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Spring 2015

### Reading About Writing: My Journey Through Authors and Novels in Order to Become a Better Writer

Thomas Wells  
*Regis University*

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## ABSTRACT

Name: Thomas Wells Major: English/Psychology

### READING ABOUT WRITING: MY JOURNEY THROUGH AUTHORS AND NOVELS IN ORDER TO BECOME A BETTER WRITER

Advisor's Name: Dr. Hicks

Reader's Name: Dr. Swanson

My thesis explores what makes a good novel, and how an author goes about writing a good novel. I begin with my story of trying to write my own novel from the beginning of Freshmen year and continue into my current passion for writing. I start by trying to answer the question "What is a novel?" and go on to look at authors individuals styles which includes how and why they write. Finally I end with a look at how well-written characters make a novel great. Overall, writing a novel comes down to having something important to say or providing your readers with an entertaining story. The importance of novels lies in how well readers can relate to the characters, and if the readers learn something new along with the characters.

READING ABOUT WRITING:  
MY JOURNEY THROUGH AUTHORS AND NOVELS IN ORDER TO BECOME A  
BETTER WRITER

A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors

by

Thomas Wells

May 2015

**Thesis written by**

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Dr. Howe-Director, University Honors Program

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
I. How I Got to Where I Am	1
Reading List & My Own Novel	7
II. What a Novel Is	8
III. Style	17
IV. Characters	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51

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conversations of my undergraduate education. I have loved the four years we have spent together and I cannot wait to see where all our brilliant minds go.



## I. How I Got to Where I Am

I thought I would be writing a novel. I thought the words on this page that you are reading right now would be my entrance into the professional writing world. That, however, did not happen, nor, realistically, will that happen for several years. Freshmen year I began working on a short story that I realized had the breadth and depth to become a novel. Since Freshmen year I worked on this “novel” and when the time came for me to choose a thesis topic I thought finishing my book would be the best project. I had it all planned out: I would complete my first draft of the book, give it to my advisors, make the edits on a nearly three hundred page manuscript, go through another draft, and end senior year with a book in hand that I could start sending out to publishers. Unfortunately, the road to writing a good book is not that straight. The road is not that well-paved. The road does not simply have three stops before the end. The road is much longer than I had originally envisioned, and the journey much more arduous. It’s going to take a car full of books and a lot of pit stops to get there (wherever “there” is) but I know I’ll make it; and I know it will be worth the trip.

### **Learning to Read**

When I was a kid I remember seeing Stephen King books on the chest next to my dad’s bed. He did not have a large collection but the small paperback covers of *Skeleton Crew* and *Night Shift* are forever burned into my brain. At the time I didn’t know who Stephen King was and it was not until junior year of high school that I finally read one of his books. My junior year English class was an American Literature course and one of

our assignments was to write four book reports about any novels written by American authors. One of the books I chose was *Cell* by Stephen King. I read it, and it was good. Nothing life changing but at that time I don't think any book I had read was life changing. Before college there weren't any books that I felt deeply affected me. Somewhere along the lines, despite not being passionate about reading, I found I really liked to write. I started with poetry and then began writing short stories in a graph paper notebook: little tales about geeky boys who wound up consoling crying girls. Nothing unique in the slightest, but I loved having a voice. I would post my work on Facebook in the hopes that someone else would realize they weren't the only one with love or relationship problems.

The strange thing about loving to write was that I didn't like to read. During my first semester at Regis, sitting in my introductory psychology class I was asked to share a fun fact about myself. I finally came up with, "I love to write, but I don't really like to read." At the time this seemed amusing to me but since then I have learned that good writers hold a book in one hand and a pen in the other. So I started picking up books. In addition to reading for fun I declared an English major because I knew it would force me to read classic literature that I wouldn't have read on my own.

All I ever heard about being a writer was that if you want to be a good writer you have to be a good and *avid* reader. Several books that I read sophomore year brought me great delight as a reader (and writer) and none of them were read for classes. I cannot remember the order in which I read them, but I'll start with Stephen King's book *Gerald's Game*. The premise is a woman handcuffed to a bed in a cottage, alone, in the

middle of the woods. What stood out in this book was a scene when she tries to free herself from the handcuffs. King compares the cutting of the skin on her wrist to an orange being peeled. A friend was coming to visit me that evening and she arrived just after I read this passage. As she walked in the room I set the book down and she swore I looked like I was about to throw up. I became dizzy and had to go to the bathroom, grab the sink, and make sure I wasn't going to vomit. I had watched a lot of gory movies by that point in my life and I had easily seen more gruesome scenes than a woman's wrists being cut. So why was my reaction so visceral?

I realized that just because I've seen gruesome movie scenes doesn't mean I've thought about such in-depth violence in the ways only a book can present. The descriptions he used allowed me to feel my own wrist being cut open and imagine the pain that would ensue. I also read *It* by King that year and another scene still sticks in my mind; a woman who is being beaten by her husband fights back by whipping his testicles with a leather belt. I remember reading that passage outside on a beautiful sunny day and the passage was so vivid that I felt the gut-wrenching pain. I had never had reactions to books like these. In those moments I thought of how amazing it would be if I could write something that would give someone such a raw reaction. Even better was the thought of writing about broader more universal topics that other people would connect with. I wanted my readers to have visceral reactions on an emotional level.

The next book I read that year was Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. It's hard to describe this book without taking up several pages so I'll just say that it's different. It's the story of a man who finds another man's manuscript detailing the events

and aftermath of a strange documentary. Danielewski did things I didn't know authors could do with a book and he helped break down the schema I had for books. He refreshed me. I discovered that reading does not have to be the mundane task of scanning left to right, top to bottom, page after page. He had paragraphs that were upside down, sideways, or printed in all red. There were two hundred pages of fictional appendices that you had to keep referring to if you wanted to keep up with the story. Beyond the structure of the novel there was also a story that was engrossing. I would read at night and get so scared by what I was reading that I would have to close the shades or turn on a light. I thought only horror movies could do that.

The summer after sophomore year I read *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer. It tells the story of a young man travelling to Europe to find the woman who saved his grandfather's life in World War II. Unlike the past books, which were along the lines of horror and suspense, this book explores the broader themes of love and how we choose to live our lives. There were particular scenes which to this day I am still perplexed by. The way love is described in certain relationships does not seem ordinary. Love never is ordinary, but this specific passage still complicates how love is often portrayed:

*She massaged his dead hand and remembered the last time she had touched it. It was not the death that had so attracted her to it, but the unknowability. The unattainability. He could never completely love her, not with all of himself. He could never be completely owned, and he could never own completely. Her desire had been sparked by the frustration of her desire. (237)*

Often times, love is expressed as being a complete, all-encompassing feeling and this passage points out how unattainable that is. Foer challenges old ideas of love by refreshing how we think about it in the same way Danielewski refreshes how we think about the structure of a novel.

Junior year I began taking several English classes which allowed me to explore literature from various time periods and genres. I drew inspiration from several books and continued working on my novel. I began implementing elements from books I had read and I began to understand how reading could help me become a better writer. When reading these books I would see the genius of others. I know I'm not Salman Rushdie but some of his narrative techniques in *Midnight's Children* seemed like something I would want to incorporate into my own work. There were nights when I would crank out eight to twelve pages at once and I was so impressed with them. I got lost in how good I thought my own writing was that I forgot I was the only one reading it. When I finally pushed part of my draft to Dr. Hicks (my advisor) and Dr. Swanson (my reader) they gave me a good knock back down to earth.

### **What do I do Now?**

Beyond the list of changes I needed to make to the book (the main ones involving cutting nearly half of what I'd written) they pointed out that finishing an amateur, rough draft of a novel was not something that could be done in one school year. So what should my thesis be if I'm not writing my novel? The whole point in writing a novel was that it is something I want to do later in my life. I didn't want to start writing a research paper for my thesis that would just be good enough to hand in and get a grade. I wanted to work

on something that I enjoy and that would help further my education on writing. My advisors suggested I write a thesis about novels. At first this was unappealing because I had my heart set on writing a piece of fiction. But as I've learned, you must read a lot (and read well) in order to write well. My advisor and reader assigned me five books to read (three novels, two books *about* writing novels) and my task was to read them and write what I learned from them.

