

Story Analysis Instructions

Every story analysis asks: how does the writer accomplish his or her deepest intentions in the story in question? While the deepest intentions of the story may be up for debate, as a careful and critical reader you should practice your ability to discern what a story is up to, why it was written, what it offers its audiences. Once you have some ideas about what the story accomplishes, the task of your written analysis is to bring these observations purpose together with a close-reading of the rhetorical choices made by the writer. The writing that you produce should help you and your readers think through the ways in which the story succeeds (or falls short) in conveying its central feeling or purpose, as you understand it.

In your story analyses, you are free to argue any point you wish, as long as you substantiate your assertions with textual proof. The basic form that you would use in an English paper (observation, assertion, evidence, analysis, and interpretation) should still hold. In this case, your work will be to connect the themes, ideas, or emotions of the story to the craft (diction, tone, syntax and form) which the author uses to produce them. In general, you should use the chapters we have read in Burroway as a guide in your discussion of craft. In that way the story analyses will allow you space to test and explore the concepts that our textbook advocates through the lens of a finished piece of writing.

Ultimately the goal is for this reading and writing to build your knowledge and experience and facilitate your ability to recognize and improve on your own points of craft.

For your first story analysis select either the Dybek or Chaon story and explore how these writers work with one or more of the craft points that Burroway has raised in the first two chapters of her book.

Story analyses should be between one and two double-spaced typed pages. They are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned.

Medvecky
English 234

Writing Exercise 5: Encountering the Mysterious

Overview

We have been talking a lot in class lately about the role of ‘mysteriousness’ in a short story. The mystery can be physical and concrete, like the illness in “Fiesta 1980”; it can be behavioral, like the lost intimacy in “We Didn’t” or the editorial obsession in “Bullet to the Brain”; it can also be down right ephemeral like the father’s tears in “Mule Killers”. Anyway you spin it, your point of view character has to encounter something unexplainable and provocative at first.

Assignment Part 1

Write a scene where you dramatize the point of view character’s encounter with Mystery. The scene should show the effect of the mysterious action on this character as they first encounter it and if appropriate on any other characters who encounter it as well.

Assignment Part 2

Take some time to brainstorm the Mystery in prose. What might it be? Is it a literal mystery or a question of human character? Can you think of a resolution? What might the point of view character discover that will dispel her/ his estrangement?

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Writing Exercise 6: Imagining the Dramatic

Overview

The beating heart of a good short story is usually its dramatic action. Many short stories have only one big moment of action, but where that action is placed can really influence the shape of the story. In “Love and Hydrogen” all the tension builds toward the explosion of the Hindenburg at the end. In “Bullet to the Brain” the gunshot happens in the middle and allows the story to reveal a new aspect of its character. In “We Didn’t” the dramatic action is actually an *in-action* and it appears at the very beginning, while the rest of the story operates to explain the (lack of) eventfulness where action was expected.

Assignment Part 1

Conceiving of dramatic action can be difficult, because often such events challenge our sense of the ‘real’ or plausible. This challenge to nature is in part what gives the event its dramatic quality. Try to sketch a scene in which an unexpected dramatic action occurs with your main character as the instigator do-er of the action. [In this model, Tobias Wolff’s book critic is the one who fires the gun].

Assignment Part 2

Now try that same basic scene again, but this time re-tell the events in such a way as to make your character the recipient or victim of a dramatic event or action. This may require you to think of a different event. [In this model, Tobias Wolff’s bank robbers fire the gun].