

Narrative linguistic analysis: A writer's workshop for your life

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Which characters are writing your story? It is a strange question to ask yourself, but it is a serious one nonetheless and the severity of its impact is only justified by its uniqueness. Herman Melville never asked, “What’s Ahab’s problem?” Miguel de Cervantes never wondered about Don Quixote’s proclivity for windmill jousting. And Martin Handford could always find Waldo. And yet, you might ask “What’s the problem with my boss?” You might wonder why your spouse keeps repeating that pet peeve despite your protests. And you might not know where you are going in life. The common thread here is stories. Whether consciously or – more often, unconsciously – we tell ourselves stories that both reflect the way we see the world and simultaneously guide our journey through it. They are important evolutionary tools that help us to make sense of our experiences. However, we casually and commonly see ourselves as the protagonists of our stories when, in fact, we are also – and more importantly – the authors of them. The problem is not with the antagonist (your boss), the sidekick (your spouse), or the plotline (your life); the problem is bad writing.

Words, commonly taken for granted, hold power. Even single, subtle words can reveal more than we realize. In Graham Greene’s short story, “The Destroyers,” a gang of boys is considering their next neighborhood vandalization when one of the newer members says he’d recently been inside the house at the edge of the parking lot they congregated in. When asked why he had gone inside for a tour by the owner, the boy said almost unconsciously, “It’s a beautiful house” (10). The head of the gang, Blackie, became concerned. “It was the word ‘beautiful’ that worried him – that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent” (10). By being tuned in to language, the head of the gang started to become aware that something was off, an unpredictable change was coming, and he had reason to put up his guard when it came to the plan the boy was going to propose. Language can reveal not only how we truly feel as well as direct our future behavior.

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Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years and for good reason. “Because knowledge only exists as an act of memory (there is no library outside of people’s recall), oral societies use language, speech and stories to aid recall...” according to Julie Allan, Gerard Fairtlough, and Barbara Heinzen in *The Power of Tale*. “Because sound vanishes, one cannot go back to check what has been heard. Instead, the checking takes place in the repetition of the idea or fact” (206). Storytelling is an innate and unavoidable aspect of humanity and the better we understand not only how we use it, but how it affects us, the better we can write our own futures.

To further this relationship between memory and narrative, past and future, Will Storr, in his book, *The Science of Storytelling*, writes, “For the psychologists Professors Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, the most important memory distortions ‘by far’ are the ones that serve to ‘justify and explain our own lives’.” Storr continues, “We spend years ‘telling our story, shaping it into a life narrative that is complete with heroes and villains, an account of how we came to be the way we are.’ By this process, memory becomes, ‘a major source of self-justification, one the story-teller relies on to excuse mistakes and failings’” (93-94). Our narratives are defensive mechanisms as much as they are machinations of identity. They project to the world who we want people to see us as and they protect us from alternative narratives that may not align with or disrupt the ones we’ve already constructed.

In Jonathan Gottschall’s book, *The Storytelling Animal*, he explains the connection between story and life. “A life story is a ‘personal myth’ about who we are deep down – where we come from, how we got this way, and what it all means,” Gottschall writes. “Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings” (161). And comprehending literary analysis makes us better at introspectively examining our life stories. For example, the subtle nuance between denotation and connotation can mean the difference between a new relationship or a catastrophic argument; the tone you use can speak volumes where your words fail; the way you develop the characters in your life influences how they impact the plot; and most importantly, the choices you make as the author determine all of this.

A good example of seeing ourselves as in our own stories is simply asking yourself two questions: 1) What do you want? 2) What do you *really* want? Regardless of the situation, this is nearly always applicable. You want a promotion; what you *really*

want is to be more respected by your peers. Dr. David Drake, in his groundbreaking and definitive book on narrative coaching, writes that, “protagonists often discover in the end what they first sought was only a proxy for what they truly desired and what they sought outside themselves was within them all along” (139). Now, consider the books you’ve read. Think about the journeys the characters have been on. Stories mimic our lives because their purpose, in part, is to make sense of them. It stands to reason that, vice versa, we can study our lives as stories in order to intentionally live them.