This new idea was one I could get behind. What better way to learn how to write novels than to read novels recommended by esteemed professors (who themselves have published fiction) and read books by esteemed authors about writing novels?

Unfortunately, reading five books while taking fifteen credit hours, working in Student Activities, being Student Body Vice President, and writing about those five books is not the easiest task. Fortunately, the books were good, and nothing is easier than reading a good book.

### Reading List

1. *On Writing* by Stephen King
2. *On Writing* by Sol Stein
3. *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton
4. *Angle of Repose* by Wallace Stegner
5. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

### My Own Novel

Throughout my thesis I will be comparing my own unfinished novel to the books I have read. To make sure readers have a good frame of reference I will shortly summarize my characters and the plot. My book was about a single father named Daniel who had a baby boy, Nathan. Daniel's mother (who is unnamed) is also a central character because she usually babysits Nathan so Daniel can go on social outings. Daniel had a sweet old neighbor named Phil (a man in his eighties) who was going to be moving off the block. The guy buying his house was a man named James who rubs Daniel the wrong way. The novel is from the first-person perspective of Daniel and deals with his struggles with James. James has a girlfriend named Sheilla who tries to hit on Daniel and Daniel has another love interest in a woman named Marda who is a single mother living down the street. Marda has a six-year-old daughter named Cynthia who Daniel sees often when he goes out with Marda. I wanted my novel to have a creepy, suspenseful vibe to it so readers would be dying to turn the pages.

## II. What a Novel Is

The first question that arose when I started this project was *What is a novel?* My immediate answer was that a novel is a form of communication. It is the author communicating something to the reader. They want readers to think as well as enjoy what they're reading, because novels are also a source of entertainment. This semester I read Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* and it serves as a piece of literature that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. I also read *The Scarlet Letter* and that book is Nathaniel Hawthorne trying to tell people that transcendentalist thoughts can be dangerous. Some authors set out with more intent than to simply entertain, but some authors want to give readers an easy escape from their everyday lives. A novel as I see it is, first and foremost, the author communicating with a reader, and if it's written well it will also keep them turning the pages.

One could argue that poetry and plays offer the same form of communication and entertainment. I would agree with that notion, but I would argue the novel communicates and entertains on a grander scale. The beginning of Chapter 11 of *Jane Eyre* reads, "A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play" (85). This analogy works well because most novels have more chapters than plays. *Jane Eyre* has thirty eight chapters and most plays have twenty scenes at most. This means with each new chapter there is a chance for the reader to see something new; an experience they would only get a handful of times with a stage production. Novels in general are longer than plays and poems but that does not inherently mean they have more substance. It is because novels are longer that they have more room to develop characters and plot more effectively. This



effective progression of the necessary literary elements allows readers to relate and better understand what the characters are going through.

Stephen King shares the idea that novels are a form of communication but his is narrower view than mine. He writes:

*Someone...once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person. As it happens, I believe this. I think that every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition of a story, the writer is thinking, 'I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads this part?' (215)*

He goes on to say his wife is his ideal reader and that he always has her in mind when he writes. I agree that authors may have one ideal reader in mind but when I think about how a person will react to my book I think of several friends and family members. I like the idea of a novel being a letter written to someone, and what makes a novel great is when each reader feels as if it were a letter written specifically to them.

When it comes to writing a novel that is both engaging and enjoyable to read King emphasizes the importance of revision. As an English major I've written dozens of essays and most of the time I write several drafts of each one. However, when I write short stories I find it very hard to go back and revise them. I punch the words into my computer, step back, and think that it all looks good. I read it over to find spelling mistakes and polish up a few parts, but I've come to learn that true revision is a much more intense and important process. King writes, "let me urge that you take your story through at least two drafts; the one you do with the study door closed and the one you do with it open" (209). The closed-door draft is writing the story with no commentary from others. No asking people how they feel about *this* section and no letting those who beg to

read it have a peek. This allows an author to communicate exactly what they want, not what other people want to hear. To me, a novel is also the author conveying some kind of truth. In *Jane Eyre* the truth seems to be that strong love can overcome any obstacles and in *Ethan Frome* the truth is that strong love can end in tragedy. Revising with the door closed allows me to make the necessary changes so that I am portraying what I believe to be true.

When I was looking to revise my novel I sent it to two friends who both gave me positive feedback. They said they read it in one day and were really gripped by the story. My advisor and reader did not feel the same way. With friends reading your work, it has been my experience, they will always give positive feedback. They may come up with some critiques, but ultimately they're not helping you. All they did was stroke my ego to the point where I didn't even think I had to revise. This is why King urges we revise first with the door closed.

The next step to revising, he says, is to sit on what you've written. King recommends waiting at least six weeks until you look back at the original manuscript. In the meantime he suggests starting a new, shorter work that is a big change of pace from the one you just finished, or simply go back to your day-to-day routine. He says if when you sit down to finally make revisions and the manuscript looks foreign to you then you've waited long enough. I have never done this. I worked on my manuscript over the course of three years, taking breaks that lasted for months and then would try to dive right back in. I would try to reread what I had written before starting a new chapter, but I often relied on memory to fill in the gaps. I went about writing and revising all wrong. I

was so focused on trying to continue the plot that I had no idea of what I wanted to communicate to my readers. I simply thought they would be intrigued by my story but if I'm not making my readers think then I'm not using the novel to its fullest potential.

The second draft is when King urges authors to write with the door open. Allowing loved ones and close friends to take a look at what you're writing is okay as long as you're prepared for what they have to say. King notes that you may not always agree with the comments people have and he says, "in baseball, tie goes to the runner; for novelists, it goes to the writer" (217). A tie in this situation implies that you and one person disagree on something. That's a tie. But if you get five people all telling you that the ending of your novel needs work then the majority is probably right. Thinking about that majority I've realized I need to be more open to criticism. I always look forward to getting a piece of fiction back from a professor so I can see their comments, but when their feedback is overwhelmingly negative it takes some effort to admit all the flaws in your own work. I must remember that the people reading my work are trying to help me. They are not trying to sabotage my career or break me down they are simply doing their best to open my eyes to the tough realities of becoming an author.

Any good writer goes through a process of revision and this means that by the time a novel is published the author has gone through several rounds of ideas for the plot and characters. When I read some novels I am blown away at how well they are written and how well the story flows, but I must remember that their first draft probably wasn't as good as what they published. In a similar vein, novels may never feel complete to their authors. This semester I read Herman Melville's epic *Moby Dick* and the narrator,

Ishmael, declares his work will never be finished: “This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught” (125). This novel is filled with beautiful prose and this comment shows that it wasn’t always what it is today, and if he had spent ten more years on it it could have turned into something completely different. Knowing that Melville feels this way gives me hope for the future because there have been times where no matter how many times I look at something I’ve written it always feels unfinished. No good book was written on the first try, and most artists never feel fully satisfied with a “finished” work of art. This is why letting other people read your drafts is an important step in getting as close as possible to completing a novel.

Of course, King isn’t the ultimate expert on how to revise but his method sounds appealing. I have a vision of me after college, working during the day and coming home to a warm laptop and a beer and writing for at least an hour each night. If I could continue this process for a year maybe I’d have a couple short stories that I could interchangeably write and revise. Just the idea of it makes me hopeful. I told myself writing a novel would be a piece of cake, and the simple question of *What is a novel?* has really grounded me. It’s made me think about what makes these books so important, and why the authors wrote them in the ways they did.

I know the reason my professors gave me the books they did was because they are all well-acclaimed for one reason or another. They each offer a different idea of what a novel is, and they all communicate effectively to their readers. *Jane Eyre* and *Ethan Frome* are both novels focused on a single person and their interactions with others. Focusing on one character is an effective form of communication to the reader. It sets a

personal tone and allows the reader to better relate to the main character because they are the only one being focused on. *Angle of Repose*, in contrast, focuses on several characters, and because of this the novel communicates in a different way. When there are several perspectives the reader has to make judgments of their own and that means the communication is muddled. This is not a bad thing, it is just a different way of the author reaching the reader.

