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Thesis: Craft Essay

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The Music of Character Development and Point of View

Creating and developing characters is essential to introducing the reader to the world of a novel. When I call to mind my favorite characters there seem to be common factors that make them impactful. They may have a strong personality, they have a sense of purpose, they overcome some great feat, they have distinguishable characteristics; all of this equates to a writer that has written a well-developed character. By many means, the writer has developed a character that resonates long after the book is closed. In his article “How to Write Fiction: Creating Characters” Andrew Miller writes, “let it be loudly asserted that character, strong characters, are the heart of great literature and always will be” (1). The beauty of crafting characters is the flexibility and creativity writers have in making them come to life on the page. They can be based off of people we know or they can be completely imagined beings that we bring into the world.

Much of this progression of character from first impression to end, begins with research; learning about their interests, creating a personality and investigating the character’s job or passion. A successful character may begin with defining an interest, career or passion project that drives the characters. In his book, *Thrill Me* Benjamin Percy speaks to the importance of work defining characters, “Work dominates our lives. And we have an obligation, in our prose and poetry, in the interest of realism, and in the service of point of view, voice, setting, metaphor, and story to try to incorporate credibly and richly the working lives of our characters” (140). Percy acknowledges that much of how character’s view the world and make decision is based on their jobs. It is vital to create character’s whose actions, associations, tones and even point of

view stems from their line of work. In most novels, work or a passion defines who the character is, and in turn what they want.

Once the character's work or interest is determined there must then be something they want to attain or intend to pursue that in some way relates to their work. In his book, *The Screenwriter's Bible*, Trotter suggests, "Whatever the goal is, it should not be easy to attain. There must be opposition to the goal. Opposition creates conflict and conflict creates drama. Conflict reveals character and motivates people to learn" (58). There are many ways to create opposition, consider loss of a job, competition over the same goal with another character or an unexpected hinderance. Whatever the opposition may be, David Corbett, in his book, *The Art of Character Creating Memorable Character for Fiction, Film and TV*, posits that the world does not simply gratify our desires therefore by "giving the character a deep-seated need or want, you automatically put her at odds with something or someone" (51). The goal as a writer is to show characters taking action in order to achieve their goals, overcoming a dilemma, or progressing towards a desire because as readers and as humans we can relate to that progression. This character progression is what compels readers to keep reading. A stagnant character is not realistic because in reality we all change, and the reader wants to be able to relate to the character in some way. To the same affect, the reader expects the character to transform in some way, whether big or small, from the person we first met. Corbett expresses that a character who develops is, "obliged to change and that requires a capacity to surprise, to contradict that first impression in significant but still credible ways" (12). This ability to surprise the reader and to contradict previous thoughts of a character stems from the ability to emphasize a character's work or passion, present them with a goal and an opposition that causes them to act.

Creating Active Characters

In life, we are often told that we are defined by our actions. This sentiment is also true of characters. Where interiority is important and often essential in getting to know a character, the character must be active in order to compel a reader to keep reading, but also to become a believable, well-developed, and memorable character. Once a goal and opposition are made known, the character must act, and must pursue it. John Gardner, in his book *The Art of Fiction*, agrees, “The character must for some reason feel compelled to act, effecting some change, and he must be shown to be a character capable of action” (186). The reason for action can stem from a variety of accelerants whether it be emotional, physical, financial, spiritual, professional or as a means of safety. Whatever it is, something must be at stake for the character. When something is at stake a sense of urgency is created which is felt by the character, and in turn relayed to the reader. Gardner explains that forces from within and outside of the character often acts as opposing forces pushing the character toward and away from the course of action. This pushing and pulling creates doubt, moral choice, and meaning. Percy expresses much of the same idea, he suggests, “you must have both: what is outside of the character (whatever is intruding on her life) and inside of the character (whatever she desires that is just out of her reach)” (21). These opposing forces create tension, causing decision making and resulting in action or reaction. The writer must make these inside and outside forces known. As Corbett argues, “Characterization requires constant back-and-forth between the exterior events of the story and the inner life of the character” (49). In doing so, the reader truly gleans what is at stake. The suspense builds as the reader anticipates how the character will overcome such obstacles that drive the plotline and create a sense of urgency.

Aja Gabel’s novel *The Ensemble* is an excellent example of introducing a goal within the first chapter. The Van Ness Quartet is preparing to compete in a competition that will define

their fate as musicians, yet they are struggling to get along both personally and professionally. The reader knows just how vital their success at the competition is, which creates suspense. The incongruity and spats between the characters creates an obstacle. Knowing this, the reader is anticipatory of how the characters will resolve or overcome the stakes at hand to accomplish their goal. Through a character's actions, the reader gains the truest sense of who a character is and their values.

