

## What we talk about when we talk about change

For as long as I've been teaching creative writing I've told students that in some respects finding the subject and focus for your short story and then writing that story is a fairly simple, transparent matter, or should be. Just write something which takes your character from point A to point B and which *shows* how that character is changed in the process. This isn't a formula exactly, it's more like a very open-ended, descriptive template. A tarot card that could be read effectively in almost any life situation, positive or negative. The change can be big or small or even a refusal to change. The trip from A to B can be inward, outward, upward, sideways, virtual, whichever way you want to go. No rules, no prescriptions.

### Step One: Thin Places

To be sure you're on the right foot going from A to B, the first thing I recommend is that you search out characters whose lives are under just the right amount of pressure—characters who are, as my teacher Jim McPherson always said, in a “thin place.” That is, anywhere in the world where the ordinary day-to-day presumptions about the nature of reality suddenly seem worn out, questionable, and wrong; anywhere at all that the real but invisible forces moving us through life (love, belief, loss, mortality, rage, etc.) can suddenly be glimpsed behind the screen of custom, culture, and habit whose normal job it is to protect us from ever seeing the invisible stuff for too long or too intensely. You don't have to push your character off a bridge or into extreme poverty, violence, séances, war, hallucinogenic drug use, etc., in order to find a thin place for him/her (though these things do often generate existential thinness...just, potentially not the right thinness for you or your character; in fact, often as not, dialing *back* the volume on dramatic content and focusing in on your character without all the clutter is the way to go). Depending on your character's situation and sensitivities, you might find a thin place in a bus ride to the YMCA, a public garden, a front hall window through which you watch the girl next door, or a cup of coffee swirling with Pet Milk. Memory can evoke it. Story action, setting, other characters. Point is, characters in a thin place are more likely to change or to think about changing than characters who are not. So go there with your fictional people. Begin in a thin place. Or end there. Or stop on the way. Or never leave.

### Step Two: Change

What I suspect hangs up beginning writers most, because it seems so daunting, or because they flat out misapprehend it, is this business about *change*. What does it look like for a character to change, what constitutes change, and how do we know if a character has earned the right to change, or the right degree of change at the close of the story? Most people, by the time they come to a serious appreciation for literary fiction either as readers or writers, have seen enough of life (and survived or witnessed a sufficient number of lapsed New Year's resolutions) to have learned that in general *people* don't change much, if at all. In fact, people change regrettably less often than we might wish, and much too slowly and reluctantly for their own (or our) good. Most of the time people in real life who come to us with stories of thunderstruck conversion seem more suspicious than inspiring, possibly crazy or in need of help, so why do we hold fictional characters to a different standard? If in our fiction we're trying to give an accurate and lasting

reflection of the human condition, why do we organize stories around this great big lie—a character goes from point A to point B and is changed by it?

One answer is this: fiction *isn't* life. It's not supposed to be. It's *lifelike*. Characters change more often in stories than in life because we need them to—for the drama and the excitement, because it's good for us to see what change might look like. We need an *un-lifelike* amount of grace in stories because otherwise the stories would be too boring. Too lifelike.

But the other problem is this word *change*. We talk about it all the time like we really know what it means, like it's a given—and sure, when you encounter a character like Joyce's unnamed narrator at the end of *Araby*, or the tragically despicable Julian at the end of O'Connor's *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, it seems transparent and obvious if unparaphraseable enough—*right there, look...that's how a character changes, that's how it works*—but maybe we're too loose and uncaredful with the term. Joyce and O'Connor were Catholics after all (practicing or not), and come out of a tradition rich with rituals, iconography, images and narratives all emphasizing the truth and power of *real* miraculous conversion, from baptism to transubstantiation, immaculate conception to resurrection, etc. In the Catholic faith, changes of the highest and most dramatic order are *de rigueur*. And through Joyce and O'Connor, whose influence on the short story form is indisputably profound, to this day, secularized or not, we have this inherited adherence to that kind of change. But is it fair to expect readers and writers of today to engage with stories modeled on miraculous, epiphanic conversion anymore? Is it still as culturally relevant? For all of us?

#### Step three: Changing the Notion of Change

To complete this exercise, try to keep in mind broader and possibly less Catholic definitions for the concept of *change* (meaning no disregard to Joyce and O'Connor) as it applies to fiction. If we say that a character goes from point A to point B and is shown to change along the way, what if we really mean this: she doesn't *actually* change. She doesn't *transform*. She doesn't necessarily undergo a cellular or spiritual metamorphosis of any kind, unless the story calls for it. Instead, what we mean is *she becomes more purely and fully herself*. She becomes the person she was destined to be from the outset of the story (à la Heraclitus's "character is destiny"), if you were paying attention, and if the story was building right from beginning to end. Like the grandmother in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, she becomes who she was all along, just a little more fully realized and mortal, if only for a final few seconds of her otherwise miserable life.

#### Step four: Logistics

Reading exercise: Pick a few of your favorite stories. Re-read them with an eye for where the thin places are. Where does the main character most come face-to-face with whatever invisible force is acting upon her in the story action? If you had to put a name to that invisible force or existential threat, what is it? Heartbreak, alienation, identity confusion, death, nostalgia, sexual longing, something else? Also be on the lookout for how the dramatic events in the story do or do not connect with those thinnest thin places, how the story's dramatic events are structured around the thin places, and what the dramatic events reveal about the fundamental and most

enduring traits of the main character. Has she really changed at the end or just become a more full-blown version of who she was all along?

Writing exercise: Take a character from a story you've basically abandoned or can't see a way to finish. A character for whom you cared enough to generate some thousands of words, but ultimately had to leave behind. Or if you have no such character in your drawer of unfinished and impossible stories, pick someone from your life who just never made sense to you. Someone who drove you to distraction with their perplexing contradictory ways or seemingly aberrant sense of judgment. The closer to you, the better. Someone you really know, but just can't understand.

Once you have the character in mind, imagine her in the one situation that made her the most afraid for her life. Borrow from your own life for this moment if need be, but imagine it through the eyes of your character. Write the scene. Sketch it, see where it takes you.

Imagine the same character's moment of worst and most painful self-doubt and remorse. Again, borrow from your own life as needed. Write the scene. Sketch it, see where it takes you.

Next, imagine this character keeping himself awake laughing all night in pleasure. What's the cause of his pleasure? Sketch that scene too, see where it goes.

Now look back over your three sketches and try to discover something about who this character was all along, most fundamentally. If character is destiny, by stringing together these moments of fear, shame and joy, what do you suppose this character's most obvious destiny might have been (emotionally, psychologically, financially, physically, etc.)? Read into your sketches to discover the most fundamental and enduring traits of this character.

Finally, make whatever you discover into the endpoint toward which you will now target your story's grand finale scenes—the revelation or anti-revelation for your story (and a suggestion: I'd encourage you to embrace any and all diversions from this target if you happen to discover better things as you get underway with writing!). Your character's moments of fear, shame, and joy can be the places to stop along the way in order to show your reader who he/she was all along.