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*A Creative Approach  
to Writing*

ROGER H. GARRISON

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**Imagination is the use that reason  
makes of the material world.**

**—RALPH W. EMERSON**



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## *Note to the Instructor*

THE BASIC PREMISE of this book is that all writing is in a real sense creative. No matter what form the writing takes, the writer must solve certain problems which are the same whether he is doing a paragraph theme of simple exposition or a publishable short story. He must know what he is talking about, be able to think it through, organize it reasonably and persuasively, and present it with clarity, attractiveness, and vigor. Surely, in a fundamental sense, this is a creative process.

This is another way of saying that good writing begins with good thinking. Most teachers of writing know this. They recognize with renewed force each year that nearly all their students' writing problems are basically *thinking* problems. The muddled phrasing, mixed-up sentences, and badly constructed paragraphs of typical freshman themes, for example, are obvious demonstrations of the confused thought processes that produced them. Instructors also observe, with an annual second-semester resurgence of hope, that as students master their subject matter and learn to arrange it in their minds and speak it out on paper with simple directness—in short, as students learn how to *think*—their writing develops sharpness, force, and even vividness. Furthermore, problems of grammar, usage (and sometimes even spelling) often begin to solve themselves.

This book is designed to provide, in an order of increasing difficulty, some typical *problems in thinking* that any writer meets. Though the emphasis is on imaginative or so-called "creative" writing, the instructor will find that the methods indicated here are flexible enough to be

adapted to the needs of beginning students as well as to the needs of those who have advanced well beyond the freshman composition level. (There is no reason why even beginning students should not have the pleasure and genuine mental excitement of working gradually toward the writing of sketches, features, and short stories. And, as instructors of creative writing classes know, even more expert students need constantly to be asked questions of the kind that this book poses in every chapter. The questions are basic; but the "answers" increase in complexity with the growing maturity of the student's mind.)

For example, most writers—beginners or even professionals—have a tendency to generalize, to clothe vague ideas in even vaguer language. Teachers of writing (and editors) annually wear out thousands of red and blue pencils writing the phrase "be specific" in the margins of papers. The only way students learn to be specific is by learning to see and think specifically. Therefore, the first chapters in this book show in detail *how* to observe objects, scenes, people, actions, moods, and feelings and how to *think* about the results of this observation so that the writing will be sharp, perceptive, and concrete. Other chapters describe ways to find the "significant details" in scene and action; they tell how to observe and express the intangibles of "mood" and "atmosphere"; and they show how to see and understand people in order to write convincingly about them. All through the book, the approach is this: How do you examine your material? What do you need to know about it? What elements of the subject can you put into words? How do you suggest what you do not tell? How do you find the right words?

One of the teaching devices I have used in this book is the dialogue. The dialogues—some of them actual transcriptions from writing class sessions—are used to demon-

strate how each student can examine and use his own experience as a source of material for writing. One dialogue, for instance, illustrates how a fragment of a random, apparently meaningless experience can be developed into a tightly formed short story. Another shows how to handle the reporting of complicated scenes or happenings.

In every illustration I have tried to consider the problems of "unity, coherence, and emphasis" by asking the student to discover the nature of his subject, his own point of view toward it, and the effect he wishes his writing to have upon a reader. In the chapters on "Selection" and "Rewriting" I have worked out problems of editing by showing the student how to rethink the materials of his observation so that the eventual finished writing will be in natural and effective order.

Neither the methods nor the suggested writing problems in this book presume any arbitrary way of teaching. Both the presentation and the sequences of work have been set forth informally so that teacher and student will be left free to adapt them to their own needs. However, any text of this kind hopefully assumes certain ideals in terms of teaching methods and student requirements. For instance, it is implicit in the way the material is treated here that students should write much and often, being carefully guided all the while by an instructor who can give some personal attention to each student's work. But since students have limitations both of time and ambition, and because instructors have their own limits of time, stamina, and the sheer population bulk of their classes, the amount of writing assigned will vary according to the individual situation.

The thousand-word theme a week is a requirement common to many writing courses. I have found it more useful for the student, especially in the early months of

a course, to write something for *each* class assignment. These papers should be short—often not more than one paragraph—and should represent the student's solution of a single problem. (Of course, as the problems become more complicated, the papers will be longer and the time given to write them should be extended.) The frequent short papers place no more burden of correction on the instructor than the longer weekly efforts. And at the same time the variety of problems given to the student stimulates his interest and challenges him to develop his skill. Obviously, thinking is only learned while thinking; and imagination is developed by repeated attempts to shape experience.

This book assumes, too, that the writing class will generally be conducted by discussion and by classroom analysis of student writing. (This method is possible even with large classes.) The discussion method admittedly asks much of the instructor in terms of energy output and concentration. But one of the conditions of true learning is that a student must be allowed to go wrong—and then be led, without pressure, to recognize his errors. Open, informal class discussion is an effective and vivid way to accomplish this.

However, no text should presume to do an instructor's teaching for him. A textbook, regardless of its merit, is a useful teaching tool only when it supports and stimulates the learning process in a way that is congenial both to those who teach and those who are taught. It is my hope that this text will help to make the process of learning to write a challenging and creative experience.

R. G.

Briarcliff Junior College  
Briarcliff Manor, N. Y.  
November 1, 1950

## *Note to the Student*

Writers kid themselves—about themselves and other people. Take the talk about writing methods. Writing is just work—there's no secret. If you dictate or use a pen or type or write with your toes—it is still just work.

—SINCLAIR LEWIS

THIS BOOK is about some of the basic problems of writing. Its purpose is to discuss some useful ways of solving these problems. It is written for beginning students who seriously want to learn to write well; and it may help advanced students who need reminders of those fundamental processes of creative thinking which underly all good writing.

Though the book is about "creative writing," I think that the methods and approach I have described here are sound and productive for anyone who is learning to write. All writing is creative, anyway—you need to be something of an artist to transfer ideas, feelings, sights and sounds into words, whether you are writing a letter or a novel. Unless you understand that writing is a natural, creative process and not a complicated thing of structural rules, special techniques, and maxims on style, you will probably do anything you can to avoid doing it. But once you realize that there are some reasonably direct routes from your experience to the words you use to express it, you will probably enjoy making a piece of writing. You might even enjoy it enough to become fairly skillful.

Obviously, you don't learn how to write by reading about it in a book. *But* you can learn much by facing and

solving the problems of writing one at a time. By being helped to dissect your own ideas and moods and observations you may learn to pin them down to concreteness and express them vividly. Learning how to write—like learning anything else—grows mainly from meeting and overcoming the varied difficulties involved in the process. There are some clear problems in thinking which all writers face; and there are some basic methods of approach to these problems which are suggestive and possibly valuable for you to try.

A method is not a formula. (Formulas are mummified methods; they tell you exactly what elements in what proportion and what sequence will produce another thing.) A method is an orderly way of discovering the means to produce something. Anyone who creates will find, as he works with his material, that he develops methods in his approach to creative problems. Though the creative process is uniquely personal, there are certain essential questions—especially for the writer—that can and must be asked, either by a teacher or by an editor, and usually by both.

So, this book has been written as a teaching companion. It is more a series of informal discussions than a textbook. As in any discussions, there are many asides, personal opinions and digressions; it might be profitable for you to disagree with many of them. You will find, too, that this book asks you to cooperate with it. (You should approach *any* book as a collaborator and not as a passive sponge asking to be filled up.) I have asked many questions and provided few answers. The truth is, I cannot answer the questions either—that is up to you. Where creative problems are concerned, there are no ready-made answers. Neither are there easy-to-apply rules for developing creative skill. When you have a rule for something, you have

an answer. There is nothing more irrelevant than the answer to a question that is never asked.

However, before we begin to explore creative problems, it might be well to state some plain truths about writing. Every experienced writer knows these truths. Most beginners have yet to learn them. Briefly, these are:

1. "Inspiration" is rarely the source of fine writing.
2. Writing is neither a knack nor a technique.
3. "Style" cannot be cultivated as a separate thing.
4. Creative writing is not the use of a special literary vocabulary.

First, about "inspiration." You may hear, especially from those who don't know how to write, that they need to "wait until they're inspired." That's wishful thinking. If writers waited for inspiration before they began to write, there would be little literature created. I don't deny that what is called *inspiration* does occasionally move people to write; but for the serious writer, the emotional urgency of inspiration is a fleeting and untrustworthy source of production. A piece of writing may begin with an "inspired" idea, but the shaping of the idea into effective reading matter is a process whose major ingredient is simply hard work.

Joyce Cary, the English novelist, has said it as succinctly as anyone. "Inspiration," he said, "is another name for knowing your job and getting down to it."

In *The Summing Up*,\* W. Somerset Maugham said essentially the same thing. "It is evident that no professional writer can afford only to write when he feels like it. If he waits until he is in the mood, till he has the inspiration as he says, he waits indefinitely and ends by producing little or nothing. The professional writer creates the mood.

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\* W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., N. Y., p. 181. Used by permission.

He has his inspiration too, but he controls and subdues it to his bidding. . . ."

Writer after writer has pointed out that so-called imaginative inspiration is developed only by long exercise in effort; imagination is strengthened and made supple by steady wrestling with the problems of shaping experience into appealing or dramatic pieces of writing. Stephen Vincent Benét, one of the finest imaginative writers of our time, once illuminated this truth with the wry remark: "I've spent most of my life at a desk."

Obviously, then, creative writing is not a knack or a natural gift that belongs to a few lucky people. There is no "knack" to any art. Most writers, especially the good ones, hammer out their ideas on the forge of persistence, measuring what they have written against severe and almost ruthless personal standards of excellence. Generally, the better a writer is, the harder he works at writing. Sheridan's famous dictum: "Easy writing is curst hard reading," is no cliché. Good writing is nearly always *re-writing*—and this stands as a writer's truism.

This is another way of saying that creative writing is not merely a technique. You don't just develop a technique and then proceed to write successfully. Ultimately you train the whole working of your mind. This idea contradicts a common belief that writing can be learned by analyzing and imitating the "techniques" of other writers. There is no doubt that the careful reading of fine books will nourish your cultural background and widen your general understanding of life. Analysis of other writers will healthfully stretch your mind and develop your aesthetic sense. It is likely to improve your taste and train your reasoning powers. But it won't teach you *how* to write. It will show you how others have written.

You can never learn to write "like so-and-so." You can

only learn to express yourself. No matter how many models you study or how familiar you may be with the techniques of other authors, you write, finally, in your own way. When you come to write, you are faced with the blank paper, with whatever ideas are in your own head, and with your own abilities to say what you are thinking. You will develop your own techniques. You have to write about any subject on its own terms and through the filter of your own personality. You may—and you probably will—end up by using forms or structures or devices that have been used by generations of writers. But if you approach your writing problems only in terms of the devices, you will be going at the job backwards. It's no use worrying about design unless you know what you're going to build. It is what you see and feel and think about your subject that will dictate how you are to write, what form you will use, or what devices will best do the job of telling.

Technique is often confused with "style." They are not the same. Technique is method and procedure. It has to do with the procession of details that results in finished work. What you learn when you study writing techniques is that words can be pushed around. Like mosaic pieces they can be set in many patterns that will look and sound like something. But making patterns—even "correct" ones—is not style. It is not even good writing. Unless you have something to say, technique is as useless to you as an empty canteen in a desert. Style comes from ways of thinking more than from ways of saying. You achieve your own style when you learn to say, in your own fashion, what you have to say.

This implies, then, that creative writing is not a special vocabulary of literary words used in a special manner. Consider, for instance, how you build up a working vocabulary. You may do it, in part, through wide reading. This

method is apt to produce an overbalance of "bookish" words which come pedantically to the pen because they have been learned out of a literary context. (This is not to belittle bookish words; they are useful for many occasions. But it is to say that a vocabulary built largely from reading will likely "smell of the lamp" and have faint traces of library mold decaying betwixt the phrases.) Or, you may develop a vocabulary from varied experience; the vocabularies of each vocation, for instance, have their own flavor and cadence.

This second kind of vocabulary should be largely the creative writer's; his words cannot be too bookish—they must come out of life direct, not life imprisoned between bookboards. His words should grow from the direct knowing of things he has seen and touched or felt or thought about deeply. He doesn't need to experience everything himself—but he must understand sharply the experience he writes about. Will he write of pain and sorrow? What has he said—or heard said—in pain and sorrow? Will he write of harvests and farmhands and the busy traffic of barnyards? What manure has he had on his shoes? Has he seen and heard the cow bellow and heave and drop a calf? Does he know the dry dust-tickle of hay chaff in the throat and the grainy, sweating gloom of a hayloft in July? If he does, then he can write of these things; he has worked with them or watched other people work with them. Because he knows them he will find words—honest words which feel at home with the places and happenings. Then he will have something to say. And only then will he begin to have a style.

Creative writing, therefore, is first creative *thinking*. What is the nature of creative thinking? How does it proceed? How do you think creatively about experience? What makes one account of an experience prosaic and dull

and another account vivid and persuasive? If we can answer questions like these—even partially—we may begin to get at the nature of creativeness in writing.

The processes of creative thinking are subtle, but they are not wholly mysterious. If you have written a poem it is possible for you to analyze (within limits) how the poem was born and how it grew. Or, you can have a good notion of the way a short story developed from a sight or a sound or a happening. The more you can become aware of the creative process in yourself, even if in the beginning it is crude and limited, the better you will be able to train yourself to write creatively.

This book is based upon the conviction that—up to a point—creative writers are *made*, not born. (It is true that some people seem instinctively to have writing ability, but even an extraordinary natural aptitude needs much discipline and training.) There *are* ways to train yourself to see and express things creatively. These ways are difficult and energy consuming, but I think they are valid and productive. My premise is this: *Creative writing is writing produced by a creative mind.* This book suggests methods by which, perhaps, you can develop the kind of creative thinking that produces fine writing.



***A CREATIVE APPROACH TO WRITING***



# 1. *Material Is Under Your Nose*

Originality is simply a pair of fresh eyes.

—T. W. HIGGINSON

THE materials for creative writing are not hard to find. They are right under your nose. To find the stuff of writing you don't have to be a bohemian and travel to exotic lands, or live through all the emotions of high tragedy, low comedy, and middle-level boredom. All around you every day are things that will make fine pieces of writing, if only you understand what riches are in them for creative use. Wherever there are people living together, working, failing, succeeding, creating, or dreaming dreams; wherever there is a river or a tree or a long, green meadow; wherever *you* feel and see and understand with a quickened perception some portion of the world around you, there is the stuff to write about.

It is a great irony, if you consider the creative possibilities locked in obvious things, that aspiring writers usually see the pasture greener over some other fence. The truly interesting things, they say, are in the experience they are going to have tomorrow. That great story or poem will finally come if only the setting could be more ideal. "Inspiration," they affirm, needs the goad of change and new excitement. If you are one of those who is always just about to write something good; if the great subject is for-

ever trembling on the tip of your pen; if today goes by, and tomorrow, and the next day, and you haven't begun to write; then you are fooling yourself. You don't really want to write. You just think you want to write. But if you are serious about writing creatively, begin with the materials at hand.

Creative writing—which is to say, *creative thinking*—begins with the obvious. You must learn to take a new look at obvious things, see taken-for-granted sights and people with an unprejudiced eye, find the excitement of new relationships in the ordinary and the day-to-day. That is where most people live: in the mundane and the obvious. That is where most people's aspirations are: in the usual, the expected and the unspectacular. If you cannot write (that is, *think*) convincingly about the places you are most familiar with, the people you see every day, and the situations which occur in the mere living of each twenty-four hours, how do you expect to write of the profound or dramatically tangled skeins of feelings and actions that go to make drama or stories or poetry?

Seeing the obvious is one of the hardest jobs there is. The philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, once said: "It requires a very unusual mind to undertake an analysis of the obvious." The creative writer is required to have this unusual mind. That is why there are so few good writers. If you can't see, touch, smell, hear, and understand the people you write about, your characters will be wooden figures, jumping like marionettes to the strings of your plot. Unless you can see the little, vivid details in the places you describe, your settings will be as unreal as stage scenery looks. Unless, from their acts and words, you can sense with deep perception the feelings that move people, the beauty that stirs them, the hopes that urge them, your writing about men and women will be sterile and cold.

Seeing things freshly and clearly is an act of mind and will. It is not easy to look with candid honesty at ordinary things or people. We are not used to it because we habitually observe the world through the colored glasses of our own prejudices or wishes. Most of us don't see very much, anyway. We go through each day like people in dark tunnels armed only with flashlights. We get through the tunnels fairly efficiently. But we've only seen the narrow paths illumined by our lights. The walls of the tunnels around us we see only as masses—generalized sights on the edges of our attention. Except for objects and situations that demand our functional attention, we see the rest of life as a kind of panorama, a large pattern, with few details, vaguely understandable in the mass and almost unbearably complicated if we look closely. This is self-protection. If we were sensitive to each detail in everything around us, we would soon lose our sanity in the incredible jumble of daily disorder. There is too much to see—whizzing, flickering, jerking, creeping, sliding, standing, looming past and around and over us. And to protect ourselves, we see it all as great patterns and big pictures and over-all views.

We could call these patterns *generalizations*. For what is a generalization but the sum of many details? A generalization is a kind of inclusive understanding—or so we think. We feel somehow that if we can go through an experience and generalize, we automatically have control of it. That is one reason why we are so facile in describing people. People are difficult, stubbornly complex, hard for us to understand thoroughly. But we cope with people by pigeonholing them in convenient generalizations such as "clever," "dumb," "good talker," and the like. As any good propagandist knows, a complicated thing appears more simple with a label.

Breaking through generalizations to the details of concrete facts behind them is hard work that goes against the flow of habit. Yet the *creative* writer must minimize generalizations. He suspects, as Oliver Wendell Holmes shrewdly said, that "the chief end of man seems to be to frame general propositions—and no general proposition is worth a damn." The creative writer sharpens his eyes, stirs his mind, and urges his will to probe underneath the general aspects of experience for the meaningful details beneath. He looks under the labels, the masks, and the postures with which people habitually clothe themselves and others. He has to school himself to see steadily and whole; to see with a kind of nerve-end intuition which discovers revealing and usually overlooked meaning in the obvious. He lets his mind prowl restlessly around the obvious and the ordinary.

He learns to look at the world the way a child does. A child hasn't the adult's reluctance to wonder, to admire, to stare without evasion. The child looks at something to learn about it, to understand it. He feels it, touches it, talks about it, stares at it. He doesn't hesitate to ask a question—a hundred questions—even though the questions may sound silly and obvious. Give a child a stone and he will learn about the earth, the past, the cataclysms of space, the erosion of ten thousand years, and the endless, silent fall of primordial forests. The stone may be obvious. But what the child wants to know about the stone is not obvious; it is creative, in the best sense of the word. Or let the child face an idea, a simple taken-for-granted idea such as eating with a fork. He won't refuse the idea because it is obvious. He will ask questions until he understands that people used to eat with their fingers (and still do in many parts of the world), that forks used to have two tines, and that sometimes they have three and four tines, because

different forks have been designed for different uses, because one function dictates a different form than another function might. In fifteen minutes the child will have learned about far more than a fork. A child is not afraid to ask obvious questions. Nor is he afraid to be naïve and say the direct and obvious. Witness the little boy who said of a perfumed dinner guest: "She stinks like Daddy's old shirt." And the same little boy whose stomach was upset: "I had to up-chuck because my throat was smelly." These statements may not be delicately polite, but they are vigorous and vivid and *accurate*, because the child has no foolish block of prejudices between his perceptions and his speech. Because they aren't "sophisticated," children also speak in images of vividness or great beauty. I once heard a child, who was looking solemnly across a wind-flecked lake to the hills beyond say, "Gee, those mountains hold up the sky on their back."

This is by way of illustrating that as we grow up we tend to go through life suppressing our honest reactions and averting our eyes. Yet without the child's curiosity and frank openness of vision we cannot ever look creatively at the obvious world around us. We are used to riding in closed cars (with closed minds) through green-smelling country sides or busyworking cities, seeing vaguely that outside the windows are "lovely" or "interesting" views. We take in great gobs of sights and sounds in a habit pattern, and we react conventionally to the whole mass, not seeing any of the significant *obvious* details. Most of us are matter-of-fact people who don't see anything wonderful about ordinary things unless they are ballyhooed as sensational or have chromium trimmings. We are used to superlatives of language, color, and size. We generalize almost automatically, with loose, flabby, all-purpose words and phrases—"An awe-inspiring view"

. . . “In view of the evidence it is a not unjustifiable assumption that” . . . “an epoch-making discovery” . . . “this historic occasion” . . . “age-old conflict between authority and freedom.”

If you are going to write creatively, you have to shun this diffuse and sloppy way of observing and generalizing. The only material you have to write about is “life”—and life has few generalizations. It has lazy husbands, nagging wives, people who borrow money, and work assignments due yesterday that haven’t been done today. It has unexpected laughter, a letter from your sweetheart, elusive beauties, the shy splendors of lovingkindness and day-dreams that sometimes come true.

These are the things to write about. They are under your nose.

. . .

Your first job is to take the blinders off your eyes and look at some obvious, under-your-noses things clearly. Then see how intelligently you can talk about those things (for in many ways good writing is just perceptive talk, on paper). After you learn to think and talk intelligently about the obvious, then you can begin writing creatively about it.

We’ll begin with something easy. Let’s look at objects so obvious that you have taken them for granted almost all your lives, things that you use so automatically that you rarely think of them consciously for themselves. Take a good look at your own hands. (Before you dismiss this problem as too elementary, I suggest that you try it—all the way through.)

What do you know about your hands? Five fingers. One a thumb. Four others of varying sizes. Each finger has a nail at the end. The fingers are attached to a roughly rectangular skin-bone-muscle mass called a palm. Fingers

are attached to palm by joints called knuckles. Above the knuckles each finger has two joints—except the thumb which has only one joint. Under the nails at the end of each finger is a fatty pad. Fingers are thicker at the middle joints than at the end joints.

What else? *Is* there anything else? Of course there is. You have just begun to examine your hands.

What are hands primarily for? To touch with? (But you can touch with your feet, your shoulders, your back, your knees.) Are hands just hung at the ends of our arms because it seems to be a good idea? Naturally, not. What is the *major* function of a hand?

To *grasp* with. Except for a limited ability of the toes to grasp, the hands are our grasping instruments. How are they constructed to grasp? The fingers can curl inward toward the palm; they move easily only in this direction. The hand can grasp massively—that is, crudely, taking an object in the whole fist. Or it can grasp with great delicacy because the thumb opposes every other finger (you can touch the tip of any other finger with the tip of the thumb. No other finger can do this). So, between thumb and fingers, it is possible to grasp something delicately, with precision.

What fingers do you use the most?

Thumb and forefinger. Therefore, these two fingers are slightly more flexible and stronger than, say, the fourth or ring finger, which is awkward and relatively weak because it is not much used for pinching or precise grasping.

And so on. You could ask dozens more questions of your hands. And even though you may have been able to answer the questions above before I answered them for you, you should be much more conscious of your hands than you were ten minutes ago. That's just the point. You have been taking a good look at something obvious. Now you

know a lot about your hands that you may have known before—but you couldn't have said you knew it unless you asked all these questions to *refocus* your attention. Furthermore, as you explored your hands, there must have grown in your mind a slow bud of admiration for them as efficient instruments, superbly adapted to their job. That, too, is in point. You may have begun to find that obvious things can be exciting.

(The real value in an exercise like this lies in what it makes your mind do: it forces you away from generalized vision and toward explicit, detailed vision. It *refocuses* your attention, which is precisely what any creative art aims to do.)

Now, just for the practice, sit down at your desk, take out a pencil and a sheet of paper, and describe one of your hands as *literally* as you can. Try to describe it exactly for what you see it to be, not for what you think it is or in terms of the feelings you may have about it. You will find yourself forced to ask questions of the hand so that you can think out plainly and logically what you are going to say. Before you write, your thinking will have to be *exact, complete and orderly*. You have to answer, first, the question, "What is a hand?" Then you will have to tell where the hand is located (in relation to what else?), what the whole hand looks like, what the parts look like, where they are in relation to the other parts, and, finally, how the parts interact to perform the whole hand's function.

You will discover that this is a difficult exercise. Good. The harder it is, the better; you will realize, then, how hard it is to be thoroughly specific—and not general—about anything obvious. You will also discover that you are learning a technique for examining fully, efficiently, and quickly the material facts of life that are right under your nose.

To help you to be a little more at home with this technique, here is another exercise in accurate observation:

Imagine that sitting opposite you is a person who knows nothing whatever about our modern civilization—a transplanted Cro-Magnon man, in effect. You are to assume that this man does know the English language. If you can go along with this impossible paradox, you will realize that no object will mean much to your primitive listener unless you tell him *all* about it. Now, suppose you try to describe to him a common, undecorated, plain-shaped *water glass*. Here is one of our most common articles of use. How would you go about describing it to someone who hadn't the faintest idea what it was unless you told him?

Get a plain water glass and put it in front of you. Ask questions of the glass.

What is it for? What is its function? How does it perform that function? Why is it round-shaped instead of square-shaped? Exactly what "shape" is it? Is this the best shape for its function? Why is it made of glass? Could it be made of some other material? Why is glass a better material than, say, copper?

The trick is to ask why of every relevant part of the article. When you ask *why* of something persistently enough, you get quickly to essentials. You have to be direct and specific. You can't drag in details that have nothing to do with the object—because as soon as you ask "why" of those irrelevant details, they are eliminated.

Now sit down and write a description of the water glass in a hundred words or less. You will find yourself writing short sentences. You will discover that every word has to be exact. You won't be able to weasel with vague terms or bluff with generalities, because each word you use—especially nouns and adjectives in this exercise—stands for

a fact. The facts are not alterable, and you need to find the precise words to match them. For example, you cannot say, vaguely, that the water glass is "round." It *is* round, in a way, but so is a ball or a wheel or an egg round after a fashion.

But if you say that the glass is *cylindrical*, then you are getting closer. If it is a slightly tapered cylinder, then your limiting adjectives to the noun *cylinder* have to be exact. In what direction does it taper? And so on.

Here is a sample, partly worked out, of the type of description these problems require. Is this description accurate? Complete? In the most logical sequence? Are the words *exact* in their meaning? If you think not, figure out why and remedy the deficiencies yourself. If you are convinced that the description needs nothing done to it, why do you think so? (Remember that the object of these exercises is not graceful wording but exact and literal thinking and statement.)

The object described here is an ordinary, undecorated *teaspoon*.

A *teaspoon* is a utensil for scooping up and carrying small amounts of something. It has two joined parts: a flat, narrow, tapered handle, by which it is held, and a shallow, oval bowl to dip and carry liquid, food, or other materials. The handle is about four inches long. It arches slightly upward at the wide end. It curves sharply downward at the narrow end. The shape of the handle allows it to fit easily in the hand when it is correctly held resting across the third finger and grasped between the thumb and first joint of the forefinger of the right hand. When the bowl is level, the handle points upward at a shallow angle. A spoon is usually made of metal or some other hard-wearing, unbreakable material.

Though this procedure may seem too precise and analytical to have much connection with creative writing, it

is an excellent reminder for you that words are not vague symbols to be pushed around whimsically. Words stand for things and happenings. English is a great language because it is marvelously rich in words which can utter almost any shade of meaning and nearly all shapes and textures of things.

You will realize, when you have finished describing your hand and the water glass and some of the other objects listed in the exercises at the end of this chapter, that you have been working with *facts*—solid, verifiable facts. *All writing is based upon facts. Competent writing is the accurate and logical expression of facts. Creative writing is the sensitive and imaginative use of facts.* I have printed these sentences in italics because they are the most important sentences in this book.

There are, to be sure, many different kinds of facts. There are sturdy, prosaic, unshakable facts like  $2 + 2 = 4$ , two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen equal water, and day is day and night is night. There are also more intangible facts which don't exist in the same way that rocks and grass and water do—that is, you can't always prove them by weighing or measuring or analyzing them. These are philosophical ideas or religious concepts, for instance. You can't pin them down with fact nouns or unqualified verbs. You often have to use the long, Latin-root words which have been coined especially for these intangibles. It is possible for you to talk in a general way about *wisdom* by using such words as *understanding*, *perception*, *humility*, *humor*, *tolerance*, *forbearance*, *knowledge*, *information*, *judgment*, *proportion*, and the like. Each of these words has an accepted collection of related meanings; and among people who are accustomed to this vocabulary, you can make yourself well understood—and even gain the reputation of being profound.

But as a creative writer you will find yourself bound almost entirely to facts which have direct connections with sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste. If you want to talk about *wisdom* as a philosopher or an academician, you may use the long words with propriety and effect. But if you want to talk about wisdom as a creative writer, you have to *show*—let me repeat the word—*show* wisdom in action. When you show something in action, you do it in terms of people or things. In short, you do it in terms of tangible facts that you can see, smell, taste, hear, and feel. Read, for example, this familiar story of Solomon and the two mothers in the Bible (I Kings, 3:16-28).

Then came two women, that were harlots, unto the king, and stood before him. And the one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house; and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the third day after that I was delivered, that this woman was delivered also: and we were together; there was no stranger with us in the house, save we two in the house. And this woman's child died in the night; because she overlaid it. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead: but when I had considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son, which I did bear. And the other woman said, Nay, but the living is my son, and the dead is thy son. Thus they spake before the king. Then said the king, The one saith, This is my son that liveth, and thy son is the dead: and the other saith, Nay, but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living. And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it.

Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof. And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment.

The man who wrote this story was a creative writer. He wanted to talk about wisdom, so he showed a man making a wise decision and, by showing it, made the impression of wisdom so vivid that almost any school child can cite Solomon's judgment.

You may reasonably ask here, How about fantasy or imaginative conceptions? What do you do with facts when you meet something like Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, or a creature like Ariel, or a book like *Alice in Wonderland*?

Think about *Alice*, for a moment. The story is full of tangible facts pinned down by thing-words and ordinary unfantastic language. Alice falls down a well. She sees a rabbit dressed up in trousers and waistcoat. She lands at the bottom of the well. She eats a little cake. She grows and shrinks. She sees a tiny door and opens it with a golden key. Wells, rabbits, doors, cakes, waistcoat, keys, growing and shrinking, and all the rest of the things in Wonderland *do* exist. But they exist normally in a different context and order from Wonderland. As far as facts are concerned, *Alice in Wonderland* is just as factual as a reporter's story of a train wreck. The difference between the two pieces of writing is not that the train wreck story deals with actual happenings and that *Alice* does not. The difference is in the *probability* of the two accounts. (I'll have more to say about "probability" in a later chapter.) Lewis Carroll, who had an extremely tidy and well-ordered mind, simply took delightful liberties with the natural order of facts and, by doing so, created fantasy.

This is what I mean, in part, when I say that creative writing is the sensitive and imaginative use of facts. Lewis Carroll's fantasy is shrewdly scrambled-up reality. He knew his facts well enough to make actuality into improbability—and still make it sound plausible. This takes a high order of imaginative skill. You will rediscover, if you take the time to read *Alice* again, how sharply Mr. Carroll's ear must have been tuned to the cadence of *real* speech (facts, in other words) because his fantasy people sound reasonable, even if they don't make much sense. Or, look for his short descriptive passages and phrases, telling what Alice wore, what a flower looked like, how Alice felt at this time or that. The descriptions are so obviously based upon penetrating observation of the facts of real life that I need not stress the point further.

The ways that the simple facts of life are transformed by the creative mind are matters for discussion in later chapters. But facts come first. That is why I am suggesting that you examine such obvious things as hands and water glasses, so that you will be able both to see and talk about the facts of reality simply and reasonably on paper. This is more than most people can do, by the way. When you have learned to write both simply and reasonably, you may congratulate yourself on a fairly rare accomplishment.

. . .

To begin training in creative thinking with simple observation and analysis is to root creative writing soundly in knowledge. The whole purpose of learning how to look at the obvious is to develop the skill to perceive in whatever you look at its essential shape, meaning, and relationship to other things. You are looking at objects to *know* them. Creativeness begins with knowing. You don't create out of nothing, nor do you create from vague knowledge. As far as I know, good writing has never

sprung from ignorance. If you can't look at the simple materials under your nose and learn from them, I doubt if you can understand the comedies and tragedies of human life enough to write creatively about them.

Apply this simple observation-analysis, for example, to a scene you might want to describe in a story or a sketch. Suppose you need to describe a deserted city street on a bitter winter night. There's the street in front of you, an unordered mass of facts which you see, smell, feel, hear, and have feelings about. You can't just say, "It's dark and cold." Of course it's dark and cold. But what kind of cold? What kind of dark? What is there about the particular cold-dark atmosphere that made you want to write about it anyhow? Is there some relationship between the empty, echoing street and the kind of feeling you want to express? What is the relationship? How does it show—that is, what details symbolize it, make it stand out so that a reader can feel and see its physical reality? How, without listing every detail that strikes your senses, are you going to convey most vividly your impression of the street?

In short, what do you *know* about this scene? Do you know enough about it to select from its outward aspects the penetrating details that will show it to your reader? As soon as you begin to ask questions such as these of your material, you will quickly find yourself looking for as many *facts* as the scene or action will yield to your inquiring mind. You'll see things as you saw your hand or the water glass. You will, probably, see significant details which are usually overlooked by the casual observer; and these details will expand the scene, illumine it, vivify it.

Here is an often-quoted passage from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* which illustrates how effectively the trained creative observer makes use of ordinary, obvious facts.

**Along 66 . . .\***

Along 66 the hamburger stands—Al & Susy's Place—Carl's Lunch—Joe & Minnie—Will's Eats. Board-and-bat shacks. Two gasoline pumps in front, a screen door, a long bar, stools, and a foot rail. Near the door three slot machines, showing through glass the wealth in nickels three bars will bring. And beside them, the nickel phonograph with records piled up like pies, ready to swing out to the turntable and play dance music, "Ti-pi-ti-pi-tin," "Thanks for the Memory," Bing Crosby, Benny Goodman. At one end of the counter a covered case; candy cough drops, caffeine sulphate called Sleepless, No-Doze; candy, cigarettes, razor blades, aspirin, Bromo-Seltzer, Alka-Seltzer. The walls decorated with posters, bathing girls, blondes with big breasts and slender hips and waxen faces, in white bathing suits, and holding a bottle of Coca-Cola and smiling—see what you get with a Coca-Cola. Long bar, and salts, peppers, mustard pots, and paper napkins. Beer taps behind the counter, and in back the coffee urns, shiny and steaming, with glass gauges showing the coffee level. And pies in wire cages and oranges in pyramids of four. And little piles of Post Toasties, corn flakes, stacked up in designs.

The signs on cards, picked out with shining mica: Pies like Mother Used to Make. Credit Makes Enemies, Let's Be Friends. Ladies May Smoke But Be Careful Where You Lay Your Butts. Eat Here and Keep Your Wife for a Pet. IITYWYBAD?

Down at one end the cooking plates, pots of stew, potatoes, pot roast, roast beef, gray roast pork waiting to be sliced.

Minnie or Susy or Mae, middle-aging behind the counter, hair curled and rouge and powder on a sweating face. Taking orders in a soft low voice, calling them to the cook with a screech like a peacock. Mopping the counter with circular strokes, polishing the big shining coffee urns. The cook is Joe or Carl or Al, hot in a white coat and apron, beady sweat on white forehead, below the

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\* From *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Copyright 1939 by John Steinbeck. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc., N. Y.

white cook's cap; moody, rarely speaking, looking up for a moment at each new entry. Wiping the griddle, slapping down the hamburger. He repeats Mae's orders gently, scrapes the griddle, wipes it down with burlap. Moody and silent.

Mae is the contact, smiling, irritated, near to outbreak; smiling while her eyes look on past—unless for truck drivers. There's the backbone of the joint. Where the trucks stop, that's where the customers come. Can't fool truck drivers, they know. They bring the custom. They know. Give 'em a stale cup a coffee an' they're off the joint. Treat 'em right an' they come back. Mae really smiles with all her might at truck drivers. She bridles a little, fixes her back hair so that her breasts will lift with her raised arms, passes the time of day and indicates great things, great times, great jokes. Al never speaks. He is no contact. Sometimes he smiles a little at a joke, but he never laughs. Sometimes he looks up at the vivaciousness in Mae's voice, and then he scrapes the griddle with a spatula, scrapes the grease into an iron trough around the plate. He presses down a hissing hamburger with his spatula. He lays the split buns on the plate to toast and heat. He gathers up stray onions from the plate and heaps them on the meat and presses them in with the spatula. He puts half the bun on top of the meat, paints the other half with melted butter, with thin pickle relish. Holding the bun on the meat, he slips the spatula under the thin pad of meat, flips it over, lays the buttered half on top, and drops the hamburger on a small plate. Quarter of a dill pickle, two black olives beside the sandwich. Al skims the plate down the counter like a quoit. And he scrapes his griddle with the spatula and looks moodily at the stew kettle.

After much practice your observation process will become (as it must become) less and less self-conscious. More efficiently than before, you will penetrate the obvious, find useful details, and learn how to talk concretely and simply about life as it is, instead of life as you imagine it to be. Creative imagination feeds on facts. Learn first how to find

the facts, and you will be building the only dependable foundation for creative writing.

## PROBLEMS

At the end of each chapter you will find a section called Problems. These are not exercises in the usual sense but problems in observation and thinking. There is no "correct" solution for any one of them. Your job is to work out each one as thoroughly and as reasonably as you can—and keep at them until you have convinced *yourself* that you have done a satisfactory job. If you do only the problems and don't read the book, you will have done the more valuable of the two things.

1. Describe thoroughly, as though you were talking to someone who had never seen it before, one of the following ordinary, undecorated objects. Use 100 words or less. In this problem, use only *simple* sentences. The resulting writing will sound stilted and awkward, but for the time being, don't pay any attention to that. For now, it is enough to be *thorough*, *logical* and *complete*, no matter how monotonous and repetitious the words sound.