A novel is also a legacy. Being a published author seems to be a way to stick around after you die. If people are reading your books you are still communicating your ideas, even if you're dead. I know that sounds pretty ethereal and "out there" but it's something I firmly believe in. Unfortunately for me there are already so many authors who have built up their own legacies and the thought of competing with them is quite daunting. King's book makes becoming an author sound so easy and when he describes selling the rights to *Carrie*, his first novel, for \$400,000 dollars in 1974 my jaw tightens a little; how do I become famous like King? What will be my *Carrie*? What I have to remember is that I am not Stephen King, and my goal of being an author is not to become famous. I cannot compare myself to a man in his sixties who has achieved worldwide fame (or any other famous authors) because I am only twenty-two and barely out of college. I have a ways to go. When I publish my first novel it does not have to be the greatest piece of mind-bending fiction this world has seen but it needs to be substantial. I'm slowly learning that simply coming up with some ideas and finding time to write is not going to get me anywhere close to a novel worth publishing.

With all this talk of a novel being a piece of communication it is important to note that not every novel functions in this way, nor do they have to. The books I read before I declared my English major I was reading for pure entertainment. I wanted to forget about the stresses of school and escape into a world of realistic characters in the midst of some great experience. Sometimes the most important thing a novel can be for its readers is an escape. Most of the novels I read in my English classes were written by authors who had an idea in mind that they wanted to communicate to the reader, and I was taught (in these classes) to analyze the text and find what the author was trying to say, or what meaning the book had for me. The beauty of the novel is that it is versatile. It is a great outlet for authors who want to convey a deeper message, but it is also an opportunity for the author to entertain the reader. There have been many times where I sit down to read a book and all I want is a good story. That's it. I *don't* want to have to think hard about what I'm reading, I just want to enjoy the page-to-page moments.

In some ways I feel my English major has forced me to constantly ask the question of *What's the point of reading this book?* If the author is communicating something profound or important then the book has great value, but often times when I tell people I'm reading a Stephen King book they scoff as if he has nothing important to say. The funny thing is even when I read a book for entertainment I still find myself learning something from it. Even though *It* is the story of an evil force tormenting a group of kids it is also a touching look at the importance of childhood and friendship. While reading it I looked back on my younger years and really began to appreciate all the time I had spent with friends.

Over these past couple years I have learned there is a difference between reading a novel for a class and reading a novel for fun. Even though the novels I've read for classes have been great I don't learn from them the same way I learn from other novels. It's hard to explain why, but there seems to be an invisible pressure on students when reading books for classes; we know there will be a quiz or essay we need to work on. When reading for fun my mind is open and I'm not worried about any post-novel stressors. I look forward to graduating because I know all the books I read from here on out will be on my own schedule, and I will be reading them all because I want to not because they were assigned.

To me, a novel is a piece of communication, but the message is one only the reader can interpret. I've had several classmates who learned from and connected with books from classes that I didn't feel attached to. This leads me to believe that once an author puts a book out there it is up to the reader to gain meaning from it. The first section of Sol Stein's book is titled "The Writer's Job" and he quotes E. L. Doctorow saying, "'Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader, not the fact that it's raining, but the feeling of being rained upon'" (8). When I say the novel is a form of communication I mean that I want to communicate that idea of being rained upon, but I understand not everyone will experience or understand what I'm trying to convey and that is okay because I, as a reader, have struggled to find meaning in novels. I want readers to be emotionally invested in my writing without having to think too hard. I want them to be looking forward to the next page of my book the way someone desperately awaits a letter from a distant lover. Writing a good novel takes hard work when it comes

to writing and revising. I rushed into wanting to be an author and got some sense knocked into me by the writing processes that I was not adhering to. Fortunately, this is why it's good that there are so many novels out there. They teach a blooming author what does and does not work. They teach them how to find a unique voice among the thousands of others.



### III. Style

When writing a novel it is important for an author to look at their style. Style could be defined as how an author writes; including word choice, narrative style, and the various techniques they use. In the second section of King's book he explains the nuts and bolts of writing (grammar, paragraph structure, adverbs, etc.) which are where you begin when writing. He appropriately titles this section TOOLBOX and uses the metaphor of a toolbox to explain various techniques of writing that contribute to an author's individual style.

*I want to suggest that to write to your best abilities, it behooves you to construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you. Then, instead of looking at a hard job and getting discouraged, you will perhaps seize the correct tool and get immediately to work. (114)*

This metaphor is a great way to start a discussion of technique and style because it implies every author is different. King's toolbox is different than mine and that's perfectly okay. Also of note is the fact that his tools would be more worn than mine simply because he has been writing longer. Having a lot of tools is not as important as knowing how to use them. In this section King helped me understand what tools I have at my disposal and the best ways to go about using them. Thinking about my own writing and my own writing process after reading what King says makes me feel like there were times I was using a screwdriver to pound in a nail or trying to measure length with a hammer. (An example of this from my own novel would be my opening paragraph which I will discuss later in this section.)

King then goes on to talk about word choice and vocabulary. He points out that you should use words you know: “Put your vocabulary on the top shelf of your toolbox and don’t make any conscious effort to improve it” (117). He notes that improved vocabulary will come with good reading. The words you use to describe something, King says, should be the first words that come to mind that are both “appropriate and colorful” (118). He emphasizes that the meaning behind the words is more important than the words themselves:

*The word is only a representation of the meaning; even at its best, writing almost always falls short of full meaning. Given that, why in God’s name would you want to make things worse by choosing a word which is only cousin to the one you really wanted to use? (118)*

In my own writing I often worried I wasn’t using big enough words or my vocabulary wasn’t vast enough for people to consider me a sophisticated writer, but King notes that what we experience in life will always be more complex than our writing. Take the act of falling in love for example. I’m sure anyone that’s ever written a poem or short story has tried to capture the feeling of falling in love, but if so many people have experienced it why try to wrap the well-known experience in fluffy language? If I’m writing a story about two teenagers who fall in love I could easily say, “After only three nights of looking into each other’s eyes they were in love,” and convey the same emotion as could a five-page description of the love. Granted, what I just came up with wasn’t good writing, but the idea is that simplicity can often speak volumes. Simplicity is part of an author’s style and famous authors like Hemingway have shown that it can be very effective.

Another example from my novel of when I used too much description was when Daniel meets James for the first time in a grocery store. Daniel wants nothing to do with James because he gives him the creeps but James persists on them having a conversation. Daniel thinks:

*I didn't know what to say next. I had so many questions, but I really had no desire to ask him or even talk to him. If he could have handed me a brochure with all the information on him I needed that would have been great. But he didn't say anything and I knew he wanted me to be the one to continue the conversation.*  
*"So...you bought Phil's house?"*

Instead of all this I could have shortened it down to read like this:

*He just stared at me, not saying a word, and I knew he wanted me to continue the conversation.*  
*"So," I began, searching for words, "you bought Phil's house?"*

This still shows that Daniel doesn't know what to talk about, but instead of stating this through his thoughts I've inserted the idea into his dialogue. I also think shortening down passages like this increases the tension between Daniel and James. The less time there is for Daniel to pause and reflect on something the more quickly he will be launched into an unwanted conversation with James.

However, just because I may use simple words or simple expressions does not mean I don't want my writing to evoke complex ideas or emotions. As an author, my goal is to get people to realize that they are not alone. The scene of Daniel and James meeting in the grocery store was meant to be awkward because I wanted people to relate to the feeling of being trapped in an unwanted conversation. The feeling you get when someone keeps looking at you, waiting for you to say something, and you know it would be too

rude to simply walk away. Someone reading my novel may have had the same experience with a nagging friend and realize that, in a positive way, their situation wasn't so unique. They would realize they're not alone. I don't need a wide vocabulary to explain this situation and convey these emotions. My own personal style, as I've come to know it, is use simplicity to convey realistic emotion.