And everyone has a story. The complication is that we are not only the author, but also the protagonist, which certainly clouds our clarity when examining our lives. But even Aristotle hinted at this delicate balance when, in his *Poetics*, he wrote, “...the poet should act out his own play to the best of his power, with the gestures that go with it...” (437). And yet, we are far more comfortable as actors rather than as playwrights. Despite our yearning to be in control of our lives, there is a simplicity – as well as an avoidance of responsibility – in being the victim of circumstance: “a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage” as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* says.

However, the stories we play a part in – and write – are never as objective as we believe they are. We are rarely the protagonists we claim to be; the antagonists are always more complicated than we give them credit for; and the plot is less a one-directional road and more like a fraying thread composed of numerous independent strings. In *Storytelling in Organizations*, Yiannis Gabriel writes, “Poetic license is every storyteller’s prerogative – the acknowledged right to twist the facts for effect” (31).

And so, our lives are less like Ahab chasing his white whale or Don Quixote piercing windmill sails and more akin to the figures in Flann O’Brien’s acclaimed novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* in which the characters in the fictional author’s novels, dissatisfied with the stories they’ve been forced to play their parts in, revolt against their creator and begin to write their own version of reality. As O’Brien writes, “The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic...It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living” (19). We are often unfair to the characters in our lives, as well as to ourselves. But, as we are characters in our own tales, we should consider demanding our own private lives and decent standard of living through self-determination. And like O’Brien’s characters, we have the ability – and responsibility – to pick up the pen and write our stories.

David Drake explains how we can rewrite our lives as the characters in our own stories. As a coach who works with clients, known as coachees, he has developed a method of helping people better understand their own influence in how they see and interact with the world in which they live. He writes, “The only way to authentically change a person’s story is to alter the underlying and contextual narrative processes that support it. Often this comes through helping coachees make new associations, e.g., between two stories, between two characters in a story, between a problem in one area of their life and a solution in another” (41-42). By changing one’s perspective, we can see ourselves not as leaves floating helplessly down a river but rather as kayakers paddling with intention and purpose while still flowing with the current, not fighting it, and pushing off the rocks as they come.

Given the subjectivity of our perceptions, the telling of our stories can be a challenge. Aristotle, again in his *Poetics*, hinted at a method for establishing some clarity here. He wrote, “The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects: things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. This he does,” Aristotle emphasizes, “in language – using either current expressions or, it may be, rare words or metaphors” (441). This idea that through language we, as the actor and playwright, can affect the subjectivity of past, present, and future has taken root in modern philosophy as well.

This philosophical subjectivity of our perceptions defining reality can be challenging to communicate effectively. Will Storr describes it concretely: “If a tree falls in a forest and there’s no one around to hear it, it creates changes in air pressure and vibrations in the ground. The crash is an effect that happens in the brain” (25). So, while the tree did objectively fall in the forest, it did not objectively make a sound. Sound is a perception registered in the brain as picked up by our human ears. To another species with a different auditory and brain structure, the tree falling would likely make a completely different sound, if even a sound at all, as opposed to a different sensation. All of our perceptions are equally vulnerable to subjectivity, not simply our physical auditory one. Our perception of how others behave, why people say what they say, or our own role in a situation are equally constructed in the brain as opposed to existing in an external reality.

Robert Shiller, the Nobel Laureate and Yale professor, writes in his illuminating book, *Narrative Economics*, that literary theorists “have found that certain

basic structures are repeated constantly, though the names and circumstances change from story to story, suggesting that the human brain may have built-in receptors for certain stories” (15-16). Shiller applies humans’ relationship with stories to economics. If narratives apply to individuals, they can also apply to many individuals – thousands, millions, billions. “When one reflects that the economy is composed of conscious living people,” he writes, “who view their actions in light of stories with emotions and ideas attached, one sees the need for many different perspectives” (12). The use of stories in our lives is not merely hypothetical or philosophical, it’s real, documented, and pervasive.