## FUNCTIONAL OBJECTS

Metal wastebasket	Window	Teacup
Round, wooden	Claw hammer	Thumbtack
pencil	Wood saw (hand	Kitchen match
Thread spool	type)	Bobby pin
(empty)	Fork (regular,	Strainer
Door (plain	four-tine)	Pitcher (plain)
unpaneled)	Tenpenny nail	Paper clip

## SUGGESTIONS

(a) Before you do any writing, get the object you're going to describe and set it in front of you.

(b) Begin by asking questions of the object:

What's this thing for?

What, roughly, is the shape?

Does its use dictate its shape? How? Is it the best shape for the purpose?

What is it made of? Does the material it is made of have anything to do with its use?

Does it have a characteristic texture? What texture?

(c) Make a scratch list (*not* an outline) of all the pertinent facts about the article. List the facts in single words or short phrases, being as cryptic or as brief as you wish. A list is merely a device to help you handle your material.

(d) Rearrange the list so that the facts are in the most logical order. (Do *not* make a formal outline.) Whatever method makes sense to you and permits you to rearrange your material efficiently and quickly is good enough for this purpose.

(e) Write out your description. One way to start is: "A wastebasket is an object for the purpose of . . ." and go on from there.

2. Try to analyze and describe accurately the qualities, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes of some ordinary articles. Do each one of these in ten sentences or less—and use simple sentences whenever possible. It doesn't matter how often you repeat, "This is . . ." "this is . . ." "that is . . ." and so on. Right now, your job is to observe and analyze, not to write graceful sentences. (Learning to have something to say is more important to you at this point than learning *how* to say it.)

## QUALITIES AND TEXTURES

Describe the difference between fluorescent light and incandescent light.

What does corduroy feel like?

Describe the smell of hot, buttered toast.

Describe the ticking of a cheap alarm clock as you hear it late at night in a quiet room.

In what way does velvet feel different from satin?

What is the difference between cigar smoke and cigarette smoke?

What do peanuts taste like?

Describe the sound of water dripping into water.

Describe the sound of a slowly frying egg.

What does a wool blanket feel like?

Describe the feeling of the first taste of cold water after you have been working hard in the hot summer sunshine.

## SUGGESTIONS

(a) You will find yourself, at first, trying to solve these problems in terms of adjectives and adverbs. Try to think out your observations mostly in terms of *verbs* and see what happens.

(b) Involve as many of your senses as you can in these analyses. How you *feel* about some of these textures is important. Often, comparison is as subjective as it is objective. Pin your feelings down concretely—that is, try to figure out *what elements* of the thing you're looking at are the causes of your own reactions.

(c) You will be tempted to make comparisons in terms of images—that is, "This object *is like* . . ." For the time being, don't try to make images. Be as literal and direct in your statements as you can.

## EXAMPLE

Here is a sample of the accurate and vivid perception of detail by the novelist Virginia Woolf. It is the opening paragraph of *Kew Gardens*, a short story.\*

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half-way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. The light fell either upon the smooth, grey back of a pebble, or, the shell of a snail with its brown, circular veins, or falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water that one expected them to burst and disappear. Instead, the drop was left in a second silver grey once more, and the light now settled upon the flesh of a leaf, revealing the branching thread of fibre beneath the surface, and again it moved on and spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the heart-shaped and tongue-shaped leaves. Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July.

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\* From *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, by Virginia Woolf, copyright, 1944, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace and Company and The Hogarth Press, Ltd. Mrs. Woolf rewrote her material many times before she considered it finished. This story, as her husband, Leonard Woolf, indicates in the foreword of the collection, was probably in the "first sketch" stage.

## 2. *You See Actions*

. . . And happiness and misery are not states of being, but forms of activity; the end for which we live is some form of activity, not the realization of a moral quality. Men are better or worse according to their moral bent; but they become happy or miserable in their actual deeds. In a play, consequently, the agents do not perform for the sake of representing their individual dispositions; rather, the display of moral character is included as subsidiary to the things that are done . . .

—ARISTOTLE

**I**T IS almost axiomatic that action is life. We are endlessly seeing or being part of action of some kind. Even when we are supposedly most quiet—when we sleep—scientists tell us that we change position thirty or forty different times during an average night. Psychologists say that under the thin layer of consciousness our minds are sleeplessly restive: the latest psychiatric theories are labeled “dynamic.” Physically, we are nervous, palpitating organisms. Pumping heart, coursing blood, rhythmically contracting diaphragm, muscles in tension—all demonstrate that we are a-tremble with motion. The behaviorist psychologists say that we even “think” in motions, in shifting body-sets of complex minuteness. And the philosophers, too, recognize the role of motion in life. A. N. Whitehead said: “We cannot think first and act afterwards. From the moment of birth we are immersed in action, and can only fitfully guide it by taking thought.”

This is all obvious. Yet plain as it is, most of us don't see much of the motions of life. We look past the thousands of revealing little actions that illumine the people and situations of each day. We ignore them because they are familiar. (Would you ordinarily look twice at a person walking, a woman sewing, a man hammering nails?) Because we take little note of routine actions, we find them hard to write about. Like the ordinary objects we talked about in the last chapter, we haven't learned to look sharply at motions to discover their real characteristics.

For instance, the way we usually see motion and talk about it is in terms of perfunctory observation and stereotyped words. We reach for our standard packet of cliché reactions. If a thing moves rapidly we say, "quick as a flash" or "like lightning" or "with blinding speed" or "in a hell of a hurry." When something is slow we say "slow as molasses" or "slow as mud" or "at a snail's pace." To this list, which you can expand for yourself, add overworked adverbs like *quickly*, *fast*, *jerkily*, *smoothly*, and so on. We use these stock expressions so often that they have become a kind of formula, a verbal shorthand, for talking about action. Actually, these words reflect the lazy habits of sight and mind that keep us from seeing things as they *really* move.

Actions, like objects, have certain qualities or characteristics which can be pinned down by accurate observation. Motions don't take place in a vacuum: they are *from* someplace *to* someplace; they are *against* something, *behind* something, *through* something. They are in terms of the thing that moves: a hand, an eye, a saw, a wheel. They are in contrast to stillness or compared to speed. When you think of action in this way, you begin to realize that it can have almost a texture or a "shape" as inanimate objects do.

Think about the act of *walking*, for instance. Walking is certainly a common enough movement, so thoroughly taken for granted that we rarely think about it. Yet walking is not as simple an action as it looks. Our language recognizes that walking is complicated (or, rather, people have recognized it and have coined the words). We don't just *walk*. We *stride*, *amble*, *strut*, *stumble*, *clump*, *promenade*, *saunter*, *ramble*, *step*, *march*, *pace*, *tread*, *tramp*, *traipse*, *toddle*, *waddle*, *shuffle*, *patrol*, *file*, *track*, *glide*, *prowl*, *straggle*, *meander*, *hike*, *stroll*, *trek*, *stalk*, *flit*, *stray*, *plod*, *trudge*, *stamp*, and *ambulate*. To say nothing of *perambulate*, *patter*, *hitch*, *scuff*, *limp*, *trip*, and *stagger*. There are many more "walking" words, of course. And the number of possible qualifying adverbs would fill two or three of these pages. But stay away from the Thesaurus (an instrument of the devil for a beginning writer) and use your eyes instead. Watch people walk. See for yourself that they don't merely *walk*—they move in certain ways: *strut*, *amble*, and so on.

How many times, when you have watched someone walk, have you tried to isolate the special quality, the key characteristics of that particular motion? What outstanding impressions did you file away in your mind? Were you able to say to yourself: that man is *ambling*; this man *struts*; that woman *slinks* (or *slithers* or *strides*, depending upon the women you choose to watch)? You probably didn't verbalize the walking motion in such a deliberate way. Actions are harder to verbalize than objects, which is why it is harder to use verbs than nouns.

We don't immediately think of actions in terms of words, in any case. Rather, we *sense* actions. We see them in relation to something else, and we note wordlessly what the quality of that relation is. We have our own feelings about actions—that is, we react to the impressions

they make on us. For instance, if you have ever seen a jet plane whoooooosshhh across an airfield at 650 miles an hour, you don't say to yourself: "That plane, like a black leaf in a hurricane, whizzed across the field and disappeared into the distance." Of course you don't. To begin with, that sentence is bad, self-conscious writing; and secondly, you don't think about actions that way at all. Chances are, when the jet plane went over, you just felt: "Wow!" and perhaps you had a quick thought of awed fear that any man-made thing could go so fast. Only later, when you thought about the plane, about your feelings, about the physical background of the whole action, could you begin to put into words for a reader a picture of what you saw. You thought how you first glimpsed the plane, a little black speck in the sky over the sun-browned hills. You remembered how quickly it grew in size as it came toward you. You remembered that you had to jerk your head abruptly to follow the plane as it sped over you. You recalled that you didn't hear the sound of the plane until the jet was nearly gone from sight; and you remembered that the sound was a swishing, burbling, hollow noise, like a giant blowtorch in an iron barrel. You recalled the hard blue of the sky, the dust whorls on the hardpan of the runways, the parked planes. You brought back your own stomach-tensed excitement, the sense of exhilaration at seeing something go as fast as that plane did. You found that you could remember in detail the action which you saw and felt as a whole.

You both see and *feel* actions. And before you can talk about them, you have to sift them through your mind and make an assessment of them. You have to find out their *quality*. In the case of the jet plane just described, the action was *fast*. What kind of fast? Many things go rapidly—what sort of "fast" was this? Was it smooth, rough, jumpy,

fluid, erratic? Was it aimless speed? Purposeful? How do you know? This is where your emotional reactions to movement are involved. Was the plane faster *than*—what? What did the physical surroundings contribute to your feeling about the speeding plane? What did it remind you of? You have to tumble this whole experience around in your mind, ask questions of it, roll it over on your mental tongue, recall it again and again. Eventually you will be able to refine from the many sensory and emotional elements of the experience ~~the~~ major impression that the action made upon you.

Thinking through an action is not as deliberate and self-conscious as I have made it sound. In practice you will find that much of this summing up is nearly automatic or subconscious. But before the process becomes automatic, you need to cultivate this probing, questioning attitude of mind until it becomes habitual.

The essential thing in writing creatively about motion is to be able to pin an action down sharply and vividly with the right verb, the apt phrase, the picture-making image. In order to do this, you have to be able to see the action as a whole, see it at the same time in detail, and recognize (usually at the same time, too) that your emotional reactions are involved. Then—later—you must be able to select from this unordered mass of facts the *key* elements in the movement, the one or two characteristics which will bring up for your reader a picture of the action you witnessed. These key elements may be either objective or subjective or a combination of both.

Here, spun out in detail, is a suggestion of the process as it might have occurred in the mind of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was walking one morning in the woods near Walden Pond. He saw a scarlet tanager flying from branch to branch in the trees. The movement probably

came to him out of the corner of his eye: the quick flutter, the red color of the bird, the green canopy of the leaves over his head. He was not looking for the tanager. He may not have had any intention of writing about this ordinary, brief sight: it probably sank into his mind in a flash, to be registered there with the thousands of other impressions of Walden. But Thoreau had trained himself to be a phenomenally keen observer. Physically, this is what he must have seen: above, the green of leaves, laced with the brown lines of branches; bright patches of sunshine; the nervous, fluttering dart of the bird; the red of its plumage against the green of leaves. In his mind he must have felt: appreciation of the color, delight at the contrast of red and green, a sense of the rapid motion of the bird. (None of these facts, I am sure, occurred to him consciously. We don't think or react to anything so stumblingly and literally.) But later, as Thoreau was writing in his notebook, he created in a single sentence this action in a way that pictures sharply for the reader the thing as Thoreau must have seen it:

**The tanager flies through the green foliage as if it would ignite the leaves.**

The one verb, *ignite*, lifts the sentence out of mediocrity, gives it vividness and pictorial value. It pictures instantly for the reader the color value of flame, the flickering motion of fire, the feeling of contrast that one would get from the flare of a scratched match in the darkness. This analysis may be labored and overdone, but you will find, if you consciously try to determine *why* you use certain words to describe actions, that this is the step-by-step method that your mind spans with speedy efficiency.

*The creative part of this kind of thinking comes when you can deliberately relate one set of facts to another set*

*of apparently unrelated facts.* Thoreau's tanager had nothing to do with fire. But Thoreau's mind sifted out the *key impression* of the flight of the bird and found a similarity in another key impression, that of fire. And so, he was able to create a fine image to bring back to his reader vividly what he saw.

To demonstrate one way the mind sifts experience to get at the facts, imagine for a short while that you are a listener at a class discussion. The following dialogue (transcribed from an actual writing class) gives some indication of the way this literal, fact-finding analysis can stir up vivid images in the minds of ordinary, untrained observers. The object of this group discussion was to consider action and how to observe it, in terms of the act of *walking*.

INSTRUCTOR: What happens ordinarily in the act of walking? Say something about the mechanics of it. Take the action apart, first, and let's see how it goes.

FITZGERALD: You mean first a person puts out one leg and then the other and how the feet go down and so on?

INSTRUCTOR: Yes.

DICKENS: But everyone walks in a different fashion. Paulson, there, swings along, Patterson humps a bit, if you know what I mean.

INSTRUCTOR: But wait a moment. You're already trying to characterize each kind of walk with a verb, and you're not taking the action itself down into its parts. The overall impression comes later. Of course, we all try to add up an action in a few words—it's more convenient, really. But just for the practice, let's get completely literal on this. Step by step.

JACKSON: Let me try it. Now let me see. . . . Well, first, your legs, swing forward from your body—swing from the hips. Most people reach out about twenty inches or so, I

mean a stride of about twenty inches. You usually land heel first, then flat-footed, then up on the ball of your foot as one leg goes back and the other one swings forward.

PAULSON: You mean your legs swing from your hips like sticks—stiff?

DICKENS: Like pendulums?

JACKSON: Oh no, they bend a little at the knees, that is most people bend a little—well, wait a minute, I haven't finished. The rest of your body does some work, too.

KLEIN: What about your hands?

JACKSON: I'm coming to that. Now where was I—oh yes—as each leg swings toward the front, the rest of your body sways a little from side to side. I mean nobody, not even soldiers for instance, walks stiffly erect. There's a sort of a sway. Now, then, about the hands. They swing, too. Forward and backward.

JELLINEK: When your left leg goes forward, your right hand goes to the front—it's an opposite swing, not the same hand on the same side.

DICKENS: Some people lean forward when they walk.

PAULSON: Women walk different than men. Women have a knock-kneed look, I mean, and men swing out a little more.

MCGREGOR: I'd rather watch a woman walk any time.

INSTRUCTOR: I think Miss Jackson's breakdown of the action did the job as far as we need to do it for this purpose. At least you all realize, don't you, that certain things are common to all people's walk—the basic mechanics are the same?

JELLINEK: Sure, but what are you driving at?

INSTRUCTOR: Well, let's take a certain person's walk. Somebody in this group. You all know each other pretty well. How would you characterize, say, the way Miss Patterson walks? Miss Dickens said a minute ago that she

“humps”—what did you mean by that? I mean, what elements of Miss Patterson’s walking action caused you to use the word “hump”?

DICKENS: She . . . she hasn’t got as loose or free a walk as McGregor, for instance. I mean, she seems to be just a little humped up in the shoulders—oh, I don’t know. I just sort of got the impression of “hump,” and now I’m not sure it’s right.

INSTRUCTOR: You think about it for a minute. Perhaps it would be easier if we started the other way—from a characteristic to a person. Suppose we take the word, *graceful*. Who, in this group, do you think, walks most gracefully?

(The group finally agreed that Miss Dickens had the most graceful walk. She is a lissome girl, medium height, slender but not thin, long-legged.)

INSTRUCTOR: Why do you all think that Miss Dickens’ walk is graceful? What do you mean, in other words, by *graceful*?

PAULSON: I think she walks smoothly.

DICKENS: You mean, I slink?

MCGREGOR: No, you don’t slink, but I agree that you do walk smoothly . . . sort of flow along.

INSTRUCTOR: Tell us what you mean by smoothly.

MCGREGOR: Smooth means not jerky . . . not erratic. Even, you know, not bump-bump.

INSTRUCTOR: But you’re still not telling us anything, are you? This is an action we’re talking about, and you’re just picking words that say only roughly what you mean.

JELLINEK: How else can you do it? You have to put it into words to write about it, don’t you?

INSTRUCTOR: Certainly you do. But, I think, you are considering Miss Dickens’ walk only in terms of the words not in terms of the walk. Miss Dickens, would you mind walking around the room for us just a minute?

DICKENS: I won't walk like myself with everybody looking at me.

(She walked about the table several times and then sat down.)

PAULSON: I still say *smooth*.

JELLINEK: That's right. What else can you say? You pick the thing apart too far, and you get wordy and say too much.

INSTRUCTOR: Well, let's attack it another way. Suppose you were standing at the top of a dam. The water was rushing over the top of the concrete spillway in a thick green-blue stream. Would you say that the motion of the water was smooth?

JELLINEK: Yes.

INSTRUCTOR: Now suppose you saw a huge, perfectly balanced wheel, turning slowly on an axle. The motion would seem slow, massive and almost inexorable, wouldn't it? Would you say that it, too, was smooth?

MORGAN: You could, certainly—but it would be a different kind of smooth.

INSTRUCTOR: Exactly. It would be a "different kind of smooth." Now a minute ago, Miss McGregor said that Miss Dickens' walk wasn't "bump-bump." Suppose you had a two-wheeled cart, and part of each wheel was flat. The motion of the cart would be . . .

McGREGOR: Bump-bump.

INSTRUCTOR: Yes. Miss Dickens' walk wasn't bump-bump. Was it *not* bumpy in the same way that a smooth-wheeled cart is different from a flat-wheeled one?

McGREGOR: No, of course not. Naturally, Miss Dickens isn't a cart—I mean, I didn't mean to say that she walked like a smooth-wheeled cart, but I wanted to point out what I meant by smooth so I said it wasn't jerky, or something like that.

INSTRUCTOR: What have we been doing here? What mistake have we been making in trying to talk about the way Miss Dickens walks . . . or doesn't walk?

MORGAN: Well, what we've said so far hasn't had much to do with walking has it?

DICKENS: We've been juggling *smooth's* and *jerky's* and other words like that.

JELLINEK: Pushing words around.

INSTRUCTOR: That's right—I think that's what we've been doing. Pushing words around. But let's get back where we belong—to the action we want to write about. Miss Dickens' walk.

JELLINEK: Here we go again.

INSTRUCTOR: Let me get you started. Do you agree with me that when she walks, Miss Dickens seems to lead a little with her chin?

DICKENS: Oh—yes, that's right, I know I do because my aunt always nagged me for that.

MCGREGOR: Yes, that's right, I've noticed that because the rest of her seems to flow along after her chin. There's the smooth again.

PATTERSON: I know another thing. She doesn't lift her feet very high. I mean they swing close to the ground.

JACKSON: Well, I know where I got the impression of gracefulness. It's her skirts. She always wears full skirts, and they ripple when she walks.

PAULSON: That's because she's got long legs. There's another thing, the legs, that is. Her legs are long, and she seems to swing them smoothly—there's that word again—I mean the stride looks . . . well, *fluid*, because she doesn't bend at the knees as much as some people.

INSTRUCTOR: Perhaps we can sum up a few things now. She leads with her chin; the rest of her seems to flow along; her stride looks fluid because she moves her long legs

evenly, and her full skirts contribute to the look of smoothness. What else? Is there anything else?

KLEIN: I like the way she walks because it seems lilting. I mean, you could see her from the back and say to yourself, "Gee, that girl looks as though she felt fine."

INSTRUCTOR: That's very interesting. Why do you say that? How do you know?

KLEIN: That's just the way I feel about it, I guess.

INSTRUCTOR: I know, but what makes you feel that way? What do you *see*, in other words, that gives you that feeling?

KLEIN: I see what you mean. Well, she has a kind of a sway—not one of these hippy waggles that some girls have but just a little sway from side to side that's free and easy . . . you know, relaxed and graceful.

PAULSON: Like dancing, you mean?

KLEIN: That's *just* it—that's just what I was trying to put my finger on. Lots of times her walk reminds me of someone waltzing—the old-fashioned sweeping glides, you know. Oh, I don't mean to say that she waltzes from one side of the road to the other, but the way she sways is . . . is . . . *controlled*, the same way dancing is controlled.

INSTRUCTOR: This reminds me of a poem by Robert Herrick. This little poem—see if you don't agree—says, in one fashion what we are feeling for here—that is, the *quality*—let me repeat—the *quality* of Miss Dickens' walk.

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes.  
Next, when I cast mine eyes and see  
That brave vibration each way free;  
Oh, how that glittering taketh me!

Notice especially the brilliant use of the word *liquefaction*—"how sweetly flows that *liquefaction* of her clothes."

There's your word *smooth* made into a picture, and into an image. And even the words move along the same way the motion does. Why are those words good? What do they do?

MORGAN: Well, they *show* it to you. You can *see* the petticoat swish around with that word tempestuous.

INSTRUCTOR: Now—at last—now we are getting down to the thing. As we have been talking about the act of walking—Miss Dickens' walking—we've made the mistake of thinking of the *words* that might be applied to the action instead of observing the action very, very closely, seeing what *exactly* the action was made up of, and then trying to make it *show* in words.

JELLINEK: Well, then, when we talk about her walking action being "graceful," then we're just talking *around* it—I mean, being indirect about it?

INSTRUCTOR: Probably.

JELLINEK: But then how *do* you get it into words?

INSTRUCTOR: Why don't you try to think about it in *other* terms? We have pretty well analyzed the characteristics of her walk. How do you feel about these? Are they true? Do they make you think of anything else—there's the important thing—does her walk make you think of anything else?

KLEIN: I'm thinking of a young tree in a gentle breeze. That's farfetched, isn't it?

INSTRUCTOR: Perhaps. Depends upon how you use it.

JELLINEK: The little swaying movement makes me think of ice skating somehow.

PATTERSON: If I were a man, that's the way I'd like to see my girl walk. It's very womanly, somehow.

KLEIN: That's right. Free, and . . . well, free and easy and liting, as I said before.

MCGREGOR: Well, I'll say one thing, I won't be able to

look at anybody walking for a long time without wondering what I'm looking at.

JACKSON: Me, either.

I have expanded the discussion to this length because I wanted you to see clearly how difficult it is to get out of the mental habit of classifying actions according to certain stock words. Toward the end of the group discussion, the participants were beginning to shake free from this habit. Accurate vision and fairly perceptive reaction were at work on the simple act of walking. Later, when the group came to write about actions, they found themselves trying to isolate the key characteristics of each one. They began to cast around for images—similes and metaphors and pictorial verbs—that would *re-create* the action rather than talk around it. At first, naturally, the words and images were overdone, strained, too flamboyant. But as they worked with the problem, their own critical judgment sharpened. They began to “feel” when the image was “right” and when it was farfetched or awkward. And from that point on, the whole process became less and less artificial and more and more habitually skillful observation.

Just to make the method clear, consider two more simple actions. The first is *eating*. The act of eating is routine enough, though it can often be complicated by etiquette, social symbolisms, and national customs. But essentially, eating is the securing of food from a receptacle and the placing of the food in the mouth. That involves a few basic movements with the arm and hand: hand holds fork; arm moves forward and down so that fork can spear food on plate; arm moves upward slightly to carry food to mouth; teeth and lips clamp over food; hand and arm remove fork, leaving food in mouth. Yet to describe these motions, we have a collection of clichés which we employ,

in a loose fashion, to describe their *quality*. We say: "She picks at her food" or "he bolts his food" or "she eats daintily" or "he gulped his meal" or "he shoveled in his food."

Here is another common cliché about the act of eating: "He wolfed his food." The word *wolfed* is meant to show that the eater is animal-like in his hunger, that he tears at his food with his teeth, that, perhaps, his chewing and gulping are accompanied by little grunts and growls. Yet when you say "wolfed," you really aren't giving a clear picture of a particular person in a particular circumstance eating a meal. You are simply indicating in rather tired and hazy language that he is a quick, voracious, and rather sloppy eater. But if you look closely and watch the action of his eating, you will begin to see that perhaps you can be much more accurate and vivid in your description than you are when you say "wolfed." How do you know he's "wolfing"? Does he crouch over his plate? Is his head bent close to the table? Does he scoop up the food in hasty gobbets? Does he tear meat away from the fork? Does he hold the fork in his fist? Does he talk with his mouth full? Does gravy drip from his lips and chin? Does he spill food around the plate? Do his eyes lift up from his food occasionally and dart penetratingly around as though looking suspiciously for interruption? Does he curl his left arm around the plate as though to protect his food while he shovels it up with the other hand? Do his jaws move rapidly, mouth open, while he chews? Does he move his head toward the food for each bite or does he bring the food up to his mouth without moving his head?

Begin to answer these questions accurately and you will begin to be able to draw a clean, vivid picture of a man "wolfing" his food. And you won't use the cliché. You will discover that some special motion this person makes—or perhaps it is a sound, like the sucking smack of lips—will

not only symbolize "wolfish" eating in general but will apply to your character in particular. You don't write about "people"—you write about *a person*. Whatever individualizes the person in the way of actions, mannerisms, or visible traits helps to characterize him.

Here's another familiar motion: the act of *stretching*. Perhaps the most common cliché is: "She stretched like a cat." When this simile was first used—several thousand years ago, I would guess—it did have an imagistic freshness. The lazy, fluid, contemptuously graceful stretch of a cat is a good thing to picture. But by this time, that expression is tired and overused. We've come to say "stretch like a cat" because it's ready made and easy, not because it fits any specific person stretching. As we did with *walking* and *eating*, we have to observe the motion keenly as it is made by some one person we wish to talk about.

Usually when a person stretches he lifts up his arms, throws back his head a little, expands his rib-cage, takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. There is a feeling of pleasant tension to a stretch. It's a way of breaking the strain of one position and relaxing easily into another. But when we say, "She stretched like a cat," we have to pin the action down to one person. "She" is female, naturally; women stretch more daintily than men. There usually isn't the feeling of rib-cracking vigor about a woman's stretching that there is about a man's. A woman will usually put her fingertips behind her head, swing her elbows wide, slowly turn her head from side to side, arch her back a little, and bring her arms down again gently. Where a man is apt to make a grunting, gurgling sound, a woman will either stretch silently or make small, drawn-out breathy sounds.

But our woman who "stretches like a cat" has to be even more particularized than this. Is she slight? Tall? Thin? Heavy? Blonde? Brunette? Long hair or short hair? Lithe

or clumsy? Where is she? Sitting or standing? How sitting or standing? On a sofa, legs curled up, a book on her lap? Sitting on a stool in front of an ironing board? What's she wearing? Tight sweater? Loose blouse? Skirt or slacks? And so forth. These visual facts make a difference in your description of stretching, because some of the facts will be used to illustrate this woman. For instance, if her hair is long and blonde and silky, your major impression of her stretching motion might be a cascade of hair, rippling as she throws her head back. Or, if she has a lithe, supple body, your dominant reaction to the stretch might be one of admiration for the shapeliness and grace of her arm motions, the round outlining of her breasts under the blouse, the easy sway of her shoulders.

When you observe an action, you must (1) see it in the physical terms in which it occurs (in the stretching action, some of these are: chest, arms, hair, clothes, etc.); (2) recognize that you also see it in terms of your own reactions to it; and (3) think of it—usually afterward—in terms of something else (*like* something, *as though* something, etc.).

The most important thing in looking at actions is to ask of each action this question: *What shows?* If you stand beside a highway and watch the speeding cars go by, here are some of the things that "show": the smooth-rushing movement contrasted with the static background of roadside trees and shrubs; the spinning wheels; the momentary glance at the faces of people in the cars; the idle glances of the riders at you, standing by the side of the road; the burred hum of the motor; the bubbly, tearing sound of the tires on the road; the quick crescendo and diminuendo of sound; the slight sway of the car as it rounds a curve. There are countless other things to see and hear in that brief moment of the car passing. Some one or two of those things will be the "terms" in which you write: they are the things that "show."

Another common action experience is riding in a train. You talk of the movement there in terms of the steadily unrolling panorama of passing countryside; the blur of telephone poles; the clackity-clackity-clackity-clack of the wheels; the rapid ding-ding-ding-ding of roadside crossing bells as you sweep by. These are the elements of action to look for because they embody motion in themselves, give it shape and tangibleness; and they give you the means to re-create for your reader the movement you want him to see.

## PROBLEMS

Writing about actions requires, almost by definition, that you use *verbs*. However, in the problems below, make it your first task to analyze and write down the actions in their proper sequence—that is, what happens first, second, third, etc.—and don't worry if you find yourself using unpictorial work-verbs such as *is*, *be*, *do*, and the like. It is more important, right now, for you to be able to see an action clearly and break down that action into a detailed sequence than it is to use a minimum of words with maximum effect. That comes later.

### SIMPLE ACTIONS

Describe the action of driving a nail with a hammer. Assume that the nail is already stuck in the wood and just analyze the striking motion.

Describe the motion of sweeping with a broom. Concentrate your description on the movements of arms and body.

Describe the throwing of a ball overhand.

Describe window curtains moving in a breeze.

Describe someone turning the pages of a book, one at a time. Assume that the book is on his lap.

## COMPLICATED ACTIONS

As with the above, break down these actions into their exact sequence. It will help if you have someone perform the actions for you. Watch the motions carefully. See *exactly* what happens.

Describe the way someone lights a cigarette. Begin with the taking the pack out of pocket or purse.

Describe a woman knitting. Pay close attention to the movements of fingers and forearms.

How do children skip rope?

What is the difference between the way a man runs and the way a girl runs?

Describe two men cutting wood with a two-man saw.

Tell how to start a car. List every action.

## GENERAL ACTIONS

This time pay less attention to exact sequence of motions and more attention to the over-all impression you have of a general action. The suggestions listed are too complicated to be broken down into single movements. The problem here is to suggest the action by describing significant parts of it (and this includes your own reactions to it).

Describe a gang of men pitching hay from a stack into a wagon.

Describe a crowded dance floor when the music is fast, hot, and "solid."

What does a speedboat look like as it goes past you at forty knots?

Describe a yard full of chickens as it looks to you while you are throwing feed to them.

How does a man look when he is mowing a lawn?

Describe a woman applying lipstick to her mouth.

How does a group of women look during a business meeting of a "club"?

Describe a housewife hanging clothes on a line.

## SUGGESTIONS

(a) If you can, keep your descriptions to 250 words or less. Whenever possible, use short sentences.

(b) Be scrupulous about adjectives and adverbs; be sure to use accurate rather than overvivid words: the action makes the word, not the word the action.

(c) In these problems on motion take the attitude that you are writing a manual of procedure for someone who doesn't know how to pound a nail, light a cigarette, knit, and so on.

(The ideas I list in these problems are merely suggestive—it isn't necessary that you write about these things only. Think up problems of your own, objects and actions that especially interest you. The main reason for doing these exercises at all is to develop your *thinking* skill. No matter what subjects you choose to analyze and describe, be sure that you *think them out before you do any writing*. Do not let the pen originate the thought.)

## EXAMPLE

This passage, from Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, is an excellent illustration of the way actions are both seen and felt. It is particularly useful for our purposes because Mr. Hemingway even tells us how much of the particular action can be seen by a close observer.

### First Bullfight . . .\*

I remembered, at the first bullfight I ever saw, before I could see it clearly, before I could even see what happened, . . . white-jacketed beer vender passing in front of you, two steel cables between your eyes and the ring below, the bull's shoulders smooth with blood, the banderillas clattering as he moved and a streak of dust down the middle of his back, his horns solid-looking like wood on top, thicker than your arm where they curved; I remembered in the midst of this confused excitement having a great moment of emotion when the man went in with the sword. But I could not see in my mind exactly what happened and when, on the next bull, I watched closely the emotion was gone and I saw it was a trick. I saw fifty bulls killed after that before I had the emotion again. But by then I could see how it was done and I knew I had seen it done properly that first time.

When you see a bull killed for the first time, if it is the usual run of killing, this is about how it will look. The bull will be standing square on his four feet facing the man who will be standing about five yards away with his feet together, the muleta in his left hand and the sword in his right. The man will raise the cloth in his left hand to see if the bull follows it with his eyes; then he will lower the cloth, hold it and the sword together, turn so that he is standing sideways toward the bull, make a twist with his left hand that will furl the cloth over the stick of the muleta, draw the sword up from the lowered muleta and sight along it toward the bull, his head, the blade of the sword and his left shoulder pointing toward the bull, the muleta held low in his left hand. You will see him draw himself taut and start toward the bull and the next thing you will see is that he is past the bull and either the sword has risen into the air and gone end over end or you will see its red flannel wrapped hilt, or the hilt and part of the blade sticking out from between the bull's shoulders or from his neck muscles and the crowd will be shouting in approval or disapproval depending upon the manner in which the man has gone in and the location of the sword. That is all you will see of the killing.

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\* Reprinted from *Death in the Afternoon* by Ernest Hemingway; used by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribners Sons, N. Y

### 3. *Out of the Corner of Your Eye*

Historians have a great advantage over novelists in that they can state a supposed fact without explaining it. A novelist, using the same fact, must explain it in order to make it clear to the reader.

—KENNETH ROBERTS

AS YOU examined objects and actions in the last two chapters you must have realized that you rarely see anything by itself—an isolated phenomenon. Whatever you look at has a background, a foreground, a left side, and a right side—and something more which you see “out of the corner of your eye.” We see things in contexts: objects plus surroundings. Most things are meaningless until you relate them to their surroundings.

Suppose you put a glass of water on a bare table in a whitewashed room. You can't talk about this glass of water at all unless you relate it to its surroundings. It is a *particular* glass of water. It is in special circumstances (on a bare table in a whitewashed room), and you talk about it in terms of its context. You talk about its position, its form as compared to the angular table and the flat floor and walls, its color, its relative size, and so on.

Or, to use another example, imagine that you were magically able to suspend a colorless, round, glass marble in mid-air against a neutral background. You would hardly

be able to look intelligently at the marble without relating it, visually and mentally, with other things around it. You will notice that even in writing this bare description of the marble I have had to indicate some relationships, vague though they were. I said "suspend" the marble; and the word intimates "suspend" *in relation to* something. So I said "mid-air," and this automatically implied *in the midst of* something else.

This is a far-fetched example, of course. The things we see and write about are more ordinary (and more complicated) than this. We see trees and rivers and streets and people doing things; we see fist fights, and a girl sharpening a pencil, youngsters kissing under a street light and people eating salami. These ordinary events are not so cleanly isolated as the marble in mid-air. They are tied to all sorts of surroundings and feelings. For the writer, the context of a fact is more important, almost, than the fact itself. Since it is nearly impossible to talk about an isolated fact, you have to talk about it largely in terms of its physical and emotional surroundings.

Almost any problem of description will show you the truth of this. Suppose you have just climbed a high mountain. You are looking at the view. It is impressively beautiful, and you want to talk about it. You can't say, "It's impressively beautiful," and let it go at that. You are more *specific*—that is, you talk about the things that make up the view. You are standing on a cliff edge high up on the mountain. You have just reached this point after a long, hot climb. Beneath your feet, the cliff drops steeply away to a tiny green valley, thousands of feet below. On your sweat-damp back the sun bakes warmly, and a gusty breeze pleasantly fingers your shirt. Afternoon sunshine burnishes the upthrust rocks. Sculptured regiments of clouds march slowly across the blue field of sky. Winding through the

valley below, a stream glistens in the green meadow. As you look, you can see and name one thing after another which *contributes* to the view which you have said is “beautiful.” You are, in short, describing a thing by describing its surroundings and your feelings about them. Many things have entered into the statement that the view is “impressively beautiful”: your own emotions as you stand “on top of the world,” the combination of warmth, light, and color in the golden afternoon, and other physical and emotional elements too numerous to list here.

To show how facts are dominated by their surroundings, let’s talk about this same mountain view as it looks five minutes later. The sun has suddenly clouded over. The breeze, no longer cool, feels chilly; your shirt sticks clammy to your back. The rocks shoulder dull gray and sullen against the cliff. The valley looks cold and far away; the little stream is a leaden streak across it. Standing on the cliff edge no longer exhilarates you; instead, you feel a bit depressed and faintly frightened as you stare over the sheer fall of rock to the gray depths. You turn and walk away.

This change in context (made somewhat melodramatic in the preceding paragraphs) demonstrates a truth that every writer should know: you can’t see just one thing and exclude the rest; you see a thing and its setting. Objects plus surroundings—and the surroundings are more important than the objects.

Just as there are ways to look at single facts like your hand or the door or a water glass, there are ways to look at the contexts around facts. To learn these ways, you have to develop a state of mind and feelings that is incessantly—and intelligently—curious and naïve. To the creative person, nothing is “obvious,” nothing is dull or taken for granted. Childlike, you must learn to look at an ordinary object, ask obvious questions of it, and move on to the

next thing. What's that? Why is it there? What's it for? Why is it there instead of here? How fast is it going? Why? And endlessly *why*. When you ask "Why?", you are asking for the relationship between, say, a water glass and a tea-cup, and when you learn relationships between things, you begin to understand them.

Picture a man standing on a street corner waiting for a bus. If you are going to describe him as he stands there, you can't simply say that he's standing on a street corner waiting for a bus—that's too vague. How does he stand? Slouching? Hands in pockets? Head turning one way and another? Is he reading a newspaper? Is he leaning on a sign? What kind of sign? Are there other people near him? How does the street look? Dirty? Clean? Is it windy? How do you show that it's windy? Scraps of paper blowing in the gutter? What's behind the man? Stores? A wooden fence? A vacant lot? What kind of day is it? Cold? Warm? Gray? Sunny? What sounds do you hear? Horns? The roar of motors as cars pass? The hum of tires? Voices? News-boys hawking headlines?

Automatically, quickly, you have to ask question after question of the scene of the man who waits for a bus. You have to see and hear much more than just the man. There are thousands of facts relating to him. These facts—observed and selected by you—will illuminate the scene so that when you tell about it, other people can see it as you want them to.

