

Amy Hassinger Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Amy Hassinger

>>Amy Hassinger is an American author whose novels are *Nina: Adolescence*, *The Priest's Madonna*, and the forthcoming *After the Dam*. Her writing has been translated into Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and Indonesian, and has won awards from *Creative Nonfiction*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the Illinois Arts Council. She's placed her work in many publications, including *The New York Times*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Writers' Chronicle*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and serves as a faculty mentor in the University of Nebraska's low residency MFA in Writing Program.

>>What is it that you want right now? Maybe it's a cup of coffee. Maybe it's a nice big, juicy steak. Maybe you wish you could take back a sharp comment you made to your family member, one of your children, earlier today. Maybe you want a nap. Whatever it is, I'll bet you anything there's something. Most of these are little things, what we might call "desires with a small 'd'" that we either fulfill or we don't. But we humans are also consumed by bigger desires, Desires with a big "D." Maybe we want a fulfilling career, or someone to love. Or maybe we want a stable job, or to find God. Maybe we want a spiritual life of some kind, or to go on a wild adventure.

The point is that we humans move through our days from desire to desire - small "d" or big "D" - and our characters should do the same. Of course the big "D" desires are really what interest us as fiction writers. Robert Olen Butler has said that "Fiction is the art form of human yearning." It's these deep yearnings that power narratives, particularly novels. Your novel's main character has to yearn for something - even if he or she isn't entirely aware of what that something is. So that's what I'm going to talk with you about today: character desire and how it interplays with point of view in structuring a novel.

[Text on screen] Using Desire to Create Structure

The writer Douglas Glover has written a very useful essay that I use a lot when teaching called "Notes on Novel Structure." And in fact, as he says in the essay, it's not really - it's really notes from a lecture that he gives, you know, habitually. And in this essay, he calls the novel a "machine of desire." I like this image because it calls to my mind those old fortune telling machines where you would put in a nickel or a dime and the machine would kind of rattle and hum, and then after a couple of minutes it would spit out a fortune. And calling a novel something like that makes it seem as if it's that easy of a process: you just kind of put in a character desire and it will spit out a plot-line for you. Though of course it's not that easy, but it's somehow encouraging to imagine that it is. However, if you were to reduce a novel's structure to it's most basic form, it might look something like the process of that machine. Your protagonist begins at Point A with a desire - striving to get X. By the end of the novel, the protagonist does or does not get X. And you can even write that as a sort of basic Yes or No question: "Will my protagonist get X by the end of the novel?" The answer is Yes or No.

This form is a little misleading because a novel is not a straight line. You know, there's a - the character, in order to strive to get whatever it is that he or she wants, has to push their way through opposing forces, through conflict, obstacles, resistance from wherever those forces are coming.

[Text on screen] Using Desire to Choose Point of View

Of course the thing that makes a novel interesting is not this sort of skeleton of a form, but how it happens, how things unfold. And there are many, many choices we have to make as novelists in determining this "how," but one of the most important is the choice of point of view: who is doing the desiring, and who is telling about the desiring, and how conscious is that desire? And I'm going to talk about three primary options here in considering point of view, and I'll just name them and then go back and talk about each of them in more detail.

[Text on screen] Narrator/Protagonist; Reader/Protagonist; (First Person Point of View)

The first option is the "Narrator/Protagonist," where the novel tracks the desire of one primary character, either through first-person point of view or limited third, a close third that tracks one character. And a subset of this we might call the "Reader/Protagonist," where the novel also follows one character but uses the second person, so it's addressing - it's in effect asking the reader to become the protagonist.

[Text on screen] The Narrator and The Protagonist (Peripheral First Person Point of View)

The second option is where we track the desires of two characters: the Narrator and the Protagonist. This is sometimes called peripheral first-person, where the narrator is telling the story that sort of stars another person.

[Text on screen] Omniscient Third Person and Rotating First Person Point of View

And the third option is where we're tracking the desire trajectories of multiple characters. This kind of novel normally uses an omniscient point of view, or kind of a rotating close third, or rotating first-person point of view. And in each of these cases, the characters' desires might be represented very directly - it might be told outright what the character wants at the beginning - or indirectly, through implication. So now let's back up and we'll look at each of these in more detail, and I'll give you some examples.