Connecting with Characters

The importance of an active character is that the character should learn something, and in turn, so does the reader. This learning can be accomplished in a variety of ways such as creating a conflict, the character reacting to that conflict, and then gaining knowledge through their reaction. This is a way of defining a character's arc, which Trottier encourages writers to "ask yourself how your character grows or learns or acquires new skills or knowledge" (67). As readers, we want to see the character act, but come out on the other side changed in some way. When a character experiences change, it creates a link to reality even in a fictitious world. Trottier suggest that writers need to make "characters seem as human as possible. In other words, your job is to make us care about them" (69). It is important that not everything goes right for a character, but also that not everything goes wrong. Readers still, in some way, expect an experience that is tangible and relatable. Well-developed characters take the reader along through their emotions. We feel joyous with them in their highs, we sympathize with their lows, we feel a sense of suspense when odds are against them, and we ultimately feel proud when they achieve their goals. Each character should have a belief system that becomes apparent through their actions. James Wood, in his book *How Fiction Works* argues that the vitality of literary character rests in "our awareness that a character's actions are deeply important" (118). The

writer has the important task of creating characters that the reader relates to and connects with. The best way to do this, is to put them in action. In her novel, *The Immortalists*, Chloe Benjamin begins by creating a sense of urgency when her four protagonists go to see a fortune teller who reveals the dates of each of the Gold children's deaths. Knowing these dates, the children pursue their lives with intention and action, making the most of every moment. The reader feels empathy towards these characters because their deaths are imminent, but also, they now live purposeful lives that are at times derailed by the unexpectedness of life. The ultimate goal is for the writer to present the reader with characters that have been called to action and that action activates empathy towards the characters.

Character Development in My Novel

Even before I put words to the page, when the ideas were just forming in my head, I had a strong sense of who Rylee and Craig were. In every piece of fiction I've ever written, I know who the characters are long before I know the plot, the action, or have a strong sense of setting. I know my characters, Rylee Owens and Craig Collins likes, dislikes, physical appearances, intentions, and emotions. I have mapped out their backstories. In his book *The Art of Perspective*, Christopher Castellani says, "the overarching voice or controlling consciousness, however wryly or subtly, instructs the reader how to see the characters and the worlds they inhabit" (68). I needed to know these characters in order to represent them accurately and fairly tell their stories. I wanted my characters to be realistic with a range of emotions and actions that often surprise the reader. In her book *13 Ways of Looking At The Novel*, Jane Smiley, says, "A protagonist in a novel, of whatever ethnic background and in whatever time period, cannot be wholly good or wholly bad and still be interesting enough to read about" (28). This passage resonated with me because it reminded me that in order to be engaging characters, they need to

be multilayered. They don't necessarily need to be unpredictable, but if a reader can calculate every move a character will make, they become bored. Anna Kerrigan, one of the two protagonists in Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*, is a character that continually surprised me. In the first chapter she is an adolescent, but even so she is confident and well-spoken. As she develops into a young woman she is not intent on simply working at the Navy shipping yard, but decides to become the first female diver. She is determined, steadfast, cunning and loyal. She uses these traits to her advantage in order to gain information on her missing father, even if that means sleeping with the enemy. She is a lively character who surprises and delights with her actions while staying true to her morals. Much like Anna, characters should contain elements of surprise and of the unexpected.

The lives of musicians hold a certain fascination and interest that is clear in the many novels and films that have been produced. Where there will be unavoidable overlap in the worlds of these characters, I don't want my novel to become just another musician story that everyone thinks they know. I have challenged myself to seek different paths and outcomes for my characters. Castellani contributes valuable thoughts on how we determine the merit of a character by "how closely we relate to the characters' experiences and "how strongly the author's ultimate vision compels us, provokes us, challenges us or makes new the everyday" (69). This quotation in particular shaped the way I thought about my own characters. I want my characters to achieve all of the aspects that Castellani speaks of. Where the musician as a character may be familiar, I intend for my characters to excite in new ways and to challenge the perceptions that already exist.

At the heart of every story, is the purpose that propels the characters and ultimately drives the story. Where Rylee and Craig are at different places in their careers and lives and have

different means to approaching their goals, they are both compelled to create music that is meaningful and representative of them as artists. Both Rylee and Craig face career challenges, which they know they must overcome in order to succeed. As a writer, I want the reader to know that Rylee and Craig are capable of accomplishing their goals. What I want the reader to ponder is how they will accomplish those goals in the face of complications. For example, Rylee is driven, determined, and passionate. She has a sense of urgency that assures us some way or another she will achieve her goal of a record deal. Yet disagreements, competition, management issues and familial fights will try to deter her from her goal. The reader continues to read because they want to see how Rylee acts and reacts towards these obstacles.

