Law & Storytelling

Discussion Tips

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How To Talk About Storytelling

By Richard Dooling

Here, I'll collect tips for studying and discussing the works we read. These include our discoveries during our gatherings, so if something is missing, and you'd like to add a short paragraph, please send it to me. Also, storytelling, especially for us, is accomplished by WRITING.

Aristotle said, "Excellence is a habit. We are what we do." Excellent readers and writers get that way by *doing* lots of reading and writing, our two main jobs in this course.

Our class-time together is to touch base and share the fruits of our adventures in reading and writing. The rest of the time we read and write.

To that end, several legendary authors have crafted rules for great writing and storytelling. I've collected some of my favorites in a separate file, Tips_From_Writers.

And at bottom I've included some of my favorite writing and storytelling resources, websites and books.

Class Discussions

As above, most of our work is reading, writing, and thinking. For a mere two hours a week we gather and share insights and observations. So you should come prepared to talk about the story using some of the principles and techniques we've discovered in class and in our readings.

The Action-Idea

As Michael Tierno wrote in *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*, great storytellers create a single unified action as a "through line," which becomes the story's subject. Then a hero takes the lead in that action, which has a "oneness" and connectivity so clear that Aristotle compares it to a statue.

Is that what happened in the story under discussion? Or did the work try too many things at once? Or maybe the *wrong* character ended up leading the action?

Consider the overall vision of the story? Is it worthy of our time and attention?

> A simple plot expressed as an ACTION-IDEA will galvanize your screenwriting, the way imagining your finished tree house will inspire you as you saw and chop wood. It's been said that the "whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Aristotle would agree, but he would remind us that "the whole is always in each of the parts."

Plot versus Story

Recall our opening salvo from Mr. King:

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Story is honorable and trustworthy;
plot is shifty, and best kept under house arrest.
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King elaborated on this notion in a different interview, when he said, "Forget plot, but remember the importance of 'situation' ":

> I won't try to convince you that I've never plotted any more than I'd try to convince you that I've never told a lie, but I do both as infrequently as possible. I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions

> and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible.
>
> A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot. The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question:
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> - What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (Salem's Lot).
> - What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog? (Cujo).

See if you can identify portions of the story where plot got the upper hand.

Billy Wilder expressed the same fondness for *situations* when he observed:

> An actor entering through the door, you've got nothing. But if he enters through the window, you've got a situation.

Both King and Wilder seem to believe that the proper situation—could we substitute "set-up" or first act—will create a story that just about tells itself.

Characters

First, the Hero. As we learned, Aristotle believed dramatists must depict not merely life but the moral life of a hero. A good story concerns the hero's moral conflict that developed during the story's middle (second act).

For example, if we are discussing *Presumed Innocent*, ask what would Aristotle or Michael Tierno, author of *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets From the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization*, would say about Turow's creation Rusty Sabitch?

Show Don't Tell

Advice so common it's now a cliché second only to "write what you know," but an apprentice to the art of storytelling must know the difference between showing and telling, between plot and story, and between active and passive voice.

"You don't write about the horrors of war. No. You write about a kid's burnt socks lying in the road," says novelist-screenwriter Richard Price. "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass," says Anton Chekhov.

Or as the great Hollywood writer-director Billy Wilder put it in his advice to screenwriters: "Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever."

Or as Tierno, the screenwriter, advises: "A plot's power and emotional impact can't grow merely because a character talks about what's going on in the story." Or as dramatist and screenwriter, David Mamet, puts it, "Any time two characters are talking about a third, the scene is a crock of shit."

Beginnings and Endings

Of acts, of scenes, of the story. Did the story begin at the right place? If it starts too early then we must wait too long for the good parts. If it starts too late then we might get too much backstory, flashback or voice-over, which distract or divert us from the seamless moving story we crave.

These movie terms have near equivalents in the world of prose, but small doses of these indirections (e.g. flashbacks) go a long way.

Building a story is a relentless series of beginnings and endings. Some filmmakers contend that every scene is a mini movie, with three acts. And story structure means arranging about forty of these three-minute mini movies into one satisfying 120 minute feature film.

As for crafting individual scenes in books or movies, sometimes it pays to startle the reader or the audience by coming into a scene long after it began, in effect skipping way ahead without warning.

Recall the original *Hangover,* especially the morning after scene. We suddenly wake up in a trashed hotel room surrounded by fallout from epic debauchery: A chicken. Broken furniture, screens and mirrors. A tiger in the bathroom. A dentist who can't remember having his tooth pulled. Bodies strewn everywhere. Watch it here..

We are mortified and intrigued. We want to know how all this all happened. We become co-creators of the world created by the storytellers, in this case, the filmmakers. The storytellers collected and arranged the images, sounds, and words, all of which act on us like a stimulus, a Rorsarch Inkblot if you will, that triggers an emotional response in us.

Do The Pieces Fit?

Aristotle tells us that the story should be so tight that if you took away any one incident, the whole would literally collapse.

Though talking about sentences themselves at the time, William Strunk's advice about writing in general echoes this advice:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that

a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

From The Elements of Style: Free 1918 Version has many revisions, most recently The Elements of Style, Fourth Edition 4th Edition (1999).