The fact of the man on the street corner is like a stone dropped into a still pond; from it, around it, because of it, many ripples hurry out toward the shore. The writer has to be interested both in the spot where the stone plopped into the water, and the ripples. He has to see them both at the same time, yet see them separately, too. *And* he has to be able to pick out the ripples which interest him as

significant. He has to see details at the same time he is seeing a pattern.

This takes skilled observation of a kind that we are all equipped to make but that is not ordinarily required of us. We usually see only the pattern (or the detail), but rarely do we take the trouble to see—or to recognize that we see—pattern and detail together. Fortunately, we can train ourselves to see things in this inclusive way. Basic to this skill is learning to *relate* the details of what you see to each other and to the context in which they occur.

Most of us can, by an effort of memory, re-create some scene or event we have observed. The way we re-create it is by pulling out of the fuzzy memories of the scene the facts of sight and sound that associate themselves as background. The more facts we are able to associate (make a pattern of) the more concrete the memory becomes. When a scene is finally re-created vividly, we discover that it is built up of details pulled out of the whole scene which, added together, produce a single coherent impression.

To illustrate this, I reproduce here another dialogue, this time between one student and the instructor, in which we worked with the problem of recalling an event and its context.

I: See if you can remember, as clearly and vividly as you can, some happening or event which impressed you very much. It doesn't matter what the event was. It could be a particularly beautiful sight or an action of some kind or a natural phenomenon like an earthquake or a heavy rain-storm. Some one impressive thing that you remember with especial vividness.

ELLEN: The thing that impressed me most was a hurricane. I was in the middle of it.

I: The New England hurricane of 1938?

ELLEN: No, this was in Bermuda. I live there. The hurricane came up all of a sudden, it seemed like. I've never seen such wind. It scared me, and I remember every detail about it.

I: In order to show you the kinds of questions you have to ask of happenings you think you remember very well, suppose we concentrate for a few minutes on this hurricane. You said you remember every detail of it. Suppose you tell me about the hurricane as you saw it. Make me see it as you did, and hear it, and feel it. If you get stuck, I'll ask you questions.

ELLEN: Well, it was a very sticky day, I remember. You know, sticky-hot and muggy. After a while I felt sort of uneasy about it, so I went and closed all the shutters because I knew it was going to blow pretty hard. Well . . . then the wind came up and the shutters banged—the wind wasn't steady at first but it came in heavy gusts—and then the lights went out. I was all by myself. It scared me, and it lasted a long time, but when it was over not much damage had been done to the house, only a lot of trees uprooted and palm branches all over the place. It was some wind. There was lots of rain, too.

I: Is that all there was to it?

ELLEN: No, but it's hard to remember exactly.

I: You didn't give any details to speak of.

ELLEN: No, I didn't, did I?

I: Let's start at the beginning. Where were you when you first began to suspect that a storm might be coming?

ELLEN: Let's see . . . I was in the living room, I think.

I: What were you doing?

ELLEN: Reading. Sitting in father's overstuffed armchair. I remember that because from his chair you can look out the big window to the ocean.

I: What made you stop reading?

ELLEN: I don't know—the quiet, I guess. It was awfully quiet.

I: How do you know it was quiet?

ELLEN: That's a silly question. It was *quiet*, that's all. No sounds.

I: But how do you talk about quiet?

ELLEN: Oh, I see. Well, I suppose it *looked* quiet. For instance, all the flowers around the trees and the walls looked limp. There's usually a breeze that stirs them and makes sounds at the corners of the house. And the sea looked quiet, too. You know on a regular clear day when the sun shines over everything, the waves sort of dance. Whitecaps sparkle in the sun. White on green. This time the sea didn't look like that.

I: How did it look?

ELLEN: That's hard to . . . it looked greasy; that's it, greasy. Long swells. Oh, and I couldn't hear a single bird. Which was strange because the birds are always cheeping and squeaking around in the trees and under the eaves of the house. Then later I turned on the radio, and it seemed awfully loud. Contrast with the quiet before, I guess.

I: You said the sea looked greasy—different from times when the sun shone on the whitecaps. Wasn't the sun shining on this day?

ELLEN: I think . . . no . . . well, it was and it wasn't. I mean it was light, all right, but it wasn't like sunshine. Sort of a yellowy glare. Over everything. And, come to think of it, it was a funny thing, there weren't any shadows at all. I noticed that because I used to watch where the corner-of-the-house shadow went at different times of the day. And at this time of the afternoon it should have just about reached the flower beds—the shadow, I mean—and there wasn't any shadow at all, only the yellow light. Kind of yellow-orange.

I: You said before that you were scared. Did you feel at all scared before the hurricane struck?

ELLEN: Yes.

I: Why?

ELLEN: I don't know, exactly . . . well, yes I do. I was all alone in the house.

I: No one home at all?

ELLEN: No, just me and the two dogs.

I: Oh, two dogs. I thought you said you were alone.

ELLEN: No people, no other people, I meant.

(By this time, you should have noticed that detail after detail of the background and context of the hurricane came back to this student as her memory was probed with questions. With each detail, the picture comes clearer and clearer; she remembered not only things that she had seen directly, but things that were on the periphery of her sight—"out of the corner of her eye." She had "forgotten" them because at the time she had had no particular reason to focus her mind on them or to relate them to the whole experience.)

We went on:

I: What were the dogs doing all this time? Where were they? In the livingroom with you?

ELLEN: Yes, they were lying down near the chair. I remember I got up to let them out, and I had to call them. That was queer because usually when anybody makes a move to let those dogs out they scoot out of the house and wag their tails and almost mow you down, they're so happy to get out.

I: What happened when you let them out?

ELLEN: I opened the door and—you should have seen all the bugs that were trying to get in the screen. Even little birds, flying around and knocking themselves against the screen. I had to shut the door in a hurry.

I: What did you do when you got outside?

ELLEN: It wasn't exactly outside, it was in a patio—well, yes, of course, it was outdoors. Well, usually the dogs race for the gate and wait for me to open it so they can get out. Not this time. They stuck close to the house.

I: Anything else?

ELLEN: I looked around some. There's a road that goes past our house. It looked funny, all yellow even though it was really black macadam. I didn't see anybody. I watched the ocean again. The swells were getting heavier because I could hear the water crashing around on the shore. After I looked around some more, I went back into the house.

I: When did the hurricane come?

ELLEN: After I went in, it got darker and darker. Then the wind began. And the rain.

I: I think I have asked enough questions now to show you the idea. You can't describe anything—or talk about anything—without asking questions like these of yourself and of the scenes or actions you are describing.

Notice that always I asked, what happened? *Exactly* what happened? What did it look like? What were some of the concrete details of sight and sound—the nongeneralized results of observation? What feelings did she have? How did the feelings affect the way she looked at the scene? And so on. At the end of it, I asked this student to write a short description of the event we had discussed. The first draft of her Bermuda hurricane description is printed in full below. Compare it with the verbatim questions-and-answers of the discussion session, and you will see how much vivid and significant detail of *context* and *background* was drawn out of the student's memory to give vigor and life to the writing.

## HURRICANE

I was sitting in a deep armchair reading a book. There wasn't a sound anywhere. I turned a page, then looked out the window in front of me. The hills and sea looked brassy; the gray sea with pale light on the crests of the swell looked as thick as mineral oil.

After a while I began to notice sounds. The earth seemed to rumble. The waves were thundering in the caves under the island. My two dogs were nervously asleep on their sides next to me; once in a while they would jerk their heads up and whimper.

The air was hot, very hot and muggy. No birds were singing. I stood up and called the dogs. I felt I had to get outside.

When I opened the patio door, masses of big frogs, birds, flies, cockroaches, and mosquitoes were clustered there, trying to get into the house. We got out quickly and shut the door. The dogs didn't want to stay out. I wondered why. They usually cried to be taken out, and if I took them for an extra walk they were so happy they practically knocked me over in their joy. But now they slunk near the house. Their tongues lolled out, red and panting.

I looked at the huge flowers growing up the walls and hanging from the trees. They were tightly closed and the leaves hung limply against their stems.

There seemed to be yellow light everywhere, but there were no shadows. No shadows anywhere.

The road by the house was deserted. Not a cyclist or a carriage passed by. I was lonelier than ever outside, so I called the dogs and we went back in. The dogs immediately went to my room and both of them waited while I pulled back the skirts of my dressing-table. They always went in there when they were uneasy. When I closed the skirts around them they felt snug and secure.

I went around the house and closed all the shutters. By now it had got completely dark, so I went back to the living room and turned on all the lights and listened to some boogie-woogie on the radio. Dutch courage.

Suddenly, above the jazzy blasts of trumpets and drums I heard the wind. A long gust tore viciously at the house, cracked some

tiles off the roof and ripped loose a shutter and sent it crashing against the wall of the house. As abruptly as it began, there was absolute calm again.

Then, in a hard crescendo, there came a steady drum of rain. An explosion of wind shook the house to the foundations. Simultaneously, the radio commentator said, "The hurricane has reached the islands. Winds reaching velocities of 150 miles per hour are expected to——"

The radio went off, the whole house went dark, and the winds worried with the house like a dog with a bone.

If you can learn to see things and their contexts clearly—in a kind of panorama—and file your impressions away for future reference, you'll save yourself the trouble of the self-cross-examination that was demonstrated in the dialogue above.

A *panorama*, as you know, is a "mental picture of a series of images or events." You can teach yourself to see panoramically. Soldiers being trained for scout duty in World War II were taught a crude form of this skill. Men in forward observation posts had to learn to take quick sweeps of terrain with their eyes, see widely and specifically at the same time, and then report what they saw. The soldiers began their observation training by looking at a blanket on which were placed articles of military equipment: canteen, bayonet, messkit, shoes, automatic pistol, a half-filled clip of cartridges, and the like. At first, the soldiers were given a half minute to study only four or five articles. Then they were asked to look away from the blanket, name the items, describe their condition, and indicate the relationship of each article to the others on the blanket. Gradually the number of items on the blanket was increased and the observation time cut down. Soon the *soldiers* could, after a five-second look, see, remember and *relate* twenty, thirty and even forty articles.

Almost anyone willing to make the small effort of will involved can develop this "perceptive" seeing to a certain degree. It does involve will power, though. You know how hard it is, for instance, to try to read a book while, at the same time, there are conversations going on around you. It is possible (within limits) to give your attention to both things. Yet to be broadly attentive—and retentive—in this way is basic to a creative writer's equipment. I do not mean that you have to spend your waking hours looking at or listening to everything with great intensity. But you do have to cultivate habits of mind which, when necessary, will help you to see, relate, and therefore "remember" quite fully what you have experienced. While you are learning to do this you will, naturally, be awkward and self-conscious about it. But after a while it will become more relaxed and nearly habitual. And, parenthetically, you will find yourself enjoying the ordinary things of life with a vividness that will surprise you; you'll be able to *see* much more than you could before.

. . .

All through this discussion of contexts and backgrounds I have used the expression *related to* or *the relationships of things*. Finding connections, resemblances, or patterns in the unrelated sights and experiences of ordinary living is one of the writer's main jobs. Yet our natural skills—like sight, hearing, touch—usually function in an unrelated fashion. For example, when you move your eyes from one point to another, you do not see the intervening spaces unless you stop and focus on them. Lift your eyes up from this book, focus on one spot on the wall, and then move your gaze slowly to a spot on the opposite wall. As you moved your head, your gaze passed the space from one wall to another in a slow blur. Now, as you read this next line of type, try to be conscious of the way your

eyes move. They move in slow, looping jerks, from focus to focus, as you take in words or small groups of words. You do not read with a smooth sweep of eye; and you do not see anything with a smooth, fully focused glance. Your eyes move rapidly from point to point.

But your mind, marvelous machine and collector of stimuli, bridges the visual gaps by relating them in terms of form, idea, feeling, and the like. When you look "around a room" you do not literally "see" the whole room—that is, your physical eyes don't see it—but your mind pulls together for you, with incredible speed, the sum of the glances you have made around the room, and you say, "I can see the whole thing." What you mean is that your mind has related the whole thing for you.

I don't want to digress into a discussion of the physiology and psychology of sight. But I use this example to point out that the skill of relating one thing to another is one we all have and use every day. The creative person merely sharpens the skill and makes it more conscious. The process of creating something is, after all, imposing form on something that has no apparent form; and form is, basically, relatedness of one part of a thing to another part.

## PROBLEMS

The problems listed here are only suggestions. Just for practice, though, make up problems in re-creating contexts that will fit all sorts of writing needs: violent action, crowds, a quiet scene, a single action against a backdrop of group actions, a tableau, and the like. The best problems for your purposes are those which come directly out of your own experience.

**SIMPLE BACKGROUNDS**

Write a piece about a man who is leaning over a bridge, fishing in the river below. It's a hot summer day.

Describe a man in a canoe. He is far out on a large lake. It is flat calm. Evening. The man isn't paddling—just sitting, smoking a pipe and trailing a hand in the water.

It is evening. A high-school boy and girl, obviously deep in puppy love, walk by your house. They are holding hands. Write as though you were watching them, unobserved, from your front porch.

It's a magnificent autumn day, and a puppy is chasing leaves on the lawn.

Two couples are cooking marshmallows on the beach at night. It's summertime.

A solitary little boy, bundled up in a big snowsuit, is sliding down the road outside your house. He trudges uphill, belly-flops, coasts down, trudges back up again.

A small girl stares at a store window display of dolls.

**COMPLICATED BACKGROUNDS**

A local ballgame. About 300 people in small bleachers to left and right of home plate. It's the last half of the ninth, tie score, home team at bat. There are two outs, score is three and two on the batter—and men on first and second. In your description consider the crowd as well as the players. Try to reproduce the "color" of the scene.

A young man is playing the piano at a large party. Piano is in corner of big livingroom. He is playing Chopin brilliantly, with superb dash and feeling. People at party are surprised. They begin to gather around piano.

## SUGGESTIONS

As I suggested in the body of this chapter, select an incident that impressed you very much and write it up. Try several things.

(a) This time, write as smoothly as you can, keeping always in mind that the ordinary, *exact* word is better than the exotic, vague word.

(b) As before, think out the problem first; make scratch lists (if you think you need to) of the *facts* you think you'll use; and then begin to write.

(c) Do at least three drafts of each problem.

## EXAMPLE

The way the context characterizes and illumines a happening is aptly shown in this description by Thomas Wolfe of the death of a man in a New York City subway station. All men die—but this death is particularized by what the artist saw and felt about it.

### Death the Proud Brother\*

At the heart and core of the most furious center of the city's life—below Broadway at Times Square—a little after one o'clock in the morning, bewildered, aimless, having no goal or place to which I wished to go, with the old chaos and unrest inside me, I had thrust down the stairs out of the great thronging street, the tidal swarm of atoms who were pressing and hurrying forward in as fierce a haste to be hurled back into their cells again as they had shown when they had rushed out into the streets that evening.

Thus, we streamed down from the free night into the tunnel's stale and fetid air again, we swarmed and hurried across the

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\* Reprinted from *From Death to Morning* by Thomas Wolfe; copyright 1935 by Charles Scribner's Sons; used by permission of the publishers.

floors of gray cement, we thrust and pushed our way along as furiously as if we ran a race with time, as if some great reward were to be won if we could only save two minutes, or as if we were hastening onward, as fast as we could go, toward some glorious meeting, some happy and fortunate event, some goal of beauty, wealth, or love on whose shining mark our eyes were fastened.

Then, as I put my coin into the slot, and passed on through the wooden turnstile, I saw the man who was about to die. The place was a space of floor, a width of cement which was yet one flight above the level of the trains, and the man was sitting on a wooden bench which had been placed there to the left, as one went down the incline to the tunnel.

The man just sat there quietly at one end of the bench, leaned over slightly to his right with his elbow resting on the arm of the bench, his hat pulled down a little, and his face half lowered. At this moment there was a slow, tranquil, hardly perceptible movement of his breath—a flutter, a faint sigh—and the man was dead. In a moment, a policeman who had watched him casually from a distance walked over to the bench, bent down, spoke to him, and then shook him by the shoulder. As he did so, the dead man's body slipped a little, his arm slid over the end of the bench and stayed so, one hand hanging over, his shabby hat jammed down, a little to one side, upon his head, his overcoat open, and his short right leg drawn stiffly back. Even as the policeman shook him by the shoulder, the man's face was turning gray. By this time a few people, out of the crowds that swarmed constantly across the floor, had stopped to look, stared curiously and uneasily, started to go on, and then had come back. Now, a few of them were standing here, just looking, saying nothing, casting uneasy and troubled looks at one another from time to time.

And yet I think that we all knew that the man was dead. By this time another policeman had arrived, was talking quietly to the other one, and now he, too, began to look curiously at the dead man, went over and shook him by the shoulder as that other one had done, and then after a few quiet words with his comrade,

walked off rapidly. In a minute or two he came back again and another policeman was with him. They talked together quietly for a moment. One of them bent over and searched the man's pockets, finding a dirty envelope, a wallet, and a grimy-looking card. After prying into the purse and taking notes upon their findings they just stood beside the dead man, waiting.

The dead man was a shabby-looking fellow of an age hard to determine, but he was scarcely under fifty, and hardly more than fifty-five. And, had one sought long and far for the true portrait of the pavement cipher, the composite photograph of the man-swarm atom, he could have found no better specimen than this man. His only distinction was that there was nothing to distinguish him from a million other men. He had the kind of face that one sees ten thousand times a day upon the city streets, and cannot remember later.

This face, which even when alive, it is true, was of a sallow, sagging, somewhat paunchy and unwholesome hue and texture, was dryly and unmistakably Irish—city-Irish—with the mouth thin, sunken, slightly bowed, and yet touched with something loose and sly, a furtive and corrupt humor. And the face was also surly, hang-dog, petulant, and servile—the face of one of those little men—a door-man at a theater, a janitor in a shabby warehouse, office building, or cheap apartment house, the father-in-law of a policeman, the fifth cousin of a desk-sergeant, the uncle of a ward-heeler's wife, a pensioned door-opener, office-guard, messenger, or question-evader for some Irish politician, schooled to vote dutifully for the "boys" upon election day, and to be flung his little scrap of patronage for service rendered and silence kept, apt at servility, fawning, cringing to those sealed with the mark of privilege and favor, and apt at snarling, snapping, gratuitous and impudent discourtesy to those who had no power, no privilege, no special mark of favor or advancement to enlarge them in his sight. Such was indubitably the man who now sat dead upon the subway bench.

## 4. *Your Feelings Are Stirred*

The resources of a writer's brain are his knowledge of facts, the results of his observations, the richness of his emotions, the vigor of his imagination, the mental training which enables him to see effect in cause and cause in effect.

—HENRY S. CANBY

**YOUR** creative task has hardly begun when you have learned to observe and write effectively about obvious things and the facts of their behavior. These are only skeletal materials. You must have them to construct a piece of writing. But your creation gets its flesh, its heart, and, if I may venture the vague language, its soul from less tangible realities than the sticks, stones, smells, and noises of the physical world. Life is, of course, something more than objects and motions. Among other things, it is full of hums and discords and the sudden harmonies and jangles of emotions. Life stirs with feelings; it is moved by the subtleties of motive; it is quickened by the disguised urgencies of desire. We are more sentient than intellectual; we feel more than we think. We are constantly in moods and fits and states of mind. We do things by "hunches" or "impressions." Much of what passes for thinking in our daily lives is no more than emotional self-justification for states of mind. We even alter immovable realities by applying to them the shapes and textures of our moods. We look at things through the emotional colored glasses we happen to have on when we see them.

At one time, for instance, we can watch a gay party and remark sourly that most parties are the pastimes of fools, mockeries of gaiety. A week later we can attend exactly the same kind of party and have a wonderful time. The truth is, we haven't seen either party flatly, as a phenomenon alone. What we have said is: I see this party, and this is how I *feel* about it now; therefore this is the way it is. Feelings penetrate our lives so deeply and operate on us and our surroundings so persistently that they are a rich source of material for writing.

Your first responsibility as an artist—and anyone who says he is a creative writer claims to be an artist—is to give shape or form or coherence to the raw material you are working with. Where there is form, there is a sense of proportion in the maker of it. Where there is proportion, there is a clear mind that can move away from the material and see not only its internal harmonies but its relation to other things, too. Some of the raw material for your writing is emotion. You ought to know emotion from your own experience of it—know what anger, love, spite, envy, and tenderness are like in quality and texture of feeling. But more importantly, you have to get outside these feelings, be objective about them, to know what they feel like to other people.

(Never forget, when you are writing, that your reader looks *at* before he looks *with*: you have to *show* him something coherent to look at before he can identify himself with it or react to it. He isn't—he can't be—as close to the material as you are.)

Understanding emotion from the outside as well as from the inside requires two different capacities of you. First, you need to train yourself to observe the signs of emotion in yourself and other people. This you can do by much the same method as I have described in earlier chapters.

But more significantly, the observation takes an act of *will*. You cannot allow yourself to be involved in and stirred too much by emotions when you write about them. You'll be too close. Your writing will be overcharged with your own feeling, and—this is usually true—as a result it is likely to be turgid, wordy, and too full of symbols which have more meaning for you than for your reader.

Emotion is contagious. Most of us react sympathetically (or the opposite) to situations which throb with feeling. You will do this, too, because you are human. But if you are also a writer, you eventually have to tear yourself away from participation. You may be deeply and powerfully caught up in torrents of passionate feeling that you want urgently to write about. Yet before you can write a coherent word about them you must be able to set the feelings aside (and yourself with them) to view them with the dispassionate appraisal of a scientist calculating a chemical reaction. Creative writers control their material; the material does not control them. Art is conscious, deliberate, calculated. The most effective "spontaneous" writing has usually been revised twenty times.

This moving away to a calculated objectivity is an act of will; it demands force of character. Do not be surprised that I inject here what seems to be a moral admonition. The more you write, the more you will discover that writing requires as much of your character as it does of your imagination. Even the mere physical act of writing depends upon your determination to chain yourself to a desk for hours every day while you wring, batter, twist, cut, club, and wrench the forms and words of a creation from your mind and feelings.

Within certain limits, as we know from the work of psychologists, emotions can be observed, tabulated, and even predicted with some precision. For example, when

one young child in a family is jealous of a brother or sister, the psychologists say, "sibling jealousy." They know that sibling jealousy normally expresses itself in typical ways: the jealous child hits the other, snatches toys, wets his pants or his bed, sulks, or creates scenes to bring attention to himself. Similarly in older people, where strong emotions like jealousy are often hidden under layers of repression, the psychiatrist can analyze the emotions by interpreting their outward signs: psychosomatic illness or disability, compulsive or unsocial habits, and the like.

As a writer, you are not thus scientifically concerned with emotion. You analyze less than you *present* or *dramatize*. In order to present emotion convincingly you have to project it in terms that look and sound real to your reader. You are not convincing when you say, "The air was charged with tension" or "I was livid with anger" or "His lip curled in disgust" or "Happiness gleamed from her eyes." These are the lazy writer's cliché indicators that emotion of some sort is going on. But they don't convey any sense that something real is occurring: they are merely "words, words, words."

Emotions do not happen in a wordy vacuum. They are felt by people. These people express themselves by acting out their emotions against the backdrop of their surroundings. Emotions show in facial expression, tone of voice, body action, looks, glances, tears, and violence. They show in a slump of the back, a lift of the eyebrows. They are reflected in other people's reactions to the emotions: the gasp of surprise or shock, the sudden twist of a head, the quick warm clasp of a hand. These are some of the terms in which you write about emotion, the tangible outward signs of inner disturbance.

The best place to begin observing these tangible terms is in yourself. Let's see what anger does to you, for exam-

ple. (Anger is a violent emotion and lends itself easily to examination because its expressions are usually crude and forthright.) The chemistry of anger is the same in you as it is in the Australian bushman: the quick pang of recognition of danger or object of hate; the massive internal secretion of adrenalin that gives extra energy either to fight or to run away—this is the same in all men. But each person expresses anger in his own way.

How does anger feel to you, inwardly? Does your belly feel tight? Is there a sinking sensation in your throat and stomach? Do your insides seem to writhe with distaste or fury? Do tears start uncontrollably to your eyes? Sometimes, when the anger is deep, can you feel the blood leave your face and the muscles around your eyes and mouth grow so tight they feel numb? Do your legs shake with tension? Do you feel choked, as though you desperately wanted to breathe and could not? If you can determine how anger feels to you—listing as concretely as possible the terms of its inward expression—then you can be sure that anger feels this way to millions of other people, too.

Now for your anger's outward signs. What do you do when you are angry? Are you noisy? Do you stamp your feet or curse or shout? Does your voice change pitch and quality—do you speak hoarsely or quietly or thinly? Do you throw things? Do your fists clench? Do you stand stiffly, frozen by your anger into a shaking automaton? Or do you fling yourself about with aimless fury? If you can draw away from yourself, if you can see a picture of yourself angry, almost as though you were watching a stage play where the protagonist was someone else—then you will begin to be able to write about your own anger. You will see it as it *looks*, as well as know how it feels.

As an exercise, make a list of your own outward and inward expressions of anger. From the list select those feel-

ings and actions that seem to you to be most typical of yourself. Then try, in a hundred words or so, to describe yourself when angry. When you have decided what the terms of description are, you will find that you have listed a good collection of tangible, specific facts about anger. Then you won't make the common mistake of generalizing. You won't say, for instance, "Anger makes me want to hit things," because in saying that you aren't being concrete, and your reader won't have a picture of you. But if you *show* the reader your hands, balled into fists, your whole body taut and ready to explode into hitting, your senseless pounding of a door or a table, then you are saying with much greater effect, "Anger makes me want to hit things."

(Writing about emotions, as indeed writing about most things, is an exercise in dramatizing reality. The creative writer cannot talk about emotion clinically: he has to demonstrate a case history. If you are writing a story and your people aren't showing themselves by *doing* things; if they aren't walking, shouting, posturing across the stage of your writing, then you are *talking around* them or *writing parallel* to them, like an academician or a philosopher. You are saying only, "This happened," and "That happened," when you should be saying, "See! This moves this way, that moves that way, the two things look so-and-so.")

Once you have seen that the way you write about a violent emotion is, usually, in terms of its outward or physical expressions, then you should examine some of the more subtle emotions—"impressions" of things, for instance—to see in what terms you can talk about them.

Because our feelings are always with us, we habitually color the plain facts of life with the tinges of our emotions about them. It is a common thing for us to characterize a building or a natural scene with words that have emo-

tional overtones. We say, this place is "gloomy" or that place is "overwhelming." We are more apt to voice our impressions of a place than our impersonal observations of it. It won't be hard, for instance, for you to recall a house which immediately repelled you on your first visit. You had a feeling of unfriendliness and hostility the moment you walked into the place. Yet the house wasn't a live thing. It did not have the power, of itself, to be hostile or forbidding. But you got the "impression" nevertheless—it gave you that "mood." *What* gave you the feeling? Was the front hall dark and gloomy? Did the rooms smell musty and not lived-in? Did you feel that the house looked out from its setting almost furtively, peering through surrounding trees as though at an intruder? Or did the house feel hostile because it was too austere, too well kept to feel like a home that people lived and loved in? How do you know it was austere? What did you *see* that made you think so?

On the other hand, to take the opposite illustration, you surely know a home that seems to envelop you immediately in affectionate warmth and security. It is an "easy" house, a house with the echoes of laughter in its walls, a house that takes you in with the friendly informality of an arm over the shoulders. What gives you this feeling of friendliness? Is it the sight of a roller skate and a catcher's mitt on the front steps, the casual leavings of children's play? Is it a picture in the hall that the occupants obviously *like* to look at—a waterfall scene cut from a feed and grain calendar—trite but admired? Is it a peep around a doorway into a living room that has deep, worn furniture, and books scattered on tables instead of regimented on shelves? Is it the rich smell of something cooking in the kitchen? What physical evidences, in short, give you the impression of a "friendly" house?

In these paragraphs I have been talking about subjective impressions. These impressions have sources and express themselves just as any emotions do. In the examples of the friendly and unfriendly houses, a whole series of related physical facts summed themselves up in your mind and expressed themselves in a single, inclusive impression. In ordinary conversation, you can get away with general indications of your impressions. You can say, "That's a very gloomy, unfriendly place," and if necessary you can go on to explain to your listener what you mean. But when you are writing about it, you must remember that your reader can't ask you what you mean: all he has is the cold page in front of him. You have to give him enough information so that he can see what you saw, think about it as you did—then he can have the impression you want him to have. If you want to transfer your feeling about a place to a reader, you have to *re-create* for him the outward, physical terms which produced the impression for you, as well as the thoughts about it that thronged your mind.

Even more subtle than impressions or subjective reactions are *moods*. One of the most common writing problems—especially in stories or plays—is the creation of suitable moods or "contexts of feeling." Little creative writing is done in the glare of flat light, so to speak; there are shadows, highlights, and contrasts. Your people meet one another, conflict with one another, act upon one another—this is the essence of what is called "plot." And in all these actions, tensions and conflicts are created, many of which have to be expressed as moods. Unless you have lived the life of a hermit, you must have seen or been a player in many tense scenes. Have you ever opened a door suddenly, not thinking about what was on the other side, and surprised two people in the midst of a bitter argument? The opening of the door cut off the sound

of their voices as sharply as though you had snapped out a light in a closet. They stood facing one another, tense with restrained feeling, their heads swiveled toward you with surprised and artificial politeness. Between them, like a taut, quivering rope, was a *mood*, suspended for a moment by your interruption. You felt the mood, felt—somehow—that the air was prickly with the knife points of conflict. You muttered your excuses and quickly backed away, shutting the door.

The mood that you sensed was as tangible as a slap in the face. Yet it didn't have a shape or a color that you could point to or name. It wasn't tangible in the same way as a brick is tangible, but it was every bit as real to you. How do you write about emotions when they are expressed in moods?

As before, you begin by finding out in what terms the mood shows itself. Instead of making a straightaway analysis, this time I have made up a conversation between you and me which will show the method of getting at the terms of moods. Though the dialogue takes some time to read, it represents a useful process for you to follow in your own mind when you come to re-create a mood in writing.

You: What sort of mood do you want to talk about?

I: Oh, something fairly vigorous and obvious. It will be easier to take it apart. I'm thinking, for instance, of the mood of a strike mob I was once caught in. It was a big mob—and a big mood, too.

You: Were you one of the strikers?

I: Oh, no, I was completely out of it, a stranger. As a matter of fact, I was in the army at the time. Out in California. For some reason, I can't remember what, I had been sent from Long Beach to Burbank on an errand—

I think it was to pick up some packages of maps. At least, I was in a jeep and the thing was crammed with rolls of brown-paper parcels marked "Secret" and "Confidential."

You: How did you see the strike mob?

I: I came over Cahuenga pass and went down the hill toward Burbank. The Warner studios are down there, and the main road goes right past them. I could see that the road was jammed with what looked like thousands of people.

You: What did you think it was?

I: I didn't know. Naturally, I was curious, but I had my parcels to deliver, and I couldn't stop to rubberneck as I would have if I'd been a civilian. But I couldn't get through. Crowds were too thick. Lots of cars had stopped on the highway, and horns were honking, people were leaning out of car windows yelling, "What the hell's the matter?" I had an advantage with the jeep because I pulled out of traffic and went across a field where there was a small path.

You: Did you get around the crowd?

I: Part way around. I got to some side streets but I was blocked again, this time by several lines of pickets, with a thick crowd behind them. They didn't pay any attention to me. I just sat and watched. There was a lot of confused yelling and aimless moving around.

You: Well, how did you feel a "mood" in this crowd?

I: I didn't sense the mood right then—I was too far on the edge of things. After the picket lines started to move, I edged the jeep along behind them because, if they went far enough, I could get back on the highway on the other side. Pretty soon, to my disgust, I found myself sitting in front of a hotdog stand opposite the main entrance of the studio. The crowd on either side of me was too dense

to try to shove the jeep through. So I just cut the motor and watched. That's when I began to feel the "mood" of the crowd that I mentioned.

You: Why didn't you sense the mood before this?

I: I suppose because I wasn't close enough to it to see any more than a generalized mass. Now I began to spot individual faces and actions and see little groups of men doing specific things. I asked a guy who was lounging near me what the fuss was about. "Hell, I dunno," he said. "Union says it's a lock-out, studio says it's a strike. Half these guys"—and he flipped his hand at the moving crowd—"half these guys just come over from the Lockheed plant because the union told 'em some other unions was gettin' shafted on this deal." He leaned over to me and said with a hoarse confidence, "Y'know, all them guys really want is a fight. Spoilin' for a fight." Right then, I heard some sharp shouts, the crackling, mouthy sound of a public address loudspeaker, and swelling crowd noises. A car was edging slowly out of one of the studio gates. Men were prancing around it, shaking their fists, leaning into the windows, pointing at the driver. Suddenly the car began to rock crazily back and forth. Some men at one side of it were pushing in unison. They were joined quickly by dozens of men—looked like ants suddenly come to a spot of sugar on a floor. The car tipped over with a jerk. Over the noise of people I could hear the thin crash of glass as the windows broke. The side door opened upward and the driver crawled out, shaking his head and yelling.

You: This all sounds confused so far—I don't get any impression of a mood yet because too many scattered things are going on.

I: You're right, it was confused. But just after the car was tipped over, the loudspeaker started up again—I couldn't hear what it was saying but I could hear the sound

—and the studio gates opened up to let some people out. A yell went through that crowd that sounded like the growing roar of a football crowd when somebody is making a long run with the ball. They surged toward the gates, then made a kind of path through which the handful of people who had come out of the gates began to walk. I watched the faces of the mob on the edge of that path. They were taut, mean. I could hear the yelling: “You sonofabitching scab!” “Dirty rat.” “What about us, you scab bastards!” “How do you feel, stooges?!” The people coming through the path of strikers looked scared, withdrawn into themselves. One woman—she must have heard one insult too many—darted into the crowd swinging her arms and screaming. Some men grabbed her; they were half laughing, half serious. They picked her up by the arms and legs. Hands snatched and tore. Her skirt came off, her blouse rolled up and nearly covered her face. She was twisting and writhing and screaming with anger, her legs moved white above her stockings. Arms grabbed roughly at her as she passed. Suddenly there were small fights everywhere, fists swinging, little knots of men swaying back and forth, people running, and through it all the confused swelling shouts.

Then I felt that this mob was waiting to do something violent—as a mob. It was like a saturated chemical solution: one more drop of something and this milling, noisy group would crystallize its action.

You: What, especially, gave you this feeling?

I: Well, I suppose I got the feeling or the mood of potential violence from the little individual scenes, the glimpses of people’s faces, the grating undersound of rage in the voices I could pick out separately. Certainly I did *not* feel the mood from the generalized crowd situation; it seemed to be the sum of many details.

You: How would you go about describing this "mob mood" you've been talking about?

I: I think the most effective way would be a kind of movie-camera method: close-ups, long shots, panoramas, blended together in such a way as to build up to a coherent impression.

You: Do you mean quick sketches of individual scenes linked with general impressions of noise and motions and the like?

I: Yes. The method reminds me of one of the most moving newsreels I ever saw. After Franklin D. Roosevelt's death. The cortege wound its way down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. The only sounds were the thudding of muffled drums, the march of feet, the clack of horses' hoofs, the scream of wheels. The newsreel editor had used Chopin's "Death March" for background music. And the camera wandered in and out of the crowds which lined the street for miles. Grave faces. Heads bared. Men with tears in their eyes. A woman's face twisted with weeping. An old Negro woman, holding a handkerchief to her streaming eyes, waving a fluttering goodbye to the caisson as it passed. Flags at half-mast. The stillness of the crowds, the sad stillness and the weeping. And in one place the round-faced mournfulness of a little boy who felt the mood of the people around him without really knowing what it was all about. That's what I mean by the "movie-camera method"—the collected individual facts which, summed up, re-create the mood you felt.

You: Then the job of writing up a mood is really a two-part one: first, you have to recognize that you feel a mood—subjectively, that is—and be able to pick out the facts or the stimuli or what-have-you that give you the mood; and second, you have to *select from* those facts the ones which you are going to write up so that your reader can also be stimulated into the same mood.

I: That's just about it, in general. I'll come to the business of "selection" in the next chapter, but you've pretty well summed up the way to think about "mood" before you write about it.

It should be evident, by now, that even "mood" and the fairly subtle emotional contexts of subjective impressions depend upon specific, tangible facts for their source and interpretation. One of the hardest jobs in creative thinking is that you have to learn to *think about one thing in terms of other things*. This is especially true of mixed-up and essentially vague states of being such as emotions and feelings.

But after you have trained yourself to see and interpret emotions in specific terms, you face a second difficulty; and this difficulty is in *you*, the person, the human being. You have your own emotional attitudes toward the collection of facts that sums up a mood or an impression or a situation full of feeling. Because you are human, you take sides emotionally with what you see; you like it or dislike it in varying degrees. Your interpretation of what you observe, then, is likely to be biased, distorted, limited, or expanded by your own feelings. As a writer you must take care to do everything you can to limit this personal distortion. Here is why. Most of us, when we like something, will look at it with some care, take pleasure in finding out a lot about it, turn it over and over in our minds. On the other hand, when we dislike something, we normally turn away from it; we instinctively reject or refuse to look carefully at things we find distasteful. Therefore, we *don't see it as well* as we see the thing we like. But you are a writer. You can't do that. You'll miss something you ought to see.

Suppose you are a gentle person who hates conflicts and fighting. You always turn your back on squabbles. You

try to evade even the sound of argument. This is peaceful and commendable of you. Unfortunately, life is noisy with brawls, spats, combats, and the sound of scolding. Unless you intend to write only about calm, peaceful subjects (and try to find them), sooner or later you are going to run smack up against the problem of creating a scene full of angry, combative characters. Will you know how they are going to act? Or are you going to guess about it—thus revealing to your reader that you don't know what you are talking about? I am not urging you to enjoy fighting or to relish the squalls of anger that blow through most people's lives. But I do strongly suggest that you firmly direct yourself to look at as much of life as you can, whether you like some of it or not, so that you will know what you are writing about.