Expressing complex ideas and emotions can start with the way a page (and an entire book) looks. The way an author simply sets up the pages of their book can speak to their style. Mark Z. Danielewski has upside down and winding text all over his pages which give his books a unique look. They say you can't judge a book by its cover but it seems King would argue you can very much judge it by flipping through the pages:

*You can tell without even reading if the book you've chosen is apt to be easy or hard, right? Easy books contain lots of short paragraphs—including dialogue paragraphs which may only be a word or two long—and lots of white space. They're as airy as Dairy Queen ice cream cones. Hard books, one full of ideas, narration, or description, have a stouter look. A packed look. Paragraphs are almost as important for how they look as for what they say; they are maps of intent. (130)*

I like to think my book looked “full” at certain parts, but flipping through my manuscript I can see all the creamy whiteness overtaking my pages. All that is wasted space. There is no need for a page of dialogue if the conversation can be had in a couple sentences. If I shrink a page of dialogue into ¼ of a page I can use the rest of the space for the characters to reflect on the dialogue or perhaps prepare for it. King refers to books as “easy” if they contain a lot of white space and I don't want to write an “easy” book.

Throughout my novel I fall victim to writing too much dialogue. Later on in their grocery store conversation Daniel asks James when he moved into town. The dialogue that follows could easily be shortened to create more tension:

*"I got here last week. Sorry I didn't say hello until yesterday. I've been making some renovations to the place. I like the way Phil had it, but I can't live in the same house as someone else, ya know? I've gotta make it my own."*

*"I saw," I chuckled. "What were you smashing out all the windows for?"*

*"Windows make it easy for someone to break in," he said.*

*"I can't have people breaking into my garage, Danny."*

What's he going to do, smash out all the windows on the house too?

*"Well we don't really have many burglaries in our neighborhood," I assured him even though I had no idea whether or not it was true.*

*"Just because it doesn't happen often doesn't mean it can't happen." He was staring into my eyes. "I need to be safe, Danny. I'm going to brick up the holes where the windows used to be."*

Why?

*"Do you have a really nice car you're going to be keeping in there?" My arm was getting tired from holding Nathan's carrier but I didn't want to set him down.*

*"Aren't we the nosy neighbor," he said with his voice declining to a whisper. To be honest, I had no idea how to interpret his voice inflection. It was almost as if he was trying to be jokingly seductive. At least I hope it was jokingly.*

*"Well I mean, why else would you-"*

*"I'm just messing with you Danny!" He yelled with a pat to my right shoulder as if the whole store was in on the joke.*

*"Speaking of renovations, are there any good hardware stores nearby?"*

Did he just completely ignore my question of why he's bricking up the garage windows?

*"There's one just off of 21st street. If you leave from here, go down Hill Street and take a left when you get to 21st you'll see it right away."*

*"Thanks Danny Boy," he smiled.*

The whole point of this conversation is to show that James is going to have something in his garage that he doesn't want anyone meddling with. This intrigues Daniel, and instead of him saying all these things about burglars and asking if James has a nice car Daniel could have a one line thought about how strange this seems. James could just say he's going to brick up the windows and then ask where a good hardware store is. Daniel would see how serious James was and the reader would be just as clueless and interested to learn more as Daniel.

King's idea of blank space in books is not always accurate though. Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* is a short book with a lot of space and very short paragraphs. However, the ideas and struggles he presents the reader are complex. It is not an "easy" book. I think King's commentary on blank space is most applicable to dialogue. If dialogue runs on for too long it becomes pointless, but if an idea can be conveyed in a couple lines then you can keep the reader engaged. This happens in *Ethan Frome* when Ethan is responding to his wife, Zeena, who keeps asking him who will take her to see the doctor. She keeps pressing the question on him and his response reveals more than the simple fact that he wasn't paying attention. Wharton writes:

*"Of course Jotham'll drive you over," Ethan roused himself to answer. He became suddenly conscious that he was looking at Mattie while Zeena talked to him, and with an effort he turned his eyes to his wife. (64)*

Ethan's one simple line of dialogue is enough to convey that he is distracted by Mattie who he is much more attracted to than his wife.

Another aspect of style is an author's ability to hook a reader from the beginning. I struggled with the opening line of my novel and, fortunately for me, *Ethan Frome* is a

great example of how to get it right. Originally the first sentence of my novel was just the first sentence I had written freshman year, but then I realized I should probably have a more gripping opening paragraph and I overdid it. This is what I had at one point:

*Often times when you hear the story of someone changing the life of another it's very romantic; a man meets a woman who changes his mind about everything and they fall in love and their lives are never the same. But my story is not romantic. There may be romantic parts to it, but the person that changed my life changed it terribly. Drastically and terribly. Nothing good came from this person.*

I tried to include too much. I wanted the reader to have a handful of questions they would have to read on to answer. But as I look back on what I wrote I realize the reader may have just thought I was trying too hard to sound cryptic; leaving them more disinterested than intrigued. So I've learned that the opening paragraph needs to be subtle in information but still interesting enough to keep the reader going. Wharton starts out her book in just this way:

*I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story. (3)*

From this we know we are going to hear a story that may not be credible because it has come from so many different sources. Right off the bat we are questioning if this is a story we can trust. If this is a narrator we can trust. Not all great novels start with such a gripping introduction and just because a novel may not have an astounding first sentence does not mean the book is worthless. Stein, however, gives reason for me to obsess about my opening paragraph. He discusses being a part of a behavioral study in a book store:

*In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book's jacket and then*

*go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting the book down and picking up another to sample. (15)*

I too do this when browsing for a new book to read. However, not only does the first sentence or paragraph have to be engaging, but the novel as a whole has to keep readers interested. While reading Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* I would read chunks of fifty to one hundred pages at a time because I was so enthralled with the story. One of the things that made the book so engaging was the level of authenticity his characters seemed to have.

This authenticity was something my advisors pointed out my characters lacked. Dr. Hicks noted that I've never been a father so maybe I shouldn't be writing a novel from the perspective of a single father. Authors often hear the phrase "Write what you know" and I struggled with this as I was reading Stegner's book. Everything he wrote sounded so credible but I knew the majority of it was all fiction. I struggled to find the line where an author writes what they know and where they allow their imagination to take the wheel. The history Stegner created for this book is vast and detailed and I'm sure he had to research the time periods he was writing about and research what these places were like back then. But beyond writing what he knew historically he had to create the characters and their actions. Just as I've never been a father Stegner has never been an American pioneer in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. The take away is that Stegner did his research. If I wanted to write an authentic single father then I should probably try to find someone I know who was dealing with that struggle personally and asked them about their experience.



Stegner addresses this point with a subtle quote embedded in the text. Lyman Ward is working on writing a book and he hires a girl named Shelly to be his scribe; he talks and she writes it all down. When Lyman is discussing his grandparents having sex he does not want to give a detailed description of the event, he merely states that it happened. Shelly notes that the “modern reader” may want more details and Lyman responds, ““That’s too bad. Hasn’t the modern reader got any imagination?”” (269). This quote goes beyond the page and I can see Stegner directing this at the reader. At me. Stegner is pointing out that in a text the author does not have to do all the work. This got me thinking. With my novel I was trying to make Daniel someone people could relate to and I thought I could achieve this by narrating his every thought no matter how crude or personal. I tried to create my own style by giving a detailed account of everything. With this quote in mind, however, I am starting to see that an author has to trust their readers. Now I see that I was trying to hold my readers hand and that is the sign of a weak author.

