

Unit: Fiction, The Literary Story
Assignment 10 — Revenge

Assignment:

In *Writing Fiction* Janet Burroway offers various pieces of advice on choosing a subject and beginning a story. In the process she suggests one can begin by engaging with various standard motifs (the dilemma, the incongruity, the connection, the memory, the transplant and the revenge (11-12)). In this assignment I would like you to try writing a revenge story. Also I urge you to test out Burroway's advice by trying to write your first draft in one sitting. Likewise, don't worry if you are not totally satisfied and do not be disheartened even if you think it is "shitty" — that's what revision is for.

Suggestions for pre-writing:

Of course, you are free to try one of the other motifs or make up your own idea if you would rather, but I have asked you to write on the topic of revenge because I think it fits in well with the issues that Burroway and Didion raise for beginning writers in the rest of their chapter. That is, the revenge narrative seems to authorize us to write in spite of a certain amount of innate fear of conflict, fear of impropriety, fear of injustice and fear of evil. In a story of revenge, Burroway tells us that an injustice is righted through the narrative. The guilty are punished. This permits us to work with a sense of conflict and resolution as well as beginning, middle and end without feeling as though the wrong-doing or evil of the world has simply been glorified or tacitly approved in our story. By choosing the motif of revenge, you can focus right away on an action which will become your climax, while at the same time practicing your ability to incorporate back-story (the original 'crime') without disrupting the flow of your primary story too much.

Other suggestions:

Burroway recommends looking in the newspaper for inexplicable acts of human nature about which you can build your stories of revenge. However, I would also point out, that you do not need to pick an earth-shatteringly evil moment in human history. You can also think of something extremely small, mundane or petty. What would you do if your little sister/brother, despite having already eaten and despite that you asked them not to, ate the last Pop Tart before you got downstairs for breakfast?!

Follow up for class discussion:

Consider the "know thyself" aspect of writing as discovery. Are you the type of person, like Joan Didion, who finds out what their story is about only after writing/thinking through the details that obsess them? Or are you someone like Burroway who can begin with a more standard premise and allow your individuality to take over once the writing gets going? Or are you completely different?

English 233

Unit: Fiction, The Genre Short: Science Fiction

Assignment 11 — World Building

Assignment:

Write a scene that presents the setting of a new and imaginary science fiction environment by showing a character in interaction with his/her surroundings. What are physical laws of this place? Where is it located? What is it called? What does the natural environment look like? What earthly (and thus familiar) time period is it most associated with? What is the technology like? What is the system of social order or government or hierarchy? Lastly, what is your character's problem in this space/place?

Context for pre-writing:

Science fiction and fantasy attempts to create probable otherness—that is, places, characters and circumstances that are not real in any present sense, but imaginable in which the writer's reliance science or reason attempts to bridge the gap between what is presently known and what is as yet unknown. This week we have been talking about the boundaries between biological life and artificial life. Computers, robots, avatars, spam-bots, reality TV, even Disneyland have all come into the discussion as forces that challenge our conception of what is natural. The stories that we will read in this genre often create their conflict by causing a tension between the natural and the unnatural, the human and the inhuman, the present and the future. In the process, the story highlights the difference and similarity between the two domains. To do this, science fiction writers first engage in what is frequently called 'world building'. They create a place and time that is imaginary and thus capable of containing all these disparate elements of story in one place.

Other Suggestions:

You might check out the internet sites for *Scientific American*, or *Nature*— two very readable science publications that discuss the very latest issues in science and technology and inspire the way to ward realistic conceptions of the future. Likewise, you might imagine an current social problem and try to exaggerate/extrapolate it into the future via allegory in the manner of a satire. Alternatively, you might challenge your imagination to come up with something completely new by combining two familiar ideas or places into one new one.

Follow up for class discussion:

Take note of any ideas you come up with for creating your worlds so that in our next meeting we can discuss the process of moving from the known to the imaginary.