No no, after you.
Estragon--No no, you first.
v--I interrupted you.
e--On the contrary.
They glare at each other angrily.
v--Ceremonious ape!
e--Punctilious pig!
v--Finish your phrase, I tell you!
e--Finish your own!
Silence. They draw closer, halt.
v--Moron!
e--That's the idea, let's abuse each other.
They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.
v--Moron!
e--Vermin!
v--Abortion!
e--Morpion.
v--Sewer-Rat!
e--Curate!
v--Cretin!
e--(with finality) Critic!
v--Oh!
He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.

This to emphasize that in this class, even though most of what we do is critiquing, we celebrate the writer, the creator. We devalue the critic, if not mock them.

Yes, when I think artists I think SUN-GODS, creators of rosy fingered dawning of life-giving light, or I think creators of high-noon scorching illuminations (of the human heart).

And when I think critic I think pale reflection, auxiliary, dim moon.

CRITIQUING

When we are pale-reflecting, dim-mooning, we are not critiquing WHAT the piece is saying unless we can’t help ourselves.

Certainly we are not trying to teach THE WHAT. How could we?

We want to focus on THE HOW. Of course we must acknowledge that in some fundamental way THE HOW and THE WHAT are inextricably bound, but it’s a question of shading our attention.

We are critiquing CRAFT CHOICES.

Not so important if we like WHAT THE STORY IS SAYING or not.

What we are trying to understand is how, word by word, scene by scene, summary by summary a writer vaults a fiction off the page and onto that stage in every reader’s head. We are trying to learn how to seduce readers with sentences. We are trying to learn how to accomplish the first and last task of every narrative, the waking of want in the reader to reach for the next page.
You hope to teach the writer something, you think you have something to teach them, and if they are lucky they might learn something, but mainly you teach yourself.

Like watching the first flight of a new flying something it is easy enough to know if a story stays up in the air or not. Fathoming WHY it flies or stalls calls for another level attention.

So we are focusing on the HOW and WHY.

TEACHER CRITICS vs. CRITIC CRITICS

The difference? Something about stance. The Critic Critic guards the gate, and already knows. And their most important job is to say, No, you can't come in. The Teacher Critic is like Keats, living like a poet, living in uncertainty, learning, searching for why. In this class I ask that you try and develop your Teacher Critic Self.

When we critique a fiction, each of us (and the rest of the class) will most likely find out more about us than we will about the fiction.

It should be obvious (but so often we forget) that there can only be so much strength to a brand new something a writer is coaxing into what it will eventually become.

It is folly (and would be overwhelming to any writer/new narrative) to lean on all of it--language, character, summary, scene, sense detail, specific detail, architecture, perspective, et cetera, et cetera--all at once.

We try to find that balance. Lean on it just right.

Different drafts call for different levels of attention.

Some submissions are only ready to bear up to inquiries of the broadest nature, to questions of obsession and want and profluence.

Sometimes, by happy miracle, an early draft is delivered to the workshop as if by the gods, and it is ready to have its structure leaned on, its scenes and summaries leaned on, perhaps even its sentences and metaphors leaned on.

Sometimes the piece is perfect. Not often, but it happened once. And we were looking so hard for what was wrong that we didn’t see what was right.

When we examine workshop drafts (turned in under deadline and duress) we should focus on potential as opposed to measuring workshop drafts up against the completed best.

As writers of new minted fictions we can only hear what we are ready to hear.
But hear everything you can.

Listen for the gifts your critics gift you, but don’t listen too hard, don’t lose your balance. Hear what you can hear, what speaks to you, and let the rest dissipate, disassociate, disappear.

We must waltz our narratives--naked hearts--out in front of that gatling gun of subjective opinion, get bloodied and shredded, and be bulletproof as well.

We are lucky to find one or two writer/teacher/critics who speak to our hearts, and who can hit .300 when they approach our work. That's if we are lucky. They are worth their weight in gold. Don’t let them get away.

FIRST DRAFTS/EARLY WORKSHOP DRAFTS

The idea is to bring in something that can be leaned on. If you are sure it is finished, and the cement has set, it is a waste of everyone's time.

That said a true first draft is probably not what we want to drop on a workshop. With a day or two of distance we would most likely see for ourselves much of what the workshop has to tell us.

The best workshop story, for both writer writer and teacher critic, is probably one that has been drafted several times, that has an idea of what it wants to be about.

Maybeperhaps.

I’m pretty sure you don’t want to use class energy checking spelling and syntax.

It is a lucky day if an early draft even approximates a story. Generally early drafts are not about writing stories but about searching for stories.

Perhaps the most one can hope for is something to save, something we can't let go of, something that won't let go of us.