What I’m getting at with all of this is that I have to allow my readers’ imagination to work on its own. I can’t be telling them what to think. People are complex and in real life you don’t get to see a person’s every thought so why should you in a book? If I’m going to write a realistic character there has to be ambiguity. Maybe he slaps someone unexpectedly but instead of giving a page of narration about why he slapped them he just breathes heavy and leaves the room, and the reader has to determine why he did it. Stegner does a great job of getting us inside a character’s head without telling us exactly what they’re thinking:

*Had he, when he mentioned Frank, been searching her[Susan] face for an answer to a question of his own? Had he seen an answer? For her heart had leaped at the name, the gladness had come before the fear, and before the furtive, alert sense of how dangerous it was to show what she really felt. Had he seen that? (471)*

In this passage Oliver's wife, Susan, is wondering if Oliver sees a change in her face when he announces that Frank, a possible love interest to Susan, will still be living with them. This novel is in third person and Stegner still manages to give an in-depth look at a single character's thoughts by creating ambiguous implications. When Susan wonders if Oliver sees her face change we don't know what is happening in Oliver's head so we don't know if he's mad or not. This allows the reader's imagination to take over and fill in the blanks.

Stegner continues to present information ambiguously and by the end of the novel he gives us reason to question everything that Lyman has written. Lyman writes:

*Up to now, Grandmother's life has been an easy game. Her letters and reminiscences have provided both event and interpretation. But now I am at a place where she hasn't done the work for me, and where it isn't any longer a game. I not only don't want this history to happen, I have to make it up, or part of it. All I know is the what, and not all of that; the how and the why are all speculation. (524)*

From the beginning Lyman has been reconstructing the history of his grandparents but now he tells us he must re-write their history, or parts of it, because he does not know exactly what happened. This is troublesome to the reader because it makes us wonder if anything he's written has really been accurate. Of course there are journals and letters to tell *what* happened, but it seems all the emotions and turmoil (like the last quote) were

made up by Lyman. He is speculating. Now I realize this is what Dr. Hicks pointed out when he said I've never been a father; I was merely speculating. I still thought I had creative freedom and could write about whatever I wanted. But when someone starts speculating too vastly the reader may lose faith in the author. The reader may lose interest if they were a father themselves and realized I had no idea what I was talking about.

Lyman, on the other hand, has a reason to speculate. He has many factual details of his grandparents' life so he is not fabricating everything. He is speculating what their thoughts would be based on the documents he has. What I'm doing is creating characters out of thin air. Yes, Stegner is creating characters as well, but readers have a reason to believe Lyman because he's using historical documents. My characters do not have such backup. Reading *Angle of Repose* I trusted Lyman with his speculations because he knew so much of his grandparents' lives that if anyone were to recreate their emotions I believed it *should* be him. As for me, if someone is reading a character I've created they don't have that same kind of trust because I have no evidence to support the character other than my own imagination.

To me, the style in which I write has a lot to do with the narrative format. First-person is a good way to explore one character in depth and using third-person is what I could do if I wanted to focus on several characters. Style is also affected by the words I use. I have a decent vocabulary but I don't like to fluff up my own writing. When I revise I often look for ways to fix the plot and characters not my descriptive adjectives.

Knowing how to use my own language and choosing a style of narration leads to a more

organized narrative; and when the narrative is more organized I think it is easier for the reader to invest in the characters and the story.

#### IV. Characters

One of the best ways to get readers to trust you, even when you're writing a fictional character, is to make the character as realistic as possible. If you give a character a realistic desire the reader will begin to believe in the character which will allow them to more easily relate to that character. Not only will this give your characters a feeling of authenticity but it will give credibility to your novel as a whole.

Sol Stein notes the struggle of writing a realistic character in his chapter "The Keys to Credibility." He writes:

*The worst mistake that a story writer can make is to have unconvincing motivation for actions that are central to the story. A married engineer with a well-paying job notices a momentarily unattended carriage in a supermarket and kidnaps the baby. What is the reader to think? (154)*

He then poses a multitude of questions the reader would have. After asking such questions the reader would believe the story seems too made-up to be realistic or believable. This is what I (unfortunately) did with my characters. I made them do things and didn't quite know why. One character was trying to seduce Daniel. Why? When I think about it my honest answer is that I thought it would create drama and that's not a good enough reason for a character's action. The reason I trusted Lyman in *Angle of Repose* was because he had solid groundwork for the characters. When Susan wonders if Oliver was apprehensive of her love of Frank we know the questions Lyman comes up with are valid because Susan has been struggling with her romantic feelings ever since she met Frank; and upon her first meeting him Oliver blatantly points out that Frank was

in love with her. It starts playfully and she brushes it off but as Frank keeps coming into her life she repeatedly questions her feelings for him.

Stein calls this planting; setting up the actions or thoughts of a character through early scenes. Again, I tried to do this because I realized that my characters needed motivation. James, Daniel's creepy neighbor, studied Psychology, specifically speech and language development. My plan was to have him want to kidnap Daniel's child and isolate the child in a room to see how language develops naturally. I wanted James to be sinister. I had this idea and I wanted to explore it. Once I figured this out I went back and changed some scenes so that James shared his love of speech. I even went so far as to have Daniel figure out that James had kidnapped someone before. I like to think I planted James' want to kidnap, but I don't think his motivation would suit the action as I had it. Yes, he's interested in language but that doesn't necessarily mean he would just outright steal a baby and lock them up.

I've studied Psychology and often when a person locks up a child to study "natural" language development the child is their own. Why wouldn't James just have a woman conceive a child for him? I don't know how realistic that is either, but the point is there were several routes James could have taken to get what he wanted and I don't think the one I wrote was the most realistic. Stegner builds up such a convincing history of Susan and Oliver that I trust him as an author to make their actions believable and meaningful. As an author I want my readers to trust me. Readers shouldn't be wondering if my character would really act a certain way; I want them to nod in agreement with the

character when he/she makes a decision. That doesn't mean they have to like what a character does or says, but it means they believe that's truly how the character would act.

Looking at a character's action I'll turn to *Jane Eyre* because the whole novel is about one character. Jane's story was interesting and I found myself desperately wanting to know what happens to her but I also found myself trudging through certain sections because the narration seemed unnecessary. This novel taught me how some narration can be too much. There were often long sections devoted to description and detail that did not interest me because they did not move the story along. Perhaps that's the plague of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century reader, but if I'm invested in a character shouldn't I care about every aspect of their life as they're narrating it? That may be too much to ask of authors but I think it's something to strive for.

Before I read *Jane Eyre* I heard it had a tendency to go on long tangents and I assumed this was the style of writing during that period, but while I was reading King a quote stuck out that I knew would apply to *Jane Eyre* before I even read it:

*Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Overdescription buries him or her in details and images. The trick is to find a happy medium. It's also important to know what to describe and what can be left alone while you get on with your main job, which is telling a story. (174)*

Upon first reading this it sounded like common knowledge but after seeing how too much description can negatively affect a story I realized it is something I need to actively pay attention to while writing and revising. It is important to note that I am biased when it comes to how much attention to pay to detail because my own writing style is one of simplicity; I must remind myself that just because there is a lot of description doesn't

mean it is automatically overbearing. Description should effectively add to the overall characters and plot. As King noted in his section on revising, if it's not necessary to the story don't write it. In the beginning of the novel when Jane is still in boarding school she describes how cold a particular winter was. She writes:

*Our clothing was insufficient to protect us from the severe cold; we had no boots, the snow got into our shoes, and melted there; our ungloved hands became numbed and covered with chilblains, as were our feet. (52)*

She then goes on to describe having to walk to church and sit in the cold and after this first description it is obvious they are cold and uncomfortable. She made her point with the above quote and she didn't need to persist in reminding us how cold it was. I understand not every page of a novel can be exciting, but I have read many books where it feels as if everything I'm reading has a purpose; each transition is only made possible because of the action that came before it. *Jane Eyre* does transition well from moment to moment but there are times where I was too uninterested in what Jane was talking about to invest myself in her story.