What I am saying, in an oblique fashion, is that each of us takes a *point of view* toward the facts of life. When we say, "the facts of life," we mean the facts of life *as we see them*. A point of view is basically emotional, and it's a dominant fact for you as a writer to recognize. For the writer of factual articles or articles of opinion, a point of view which is consistent and thoroughly backed up by facts is not only desirable, it is indispensable. For the creative writer—one who writes stories or poems where people other than himself carry the burden of the tale—a point of view that is too dominating might get in his way and confuse matters. If you are going to create fictional characters, for instance, they can't all be little replicas of you, looking at life from the same point of view you do. Therefore, you must first realize how thoroughly your own emotions color the life you want to put on paper; and second, you have to understand *why* you have the point of view you do have so that you can train yourself to observe things from *several* points of view.

For example, a tourist and a farmer, looking out over the same fields, would probably have completely different points of view about what they saw. The tourist, from a city or suburb, would be likely to feel and remark upon the fresh greenness, the hazy lumps of mountains miles away beyond the valley, the smell of fresh-cut hay, the warm breeze. The farmer, on the other hand, might be speculating upon the effectiveness of his neighbor's contour plowing, the state of the young corn, the hint of rain in the towering cumulus clouds to the west, and the advisability of cutting the hay on number four pasture while the weather still held.

Similarly, a layman and a doctor, both witnessing an accident, would probably be moved in different ways: the ordinary person's shock and horror and fascination would be, in the doctor, secondary to his professionally cultivated point of view which would cause him quickly to assess a victim's wounds, calculate the effect of shock, and take the necessary first-aid measures.

Obviously, it would be impossible for the tourist and the farmer or the layman and the doctor to write similar descriptions of the same events. The whole emotional context for each man is so different that anything but superficial agreement would be out of the question. Yet some of the characters you may want to write about will have points of view just this widely different from your own. But *you* will be creating both of them. Each character will have to be consistent with himself; he will have to stand up as a person with his own characteristics, his own points of view. Obviously, at least one character you create will reflect more than a little of yourself. But too many characters with your bias, your attitudes, your blind spots, will bore a reader to death with sameness.

So, by all means have a point of view. But know what

it is, where it comes from, and to what extent it colors your objective view of the rest of the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson said of Thoreau:

His power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses. He saw as with a microscope, heard as with an ear trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. And yet none knew better than he that *it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. . . .* (italics added.)

This is just another way of saying that your accurate observation of the world and your emotional reactions to it are inextricably mingled—and that emotions are as significant as facts.

. . .

So far in this chapter I have talked about the *terms* of emotional expression, and I have suggested that these terms are rarely seen with complete objectivity—they pass through the filter of your own emotional attitude or point of view. Now let's return for a moment to the admonition I made on page 61, which was that you have to be able to move *outside* emotions and see them dispassionately before you can write well about them.

Ordinarily, when we have been mixed up with situations that vibrate with feeling, we generalize our reactions to them. We say, "That was a horrible mix-up! I'm glad I'm out of it" or "It was so confusing and frightening that my stomach sinks when I think about it" or "It was embarrassing, and we all felt very much ashamed." These vague descriptions do not begin to tell your reader what emotions were involved, who had them, what caused them, or anything else. Like the ever-convenient and seductive clichés, generalizations lurk behind every corner of thought to mess up the possibility of good writing.

We are especially vague in our talk about emotions, anyway. Our language is thick with “high-voltage” words—words with whole amperes of generalized emotional currents in them. It is one of the easiest tricks in the business to spread these high-tension words around in order to get a spurious effect. (Politicians do it all the time.) To show you what I mean, test your own reactions to the following strings of words. Read them across slowly and aloud, as though you were savoring them. Unless your heart is made of rock, you should feel some slight emotional reaction after each string.

1. poor . . . hungry . . . ragged . . . crippled . . . shivering. . . weak. . . .
2. deserted . . . lonely . . . destitute . . . lost . . . sad . . . longing. . . .
3. home . . . hearth . . . mother . . . love . . . security . . . faith. . . .
4. happiness . . . gentleness . . . joy . . . freedom . . . hope. . . .
5. lust . . . greed . . . envy . . . spite . . . passion . . . hate. . . .

For each string of words anyone with even half an imagination can conjure up a cliché picture of something they stand for. From 1., for instance, I could make up a picture of woe that could come straight out of Dickens: It’s Christmas Eve. A little boy, shivering in pitiful rags, leaning on a crude crutch, stands wistfully in front of the bright window of a food store. Well-fed, warmly clad passers-by ignore his outstretched hand. A large tear rolls silently from his eye and freezes on his cheek. And so on and so on. Yet, you might have made up, from this string of suggestive words, an entirely different picture from my oversentimentalized one.

The real point is that these words weren’t accurate

enough to tell either of us the same thing. They aroused our emotions, but they didn't stir us specifically. If an author writes words which have no more control over his readers than these loosely emotional word-strings, then he has failed his job.

But when you are too close to emotions, when they still have you boiling and disturbed, then you are apt to use these loose words, and use them lavishly. The amateur writer almost invariably tries to write of emotions when they're still too hot to touch. He writes passages that are full of the high-voltage words . . . with ellipses in between . . . to signify the gasps . . . of passion. He is so preoccupied with his feelings that he forgets to set his scene, introduce his characters, create his context of meaning—and his reader flounders around the page without a landmark.

So, before you write, you have to wrench yourself away from these feelings: pull them out of you, so to speak, and set them on a table where you can look at them with intelligent curiosity to fix the terms of their expression. This takes considerable force of mind—and we're back to the will power I talked about earlier. However, there are ways to cope with this problem; and these ways will help you train yourself to write about emotions.

1. Don't try to write finished stuff about an emotional situation that still disturbs you. Make notes on it, write it out if you want to, but let it cool off for a few days before you seriously try to re-create it. Wordsworth's definition of poetry—"Emotion recollected in tranquillity"—is a good guide for you here.

2. A useful sign that you are ready to write about emotion is when you can sit down and calmly list the sequence of events that led up to and through the emotional scene. When you have got far enough away to be able to see the

thing sequentially, you are probably “cool” enough to begin writing about it.

3. When you no longer take sides with the people or things involved in the emotional scene—when, frankly, it doesn’t matter that much to you—then you are ready to make a qualitative judgment of the experience. You can determine impersonally what is important and what is not. You can sum up the experience and compare it, proportionally, with other things.

4. When you are curious enough to figure out for your own satisfaction what caused the emotional scene and why it made such a fuss at the time, you are probably ready to be objective enough about it to re-create it intelligently.

If you cope with your emotional material this way, you will discover that the important things about it have stayed with you: the highlights and contrasts and vivid details remain, and the tangled meshes of feelings have straightened themselves out. You will not be satisfied to use loose, high-voltage words, but you will demand from yourself the re-creation of the emotion in terms that a reader can see and smell and touch and hear. Then your reader will begin to understand what you’re driving at.

## PROBLEMS

Using just the sketchy suggestions of situations listed here, write short pieces which will re-create *mood* or *impression*. These are merely sample ideas; only use them if you can fill them out with your own experience.

Saturday night at the local arena. It’s the eighth round of the main bout. Fighters are an upcoming youngster against a ring-wise veteran. It’s been a savage fight so far, advantage about even for either fighter. The crowd is all worked up. Describe

round eight as the final round—one of the fighters wins by a knockout in the last thirty seconds after a brutally punishing round. Use this framework as a means for picturing a night at the fights.

You're in a group of people. Conversation has been general. Then two voices are raised. Talk begins to die down. Two men are arguing. Then one man grossly insults the other. Describe the mood of the group.

Early morning. Spring. You're in the plains country—farming land—where the earth seems to stretch flatly to infinity. You step out of the farmhouse and walk toward the fields. What's it like?

Describe a ride in a roller coaster.

It's autumn. You're at a county fair. You've worked very hard all summer, and this is the first outing you've had. You've got your best girl by the arm, a wad of money in your pocket. What is it like to tour the midway?

Describe the mood of a large library reading room at about 8:30 P.M.

You've been skiing all day, now it's late evening. A group is in the main room of a ski lodge. Huge fire in fireplace. What's the general mood?

You're involved in a petty, increasingly bitter argument with a friend. You know it's not important, yet neither of you gives in and the whole thing gets worse and worse. How do you feel?

## SUGGESTIONS

(a) Helpful in thinking through problems of emotion in writing is this device: list various emotions—anger, fear, sorrow, etc.—then under each emotion, list first your own expressions of it, and then other people's expressions of

it as you have observed them. Don't write these out at length; just make lists.

(b) In every case, avoid overcharged emotional words as much as you can. Look for the substantives of the emotion.

## EXAMPLE

Look for the *substantives* of emotion in this passage by D. H. Lawrence.

### Father\*

When William was growing up, the family moved from the Botoms to a house on the brow of the hill, commanding a view of the valley, which spread out like a convex cockleshell, or a clamp-shell, before it. In front of the house was a huge old ash-tree. The west wind, sweeping from Derbyshire, caught the houses with full force, and the tree shrieked again. Morel liked it.

"It's music," he said. "It sends me to sleep."

But Paul and Arthur and Annie hated it. To Paul it became almost a demoniacal noise. The winter of their first year in the house their father was very bad. The children played in the street, on the brim of the wide, dark valley, until eight o'clock. Then they went to bed. Their mother sat sewing below. Having such a great space in front of the house gave the children a feeling of night, of vastness, and of terror. This terror came in from the shrieking of the tree and the anguish of the home discord. Often Paul would wake up, after he had been asleep for a long time, aware of thuds downstairs. Instantly he was wide awake. Then he heard the booming shouts of his father, come home nearly drunk, then the sharp replies of his mother, then the bang, bang of his father's fist on the table, and the nasty snarling shout as the man's voice got higher. And then the whole was drowned in a piercing medley of shrieks

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\* From *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence. Copyright 1913 by Mitchell Kennerley. Reprinted by permission of the Viking Press, Inc., New York.

and cries from the great, wind-swept ash-tree. The children lay silent in suspense, waiting for a lull in the wind to hear what their father was doing. He might hit their mother again. There was a feeling of horror, a kind of bristling in the darkness, and a sense of blood. They lay with their hearts in the grip of an intense anguish. The wind came through the tree fiercer and fiercer. All the cords of the great harp hummed, whistled, and shrieked. And then came the horror of the sudden silence, silence everywhere, outside and downstairs. What was it? Was it a silence of blood? What had he done?

The children lay and breathed the darkness. And then, at last, they heard their father throw down his boots and tramp upstairs in his stockinged feet. Still they listened. Then at last, if the wind allowed, they heard the water of the tap drumming into the kettle, which their mother was filling for morning, and they could go to sleep in peace.

## 5. *You Create People*

. . . A writer should create living people; people not characters. A *character* is a caricature. If a writer can make people live there may be no great characters in his book, but it is possible that his book will remain as a whole; as an entity. . . .

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY

UP TO this point we have been working with preliminary materials, learning how to dress the stage to create a lifelike background for the players. Now we come to the main show and our most puzzling raw material—people. When a writer creates people, his reader has to be able to know them, and know them better than he can ever know real people. The characters and the reader must quickly form a relationship that is impossible in real life. In the space of a few thousand words, three hundred pages, three acts, or whatever, the reader not only has to become acquainted with a gallery of people, he has to believe in them, know their motives, understand their frustrations, and feel *with* them in their problems or dilemmas. Therefore, the people you write about must stand out plainly. Their motives and actions must be comprehensible. This is not to say, I add hastily, that characters must be crudely simple, without complexity or subtlety; it is only to say that their personalities must be more consistent, more of a piece than those of real people.

Real people are confusing. They are never “all of a piece.” An ordinary man is such a bundle of incongruous

traits, conflicting motives, and mixed desires that any observer of him can say, with Hamlet, "What a piece of work is a man!" Never, even in apparent intimacy, can we know another person wholly. We know some people in general, and our closest associates we know in many particulars. Yet there are always puzzling inconsistencies and unexplained traits that hint to us of an inner stream of life so deep and secret that it is untouchable by another. Somewhere, even in the humblest of men, is apt to be a streak of the infirmity called ambition, and with it the faint trace of hard arrogance that makes his general humility puzzling. In a cruel man you may find, deeply hid, tenderness or the touch of banal sentimentality that causes you to wonder how deep the cruelty goes. Perhaps in a vain person, inexplicably, is a mocking echo of self-laughter, and you wonder how the vanity is supportable. Or with a person you feel to be greatly good and virtuous, you may sense and cannot prove the gray sin of self-congratulation. Even in the most common persons you will find almost infinite complication.

Consider a young man in love, to begin with a simple case. He is alternately trustful and jealous—and both at the same time. His love for some girl melts him to be tender; and sometimes it makes him want to hurt her. One moment he will idealize his love. The next moment he is passionately critical of her most innocent defects, because love makes him see them so clearly that he rages at the flaws in his idealization. He is proud to introduce his sweetheart to his friends. Yet, sometimes, his own egotism makes him afraid to let her be seen for fear she will seem more common to others than she does to him.

Well, perhaps, a young man in love is an unfair example. Such young men, traditionally, are in an unnatural state. There are more mundane examples. What about the

man who passes you in the street? What about the people who press sweatily against you in a crowd or jostle you in a store? Are they so complicated? Aren't most ordinary men just types you can be certain about? No. Of each of these people there is only one thing you can be sure: that each considers himself unique in the world. Each person protects his own identity by insisting to himself, with wordless surety, that he is not like other men. (Don't *you* do that? Deep down, aren't *you* sure of your own uniqueness?) To you, the observer, one man may be as like his neighbor as one leaf on a tree is like another. But because each person is dead sure of his own differentness, he *is* an individual, he *is* different from others; and his self-esteem shows itself, partly, in traits of character and oddities of action that belong to him alone.

Each man has, further, a secret life (as we all have) which is at the core of his individualness. Few but the psychoanalyst or the creative artist can get at this inwardness; and of the two, the creative artist is likely to hit closer to the truth. You can measure "personality" with evidence only so far. Beyond that is the truth of creative imagination.

You cannot, as a writer, generalize a man as a unit in a social whole. He is too complex for that. If you write about him just as he is, then you will be a biographer or a historian or a social scientist. You will give a reader much useful *information* about a man this way, but you will not be creating people, which is the job of the creative writer. It is sometimes convenient for the historian or the social scientist to group people, to order and classify them according to status and group motivation, and to see them as blobs of plastic clay, molded by large, impersonal forces called "environment" and "mores" and "society." (This is not a backhanded attack on social scientists. Prop-

erly understood, their findings should be supremely useful in understanding the larger backdrop against which men move and live.) But the creative writer commits artistic suicide the moment he sees masses of people instead of a person. As a writer, your relation to human beings is person-to-person: you do not write about Mankind, you write about John or Mary or Joe.

This is all general and theoretical. How do you get Joe down on paper? Do you observe him, analyze him, list his traits? Do you try to re-create him as he is in a word-picture of the real thing? Of course not. He would be as confusing and hard to understand as a real person is—too real for the reader to know him very well. The mere accumulation of physical detail, no matter how well observed, will not bring fictional persons to life. Your hardest job is to create fictional people who are believable to the reader because they are capable of a life of their own. Unlike real people, written characters must be consistent with themselves and with the created world in which they move. You do not *reproduce* life merely; you create something *like* life. This is the creative paradox: that the more cunning you are as an artificer, the more convincing you will be as a creator of "real" people in your writing.

In general, then, how do you begin this job? How do you get at people for writing purposes? First, you recognize that—at least in the first steps—fictional people are creations in almost exactly the same way as statues are creations. Real life has served as a model for them, but they are not literally real. Right at this point, lift your eyes up from this page and try to recall some character you have wanted to write about—and it is enough, for this moment, just to recall a general picture or impression.

As I write this, I am thinking of an old man I know; I'd like to write about him someday. He is in his late

seventies, yet he stands as slimly straight as a young birch. His skin is tanned and smooth, and about his eyes is only the fine fan of wrinkles which comes from squinting into the sunlight. He is tall. He dresses well; he wears a dark, double-breasted suit with an air, as though a girl were waiting for him around the next corner. Below his fine-brushed, white hair grow straight, thick eyebrows, and looking out under them are cool gray eyes, clear around the iris, with no trace of aged rheum. He sounds like a distinguished old gentleman, doesn't he? He is—but only in his looks. When he opens his mouth to speak, he is a stupid, bigoted old fool. Not only is his voice nasal and harshly unpleasant, the things he says are mean, crabbed, and self-righteous. He is a rabid anti-Semite, though like any fanatic he has long since forgotten his reasons for this. He hates Negroes because he once lived in the South (for six months in 1902), and he “*knows* the color problem first hand, sir, first hand.” He has never done a lick of productive work in his life. His father made enough money in the Civil War to provide him with a comfortable idleness all his days. Yet he is brutally critical of “the working class” and does not hesitate to condemn “the shamefully lax standards of work these days, compared to when I was a young man.”

Yet I want to write about him—not about his stupid, futile life but about the way he makes old age *look*: serene, dignified, vigorous, and wise. I would like to combine this man's outward aspect with the character and soul of another old man I know. The second man is a children's doctor. Last year, at sixty-eight, he gave up active practice, not out of choice but because he was too gnarled and knotted with arthritis to get around to his patients any more. The doctor is a short, tubby, shapeless little man. He never was good looking. His hair always looks uncombed and ragged. And it is hard to look away from an

ugly wart next to his nose; it seems to dominate his face like the bull's-eye of a target. He dresses badly, too. He buys a suit if it fits approximately, never bothering to have it altered, and thenceforth rarely thinking to have it pressed. But it doesn't matter how he looks. I have seen how he is with a hurt child, and, seeing him then, I have forgotten entirely his slovenly appearance. The gentleness in him is marvelous. He soothes. He calms. A child's pain seems to focus his skill like a sharp light; and when he has to hurt one of his small patients he does it with a deft quickness that minimizes the youngster's fright. He can say, in a voice that almost brings tears to your eyes, "There now, little man, that's *all* we have to do, and it won't hurt any more."

Now the doctor sits at home. He works, as much as his infirmity will allow, on a manual for pediatricians, trying to distill his experience for younger men. Even a little work is painful to him because leaning over a desk and moving his arthritic hands is agonizing. Yet he is no close-mouthed martyr. He complains often about his misery, but it is with such a hint of underlying laughter at the whole ridiculous dissolution of his body that the complaints are almost philosophical asides on the human comedy.

To me, the outward symbol of this doctor's fine life is the lithe and handsome person of the first old man who looks so distinguished. I am not trying to be sentimental when I do this. It appeals to my sense of fitness. I want to re-order reality so that the just and dramatic climax of the doctor's life is embodied in the outward evidence of vigorous and comely old age. This has dramatic validity because I want to *affirm* the character of the doctor positively and vividly. (This is my *point of view*. Another writer, with equal reason, could use the doctor's triumph

over his lumpy exterior as a dramatic means; or a third writer could have a fine, cynical time developing the contrast between the first old man's looks and his crabbed character.)

What I am saying in this example of the two old men is that *characters are drawn from real life, but they are not exact replicas of particular lives*. When you create character, you draw on your observations of many people. You may use the face and body of one person, the gait of another, the physical traits of another, the personal flaws or virtues of several more, and so on. As a writer you are not concerned with photographic likeness; you work toward a probable or convincing synthesis. This is another kind of truth than literal representation. It is, if I may use the words, artistic truth, because it is self-consistent; it has its own inner and outer harmonies; it is capable of being recognized, remembered, and understood on its own terms.

What are some of the methods for getting at your material? How do you go about thinking a character through? Where do you begin? Naturally, the answers to these questions vary with each person, but certain general processes of thinking will be broadly true for most of us.

As before, you begin by learning what to look for. By this time, you should have trained yourself to observe things with some perception. Anyway, the plainly visible things about people are easy enough: clothes, shape, movements, and the like. But people are not just phenomena, and mere sterile observation is not enough. You can no more re-create a character by describing his outward aspects than you can by describing a clothes display dummy in a department store window. People affect us mainly through a vague element called "personality." You not only have to determine, for your own use, what "person-

ality" is, but you have to discover in what terms you can talk about it.

There are more ways to talk about people than there are for talking about any other subject. You can describe them subjectively or objectively or a combination of the two. You can present them through your own eyes, through others' eyes, or both. You may show them in an action either by reporting it or re-creating it; and similarly, you may have them speak directly, or you may tell about what they have said, or both. You may introduce them to your reader briefly or in lengthy description; or indirectly, by showing their influence on other characters. No matter how you decide to manage it, there are certain fundamental problems in character creation which you will always have to solve. One of these problems is getting a character started—introducing him to your reader.

In ordinary social relations, you recognize the significance of "first impressions." You feel, as we all do, that these are "important," and when you meet new people you try to act in such a way that they will have a good opinion of you. You should have no trouble remembering your own first reactions to some of your friends or acquaintances. The initial handshake, the preliminary words, the quick, over-all assessment, and you "knew instinctively" that you had met a person whom you would like or dislike. Obviously, these first reactions are often untrue. Like everything else that has to do with human beings, they change and modify themselves. But the people you create for a reader have to impress him at once—in exactly the way you want him to be impressed. Your characters won't have several years' acquaintance with the reader, but only a few thousand words in which to make their personalities felt. Unless you are writing a vast novel whose main character develops slowly over a long stretch of time, you have

to use more abbreviated ways of showing personality than are given us in real life. (Frankly, you have no business writing a "vast novel" unless you have been through all this fifty times—maybe a hundred.)

Try to analyze how you get a first impression of someone. Are physical looks the main thing? Tone of voice? Way of moving? The look of the eyes? Mannerisms of hands or face? Or is the impression more subtle, something you "can't quite put your finger on"?

More than likely, a first impression is basically emotional—that is, you feel or sense something about another person before you think much about him. "Strong" personalities immediately and forcefully "impress" us because, somehow, we *feel* their strength and vigor at once, apparently by vague interpersonal "vibrations." Obviously, though, when you write of a "strong" personality, you cannot merely say, "He is a strong person; he gives everybody vibrations." A reader has little to see or feel from your opinion of a character: he must see and understand him on the character's terms.

To get a little closer to possible ways to introduce people, join me in a discussion of a theoretical first impression you might have had of someone you saw or met.

You: Well—I met a man in an art museum the other day. Never saw him before. We had wandered into the same room—nobody else around—and I remember sitting down on a bench to look at one of the pictures more carefully.

I: Where was this man when you first saw him?

You: Actually, I didn't see him right away. I was looking rather hard—and I suppose a bit dreamily—at one of my favorite pictures: "The Great Wood," by Ruisdael. I suppose I sensed another person out of the corner of my eye, but I wasn't paying much attention.

I: What was the first thing that made you realize there was another person in the room with you?

You: I heard his footsteps. I remember now, they were brisk, coming down the corridor, then they slowed down and finally stopped, someplace behind me. I suppose I must have thought that he was looking at one of the pictures, though I didn't look around to see.

I: But when did you actually *see* this man?

You: As a matter of fact I heard him before I saw him. I was so caught up in the picture—you know it?—the great sky, the clean, green-yellow light through all the trees—that when he spoke I almost jumped.

I: He spoke?

You: Yes. He must have come up softly behind me because his voice sounded very close. He said, "Magnificent thing, isn't it?" and I turned around.

I: What did you feel when he spoke?

You: As I said, I was surprised—surprised, I suppose, because one generally expects a kind of hushed reverence in art museums—at least, having somebody speak out behind you with that kind of hearty companionableness seems as out of place as singing drinking songs at a funeral.

I: You said you turned around—what did he look like?

You: He was surprisingly small; I expected a big man, from the deep sound of his voice. But he was small, spare, dressed in a quiet old suit—gray, I think—standing very erect, with his head cocked a little to one side, still looking at the picture, not at me. He had on steel-rimmed glasses. His hair was blond, gray at the temples, thin on top. He had a thin face, with sharp planes around the cheeks, and his mouth was set pleasantly in a half smile. After he spoke and I turned, he kept his head cocked for a moment, and then looked right at me and said again, "Perfectly magnificent."

I: What did you do?

You: I've forgotten—I suppose I stammered something about, "Yes, yes, isn't it?" or something like that—and then I remember saying lamely, "It's one of my favorites."

I: Was the man standing all this time?

You: No—he came around and joined me on the bench, and we sat there silently for a little bit, just looking at the picture.

I: Then what happened?

You: Well, I was curious. Here was this man—total stranger—who barged right into my rapt contemplation with a rather commonplace remark. And yet I didn't resent it at all. I rather liked him—and right away. And I didn't mind in the least when he walked around and sat down on the bench as though we were old friends.

I: You looked at him some more?

You: Oh yes. We got to talking right away. Or rather, *he* got to talking. He pointed at the picture and talked about the light. And then he went on about how painters got their effects, told me all sorts of things about "overpainting" and glazes and varnishes and so on. He had an amazingly broad—and at the same time, unselfconscious—fund of information about painting.

I: How did you feel about this "lecture"?

You: I didn't feel as though it were a lecture at all. Really, the man was so likable and friendly and not at all intrusive about his conversation.

I: Why didn't you feel that he was "intrusive"? You said a moment ago that people didn't expect to have strangers speak so familiarly in art museums.

You: I suppose it was because he expressed admiration for something I admire—made us kindred spirits right away, or something like that.

I: But how did you feel that he was *not* intrusive, even then? It's quite possible that another person, making the same remark, might have annoyed you.

You: Yes, I guess that's right. It was probably in the way he did it. I mean, I didn't feel assaulted by his opinion; it seemed to match my own thoughts at the time quite smoothly.

I: How would you go about summing up a first impression of this man, then?

You: I can see that a first impression wouldn't be much concerned with his physical appearance. I would probably talk best about it in terms of the Ruisdael—the painting—and my own feelings about this man, much as I have talked it to you. I mean, the important things about this impression were the mutual admiration of the painting, my surprise—and eventual pleasure—at being interrupted, and then the friendly and unforced attitude which this man took.

I: At least, that would be a way to begin thinking about it.

It should be plain, from the foregoing, that first impressions are not usually remembered in terms of catalogued detail. You don't remember each item of clothing, each mannerism; you choose (or remember) a dominating trait or a few outstanding details. Then you use that salient characteristic as a means, temporarily at least, for describing your first impression to other people. Essentially, this is the method of the caricaturist. (And here I am using the second meaning of the word *caricature*. I don't mean an enlargement of the grotesque or the ridiculous; I mean, rather, the selection and emphasis of particular qualities so that recognition comes from these alone. Cartoonists,

for example, created in a few bold lines a recognizable impression of the late Franklin D. Roosevelt: uptilted cigarette holder, prominent upper teeth, jutting jaw—and presto, F. D. R.) In writing, the aim is almost exactly as it is in caricaturing: to delineate in a few sharp phrases the essential ingredients of an impression. If the look of a saucy eye, the tempestuous rustle of a skirt, the bold free swing of a shoulder, or the hint behind a nuance of a lifted eyebrow dominate your first impressions of a character, then with these things you may re-create that feeling for your reader.

The following demonstrate two different ways of introducing character. The first example shows how W. Somerset Maugham introduces the leading character of one of his most famous short stories; the second is the reader's first glimpse of Leopold Bloom, hero of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Here is the way we first meet Sadie Thompson, in *Rain*.<sup>\*</sup> Notice how one or two brief, symbolic physical details are made to stand for the quality of the woman.

"Miss Thompson was sailing with you to Apia, so I've brought her along here."

The quartermaster pointed with his thumb to the woman standing by his side. She was twenty-seven perhaps, plump, and in a coarse fashion pretty. She wore a white dress and a large white hat. Her fat calves in white cotton stockings bulged over the top of long white boots in glacé kid. She gave Macphail an ingratiating smile.

"The feller's tryin' to soak me a dollar and a half a day for the meanest sized room," she said in a hoarse voice.

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<sup>\*</sup> Reprinted by permission from "Rain" in W. Somerset Maugham, *Collected Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., N. Y.

James Joyce's introduction of Leopold Bloom,\* however, depends only a little on outward detail, as you will see. First, the author makes a statement about Bloom (which, symbolically, strikes a main note of Bloom's character throughout the book) and then he allows us to hear the working of Bloom's mind as he begins to get breakfast for his wife.

Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. Gelid light and air were in the kitchen but out of doors gentle summer morning everywhere. Made him feel a bit peckish.

The coals were reddening.

Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn't like her plate full. Right. He turned from the tray, lifted the kettle off the hob and set it sideways on the fire. It sat there, dull and squat, its spout stuck out. Cup of tea soon. Good. Mouth dry. The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.

—Mkgnaol!

—O, there you are, Mr. Bloom said, turning from the fire.

The cat mewed in answer and stalked stiffly again round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writing table. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr.

Mr. Bloom watched curiously, kindly, the lithe black form. Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes. He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.

—Milk for the pussens, he said.

—Mrknaol the cat cried.

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\* From James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

But a character is more than a first impression. Characters walk across the stage not once but many times. They throw themselves into the life you have created. They speak and move and tangle themselves in dilemmas. Now your character is introduced, what comes next?

What comes next in real life? You meet someone, get an impression of him, and then what? Chances are, you see him doing something. He may be doing something completely inconsequential: riffing a pack of cards or walking down a street or anything equally mundane and unrevealing. But sooner or later, your real acquaintance will be mixed up in an action which gives you a clue—many clues—to what kind of person he is. “You are what you do,” someone said. It was Aristotle’s principle that character is revealed by action; and though Aristotle’s analysis was based only on the drama, his contention is still sound advice for a creative writer.

Here is an outline of a famous story, told *indirectly*—that is, the characters aren’t shown doing anything; I’m only telling you that they’re doing something.

A man was taking a walking trip. Some thieves beat him up and left him. One passerby saw the hurt man and avoided him; and so did another traveler. But the third traveler was kind. He took care of the hurt man.

That’s pretty bare and uninteresting, isn’t it? Now read the original, written with an economy and vividness that most writers can’t begin to match.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was

at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, "Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee."

From this brief account, we may not know what the Samaritan looked like or what clothes he wore; but from barely a dozen *actions* (count them) there has been created a picture of a good, charitable man which has lasted nearly two thousand years.

This is an extremely simple example. What do you do when your character is involved, complicated? Well, take Hamlet, one of the most complex characters ever created. He may talk and soliloquize in superb poetry, but he *shows* in one action after another the anguish and self-reproach he feels for balancing on the raw knife-blade of indecision. Instead of facing his uncle directly with the murder of his father, Hamlet causes a play of the crime to be performed. The play may have "caught the conscience of the king," but essentially it was an act of Hamlet's to postpone decision. Again, as Claudius prays, Hamlet stands ready to kill—yet afraid to kill. He goes to his mother's chamber and berates her—and himself, by doing so—in one of the bitterest scenes in literature, diffusing the furious point of his rage that could not be brought to specific violence against the guilty king. It is as much what Hamlet does as what he says that gives this play its classic fascination for actors, readers, and audiences.

Now back to the writing problem. You have introduced your character. You know that you must show him in

action that will reveal what kind of person he is. All right, what actions? How do you choose? Certainly, you can't show every twitch or move. To find the answer, go back to real people again. Suppose your character is waiting impatiently for a bus. How do real people wait impatiently for a bus? They crane their necks and look down the road. They look at their watches. They consult timetables. They pace nervously back and forth. Or, they sit, stoically, smoking a cigarette. Or, they try to read a magazine, looking up from the page with quick inquiry every time motor noises sound close. And so forth. Ask yourself about your character. Is he the kind of person who waits (1) patiently, (2) nervously, (3) tensely, (4) dumbly, (5) et cetera? When you have decided what your character will do while he waits for a bus, dig back into your real-life observation to see what you know about such persons; or, *combine* what you know—an action here, a mannerism there—into a consistent pattern for your created person.

Unlike real people, characters can't waste motions; whatever they do, even if it is aimless idleness, has to contribute to the greater effect of a story or a sketch. Your reader is interested not only in the people you create but in what happens to them; and you won't keep your reader's interest if you spend too much time talking about your characters before you have them do something which begins to move a story toward a climax. Therefore, you need to be careful to choose actions which reveal as much of your characters as possible and which, at the same time, are necessary actions in the unfolding of a story. Here is an excellent example of a scene which not only introduces a character but tells you a great deal about him simply by showing you some of the actions he performs. (This is the beginning of a fine short story, "Champion," by Ring Lardner.)

### First Knockout\*

Midge Kelly scored his first knockout when he was seventeen. The knockee was his brother Connie, three years his junior and a cripple. The purse was a half dollar given to the younger Kelly by a lady whose electric had just missed bumping his soul from his frail little body.

Connie did not know Midge was in the house, else he never would have risked laying the prize on the arm of the least comfortable chair in the room, the better to observe its shining beauty. As Midge entered from the kitchen, the crippled boy covered the coin with his hand, but the movement lacked the speed requisite to escape his brother's quick eye.

"Watcha got there?" demanded Midge.

"Nothin'," said Connie.

"You're a one-legged liar!" said Midge.

He strode over to his brother's chair and grasped the hand that concealed the coin.

"Let loose!" he ordered.

Connie began to cry.

"Let loose and shut up your noise," said the elder, and jerked his brother's hand from the chair arm.

The coin fell onto the bare floor. Midge pounced on it. His weak mouth widened in a triumphant smile.

"Nothin', huh?" he said. "All right, if it's nothin' you don't want it."

"Give that back," sobbed the younger.

"I'll give you a red nose, you little sneak! Where'd you steal it?"

"I didn't steal it. It's mine. A lady give it to me after she pretty near hit me with a car."

"It's a crime she missed you," said Midge.

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\* Reprinted from "Champion" in *How to Write Short Stories* by Ring Lardner; used by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons.

Midge started for the front door. The cripple picked up his crutch, rose from his chair with difficulty, and, still sobbing, came toward Midge. The latter heard him and stopped.

"You better stay where you're at," he said.

"I want my money," cried the boy.

"I know what you want," said Midge.

Doubling up the fist that held the half dollar, he landed with all his strength on his brother's mouth. Connie fell to the floor with a thud, the crutch tumbling on top of him. Midge stood beside the prostrate form.

"Is that enough?" he said. "Or do you want this, too?"

And he kicked him in the crippled leg.

"I guess that'll hold you," he said.

There was no response from the boy on the floor. Midge looked at him a moment, then at the coin in his hand, and then went out into the street, whistling.

Action, you will agree, is revealing. But action is not an end in itself. Any stock character, or "type" character, can be shown in a number of revealing actions, yet the picture of him will be stilted and oversimplified. In past centuries (or in today's movies) it was the fashion for dramatists to create characters after a "humour"—a humour being an outstanding character trait, an oddity, or some one ruling aspect of personality consistently displayed by a person. Thus, a sullen "humour" was easily dramatized by giving it two arms, two legs, a voice, and a steady disposition to be sullen in any circumstance. A glutton was always gluttonous. A philosopher was always philosophical. Using just one trait, it was no trick at all for the writer to move his character about and to let him talk: he was only one-dimensional and could not possibly complicate matters by being an individual.



the cadence of the talk. An inexperienced writer will usually make his characters talk too much. But the same principle applies to talk as to action: do you *need* it to reveal character or to move the action forward? If you don't *need* it, delete it. (It is worth pointing out here that dialogue is a very dependable device for changing pace or mood. It's amazing how a page will come to life when it is broken up with talk.)

. . .

The subject of creating character is nearly inexhaustible. And each time you write a story or a sketch, the character problem has its own special difficulties. Rather than work out here too many different devices and methods, it is more useful for you if I suggest basic principles to you and leave you to wrestle out their execution. That is what you will have to do in any case, whether you have at your elbow one book or fifty books on the subject.

Up to now I have only hinted at the most important element in writing about people, and that is *your own relation to them*. You know them better than anyone else can. You know them so well that you cannot only talk *about* them, you can let your own voice be heard *through* them. You even know them well enough that you are able to eavesdrop on the slow murmur of their thoughts; and you can show your reader clearly the path from the thoughts to the resulting actions (a thing that is impossible to demonstrate in real life.)

This is more than the mere selection and shaping of physical evidence. No matter how carefully you observe people or how shrewdly you choose and emphasize traits and characteristics, no matter how convincingly you make a character talk and act, in spite of the plausibility of your settings and problems, unless your characters have what I must vaguely call "temperament" or, with equal vague-

ness, a sense of inner life stirring underneath their observable beings, they will be flat and thin and not quite "real." This extra something is you, the writer, revealing your own attitudes toward life and people, reflecting your emotional temper in the varied life of your writing.

Inevitably, there is part of yourself in every character you create. This is what some critics mean by claiming that most fiction is basically autobiographical. Most good writers readily admit that, in one fashion or another, in their characters they are writing about themselves. You can't help adding part of your own personality to a character which is, after all, the result of your observation and thought and feeling.

This may give you a feeling of Olympian omnipotence. These are *my* characters, you may say with some truth; I'll have them do this, and feel that, and think the other, to suit my purposes. To a certain extent, naturally, this is what you must do. Yet here is just the point at which you should be most wary. You can't let your characters turn into little *You's*. Neither can you allow your reader to suspect—too often—that you are squatting behind each page, pulling the strings for your puppets. This is a quick way to create characters in stock sizes, without giving them the interesting complexity that is in real people.

One of the best ways to learn to create characters who are not mere reflections of yourself is to begin, as usual, with real people whom you know well. Choose a close friend or a relative for a subject. Draw a word portrait of him, being as accurate and as unbiased as you can about his chief characteristics and mannerisms. When you feel sure that you *know* him—and when you are sure that a reader, from your portrait, would know him too—then sit back and try to invent some reasonable situation in which to place your character. Suppose he is a brash, extroverted,

noisy, good-hearted fellow whose idea of a fine time is to spend an evening in a smoky hall playing the piano, drinking beer, and matching harmonies with assorted convivial baritones and tenors. You have been with him on many a rousing beer-hall spree and you know how he acts and almost the way he thinks in these circumstances.

