

## Building Worlds through Evocation

One of the most revered figures of speech in the teaching and critiquing of creative writing is: Show, don't tell. But what exactly does this mean? When teachers of creative writing invoke it, they often mean that a scene or story was under-dramatized or that the writing presented vague generalities. For example, a writer might tell us something that is generally true about a character without fixing that trait or action in a specific moment or situation.

In this session, we'll see how showing can make your writing more immediate, vivid, detailed, and \*visceral. We'll see how it invites readers to identify with your characters and participate in the story, if only in their imaginations.

### Telling versus Showing

Let's consider two versions of a scene, one that gets the facts across and one that puts the reader in the scene with the characters. Here's the first version:

I was driving home from work this afternoon when some jerk came out of a side street and cut right in front of me. I was angry about something my boss had said that afternoon, so instead of just letting it go, I blew my horn and tailgated the guy for half a mile. He pulled over, and we nearly got into a fight.

Now let's look at an excerpt from what a fiction writer might do with this same scene:

Naturally, as I was just about to cross the river, a guy in a Jeep Cherokee with enormous tires shot out right in front of me and cut me off. Worse yet, he was a young guy, with big redneck sideburns and a feed cap, and when I honked my horn, he gave me the finger and a big nasty grin. Worst of all, he had out-of-state plates and an NRA bumper sticker, and all of these, along with my rage at my boss, made me erupt.

- Note that the outline of the two versions is the same, but the second version has much more detail. Instead of “a guy shot out in front of me,” it's a young guy with sideburns and a baseball cap. He not only cuts the narrator off, but he enjoyed it. It's the same story, but the second version contains many more details about the two characters and the setting. The reader is much closer to being in the mind of the narrator.
- When creative writing critics say, “Show, don't tell,” they mean: Give us more detail, make it dramatic, and put the reader in the scene.
  - Writing fiction by showing means bypassing the logical, analytical mind and going for the gut, engaging the readers' senses, not just their minds. More important, you're engaging the readers' imaginations and allowing them to fill in the gaps by drawing on their own experience.
  - What you're doing is evoking the experience for the reader. The idea of evocation is at the heart of good fiction; it's the thing that allows a fictional story and imaginary characters to wedge themselves indelibly in the minds of readers.

### Defining *Evocation*

- The variants of the word *evoke* come from the Latin *evocare*, which means “to call out” in several different senses: to summon the spirits of the dead, to call forth a deity, or simply to summon another person. In English, when talking specifically about art and literature, the dictionary definition of *evocative* is “tending by artistic imaginative means to *re-create* ... especially in such a manner as to produce a compelling impression of reality.”

- In English, *evoke*, *evocative*, and *evocation* can also mean “calling out or calling forth,” “summoning a spirit by incantation,” “calling up an emotional response,” or “calling up memories, recollections, or associations.” All these meanings apply when it comes to writing fiction because all these definitions have in common the idea of drawing something out of a reader's imagination, not just putting something into it.
- When you tell readers something, you appeal mainly to the rational, analytical mind, not to the senses. But when you show readers something, you draw out something that is already present in their memories or imaginings, even if they don't know it. In other words, when you tell readers something, you make them a witness, when you show them something, you make them a participant.
- Evocation is both a subtle and a powerful technique. It entails both the writer and the reader using their imaginations.
  - As writers you call forth scenes from your imagination in enough detail that readers, without really thinking about it, use their own imaginations and memories to fill in the gaps. In the process, memories, emotions, and sensory impressions are evoked.
  - One of the benefits of evocation is that even though readers are doing half the work, they don't realize it, and they actually enjoy the experience. The feeling of being in the scene with the characters is one of the great pleasures of reading fiction.
    - It's been said that reading fiction allows us to feel strong emotions “without paying for them.” This is what evocation is all about. When you get the reader to laugh, you're evoking merriment; when you get the reader to shudder and turn on all the lights, you're evoking fear.

### The Balance of Detail and Economy

Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* is one of the best horror novels ever written. Here's a passage from it in which King evokes the arrival of spring in New England:

“By mid-May, the sun rises out of the morning's haze with authority and potency, and standing on your top step at seven in the morning with your dinner bucket in your hand, you know that the dew will be melted off the grass by eight and that the dust on the back roads will hang depthless and still in the hot air for five minutes after a car's passage; and that by one in the afternoon it will be up to ninety-five on the third floor of the mill and the sweat will roll off your arms like oil and stick your shirt to your back in a widening patch and it might as well be July.” (pp. 192-193)

This passage is an excellent example of how evocation works because it gives us a nice balance between detail and economy. Evocative writing provides significant detail, but it doesn't overwhelm the reader. The point is to draw something out of your readers, which you can't do if you pour too much in.

- This is a tricky balance to get right, inexperienced writers often have the most difficulty. One common error among young writers is not providing enough detail, another error is to overcompensate by telling too much.
  - Often, inexperienced writers will go on for several paragraphs about the appearance of a character or a place when a few well-chosen sentences or words would have done just as well.

### What are the right details to include?

One answer is to include too much detail in your early drafts. Write much more than you need, then pare it back later.

You can also ask yourself some questions about the details you provide:

- Does this detail tell something that the reader didn't already know?
- Does it advance the story?

- Does it say something about the character relative to this scene?

Think about whether your details are concrete and appeal directly to the senses. Don't just write, "He was in love with her"; instead, write, "He felt his face get hot when she came into the room."

Another issue to consider in making a passage evocative is the language itself. There are no rules in creative writing, but on the whole, evocation works best when you use active, specific (strong) verbs and avoid adverbs unless they're absolutely necessary.

- Inexperienced writers often write "She hurried quickly across the room" or "He pounded the table angrily." In these examples, the adverbs are unnecessary; it's clear from the verbs that she's moving quickly or that he is angry.
- In most cases, use the strongest verbs you can think of. "It was raining" is not as evocative as "The rain hammered the roof and splattered the windows like buckshot." Instead of starting with the bland pronoun *it* and the even blander verb *was*, the second sentence makes the rain itself the subject; the strong verb *hammered* evokes not only an image but a sound and renders any adverbs superfluous.

### Telling, Not Showing

- Despite the importance of evocation in fiction, it's also sometimes preferable to tell a story rather than to show it. Many of the great books of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries used telling as their default mode.
- In most conventional narratives, where much of the story is shown or evoked, there are also long passages in which the writer or narrator simply addresses the readers, telling them what they need to know. Just as a composer might vary the tempo of a piece of music, the fiction writer should provide variety among intensely evocative scenes, passages of pure exposition, and scenes that combine the two.
- In science fiction and fantasy, for example, there is often a passage or even an entire chapter early in the narrative known as the *info dump*, whereby the author takes a few pages to simply explain the world of the story before the action starts. Many fine literary novels and dramatic popular novels also have passages in which the author simply tells readers about the action or the characters.

### Suggested Reading

Burroway, *Writing Fiction*. Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*.

\*A major portion of this paper was produced from notes from a "Great Courses" lecture on building fictional worlds, with other bits from "Stein on Writing" by Spl Stein