In my early drafts of the novel, I realized that I spent so much time inside the minds of my protagonists that they became stagnant characters. They thought a lot but did not act on those thoughts or against them. Corbett suggests we cannot truly know a character by only residing in their heads or solely through biological data, instead, “we get to know them through interacting with them – especially during emotional, unpredictable, or demanding times” (117). In this draft of the novel, I wanted to show my characters are capable of action, not just thought and reflection. While interiority is interesting and can reveal a lot, it should be balanced with action, because ultimately, action is what engages the reader. Interiority allows the reader to get to know the character and empathize with them, but action is what compels. Action is essential for showing the character, rather than simply telling readers how to interpret them.

In my original draft of the first chapters, Rylee and Craig were thinking, but not doing. Where it gave the reader an inside to the character’s thoughts, it did not make for exciting copy in terms of plot movement or action. I transitioned from telling to showing. I gave my character’s problems and oppositions that got in the way of their goals, and then challenged them to

overcome by urging them into action. Many of Rylee's and Craig's issues arose from the same point of contention, the desire to create music they consider to be of value despite the demands of the popular market. Because many of their problems were similar, I began to question why tell both character's stories? Trottier shares a statement that helped me through some of these questions of sharing both Rylee and Craig's point of view:

Everyone had a belief system, a perception of reality that is influenced by a past experience, a point of view that has developed over time. Our current experience is filtered through our past experience. This means that two people may react in totally different ways to the same stimulus. It depends on their perception. Their point of view is expressed in attitudes. (64)

Where Rylee and Craig share the same world of music and the issues that arise within the industry, they are two vastly different characters, both deserving of having their individual stories told.

Point of View

Early on, this novel came to me in third person, and it felt necessary that the character's stories were shared in this way. It wasn't enough to simply say, "it just felt right," I needed to understand why and to determine if this method was truly how the lives of Rylee and Craig should be told. While any point of view can provide information, the strength of third person is its versatility and ability to zoom in and pan out. Alice LaPlante, in her book, *The Method and the Madness* describes this technique, saying, "by using shifts in narrative distance you can easily get into the heart and mind of a character, just like first person, yet you have the advantage of pulling back (panning the camera, if you will) to show the readers more of the world of the story"(204). I realized, upon reading La Plante's chapter that writing a novel in multiple points

of view appealed to me because I am able to engage with each character distinctly while also showing the world they are involved and active in.

There is a distinct flexibility of knowledge and range present in third that other point of views lack. LaPlante describes the limitations of first person by saying, “the disadvantage of this point of view is its very limited scope. Everything is filtered through only the eyes, ears and brains of one character” (203). A closeness that can become too close, especially when the writer intends for other character’s thoughts and emotions to be considered equally. As reader’s we tend to empathize with characters we can relate to or see aspects of ourselves in. By putting multiple characters in the same amount of spotlight, the reader can better empathize with each. La Plante argues, “you can have all the advantages of the first person (being intimate) and still pull back and get more perspective on the larger world” (203). I specifically utilize this technique during performances scenes. One moment we are in Rylee’s head as she frets over her employer’s record deal, and the next we pan to a packed Broadway bar. This telescopic ability is best utilized by third person, but it must be managed well so the reader doesn’t become disoriented. John Gardner, in his book *The Art of Fiction*, says that to establish third person multiple, “the writer must dip fairly soon into various minds, setting up the rules; that is establishing the expectation that, when he likes, he will move from consciousness to consciousness” (158). When I began writing, I had three characters in mind. I found that Rylee’s and Craig’s chapters were longer and ultimately more interesting. This led to the decision to alternate my chapters between Rylee and Craig and to make Bryce a minor character later in the novel.

Models for Point of View

With my focus honed on these two characters, I began read through novels that used third person multiple to tell the stories of their characters. Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*, Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies*, Aja Gabel's *The Ensemble*, Chloe Benjamin's *The Immortalists*, Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney's *The Nest*, Ana Pitoniak's *The Futures*, and Ann Patchett's *Commonwealth* all feature third person points of view spanning from limited to omniscient narrators. Each of these novels placed emphasis on the importance of hearing the individual stories of each character, presented through thoughts and feelings while exhibiting how those individual characters interact and engage with one another in a shared world. Not only does the reader gain insight to the interiority of each protagonist, but also the expanse of their surroundings and interactions with one another. This merging of character interiority and action propelled by their setting leads to richer, more developed characters. With multiple character points of view, the reader gets two stories, which creates a broader sense of the world. In an effort to make each character's voice resonate differently and distinctly, Corbett suggests, "Each character should possess his or her own tone, express through voice, and that shift in tone can provide welcome variety" (339). This variety of characters in a familiar space is exactly what I envision for my novel.

Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* alternates between the characters of Anna Kerrigan and Dexter Styles. As a child, Anna first meets Dexter when she accompanies her father on a business meeting. Years later, Anna's father mysteriously disappears. The story follows Anna as she grows into a young woman who works at the Brooklyn Naval Yard and eventually becomes the first female diver. One night, at a night club, Anna again meets Dexter. In this passage from Anna's point of view, we see her recognizing Dexter, "Dexter Styles was the man from the beach. This discovery arrived in a hot-cold rush, disorienting her as if the room had flipped on its

side. A lost memory surfaces: riding in the car with her father. Playing with another girl. This man, Dexter Styles, on an icy beach” (71). She knows he won’t remember her so to discreetly learn more about her father’s disappearance she conceals her identity. Dexter is a crime boss and a gangster who once employed Anna’s father. Through his point of view the story follows the underground crime rampant in Brooklyn. From Dexter’s point of view we see his fascination with Anna, “An intelligent person sat beside him, a girl who was not silly, who would understand whatever he gave her to understand, who intrigued him through some combination of physical attributes and mental toughness, but really it was the latter because physical attributes surrounded him daily and prompted little feeling” (235). Through having both points of view, we have access to how each character feels about the other.

This novel alternates between two vastly different characters whose lives converge because of Anna’s father. By having access to both points of view, the reader knows why each is interested in the other. Anna intends to gain information about her father’s past and present through Dexter, and Dexter is enthralled by the beauty and brains of Anna. In third person multiple the reader sees these two separate stories converge as one. Much like Rylee and Craig these characters are very different in personality, background, and life experiences, yet their lives merge through music. I’ve found that I am drawn to third person multiple novels because I am able to clearly see how the world affects them, and they in turn affect the world.

The Future of My Novel

In my early chapters I relied heavily on the interiority of the characters. It took reading the first chapters of novels that I enjoy to realize I needed to make the shift to more active characters. The first few pages of a novel can either ignite excitement in the reader or cause them to put aside the novel altogether. There are a multitude of books to be read, and I do not want

readers to put mine down and select another. I realize that my strength lies in creating characters and introducing readers to their world. I intend to hone in on these characters and emphasize a sense of empathy for who they are and what they will accomplish.

By the conclusion of the novel, Rylee will receive a record deal through Craig's record label and will begin touring as an opener with one of her shows being at The Ryman, her dream concert venue. Where Rylee and her mother will have confrontations about Rylee's image as an artist, they will ultimately come to respect and understand one another. At one point, they will consider if Leslie is best suited as Rylee's manager. The decision will be that she is, but they will both need to compromise with one another. An element that will bring Leslie and Rylee closer and will help Rylee to understand her mother's hesitations with males within the industry, is when Rylee learns that her biological father was once Leslie's managers when she pursued a music careers in the early 1980's. Rylee and Craig will form a working relationship in which they write music together and become friends and each other's support systems. Where Rylee is drawn to Craig she is more compatible with Bryce, a guitar player.

Craig will continue to experience debilitating anxiety attacks and bouts of depression. He is also unable to produce any music for his expected second album. He experiences periods of deep doubt and questions his career within the industry. He seeks Rylee out as a potential songwriting partner. She ends up writing most of the music and tells him how this is an unfair partnership. He confides in her about his anxiety and depression. One night, Craig purposefully drives his car off the road and into a tree with the intent of self-harm, both Rylee and Charlie intervene. This is when Craig enters into therapy and rehab. Rylee visits him and eventually, he writes the album on his own, detailing his struggles with mental health. This album is highly respected within the songwriting community.

In order to keep writing this novel, I need to continue to seek active characters and events that create a compelling plot. To be accurate in my depiction of Craig, I need to do more research on anxiety, depression, and mental illness. While I have done much research on the music industry, I plan to do even more, especially in regard to pursuing and obtaining a record deal.

Conclusion

Writing a novel about the music industry in Nashville was of interest to me because while it's a huge industry, it is also a very interconnected one. From Broadway to Music Row singers, songwriters and musicians overlap in working together whether they are songwriting, recording or performing. This interconnectedness of stories and voices lead me to writing in third multiple. I had not written in this point of view before therefore I enlisted the novels of novelists writing in the same form as my guides. Where these multiple characters have their own stories to tell, in some way, they connect and create a larger world for the reader to delve into and view from multiple perspectives. My purpose in writing this novel is to emphasize the unity music can bring, the healing that art can provide, to bring awareness about the lives that singer/songwriters and musicians in Nashville live, to inform of industry related mistreatment of female artists and to develop characters that encourage empathy.

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