But now try to imagine this same extrovert in another setting: he's been trapped by his girl into going to a formal afternoon concert and tea at the local conservatory of music. You, his friend, can no longer predict how he will act, but you can imagine. Also, *you* have been to formal concerts and teas yourself. You know how *you* feel. It is reasonable to assume, isn't it, that your friend will have some of the same feelings about formal teas that you have? Therefore, the sketch you would write of your friend at the formal tea would have elements of *yourself* in it—your feelings. But those feelings would be subordinated and changed and molded into the personality of your friend because you have to show *his* reactions to the feelings.

This sublimation of yourself is even more difficult when you create a wholly fictional character. Let's see what the creative thought process might be in this case. Suppose, out of the bits and pieces of your observations of real people, you have assembled the person of a middle-aged schoolteacher—a professor of romance languages at a small college. In your composite you have skillfully combined the characteristics into a plausible harmony. He is a tall, shambling man, and he walks with an absent-minded looseness, as though his body were going in one direction and his mind in another. He has a gentle face; the features seem to melt softly into one another until there is nothing about his visage that catches the eye. He is neither a good teacher nor a bad one. His students don't particularly like

him—and they don't dislike him, either. For twenty-two years he has read the same lectures, showed the same small animated enthusiasms at exactly the same passages in *Don Quixote* and the same dialogues in Corneille and Racine. For twenty-two years he has lived in the same rambling, clapboard house at the corner of Elm and College Streets. All this time, during the long years of teaching and through generations of students, he has been secretly and passionately at work translating legends and poems of some of the medieval French ballade writers. His whole heart and mind have gone into the work. He dreams of the reception his translations will have among the scholars. He hopes—no, he *knows*—that he has managed, at last, to transmit the freshness and vigor of the originals into another language. At last his book is published. He waits in a fever for the first reviews in the journals. They arrive. He sees: "Competent, but pedantic." "Adequate, though missing the spirit of the originals." "A pedestrian performance, losing in translation the poetic fervor of the great lines." "A dull but useful addition to the body of English translations of period literature." How does he feel, this professor of yours? How do you transmit the disappointment, the cumulating sense of failure, perhaps the hopeless recognition of his own futility?

How would *you* feel in his place? Here, intimately, is *your* relation to your character. Re-create the circumstances. Project yourself into the twenty-two years of striving, of hope. Then realize that it is not *you* who have undergone the disillusionment, but another person entirely. Once you have put yourself in his place and felt *with* him and *of* him, once you have savored the feelings for what they are, then you must withdraw to a place apart, leaving the feelings behind—leaving a part of yourself behind, to be modified and changed and made a part of the

gentle professor who had to meet the failure of his life work. The question is not, How would *you* have met this failure? but, How would *he* meet it?

This is a very difficult thing to do. Your character belongs to you, and you feel for him and with him—but in the end, you must let him stand up on his own feet, to be a person in his own right. The feelings and inner thoughts which you have pried out of yourself to give to him no longer belong to you. This released part of yourself is like a ball that you have thrown: it has left your hand, and you are content to watch it from a distance to see where it lands.

You need to nourish a sense of humor about the process. By humor I do not mean that you should laugh at it—at least not too often. You take your characters from reality, which, because you are a human being, involves you emotionally. You put yourself into your characters, and this weaves you emotionally a second time into the process. But a sense of humor allows you to step aside enough to see what is going on—it lets you, therefore, cope with the creation as an artist instead of as a partisan.

Imagine, for one more example, that you want to create a character based on your observation of a local politician. You have watched this man in action for several years. He's a town fixture. Everybody knows him because he's a ubiquitous glad-hander who manages to have his nose in nearly every slice of the civic pie. As you see him, he's ignorant, ambitious, small-minded, a practiced liar, and a thorough humbug. You despise everything he stands for. It makes you writhe to see him elected year after year. You wonder bitterly if a supposedly intelligent electorate really knows what a venial character he is. You are personally wound up in this man with your emotions, aren't you? In real life you wouldn't cross the street to spit in

his eye, would you? Yet if you want to write about him, or someone like him, you can't afford to be emotionally wound up. You need to resist the temptation to moralize, to scorn, or to condemn. This would be one-sided writing, clouded too much with your own feelings. The creative writer seeks to *understand* rather than to judge. And here is where you need the sense of humor, indispensable for seeing things in their proper proportion. Instead of being angry at the noisy little fool of a politician, you can laugh gently at him (to yourself), and thus see through his bombast and fraud. You can be tolerant, and therefore understanding. And, most importantly, a sense of humor allows you to take pleasure in people, no matter what they do and regardless of your private opinions of them. People are a part of life. As a writer you are immersed in life up to your neck, not only to live it yourself but to project it for other people.

## PROBLEMS

Describe your first impressions of someone you have met recently.

Think of someone whom you know very well and try to describe him for a reader *only* through dialogue—through what he says and how he says it. Assume that you are overhearing a conversation but can't see the people talking.

In three sentences or less, give thumbnail impressions of four different people as they would be revealed by: (1) opening a door, (2) being spotted in a crowd, (3) walking by, (4) sleeping, (5) talking. These impressions should give your reader some indication of the character of the person you're describing.

Using only people you know or have seen as models, describe in a hundred words or less, (1) an old man walking, (2) a fat girl running, (3) a teen-age boy smoking a pipe, (4) a three-

year-old child playing in a sand box, (5) a woman staring out of a window with avid curiosity, (6) a twelve-year-old boy coming into the house for lunch.

Using *actions only*, describe someone whom you (1) like, (2) dislike. The job here is to reveal character through action, keeping straight description to a minimum.

Using both description and dialogue, re-create two middle-aged women gossiping at a card party.

## SUGGESTIONS

Any other ideas you have for describing people are useful for this problem.

(a) It is helpful to write three or four different versions of the same thing in writing about people. Try to reveal character through talk or action or straight description or combinations.

(b) Rewrite thoroughly and exhaustively. Eight or ten rewrites per problem are not too many.

(c) It is good practice to fill a notebook with a "rogues' gallery" of character sketches. Try writing about two or three dozen people whom you know—paint "pictures" of them in words.

(d) Another helpful thinking device is to think out a character, as though for a story, and then—keeping your situations as reasonable as possible—invent all kinds of situations for the character, trying to determine what *he* would do in the circumstances. Make lists of his probable actions.

## EXAMPLES

These brief examples, from the opening lines of two different short stories by Stephen Vincent Benét, will give you further hints about how characters first meet their readers.

### Freedom's a Hard-bought Thing\*

A long time ago, in times gone by, in slavery times, there was a man named Cue. I want you to think about him. I've got a reason.

He got born like the cotton in the boll or the rabbit in the pea patch. There wasn't any fine doings when he got born, but his mammy was glad to have him. Yes. He didn't get born in the Big House, or the overseer's house, or any place where the bearing was easy or the work light. No, Lord. He came out of his mammy in a field hand's cabin one sharp winter, and about the first thing he remembered was his mammy's face and the taste of a piece of bacon rind and the light and shine of the pitch pine fire up the chimney. Well, now, he got born and there he was.

### O'Halloran's Luck†

They were strong men built the Big Road, in the early days of America, and it was the Irish did it.

My grandfather, Tim O'Halloran, was a young man then, and wild. He could swing a pick all day and dance all night, if there was a fiddler handy; and if there was a girl to be pleased he pleased her, for he had the tongue and the eye. Likewise, if there was a man to be stretched, he could stretch him with the one blow.

I saw him later on in years when he was thin and whiteheaded, but in his youth he was not so. A thin, whiteheaded man would have had little chance, and they driving the Road to the West. It was two-fisted men cleared the plains and bored through the mountains. They came in the thousands to do it from every county in Ireland; and now the names are not known. But it's over their graves you pass, when you ride in the Pullman's. And Tim O'Halloran was one of them, six feet high and solid as the Rock of Cashel when he stripped to the skin.

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\* From *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, published by Rinehart & Company, Inc. Copyright, 1940, by Stephen Vincent Benét.

† From *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, published by Rinehart & Company, Inc. Copyright, 1938, by Stephen Vincent Benét

## 6. *You Shape Your Material*

The mind considers the object in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects, examines the balance of its parts, contemplates the form of the object, traverses every cranny of the structure. So the mind receives the impression of the symmetry of the object.

—JAMES JOYCE

FOR the last five chapters we have been experimenting with some of the raw materials of writing. Now, like prospectors with sacks full of ore, we need to take our material to the smelter—to separate the valuable and the useful from the dross.

This analogy holds up for the writer, too. If you are a good observer, if your mind and memory are well stocked with the stuff of living, then you bring your material, all unassorted, to the writing table and to the blank white page, where you refine it and shape it and turn it into a well-made thing. You can't use everything. You choose and discard. You select and throw away.

You select. This is standard advice, and you will find it in most books on the art of writing. But *how* you select, and *what* to select are very subtle problems. I am afraid I cannot give you any solutions to these problems, though there are some general principles that might pass for solutions. I would rather set up some problems and let you solve them for yourself, since that's what you will have to do anyway. As a starter, suppose you read carefully

the following quotation from an essay by the American novelist, Frank Norris.\* This anecdote has in it the seeds of a key principle in writing. Ponder it long and remember it, because you will rarely find better advice.

Once upon a time I had occasion to buy so uninteresting a thing as a silver soup ladle. The salesman at the silversmith's was obliging and for my inspection brought forth quite an array of ladles. But my purse was flaccid, anaemic, and I must pick and choose with all the discrimination in the world. I wanted to make a brave showing with my gift—to get a great deal for my money. I went through a world of soup ladles—ladles with gilded bowls, with embossed handles, with chased arabesques, but there were none to my taste. "Or perhaps," says the salesman, "you would care to look at something like this," and he brought out a ladle that was as plain and unadorned as the unclouded sky—and about as beautiful. Of all the others, this was most to my liking. But the price! ah, that anaemic purse; and I must put it from me! It was nearly double the cost of any of the rest. And when I asked why, the salesman said:

"You see, in this highly ornamental ware the flaws of the material don't show, and you can cover up a blow-hole or the like by wreaths and beading. But this plain ware has got to be the very best. Every defect is apparent."

On the surface of it, this is an argument for simplicity. But more than this, it suggests an answer to the major question you should ask of every piece of writing you produce: "*What do I want this piece of writing to do?*" Perhaps you haven't considered that writing has to *do* something. Many beginning writers think it is enough for their writing merely to *be*. What do I mean by *do*? What is the function of creative writing?

I suggest this as true: creative writing must have an *effect*. And I further suggest that the effect is usually emo-

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\* Reprinted by permission from "Simplicity in Art" in Frank Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1903.

tional, moving the reader to recognition, sympathy, laughter, fear, nostalgia, passion, or pleasure. Creative writing enlists the reader as a participant—at least to a degree. (This does not exclude so-called expository writing from being “creative.” Informative or persuasive writing can give the reader pleasure from the skill of its arrangement or from the cumulative force of its argument, without being, itself, “emotional.”) I must make one crucial qualification immediately: to say that creative writing should have an emotional effect is *not* the same as saying that creative writing is emotional writing. Or, to put it another way, you do not need to treat your subject emotionally in order to produce an emotional effect in your reader. But I will have more to say about this shortly. The problem now is: what must your writing *do* to produce the desired effect? How do you go about it?

Let’s begin, as usual, with an example. What, in real life, affects your feelings? Suppose you are sitting in your living room reading the newspaper. You run across this:

#### **Child Killed by Truck**

While playing a game of tag in the street, John Doe, Jr., 4, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Doe of 21 First Street, was struck and killed by a passing truck. He died in the ambulance on the way to Memorial Hospital. The driver of the truck, Joe Jones, said that the boy had run suddenly into the street between two cars parked along the curb. Witnesses said that the truck was moving slowly at the time of the accident. The driver was not held.

Your reaction to this is probably a kind of generalized pity. What a shame that a little boy should be killed. And

how badly the truck driver must feel. It's too bad that children have to play in the streets. Dangerous business. And you turn the page to the sports section to see how the Dodgers made out in last night's game. This isn't callous of you. The killing of the child was presented too impersonally for you to feel it strongly. You, the reader, weren't *enlisted* or *involved* in the thing, and your emotions, therefore, were only vaguely stirred.

But what if you had been there? What if you had seen it yourself? That's something else again. There's Johnny's house. The kids are shouting and running on the front lawn. You can hear a radio going somewhere in the back of the house. A little girl stands up against a tree, her arm over her eyes. She is counting in a childish singsong, ". . . seven, eight, nine, *ten!* here I come, ready or not!" She turns around, looking for victims to tag. She sees Johnny. He's crouched behind the back bumper of a car parked in front of his house. She cries, "I see you, Johnny!" and starts to run after him. He laughs, high and excited. He runs. You hear, suddenly, the noise of a motor, the hissing screech of air brakes, the blurt of a horn, a tearing shriek of fright. You see the truck lurch to a stop, the driver's horrified face. Out of the corner of your eye you see the front door of Johnny's house open. A woman is coming out, wiping her hands on an apron, looking toward the curb. You see a little body crumpled on the road. It squirms and makes faint mewling noises. There is an instant when motion seems suspended and sound seems dead. Then, around the scene, people whirl and eddy, and you hear the gasping sobs of a woman.

Is your reaction to this generalized? Is pity vague? Is terror academic? Probably not. Obviously, it is the thing that happens, more than what is said about it, that produces emotional effect. The task of the creative writer is to select those happenings or those elements of a scene which

produce most sharply the effect he desires. So, we are back to the big question again: what do you want your writing to *do*? If, as I did in the description above, you want to move your reader to terror or pity, then you select the elements—the substantives—of the scene which you calculate will most effectively move him to have those feelings. Obviously, there was much more to this accident scene than the things I wrote down. It was a lovely day, for instance, and the afternoon sunshine was warm and bright. This was a typical suburban neighborhood: a tree-lined street; big comfortable houses set well back from the sidewalk, each with its broad front lawn; cars parked in driveways or in front of houses all down the street; a glimpse of a woman hanging out the washing in the back yard of a house across the street. But I didn't need these details to tell you about the accident. I wanted you to get into it quickly. I wanted it to shock you. If my aim had been to have you feel a slowly growing sense of coming tragedy, if I had wanted the scene to produce gradual horror rather than shock, then I would have selected other details to talk about. I would have given you a glimpse of the truck as it turned into Johnny's street. I would have built up the happy, careless game of tag. I would have shown you, perhaps, Johnny's mother. Possibly I would have made the incident more poignant by telling you a little about Johnny's family: he was an only child, his older brother had been killed in the war, his mother's life had been bruised by one tragedy after another, and so forth.

I chose this melodramatic incident because it demonstrates crudely and directly what selection does to produce effect. Let me repeat this because it's important: *what you select depends upon what you want the writing to do.*

Suppose, to choose a less violent example, you want to set a scene of rural calm and peace. You want your reader to feel the slow serenity of early evening as he would feel

it with you, sitting on the veranda of a farmhouse and looking across the pastures to the darkening hills. There is so much to see! So much to describe!

There always is. What do you do now? Do you marshal your vocabulary and bring up battalions of adjectives? They make an impressive array: *still, quiet, calm, serene, lovely, slow, gentle, peaceful, hushed, muted, subdued, hazy, restful, soothing, sleepy, dusky, beautiful*. Yet all these words, surcharged though they are with feeling, don't tell your reader anything. They don't move him or involve him in the scene you want to create. What are you going to pick out of the scene to make him feel the way you want him to?

Instead of answering this question, let's re-create the problem; then you can figure out your own solution.

QUESTION: What do you want this piece of writing to do?

ANSWER: I want the reader "to feel the slow serenity of early evening as he would feel it sitting on the veranda of the farmhouse and looking across the pastures to the darkening hills."

QUESTION: Do you want the description to be long or short?

ANSWER: Just long enough to be convincing—long enough to set the scene for a subsequent action in a story.

QUESTION: What are the terms of description?

ANSWER: I can select from six general sources; and they are the things I *see, hear, smell, taste, touch*, and *my own reactions (feelings)*. Some of these are:

#### SIGHT

The red flush of sky . . . hills almost black against horizon . . . a touch of lambent green light seems to hover above the skyline . . . the pearly gray of the light . . . the cattle in the far pasture are hard to see, they graze slowly toward the woodlot . . . the sheep clustered around the big elm tree in the close pasture . .

can still see the black faces, woolly backs . . . black silhouette of a horse . . . the warm red color of the barn wall . . . dew glistens on the long grass by the chicken house . . . the white fences look even whiter than usual . . . the dog lies at my feet . . . the first pale winking of fireflies . . . the glow of a pipe bowl and a faint gray ruffle of smoke which floats and catches the last light . . . the evening star . . . the flitting black shapes of birds against the sky . . . the soft weathered texture of a stone wall . . . the slow, easy motion of the rocking chair next to me . . .

SOUND

The occasional muted clunk of cowbells . . . once in a while the stirring of sheep and the small baa of a lamb . . . a horse nickers, far-off, the sound seems to come out of the ground . . . the rustle and sleepy-drawn-out cluck of roosting chickens . . . faint creak of rocking chair . . . the dog sighs, a long breath . . . a steer moos, low and muffled . . . across the valley, faintly, the yelping of a dog . . . a frog sounds, oooonk . . . ooonnk, deep bass . . . and the melodic thread of the peepers . . .

SMELL

The barn smell, diluted by distance . . . fresh-cut grass . . . the warm, amber smell of hay . . . the sharp, nutty smell of tobacco smoke . . . spicy, apple pie odor from the kitchen . . . the light, sweet hint of clover . . .

TASTE

Fresh, rich taste of new-lit tobacco . . . the full aftertaste of dinner . . .

TOUCH

Drowsy-tired . . . the sag of used muscles . . . clean crispness of fresh clothes . . . faint damp-cool breeze . . . warm pipe bowl in the palm . . . comfortable support of chair against back . . . general well-being . . .

FEELINGS

It's been a good day . . . seven tons of hay baled and in the barn . . . number five cut and ready for tomorrow . . . cattle look fine . . . what a gorgeous evening . . . I can almost hear the "golden sound of horns in the west" . . . evening like this would make any-

body feel poetic . . . it's good to feel so relaxed . . . well, we've earned it, anyway . . . mind always feels calm and free when it's satisfied with itself . . . it's so peaceful I can't help contrasting with the city . . . no raucous screeches here, no raw fumes, no intrusive noises . . . so fine an evening you want to stretch out your hands and hold it, just the way it is . . .

This list represents just a part of your "raw materials"—some results of perceptive observation and feeling. The list takes longer to read than it does to think out; your mind can flick over this many facts with startling speed and thoroughness. And I'll venture the assertion that a summing up, somewhat like this (though not so ordered and self-conscious) is the first action of a creative imagination at work on the stuff of life.

Now you need to sift the material. You know what you want the writing to do, and the question is: what method will do it best? You have a number of choices, any one of them useful.

1. You can try to discover whether the scene has any one dominant impression—a sight or a sound, for instance—that seems to represent the whole picture. For example, it was quiet and peaceful, yet not dead silent. What accentuated the quietness? What one thing made the quiet seem most apparent?
2. Perhaps your impression of serenity came from an accumulation of separate details, none of them related except in your mind. Of the accumulated details, what ones seem most important? How are they linked together?
3. Or maybe the total impact of the scene focuses itself in a single emotional reaction in yourself. What is the reaction? In what terms will you describe it?
4. Or does the whole impression of the scene contrast with a remembered impression of another, less peaceful scene? What are the high points of contrast?

There are other possibilities, of course, but these will be enough to start on. And when you have finished with the process, you may discover that all this material has refined itself into a single sentence or phrase or image. Or, the description of sunset and evening might be so suffused with your own feeling that it nearly turns into poetry.

Ordinarily, you do not need the greater intensity of poetic image. (Again, it depends upon the purpose of the writing.) You need only to be convincing or lifelike.

One of the reasons why good writing is such grinding hard work, why it demands so much from the writer, is that the process I have so generally described takes place in the creation of almost every sentence, every image, every small scene. Naturally, it doesn't occur in this extended, halting fashion—at least not all the time. Eventually, it becomes a habit of mind. (As I have said or implied repeatedly, creative writers are made, not born.)

It is not only the selection of significant details that is needed. A longer piece of writing—short story or extended sketch or narrative poem—has to have a cumulative growth; it must move toward a single, coherent effect through actions, incidents, and the unfolding of various scenes. This means that every action a character makes, every word he speaks, every glimpse of scenery that you give your reader has to contribute to this effect. Now think back to the anecdote about choosing the soup ladle that I quoted at the beginning of the chapter; let us apply it to the more complicated problems of an extended piece of writing.

Applied to writing, that anecdote said: it is what you have to say and the sequence or form in which you shape it that is crucial. Structure, form, sequence—by these a piece of writing stands or falls. No skill with words, no brilliant diction or eloquence can repair flaws in structure.

Like the chasing and arabesques on the soup ladle, a writer's adjectives, elaborate phrases, or clever images will only cover up and obscure the facts. *The facts must speak for themselves.* It is less the creative writer's task to comment upon them than to present them.

Suppose you wish to write about a scene of heart-tugging beauty, full of emotional appeal. Perhaps the setting is a great cathedral. There is music and the soaring voices of a choir. The whole scene cumulates for you with such perfection that your response is passionate and affirmative. You feel close to tears, your heart rises in your throat. Will you say, as an author, "Oh, how magnificent!"? Will you put into the mouth of a character, "How lovely, how beautiful!"? You will do this if you are more concerned with your own feelings than you are for your reader's participation. For him, you need to select the facts, the substantives that will stir him as you were stirred—and *only those which will do the job.* The great, warm flare of a stained glass window. The tiny, golden thread of sunlight on the altar. The surging harmonies of voices—is it the Hallelujah chorus?—and under them the sonorous organ. Glimpse of an old man, eyes closed, face uplifted. The bowed head of a woman. And a sense of exaltation soaring, like blown incense, to the vaulted dimness above. Perhaps these are your substantives. Let them speak for themselves. Do you look at a Rembrandt through colored glasses? Would a giant sequoia be more effective hung with neon lights?

The need to cut out all elaboration and author-editorializing is at the root of the problem of selection. As a further guide to *what* you select, here are four suggestive questions which apply, I think, to any type of writing, whether it be simple description or the re-enactment of desperate tragedy.

1. *Are the facts you choose relevant to the subject?* That is, are they commensurate with the size or aspect of the subject? Is an image too overblown, too strenuous for the mild aspect of the fact? Do you say, "colossal" when you really mean "fairly large"?
2. *Are the facts you choose necessary?* Do they reveal a character trait that the reader needs to understand a story? Are they vital to the reader's vision of a scene? Do they move the action of an incident forward? Are they so necessary that a scene or character or action will be crippled without them? (This is the real test. A piece of writing should be so tight that you can neither add anything or delete anything without spoiling it.)
3. *Are the facts you choose probable?* Given the other elements of your subject, are the facts likely? Would a character who has acted in one fashion be likely to act in such-and-such another fashion? Is this action likely to happen as a result of that one? Is a sequence of events reasonable in the context you have created? Is the climax of a series of actions a *natural* result of what has gone before?
4. *Are the facts you choose dramatic?* Do your facts *show* things or only tell them?

Suppose you are writing a sketch of an action; you want to tell someone else about an automobile accident you were in, and you want to create for this reader all the shock and fright and smashing suddenness of the crack-up. Do you need to spend a page or two telling where you had come from, what you did there, where you were going, and why? Probably not: these facts would not be *relevant* to the accident itself. If there were several other people in the car, do you need to describe each one of them carefully?

Probably not: the descriptions would not be *necessary to* re-create what happened in the accident *unless some specific act of one of the people had a direct effect upon you or upon the total scene itself*. Would you need to analyze and describe your own feelings in the midst of the crash? No: it is hardly *probable* that in the midst of the accident's confusion and terror you had any time for more than instinctive reactions. Above all, you would need to recall and select and record those tangibles of sight and sound and touch that would help the reader participate as closely as words will let him in experience *as you went through it*.

If you write a short story, for instance, you need to check every element in it by the four measuring sticks listed above. A story is, by definition, a thing in which something happens. Characters squirm out of dilemmas or overcome problems. They perform a series of actions and come to some kind of conclusion. Since stories usually begin in a writer's mind with character, the first job is to think out a plausible person. (See Chapter 5.) Now you can begin to use the four measurements as you think out a story plot. What sort of thing would be apt to happen to a character like this? (Is it probable?) Is he saying and doing things that fit his personality? (Is it relevant?) Does he *have* to talk as much as he does, or struggle as much as he does? (Is it necessary?) Are his actions the best or most illuminating you can contrive? (Is it dramatic?) Remember that the greatest faults of beginning writers are those of omission—*they do not omit enough*. (Whenever you catch yourself admiring a patch of your own writing, be suspicious of it. It should belong to the story or the sketch, not to you.)

Another useful criterion of selection, especially for story writing, is this: Is there conflict or dilemma which needs resolution? If you have a choice between an action which is merely positive and an action which makes your

characters struggle, choose the latter in most cases. It is true in real life that trouble brings out the best (or worst) in people. Why shouldn't the same be true for fiction? Which is better for the creative writer to say:

She is on a diet, so she didn't eat the chocolate candy that was passed to her.

or

Susan took the candy plate with a smile, but inwardly she yearned. Chocolate creams, slick and sweet in the centers, fudge centers, thick and creamy underneath their chocolate jackets, crisp almonds. . . . Her eyes hungered after the plate as she passed it to her neighbor. "No thank you," she said.

This is a very real conflict, as those who have to refuse candy will testify. But the principle holds good whether it concerns a foolish little conflict of desire over a piece of candy or the struggle of a man to light a fire in order to save himself from death by freezing, as in Jack London's fine story, "To Build a Fire."

The choice of details depends mostly upon your subject and the over-all effect you are working toward. In general, it is better to select a detail which points up a *contrast* than one which emphasizes a similarity. (This is a part of the technique of making images, which I will discuss more fully in the next chapter.) Just as a minor example—and setting aside for a moment any consideration of the general tone of the thing you are writing—compare the following statements for contrast. One of them you could find in any standard murder mystery tale; the other is one of Henry David Thoreau's delightful witticisms:

The circumstantial evidence was very strong because his fingerprints were found on the murder weapon.

Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.

You can go on to apply this idea of contrast to innumerable actions and situations. When does a gunshot sound most loudly? When it is most quiet. Where do you see luxury and wealth most apparent? When it is next door to poverty. When does violence seem most shocking? When it occurs suddenly in a context of mildness. When is lust most revealing? When it despoils innocence. Where is ambition most ruthless? When it tramples the inoffensive. And so on. There is no point in my working out examples for you or quoting stories and excerpts which show this. They won't do you any good when you come to the problem yourself. It will be enough that you recognize the idea of contrast as a useful principle of selection.

There are some final considerations of selection (though I have most certainly not touched all of them) which will come when you have completed a piece of writing. The thing is done. First draft. Hot and smoking from the typewriter or the pen. Go away and leave it alone for a week—this also is standard advice—then try to come back to it as though you had never seen it before. (What do you think your reader does?) Assuming that your story or sketch or whatever is approximately what you want it to be—and you're lucky if it is—look at it structurally again for these things: *pace* and *clarity*. Just for the moment, disregard the language; it is easier to fix sloppy wording than it is to repair faulty structure. Concentrate on the facts you have selected. Is one action early in your story too bulky? Does it take too long? Does it slow up the *pace* where your narrative should be fast? Maybe you selected the wrong action. Or maybe you told the right action in too much detail. Or, later on in the story, does your chief character solve his crucial problem too quickly? Does he say enough—of the right things? Is it clear *why* he does one thing instead of another? Did you select the *clearest* elements of the scene?

Many of your selection problems will almost solve themselves, if you take toward your reader the same kind of sensitive common-sense and courteous attitude you would use toward a respected conversational partner. When you talk face to face, you are—whether you are aware of it or not—constantly adjusting the tone and quality of your information to what your listener seems to be taking in with interest. You talk in longhand or shorthand as the face of your listener seems to require. As H. G. Wells once remarked, “But in writing there is the blank face—what will they understand, what must be explained, and repeated, and what is too difficult for them to believe?”

If in your writing you unerringly select the relevant, the necessary, the probable, and the dramatic; if, with faultless timing and exact clarity, you select so that your writing moves smoothly to a rounded conclusion—then you are a genius, and you don’t need this book or any book to help you learn how to write.

## PROBLEMS

From now on, you are on your own. I suggest that you take at least ten different writing problems—extended action, description of scenery, an anecdote or story incident, the material for a poem—and for each make lists of the facts, as I did in this chapter, under the various headings of the senses and whatever other headings you need to add. List *all* the possible facts for each one until the lists cover several pages. Then try to write each scene or situation or description in at least five different ways: for different effects, from other points of view, and so on. Each time, you will find, there is a different problem in *selection* for you to solve.

Suppose, for example, you are describing a meeting of

clubwomen—the weekly gathering of the town's most exclusive group, The Tuesday Culture Circle. These women have captured a second-rate author who is to talk to them about his latest novel. Here are five possible points of view you could take toward this situation, each point of view demanding different *substantives* to express it.

1. *Satire*. You want to indicate that the "culture" of the Culture Circle is synthetic, pretentious, self-conscious, and somehow painfully foolish.
2. *Humor*. Like Helen Hokinson, whose cartoons of clubwomen are genially satirical yet without the sometimes savage sharpness of satire, you want to show the ludicrous elements of the meeting: overweight, middle-aged women acting girlishly idealistic. Comparison of fact with aspiration.
3. *Compassion*. The fundamental goodness of the group. The good will. The earnestness. The real striving and the real failure of the striving. The mistaken (or misdirected) tastes.
4. *Ridicule*. The stupidity of fatuous activity of a group. Comparison with a "higher" level of cultural achievement in order to make this group look small and cheap. Emphasis on "tea-time" food—rich cakes, tiny sandwiches, etc.
5. *Dispassionate objectivity*. An almost photographic report of the scene and what occurs in it.

List the facts (*not* your opinions) which will *show* the reader (*not* tell the reader) each of the five points of view listed above.

After you have written, rewritten, and re-rewritten every one of the fifty different problems, try a few more *without* making lists. Be sure to think them out before writing.

## EXAMPLE

Mark Twain had an unerring eye for the humorous and the significant detail in situations. Notice in the following selection the things he chose to describe in order that you might have a picture of a typical American phenomenon—lower school graduation exercises.

### The Graduation Exercises\*

In the fullness of time the interesting occasion arrived. At eight in the evening the schoolhouse was brilliantly lighted, and adorned with wreaths and festoons of foliage and flowers. The master sat throned in his great chair upon a raised platform, with his black-board behind him. He was looking tolerably mellow. Three rows of benches on each side and six rows in front of him were occupied by the dignitaries of the town and by parents of the pupils. To his left, back of the rows of citizens, was a spacious temporary platform upon which were seated the scholars who were to take part in the exercises of the evening; rows of small boys, washed and dressed to an intolerable state of discomfort; rows of gawky big boys; snowbanks of girls and young ladies clad in lawn and muslin and conspicuously conscious of their bare arms, their grandmothers' ancient trinkets, their bits of pink and blue ribbon, and the flowers in their hair. All the rest of the house was filled with nonparticipating scholars.

The exercises began. A very little boy stood up and sheepishly recited, "You'd scarce expect one of my age to speak in public on the stage," etc.—accompanying himself with the painfully exact and spasmodic gestures which a machine might have used—supposing the machine to be a trifle out of order. But he got through safely, though cruelly scared, and got a fine round of applause when he made his manufactured bow and retired.

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\* From Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Copyright, 1922, by the Mark Twain Company. By arrangement with Harper & Brothers.

A little shamefaced girl lisped "Mary had a little lamb," etc., performed a compassion-inspiring curtsy, got her meed of applause, and sat down flushed and happy.

Tom Sawyer stepped forward with conceited confidence and soared into the unquenchable and indestructible "Give me liberty or give me death" speech, with fine fury and frantic gesticulation, and broke down in the middle of it. A ghastly stage fright seized him, his legs quaked under him, and he was like to choke. True, he had the manifest sympathy of the house—but he had the house's silence, too, which was even worse than its sympathy. The master frowned, and this completed the disaster. Tom struggled awhile and then retired, utterly defeated. There was a weak attempt at applause, but it died early.

"The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck" followed; also "The Assyrian Came Down," and other declamatory gems. Then there were reading exercises and a spelling fight. The meager Latin class recited with honor. The prime feature of the evening was in order now—original "compositions" by the young ladies. Each in her turn stepped forward to the edge of the platform, cleared her throat, held up her manuscript (tied with dainty ribbon), and proceeded to read, with labored attention to "expression" and punctuation. The themes were the same that had been illuminated upon similar occasions by their mothers before them, their grandmothers, and doubtless all their ancestors in the female line clear back to the Crusades. "Friendship" was one; "Memories of Other Days"; "Religion in History"; "Dream Land"; "The Advantages of Culture"; "Forms of Political Government Compared and Contrasted"; "Melancholy"; "Filial Love"; "Heart Longings," etc., etc.

A prevalent feature in these compositions was a nursed and petted melancholy; another was a wasteful and opulent gush of "fine language"; another was a tendency to lug in by the ears particularly prized words and phrases until they were entirely worn out; and a peculiarity that conspicuously marked and marred them was the inveterate and intolerable sermon that wagged its crippled tail at the end of each and every one of them. No matter what the subject might be, a brain-racking effort was made to squirm it into some aspect or other that the moral and religious

mind could contemplate with edification. . . . There is no school in all our land where the young ladies do not feel obliged to close their compositions with a sermon; and you will find that the sermon of the most frivolous and the least religious girl in the school is always the longest and the most relentlessly pious. . . .

Let us return to the "Examination." The first composition that was read was one entitled "Is this, then, Life?" Perhaps the reader can endure an extract from it:

*In the common walks of life, with what delightful emotions does the youthful mind look forward to some anticipated scene of festivity! Imagination is busy sketching rose-tinted pictures of joy. In fancy, the voluptuous votary of fashion sees herself amid the festive throng, "the observed of all observers." Her graceful form, arrayed in snowy robes, is whirling through the mazes of the joyous dance; her eye is brightest, her step is lightest in the gay assembly.*

*In such delicious fancies time quickly glides by, and the welcome hour arrives for her entrance into the elysian world, of which she has had such bright dreams. How fairylike does everything appear to her enchanted vision! Each new scene is more charming than the last. But after a while she finds that beneath this goodly exterior, all is vanity: the flattery which once charmed her soul now grates harshly upon her ear; the ballroom has lost its charms; and with wasted health and embittered heart she turns away with the conviction that earthly pleasures cannot satisfy the longings of the soul*

And so forth and so on. There was a buzz of gratification from time to time during the reading, accompanied by whispered ejaculations of "How sweet!" "How eloquent!" "So true!" etc., and after the thing had closed with a peculiarly afflicting sermon the applause was enthusiastic. . . .

Next appeared a dark-complexioned, black-eyed, black-haired young lady, who paused an impressive moment, and began to read in a measured solemn tone.

*Dark and tempestuous was the night. Around the throne on high not a single star quivered; but the deep intonations of the heavy thunder constantly vibrated upon the ear; whilst the terrific lightning reveled in angry mood through the cloudy chambers of heaven, seeming to scorn the power exerted over its terror by the illustrious Franklin! Even the boisterous winds unanimously came forth from their mystic homes, and blustered about as if to enhance by their aid the wildness of the scene. . . .*

This nightmare occupied some ten pages of manuscript and wound up with a sermon so destructive of all hope to non-Presbyterians that it took the first prize. This composition was considered to be the very finest effort of the evening. The mayor of the village, in delivering the prize to the author of it, made a warm speech in which he said that it was by far the most "eloquent" thing he had ever listened to, and that Daniel Webster himself might well be proud of it.

It may be remarked, in passing, that the number of compositions in which the word "beauteous" was overfondled, and human experience referred to as "life's page," was up to the usual average.

## 7. *You Search for Form*

*Form*: the shape and structure of anything. . . . Form usually suggests reference to internal as well as external structure and, often, suggests the principle that gives unity to the whole. . . .

—WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY

ALL through this book I have had in mind the classic idea of form and function: the form is the expression of the function. That is why I asked in the last chapter, "What do you want this piece of writing to *do*?" The particular form of your writing inevitably grows from three closely related things: (a) the nature of your material, (b) your own point of view toward it, and (c) the effect you want the finished writing to have upon the reader. Therefore, instead of talking about forms, as such, let us try to discover what it is you want your writing to accomplish, and then see what form best suits your aim.

"Prose," said Ernest Hemingway, "is architecture, not interior decoration." The architecture of a thing is the sum of its purposes, both functionally and aesthetically. The architect who builds a house adapts that dwelling to the terrain on which it is built, to the needs of the people who are to live in it, and to the necessities of shelter, efficiency, and finally of beauty. The best house is that one which makes the most of its location, size, and the materials from which it is constructed.

If this analogy is true for writing (and I think it is) then the best form for a piece of writing is that which makes

the most of the subject. You would not make a ship's anchor chain out of pack thread; no more would you try to make a novel out of a brief mood or a solitary happening; nor would you try to tell an action story in the short space of a single anecdote.

There is a wide choice of more or less recognizable forms in prose. These are loosely labeled short story, essay, sketch, short-short, novelette, novel, feature article, and so on. It is helpful and interesting to study forms for themselves; but no matter how much you know about the short story form, for instance, your skill with the form won't do you any good until you have some substance to bring it to life. Therefore, let us first investigate a general subject about which you might want to write, then discuss what special forms could be used to express various points of view toward it.

One of the main themes in much modern writing is the life of men in great cities. City culture, with all its complexities, its environmental pressures on people, and its apparently impersonal largeness, has been and will continue to be rich material for writers.