This was a pitfall in my own novel. I was so focused on showing how "real" of a character Daniel was that I narrated mundane events of his life because I thought that would make the reader believe in the story more. An example you often see in movies is where the main character has cancer. There is often a scene of them urinating and there is blood in their urine. This is important to the story because it shows one of the symptoms (and hardships) of the illness. However, if we saw the character every single time they went to the bathroom we would get bored. In my novel the boring scenes, looking back on it, were when Daniel would go to work at his grocery store. Yes, I could have maybe



one or two scenes of him in the store if they were essential to the plot, but I had him there at least a dozen times going through his daily routine. In a similar fashion Jane has several encounters with Mr. Rochester (the man she loves) and after a while I wanted something to happen that would progress their relationship. Brontë does a good job of planting the romance, as Stein suggests, through these encounters but after a while I just wanted their romance to flourish. I blame myself for this frustration because I was being impatient. After thinking about their on-and-off encounters I realized that these moments create tension in the same way I tried to build tension between Daniel and James.

After working for Mr. Rochester and living on his estate he decides to send Jane off to Ireland to work at a school. Before she leaves they have a conversation wrought with emotion and beautiful dialogue but they are still not expressing their true feelings.

Mr. Rochester says:

*"I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you—especially when you are near to me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land, come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapped; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly. As for you—you'd forget me." (239)*

The writing here is excellent but if either Jane or Mr. Rochester had shared their true feelings for one another there would not be a need for such back and forth in terms of how they'll never stop thinking about one another. I understand that the romance is central to the plot of this novel and if they were to get together right off the bat that

would not make for an interesting story. A lot of my impatience with *Jane Eyre* came from my state of mind while I was reading it. I read it over winter break and sometimes it felt like an assignment; in some ways it was an assignment. Reading a novel for school (thesis) and reading a novel for fun on your own time are two different experiences.

I truly enjoyed the story of Jane with all of her triumphs and struggles but there were times I was reading when all I wanted to do was hang out with my family. If you're reading a novel and you are longing to do something else chances are you're not fully enjoying it. Sometime down the road I will read *Jane Eyre* again. I will read it not because I have to but because I want to and I think that will allow me to better appreciate a book considered to be one of the greatest novels ever written. A second reading of a novel can be enjoyable if you liked the book on the first read. Even after a second reading you may not pick up on all the book has to offer but that's the beauty of reading a novel; it is always there for you whenever you want to dive back into it.

My novel focused on a single character because I was writing in the first-person perspective. What reading all these books has taught me is that I was not giving my character his own life. Stein's most important notes, for me, are those on characters, and how to write them well. He advises:

*Imagine your character in an armchair talking to you. Ask your character questions that are provocative. Let your character challenge you. Disagree with your character Let him win the argument. (67).*

I have never done this with my characters. I prided myself on making characters that acted on their own accord, but I never imagined myself interacting with them. This seems like a useful exercise because it would give authors more autonomy. I enjoy talking to

people about the characters I'm writing and telling them that I don't know what the character is going to do. I do not map out my stories. I come up with ideas for how characters *should* act in any given situation, but most of the time I make them act how *I* think they should, not how *they* think they should.

This idea of letting a character win an argument is, I think, the most effective aspect of this technique Stein suggests. If you let a character win an argument you are succumbing to what they want to do or what they want to say. There may be room to say, "You're wrong and here's why," but in reality even if you say that to someone they may not change their mind. My problem with this is that when I was writing my main character (Daniel) I felt some of his actions made him out to be a not-so-great guy; but I justified everything he did by telling myself it was him making the decisions. My advisors pointed out readers, however, do not want to read the story of an unlikeable character. Daniel wasn't fully unlikeable but there were many unlikeable qualities. What it all amounted to was they didn't seem to care about Daniel. And just as I want the reader to trust me I also want them to care about my characters, because if they care then they will invest more of themselves in my book.

The reason my advisors didn't care about Daniel was because he was a boring, somewhat unlikeable guy. First, let's tackle why he was boring and what I could have done better. When I was the one making Daniel's decisions it took the life out of him. He wasn't an independent person making interesting choices. He was an extension of my mind acting how I made him act. I also wanted Daniel to be an ordinary guy. As I've said, I believe an author should give readers people they can relate to. I thought if Daniel

was ordinary then ordinary people could relate to him. An example from my novel is how I wrote about every day of Daniel's week. The first two paragraphs, I believe, are important because they open up new possibilities for Daniel (talking to a neighbor and this new woman he is fantasizing about) but the third paragraph is unnecessary for the story.

*Monday dragged on slower than expected. I saw Mrs. Rylend walking through the aisles while I was fixing a cash register on check-out lane 10 and it reminded me to talk to her. I wanted to ask her if she'd noticed anything about James. I figured she had met him, and she lived on the other side of his house so maybe she'd noticed something strange. I don't know what she would have seen but I just wanted a little closure to my being so unnerved by James. Mrs. Rylend has been living on the block for a long time (as far as I know) so I'm sure she's had a lot of experience dealing with new neighbors.*

*I finished fixing the register and on my way back to my office I saw a woman looking at the coffee in Aisle 3. I saw her from the back, but she was wearing a tight white t-shirt and jeans shorts. I stopped and probably would have offended an old woman if she saw where and how I was staring. Remembering my job I quickly snapped out of it and continued on my way back to my office. I sat down at my desk and rubbed my forehead. I was sweating and I saw how red my face was in the silver cover of my desk lamp.*

*Tuesday I sat at my desk all day. No one called me with a problem and we didn't get any shipments of anything. I walked around the store multiple times, but there weren't even any elderly people who needed help pushing their carts. When lunch rolled around I sat on one of the red benches and ate my turkey and provolone sandwich. I watched the cars driving by the store and I watched people walking in and out. Watching the cars I saw a square green car (the same kind James had) go by and first my mind flashed back to seeing him pulling out of the driveway in that car, and second my mind flashed to the girl in his backyard.*

I went wrong by trying too hard to establish that he was normal. I was convinced that if I took several chapters and showed readers how normal he was then the progression into him becoming a dark, mysterious character would have been more realistic. Stein points out that readers don't want to read books about ordinary people: "Readers don't read novels in order to experience the boredom they often experience in life" (61). Daniel was a grocery store manager and I wrote several scenes about his days at the store. This is not what readers want. If someone just came home from a nine-to-five desk job and wanted to be swept away in a good novel I don't think tales of another guy going about his nine-to-five routine would be very interesting. That would equate to me coming home after a long day of classes and reading a book about an ordinary college student going to a bunch of classes. That's not the kind of novel I would want to escape to after such a day.

So how do I fix it? Fortunately, the answer to that also turns Daniel into a more relatable character and hopefully a more likeable character. The answer is desire. Stein writes:

*We are driven through life by our needs and wants. So must the characters we create be motivated by what they want. The driving force of characters is their desire. (82)*

After reading some of my novel Dr. Hicks asked me, "What does Daniel want?" and I think my honest-to-God-said-it-in-my-head-so-as-not-to-embarrass-myself answer was, "To live an ordinary life." Even after he asked me this I still couldn't come up with what my character wanted and that's where I went wrong. I was writing Daniel to fulfill what I wanted: people to be able to relate to him. I should have been letting him do what *he*

wanted. My answer of wanting him to live an ordinary life was *my* desire for him not his.

It's spooky what Stein has to say about this:

*Inexperienced writers, sometimes ill read in the great works of their own and previous times, often try to write novels with a relatively passive protagonist who wants little or has largely given up wanting. I have met more than one writer who say that his character doesn't want anything—he just wants to “live his life.” (82)*

By writing a character who has wants I automatically make him/her someone a reader could relate to. A character who doesn't want anything is hard to relate to because even the guy who works a boring nine-to-five job probably has goals he *wants* to achieve.

These notes about character design and development show that if you let a character be a real person, outside of your own wants as an author, the reader will be able to relate to them because they will be realistic. Daniel was the father of a baby boy and Dr. Hicks thought it strange that there was no point where Daniel wanted the kid to just “Shut the fuck up.” That's something parents think about their children (at some point) and therefore a reader would relate to Daniel on that note.