We lay story
traps in
haunted
word forests.
For the bravest,
the flesh and
bone we
want those
trap teeth
to taste
is our own.

If we nail one moment in an early draft, really capture it, that should be enough to keep us going.

Great fictions are miracles.

Good fictions are miracles.

A story that flies is as much a miracle as flying yourself. To assume a first draft will take wing is as naive as stepping off a cliff with feathers glued to your fists.

Be sure you build first drafts from sand, not concrete. You want to be able to kick it over; it will get kicked over; kicking it over is a good thing.

We revise words that aren't stories into words that are.

We are high wire walkers, balanced on thin cables of language, knowing wire walkers

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\text{l.}
\end{align*}
\]

We will do it fifty times before we get it right. If our gods favor us.

Writing great fictions calls for skills equal in complexity to those skills needed to orchestrate great music, to direct great films. The range of knowledge necessary calling for (for most of us) years of study and practice.

**Reader, critic, writer, remember, these are drafts.**

**FAILURE, FAIL-YOU-ARE**

Wonderstand failure it no enemy.

Most any artistic triumph is an eyelash away from disaster.
We must give ourselves permission to fail, and to fail spectacularly.

The greatest hindrance to creativity is fear of failure. Whenever the punishment is too severe, creativity dies. Look at the unholywoods; if they fail somebody loses 100 million.

It is trapeze artist work we do. We fling ourselves, flipping and spinning and dancing on air with our language, and the reader has to make the catch.

Sometimes they don’t.

But when we do workshop work, we are not in front of a hostile crowd, we work over a net of peers. If the catch is missed, our fault or the reader's, and if we fall, we fall to friends.

If we work long enough with a net under us, finally, we don't need it.

Like those Olympic ski aerialists who practice their flips and twists by landing in pools of warm welcoming water. They would never learn those moves over stone hard snow.

Yes, we must forgive each other for falling short (of course we must fall short), and, most importantly, we must forgive ourselves.

When I write the word forgive I am reminded of a thought that winged through my mind: the idea that for the novice writer there can be no greater quality to cultivate than forgiveness. Maybe for any writer. If we can’t forgive ourselves for our early efforts, for not measuring up to what we admire as great, we are doomed to half empty notebooks of paralyzed poetry and stunted stories.

…J.S. is perfectly right in regard to the slipshod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine.—No!—though it may sound a little paradoxical. It is as good as I had the power to make it—by myself—Had I been nervous about its being a perfect piece, and with that view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble—I will write independently.--I have written independently without Judgement—I may write independently and with judgment hereafter.--The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself—That which is creative must create itself—In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.-- I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest.—But I am nigh getting into a rant…Keats.
I pass on the Keats’ letter because it is instructive, because he articulated so well what is to be lost. If Keats had allowed himself to focus on what Endymion was not, if he had not given himself permission to write without Judgement, to flex and strengthen, to stretch his capacities, to fail, writing the 4000 lines in eight months, then the extraordinary reach of 1819 would not have happened, and the miracles of Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode on Melancholy, To Autumn, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, Bright Star—would have been lost to all of us. So. So I just wanted to say that.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities of mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve:
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new:
More happy love! More happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young:
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

5
O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
--Keats

READING LIKE WRITERS

Why does the reading of good writing not guarantee good writing? This is true, isn’t it? My proof? Some of the best-read people I know couldn’t write themselves a parking ticket.

My sense is that reading good writing gets you ready to write good writing about as well as taking a 767 first class from here to LA gets you ready to pilot the 767 yourself.

And might a measure of how well a writer is doing their job be the amount of attention (or lack of attention) we pay to how they are doing it? So, the better the writing, the less we notice, the less we learn about “the how” of it?

Isn’t it true that the work of great writers—great anybodies, think Jordan, think Callas, think Hendrix, think Flannery—appears effortless?
The metaphor is an impossible reach, an uncrossable crevasse, and the writer pulls it off with a little ink, with a covering over of blank space on the page with a flimsy word bridge, from nothing to something.

It is a litmus test, isn’t it? That illusion of effortlessness? With a great story we are lost in the dream, paying no attention to how the dream is generated. Yes? Maybe? And so we learn nothing about the how of the piece, we just experience the piece.

Yes, the reader, the reader reading for joy or distraction or illumination, of course, doesn’t give a shit about how a piece of writing works. They want to be lost in the read, they are just hoping for a momentary masking of the tick-tock, a quieting of THE GREAT THUDDING CLOCK. Well, I am. You?

Maybeperehaps?