Shiller also points out that narratives spread like diseases in epidemics. He notes that the Ebola epidemic that spread through West Africa was greatly affected by stories. “Medical researchers in the Congo during a 2018 outbreak of Ebola linked the high contagion to narratives reaching the population,” Shiller writes. “Over 80% of the interviewees said they had heard misinformation...These narratives discouraged prevention measures and amplified the disease” (23). Whether it be economics, epidemiology, or our personal lives, narratives are unavoidably integral to humanity and the better we understand this relationship, the more intentionally we can direct our futures.

In *The Three Laws of Performance*, the critically-acclaimed book on rewriting the future for people and organizations, Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan write that the first of three laws of performance is: “How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them” (6). This establishes the subjectivity of perception and how it relates to people’s subsequent behavior. And then The Second Law of Performance is: “How a situation occurs arises in language” (36). It is important to clarify that “*Language* is used here in the broadest sense,” according to Zaffron and Logan. “It includes not only spoken and written communication, but also body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, pictures and drawings, music, how people dress, and any other actions that have symbolic intent” (38).

This brings us to paying attention to the stories we have been telling ourselves and how they arise in the language we use. We perceive the world subjectively and then tell the story of that perception subjectively. “If poetic interpretation allows the storyteller to align events with desires and construct meaning in a meaningful way,” writes Gabriel, “analytic interpretation asks why such constructions resonate with meaning; whether they possess a deeper layer of

significance” (43). We should look introspectively at our own lives from the perspective of literary analysis, asking *why* we attach particular meaning to specific events, *why* a specific person resonates with us the way that they do. What motivates the characters in our stories and are they permanently relegated to the role we’ve given them? How does the language we use foreshadow later chapters? How did the plot get to this point and where do we go from here?

Few aspects of our stories are as abstract and meaningful as symbols. An old adage used earlier in this paper comes to mind: if a tree falls in a wood and nobody is around to hear it, did it really fall? Of course, it did. While objectively, the tree fell regardless of a person’s ability to witness it, subjectively it has no meaning. In his book, *Every Person’s Life is Worth a Novel*, Professor Erving Polster of the Department of Psychiatry for the School of Medicine at the University of California writes, “This versatility in the management of meanings has been the subject of extensive exploration, not only among psychotherapists but also among artists...” Elaborating on the plasticity of the mind, he continues, “The plasticity they have found – as represented by Dali’s limp watches, Picasso’s manipulation of shadows as if they were solid forms, Beckett’s characters who wait in limbo, and Joyce’s idiosyncratic syntax – have given new latitude to the perceivers of these most elemental experiences” (100-101). In art and literature, meaning and value are distinctly personal and somewhat ethereal just as they are in real life. Despite what a brand-new Fitbit is capable of, why do you still zealously wear your father’s old analogue watch? Despite your lack of respect for a coworker, why do you stew all day over something they said at a morning meeting? And despite the lack of hazard or threat of injury, why does your child avoid stepping on cracks when skipping down the sidewalk or bypass walking under ladders? As humans, we attach symbolic meaning to things in our lives unconsciously and everywhere. If we can pick up the symbolism of a bloody dagger in *Macbeth*, a forked path in “The Road Not Taken,” or an elusive white whale in *Moby Dick*, then we can certainly become aware of the symbolic meanings in our own lives. And just as Shakespeare, Frost, and Melville were able to construct their symbols, we are able to forge our own as well. By identifying those things which are meaningful in our lives and analyzing them, we can either remove their hold over us, strengthen it, or displace it elsewhere. Like the arbitrary tree falling in a forest, things only matter to us because we make them matter to us and likewise, we can make them not matter. This is how we can

begin to write our own futures as opposed to being unconsciously influenced by the symbols of our past.

Julie Beck, in *The Atlantic*, further elaborates this concept through an explanation of narrative psychology in which “a person’s life story is not a Wikipedia biography of the facts and events of a life, but rather the way a person integrates those facts and events internally – picks them apart and weaves them back together to make meaning. The narrative becomes a form of identity, in which the things someone chooses to include in the story, and the way she tells it, can both reflect and shape who she is. A life story,” Beck continues, “doesn’t just say what happened, it says why it was important, what it means for who the person is, for who they’ll become, and for what happens next.”

