

## **IMAGINATION in WRITING & TEACHING**

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Welcome to everyone. I hope you are enjoying the conference. And thank you for coming here today. When I first signed up to do this conference back in January, I thought about how great it would be to hear experts connected to the field speak about their research. This is my first conference and I was really excited to be a participant and meet a lot of interesting people. Then a couple of months ago, I thought, yes, but you will have to write a paper, and then deliver it.... I tried to imagine the audience and this image of a lot of grim, tight-faced scholars came to mind, who would sit in the back hissing, "that's not Csikszentmihalyi! Eliot Eisner said that." As I became more anxious, the image developed and I believed I could see brown bags below the chairs containing soft red fruit. Then I worked myself into such an emotional state that I saw myself lying unconscious on the floor, tomatoes sliding down the wall behind me. Come on, be reasonable! another voice in my head told me. You need a reality check here. Eventually I convinced myself that none of this would actually happen and I was able to go on and write the paper.

Just keep that idea in mind for a few moments and we will go back to it shortly!

Today I am going to briefly discuss three main areas of Imagination and Creative Writing: 1) I will mention some of the more recent research on Imagination as related to

Creative Writing, 2) how Imagination occurs in Creative Writing, and 3) explore some practical approaches that foster Imagination in the teaching of Creative Writing.

But first, how do we define Imagination in Creative Writing?

Imagination is the mind in flight, soaring on the wings of memory, emotion, association and perception. Our mind struggles to create order, and imagination offers a structure. In writing down how we “see” what we are imagining, we gain control and can return to these visual and emotional ideas again and again to discover ourselves. And we can communicate these thoughts and experiences through shared language to make meaning, and negotiate a larger way of understanding with others.

Before we go straight at imagination in writing, we need to explore the concept of “creativity” in Creative Writing and understand where the concept has come from.

In earlier times creativity was seen in terms of inspiration, occurring in a unique individual, someone whom today we might call a “genius”. Most educators would now emphasize that creativity flows out of a process – that of learning skills, honing those skills, being introduced to the tradition, gaining knowledge steadily, and all the while, the imagination throws its net deeper, wider, making quicker associations and developing more keenly felt emotions. For although one can master the techniques of the field and accumulate much knowledge, without a healthy imagination there can be no “going beyond” the given, and there is little hope for originality or novelty.

Imagination is crucial to good writing, and at the same time undeniably connected to the acquired skills and knowledge. Perhaps more surprisingly though is that imagination also depends heavily on rational thinking. The emotions combine with

reason to judge new ideas as the imagination is putting them forth – judging the soundness of the idea as it fits with the outside reality and the inside reality of the story or poem. Accepting or rejecting an idea will depend on verifying the authenticity of the emotions while at the same time delighting in its cleverness. The relationship between emotion and reason therefore leads to leaps of insight and we can determine the truth of our passions.

So far, no one view of creativity has been able to sufficiently explain the “spark”, or “the something more”. (Bailin 109). Often the words creativity and imagination are used interchangeably but imagination is specified as the source of novelty, originality and generativity. (Egan 36).

We will now try to get at the central mystery that is the essence of writing fiction and poetry. Attempts have been made to link imagination to “seeing”, particularly in making images in the mind, but it also includes putting ourselves in projected situations and vicariously experiencing the “what if”, which is exactly what is required of creative writers while trying out new plot movements, character responses, settings, etc. But it is not only making images in the mind, it is enveloping ourselves deeply in an imaginary situation, so we can “feel” what it would be like for it to really be happening.

What happens if we are able to let go of reality, to no longer “be” in our physical surroundings — so that we no longer see the daylight, or feel this hotel room’s cool fan blowing on our faces -- let ourselves enter another world, say, the night market in Singapore? We might start with picturing the tight streets of Asia, what it is to move through the thick sultry air of the equator, sweat trickling down the spine; squinting at

brightly-lit tables while just there the perimeter remains in shadow; we drift through a fog of incense as we pass a temple gate -- our imagination is carrying us now and we continue elbowing between the vendors' stalls, pinched between chattering shoppers, whiffs of lemon, cilantro and mint sizzle over there in a wok, a boy spreads fish on a spitting grill, watch it! tripping over uneven sidewalks. We're moving in and out of music from ubiquitous radios... The emotion is pulling us along, stronger and stronger, depending on how we feel about Singapore. It's there, hidden in our minds, re-surfacing now from the memory of having been there, experiences in other markets, images on TV, film, photographs, books, even from friends who have told us stories about it. The dreamy view of exotic lands may hold sway, or the resentment of generations who have lived under colonial occupation. Nonetheless, we can't help but fall into imagining if the language gets its hooks into us.

