

The Psychological Effect

By
Lawrence Buentello

In every work of fiction the protagonist—or, in longer works, the protagonists—must experience a *psychological effect*.

In fiction, this translates into the quality of the response experienced by the protagonist when confronting the dimensions of his or her problem or dilemma and the psychological ramifications of that confrontation. Too often in serious fiction the protagonist suffers little psychological distress when confronted by the severe implications of the problem or dilemma which he or she is experiencing. Conflict merely implies a confrontation between forces; in most commercial fiction the psychological ramifications of such conflict tend not to touch the depth of human of motivation that we all possess, and leave the protagonist minimally psychologically changed (if psychologically changed at all). But it is this psychological change (and the experiences of the protagonist as this change is taking place) that speaks to the human condition, and creates an added dimension to the often merely mathematical scenario created by the writer.

When a character in a story experiences conflict he or she is actually experiencing a *threat* to their well-being. We can define 'well-being' fairly broadly, as it may include the immediate physical safety of the character, a significant assault on the character's self-concept, or a disruption or discontinuation of the entire substance of his or her concept of life (in physical or psychological terms). Overt representations of this paradigm are easily described: a character is confronted by another character that is aiming a gun directly at his head. In this case, the psychological response is immediate and fairly predictable: will the assailant fire the gun? And is there some way to escape the situation? The emotional response is also fairly predictable: fear, panic, and terror. But when these are combined with a specific character's personal psychology the fictional conflict can take on other dimensions. For instance, in hard-boiled detective stories the threatened character may not react in terror to the situation (as unrealistic as that sounds) but may, in fact, react heroically and seek to disarm the assailant at the first opportunity. This is a simple way of illustrating how a character's personality dictates his or her response to the particulars of his or her problem or dilemma.

In the gentle art of writing fiction the writer's task becomes much more demanding when determining how a complex and realistically

human character will respond to complex problems or dilemmas. In this case I am speaking of serious literary fiction rather than commercial fiction because of the unfortunate tendency of commercial fiction writers to depend on shallow intellectual and emotional responses to the problems they encounter. It is even more unfortunate that that tack need not be followed in those cases, and an ultimate tragedy that these hoary tricks are offered to studious writers in various 'how-to' books on writing as the best means available for writing fiction. Such programmed approaches to writing destroy art and encourage mediocrity. Though, to be fair, much so-called 'literary' fiction continues to glorify intellectual navel-lint as meaningful subject matter for exploration and abandons truly human issues for academic nonsense.

The glory of fiction writing is that innumerable configurations exist for the exploration of the human psyche confronted by human and inhuman conflict—but the demand of realistic fiction writing requires that the writer carefully assess those configurations in order that he or she may assign a truthful quality to the experience of his or her characters.

In the best fiction the psychological effect is a perfect collision of a character's psychology with his or her problem or dilemma. And the psychological effect is the most truthful consequence of that character's reactions to the trial that he or she is experiencing.

For instance, if the protagonist of a story has an elevated estimation of herself—like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*—every problem that she encounters will be approached from the viewpoint of this self-concept. The psychological changes will occur because of this collision of self-concept with continuing problems and dilemmas. Scarlett's personality directs and guides her decisions in confronting her problems, but the psychological experience also changes her self-concept when she assesses the ramifications of the outcomes of her engagement with these problems. Her assessment and confrontation of her problems changes as her self-concept slowly changes over the course of the story. This is the process of character for all good works of fiction.

A character's self-concept is simply the character's belief in who and what they are in physical, intellectual, and psychological terms. We all possess a self-concept that may or may not be accurate—much of our psychology is unconscious in nature, and how we react to our own problems depends on that unconscious psychology. The writer is fortunate enough to be able to construct his or her characters' psychologies in overt terms; the subtlety lies in the writer's ability to separate a character's conscious perception of his or her own psychology with that character's true or unconscious psychology. This is a different level of writing altogether and proceeds by degree.

Whereas the novelist has a greater opportunity to expand and explore a character's psychology, the short story writer must do so within the word restrictions of the form. The method may be somewhat attenuated—for instance, in a novel a character may encounter several major problems that test his or her self-concept. But in a short story the focus is much more intense, and it is generally only one major problem that the character is confronting, and the writer therefore has only one opportunity to expose that character's psychology within the story. The exposure of that psychology takes place significantly within the story's *psychological effect*. How the character reflects on his or her situation and reacts to it determines the depth of that character's self-concept and

psychology. And the writer must not be shy about plumbing the psychological depths of his or her own mind in finding these reactions. Fiction is most surprising and effective when the cumulative qualities of a given psychology produce a given reaction to circumstances confronting that psychology: that reaction is what most truthfully describes it. And so in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the character of Marlowe is forever changed from that of a man in search of self-attainment to a man made painfully aware of the depth of human savagery when trying to solve the problem of Kurtz's presence in the Congo; simply because the only psychology he can compare to Kurtz's monstrousness is his own.

This is not a difficult aspect of the craft, nor should it be; it is simply writing truthfully about the human condition, and avoiding the shallow inanities of programmed writing. The *psychological effect* is the only means by which a writer can expose the human condition in any depth.