But before we can tackle the future, we have to consider the past because it is our subjective view of the past – as opposed to a deceptively inaccurate belief in an objective, historical view of the past – that guides our future. We don’t touch a flame because in the past it burnt us. We buckle our seatbelts when we get in the car because we’ve seen, either on TV or in real life, what can happen when a person gets into an auto accident. However, one of the most counterproductive elements influencing our view of the past and thus, distorting our clarity ahead, is also one of the most alluring, deceitful, and influential aspects of the past: nostalgia. According to Gabriel, “...nostalgic feelings can profoundly affect our construction and interpretation of present-day phenomena and mould our emotional reactions to them” (172). He goes on to explain, “One outstanding feature of nostalgia is that it always selects the terrain so that the past, dressed up and embellished, will triumph over the present...But, if nostalgia approaches the past in this glowing manner, it also affirms that the past is irrecoverably gone; it is part of the ‘world we have lost’” (172-73).

When it comes to The Second Law of Performance – how a situation occurs arises in language – English doesn’t quite suffice for this concept of nostalgia. To get more to the heart of how the past can guide our next steps into the future, we can look to a Portuguese word used in Brazil called *saudade*, pronounced sau-(rhymes with cow)dah-jay. It is loosely defined, according to Jasmine Garsd for NPR’s *alt.Latino*, as “a melancholy nostalgia for something that perhaps has not even happened. It often carries an assurance that this thing you feel nostalgic for will never happen again.” It is a beautifully tragic word exemplifying a longing for a past that may or may not exist the way we know it with the layered complexity of fearing that what you long for may be,

as Gabriel put it, “irrecoverably gone.” This single word is a perfect example of how language can both reflect how we feel about the world and show how one who uses that word would behave while navigating it. Its usage defines for its user not only their distorted view of the past, but also their belief in its impact on their future.

But we aren’t victims of our perceptions, far from it. This takes us to The Third Law of Performance by Zaffron and Logan: “Future-based language transforms how situations occur to people” (68). Just as someone’s use of *saudade* may predetermine their behavior regarding trust, relationships, or even travel options, someone’s use of another word may steer them in a different direction, a direction that may not have been a visible option to others. Think: *risk* versus *opportunity* when describing an imminent decision. Depending on which word used, the likely outcome is already foreshadowed for us. To this end, Zaffron and Logan use terms such as *default future* and *invented future*. They write that a default future is “the future that was going to happen unless something dramatic and unexpected happened” (12). “Future-based language projects a new future that replaces what people see coming. It doesn’t modify the default future; it replaces it” (71). People live into the future they see like a goldfish growing into the bowl in which it lives. It stands to reason that if the language we use not only reflects our worldview but also guides it, then being more conscious of our language can influence our future with more intention.

We often believe that our past and future are separate from each other as simply where we were and where we are going. However, research has shown that the past and future, held within our subjective minds, are far more intertwined in the stories we make for ourselves than we might realize. As David Drake writes, “Even though the past is given the bulk of attention in conceptualizing identity and development, a clear case can be made that who we are and how we act are as much influenced by our expectations of the future as they are by our explanations of/from the past” (85). The stories we wrote in the past: my co-worker doesn’t care about her job or my son is lazy – are the outlines for the stories we write for our futures: I won’t ask my co-worker for help or I’ll micromanage my son’s schedule to keep him on track. It isn’t a matter of right or wrong so much as understanding that these stories aren’t objective *or* benign; they were what we told ourselves in order to make sense of things and regardless of their accuracy, they don’t merely guide our behaviors, they dictate them. Coming to terms with this is what transforms us from simply passive characters in our own stories into skilled authors.