When we read as readers we only care that it works, that it loses us in the fictional dream—exceptions, of course, are the metafiction readers--that it transports us to a whaling ship sailing a Quito spring, or to a civil war field hospital that Inman walks out of, or to a hotel room in Dublin where Gretta remembers her one true love, Michael Furey, and with such a fewness of words destroy’s Gabriel’s world.

Another question: Why does it appear there is no connection between book reviewing ability and fiction writing ability?

What are book reviewers doing when they review a book? I don’t know, probably each one of them is doing something slightly different. I suppose some are trying to help those of us who haven’t read the book yet decide if we should read the book.

Some are just making some money. Because if you have anything to do with the book business you usually don’t even have enough money for a Starbucks giga-mocha-choke-a-bambino.

Some might be settling old scores, real or imagined.

And, of course, often you realize they are just showcasing their big brains, hoping to dazzle us with their interpretations, their language, their own show (the me); although, generally, I think this look-at-me razzle-dazzle is subordinated in the reviewing world, considered bad form when it is too obvious and out of control.

Yes you usually get some sort of synopsis from the reviewer, but, in general, you don’t get much of a nuts-and-bolts discussion of how a book’s words and sentences and scenes and summaries work. That said, I imagine a good part of the visceral response by the reviewer, the thumbs-up thumbs-down part of it, is a reaction to THE HOW of a book, even if THE HOW remains unexplored.
One might also think there should be some connection between book critiquing ability (as opposed to reviewing) and fiction writing ability, but I can’t say I’ve seen a trend.

What are book critics doing?

Probably some critics are publishing so they don’t perish; publishing so they can get or keep one of those increasingly elusive tenure track teaching jobs--publishing for the resume, for food in mouth, roof over head. Hard to argue against that.

It seems to me that, more often than the reviewer, the critic is not subordinating the me, is more about championing THE ME, is about singing out, Look at me, look at my interpretation, look at how clever I am, come close and I will illustrate how much I know.

Of course some critics must love language and story and just want to steep themselves in it and are trying to find a way to get paid.

Not to say there aren’t literary critics trying to figure out how it works--Gerard Genette and other Structuralists. And others I am sure.

If it is even a little bit true that reading like a reader doesn’t teach you how to write, is there something we might take from that? Should it shape the way we read when we are teaching ourselves to write?

Maybe, perhaps, for the first read, you should give yourself permission to read with those same sympathies/tendencies/wants that the reader reads with, not asking for anything more than the reader asks for: seduction, fictional dream, mystery, profluence, take me away, mask the tic-toc.

But, for the second read, maybe, perhaps you want to read not as a reader, or as a reviewer, or as a critic, but as an apprentice wordwright.

So how is a word writer to read?

Perhaps as apprentice word writers we should read like child mechanics taking apart our first car, trying to find the heart of its car-ness, scattering bolt and molded metal on a greasy floor. What is this? Is this the story’s engine? What is piston? What is cylinder? Where is this oil drip coming from? Time for a timing belt?

Or perhaps a writer should read like a carpenter climbing around an old house looking to see how it was put together. Slab foundation? Deep basements? Sheet-rocked? Plaster on lathe? Balloon framing? Post and beam? Post and modern?

Or like a medical student, dissecting that body they give you to slice and dice, to peel the skin off of, to gut and learn on.
Of course the questionnaires are an attempt, no doubt painful, at getting you started reading the way apprentice writers might want to read. A way to tease out “the hows” of an effective piece of fiction.

So I ask you to ask yourselves: Does anyone want anything? How is time handled? Is it in scene, is it in summary? Does it live in the reader’s mind? And why? Which sense does the author favor? And what is the effect of that?

Now you can’t read like an apprentice wordwright always, or you’ll stop reading, because it’s work, not much fun, going down like Ipecac rather than candy. But if you want to write, read like a writer as often as you can. Read like a writer as if your life depended on it, because your writing life does depend on it.

This worry: Is it possible that understanding “the how” of a performance actually hinders the experience of it?

Certainly this is the case with magic.

Or even a worse worry: Is it possible that knowing how something works actually hinders the creating of it? Is it possible that you would be better off working instinctively, not thinking about it?

My sense is there is probably something to this worry. There is most likely a stage we pass through when learning how something works that leaves us illuminated, perhaps for the first time, as to the complexity of the craft. And this awareness might leave one feeling, at least temporarily, inadequate, self-conscious, blocked.

But I am also fairly confident that an informed approach to writing is the only way to give yourself a chance at repeatable success.

The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert--in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. Ten thousand hours is equivalent to roughly three hours a day, or twenty hours a week, of practice.
over twenty years. Of course, this doesn’t address why some people don’t seem to get anywhere when they practice, and why some people get more out of their practice sessions than others. But no one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery. Levitin, This Is Your Brain on Music