Assume, to begin with, that out of your experience and observation of big-city life you find yourself curiously interested in little-known or unusual jobs or occupations and in the people who do these jobs. For example, you have been in a subway station in the morning's small hours and seen the squads of armed men who swiftly collect the day's take in coins from the turnstiles: you want to know more about the collection procedure. Or, you run across a dingy little silversmith's shop whose proprietor makes marvelously delicate and beautiful things in metal—yet he has only one arm. Why does he do it? How does he do it? Or, you discover, in a large old cellar beneath a warehouse, the establishment of a man whose occupation is

brewing special beers and ales for discriminating clients. He is a master brewer and his products are delicious. How did he get into that business? What are some of the requirements of his clients?

To you these jobs are fascinating. You do research on them. You talk to the people and find out how they got started, why they like their work, how long they've been at it, and the like. You collect many informative and vivid little anecdotes as well as the straight facts about the jobs themselves.

When you begin to think about writing up these things, chances are your main idea is to tell people about them and why they are interesting. What "form" would you use for this?

From your apparent point of view toward the subjects and from your desire to "tell" about them, it sounds as though you should write a feature article. The average feature is both informative and entertaining—and if that is what you want your writing to *do*, then the feature form is probably the one to use. (Feature writing is a particular skill which deserves a whole book, and I won't do more than mention it here. Many of the things I have discussed in this book apply to features as well as to other types of writing.)

Suppose, however, that your point of view toward the city theme is more general than this; you want to discuss city culture more philosophically—and you wish to air your opinions and interpretations of, say, the sociological aspects of neighborhood divisions in large cities. This is a different function to ask of the writing. You need to have a more direct relation with the reader than is usually possible in the feature article. Possibly the best form to express this second point of view would be an informal essay. Most essays are, like features, informative—but there is

more of the author in them. (One of the finest examples in recent writing of the informal essay treatment of the big-city theme is E. B. White's *Here Is New York*.)

But if your interests are in the problems and dilemmas of individuals: in the clashes of personality, in the glimpse of a sad-faced boy in juvenile court, in the sight of a red-faced policeman giving a traffic ticket to a loud-talking woman, or in any of the poignant or amusing or dramatic things which happen every day to ordinary people—things which are important to you because their happening stands for something that doesn't show on the surface—then you will probably turn to some form of fiction for your expression.

As an illustration of one way the life-stuff of reality may be formed into fiction, I will develop an inconsequential happening into a plot for a brief story. Whether this happening is insignificant is not important. What is important for our purpose is the *way* it takes on form. The process we will unravel here is largely the same, whether you are shaping a story of deep psychological meaning or—as in this—you want to write a light little story, designed mainly to entertain.

Imagine that we are walking together around the city; we have no special purpose in mind. Lunch hour comes. We're hungry. We stop in a little restaurant, find an unoccupied booth, and sit down for a hamburger and coffee. In the booth next to ours there is a young couple. We can see only the tops of their heads, but every once in a while we hear snatches of talk, a short laugh, and the indistinguishable murmurs of conversation. Then, clearly, we hear the man's voice, with an edge of irritation in it.

"Aw, honey, I said you were a pretty good cook, didn't I?"

"Apparently I'm not good enough for you, though," the girl answered snappishly.

"But—oh, hell, sure you are. I mean after all we've only been married for five months and you just can't. . . ."

"You mean in six months I can't cook as well as your—your blessed mother could!"

"Now, honey, don't get mad. Please. Gosh, I mean it takes a while to learn how to be as good a cook as. . . ."

"Well, Lawrence Jennings, if you knew how many hours I spend shopping and cooking to make your meals nice, you'd. . . ."

"Shhhh, honey, please, not so loud. People are looking at us. . . ."

And the voices subside to staccato undertones. In a few moments, with a scrape of feet and crackle of paper bags, the young couple leave, the girl carrying her shopping bundles, standing severely erect, her heels snapping smartly on the floor. "Lawrence Jennings" follows, looking sheepish, fumbling at his hip pocket for his wallet to pay the check. You and I look at each other, smile a small smile with our eyes, and finish our meal.

This is a slice of material for you. What could you do with it? What is here that might make a piece of writing? Suppose we let the following extended example serve as a demonstration of one way that *form* can grow naturally out of subject and point of view.

Obviously implied in the bit of conversation we overheard was a small conflict—one of those ordinary, young-married spats that could (and does) happen to everyone. In fact, you and I were mildly amused because of its near-cliché typicalness.

(You could object here and say, "Now, wait a minute; this sort of thing isn't worth much as fiction material. It's commonplace and trite and 'formula' and really not worth bothering about." My only answer to that is, "No *subject* is commonplace; it is only the writer's mind that is stale, trite, or ordinary." Clarence Budington Kelland, himself

a masterful yarn-spinner, once said: "There are three things that make a good story. Take characters people like—young lovers; salty old philosophers—and put them in an interesting situation. Let 'em work out of it. You don't need a novel solution. Hell, who cares about novelty? The eternal verities aren't novel. But what's better?")

So we have a young married couple—nice-looking kids—involved in an argument. The man doesn't think his wife cooks as well as his mother did; the girl is mad because she has worked hard to prepare tasty meals, and her big oaf of a husband doesn't appreciate the meals. (And by feminine extension of logic, he therefore does not appreciate *her*, either.)

Let your imagination play around with this situation. Draw on your observation of the young people, on what you heard them say, and how they said it. Try to build up a larger picture of them: What's probable? What's likely? What do you think is behind the conflict in the way of day-to-day behavior?

**You:** They were dressed well. The man's suit fit decently; looked as though it came from a good shop. And I liked the girl's clothes—simple but not cheap. (And wrapped around a neat figure, too.) The man probably has a good job in some office—white-collar level.

**I:** How do you guess that?

**You:** By the tone of their voices—pleasant, good diction. . . . The *way* they talked rather than what they said.

**I:** But "nice" folks, you think?

**You:** Yes.

**I:** What kind of place do you imagine they live in?

**You:** A small apartment—you know the kind of place; the rent is a shade too high for the income—living room, bedroom, small efficiency kitchen. Probably she keeps it

up neatly. Her mother-in-law was probably a good housekeeper, too.

I: Do you see any kind of a story?

YOU: There's the conflict about the cooking—new wife versus mother-in-law. And, as we heard the girl say, she's trying hard to be the best kind of a cook. There's a competitive feeling toward her husband's mother undoubtedly.

I: What would be a likely activity for the bride, then, having this feeling?

YOU: She might have a whole shelf full of cookbooks, the latest gadgets for the stove. And it's likely that she spends a good part of every afternoon trying hard to create a masterpiece for the husband's dinner.

I: And when the husband eats the "masterpiece" . . . ?

YOU: Maybe he comments on how good it is—BUT—"When mother did this dish, she . . ."

I: And the girl's reaction?

YOU: Anger, of course—and frustration. Angry at husband *and* mother-in-law.

I: What "problem" has she, then?

YOU: Obviously she has to overcome, in some way, the idea in her husband's mind that "mother's" cooking was better than her own.

I: You have a main character. She has a problem that's fairly easy to state. How would she be likely to work out of it?

YOU: It would be natural for her, I suppose, to try harder and harder, day after day, to get up the superlative meal. Still, no luck with the husband. Then, at last, she's desperate. She's failed to beat her mother-in-law's culinary ghost.

I: What then?

YOU: It would be just like a woman to go and spill her troubles to some other woman. Maybe the girl goes *next*

door. Middle-aged divorcee lives in that apartment. She sympathizes with the girl's plight—men are selfish brutes, they never realize how much trouble they make for women, and so forth. Maybe the girls have a couple of cocktails. Or three doubles.

I: Sounds likely. And then?

YOU: Then the girl goes back to her apartment—late. Her husband is home. She doesn't care, for once, what he gets for dinner. She throws a can of beans into a pan, fries up some bacon, turns the gas up too high, scorches the food. Never mind—scorch or no scorch, he's going to eat it. She slops the food on to plates, bangs it down in front of her husband. He eats. Surprised look on his face. He eats again. The food has the flavor—that remembered flavor of his mother's cooking: she used to burn everything. The husband is satisfied, the bride triumphs, and all is peaceful in the Jennings household.

I: Very ingenious. Is a trick ending like that a fair thing to do to a reader?

YOU: Trick endings are—usually—not fair. But I think this one is a *possible* ending. It isn't too farfetched, given the circumstances. The rest of the story has built up to something like that.

I: What do you want the story to do?

YOU: It's just for entertainment, really. There's nothing "significant" about it. The theme is light—too light for any heavier treatment.

I: Exactly. Then how long should your treatment be?

YOU: Not very long—a couple of thousand words. Maybe the short-short form is the one to use.

Thus far, to sum up briefly, we have done the following: (a) we have found a conflict, (b) imagined it into a plausi-

ble plot, (c) decided on the nature of the subject (pleasantly inconsequential), (d) decided on a point of view (the story is for entertainment only), and (e) estimated that the story will fit the prose form known as the short-short.

Now—and only now—is it time to talk specifically about a *form*.

The “short-short” ranges in length from 1500-2500 words, usually. There is little time for characterization in detail, and therefore the number of people in a plot of this sort is strictly limited (here we have three). There is also little time to develop more than one conflict or dilemma. Because the aim is to entertain, the writing must be deft, light, tightly packed. Scenes, action, dialogue must carry the maximum impact in a minimum space. (Do not feel superior to this type of writing; it is extremely hard to do it well.)

A major problem in the architecture of this story is *pace*: how much time to spend characterizing the girl (let’s call her Ann), and how much on the husband? Will you do it through dialogue, mostly, or description, or both—and how much of each? How do you make the people believable, and yet not be so brief that they seem merely to be puppets or caricatures? There are no formula answers to these questions; you must work them through on their own terms.

But it may help if I sketch out briefly a workable structure for the story we have developed.

The story follows a classic pattern: the struggle of a single character to overcome a problem. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning shows Ann (the bride) with a problem; the middle shows how she attempts to solve the problem by various efforts until the reader almost believes that she is not going to solve it.

Then Ann decides on a if-he-doesn't-like-it-to-hell-with-him course of action, leading up to her careless preparation of the dinner. And the ending is the result of this decisive action.

Because the story is so short, here is one way it could work out in terms of proportion ("pace").

The reader needs to meet the chief character (Ann) immediately—in the first paragraph. (Why is this so? Why not spend a paragraph setting the scene?) In this short space, the reader must become acquainted with her, must like her. (Again, why? Would the story be successful if the reader didn't like her?) The reader must see, too, that she is a fine, conscientious cook.

In the next paragraph the story's "problem" is presented. (Why here instead of later?)

And in the third paragraph, we meet Ann's husband. He should be likable, too. (Why don't we meet the husband earlier—before the statement of Ann's problem?)

One more paragraph develops Ann's personality and her relation with her husband. You need to convince the reader further that she is making strenuous efforts to be a fine cook.

Having stated the story's problem in paragraph 2, you now need to show the conflict in action. Perhaps you show the young couple at dinner. Ann has cooked up a superlative mixed grill, with crisp salad on the side, and light, smooth fudge cake for dessert. She watches her husband anxiously. He eats. She asks how he likes it. He likes it fine. Wonderful dinner—BUT. And Ann feels disconsolate about another "failure."

When you finish this section (several paragraphs) you have completed the end-of-the-beginning of the story. You have introduced the main character (Ann) and the principal minor character (her husband). You have shown the

conflict between them, and your reader knows that Ann's problem is: how can she equal, in her husband's mind, the perfection he remembers in his mother's cooking? With this information, the reader is set for what happens.

Now the "body" of the story begins. Ann tries and tries to solve her problem. She spends long hours in the kitchen. She shops with care and imagination for the best meats, the freshest vegetables, the most exotic seasonings. She cooks meals that would make a connoisseur drool with delight. But no luck. Ann becomes morose. She doesn't know what to do. And in this mood, she goes next door to talk to the sympathetic divorcee.

The divorcee knows all about men. Heartless, selfish creatures. Thoughtless, self-centered, sloppy, and takers-of-wives-for-granted—all husbands are alike. The divorcee feeds Ann some strong cocktails and some further cynical advice. Ann gets to the point where she doesn't care what her husband thinks about her cooking.

Now comes the end-of-the-middle—the climax. She decides that if she can't please her husband with her wonderful cooking, then he can take what he gets whether he likes it or not. She's going to get together the simplest dinner she can prepare, and if he doesn't like it—well, that's too bad. If he objects she might even get mad enough to walk out on him. And from here on, what happens in the story depends upon how the husband acts. The action of the story—which the main character (Ann) has forced up to this point—is now out of her hands. This is the end of the middle—or "body"—of the story.

The story's ending comes fast. Ann burns the bacon, scorches the beans, and uses limp lettuce for the salad. Her husband finds a reminder of his mother's cooking: he loves the burned dinner. Now Ann knows what she has to do. The mystery has been resolved. It is a surprise twist,

of course, but it solves the conflict. The loose ends of the problem are tied up. The story ends.\*

I have taken all this space to develop this story because—though it is admittedly slight in theme—it has in it the seeds of a most important lesson for fiction writers. Stories must be architecturally sound. They should be absorbing. They need strong plots. (It often seems to me that learning writers fail to ask themselves this crucial question: “Would people really be interested in this story? Would they find it absorbing right from the start?” Too often writers think: “Will they admire the writing, my cleverness with words, my subtlety of thought?”)

Incidentally, the “surprise ending” is, in itself, neither good nor bad. Many short-shorts, as you will find if you study them, are a surprise ending and nothing else—an original situation, the characters “running in place” for a thousand words until the time comes for the surprise to be sprung. This is, I think, an illegitimate way to use the surprise. The whole point of a surprise ending (as it is the point of *any* good story) is that the reader’s attention has been caught by a series of actions which have held him so closely that he has not thought about the ending at all.

It should be plain from the foregoing that the “form” of your writing comes *last* (usually) rather than first in your writing considerations.

Suppose, for example, that you wanted to project an even smaller segment of experience than the one illustrated in the short-short we just developed. Perhaps you wish only to transmit a mood, or the isolated interest of a single, provocative little incident which seems to have no beginning-middle-end possibilities in it. Your form for this would probably be the *sketch*, which has little or no

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\* This analysis was based on a story, “That Certain Flavor,” by Lee Rogow, in *This Week Magazine*, April 10, 1949.

“plot” in the sense I have been describing it. The sketch is an elastic form; it requires much skill from the writer to keep reader interest because the emphasis is less upon what happens (plot) than upon what mood or feeling is to be sustained. (There has been an increasing amount of distinguished writing in the sketch form in the last few years. One fine example of a type of sketch is James Thurber’s familiar “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” which is nothing more, structurally, than a series of improbable and amusing daydreams of heroism contrasted with the obvious meek futility of the daydreamer.)

There are several helpful questions to be asked of your material in order to determine what form of writing will best express it. If what you have to tell is simply a series of happenings, one after the other, you will have a story whose unraveling will probably be in terms of narrative: this happened, then that happened, then the other occurred. However, if your subject requires that you present a happening, then another happening which occurs *because* of the first one, you will have a more complicated form because you will need to establish a chain of probabilities. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, says: “. . . A story [is] a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. . . . If it is in a story, we say ‘and then?’ If it is in a plot, we ask ‘why?’”

In constructing a story, the reference I made in Chapter 4 to “movie camera method” is a useful one to remember. If you imagine that, instead of a writer, you are a movie camera which glides about a scene picking up visual impressions, dialogue, and actions, you will discover that you will be organizing your story’s proportions in terms of their proper (best) effects upon the reader. You will begin to sense when and how much character talk you

need, how detailed a description should be, what proportion one action should take as against another, whether you need a bit of "flashback" and where it fits most reasonably.

The broadest and most complex of the prose forms is, of course, the novel. Though I have discussed many of the problems of a novelist in this book, the form itself deserves a separate study, and I will not go into it here.

No matter what form your writing finally takes, it is needful for you to remind yourself again and again that the best form is that which makes the most of the subject. Keep in mind, too, that your relation to your reader is a responsible one—you are responsible. Especially in fiction is it true that you are required both to enlist your reader's feelings and to appeal to his judgment—that is, to his sense of the fitness and comeliness of your imaginative realities. *Form*, as I said earlier, results from the *coherence* or *meaning* which you find in your subjects.

Finally, therefore, to remind you once again of the practical approach a writer needs to take toward "form," here are the three key questions to ask:

What do I want this writing to *do*?

What kind of subject have I?

How do I feel about it?

Work out the answers to these questions reasonably and fully, and the form is likely to take care of itself.

## PROBLEM

Read this story straight through. What was the author trying to say? What do you think of the *form* of the story? Does the form—if you can discover any—make the most of the subject? What would you do to improve this sketch? What needs editing? What needs rewriting?

DAVY\*

I went to high school with Davy, and I knew him, and I knew why he was different. He used to be an ugly, gawky kid, with baggy pants, rundown shoes, and light green shirts that were dirty, sweat-drenched, and the shirttails always hung out. He had bands on his teeth, and he had straight black hair and black eyes, and the girls didn't like him. Davy was different. He was different—well—because everybody knew about his mother: the long, tragic years of waiting, the hope—and nobody said anything. He couldn't write the weekly English themes we sweated out for Miss Tompkins and Miss Tompkins said he had "no romance in his soul." He didn't like History; the binding was busted off his book and the pages about the Civil War were missing. School was kind of silly anyway. Nothing mattered until you were a Senior, and then it was too late.

The boys had to be good in sports and weak with the books, and the girls had to be cheerleaders. The boys had to wear blue satin jackets on Fridays with orange stripes down the arms and they had to have Varsity letters that looked like hunks of colored bath towel sewed on their sweaters. They had to look the part of smelly locker rooms, initialed books, and jammed lockers in the hall. And the boys had to go with short-skirted girls who necked in the back of the bleachers.

Only Davy didn't go with girls. He didn't go with girls because he thought they wouldn't have him anyway. Not growing up with a mother had made him—different. He didn't know about girls—what they said and what they did. No one had ever told him. He didn't smile at them or talk to them or kid around—and boys at G.H.S. weren't *that* different. He told me once he knew his mother couldn't help it, but that no girl would marry him because—because of what had happened to her—and so he figured he'd just as soon not get mixed up with them.

But, Davy played football and he had a big identification bracelet. He began to grow into his ugliness until it was just cute

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\* By Sarah Jane Farrell. Used by permission.

and masculine, and all the girls began to like him, and Jean, my best girlfriend, guessed she was crazy about him. Only she wasn't—but Davy didn't know that. He played on the football, basketball, and baseball teams. And he was good. He wore faded blue-jeans, army shirts and moccasins like the other boys, and he walked down the halls in big huddles with the other boys on the teams while they told jokes about traveling salesmen. He carried only one book at a time wedged in between his hip and his wrist because both hands were always dug into his pockets. All the boys walked that way and they never did homework and they never had pencils. They were late for classes; they were always late because all the boys were late. Marble floors, banging lockers, and the big study hall with the big tables. Davy always sat at the back of the room with all the boys, and Jean sat closer front at the table with all the girls. We never worked because the girls were talking about the boys and the boys were talking about football.

We went to the games on the team bus during football season. The girls sat up front in a nervous little lump, and the boys sat in back and swore and laughed extra loud at jokes. Then at the game there was numbing cold, hoarse throats, mud, hotdogs, big drags on cigarettes in trembling hands, and the other team was unfair. The girls clutched "their" boys' varsity jackets and the silver footballs they wore around their necks, and the boys wore dirty socks that always brought them luck. And then it was over and the girls waited—either bursting with spirit or respectfully sad, according to the game of course. Then the boys came out and got on the bus and sat with their girls. The windows were frosty and the bus driver always turned the lights off. The boys were tired and muddy and punchy and they kept their heads on the girls' shoulders all the way home. In basketball season, they got off the bus and then walked home in the snow together, and the girls remember the big blue varsity jackets with snow on them.

Davy really seemed to be like the other boys now. Everybody liked him. He built roadblocks with the other boys on Hallowe'en, and went to the Junior Prom in the Spring and so things were pretty smooth—and then I fell in love with him. He'd pulled my

pig-tails when I was ten, hit me over the head with dirty track shoes when I was thirteen and then I lent him my Algebra homework when I was fifteen. And if you lent a boy your homework it nearly always meant you'd end up liking him, so I guess it was no surprise to either of us. It was too bad I fell in love with him because he was just getting over the final break-up with Jean. I was easy after Jean and we'd always been good friends. I let him bask in his sorrow for a week. All the boys hung their heads and acted surly for at least a week after a break-up. Davy did too. And then I became a member of the "chosen few." I had prestige because I waited after football practice and I wore his ring during basketball games. Everything was the same as it had been with Jean only Davy didn't love me. But I didn't know that and sometimes I don't think he did either.

The first time something went wrong was one day in October. I met him after football practice and we decided to walk up to Weeks' and get a little free tutoring in Intermediate Algebra. Weeks was good at it and besides we felt like walking.

I liked to walk with Davy. Even then he was quite tall and I thought of all the cars that would go by and see me with him. He had nice smooth tan skin, big hands and I liked to look at him when he walked. We were walking up Central Drive—slowly because it was a steep hill—and he said: "Gee, I love to go hunting." I smiled because I already knew that and because I loved to picture him walking down the road with the gun "broken" over his arm.

"Someday," he said, "I'm just going to take off and head for the woods and just hunt the whole damned time. Sleep outdoors, eat what I've gotten and just roam around away from everything and everybody."

I looked at him. I didn't like to hear him talk about that because it didn't include me. Davy had never asked me to go hunting with him. He'd asked Jean though. How could he want to be away from everything when everything was so close, right here in Rockville. Sure there was a lot out of Rockville—but what? Big cities, juvenile delinquents and probably a lot of football teams that were bigger and better than G.H.S.: but Rockville was our home-town, and all

you had to do was ask the boys home from the war—those who'd gotten back—how much the town meant. They'd tell you. Paul Bowman had lost his eyes at Anzio and all he ever talked about was how the one thing in the world he wanted was just to walk down Maple Street and see the houses, Bigelow's, the Post Office, and Looie the tramp with his dog Jackson. He also wanted to see the difference between night and day, but we all secretly thought he'd probably rather see Sue Linscott more. Anyway I didn't like to hear Davy say those things about being away from everything because it scared me. He stopped in the middle of the hill and said with a grin: "Did you ever break a duck's neck?"

"Of course not," I said.

"God, what a feeling. It's so soft and warm, you can almost feel the blood pounding and—"

"Dave, don't talk like that," I said—my stomach getting squeamish. "It makes you sound like—well it makes you sound—queer." He gasped. The word fell like a rock in the silence. The very sound of it seemed to cut the air. Everything around seemed heavy and oppressing and my stomach pounded in sheer fright. Strange, peculiar, funny, dopey, I thought wildly. Why couldn't I have said one of them—but queer—that one word—queer. He turned violently to me. His eyes burned.

"Go ahead and say it," he said, "go ahead. It makes me sound—like I'm—insane." Neither of us moved. I gulped. I didn't ever want to hear that word—especially from him, and it got away from him before he knew what he was saying. I didn't ever want to talk about that. The other boys weren't like this. Why did he have to ruin a perfectly good afternoon just to be dramatic. It would break up everything. I started to cry, though I didn't want to. Davy's face changed, he took my hand and stammered:

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Honest. Please don't cry. I—I, well, hell, what can you do when a girl cries?" My heart leaped. That was just what the other boys would have said. Davy had just been trying to be different, just trying to impress me before. He hadn't meant it. The big shadow that had come between us for a minute disappeared. He squeezed my hand and we started to walk again—not saying a word. Truth was I couldn't think of anything

to say. You had to say something sweet now—all the other girls did when "something" happened.

"Mad?" he said.

"A little," I pouted. You couldn't be too easy with them. You had to make them crawl. Then he spun me around and before I had time to finish what I was going to say, he kissed me. With awkward fondness, he let me go, and I said: "What did you do that for?" He glared at me. That shadow came back again between us. "What does anybody do anything for?" he said sullenly. And he walked on ahead of me. I didn't cry this time. Somehow I didn't think it would be effective. This wasn't what I'd expected—or what I wanted.

I caught up with him and we walked to Weeks' without another word. We did Algebra and more Algebra—that little stub of a pencil looked so silly sticking up out of his big fist. But I was mad—righteously and deliciously mad. Our first fight and all the girls said making up was the most fun. Yet, what was the matter with him? He didn't have to shout at me. Sure I liked him, but the other girls would think I was the biggest dope in the world if I let him get away with this. We left at six and walked down the hill. My bus came at six-thirty, so Davy waited with me. His identification bracelet was cold on my wrist.

"Davy, do you want your bracelet back?" I said.

"Nope. I just want you never to ask me again why I do anything. I know I'm queer but that's the way I want it—"

"You're *not* queer, Davy. I just didn't know and—"

"Skip it," he said quickly. "Skip it. See you tomorrow." He feigned a punch at my chin, turned and walked off down the road with his hands in his pockets. I couldn't get it out of my head. "Just want you never to ask me again why I do anything." Why? Maybe I wouldn't tell the girls anything. What could I say? And I knew what they'd say. Pretty near all of us thought the same way as far as boys were concerned. They'd think it was—queer. (That word again.) They'd think I should have made him take the bracelet back. But I didn't want that. I loved Davy. He was tall, and he played football and the other girls liked him. I could count at least eleven of the sophomores who wished they were going with him

and you could always tell about a boy if other girls were jealous.

The week went heavily by. I didn't feel too well—and then suddenly I had pneumonia. I was in a fog of night-lamps, penicillin, blood tests, pillows, and the flower print of the counterpane. When I got to the baked-potato stage of my illness, Mom let Davy come and see me. She said she didn't like him—he wasn't the "right sort" but she felt "sorry for the poor kid." That made me mad but Dad laughed and said for her not to be silly and let romance bloom if it must. That made me mad too, but I didn't say anything because that meant that Mom would let Davy come and see me.

He came almost every afternoon until I began to wonder if he was on the team any more. That worried me a little but not nearly as much as the thought that I would miss the Fall Dance. In the meantime, Davy and I played gin rummy, he taught me to play poker and he brought me all my work from school. Mom and he made friends, which was a good thing because it confirmed Dad's belief that "you've just got to give these kids the benefit of the doubt. They're all pretty regular." And so on. Davy would come at four, and about six-thirty he'd go down to the kitchen with Mom and before he left he'd bring me my supper tray. Mom complained about him getting underfoot but I think she liked it. All mothers like to have boys underfoot especially if those mothers have daughters. The night of the dance Davy came up and we played gin rummy and I told him I wished he'd gotten someone else and gone. I didn't wish it, but you had to say those things. He said he'd made a date and he meant to keep it, and besides he didn't like to dance anyway which wasn't true because he did. The girls all said he was the best dancer in our class—the boys just grunted, but they hadn't ever danced with him so they didn't know. All the boys hated to dance and most of the time they shuffled aimlessly around the floor in questionable time to the music. Davy didn't dance that way but he still said he hated to dance. All the boys did.

Along about the first of December I went back to school and all the sophomores were whispering that Davy and I had been married secretly and that I'd never been sick at all. I didn't say anything because I had been sick, we hadn't been married, and be-

sides you always kept the sophomores "in the dark." It was more fun that way and everybody did it. That winter was a good one. Davy liked to build snowmen but we didn't build many because there wasn't too much snow and usually by the time Davy got out of basketball practice it was too dark to see. We went sleigh-riding a lot over Christmas vacation and played snap-the-whip on the ice on the duck pond in the village.

Well, finally along about the end of February the snow went away and we had slush, ice and wind for pretty nearly all of March. It was sometime in April when everything changed. As a matter of fact it was April 18th. I remember because it was Mom and Dad's anniversary, and I had the snow tires taken off the Plymouth. That night Davy and I went to the movies down in Stockton, the next town. It was a war picture and we were both glad when it was over—when the news came on and the cartoons. Davy liked the cartoons especially. But they had a long show that night and had a film short on hospitals and how they treated T.B., cancer, typhoid and—insanity. When they came to insanity they were "calling attention to the deplorable conditions in our mental institutions today and the manner in which the disease itself is received by the general public." My heart flipped—October and the walk up to Weeks', the cold, the bracelet, and I almost lost Davy. Why in God's name did we have to come tonight? I should have stayed home with Mom and Dad on their anniversary. We could have come tomorrow night as easily and they wouldn't have had this stinking lousy show with its stupid pictures and oily advice. Why didn't they shut up? How did they know what it was like? They didn't know how it felt to wonder all the time whether you'd end up the way your mother or your father, sister or brother had. They just could never know. "Insanity can be cured, insanity can be cured," the voice droned from the screen, getting progressively louder. Davy started to laugh. He kept on laughing, harsh, loud, unnatural laughter.

"Stop it!" he shouted suddenly. "Turn the damned thing off, oh, turn it off!" A girl in the row in front of us turned and looked at him with an open mouth, a stupid curious expression on her face. A man further down turned frowning and then wagged his head

in mutual irritation with his wife. A chorus of shhhhh went up here and there and somebody said, "Get the usher." Looking, staring, turning—everybody. Davy stood up abruptly, grabbed my arm and we stumbled over people until the end of the row, then ran down the aisle and outside.

We had to walk to Rockville because we'd been at the late show and the buses didn't run after ten. Everything looked so healthy and lush and the spring air moved in easy little gusts—warm and soft. How could the world be so light-hearted, everything so full of the excitement of Spring and still have people in it so unhappy. Poor, unhappy Davy. Where was the best place for him? Where could he hide? Where could he be where people wouldn't give a damn about what had happened to his parents, where people wouldn't hold it against him and block him out of every healthy normal thing there was. I took his hand as we walked along and he turned his head away from me. I walked along looking down at the road, and then Davy stopped, wrenched his hand out of mine, put his face in his hands, and turned his back on me. There in the middle of the old Stockton road, with nothing but the parkway down the hill, and the little twin lights of a few cars as they went along. Dark and deathly quiet. And I saw his shoulders shaking and heard the shocking sobs—shocking because I'd never heard a boy cry before—I didn't know they did. Boys were supposed to be hard and tough. Boys never cried. But Davy was crying; and then I didn't care whether anybody'd ever cried before. He was unhappy—as unhappy as he could be. I turned him around and put my arms around him.

"Oh, Davy," I said, "Davy, let me tell you something." He put his arms around me, his face in my neck and said huskily,

"Don't bother. I know what it is."

"You don't know what it is," I said evenly. I could feel the anger rising and churning around in my stomach. Anger at everyone and everything that made things like this.

"You're crying, Davy, because—because you're ashamed and—well, you've got no right to be. Me?—why me—you know me. You don't need to feel ashamed in front of me. Do you think I—

do you think it matters—it—how—Davy, I knew all about you when I started going with you. And if you're ashamed for anyone else, you're foolish. Do you honestly think they care, Davy? Do you honestly believe that they hold something over you or—or something against you because of—of—your mother—something that you couldn't help, that—that you had no part of? If you do you—well, you know you're wrong."

Shut up, you fool, I kept thinking. Shut up before you say too much. He held me convulsively for a moment, then swung around and walked quickly down the road. While we walked it kept running through my head that I didn't care. I didn't care whether he was tall, whether he played football or broke his bread at lunch. I hadn't cared for quite a time because he'd started to matter to me just as a person—a tortured, helpless person. I pitied him with all the love I wished I could have loved him with. Because I didn't love him. I guess I hadn't for a while. And I began to see how he'd "loved" me. I was dependable—I was "someone there." But what could I do now? To give him his bracelet back would have been a slap in the face, yet now I didn't feel that bracelets or football meant much any more. We got to Rockville and the light was still on in the little taxi shed by the station. Davy got a cab, and we went home. He said nothing and I said nothing. We didn't need to.

And so I went with Davy until after we'd graduated in June and then I went away in July for the summer. I gave him a new I.D. bracelet; I told him I wanted to keep his old one. Then I didn't see him for a long time. The whole crowd split up, what with college and all and Davy went to work with his father up at the ski lodge at Mountain View. They cut wood and sold it to people for firewood. Then the next fall his father remarried and Davy's house seemed to pick up a little. I only saw Davy occasionally sometimes when I went to town for the papers and sometimes we'd talk a long time without saying much.

Then there was college again, and vacations—and that spring was when I made the trip to the mental hospital with Davy. The nurses with the dark blue capes and the red linings with the neat

white monograms H.V.M.H. on the collar. Red brick, green bars, locked doors, the thick doors with the chicken wire between the two layers of glass. The nurses had keys on their belts and their uniforms were stiff and white and cold. The people in the wards, the people in the shapeless hospital clothes—people who stood and blankly stared for hours on end—the people that were "different." And that was where Louise was and that was where she would always be; for Louise was Davy's mother. That was why Davy was different.

I wore his bracelet for a long time, just never took it off until yesterday. I feel sort of lost without it.

## 8. *You Can Suggest Much*

. . . language includes much more than oral or written speech. Gestures, pictures, monuments, visual images, finger movements—anything deliberately and artificially employed as a *sign* is, logically, language.

—JOHN DEWEY

ONE of the most frustrating things about writing is that words are maddeningly inadequate. Suppose you want to transmit the simple idea that it is raining. You say, "It's raining." Someone looks out the window, sees the same thing you do, and replies, "Why, so it is." And that's enough for ordinary use, isn't it? In a rough-and-ready, telegraphic fashion you have indicated the weather to some other person. But your reader can't look out the window with you. All he has are the words you have written. He looks at the page, and there you have written, "It is raining." Your reader doesn't know whether it's a drizzle or a cloudburst, a hard, wind-driven rain or a gently spattering spring shower. Obviously, he needs more information. Then suppose you say, as you might to someone who was near you but who couldn't see out the window at that moment, "Boy, it's raining like the devil." That's a little better—a very little. At least, you have got across the idea that it is raining pretty hard; but you still haven't made a picture of the rain for the reader. "Raining like the devil" could mean any one of a dozen things to him: gusty curtains of rain, straight-down solid sheets of water, the slanting drive of a squall, the heavy-drop patter of a

thundershower. All right then, you say, I'll tell him *all* about it: the sounds, the sights, the feeling of the hard rain.

But readers are perverse. They get bored quickly. If you tell your reader too much about the rain, he may say, "This fellow takes a long time to get to the point," and turn away without reading further. And there you are, hung on the writer's most persistent dilemma: how to suggest much and say little. *Multum in parvo*—much in little. You should tack that on the wall over your writing desk as a motto. One of the basic skills of a creative writer is the ability to *suggest*.

How do you suggest? How do you reduce a complicated feeling or action to a few words? How do you build your stairway to the reader's imagination? Indirectly all through this book I have indicated ways to do this: the caricaturist's technique in Chapter 5, the need for selection, the observation of meaningful details. But these are quite literal ways—almost mechanical ways—of managing your material. The next step requires *imagination*. This is where we move away from the comfortable security of the tangible into the more subtle workings of creative thought.

One way to suggest more than you say is to use symbols. A symbol, the dictionary says, is a sign by which one knows a thing, a visible sign of an idea or quality of another object. For instance, you walk down the street and see three gilt balls hung in front of a window and you say to yourself, "pawnshop." The staff and two twined snakes of the caduceus means "medicine" or "medical." The red cross means first aid or help in trouble. And so on. Daily life is full of signs which stand so familiarly for other things that we scarcely think of them as "symbols." Indeed, if you stopped to analyze the number of symbols that you

use or recognize each day, you'd be amazed at how many there are.

But the importance of symbols for writing is not so much what they are, as whether they have a common meaning for most people. When you use a symbol—or when you create one, for that matter—you must be sure it is a sign that your reader can recognize or understand out of his own experience. Many writers forget this vital qualification. They find symbolisms—or make them—that are so subtle or so learned or so obscure that their readers must puzzle through their writing as though they were working out a difficult translation. (It is the rare genius who can get away with this.) Writers who become too entranced with symbols often get so thoroughly tangled up that they end by writing in a special language, understandable only to a few initiates and a handful of sympathetic critics. W. Somerset Maugham\* has truthfully (if querulously) stated a sharp reminder to those who succumb to the temptation of writing with vague complexity:

Some writers who do not think clearly are inclined to suppose that their thoughts have a significance greater than at first sight appears. It is flattering to believe that they are too profound to be expressed so clearly that all who run may read, and very naturally it does not occur to such writers that the fault is with their own minds which have not the faculty of precise reflection. Here again the magic of the written word obtains. It is very easy to persuade oneself that a phrase that one does not quite understand may mean a great deal more than one realizes. From this there is only a little way to go to fall into the habit of setting down one's impressions in all their original vagueness. Fools can always be found to discover a hidden sense in them.

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\* Reprinted from W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, by permission of the publishers, Doubleday and Co., Inc.

You cannot forget that a symbol is merely a device for suggesting much while saying little—being sure, all the while, that your symbols have commonly understood meanings. I am not particularly concerned with functional symbols such as the pawnshop's gilt balls and the barber's striped pole. These don't come into your writing problems often, anyway. But there is another category of symbol which is sometimes useful, even though it may lead you into clichés if you're not careful. This is what I will call the *type symbol*. The type symbol is a favorite of advertising illustrators and political cartoonists. (I sometimes think they would be helpless without it.) The most common method of creating this symbol is to show people in the typical "uniforms" of daily life. Heavy shoes, coveralls, rolled shirt sleeves, and a tin lunch box are the equivalent of a factory worker. Picture of a man with white coat and stethoscope equals doctor. Woman with apron, broom, and dustcloth is, obviously, housewife. You can think of a dozen others without half trying.

Slightly more subtle are the stereotypes out of real life, though these are still clichés or type symbols. For example: a car pulls up in front of your neighbor's house. A man gets out and goes up the front walk carrying a squat black bag. "Hmm," you say, "the Joneses are having the doctor." Or, at another time, you are at the railroad station. It is 8:35 A.M. There is a man standing on the platform waiting for a train. He wears an impeccable gray flannel suit. A gray homburg sits squarely on his head. Under his arm is tucked the morning paper. In his hand is a slim, zippered briefcase. He's a commuter, of course. Probably a junior executive in some well-established, conservative business office. Stereotypes such as these are easy to recognize. Sometimes they are effective ways of saying much in little because around them your reader will uncon-

sciously assemble his own familiar impressions of the same thing.