Interestingly, not coming to terms with our narratives can have quite an adverse effect. Jonathan Gottschall writes, “According to the psychologist Michele Crossley, depression frequently stems from an ‘incoherent story,’ an ‘inadequate narrative account of oneself,’ or ‘a life story gone awry’” (175). When we are the hapless victims of external plot points in our lives, we feel like we are being dragged along by life, characters in stories written by others. Considering those narratives more consciously, one can take more authorship. However, it is not so simple. Your unconscious narratives exist in your limbic system which is the primitive part of your brain, controlling emotions such as the fight or flight reflex. It communicates to the rest of your brain through emotions. Tapping into your limbic brain requires the effort of your neocortex, which is responsible for higher order functions such as spatial reasoning and language. This is the part of your brain which makes you distinctly human. Using language (diction or word choice) is challenging and imperfect when exploring your limbic brain and so writing out or discussing those narratives with some professional guidance – such as with a coach – can be an arduous and yet valuable exercise. Once the narrative can be pulled out from your limbic system via words assigned by the neocortex, you can begin to identify and make meaning of the unconscious story you’ve constructed and have been telling yourself ever since. From rewriting your past narrative, you can choose how to navigate through the present and future.

This analysis of the relationship between the mind (limbic brain) and language (neocortex) is a scientific branch known today as cognitive linguistics. As Vyvyan Evans writes in *Cognitive Linguistics: A Complete Guide*, “...cognitive linguists have deployed language as a means of investigating the nature of the human mind, and specifically the conceptual system – the nature and structure of non-linguistic knowledge – concepts – which language helps to encode and externalise” (42). What we tell ourselves on a conscious or unconscious level is a means of making sense of the emotions we feel and how we interpret the world. And these stories we tell from our past, encoded and externalized in language, can reveal how we will behave in the future in a variety of different scenarios.

At this point, it is worth noting that this isn’t merely philosophical or whimsical. “There’s been some brain research supporting this link between the past and the future,” writes Julie Beck, “showing that the same regions of the brain are activated when people are asked to remember something and when they’re asked to imagine an event that hasn’t happened yet.” This further relates to *saudade* in this missing of the

past blended with a fear for its future loss. It can be beautiful the way our need to express what we feel through language often precedes our scientific understanding of it.

Our ability to tell stories can make us victims of our own tales or authors of our futures, depending on our awareness of language and use of it. Skill in literary analysis and study of literature can help in this. Gabriel writes, “Omissions, exaggerations, subtle shifts in emphasis, timing, innuendo, metaphors are some of the mechanisms used. Far from being an obstacle to further study, such ‘distortions’ can be approached as attempts to re-create reality *poetically*” (31). By using the same literary devices an author uses to write a novel, the average person can write their future. However, being the author of your story doesn’t mean you can control all of the characters in your life; that would be bad writing. It means you can control how they appear to you and what role they’ll play. It is also important to consider what role *you* play in others’ stories. How might your boss or your spouse see you in the narrative they’ve constructed in their minds? Is it any more or less accurate than the roles you’ve created for them?

Those literary mechanisms Gabriel refers to – exaggerations, innuendo, and metaphors – are used in the stories we tell ourselves and they have the same effect on our lives as they have in literature: direct, mislead, and reinforce. Robert Shiller writes, “Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (2003) have argued that such metaphors are not only colorful ways of writing and speaking; they also mold our thoughts and affect our conclusions. Neuroscientist Oshin Wartanian (2012) notes that analogy and metaphor ‘reliably activate’ consistent brain regions in fMRI images of the human brain. That is,” Shiller concludes, “the human brain seems wired to respond to stories that lead to thinking in analogies” (17). The names we call our boss or the analogies we use with our spouse reflect as well as affect us.

Metaphors are not simply a creative literary tool or something we use in our narratives sparingly. They are incredibly common due to their absolute necessity in making sense of the world, ourselves, and our relationships with others. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, “Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and communicating the nature of unshared experience” (231). If the other person wasn’t there to experience one’s situation or, more abstractly, they cannot experience the idea in one’s mind, metaphors can be an essential tool for connection. Likewise, “just as we seek out metaphors to highlight and make coherent what we have in common with someone else, so we seek out *personal* metaphors to highlight and make coherent our

own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals as well (232-233). As Lakoff and Johnson conclude: “Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action...In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies” (156). And so, we should consider literary devices such as metaphor, personification, or metonymy not simply as tools authors use to create stories; for the same reasons, they are tools we all use to write our unconscious narratives and hold significance in our cognitive processes. Our use of language has the power to explain and clarify as well as direct and create. This generative power of language can be powerfully felt in our interactions with others.

