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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS FOR WRITING GOOD FICTION

Motion:

action - suspense - conflict
opportunity - irony
encounter - movement
incident - change
choice - time

Character:

description
dialogue
inner monologue
motivation
awareness
revelation

Orientation:

place/setting
concrete details
specifics
point of view
style
tone

Multiplicity:

several points of view, different realities
variety of characters with differing worldviews
layering
various time periods
dream consciousness, day consciousness
overlapping of events, sensations, and emotions
general richness of invention

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT NUMBER 1:

Motion

The story must have something that drives it onward and keeps the reader reading. This is often called forward motion or suspense. The best source of forward motion is conflict, one of the timeless techniques of good storytelling.

Human beings in general find conflict fascinating. Our lives are filled with daily minor conflicts — choices we must make between one desire or commitment and another. Most people need to juggle the demands of family, work, personal fulfillment — we all have many claims on our time and energy. The daily news is rife with stories of more dramatic conflicts at home and around the world, and we often find it hard to resist the urge to know what happened. Whenever an argument breaks out in public, our attention is immediately riveted.

Of course there are other methods of holding reader interest — aesthetic use of language, interesting ideas, and factual information interlaced with narrative — but nothing works quite as well as conflict. Dickens and Dostoevsky knew this. Both authors wrote some of their best books for serial publication. They had to hold their reader's interest in suspension from week to week by keeping them wondering what would happen next. Suspense is about what will happen next, what actions a character will perform.

Aristotle's *Poetics* may be the world's first work of literary criticism, but it is also a treatise on how to write a great play. After viewing the play festivals year after year, much like a film critic would watch all the films at Cannes, Aristotle felt the need to make a general statement about what works and doesn't work. He believed that in order to be effective, a play must have a good plot. He even went as far as to say that plot is more important than character. And on a certain level he's right. Using the example of the Oedipus story, he theorizes that when someone hears the bare outline, he wants to see the play. If you tell someone you've written a book about a man who murders his father and marries his mother, the chances are pretty good that they will want to read it just to find out how it happens and what are the consequences of such a horrific series of events. Readers are initially more curious about what happens than who it happens to. The opening lines of *Romeo and Juliet* are spoken by the Chorus, and they give the audience a summary of the plot — they give away the ending, the young lovers will kill themselves — so why watch the play? To find out

how it happens. Fairy tales don't give us much character development, and other than the final transformation not much changes for them. We are interested in Cinderella or Beauty because of their single redeeming quality, their goodness or compassion, and the fact that this positive character trait brings about their reward. Our interest in the Beast is limited to the end result of his curse, and with the princess in Rumpelstiltskin we simply want to know if she will guess his name or lose her child. In other words, we listen or read to learn the outcome of the events of the story, not for the thoughts and emotional life of the characters. When we read fairy tales we don't gain much insight into who the central characters are in terms of their complex psychological make up, and may not really care to know them beyond finding out what they do to overcome the obstacles to their goal.

In conclusion, then, let's accept it on faith that readers find conflict engrossing, and a skillfully developed conflict in a story can grip them more strongly than anything else.

CONFLICT

As in life, literary conflicts form at many levels simultaneously and are multi-directional, i.e., an individual in conflict with himself may also be at odds with his condition, his wife, his colleague, etc. (think of Hamlet); however, a single conflict should emerge as the clear focus of a work of fiction.

All dramatic action should somehow grow out of this central conflict.

External or straightforward conflict

External conflict is the oldest and most common form. In its simplest terms, it can be understood as a struggle between a force and an opposing force of equal strength, a protagonist and an antagonist. Simplistic stories of good vs. evil use the good guy/bad guy stereotype with the conflict taking the form of a physical battle in which the bad guy is vanquished either permanently or temporarily. The outcome, or resolution of the conflict, is usually clearly understood. It gives the reader emotional satisfaction to know that good has clearly triumphed, as is often not the case in life.

For convenience, consider external conflict as an individual versus nature, society, a condition (such as poverty or racism), or another individual.

Internal Conflict

Internal conflict may be understood as an individual versus his or her inner demons. In modern literature, internal conflict is always present in the central character. In fact, it is the sine qua non of contemporary literature. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner stated that the only subject worth writing about is the story of the human heart in conflict with itself. I fully agree. Our motives are never clear-cut — we want to do something, and we don't want to do it at the same time. Rarely are our actions pure, simple, and straightforward — they are often tainted by self-interest. Do you, or does anyone you know intimately, have a single motivation for every action that is more involved than satisfying a basic need such as hunger? And yet, when you take someone to lunch there is always another reason beyond just sharing a meal. There's always more than one need to be satisfied, we feel torn between them, and one or more desires always go unfulfilled. We can't have our cake and eat it too, to continue the food metaphor, as most of us would like. So it is, or should be, with characters in contemporary fiction.

The Resolution Question: do readers need closure?

You will have to solve the problem of whether or not your major conflict will have a clear-cut resolution. At the simplistic level of an action film, the good guy always defeats the bad guy even if the bad guy may be back in an other episode. Leaving viewers wondering whether the villain was killed is a common device that leaves open the possibility of a sequel. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has a major antagonist and a definite goal — when the villain is defeated and objective accomplished, the story's tension and suspense are over, and we feel a sense of finality. What happens after that in terms of the Hobbits return to their village and their new life is of only minor interest. In an ongoing series like Harry Potter, we expect new obstructions and more powerful opponents in each book.

External conflict sets up reader expectations for some kind of closure. Internal conflict rarely has closure, just an adjustment or acceptance which may lead to peace or just continued survival at a price.

The outcome of internal conflict is seldom made plain. There's rarely a resolution, just an awareness and an acceptance. A story about the adjustments of marriage may end with the newly-married woman having an

epiphany about herself or her husband. Kimberly may, for example, realize that she did not marry Kevin purely for love, that he may, in fact, have some traits that she finds abhorrent. She goes through a crisis and comes to terms with her situation. She may want to leave him, but she doesn't want to admit she made a mistake and lose face with her family, especially her sister who advised her to reconsider her decision. Perhaps she doesn't love Kevin as much as she thought she did, but he has money and she likes their lifestyle, and, besides, she may grow to love him more with time . . . etc. So what does Kimberly do? Leave him? Of course not. The end of the story strongly implies that she goes on living her life with nothing but a change in attitude and the possibility of extramarital affairs to satisfy her emotional/sexual needs.

Multiple Levels of Conflict in Hamlet

In the most compelling stories, conflict exists at multiple levels simultaneously. In other words, a character may be in conflict with society, nature, another individual, a condition, and himself all at the same time. Think of the many conflicts in *Hamlet* — there's Hamlet versus King Claudius, his mother, Laertes, Ophelia, Polonius, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, and, of course, himself. He even does battle with a storm at sea, though it's not in the immediate action of the play. The only character of any importance with whom Hamlet is not in conflict is Horatio.

NARRATIVE DRIVE AND THE EMOTIONAL ARC

Your story needs some forward motion in terms of a sequence of events, rising action, falling action, developing to a climax, but the emotional build-up is equally important — think of your climax as the emotional peak of the story. Readers need an emotional pay-off that will justify their investment of care and concern for the life of the central character. Your central character, regardless of the upward or downward slope of his/her fate, should have fulfilled his/her potential to some extent. Perhaps she never becomes the superstar she dreamt of being and worked so hard to become, but at least she had her special moments of glory, pleasure, happiness, love, joy, which we have shared with her. Even if she dies at the end of the book, if she looks back and realizes, "I've tasted the joys of life," readers will find that satisfying.