Warnock says there is a "power in the human mind which is at work in our everyday perception of the world, and is also at work in our thoughts about what is absent...Its impetus comes from the emotions as much as from the reason". (Egan 31). Proust tells us that "the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone: powerful emotions have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play." (Nussbaum 7). Egan asks whether emotion is a necessary element in imagining or whether emotion is what makes imagining more effective. (32). Far from pulling imagination into the irrational, then, emotion is tied to reason in the act of making appraisals and evaluations. This has been said to be the definition of "intuition". It occurs below the level of conscious awareness (Bailin 127)

and is responsible for what is commonly called “gut feelings”, something most writers rely on in spades to test the authenticity of what’s been written on the page.

As we have said, Imagination in writing cannot be considered separately from the skills that help execute it. But where exactly is the moment when the great leaps of insight or inspiration take place? In literature, exceptional imagination may awaken in the reader startling comprehension, which may be accomplished by a distinctive handling of language. Through new combinations of words, unusual juxtapositioning, rhyme, pattern, metaphors, etc., the reader is allowed to see and feel a situation in a fresh way. (Bailin 115). Although imagination is expressed through language, it is actually the other way round: the language is in fact what is developing the imagination. Skills and imagination cannot be separated but must be seen as entwined parts of a whole that grow together organically. As the skills increase, the imagination transcends these skills, which is the moment in creativity when the writer is able to go beyond the given. (Bailin 109).

The ability to write a piece that has a particular effect on the reader is defined as a higher order skill. (Bailin 114). Being part of the emotional and reasoned assessments an author makes during the process of writing, higher order skills become second nature with experience and occur below the level of the writer’s consciousness. For Coleridge, imagination is a thing that is “unsubdued by habit, unshackled by custom, and as that which enables us to transcend those obstacles to seeing the world as it is...” and also, as the way it isn’t, but could be. (Egan 36).

Knowing these details about imagination now, the question begs to be asked, “But can we teach it?” For a practical approach we go to Barrow, and his argument that

imagination can be fostered in students and that, in fact, it is inherently part of a satisfactory education. For him, imagination is the way we *do* something; it is unusual and effective action. It is not inspiration, but execution. (Barrow 84).

Barrow further maintains that the imagination must be developed indirectly, and it can only grow as a result of efforts by teachers to impart understanding. It must be taught within contexts, in a way that exposes students to the unfamiliar with an aim to widen their experience, both actual and vicarious. The material ought to be taught in an imaginative way to stimulate the student and by a teacher who personally models imagination. (91-92).

Now that we have looked at some of the philosophy and theories behind imagination in writing, what will they look like in a creative writing class? Are rules and research results smothering to a beginning writer? Are students better left alone, to self-teach, in order to avoid blandness and conformity?

First we have to ask, why is creative writing important?

One simple answer we have pointed out already is that in the act of writing down what our imagination tells us, we are better able to understand our meaning. But this activity also spills out into the larger picture. It helps us come to terms with life itself. In reading literature or the creative writing of others, we can use our imagination and enter into other worlds, other lives, know other people and cultures, even other time periods. We can find out what it is to live those lives. There is a safety in trying on those lives vicariously, and we are also privy to their deepest secrets. It is an intimacy we all crave.

By reading enough, we begin to understand what can be written about. We may then choose to open our own lives and share something of ourselves, maybe even begin to have the courage to reveal our worst pains and humiliations. We take terrible risks of being laughed at or reviled, but by writing it out, it is also an act of gaining freedom. For in the right environment, say the Creative Writing classroom, if an atmosphere of trust has been established, there will be no judgment of the author and the benefits of writing openly can be tremendous.

If we take turns sharing our writing, we will learn how to imagine other authors' characters and experiences, and then we start to realize that they are also capable of putting themselves into our stories and identifying with our view of life. When we imagine other lives, we see other ways of being and our possibilities grow, not only for ourselves but for our concept of humanity as a whole.

Where does one begin to teach Imagination in the Creative Writing class? We are always telling ourselves stories – as we drive in our car, cook dinner, sit in the dentist's office. We take time to re-write the events in our lives, and shape the things that have actually happened. Can you just hear yourself going over and over some conflict – oh! I wish I'd thought to say this, or, if only it had happened this way. We are searching for creative ways to solve problems, both in the past or present. Out of habit we project our personalities and desires onto people we barely know – until we are sure Aunt Maude's friend would genuinely prefer vegetarian risotto to steak and potatoes . We constantly predict what we think might happen in the future, trying to foresee stumbling blocks or outrageous consequences. Or we read a snippet in the newspaper and we are off on a

fantasy, placing ourselves in the role of the protagonist -- what would I do? It is natural that we human beings slip into narrative and tell ourselves about life; we impart information to friends and colleagues in such a way that we heighten the important details for emphasis, colour it for interest.

Teachers can use these inclinations as a starting point to initiate creative writing in the classroom. Our imagination is always on the starting blocks, waiting for the gun. Give students a stimulating idea and it's not long before they will take it and run. Getting into the routine of using the imagination will go a long way towards developing the writing. If students seize upon an idea, they won't notice that they are writing. They will *want* to tell you something. The teacher ought to model writing with her own stories, show she is willing to be vulnerable and expose her own ideas.