A good symbol is, fundamentally, a good picture. A "picture is worth a thousand words"; it says, undeniably, much in little. Therefore, a writer needs to have a pictorial eye for things that sum up or symbolize much more than they are in themselves. For example, one of the greatest photographs taken during the last war showed a Chinese baby, alone, forlorn, and crying bitterly amid the tangled rails and rubble of a bombed railway station. Few pictures have better symbolized the pathos, brutality, and senseless wreckage of war. The picture sets off in the viewer's mind a chain of feelings and images: the death of families, the ruin of homes, the wrack of grief, the helpless innocent terror of children, the anonymous martyrdom of catastrophe. No spate of words could have conveyed half the meaning of this one symbolic picture.

This suggests a means for coping with large, complex happenings without drowning the reader in a flood of words. The small, personalized segment of a greater thing can often be made to symbolize the whole with greater effect (and therefore more understandably) than a grandiose attempt to spread out panoramas in words.

Suppose you want to write about an immense, natural disaster such as a flood. Thousands of people are homeless and suffering. Huge tracts of earth are sodden and ruined. Desolation is vast. Misery has ten thousand faces. You can't write about it all—there's too much. What do you do? You look for things to symbolize the whole, things that will suggest the size and impact of the tragedy, and the pathos of it. You tell about a farmer named John Jones and what happened to his home and his wife and four children. Perhaps you let him tell some of it in his own words: the wild warnings in the middle of the night,

the first terrifying wall of water roaring across the fields, the shuddering house, the family clinging desperately to the roof while water rose to the eaves and lapped angrily past the chimney. Perhaps you find another symbol—men's common effort in danger—by showing how a little group of struggling men tried to open the sluiceway of a spill dam while the rising water curled spitefully over the ragged wall of sandbags hastily thrown up. Or a touch of grimly humorous contrast in the sight of a dog, a cat, and several chickens perched on the roof of a small shed which lurched slowly by in the flood. A picture of tragedy: the quiet rows of blanketed forms, ignominiously barefooted, in the improvised morgue of a warehouse. And the long, lazy veils of gray rain, hanging endlessly from a dark sky, forecasting more flood to come.

Here, for instance, is the way a *Life* magazine\* writer handled the lead text block of a disaster story. Though the article also had photographs you will notice how the reporter used symbol after symbol to *suggest*, with verbal pictures, the magnitude and the human pathos of the happening.

### THE SOUTH AMBOY CLOCK STOPS AT 7:26

One night last week, in the grubby little factory city of South Amboy, N. J., the city hall clock pointed to 7:26. Some of the 9,500 people in town were eating dinner, but along the main drag the stores were open and shoppers were out in the drizzling rain. In some of the houses, parents helped their teen-age girls struggle into their party clothes, for St. Mary's School was having its junior prom that night. Near the waterfront a Pennsylvania commuter train from Manhattan slid past the yards adjoining the railroad's docks, heading for the station. Nearby on Pier A, longshoremen

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\* *Life*, Vol. 28, No. 22, May 29, 1950. Copyright Time Inc.

were transferring the last of 12 freight cars of ammunition to a string of lighters. Standing offshore in Raritan Bay was the Isbrandtsen Line's *Flying Clipper*, her hull still scuffed from a recent bombardment by Chinese Nationalist planes. She was to load the shells and antipersonnel mines for a voyage to Pakistan.

The city hall clock never got to 7:27, and the 467 tons of the *Flying Clipper's* deadly cargo never got loaded. The explosives erupted into the sky above South Amboy. The concussion shattered windows over a radius of 12 miles; hundreds of people, blinking at the sound of the blast, looked at their arms and legs and saw that flying daggers of glass had stabbed them. In a Catholic church the stained glass windows dissolved over the worshippers who left their prayers to run into the streets crying that atomic war had come. The city's lights went out, a man was blown out of a barber chair and a high school boy, tying his tie before a mirror, saw his image disintegrate as the glass flew at him. In the wrecked and darkened business area the dazed shoppers heard the wail of sirens, while all over town a rain of oily mud, blasted from the bottom of the bay, came down on them in dirty gobs. Panicky crowds tried to leave town and head south, while portly Mayor John B. Leonard, who had been dumped on the floor in front of his collapsing television set, manned a sound truck to bawl hoarse assurances that the danger was past.

At dawn, with the cause of the explosion still unknown, people saw that Pier A, the freight cars and ammunition lighters had vanished. So had 22 longshoremen, and four were known dead. Three hundred and twelve were injured. In the waterfront area, sown with live mines, searchers walked gingerly as they began a hopeless search for the other victims of an explosion more devastating than New Jersey's famous Black Tom disaster of World War I.

There are many kinds of symbols that a writer can use. But there is no need for me to go into them here. The wave of a hand, the sound of a bell, the expression on a face, the sight of an object—almost anything can be a

symbol, once you have established a meaning for it. The main thing to remember is that a symbol is merely a device to save you time, to help your reader understand something more quickly, and to let you say much in little.

The need for much meaning in few words is not satisfied if you only use symbols occasionally. When, in the space of a few thousand words, you must make and sustain the illusion of full and energetic life of far greater duration than the short minutes or hours it takes to read the words, then every paragraph and nearly every sentence must be so charged with meaning that they suggest more than they say. This is the function of *imagery*. Creative writing is full of similes and metaphors. In fact, this is almost a definition of creative writing. It unfolds picture after picture, not statement after statement. Your ability to coin images is one measure of your skill in creative thinking.

Many beginning writers believe, mistakenly, that finding the right similes or metaphors is a happy accident of inspiration—that “they just come to you when you’re in the right mood.” This is not so, of course. Image-making is as deliberate and calculated a skill as any other part of the writing process. Go back for a moment to the beginning of this chapter where I tried, fumblingly, to indicate that it was raining very hard. “It is raining” was not enough to say. But since images are instinctive to us, I floundered around and said, “It is raining like . . . like . . . the devil.” That’s a very inefficient simile, but the “like” shows that there is a need to *compare* the rain to something else, to make a thumbnail picture of it by bringing in another idea. I could have said, “It is raining like a waterfall,” and thus crudely have expressed the weight and volume of rain. Or, if the rain were gusty and spattering, I could have used a metaphor and said, “The sharp drumroll of rain against the window,” bringing to you a

comparison in terms of sound. In any case, to make a proper image about the rain, I have to probe around in my mind for an apt comparison. The rain looks like . . . a wall, a veil, a curtain, a sheet, etc. It sounds like . . . a drumroll, hammers, solid as a wave, the rattle of dry leaves, etc. None of these is satisfactory, but this is the start of the process of image-making.

“Making an image,” if I may paraphrase Aristotle, “involves an insight into the resemblances between objects that are superficially unlike.” A rainfall is not a wall or a sheet or a drumroll—but it may *resemble* these things; and the molding together of two “superficially unlike” pictures might make a fine, vivid image which will save you dozens of words of straight description. Another way of defining an image is: talking about one thing in terms of something else.

Making good images requires two main things of you: (1) a well-stocked mind and memory, full of the results of your perceptive observation of the world around you, and (2) the taste, the sense of fitness and comeliness, the insight, in short, the *imagination*, to see that one thing resembles the other. We have thoroughly discussed the first requirement. The second is difficult and evasive because seeing resemblances is the essence of creativeness. However, there are ways to learn how to see this way, and it is with these ways that we will be concerned from now on.

The need for an image begins with a situation or a series of facts which you want to condense. Just for practice, I'll spin out a couple of examples in a sort of stream-of-consciousness fashion to see if it is possible to reveal the nature of the process.

Here we are sitting on a rock in the woods . . . sunshine comes down through the trees, a cool green-yellow . . .

patches of blue-glitter sky . . . the sun far off and small and bright as brass . . . you see a bird, a bluebird . . . it flies past a background of warm-brown tree trunks and the blue color of the bird is sharp and clear . . . lovely blue color . . . How blue? Blue as . . . as . . . ? The bluebird like . . . like . . . ? No, not a simile—too heavy . . . What kind of blue? Electric? No, cliché . . . Like the sea? No, sharper than that . . . Like the sky? Yes, quite like the sky today . . . But that's cliché, too . . . "The bluebird, like a piece of summer sky . . ." No, that's blah . . . self-conscious . . . How about metaphor? "Winged sky"? No, sounds like freshman poetry . . . *The bluebird carries the sky on his back*— There it is.

Of course, your mind may work in an entirely different way from mine. You may make wide mental swings through your memory, or you may, as I have done many times, sit in a kind of suspended freeze of concentration with an image quivering at the end of your pen. But you will find, I think, that you ordinarily pick and haul at the facts in front of you and at the store of remembered facts in your mind until you get two or three things that match up into an appropriate image. Here is one more example: the problem is to make an image of the sunrise on a certain morning.

It's mid-November . . . been raining all night . . . now beginning to clear . . . I'm standing on the slope of a hill, looking down into a valley which looks like a dark bowl . . . streak of light in the east . . . stars looked washed out . . . eastern light is a broad band . . . misty, gray . . . the naked trees stand out black against the pale, cold morning sky . . . there's the rim of the sun edging up over the hills . . . it looks red . . . bloodshot through the mist . . . like an eye . . . suspicious eye . . . it comes up slowly now—a June dawn would burst golden into the

sky . . . The sun came up like . . . like—*came* isn't a pictorial verb— The sun *edged* up . . . like a suspicious eye looking over the rim of hills . . . *The sun edged up and peered over the rim of hills like a suspicious eye from behind a wall.* That's an elaborate image—too elaborate for some kinds of writing—but it is pictorial; it does suggest more than it says.

It further suggests a method of making images: look for the possibility of giving *personal* attributes to impersonal things, or vice versa. I said, for example, that the sun (an impersonal thing) looked like a "suspicious eye" (a personal or human attribute). You need to be very careful with this method. Personalizing inanimate objects has been called "the pathetic fallacy," because the temptation to infuse everything with motive and feeling is pernicious and likely to seduce you into verbal foolishness. Like any device, you need to use this one with care and taste, lest your writing be overblown and unnatural.

Another thing to consider is the *quality* or the general effect of the facts that you want to condense into an image. Suppose you are writing about a character who is a terrible bore. He thinks highly of himself. He is forever getting "a good idea" or having an "original thought," or so he thinks. But you don't think his ideas are worth a hoot: they're dead, tasteless, dull, and repetitious. You want to get this whole impression into one image as nearly as you can. What is the *quality* of his ideas? Well, they're "dead," you say. How do you mean, "dead"? Oh, monotonous, no life in them, colorless, hollow, ordinary. And this bore of a character keeps bringing them up with dull regularity. Now let's try it: "His ideas were as dead as . . ." What? A doornail? A mackerel? No, these are just lazy clichés of "deadness." The quality of deadness here is something cumulative; it makes me think of rows and

rows of something. Now I must cast around in my memory for “rows and rows” of dead things I have seen. Not bodies of people—that brings in too many other considerations; the same is true of animals. But I remember seeing a cornfield in the spring—rows of stubbled cornstalks, limp, brown and soggy. “His ideas were as dead as last year’s cornfield.” Well, that will do for the time being. It may not be the exact image you want, but it’s close enough for a first draft. At least the *quality* of your boring character’s “dead” ideas has been suggested.

Stephen Vincent Benét, a brilliant and sensitive image-maker, coined many suggestive images in his writing. Here is one from “Spanish Bayonet,” in which Benét describes the quality of faded beauty in a middle-aged woman:

Mrs. Gentian had the wreck of what must have been a great beauty. The beauty had gone, but its jealousy, apparently, remained—acrid as the dregs of spoilt incense.

You usually indicate the quality of something by comparing it to another thing of familiar quality. Many images grow out of comparisons. Assume, for example, that you want to indicate the superlative uselessness of something. Merely to say, “This thing is superlatively useless,” is not enough; there is no pictorial value in the words *superlatively useless*. Try comparison. What is the most useless thing you can think of? Absolutely no good for any use at all? “As useless as . . .” What? Your mind digs back into the memory compartment labeled good-for-nothing objects, and you dredge up all sorts of things: useless as a fur coat at the equator, useless as a cigarette without a light, useless as a lifeboat in the desert, and so on. You think up dozens of things. Either they are too farfetched or too flippant or too strained, or they don’t fit the tone of your subject, or they aren’t accurate enough. Here’s how John Donne expressed supreme uselessness, in a poem

called *The Will*. He is talking to his ladylove, saying that when he dies he will give to others all that he was and all he thought. And he tells his lady that all her beauty and grace exist only in his loving eyes; that when he is dead, “. . . all your graces no more use shall have than a sun-dial in a grave.” *No more use than a sun-dial in a grave*—the image has vivid finality.

Comparison is also a matter of degree. In your writing you are always having to invent ways of expressing gradualness, speed, happiness, pain, size, diminutiveness, and the like. As always, you need to find comparisons that harmonize plausibly together, ones that express accurately and vividly the degree or quality of the thing you are talking about. One of the common mistakes that beginning writers make is to invent images that are too bold, too startling, or vigorous for the subject. When the tone of a descriptive scene is quiet and somnolent, obviously an image that brings explosive or rapid or nervous pictures to your reader's mind is not apropos; it doesn't have the right degree of quiet or sleepiness. If you are describing a sunset on a calm evening, for instance, you don't want to make images about the color which use strenuous verbs such as “splashed,” “flared,” “exploded,” “burst,” “soared,” and the like. These words are, obviously, too strong for the tone or level of your description, and you search for quieter ones.

Another image from Benét's “Spanish Bayonet” illustrates how vividly words of the right “weight” and texture suggest the quality of a thing to a reader:

**The evening air was light with the frail sweetness of crepe-myrtle; a little wind stirred in the trees like the ghost of a hummingbird.**

The most useful way of suggesting through images is, I suppose, the metaphor. You make a metaphor by giving

to one thing a name or an attribute of another; and thus, more quickly than you can with a simile, you suggest a resemblance between unlike things. When you say, "It was a bright diamond of a day," you are metaphorically speaking of a clean, clear day which resembles a diamond for flawless sparkle. Other examples: the wind slunk around the corner and whimpered in the alley; the mountains shouldered the sky. In each of these cases, you are making one type of fact perform an act which is clearly the attribute of something else.

One more image will be enough for our purpose. As before, I will try to show how the thought process might work through to the metaphor. You are writing about the amusements of average people—movies, television and radio programs, dances, and such. You're supercilious about these things. You don't approve of them. Waste of time, energy, creative ability. You think of the bobby-sox crowd you saw at a juke joint one night. There they stood, mouths open, eyes glazed, bodies rhythmically twitching, listening to some "real gone jive." They looked paralyzed, hypnotized. Or, you remember people sitting at the radio, wholly absorbed in the strained fatuities of a famous comedian. Their laughter was forced, vacuous, foolish. Your problem is to make an image which will sum up all this and which, at the same time, will express your attitude toward this sort of amusement.

*Passive* is the word . . . all these people look like open mouths . . . empty and dull . . . especially the juke-boxers . . . look as though they were doped, drugged . . . as a matter of fact, that seems to be a chief characteristic of this amusement . . . it drugs . . . it's a kind of narcotic . . . was it Marx and "opiate of the people"? . . . that applied to religion . . . Amusements, like opiates . . . no, not a simile . . . try metaphor . . . his fun drugged him . . . here! *The piddling narcotics of amusement.*

Writing that is too full of images, however, is likely to be turgid and overrich—like a pudding too stuffed with sweetmeats. It makes “purple patches.” Here again, as with the selection of incidents and facts in a story, the measuring sticks of relevance, probability, and necessity apply. You make an image to satisfy a need to condense your writing, to say much—vividly—in a few words. When you are too infatuated with your skill in imagery, you are likely—as many learning writers do—to confuse words with sense and to defeat your ends by falling in love with the means.

In this connection, it may amuse you—and I hope instruct you—to read what I consider the worst piece of writing I have ever seen. It was a prize winner in an essay contest, sponsored by a town patriotic organization, and it was written, in all seriousness, on the theme of History and Citizenship.

## HOW OUR HISTORY GIVES US FAITH IN THE AMERICAN FUTURE

Young man, did I hear you say our future is hopeless, that the atomic bomb marks the Armageddon of civilization? I fear that such defeated nihilism has assailed the American youth throughout the rolling acres of our homeland.

Look, Sir, see your forebearers struggling to lay the cornerstone of a future power, which one day would hold the torch of Democratic living. Think of our pioneers or of freezing and starving soldiers in the Revolution without the essentials of life. Such incidents hampered this new-born nation but never the spirit of our people, always gleaming bright.

Westward our progenitors surged, facing the gleaming fang and blazing eyes of war and the wilderness. Always there seemed to exist an unseen power guiding the destinies of a curtailed humanity.

America was shaken by the bloody War of 1865; men were

forced literally to murder their brothers. But when the smoke cleared the pioneers looked to a brighter future. They kept faith—and lived. The future is in the hands of your generation. Fear not. Stand solidly and staunchly on the principles of your democracy. Above all, maintain the faith of your fathers for fruited plains and amber waves of grain are blessings of Almighty God upon a nation that holds to its Christian principles and ideals.

Farewell, Sir, and never forget the history of your American nation, for it is the light of future security in the world to all who hope to see her prosperity increased, her principles indoctrinated, her sceptre universalized.

Incredible, isn't it? I hardly need to comment on the defects of this (it has no virtues). It is in poor logical order; it is stuffed with clichés; its imagery is confused; it has few (if any) facts to give the writing firmness and tangibility; it is addressed vaguely to "Sir" (though it does not explain who "Sir" is or what he has to learn from this effusion); it is highly emotionalized (without indicating any real reasons for the emotion); its central idea (if it has one) is not clear—and the average reader's reaction to this is undoubtedly one of amazed disbelief.

## PROBLEMS

The problems here are, in many ways, merely finger exercises. They are worth doing because practicing scales doesn't hurt a writer any more than it does a piano player.

## SYMBOLS

Make a list of at least fifty familiar gestures, motions, postures, or situations which in your opinion mean the same thing to enough people so that they could stand for "symbols." Then opposite each symbol, write briefly what you think it stands for. For example: Woman standing, hands on hips, foot tapping rapidly, stands, I think, for annoyed waiting or impa-

tient boredom. You may have a different idea, in which case that's not a good symbol. Another sample: arm outstretched, hand turned palm up, fingers clenched, index finger crooked, means "come here." Or, dark clouds mean possible rain. Or, siren means fire or ambulance. You should be able to think of a hundred of these.

#### IMAGES

For each one of the following, invent at least a half dozen good images.

Strong as . . .	Plain as . . .	Green as . . .	Straight as . . .
Weak as . . .	Nervous as . . .	Blue as . . .	Crooked as . . .
Foolish as . . .	Calm as . . .	Red as . . .	Smooth as . . .
Gentle as . . .	Thorough as . . .	Sloppy as . . .	Cruel as . . .

Wind in autumn leaves

Birds in early morning

Nerve-wracking noise

Sunshine in dark room

Boring conversation

Complete silence

#### SUGGESTIVE SELECTION

Choose at least four large-scale catastrophes or events which you know about first-hand. Select the segments of each event that will best re-create the whole. Write these out at some length.

#### EXAMPLE

Notice how Alan Paton in *Cry, the Beloved Country*,\* uses symbolic suggestion to enlarge and at the same time to intensify the idea of *fear* he writes about.

Have no doubt it is fear in the land. For what can men do when so many have grown lawless? Who can enjoy the lovely land, who can enjoy the seventy years, and the sun that pours down on

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\* Reprinted from *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton; copyright 1948 by Alan Paton; used by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons.

the earth, when there is fear in the heart? Who can walk quietly in the shadow of the jacarandas, when their beauty is grown to danger? Who can lie peacefully abed, while the darkness holds some secret? What lovers can lie sweetly under the stars, when menace grows with the measure of their seclusion?

There are voices crying what must be done, a hundred, a thousand voices. But what do they help if one seeks for counsel, for one cries this, and one cries that, and another cries something that is neither this nor that.

. . .

We do not know, we do not know. We shall live from day to day, and put more locks on the doors, and get a fine fierce dog when the fine fierce bitch next door has pups, and hold on to our handbags more tenaciously; and the beauty of the trees by night, and the raptures of lovers under the stars, these things we shall forego. We shall forego the coming home drunken through the midnight streets, and the evening walk over the star-lit veld. We shall be careful, and knock this off our lives, and knock that off our lives, and hedge ourselves about with safety and precaution. And our lives will shrink, but they will be the lives of superior beings; and we shall live with fear, but at least it will not be a fear of the unknown. And the conscience shall be thrust down; the light of life shall not be extinguished, but be put under a bushel, to be preserved for a generation that will live by it again, in some day not yet come; and how it will come, and when it will come, we shall not think about at all.

. . .

Cry the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. Let him not laugh too gladly when the water runs through his fingers, nor stand too silent when the setting sun makes red the veld with fire. Let him not be too moved when the birds of his land are singing, not give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley. For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much.

## 9. *Finding the Right Words*

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

—*Through the Looking-Glass*

**I**F YOU have ever tried to pick up a blob of mercury, you have a fair notion of how hard it is to make words do exactly what you want them to do. No matter how sharply you observe your surroundings or how penetratingly you analyze experiences, you must, finally, fit these things into words which will re-create them for your reader. There is plenty of good advice on word usage in dozens of competent books on writing. These tell you, sensibly, to use familiar words instead of exotic ones, short, concrete words instead of long, abstract ones. They tell you, further, to prefer short sentences to long ones; they suggest that simplicity and lucidity are to be preferred to circumlocution and ornamentation. (Thus, following this advice, I should have re-written this last sentence to say: A short sentence is better than a long one. Don't get fancy and beat around the bush when you can come straight to the point.) Most of this is excellent advice for any writer.

But the trouble with the advice—though it is undeniably sound—is that it usually admonishes rather than explains.

The study of grammar and its rules, for example, is both necessary and useful in learning proper written speech. But grammar is simply common speech legitimized. A writer does not use words according to their legitimacy in a sentence structure. He uses words as a means to an end. Whatever words—familiar or not—that make the most natural and enlightening expression for the subject in hand are the words a creative writer uses. (Normally, of course, one writes grammatically; but whenever necessary, correctness is always sacrificed to these other needs.)

Language doesn't begin with the machinery of saying things. It begins with the *need* to say things. Since people have needed to say tens of thousands of things in all degrees of directness or subtlety, the English language is, therefore, exceedingly rich. (Its very fullness and flexibility is one of the writer's biggest problems. It tempts him to think of words for their own sakes, instead of thinking of words in terms of his particular need of them.)

The creative writer's relation to words is much like the cabinetmaker's relation to wood. A cabinetmaker sets out to make a piece of furniture. First, he determines the need for it. Then he designs it to fulfill the need, to perform the function. Finally, he considers his materials. He chooses the kind of wood that is best, both functionally and aesthetically, for the furniture piece he has designed. Then he makes the chair or table or cabinet. Similarly, the creative writer chooses words—his materials—in the weight, strength, color and texture needed for his piece of writing. *The full process of creative thinking has taken place before words are considered.*

To carry the wood-working analogy a bit further: suppose you want to make a mallet. You will need a hard, tough, resilient wood for the head; the mallet head will have to take hard pounding without splintering or dent-

ing too much. Therefore, you choose hickory or ash or oak because these woods will stand up and take the battering. Now, as a writer, suppose you want to express the idea of hard pounding. Like the wood for the mallet, you will need some tough, hardy, *pounding* words. Here are some possibilities:

pound	clout	sock	belt	thud	slam
thump	bang	knock	hammer	crash	crack
bump	whip	clack	batter	smack	lick

These are fine, vigorous words to express hard or violent contact. But which one are you going to use?

This is still going at the problem backward, isn't it? The question is not, Which word am I going to use? But, Which one do I *need*? You don't approach words *as words* when you are writing. You begin, as we have begun all through this book, by asking: What is happening? *Exactly* what is happening? How strong is it? How weak is it? What is its quality? How close is it? How far away?

Let's examine a real writing problem and see how we go about getting words for it. You are writing a story. You need a brief description. It's before dawn in the forest. Your character has been walking all night. Now he is nearing habitation—a lumber camp. You want your reader to know what he sees and hears. Among other things, he hears the sound of an ax through the cold, misty stillness of the morning. How do you get that ax-sound into words? Listen to it, first. The sound is clear, a little hollow, diminished slightly by distance and the intervening trees. It is rhythmic, regular, the stroke of a skilled woodsman cutting fallen wood for logs. As nearly as I can reproduce it in letters, the quality of the ax sound is *thock . . . thock . . . thock . . .* Now add up the facts of your observation: it is

quiet . . . before-dawn-dark . . . regular *thock, thock* . . . quite a distance away . . . misty . . . cold . . . person listening . . . lonely, hollow sound. Choose the facts you need. Then search for the words. How about "clack"? No, that won't do—it has overtones of flat clattering. "Thud" isn't right—a thud is heavy, dull. "Crack" is a little closer—but "crack" is too sharp, it has a splintery feel. Try this: *In the stillness he heard, far off, the measured knock of an ax against wood.* "Measured knock" is fairly close, I think, to the texture of the sound of the ax.

This is an artificial prolonging of the process through which your mind moves with great speed. In good writing, words do not shape thought. Rather, words are pulled out of your mind, weighed with the reality they are standing for, and used with calculated economy as they are needed to make pictures or show actions. *Let the need choose the word.* Think out the thing to be written wordlessly—pictorially—then search for the word.

Lewis Carroll, in *Alice in Wonderland*, makes an indirect (though shrewd) comment that we can apply:

Here one of the guinea pigs cheered, and was immediately suppressed by the officers of the court. (As that is rather a hard word, I will just explain to you how it was done. They had a large canvas bag, which tied up at the mouth with strings: into this they slipped the guinea pig, head first, and then sat upon it.)

"I'm glad I've seen that done," thought Alice. "I've so often read in the newspapers, at the end of trials, 'There was some attempt at applause which was immediately suppressed by the officers of the court,' and I never understood what it meant till now."

You become skilled in choosing words in the same way you learned to observe simple objects. As one beginning writer remarked in her journal:

I'm discovering that hearing things is a kind of "observing," too. I never realized how many different sounds a footstep makes on a pavement. I'm playing a game of matching sounds with things and then hunting for words or images which will reflect them accurately—and therefore vividly. It seems so ignorant to have gone through life only hearing big, general sounds and missing the fascinating specific ones because I really didn't pay much attention to them. This morning I tried to find a good word for the way water drips on tin. I tried "plink," for instance. Then I compared this with the dripping of our faucet which "tonks" in the drain, making a kind of wet hollow-echo sound. I'm learning to listen. And because I'm listening everything around me seems so much more real than it used to be.

The more practiced you become in linking words to reality, the less awkward the process will be and the smoother and more vivid your writing will become.

This is another way of saying that the creative writer's vocabulary grows mainly out of his experience rather than from his theoretical thinking. You will discover, if you try to write too far beyond your experience, that you will be tempted into using vague words to disguise your ignorance. Before you know it, you will mistake the words for the real thing. And this is the beginning of stilted, unnatural writing. Thoreau once remarked: "A writer who does not speak out of a full experience uses torpid words, wooden or lifeless words, such words as *humanitary*, which have a paralysis in their tails."

But there is an opposite to this. The very fullness of your experience may get in your way and make you too conscious that your expression of it is, perhaps, oversimplified. No matter how well you select your facts, your thorough knowledge of them is likely to tempt you to qualify them, try to make them more precise than is necessary. Qualifying takes extra words. Adjectives pile up.

Phrases multiply. The tough, vivid words you originally had are watered down to precise, legal-sounding terms.

Witness the "expert." He knows so much about his subject that he hedges it about with "maybe's" and "perhaps's." Every statement he makes is weighted by a qualification or two dangling heavily from it. Soon he is saying things such as "It is, however, not without some slight justification that . . ." and using words like *expedite*, *extraneous*, *ameliorate*, and *plenitude*. And, in a trice, he becomes not only dull, but hard to understand. Here's an anecdote to illustrate:\*

A home economist from the nearby state university was giving a cooking demonstration before a group of farm women. "Take an egg," she explained, "and carefully perforate the basal end. Duplicate the process in the apex. Then, applying the lips to one of the apertures, by forcibly exhaling the breath discharge the shell of its contents."

Eighty-five-year-old Aunt Cassie turned to a neighbor. "Beats all how different these newfangled ways is," she whispered. "When I was a gal we just poked a hole in each end—and blowed!"

Think of this story whenever you get the urge to spread out more words than you need. Poke a hole in each end of the urge—and blow.

I have reminded you many times that creative writing is for *effect*. Within the limits of your need to say exactly what you mean, with words of the right weight and texture, it is legitimate to use the words themselves for effect, too. Often, the sense of a word, and its sound, combine to produce effects. And sometimes a series of similar sounds in a sentence will strengthen the sense of a passage. These

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\* Reprinted by permission from "College English," by Dorothy McDonald, *The Reader's Digest*, April 1949.

are devices to be used sparingly. Overuse of them will make your writing sound self-consciously arty.

Two examples of this will be enough, I think. Here are seven magnificent lines from Book I of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

The Sulphurous Hail

Shot after us in storm, oreblown hath laid  
The fiery Surge, that from the Precipice  
Of Heav'n receiv'd us falling, and the Thunder,  
Wing'd with red Lightning and impetuous rage,  
Perhaps hath spent his shafts, and ceases now  
To bellow through the vast and boundless Deep.

What happens to the last line if you substitute "roar" for "bellow"? Or, "detonate" or "concatenate" or "rumble" or "resound"?

This passage, from James Joyce's *Ulysses*,\* shows even more sharply how words, as they tumble about stream-of-consciousness fashion in Stephen Dedalus' mind while he stands by the sea, can be employed both for sound, cadence, and meaning to produce vivid effect.

In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full, covering greengoldenly lagoons of sand, rising, flowing. My ashplant will float away. I shall wait. No, they will pass on, passing chafing over the low rocks, swirling, passing. Better get this job over quick. Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss oos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling.

Under the upswelling tide he saw the writhing reeds lift lan-

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\* From James Joyce, *Ulysses*. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

guidly and sway reluctant arms, hising up their petticoats, in whispering water swaying and upturning coy silver fronds. Day by day: night by night: lifted, flooded and let fall.

I needn't do any more than point out another kind of word-effect: sentence length and complexity. Generally, a scene full of harshness and violence demands the staccato treatment of short sentences, vibrant with vigorous verbs. The massive, slow dignity of a rolling sea, crashing ponderous waves upon the shore, retreating in surges and swelling again upon the rocks and beaches, may take a sentence with long and rolling phrases, full of subordinate clauses and the weight of rich words.

These are simply rhetorical tricks, to be used with the greatest caution. You only need these fine verbal embroideries when they fit the subject—and *never* when you admire them for themselves.

The real test of word use, finally, is naturalness. How naturally does your writing read? Do your words fit the size or dignity of your subject? Are you always conscious of the words? Do you sense yourself behind the page, the author self-consciously trying to verbalize experience? If the words get in your way, if they keep calling attention to themselves because they are bizarre or out of place, then your writing is bad. Language, like the glass in a window, exists to let in light; your job is to provide the light—not fancy designs on the glass.

And above all, simplicity. Don't mistake simplicity for mere briefness or shortness of words. *Simplicity is the saying of a thing as it should be said—no more or less than this.* Thus, simplicity is ever so much harder to achieve than grandiosity or, oppositely, vulgarity. If you can be both simple and grand, your writing is likely to be great writing. The following story, for its simplicity and almost

perfect aptness of word use, is one of the greatest pieces of writing I have ever read. Read it, and see what you think.

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, "Where art thou?"

And he said,

"I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

And he said,

"Who told thee that thou was naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?"

And the man said,

"The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."

And the Lord God said unto the woman,

"What is this that thou hast done?"

And the woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat."

And the Lord God said unto the serpent,

Because thou hast done this,

Thou are cursed above all cattle,

And above every beast of the field;

Upon thy belly shalt thou go,

And dust shalt thou eat

All the days of thy life:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman,

And between thy seed and her seed:

And it shall bruise thy head,

And thou shalt bruise his heel.

Unto the woman he said,

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception;

In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children;

And thy desire shall be to thy husband,

And he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said,

Cursed is the ground for thy sake;  
In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.  
Thorns also and thistles shall bring it forth to thee;  
And thou shalt eat the herb of the field;  
In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,  
Till thou return unto the ground;  
For out of it wast thou taken:  
For dust thou art,  
And unto dust shalt thou return.

And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.

And the Lord God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever—" therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

I can't end this chapter about "finding the right words" without making some suggestions about your work habits. You can read and theorize all you want about writing; but, at last, you must sit down and do it. How you go about it is, of course, your own business. You may like to write longhand or on a typewriter. You may crave a neat, uncluttered desk, with stacks of clean paper on one side and a dozen sharpened pencils in ordered ranks on the other. Or, perhaps you need an old table, piled with books, and mussy with scraps of paper full of cryptic notes to yourself. Whatever physical conditions make you comfortable and allow you to keep your mind on the primary business of thinking and scribbling, are the right condi-

tions for your writing. If you find yourself fussing and finicking with the "proper" arrangements, chances are you are just fooling yourself—putting off writing by using "conditions" as an excuse.

But now the important things. First, if you can possibly manage it, set a regular time each day for writing. Discover when your mental and physical powers are at their peak, and set aside this time for writing. If you know, for instance, that at 8:00 A.M. you are going to be at your writing desk, and that, like it or not, you are going to stay there until 1:00 P.M., you will soon get over the urge (and it's a strong urge) to put off writing until you feel more like it. There is much, as any psychologist will tell you, in "assuming the attitude."

How long you write or how much you write are things that you learn to measure for yourself. Some people cannot write for more than two hours without burning out completely the day's quota of creative energy. They produce at high speed; to try to push themselves for more than two hours is just a waste of time. Others are more deliberate. Short spurts of writing are followed by half hours of pacing up and down or sitting in an easy chair, thinking. Others can write steadily and slowly for three, four, and five hours, stopping by the clock instead of stopping when they are tired. Some can even write all day, every day. This is a matter of personal capacity. You will find your own limits.

What if you come to your desk at the set hour and you haven't a thing to write about? Write anyway. Keep a journal or a day-book. Jot down anything you wish in it. Think back over the last twenty-four hours and record some sights or sounds that you heard, the fragments of ideas that may have turned over in your mind. Make up

stories about them. Or look out the window and write down what you see. The important thing is to write every day.

Should you use an outline for everything you write? That, too, depends on you. My experience is that outlines with elaborate headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings are cumbersome. They take time and energy to make. Like anything else you write, once you have pinned down your thoughts in that kind of detail, they take on an obstinate life of their own. You begin to write to the outline instead of to the subject, with a consequent loss of fluidness and freshness. But you do need a guide, especially for a long piece of writing such as a story or a book. For this purpose, a collection of notes, roughly in order, is enough to keep you from straying too far from your main ideas. Sometimes, though, after you have tried three, six, nine times to pull the writing together without succeeding, an outline may serve to shake out incoherences and digressions and help you finish the job. To use an outline or not to use one, depends on your need of one.

Another familiar frustration is getting started. You may be full of ideas. You may have a piece of writing cleanly thought through and ready for words. But the obstinate, obdurate, stubborn thing won't get started. The first sentence, the first paragraph just won't come out. (This frustration is especially typical when you try to write a feature article, where the "lead" is important.) The best suggestion I have for this is to start writing—anything. Just get going. Write nonsense and foolishness if you have to, trying all the while to keep as close to your subject as you can. Just begin to grind out the ideas, regardless of their order, even if it takes you two or three pages or more. This works satisfactorily for many writers. After you have

finally dug into your subject, you can throw away the scribble you started with. It has served its purpose.

The main job is to get it down on paper. As you write, be as clear and as vivid as you can. Don't stop to polish up a bad sentence or paragraph if it will hold you up too much. First time is only first draft. No creative writer finishes anything in one draft. Or two drafts. Or sometimes twenty drafts. He rewrites.

## PROBLEMS

Reread some of the pieces you have written in the last three or four months, and look at the words for their textures, their exactness, etc. There is no need for extended "exercises" in word usage. Let the need choose the word.

I suggest that as you read other authors, you keep an ear tuned to word use. See where other writers have succeeded—or not—in using the best words for their purposes.

## EXAMPLE

The character sketch below is a section from a short story, "Dry September," by William Faulkner.\* Read it carefully several times. Notice the use of certain key words such as *bright*, *haggard*, *furious*. Try to determine whether Faulkner has used his words with such deliberateness that the artifice is hidden (because inconspicuous artifice is usually a sign of skilled writing).

She was thirty-eight or thirty-nine. She lived in a small frame house with her invalid mother and a thin, sallow, unflagging aunt, where each morning, between ten and eleven, she would appear

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\* From William Faulkner, *These Thirteen*. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc. Copyright 1931 by William Faulkner.

on the porch in a lace-trimmed boudoir cap, to sit swinging in the porch swing until noon. After dinner she lay down for a while, until the afternoon began to cool. Then, in one of the three or four new voile dresses which she had each summer, she would go downtown to spend the afternoon in the stores with the other ladies, where they would handle the goods and haggle over prices in cold, immediate voices, without any intention of buying.

She was of comfortable people—not the best in Jefferson, but good people enough—and she was still on the slender side of ordinary-looking, with a bright, faintly haggard manner and dress. When she was young she had had a slender, nervous body and a sort of hard vivacity which had enabled her to ride for the time upon the crest of the town's social life as exemplified by the high-school party and church-social period of her contemporaries while still children enough to be un-classconscious.

She was the last to realize that she was losing ground; that those among whom she had been a little brighter and louder flame than any other were beginning to learn the pleasures of snobbery—male—and retaliation—female. That was when her face began to wear that bright, haggard look. She still carried it to parties on shadowy porticos and summer lawns, like a mask or a flag, with that bafflement and furious repudiation of truth in her eyes. One evening at a party she heard a boy and two girls, all schoolmates, talking. She never accepted another invitation.