A wonderful example of the relationship between what someone else in our lives can do and how we choose to see them is illustrated in Shakespeare’s play, *Macbeth*. In Act I, Scene 7, Lady Macbeth is enraged that her husband, who has the chance to become king, is going back on his promise to her regarding the murder of King Duncan which, to her, would help satisfy the witches’ prophecy of her husband’s rise to the throne. It is typical for readers or audience members to view Lady Macbeth as a power-craving homicidal madwoman. After all, it is she who pushes Macbeth to commit murder in order to become king. However, she is far more complex than that. She claims in the same scene, “I have given suck, and know How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.” It is clear from the past-tense use of “I have given” that some time prior to the play taking place, the Macbeths had a child whom she breastfed and has since passed away given that there is no child in the current drama. According to Alixe Bovey of the British Library, “Pregnancy and childbirth were risky in the Middle Ages: complications that would today be considered relatively minor, such as the breech presentation of the baby, could be fatal for mother and child.” Further complicating the situation was the role of women in 11th century Scottish society. Bovey continues, “Most women, even those in privileged circumstances, had little control over the direction their lives took.” Lady Macbeth, a motherless aristocratic woman in a patriarchal Medieval society, had no purpose in life. Her only chance of advancement was tied with her husband’s actions; if she couldn’t be mother to a child, at least, perhaps, she could be mother to a country if, that is, she could push her husband to become king. This subtle realization illuminates previously unconsidered motives for Lady Macbeth and now one can see her in a new light. It isn’t power she craves, but rather purpose. While her actions and dialogue, written by Shakespeare four-hundred years ago and thus static and out of our control, do not change, our view of her and, as a

result, our behavior toward her character, changes. This is how it is with the people in our lives. We cannot control them, but we can choose how we perceive them. This new role for them in our stories changes how we behave toward them and, as a result, alters their behavior in turn and their effect on our lives.

Narratives have been gaining popularity lately in western culture to the point where they've nearly become meaningless buzzwords. However, the effectiveness of exploring and writing one's narrative is all in the effort. It takes practice and hard work to live the new narrative as opposed to simply calling it out. And despite narratives' recent recognition as a behavioral tool, this is something that has been going on for tens of thousands of years. In Yuval Noah Harari's book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, he describes the Cognitive Revolution which occurred some 70,000-30,000 years ago. He notes that it wasn't our use of language, as a species, to transmit information regarding everyday things that propelled us up the food chain; it was our ability to communicate about things that didn't exist in the real world. This capacity for fiction had huge benefits for *homo sapiens* from a collective viewpoint. "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings," (28) writes Harari. With these imagined concepts spreading throughout humanity, people were able to relate to one another and understand something about each other quickly, without ever having met. "Since large-scale human cooperation is based on myths," he continues, "the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths – by telling different stories" (32). And so, we were able to affect real change in the outside world through the evolutionary ability to imagine it in our own inner worlds first.

These complexities mount in the stories we tell. As Gabriel writes, "They also cast other individuals into a relatively narrow range of roles...Story-work permits the narrator to rearrange his or her cast of characters, to turn allies into enemies, defeats into victories, traumas into triumphs" (41). You can rewrite the characters of your life to better fit the story you wish to live such as when Don Quixote, thinking of his lowly donkey, was "determined to call the horse Rozinante" or when considering the country lass whom he had affections for named Aldonza Lorenzo, "he resolved to call her Dulcinea del Toboso" (18-19). Our boss, who was the creator of chaos, the purveyor of problems, can be seen in a new light as a victim of their own circumstances, a helpless pawn in a game even they cannot control. This will alter the way you interact with your boss in the future. Your spouse who continually triggers your pet peeve is no longer an

inconsiderate accomplice to misery, but rather an insecure lover who has sought attention from those she loves – despite their sometimes perceived nuisance – since childhood when her parents were preoccupied with their divorce. This will motivate a new conversation you never considered having before. And the direction of your life is not in the hands of a faceless jury in the shadows pulling the strings of fate; you are the author of the next chapter of your life, just as you have been the author of every chapter that has preceded it. The crime is that you haven't noticed it sooner.