Good characters then interact with one another to create a good plot. Stein, again, understands a central struggle I had with my own plot: “Some writers I've worked with find it difficult to develop plots because they're not sure their plot ideas would be of interest to readers” (86). This is what I worried about. I thought people wouldn't be interested in what Daniel was doing and that was true because he was not an interesting enough character. I think plot will fix itself, or create itself, if the characters involved are interesting. In *Angle of Repose* Oliver and Susan are two complex characters but it's when they interact with each other that we get material worth reading about. When Oliver

is looking to take a new job which would force the family to move there is tension when Susan asks him about it.

*“Where is it? Off on some mountaintop, like Leadville or Potosí?” [Susan asked]  
She saw his forehead pucker. His eyes returned from outdoors and met hers steadily. His head was up so that the pupils sat in the middle, not up against the upper lids, and there was not that sinister half-moon of white below them.  
“Sue,” he said, “it’s my profession.” (308)*

An important note from this novel is that it is not enough to have one interesting character; you need at least two. When the thoughts and feelings of two characters are at stake readers may invest more of their interest in the novel than if it was just one character they were worried about. Even if, in my novel, Daniel had been interesting the other people he interacted with were not. It takes two to tango. But before I start thinking about other characters I need to focus on making Daniel as realistic as he can be.

Stein provides another insight as to how I could make my main character more interesting: “Think of the worst thing that could possibly happen to you right now. Don’t censor. A layman instinctively covers up. A writer disciplines himself to uncover” (85). The worst thing that came to mind was something like **my mom dies**, and that would have fit perfectly for Daniel. He has this baby boy that his mom watches pretty much whenever he needs her to (because his wife is no longer in the picture). So what if his mom had died? He’d have to bring his son to work or on every date. He couldn’t have sex without possibly being interrupted by his baby. Or perhaps he would have to hire a babysitter and that could present new problems. The babysitter could be a threat or a

complicated love interest. That simple idea of changing one thing about a character's life could change the entire plot.

This idea of change is what constantly drove the plot in *Angle of Repose*. This family continuously moves around the United States and Mexico because Oliver is driven to find a job he loves and still provide for his family. His desire fuels their constant travelling, and every time they seem to be settled in they move on. This strains their marriage and pushes them further away from each other:

*She [Susan] knew that sooner or later, this fall or next spring, she would be packing up her children and her depleted collection of household goods and going West again—not, as at first, on an adventurous picnic, and not with a solemn intention of making a home in her husband's chosen country, but into exile. (371)*

Every time they move it is an “exile.” This one word alone shows how hard it is for Susan to pick everything up and start a new life in a different place. The characters change along with their lives. The situations Stegner puts this couple into are interesting and because of that the characters themselves become more interesting. This also works the other way around; interesting characters inevitably lead to an interesting plot.

Essentially, Stein suggests that in order to create interesting, unique characters an author has to think outside the box. That sounds like basic knowledge to a creative writer but I think it's easy to get lost in thinking about what you as an author would want to read. I think to myself that I would enjoy reading my own story when in reality I'm not the one who will be picking it off a shelf. So maybe I had some good ideas for the characters, but it is only through revision and re-writing that I would be able to unpack the fullness of each character.



Unlike *Angle of Repose*, *Ethan Frome* is a short novel and focuses on one character. When I first picked up *Ethan Frome* I was taken aback at how small it was. King talks about the size of books and how some have a certain heft to them, and at first glance *Frome* was seriously lacking. However, Wharton shows us that just because a book is small does not mean it is any less influential than a book four times its size. The way a character develops is crucial in a good novel and it's impressive how much we learn about Frome in less than two hundred pages. Of course, the story revolves around him so it is not surprising that he is the focus of our attention, but by the end of the book I felt more sympathy for him than I did for many characters of longer novels.

Frome is a strong character because Wharton gives us Frome's actions and we, as readers, determine what we think of him. Stein notes the importance of this method of character development stating, "Avoid telling the reader what your character is like. Let the reader see your characters talking and doing things" (51). This is exactly what Wharton does. The most effective way she allows us to learn about Frome is by showing his greatest desire. He has a romantic interest in his wife's cousin, Mattie, and in one scene he sees her dancing in the town dance hall.

*Frome's heart was beating fast. He had been straining for a glimpse of the dark head under the cherry-coloured scarf and it vexed him that another eye should have been quicker than his. (30).*

The simple detail of a fast-beating heart shows us Frome is interested in this girl and being able to see him strain at the window to get a glance of her makes him seem even more desperate; he wants to see her face before anyone else has a chance to. Stein

discusses the importance of a character's desire and Wharton combines Frome's longing to know more about Mattie with his desire to break away from his monotonous life:

*They turned in at the gate and passed under the shaded knoll where, enclosed in a low fence, the Frome grave-stones slanted at crazy angles through the snow. Ethan looked at them curiously. For years that quiet company had mocked his restlessness, his desire for change and freedom. (49-50).*

The statement of Frome's "desire for change and freedom" is a blatant statement of him wanting escape. Frome's desire is shown by comparing him to his ancestors. Wharton shows us how he feels in the presence of these headstones, and saying "that quiet company had mocked his restlessness" shows he feels a need to get away from the boring life the rest of his family lived. This desire to have a different life combines with his interest in Mattie and propels Frome's story in a way that keeps the reader wanting to know what happens next.

The longing for change is Frome's main desire, and it is highly effective. I think most people can relate to wanting an escape from their current circumstances. This struggle for a new life leads him to falling in love with a girl who lives with him and his wife. Frome feels stuck with his wife in the sense that he does not feel love for her the way he feels it for Mattie. Frome's wife has an illness that forces her to leave for an evening seeking treatment from a doctor in another town. He is left alone with Mattie for the evening. Because we know of Frome's desire we expect something crucial to happen in this unique opportunity for the two of them to be alone.

Frome's elation at this opportunity is expressed when Wharton writes:

*For the first time they would be alone together indoors, and they would sit there, one on each side of the stove, like a married couple, he in his stocking feet and smoking his pipe, she laughing and talking in that funny way she had, which was always as new to him as if he had never heard her before.” (68)*

Mattie’s ability to talk to Ethan in a way that makes it feel like a new conversation conveys how well she fulfills his longing for change. His wife no longer arouses new feelings in him, but Mattie has the ability to make Ethan feel like he’s experiencing something new simply by talking. I’ve never been married but I can imagine feelings of entrapment or monotony may creep in after several years. One of the greatest joys of reading is relating to characters, and by grounding Frome’s desire to escape his boring life in his actions Wharton gives us a clear situation in which we can slip into Frome’s shoes.

Frome is a character we can relate to with a simple story, but Oliver and Susan’s story in *Angle of Repose* is more complicated. When thinking about Stegner’s thick novel the first thing that comes to mind is how impressive and in-depth of a history he creates. As an author I want people to be immersed in my writing. What I wanted to do with my novel, and particularly Daniel as a character/narrator, was explore all of his thoughts and exactly what was going on every day of his life once this creepy new neighbor moved in. However, Stegner shows that just because you don’t get a day-by-day rundown of what characters are doing doesn’t mean you do not get wrapped up in their lives. The lives of Susan and Oliver span several decades of moving around the country, having children, and struggling through several hardships. We don’t see what happens to them every day

because it is unnecessary. That's one of the most important things I've learned while working on this thesis: what is and is not necessary in a novel.

It all comes back to what the characters desire. Ethan Frome was a compelling character because we know what he wants but as we're reading we're not sure if he's going to get it. The same is true of Oliver. He has such high standards for how his family acquires money and what kind of job he would work. His desire stems from his pride. This then affects his wife's desire; she wants him to be happy in whatever he's doing but that conflicts with her wanting a good life for her family. Their different visions for their family collide in such a way that causes strain on their marriage and their family dynamic. Dr. Hicks pointed out that in my book Daniel seems to be too ideal as a father. If I had to describe Daniel's want it would be he wants to have a romantic life and be able to get away from taking care of his son. I thought he would have to sacrifice time with his son for such a life, and often send his child to be with his mother, but I never wrote about the strain that put on him as a father. Unlike Stegner, I was so focused on the details of what was happening that I forgot about the realistic ramifications of characters actions. *What* a character does doesn't matter as much as *how* and *why* they do it.