It goes without saying that these early stories should not be evaluated on the rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation; rather the ideas should lead the way. With time, the teacher will introduce the elements of writing, and allow the students to focus on each individually before pulling them together.

In a later stage, when students are aware of "how" to put together stories, encouraging the imagination is taken to the next level. As students discover their taste in literature, they should choose stories or poems they feel they could imitate. By borrowing a framework, a plot outline or character development, and they can experiment and plug in their own special details. This tinkering with the story's mechanics can provide huge leaps of progress in a short time. The students will start thinking like writers.

At this point, the teacher's role evolves to that of mentor. She is an authority in the field and also a role model to the students. They will see the teacher as someone who has worked very hard through her own apprenticeship, as someone who is still motivated and as a person who has had some public experience in writing, such as publishing, screenplays, theatre, etc. The teacher can offer practical advice to the student on how best to use her talents. (Mamchur, class lectures).

Perhaps also in this relationship between student and teacher, the student will absorb a kind of "writer's attitude". It tends toward a "passionate curiosity", as Einstein explained his own outlook, about people and life, both on and off the page and the grand drama in which we find ourselves. There are certain creative personality traits, and in the teacher and other class members, the student may recognize kindred souls. On the other hand, teachers must bear in mind that research has shown that teachers do not always like the most creative students and they do not always earn the highest grades. (Parnes 341).

This is all slowly taking place as the student develops a mastery of language skills and familiarity with elevated writing. If basic writing techniques have been "caught on" to, then the student has also begun to see what great imagination some writers are capable of. Eventually the student wants an answer from the teacher: where do original ideas come from? The teacher will direct her back to the curriculum: first, original ideas come from the literary tradition; second, from making analogies with parts of other stories; and third, from "small inspirations", strings of associations that come together for the writer. (Weisberg 252-55). Originality may issue from ordinary thinking processes, but if we are relentless in our pursuit of ideas and hunting down solutions, there is a much higher chance of finding something novel.

In the creative writing class we find a wide range of students, all at different points in their development as writers. How to teach the class as a whole? The teacher must be subtly attuned to each student. There may even arise the problem of culture and differing values of what constitutes quality writing. In some societies, creativity lies not in original stories, but in the retelling of classical myths, such as the *Ramayana*. The author's contribution is not in plot or character, but in her style of telling the story. In some societies, the artistic goals are to preserve the classical patterns. (Weiner 150).

Often the desire to go further is motivated by a certain personal philosophy rooted in a strong sense of self. To go further towards capturing a writer's philosophy, we might link it to Rorty's definition of an intellectual, someone who has "the hope to be one's own person rather than merely the creation of one's education or one's environment", or what Heidegger calls the yearning for authenticity. "As Heidegger emphasized, to achieve authenticity in this sense is not necessarily to reject one's past. It may instead be a matter of reinterpreting that past so as to make it more suitable for one's own purposes." (Rorty 2). This is exactly what writers do; they keep reinterpreting their experiences in hopes of mining innovative ideas or drawing out more profound stories. The point, as Harold Bloom tells us, is to become aware of a great number of alternate purposes, perhaps by going to theatres, museums, churches, gurus, and above all, reading a great many books. (Rorty 2). Perhaps the very first step, then is for the beginning writer to imagine herself as a writer, thereby making it possible in the mind to become that writer.

It's been said that nowhere in Shakespeare's writing is the man Shakespeare to be found. And yet, his imagination and insight to a host of characters is renown. If students

can experiment with multiple versions of themselves and embrace varied experiences as part of their metamorphoses as writers then they can become more adept at imagining different lives and increasing their compassion and acceptance of “otherness”. Nadine Gordimer says authors invent characters from parts of themselves – Joseph Conrad *was* Lord Jim, and Conrad *was* Marlowe. Toni Morrison said, “the ability of writers to imagine what is *not* the self is the test of their power.” (Gordimer 14).

In the last few minutes, perhaps we could share the ways in which we write. I can tell you how I go about it -- it’s a quirky process but very defined. I have to start at the beginning, that is, I have to find an idea. I won’t even start writing until I have something significant in my head. It almost begins in a state of dreaming, but with gentle control. I am searching through my memory, a little out of focus, until I start to follow an emotion. When something starts to feel interesting, I leave signposts so I can remember what triggered the idea. But I stop to judge the value of the idea, go back over it again and again, until I start to know the idea and feel more sure of its worth. It’s like a road now, where I keep telling myself the story, adding details, increasing images along the landscape, and then, when I have told it to myself clearly, I can go and start writing it down.

I’m certain that there is a method for each writer and that none of you here will write in exactly the same way. It develops out of practice and then we try to stick with what works.

Even now at this moment, as I am trying to tell you about it – I am seeing the images in my mind, trying to find the right phrases that will make the idea more vivid for

you, take you with me on this journey. If we can share some ideas that help enlarge our imaginations, we can find better ways of seeing and writing.

Thank you.

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