In fact, one might take a page from O'Brien's novel in which the characters put their fictional author – Dermot Trellis – on trial for his ill treatment of them in his stories. “*Call the first witness*, said the voice of Mr. Justice Shanahan, stern and clear as the last bit of music faded from the vast hall and retired to the secrecy of its own gallery,” he wrote. “This was the signal for the opening of the great trial. Reporters poised their pencils above their notebooks, waiting” (214). But perhaps you shouldn't be too hard on yourself. We've all been there. Besides, we are talking about the future and while what has happened leading up to the present has certainly influenced where you are and how you see things, once rewritten, the past is best left in the past.

Remember: stories are messy. There are unexpected character developments and emerging and/or diverging plotlines. Likewise, *writing* stories is messy. There is outlining, research, and character sketches; during the writing process the outline will change, additional research may be needed, and minor revisions are constant; as writing gets completed, the author gets introspective and makes more substantial edits, usually with the helpful eye of a trusted editor. Life, too, is a messy process. It requires planning and learning as well as action and adaptability, reflection and course-correction. And it usually works out better if you have a good editor – or sidekick character, at least – in your corner to help with those blind spots because you don't know what you don't know. This process – call it what you will: therapy, coaching, narrative psychology – is essentially a writer's workshop for the story you're living as you write it. The language we use, the tones of our voices, the positioning of our bodies, the way we dress, how we walk with good or poor posture, the steps we take or don't take...this is all character development. But we chose that outfit, those words, this tone, our posture, these hand gestures, and which paths to walk. And it is those decisions (as an author) that guide us (as a protagonist) through our lives (our stories).

If we simply live life as many of us do – like sleepwalkers, unaware, as Prospero says in *The Tempest*: “we are such stuff as dreams are made on” – then we are

conducting our lives like a free-writing exercise: loose, short-term, and haphazardly. However, if we live our lives as actors *and* playwrights – rewriting our roles, the roles of those we share the stage with, and our plotlines, as William Ernest Henley writes: “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” – life is more like an MFA writer’s workshop for a novel: intentional, enriching, and fulfilling. David Drake refers to this difference between the old story we had told ourselves unconsciously and have been living our lives by and the new story we consciously tell ourselves to write our own futures with as reactive versus proactive (122).

And as a word of caution to all those who, by now, are understanding the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary analysis, be aware that whatever you resist, persists, as the adage goes. David Drake writes it perhaps more eloquently: “What people are defending against is often the very thing they most need in order to grow” (108). Just as a self-conscious writer whose novel is being workshopped might become defensive over any constructive criticism or deeper questioning, a person looking to improve oneself has to be open to the process and treading into the dark. The areas of our lives we are blind to are usually that way for the same reason we don’t want to go there. But just as we choose to avoid those dark spots, we can choose to shine a light on them.

The first step in shining that light is identifying the stories being told because, as they can be of a defensive nature, they will attempt to elude detection. A powerful and well-researched example of narratives’ use as a defensive or coping mechanism has been in the arena of unemployment. According to a paper by Yiannis Gabriel, David Gray, and Harshita Goregaokar, Douglas Ezzy’s research in the early twenty-first century into unemployed Australians revealed primarily three types of narratives people constructed for themselves, in which “the story’s narrator and its protagonist co-created each other” (1694), as coping mechanisms for their unemployment: “romantic narratives approach job loss as a positive experience of emancipation from oppressive work, leading to a better future; tragic narratives cast job loss as a negative turning point in people’s life plans, leading to depression, anxiety, and self-blame; complex narratives interweave job loss with other adversities such as marital breakdown or serious illness” (1692). Interestingly, these narratives were not found to be rigid, but rather quite fluid depending on how the individual perceives their situation, perceives themselves, and is coping in real time. “The unemployed manager or professional may create a story in which he or she constantly mutates from wronged casualty to dignified survivor to

dejected victim, from angry and rebellious fighter to resigned and apathetic sufferer” (1705). It can be difficult to grasp the narrative in our unconscious because it is constantly changing to fit the need for which it was written.