She watched the girls with whom she had grown up as they married and got houses and children, but no man ever called on her steadily until the children of the other girls had been calling her "aunty" for several years, the while their mothers told them in bright voices about how popular Minnie had been as a girl. Then the town began to see her driving on Sunday afternoons with the cashier in the bank. He was a widower of about forty—a high-colored man, smelling always faintly of the barbershop or of whiskey. He owned the first automobile in town, a red runabout; Minnie had the first motoring bonnet and veil the town ever saw. Then the town began to say: "Poor Minnie!" "But she is old enough to take care of herself," others said. That was when she first asked

her schoolmates that the children call her "cousin" instead of "aunty."

It was twelve years now since she had been relegated into adultery by public opinion, and eight years since the cashier had gone to a Memphis bank, returning for one day each Christmas, which he spent at an annual bachelors' party in a hunting-club on the river. From behind their curtains the neighbors would see him pass, and during the across-the-street Christmas-day visiting they would tell her about him, about how well he looked, and how they heard that he was prospering in the city, watching with bright, secret eyes her haggard, bright face. Usually by that hour there would be the scent of whiskey on her breath. It was supplied her by a youth, a clerk at the soda fountain: "Sure; I buy it for the old gal. I reckon she's entitled to a little fun."

Her mother kept to her room altogether now; the gaunt aunt ran the house. Against that background Minnie's bright dresses, her idle and empty days, had a quality of furious unreality. She went out in the evenings only with women now, neighbors, to the moving pictures. Each afternoon she dressed in one of the new dresses and went down-town alone, where her young cousins were already strolling in the late afternoons with their delicate, silken heads and thin, awkward arms and conscious hips, clinging to one another or shrieking and giggling with paired boys in the soda-fountain when she passed and went along the serried stores, in the doors of which sitting and lounging men did not even follow her with their eyes any more.

## 10. *And Rewriting*

The main thing I try to do is write as clearly as I can. Because I have the greatest respect for the reader, and if he's going to the trouble of reading what I've written—I'm a slow reader myself and I guess most people are—why, the least I can do is make it as easy as possible for him to find out what I'm trying to say, trying to get at. I rewrite a good deal to make it clear.

— E. B. WHITE \*

ONE of the healthiest things a beginner writer can learn is that nothing he writes is sacred. The cheerful willingness to throw away five or ten pages, to cut paragraphs down to sentences, and to rework "finished" writing dozens of times, are signs that a beginning writer is beginning to learn his business. He begins to understand that writing is not a one-shot job, but a painstaking molding and shaping and kneading of material into a form. One measure of his growing skill at the craft is his ability to do the cutting, patching and rearranging of rewriting. "Get it right," is a good writer's motto.

Nearly all first drafts, even those of skilled writers, are verbose, awkward, and disconnected. Ideas have gaps in one place and overflow in another. Sentences and paragraphs are turgid and muddy. A first draft is like the slowly emerging shape of a statue from a block of stone.

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\* Reprinted from *Writers and Writing*, by Robert Van Gelder; used by permission of the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons.

The rough shape of the work may be plain. But there is still much chisel work and smoothing to be done.

The end of the first draft is a dangerous time. You have wrestled with your adversary, and you have thrown him. You feel relieved of a weight. Naturally. Getting through any hard job—and writing *is* hard—gives you the same kind of relief you might feel after carrying heavy suitcases for endless blocks and, finally, you put them down. It is at this point that you should be wise and put the piece of writing away. By all means, feel relieved. But don't mistake the relief for a sense of completion. Just don't touch the draft for three or four days—longer, if you can keep away from it. As most books on writing advise, "Let it cool off." Start another project. Get absorbed and heated up with some new ideas for a time.

After a decent interval, go back to your draft. Do your best to persuade yourself that you are going to read the thing as though it had been written by someone else. Then read the whole piece through without stopping. When you've finished, sit back and ask yourself these questions: What was the author trying to do? On his terms, was he successful? What effect does this thing have on me? Does it get anywhere? Does it say anything? It is *worth* saying? The chances are that your answers will be, "Well-yes-and-no"—something less than completely affirmative. Read it through again. After this second reading, if you think it fails utterly in every part, you might just as well throw it away and start over again. However, if there are glimmers, here and there, of merit and insight, maybe you can make it amount to something after all.

We'll suppose, for the moment, that it is a short story you have written—though these rewriting suggestions are useful no matter what the form of the piece. Now go through it a third time, pencil in hand, and mark the

passages where you think the story line is blurred or off the track. Try to figure out why. Do you need this anecdote? Is that bit of dialogue necessary? Should this action be expanded? Do you need another series of happenings toward the story's end to clarify the climax? Have you selected the *best* material for each incident?

The first step in rewriting is not fiddling and fussing with words. First, you secure and shape the general outline and basic content of the work. This is a matter of structure. Be old-fashioned about it. Make sure that your story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. See that your descriptions and happenings are relevant, necessary, probable and dramatic in relation to the over-all intent of your writing. This is not easy. You may have a special fondness for a passage that your good sense tells you isn't really needed. Suppose your story has three pages of fine, witty dialogue, bright with *bon mots* and really quite subtle in its reflection of people. But having read the story through three times, you know—honestly—that this passage doesn't add to the narrative or the characters; it's just a pleasant digression, though a rather clever one. That is the best possible sign that you should delete it—entirely.

The opposite is true of a passage which is too thin. Your story demands more material at this point or that, or more detail to clarify a motive or vivify an action. What details? What is needed? How much is needed? What is suitable to the characters? Now is the time to find this added material and build it into the inadequate scene until it shows your reader what he needs to be shown in order to understand it and be moved by it.

Now make your major deletions and repairs. Write drafts to fill the big gaps. Pull the thing together once more. Put it away for a while. Then read it through for the fourth time, giving all your attention to the structure.

Never mind the words or the awkward phrasing at this stage. You may have to repeat the process I have just outlined many times—how many times depends upon your subject, your skill at fixing the bad spots, and so on. When you are sure that you can neither take out or add another fact or incident or speech, then you have done the first big job. Your architecture is sound; the shape is clear. Now you can attend to the refinements.

While you are rewriting, keep in your mind the fundamental idea that all creative writing is designed to *affect*. Therefore, the first major refinement to think about is this: have you used *the most effective order* of events or facts? Do they build up naturally and inevitably to climaxes of action or persuasion? Suppose your main character in a story has to face a sudden tragedy—the death of a child or a husband. You have to show how the tragedy affects her. Perhaps she weeps—bitter heart-tearing weeping. When is it most effective to have her cry? During the tragedy? Right after it is over? Long after it is over? Which would be the more dramatic? Which would be most in character? Or, to use one more example, perhaps you are describing something like a tremendous series of noises or explosions. What is the best way to show the cumulative effect of the noise? Do your facts add up and build upon one another in the most vivid possible fashion, or is there a let-down in the middle of the description?

When you have shaped the main outlines of your writing and rearranged the materials in their most effective sequence, you have done the hardest part of rewriting. Now you can tinker with the details: smoothing sentences, sharpening images, and changing words. A good piece of writing usually should flow along smoothly, with the rhythms of the sentences moving in natural, unforced cadences. One reliable way to test for natural cadence is to

read aloud. If your phrasing is stilted or twisted, you will stumble in the reading. Mark the points where you hesitate or read haltingly so that you can come back later and smooth them out. Getting good cadence in your writing is largely a task of reshaping sentences so that they follow fluidly one after the other. Within each sentence, any one of several variations of phrases may be euphonious. The only way to satisfy yourself on this is to try the sentence various ways. The way that sounds most natural is likely to be the best one.

Rewriting sentences and single words is, when you get down to it, a matter of taste. When all the factors are brought into account—your reader, your subject, your intent—it is for you to decide whether to use a vigorous, racy slang word or a moderate, staid, ordinary one. The real test, as I said in Chapter 9, is naturalness. Whatever is easy and unforced I would guess was right for the purpose. If you use the apt and natural words of civilized speech, your writing will be distinguished to the degree that your mind is distinguished.

When you have done hacking, cutting, rewording, interlining, and repunctuating, your manuscript is—as it should be—a mess. You may have rewritten some portions of it five times or twenty times. Of your original draft perhaps only a few sentences are intact. (As you grow in experience, perhaps you will be able to write longer “clean” passages.) Pull all the pieces together and copy it for the last time. Put it away again for a few days. Then give it a final reading, make the minor changes you are sure to find, and consider the job done.

Yet, if you are a scrupulous craftsman—and I hope you are trying to be one—you will never think your writing is “done.” You will always want to make one more change, add a good phrase, change a word here and there. This is

as it should be. The writer who is too easily satisfied is apt to be a slovenly workman. You know the old definition of genius: "the capacity for taking infinite pains." It applies to writing as well as to painting, sculpture, cabinet making, or bricklaying; if you are willing to take pains, you are apt to do finer work.

But you must recognize, as all craftsmen do, that there is a point beyond which tinkering and adjusting will do more harm than good. It takes time to learn this. I don't know of any special ways for you to recognize when your work is finished, because it depends wholly upon your developed instincts and your sense of taste or fitness at the time you have produced the work. The more you write and compare your writing with the finished work of other writers whom you admire, the more sure your instinct for the "right time to stop" will become. Any good craftsman comes to know the top limit of his capacities. He is sure that he can be better than he is; but he senses that at his present level of skill and experience he has done the best he can.

You may feel that my description of rewriting exaggerates the complexity of the process, that it is really simpler than I have made it out to be. Not at all. It is harder—much harder—than I have begun to indicate in this short chapter. I can only repeat what I have said again and again: good creative writing is hard, complicated, subtle *labor*. It is nerve-racking, time-consuming, energy-burning *work*. Its practitioners are many. Its masters are few. Its satisfactions—sometimes—are profound.

## PROBLEMS

You can practice rewriting by trying to edit almost anything. It is excellent training—and good fun, too—to pick

passages from textbooks and rewrite them. (You'll find plenty to cut and change in textbooks. This one is no exception.) Even better than rewriting bits from textbooks is trying to redo passages from novels or short stories.

As a starter, here is a loosely written excerpt from a first draft of an unpublished short story. The experience is familiar, and you should be able to rewrite this into a tight, persuasive incident.

For mechanical convenience, I suggest that you copy this out, double or triple spaced, with wide margins so as to give yourself plenty of room to add and change.

The office was large, dingy, very Victorian, with a large old dusty mirror above the fireplace. A fireplace is an incongruous thing in a dentist's office. Beside the fireplace was a battered roll-top desk, its top littered with bills. In a bay window stood the dentist's chair. Hovering over it, darkly menacing, was a tree, whose trunk is a motor, whose branches are electric cords, and whose fruit is a variety of drills. It's a frightening nightmare tree. The floor is covered with linoleum in large black and white checks. Walking in, your feet grate a little upon it because you have picked up sand from the icy street below. The constant black and white pattern of the floor beats and throbs against your eyes like a frightened pulse.

The dentist has a twinkle in his eye. His glasses are steel-rimmed, and they reflect, repeat the twinkle. He has on a white coat. His hands are large and clean. And he has dazzling smiling teeth.

You get into the chair and he swathes you in a white sheet and tilts you back. Scrutiny. A small mirror moving around inside your cheeks. None here. A pause. A frown. Another instrument. It scratches, probes. A tiny finger of pain in your jaw. UH uh. He looks again. "I'm afraid you have a little cavity here, Joan."

"Will it take long, Doc?" Your stomach heaves a little with fright. You don't like dentists. You curse yourself for being so craven. "I have a luncheon engagement."

He looks again. "I can finish it by 11:30." Pause. More searching. "That is, if I don't find anything else." He turns abruptly to mix something in a little glass dish. The mood changes.

"The reason your teeth are good is because your father has always taught you to preserve them in alcohol." The twinkle again. "Have you still got the bottle of Charleston rum on the mantel?"

"Oh, Doc, we'd NEVER move that. It's traditional."

"Haven't had any good rum since your father died." He came closer again and tilted the chair some more. Another careful look. A flick of his foot turns on the drill. You shrink. His glasses are cold steel now. It is as if they were opaque. Intense. Reflecting nothing, revealing nothing. The drill probes. The noise of it fills your head, obscures everything else. Lapping out to the corners of the room. It hits the soft part with a penetrating pinpoint of pain.

"Gaw-amn-oooo!"

Only for a moment. The little sparkle again.

"You're just like your father. You two are a profane pair." Then again, intense, vibrating. He hurts. He knows he is hurting you. When it is over, he strokes your hair once, impulsively and hard. It is hard for him to have to hurt you. He smooths your hair once more, and then twinkles again.

"Wash out your mouth."

Then he turns and heats the wax for an impression.

## SUGGESTIONS

(a) Is this piece structurally sound?

Is the point of view consistent—or does it shift from objective to subjective without much reason? What will you do about it?

Is it wordy? Why?

Do you, as reader, need to know more about the scene than you do?

(b) Rewrite it, inserting your own experience where it is needed, but trying to keep the flavor (if there is any) of the original.

## 11. *Creative Imagination*

True, I talk of dreams;  
Which are the children of an idle brain,  
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
Which is as thin of substance as the air,  
And more inconstant than the wind . . .

—Mercutio, in *Romeo and Juliet*

**I**T IS not easy, nor will it be useful, to try to define creative imagination too closely. There are too many personal factors in the imaginative process to make such a definition either accurate or enlightening. But it may help you if we explore, in a more general fashion than before, the nature of creative imagination, and what is demanded of you if you want to stimulate and develop it.

Imaginative ideas are not “the children of an idle brain.” The creative imagination is not a quixotic turn of mind. It is not the private property of dreamers or romantics. To confuse imagination with the idle and speculative fancies of daydreaming is to say that it is merely a loose-minded pastime, vague, without mental and emotional nourishment, and faintly foolish. This would deny imagination to Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Cervantes, and the great company of artists, philosophers, and writers whose imaginative works have not only outdone reality but outlasted it. It takes some virility and substance to defeat the slow erosion of time. Is it an accident that works of real imagination outstay monuments, heroes, and systems? Or is it a hint that in the creative imagination there is something of the Absolute?

Though it is currently fashionable to think so, imagination is not the disguised expression of the subconscious. I suppose there are excellent psychological explanations of the nature of imagination. Certainly, memory, the marks of past experiences, inner tensions, and outer pressures have something to do with it. Yet to explain imagination by tracing the functioning of the id, super-ego, and repressive mechanisms of the individual mind is merely to blueprint the mechanical whirrings and clankings of the machinery without taking notice of much else. This may well be, in fact, the way our minds act in imagining. But there is more to it than mere process. If you define imagination as the expression of the subconscious you take away, it seems to me, all responsibility from the person doing the imagining. Imagination then would resemble a mental vomiting, involuntary and uncontrolled. This cannot be true, at least for the writer, because of all people he is responsible not only for what he says but for knowing precisely why he says it.

I prefer to think of imagination as reason set a-fire, reason expanded in power and depth, reason vaulting above the mundane and the flatly rational. Isn't it a primary characteristic of the great works of creative imagination that they are sweetly reasonable and mightily persuasive?

We need, here, a working definition of creative imagination, at least as it applies to the writer. You may not agree with this one, but, in any case, it is a positive statement for you to argue with or think about.

Imagination is the curiosity to ask *why* a thing is, the ability to understand *how* it got that way, and the capacity to *wonder reasonably* what it could be in other circumstances.

This is vague necessarily, since it covers vast ground. But let me put it another way, repeating in general what I have said elsewhere. Before you can do any fruitful imagining,

you have to *know* a great deal. But knowledge is not enough; you must *perceive relations* between the things you know. Then, at last, you must *project* your knowledge and perception of reality into pictures which are reasonable imitations of life.

This is the basic method of all creative literature: to represent reality by means of images, “. . . to hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” Every work of creative writing is a network of images. The main function we expect of it is that these pictures or images will be at least as vital and moving as the real life they represent.

But what is more useful for you, as a learning writer, is not a definition of creative imagination but an understanding of what is required of you to sustain it and keep it stirring and fully at work. If you believe, as I do, that creative imagination is a function of the reason, you will recognize that it is possible to manufacture “inspiration.” Inspiration is imaginative insight; and insight never comes without the preparatory spadework of hard and productive thinking. Therefore, you can create inspiration by pressing your mind to be incessantly curious. Curious about everything. Why this? Why that? Why this result from those causes? The key word is, *why*. No person or happening or object will stand unyielding against the intelligent onslaught of the word *why*. Relationships appear. Sources are uncovered. Motives are revealed. Probabilities are envisioned.

For example, a historian can record the fact that one hundred and twenty years, seven months, and five days ago a wagon train of pioneers, magnificently equipped, set out to cross the Sierras; and he can say only that the train utterly disappeared, without leaving so much as a bleached

skull or broken axle-tree to hint at its fate. The historian, by finding and recording the fact, has done his duty as a chronicler. He may draw a conclusion from the fact, but as a historian he is not justified in doing any more than this. No more facts—no more mention of this group of pioneers.

But the creative writer can't get away with this. He has to explain it. He needs to tell how and why it happened. His answer may not be true—he has no more facts than the historian—but it has to sound true. If the writer is curious enough about the fact (and his reader will be), his persistent questioning of it is likely to suggest a number of reasonable explanations *why* the pioneers disappeared. (Insistent curiosity about a fact like this one, for instance, involves not only thought but research: what were the Sierras like one hundred and twenty years ago? What about Indians? How well equipped were the pioneers? What leadership did they have? The basic requirement of insight, in short, is knowledge.)

Creative imagination can be deliberately courted by getting absorbed in the job of writing. You know that your enthusiasm for any work is usually greatest when you are most thoroughly immersed in it. This is especially true of writing. The self-stimulating aspect of regular hours of writing and the setting of a quota of such-and-such number of words per day is extremely important in nourishing and training the imagination. The old saying, "You are what you do," is not far wrong in the writer's case. When you are writing, you are a writer, no matter how fumbling or poor your work may be. If you assume an attitude seriously enough and often enough and intelligently enough, it is likely that the attitude will become a natural part of you.

At least, this is one way to build the habit of imaginative

thinking. If, day after day, you press yourself with restless curiosity to think in terms of images, pictures, probabilities, motives and drama, it would not be surprising, at last, that the stuff of writing began to flow through your mind with some effectiveness.

But, unfortunately, this is too clean a picture. It is my guess that creative imagination never "flows." It moves, yes, and in a pattern which you will come to recognize after awhile. But it does not "flow."

The way your material moves in your mind from reality to imaginative creation is a sequence which, though it differs in degree for each person, is probably similar for everyone. At least I will venture that certain clear steps in the imaginative process can be pinned down and described.

The first step, usually, is the vague perception of the outline of an idea. For a writer, this might be an idea for a story. You get an idea, say, for a long story about a queer old man named Gaffer Sykes whom you knew, vaguely, as an odd character in a tiny seacoast village near the place where, as a boy, you spent your summers. You recall that Gaffer claimed to have been once a sea captain—that he had sailed everywhere, had made and lost several fortunes. At last, he had retired to a cranky and indigent old age. When you knew of him, he was just a dirty, nasty-tempered old hermit, scoffed at by children and politely ignored by the townspeople. But when you got to know him, you found that his temper was only a pose, a rebellion against time and circumstance. And this was where your story idea first began to form.

The second step is a reorientation of your mind; around the general story idea begin to gather the observations and thoughts you made years ago and tucked away into memory. Associations multiply. You remember the smell of the

sun on seaweedy rocks, the nasal flatness of Gaffer's voice, the pearl-gray shingles of his weathered shack down in the cove, the brass sheen of the ancient sextant he used to fondle as he talked. You begin to build from these things the structure of your story. You try a first draft.

Here begins, often, the third stage of the sequence of creative imagination. The work bogs down. The material becomes stubborn, perverse, unmanageable. You're stuck. You enter the period of frustration.

This is a mild statement. It is mild compared to an author's plight when he has his main character in a dilemma that simply won't resolve itself reasonably; or when his research tells him that a certain sequence of events occurred, and he can't make any sense whatever of the sequence; or when every word he writes sounds false, tinny, pretentious, overblown, or vacuous. Yet this period of frustration, whether you like it or not (and you won't), is not only inevitable, it is necessary for the functioning of the creative imagination. It is the hot fire in which the dross is burnt out of the ore. It is that part of the writing process that is the most exhausting—and often the most profitable.

Because out of it, often enough to make it worth the trouble, come the pictures and the insights which are the true products of imagination. Yet the experience of frustration followed by the invariably hard struggle for insight into the solutions of imaginative problems is always a thing full of strain and even anguish. Many experienced writers have testified that the more they know about writing, the more labored and painful they find this part of the process.

At last, once the insights are thus strenuously arrived at, there is a period of doubt and evaluation of them. Are they true? Are they reasonable? Are they a natural de-

velopment of the material? Will they have a life of their own?

This, I think, is the method of creative imagination. I have made it sound complicated. It is. And you may reasonably ask: How does one know whether one *has* a creative imagination? There's a glib answer for that: If you have, you'll know it; if you don't have, you'll never know it. But that answer is neither fair nor wholly true. There are some signs, usually reliable, that your creative imagination not only exists but that it is working fully and deeply.

One of these signs is when you find yourself talking and thinking naturally about the people and situations you have created, as though they were as real as a next-door neighbor. You know your characters well enough to tell stories about them, just as though they had pasts and presents and futures like the rest of us. When you can chuckle over the possible mishaps that old Gaffer Sykes can get himself into between sunset and sunrise, you may be fairly sure that your imagination is functioning creatively. And when the shouts and cries, noises and smells of a fictional event come so strongly to your mind that you're not exactly sure, sometimes, where reality ends and fiction begins, then your imagination is at full tide.

Another sign, too subjective to be counted on, is your own heightened sense that the whole world vibrates and pulsates with vivid life, and that everything you see and feel is sharp and strong. Your own feelings delight you. And the thought that the life in you is also in other men gives you that compassion for people that is the only basis for understanding them.

Best sign of all of the vigor of your creative imagination is the feeling that you *must* write. That you are uncomfortable unless you do write. That you feel full, urgent with the need to make a good piece of writing. That what-

ever keeps you from writing, however seductive, is temporary and of no great account. If you feel this way, you are a writer, and you will write no matter what else necessity forces you to do.

### EXAMPLE

Writers rarely give us the chance to "look inside" to see the creative imagination at work. But here is a passage from a piece by Virginia Woolf\* which seems to me to be a remarkable portrayal of the creative reverie at work upon a mundane fact of life.

Perhaps it was in the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember that I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time. I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece.

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it. . . . If that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been

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\* From *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* by Virginia Woolf, copyright, 1944, by Harcourt, Brace and Co., Inc. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace and Co. and The Hogarth Press, Ltd.

made for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white-powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud, of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room. That is the sort of people they were—very interesting people, and I think of them so often, in such queer places, because one will never see them again, never know what happened next. They wanted to leave this house because they wanted to change their style of furniture, so he said, and he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.

But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by a nail after all; it's too big, too round for that. I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. Oh! dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity!

## 12. *Your Relation to Your Writing*

Having to say something is a very different matter from having something to say.

—JOHN DEWEY

**YOU** are the one who wants to write. I have taken it for granted all along that you are serious about it. Perhaps because of this, I have made the business of creative writing sound harder and more complicated than it is in practice. Well, I would rather have made it sound this way than have given you the easy and specious idea that with a few good formulas, plot graphs, and “tricks of the trade” you could be a writer. This would have been like telling you that you could play the piano like Rachmaninoff after ten easy lessons. In ten easy lessons you can learn enough to render Chopsticks with fidelity and some feeling. If Chopsticks is what you want, ten lessons are enough.

Neither am I deluded enough to think that this book—or any book—can teach you how to write. No matter if you have believed everything I have said, and if you have done every exercise adequately and even brilliantly, you still may not be a writer. What I have tried to do is to get you thinking about the writing process—thinking hard about it. If you want to write, you can’t avoid this. Get your mind whirling, said William James, and see what happens.

The writer is no special breed of man, due extra privilege and homage because of his talent. As Wordsworth said of the poet: "He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind. . . ." But this gives no writer an excuse to set himself apart from others; it rather impels him to immerse himself more deeply in the volitions and passions of life so that he may satisfy his impelling need—and the need of all men—to re-create life in order to understand it. If you, as a writer, begin to think of yourself as a cut above the cabinetmaker, the stonemason, and the architect, you shut yourself off from the sources of your craft. If you begin to preen yourself on being an "artist," then you are on your way to the bohemian preciousness which, except for the grace of God, will keep you from writing anything anyone will want to read.

Self-expression that springs from whim, vagary, and irrationality has no place in the creative process. Real creativeness is fundamentally truthful; it has its roots in honest perceptions and real knowledge, not the pretense of knowledge. And it is presented truthfully—that is, well-composed, free of spurious tricks and self-important elaborations.

Therefore, to be a creative writer you must have a mature interest in the work. Maturity underlies all creative effort. If you are thinking of writing in terms of its rewards—fat checks for stories, No. 1 spot on the best-seller list, fifty thousand dollars for a movie script, fame and adulation from an admiring public—then your attitude toward writing is immature. You may achieve the best-seller list, still feeling this way. You may even make a lot of money.

though most writers don't. But you probably won't have written anything worth much. Immaturity and real creative achievement never—I say this flatly—never go together.

This is not to urge you to shun commercial writing or to wrap yourself in the dignity of your art and create masterpieces in a garret. By all means try to write for money. There is nothing crass about wanting to be a writer and being paid for it. But the need for maturity still applies. No matter how trivial a piece of writing you do; no matter what kind of market you write for, whether it is pulp, slick, or highbrow, approach the job as though it were worth doing. You have to be mature enough to realize that for every two hundred thousand words you write, maybe five hundred will be remembered day after tomorrow. But if you write every piece as though it were worth writing, then you will be an honest commercial writer, probably a good one, and maybe even a great one. For example, I doubt whether even Shakespeare, except when he wrote the long poems and the sonnets, was conscious of posterity. He was writing, as best he knew how, to appeal to public taste and to move the emotions of the people who crowded the theaters to see his plays. Except for his incidental poetry, Shakespeare's work was almost wholly commercial; and even most of the incidental poetry was written for a patron, after the fashion of the day, in the hope of the few guineas the patron would be pleased to bestow. Being commercial did not hurt Shakespeare.

Indirectly, this is a comment on what the writer's attitude should be toward his readers. Obviously, it is Shakespeare's readers who have kept his work alive. We read Shakespeare—and he will be read long after we are gone—because the great core of his work, commercial though it was in motive, is well and honestly made, truthful to itself and to its material. Except in a few artificially inserted

scenes—especially in the early days—Shakespeare, the writer, did not talk down to his audience. His attitude was—it must have been—of an equal speaking to equals, of a craftsman who knew that “good theater” was legitimate but that false tricks, emotion-begging scenes, and cheaply sensational language were unfair. If you read Shakespeare through chronologically, you will see how his youthful, early work has many false tricks and self-conscious appeals to audience prejudice or applause. But when he reached artistic maturity, Shakespeare spoke as “a man speaking to men,” with none of the flummery and condescension of a superior talking to inferiors.

It is not likely that you will be a Shakespeare. Yet you will need to set standards of excellence for yourself that may seem impossible. If you want to be mediocre, that is your privilege; but I have never heard of a writer who either wanted to be mediocre or who liked to be considered so. Your standards are your own, after all. It is a further evidence of your mature approach to writing that you not only make your standards high enough to be worth working toward, you are cheerfully willing to discard, rewrite, change, reshape, and rethink writing that doesn't come close enough to these standards to satisfy you. Excellence cannot be compromised. A thing is either excellent or it is not. From time to time, there will be some things you will write which will be “good enough.” But you would be wise not to cultivate the “good enough” habit. The question to ask of any writing you do, whether it is a story for an adventure pulp magazine or a novel over which you have labored for two years, is this: *Of its kind, is this absolutely the best I can do?* If I had a choice between a fine, workmanlike adventure-pulp story and a vast, overdone, sloppy novel, I would take the pulp story without hesitation.

Excellence takes patience, and I suppose patience is the first evidence of maturity. The creative writer needs patience because excellence never comes easily. More often than not, the worth of a thing is in direct proportion to its difficulties. The get-results-quick attitude is no help to a writer. (I doubt if it is good for anyone else, either.) The impatient writer, who would rather rush through his novel and get it on the best-seller list than make sure it is a well-made novel, is not a writer. He is a huckster, purveying cheap merchandise for quick profit. He fills his book with characters who go rapidly to bed with one another, or who fling themselves wildly into unreasonable situations, because he knows that there is a guaranteed audience for this kind of stuff.

(Don't misunderstand me, I am not against sex; but I am against it as a device to sell books. If a writer wants to know how the subject of sex should be handled, let him read Chaucer. There is no objection to sex, violence, fraud, perversion, unnatural greed, grinding ambition, or sensational heresy, providing it is used by a writer as a natural, dramatic result of his material. Sensationalism, employed by impatient writers, is merely sensationalism. The sensational, worked inevitably into a piece of writing by a patient craftsman, can be the climactic greatness of real tragedy.)

This adds up to an impressive list of personal requirements. You'd think, to read this, that a writer has to embody most of the virtues and few of the vices that plague other men. It would be wrong to imply this. I am talking about the patience, humility, keenness, maturity, honesty, and scrupulousness of a craftsman *in relation to his craft*. Talking to you, as a would-be writer, I urge you to cultivate them in order to be a craftsman. What you are as a person is no one's business but your own. I would guess,

parenthetically, that a person who is honest enough with himself to be a good writer is likely, also, to be a fairly palatable fellow when you get to know him. (Apparently Shakespeare was. Yet Richard Wagner was insufferably selfish and willful, Marcel Proust was a snob, James Joyce was bitter, Christopher Marlowe was a brawler.) It is my belief—though I am aware of the many exceptions—that the creative imagination is most genially nourished in a healthy mind. Certainly, the vigor in most fine writing is not the hectic flush of fever but the full, strong pulse of strength. Creative writing—like any art—is the effort of intelligent, sensitive, perceptive, and articulate people to make sense out of life and express it in coherent form.

But this is moralizing. Do you want to write? Get at it, then, and everlastingly at it. There is deeper pleasure, I think, in creating and building than in anything else. Whatever the frustrations there are in writing; whatever the hard, solitary, mind-wracking hours at a writing desk cost you in the way of the pleasures of social life and the easy freedom of your friends; whatever else it may cost you, remember that no one is making you write—except yourself. And you will know, at last, as every creative writer knows, that the job is worth it.

## Reading List

THIS LIST does not pretend to be a complete reading program for writers. It merely suggests a handful of writings to be read as illustrations of the ways different authors handle their writing problems. The selections are emphatically not meant to serve as models for the "right" ways to solve particular writing problems. Though the readings are loosely grouped according to their relevance to specific chapters in this book, many of them will be useful as accompaniments to any of the chapters.

Reading lists usually reflect the tastes and enthusiasms of the person who compiles them. However, I have tried to select these readings for their *diversity* and their *excellence*. Represented here are novels, news reports, feature articles, histories, scientific and philosophical works, essays, and short stories. There is even a selection from a cookbook. All of these pieces, whatever their form or subject, are well written; of their kind they are good and often brilliant examples. There is enough variety here that you should find yourself stimulated to browse widely and intelligently on your own. The best reading comes from browsing, anyway—all a reading list can do is to get you started.

### CHAPTER 1

Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, William Sloane Associates, 1949.

Stephen Vincent Benét, "Spanish Bayonet," from *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Vol. 2, Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., pp. 113 ff.

- John Hersey, *Hiroshima*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1946.
- Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, Modern Library, pp. 2-12.
- John P. Marquand, *Point of No Return*, Little, Brown & Company, 1949, Chapter 2 and pp. 125-130.
- John Bartlow Martin, "The Strangest Place in Chicago," *Harper's Magazine*, No. 1207, December 1950.
- J. B. Priestley, *Delight*, Harper and Brothers, 1949, pp. 4, 7, 18, 21, 31, 37, 42, 56, 66, 95, 100, 103, 110, 127.
- Irma S. Rombauer, "Cakes," from *The Joy of Cooking*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943.

## CHAPTER 2

- Joseph Conrad, *Typhoon*, Chapters 10-22.
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Modern Library, Part One, Chapters 6 and 7.
- William Faulkner, "Dry September," from *These Thirteen*, by William Faulkner, Random House, Inc., 1931.
- Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, Oxford University Press, 1949, Chapter 8.
- Douglas Southall Freeman, "How to Accomplish the Impossible," Chapter 18 of *Lee's Lieutenants*, Vol. 2, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945.
- Ernest Hemingway, "After the Storm," and "A Day's Wait," from *Winner Take Nothing*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933.
- T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1935, Chapters 61-68.

## CHAPTER 3

- Katharine Brush, "Night Club," originally printed in *Harper's Magazine*, September 1927.
- Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, pp. 7-21.
- Douglas Southall Freeman, "A Night in the Wilderness," Chapter 33 of *Lee's Lieutenants*, Vol. 2, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945.

- John Galsworthy, "Indian Summer of a Forsyte," from *The Forsyte Saga*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- A. B. Guthrie, *The Way West*, William Sloane Associates, 1949, pp. 26-38.
- Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, Modern Library, pp. 6-8, 11-13, 196-198.
- Wallace Stegner, "Turtle at Home," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1943.
- Mark Twain, *Life On the Mississippi*, Harper & Brothers, 1950, Chapters 4 and 10.

## CHAPTER 4

- Sherwood Anderson, "The Strength of God," from *Winesburg, Ohio*, Modern Library.
- Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, Modern Library, pp. 17-27.
- Stephen Crane, "The Blue Hotel," from *Twenty Stories*, by Stephen Crane, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1926.
- John Galsworthy, "The Apple Tree," from *Five Tales*, by John Galsworthy, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918.
- D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, Modern Library, Chapter 8.
- George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1949, Part 3.
- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act II, Scenes 1 and 2.
- Thornton Wilder, "The Marquesa de Montmayor," from *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Albert and Charles Boni, 1927.

## CHAPTER 5

- Sherwood Anderson, "On Realism," from *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook*, Boni and Liveright, Inc., 1926.
- Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*, Harper's Modern Classics, Harper & Brothers, 1950, pp. 37-39.
- Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, Oxford University Press, 1949, Chapter 1.
- Ernest Hemingway, "Fifty Grand," from *The Collected Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Modern Library.

- Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay*, Modern Library, Chapter 1.  
 Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, Chapter 1.  
 Katherine Mansfield, "The Daughters of the Late Colonel,"  
 from *The Garden Party*, by Katherine Mansfield, Alfred A.  
 Knopf, Inc., 1922.  
 Guy de Maupassant, "The Diamond Necklace," from *Selected  
 Tales of Guy de Maupassant*, Random House, Inc., 1950.  
 Dorothy Parker, "Arrangement in Black and White," from  
*The Collected Stories of Dorothy Parker*, Modern Library.  
 William Shakespeare, *Richard III* and *King Henry the Fourth*,  
 Parts I and II.  
 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*.  
 Thornton Wilder, *The Ides of March*, Harper & Brothers, 1948.

## CHAPTER 6

- Stephen Vincent Benét, "Everybody Was Very Nice," from  
*Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Vol. 2, Farrar &  
 Rinehart, Inc.  
 Erskine Caldwell, "Saturday Afternoon" and "Kneel to the  
 Rising Sun," from *Jackpot*, *The Short Stories of Erskine  
 Caldwell*, Duell, Sloan & Pearce.  
 John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers*, Modern Library, Part 3.  
 Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Modern Library, Chapter 1.  
 James Joyce, "The Dead," from *Dubliners*, Modern Library.  
 Alan Paton, *Cry, The Beloved Country*, Charles Scribner's  
 Sons, 1948, Chapters 18-26.

## CHAPTER 7

- "The Book of Esther," from *The Holy Bible*, King James  
 version.  
 Stewart Chase, "The Luxury of Integrity," from *The Nemesis  
 of American Business*, The Macmillan Company, 1930.  
 Joseph Conrad, *Victory*, Modern Library, Chapters 4-8.  
 James Joyce, "Counterparts," from *Dubliners*, Modern Library.

- Franz Kafka, "First Interrogation," from *The Trial*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1937.
- T. E. Lawrence, "The Expedition against Akaba," Chapters 39-54 from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1935.
- Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal," from *Satires and Personal Writings*, Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Mark Twain, *Life On the Mississippi*, Harper & Brothers, 1950, Chapter 40.
- Virginia Woolf, "Time Passes," from *To the Lighthouse*, Modern Library.

## CHAPTER 8

- Sherwood Anderson, "Hands," from *Winesburg, Ohio*, Modern Library.
- "The Book of Ruth," from *The Holy Bible*, King James version.
- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913, Part 1.
- Will Cuppy, "A Short History of Man," from *How to Tell Your Friends from the Apes*, Liveright Publishing Corp.
- Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, Chapter 1.
- William Sansom, "The Long Sheet," from *Fireman Flower and Other Stories*, Vanguard Press, Inc.

## CHAPTER 9

- Gelett Burgess, "Short Words Are Words of Might," from *Essays for Our Time*, Bader and Wells (eds.), Harper & Brothers, 1947.
- James Gould Cozzens, *The Just and the Unjust*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1942, Chapter 8, pp. 389-434.
- O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, Harper & Brothers, 1929, Book I, Chapter 2.
- Samuel T. Williamson, "How to Write Like a Social Scientist," from *The Saturday Review of Literature*, October 4, 1947.

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Modern Library, Part VIII.

## CHAPTER 10

Rudolf Arnheim, *et al.*, *Poets at Work*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1948.

Kenneth Roberts, *I Wanted to Write*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1949.

## CHAPTER 11

Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1946, Introduction II and Chapter 5.

Ernest Dimnet, *The Art of Thinking*, Simon and Schuster, 1928.

Don Marquis, *The Lives and Times of Archy and Mehitabel*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1950.

Jonathan Swift, "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms," from *Gulliver's Travels*, Oxford University Press, 1933.

## CHAPTER 12

Helen Hull, ed., *The Writer's Book*, Harper & Brothers, 1950.

W. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*, Doubleday and Co., Inc.

Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," from *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Random House, Inc., 1946.

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