When talking about realistic characters we cannot forget about Jane Eyre. At the time, there were nearly no narratives about a woman living her life as she wanted which makes Jane all the more admirable. Brontë writing about an independent woman made me realize that any woman I write about has her own independence. A female character is not there to service Daniel or just create some kind of drama for the story. She has her

own life, thoughts, and desires and once I realistically create those then I can have her and Daniel interact in a real and meaningful way.

An interesting aspect of Brontë's narrative style is that Jane will often address the reader. In talking about the arrival of someone she says, "Stay till he comes, reader; and, when I disclose my secret to him, you shall share the confidence" (262). Dr. Hicks told me that this was a common stylistic choice of the time, but it also a postmodern move on Brontë's part. Having the narrator refer to the reader calls attention to the existence of the novel itself. This forces us to question whether Brontë or Jane is the narrator of the book. I would say Jane is the narrator because she is brought to life so well. Her pleas to the reader are heartfelt and truly make me feel sympathy for her situation.

These sympathies she invokes are due to the fact that she struggles through relatable difficulties. When she has her heart broken her note to the reader is raw with emotion:

*Gentle reader, may you never feel what I then felt! May your eyes never shed such stormy, scalding, heart-wrung tears as poured from mine. May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonized as in that hour left my lips; for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love. (306)*

This is the kind of character readers can relate to. A good majority of the population has experienced heartache at one time or another, and even though Jane does not wish this sorrow on anyone else I'm sure others have experienced it. In reading these lines someone who thought they had their heart broken worse than anyone else may realize they're not alone.

Another simple detail that can affect a character's motivation is the time period a book was published. In thinking about the great development of Jane Eyre as a woman it is important to note that her development was unique in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century for a woman. Because the book was published so long ago I had the same struggle I have with old books: How is this book that's over 100 years old still relevant? In trying to understand the modern relevance of this book and its main character I found the answer in the brief description on the back of my copy. It reads:

*Published in 1847, under the pseudonym of Currer Bell, the book heralded a new kind of heroine—one whose virtuous integrity, keen intellect and tireless perseverance broke through class barriers to win equal stature with the man she loved. (back cover)*

The importance of this book really comes from having an independent female protagonist who also narrates the novel. One of the reasons we see the full development of Jane as a character is because we get the story from her perspective. In Stein's chapter "Choosing a Point of View" he discusses the pros and cons of various points of view. He compares first and third-person narration and notes:

*Despite the seeming limitations of a single character's perspective, first person well done is immensely rewarding to both experienced writers and experienced readers. The first-person point of view is valuable, for instance, if you've drawn a character who is highly intelligent or perceptive. His or her complex thoughts can be conveyed much more directly and intimately to the reader. (133)*

Having Jane narrate the novel makes her story even more remarkable; she is not a woman being controlled by the author, she is a woman in control of her own life. Because we see

everything through Jane's eyes we experience all she is going through and that makes her struggle for independence and happiness much more compelling.

Stein references another book but the point is relevant to *Jane Eyre* when he says, "If it were told in the third person, it wouldn't seem credible" (135). Jane's story kept me interested because I understood how invested she was in all her decisions. Towards the end of the novel when Jane has been separated from Mr. Rochester for some time she writes:

*Perhaps you think I had forgotten Mr. Rochester, reader, amidst these changes of place and fortune. Not for a moment. His idea was still with me, because it was not a vapour sunshine could disperse, nor a sand-traced effigy storms could wash away; it was inscribed. The craving to know what had become of him followed me everywhere; when I was at Morton, I re-entered my cottage every evening to think of that; and now at Moor House, I sought my bedroom each night to brood over it. (381)*

Jane utilizes first-person narration effectively by noting a skepticism the reader may have. Because she is addressing the reader directly (and has been throughout the novel) we understand her feelings as she experiences them, not as an author wants us to believe she experiences them. Yes, Brontë is writing the character of Jane, but using the first-person allows us a more intimate relationship with her. The first-person point of view allows the reader to connect with the narrator on a deeper level than with a narrator who is recalling the thoughts of several characters.

I wrote my novel in the first person. This narrative style always appealed to me because I want readers to hear the character's reasons for doing something and realize they may act the same way. Not all readers would agree with what my character was

doing, but with the first-person perspective a reader may at least understand and agree with the character's motivation. Unfortunately, telling a whole story from one person's perspective is difficult. This goes back to the issue of credibility I had with *Angle of Repose*. When I was writing from the perspective of Daniel I thought he was the only character I had to worry about. I would make a woman interact with him and I only thought about Daniel's thoughts. Looking at it all now I see that every character is having just as many thoughts as Daniel, but he's the only one whose thoughts we see. I can't just throw a woman into a scene because I want to see how Daniel would react; I can only put a character in a scene if they would naturally show up there.

Ultimately, characters are what matter most. I love watching movies, and some movies leave you feeling as if there was no plot; it was just a bunch of people talking to one another in a certain setting. Novels can sometimes feel this way, but what I have learned is that I want to write interesting characters more than an interesting plot. Rarely do you see a movie or read a book where you feel no connection to a character. What makes novels great is their ability to offer us several characters. If a reader doesn't relate to one perhaps they will relate to one who has not been introduced yet. Stein showed me that creating a character can be fun if you allow them to be their own person, and the novels I read showed me how effective realistic characters can be. I saw myself in every main character I read about, and the authors made that relation possible by crafting lifelike characters who grappled with universal struggles.



## 5. From Here

As an author, reading these books has not been easy. They are all well-written novels with greatly developed characters, and after looking so deep into their pages I have been reminded how far away I am from such a level of writing. I will admit this thesis enhanced the anxiety of influence that already plagues me anytime I read an exceptional book. So where do I go from here? This thesis was meant to help me analyze my own writing in the shadows of great authors. Throughout my writing I have had fears that my dream is too vast, and in the face of these great books I am worried I will never reach the great skill these authors have achieved.

I had the same thoughts at the beginning of this thesis with Stephen King and I've had some practice in talking myself down from the ledge. I recently had the privilege to see Sherman Alexie speak at Regis and someone in the audience asked him what advice he had for young novelists. He responded honestly saying he had no advice because in the dawn of this technological, literary revolution he has no idea what the future will hold for writers. He did, however, express the same sentiment that I've been told for years; you have to read a lot. He said for every one page that you write, read one thousand pages. While he may not have meant this literally he showed that even famous authors understand the importance of reading.

In response to my own question I would say I need to start reading. Once I graduate I can focus on reading for fun and not worry about what my post-reading essay will be about. Dr. Swanson did point out that reading and writing every evening after coming home from a job is not as easy as it sounds. She noted that being an author is like

a second job, and it takes time and energy to go to work. Alexie also noted that reading while you write is one of the greatest ways you can stay educated. While reading all these books I plan to get back to writing daily on some new short stories and begin to revise some old ones. I have a vast array of new knowledge that I can't wait to apply to my work. Fortunately, after all this reading and writing I have found I still want to be an author. I still want to write stories and books that will make people feel as if I wrote them a personal letter. Alexie said, "I'm just trying to write about normal shit. Everyday shit" and I would say that's my goal as well.

What's important to remember is that almost every author I look up to (or have talked about in this thesis) is at least forty years old. I have time on my side and that's something I should be thankful for, not scared of. The next few years will be full of new experiences and I am happy to say that my laptop will be with me through it all. I can document, create, and re-write events and people I see throughout my life. I can imagine new characters and give them personalities unlike any I have personally seen. I can create worlds that have never existed, I can create situations fraught with intensity or suspense that readers will be dying for me to resolve in the last chapter (and I probably won't). What's important is that I love to write. I know I may not become a millionaire author who can buy a house anywhere or buy any car to drive anywhere, but I can write to the best of my ability and the fullest of my potential. So for now I'll stick with the car and house I have and get the most mileage I can out of the keys on my keyboard and the pages on my shelf.

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