This defensive nature regarding a change in our narratives is difficult to overcome. As Will Storr writes, “The neuroscientist Professor Sarah Gimel watched what happened when people in brain scanners were presented with evidence their strongly held political beliefs were wrong. ‘The response in the brain that we see is very similar to what would happen if, say, you were walking through a forest and came across a bear,’” (87). It is a simple fight-or-flight reflex, and it doesn’t merely pertain to real physical threats, but also emotional and psychological threats to the stories we deeply believe.

Few things better exemplify this defensive reaction to narratives and our attempts to alter them than an excerpt from Claudia Rankine’s book, *Just Us: An American Conversation*. Rankine, discussing race and whiteness in America, talks with documentarian Whitney Dow of Columbia University’s Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics in which he gathered data on over 850 people – mostly self-identified as white or partly white – and documented their oral histories. When asked what he has learned about conversing specifically with white men, he replied, “They are struggling to construct a just narrative for themselves as new information comes in, and they are having to restructure and refashion their own narratives and coming up short” (29). As new information comes to light, such as when Rankine pointed out earlier in her book that a recently emerged audio recording from 1971 captured pre-president Ronald Reagan referring to African delegates to the United Nations as “monkeys” who “are still uncomfortable wearing shoes” (16), white men – in this case, also republican – have to conduct some mental gymnastics to justify being pro-Reagan while simultaneously anti-racist. While race is a sensitive topic for most people, it shows us just one of many examples of how we are constantly adjusting our unconscious narratives to keep us the protagonists of our own stories as opposed to the antagonists.

However, it is worth considering that the protagonist of one person’s story – perhaps Charles Marlow of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* – is the antagonist of someone else’s story – such as the district commissioner in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In one’s own mind, they are the struggling yet scrappy workhorse keeping the business afloat by any means necessary while the boss is a tyrannical bureaucratic

cog; in the boss's mind he is the unappreciated hero in the background while the employee is an arrogant and often rogue asset who needs reigning in. It is all a matter of perspective and sometimes those narratives are subject to potentially very sensitive perspectives. As the unintentional authors of our narratives, this can lead to some highly misleading and self-sabotaging narratives for the sake of comfort.

When Sigmund Freud, in his 1908 essay entitled "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," he wrote of authors that, "The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it..." (153). In this regard, when we write our narratives, we are consciously and unconsciously expressing and repressing ourselves. Even writer and professor Guy Davenport suggests as much when he mentioned, "Narrative is first of all interested in the functional liberty of the lie" (308). And from a cognitive linguistic perspective, the use of metaphor is employed for this very purpose. As Vyvyan Evans wrote, "An important idea in conceptual metaphor theory relates to hiding and highlighting: when a target is structured in terms of a particular source, this highlights certain aspects of the target while simultaneously hiding other aspects" (316). Our narratives simultaneously reveal hidden truths and mask with covert falsehoods. It is only through exploration into the words we choose, the meanings we assign, and the roles we and others play that we can fully comprehend what it is we really fear or desire.

When I think about the three characters – Orlick, Lamont, and Shanahan – near the end of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, I'm saddened. Fed up with their treatment in Trellis's novels, they sit at a desk while Orlick rewrites their story, punishing their indifferent father/creator. They essentially put him through the experience of the Mad King Sweeney, subjecting him to physical and emotional torment. However, nobody ever stopped them and asked, "What do you *really* want?" Before the pages on which they existed were unceremoniously discarded into a fire, thus killing them, they spent all of their time and energy on revenge when what they really desired was freedom. Some would argue that they needed more time in order to fulfill their devious plot and kill Trellis before he had a chance to murder them; I would argue that they needed a good narrative coach.

To this end, as a constant and conscious reminder of the authorship we have over our own lives, I have an artifact – a literary relic from O'Brien's influential novel – that rests on my desk at all times. In the novel, Orlick is the one rewriting his father's plight, taking control of the story and thus, his own fate. He does so with a specific

weapon, the one on my desk: “On his small finger Orlick screwed the cap of his Waterman fountain-pen, the one with the fourteen-carat nib...” (213). This antique pen reminds me of the elasticity of stories and that while we are certainly the protagonists of our lives, we are also their authors. We should write the stories we were always meant to live.

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