So first, the "Narrator/Protagonist." If you're using first-person, this desire is presented by the protagonist him- or herself, usually very close to the novel's beginning, sometimes on the very first page. Sometimes the narrator is totally aware of what he or she wants, and other times they might think they want one thing, but in fact it's really something else that's driving them. And often in those cases the novel tends to be about the Narrator/Protagonist coming to a greater awareness of their own desire. The example I'd like to start with here is from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I'm going to read to you the first two paragraphs of the novel.

[Text on screen] Desire and Omniscient Third Person Narrator: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee.

And as I read, just see if you can listen and hear if you sense a desire coming through.

"When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom selfconscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn't have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt.

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out."

So the way I read this, we hear the desire stated fairly explicitly at the end of that second paragraph: they want to make Boo Radley come out. This might qualify as a small 'd' desire, it's very concrete, very specific, and it's the desire of children. Now Scout is a child, and even though the narrator is a distanced narrator - as you could hear from that beginning, it's an adult looking back telling us the story of her childhood, and so she's therefore more conscious than young Scout about her own desires - most of the novel really takes place in that younger perspective, and that child Scout isn't truly aware of her deeper yearning, her big 'D' desire. But as the novel proceeds, it becomes clear that she does indeed have a deeper yearning, which is closely related to this initial, small 'd' desire to get Boo Radley to come out. Not only does she want that, but she wants, in a sense, to get the whole community of Maycomb County to come out - she wants to know them, she wants to understand her community, so that she can then understand herself and kind of place herself in this community. And the trial of Tom Robinson, which rises in importance really only in the second half of the book, puts all of this on display, puts the whole community on display. So even though the young Scout

isn't entirely conscious of her own yearning, the narrator is, and she reveals this deeper desire indirectly through the structure of the novel, by having each new section kind of deal with a new character in Maycomb that Scout is trying to come to terms with and figure out.

Sometimes, though, when you're using first-person narration in particular, you're dealing with a more unreliable narrator, a narrator who is actively either trying to deceive you, the reader, or themselves about what they actually want. And in this case, one of your tasks as a novelist is to try to find ways to reveal the true desires and true kind of truths of this narrator outside of what he or she is saying.

[Text on screen] Desire and the Unreliable Narrator: The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro.

So Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* is a good example of this. Stevens, the narrator, is a butler with a new American employer. Stevens wants to go to the west country to see Miss Kenton, the estate's former housekeeper. This desire of his has been prompted by his boss encouraging him to get away for a few days, and also by a letter from Miss Kenton herself. And it's clear, though, from the way Stevens speaks - so sort of overly correct about every last thing, so quick to explain himself - that he's not being completely forthright about his true feelings, which are, of course, to see Miss Kenton, herself. So I'll read to you a short excerpt from the first time he talks about the letter she sent, which comes at the beginning of the book.

"The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion..." this is referring to the suggestion that his boss made to him to get out into the country a bit. "The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days - indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts - is no doubt substantially attributable to - and why should I hide it? - the arrival of Miss Kenton's letter, her first in almost seven years if one discounts the Christmas cards. But let me make it immediately clear what I mean by this; what I mean to say is that Miss Kenton's letter set off a certain chain of ideas to do with professional matters here at Darlington Hall, and I would underline that it was a preoccupation with these very same professional matters that led me to consider anew my employer's kindly meant suggestion."

So I think you can hear a little bit in the way he protests a little too much about his response to the letter - he clarifies it, "Let me make it immediately clear;" "This has to do completely with professional matters, there's nothing personal whatsoever involved here" - you can hear he's hiding something.

Close third-person narration is similar to first-person with the notable added layer of some authorial distance. We tend to believe third-person narrators more than we do first-person narrators, as a rule, but we're still tracking a single character's desire, this time via the close third narrator who, again, might tell us this desire directly or indirectly through implication.

[Text on screen] Desire and Close Third Person Narrator: Brooklyn by Colm Tóibín.

And the example I'd like to use today for this is Colm Tóibín's novel Brooklyn, where the limited third perspective never tells us Eilis' desire outright, but it's hinted at in the way she behaves toward her sister. And I'll read, again, this is the opening passage. And forgive me if I'm mispronouncing his name, or Eilis, I'm not sure how they're pronounced.

"Eilis Lacey, sitting at the window of the upstairs living room in the house on Friary Street, noticed her sister walking briskly from work. She watched Rose crossing the street from sunlight into shade, carrying the new leather handbag that she had bought in Clerys in Dublin in the sale. Rose was wearing a cream-coloured cardigan over her shoulders. Her golf clubs were in the hall; in a few minutes, Eilis knew, someone would call for her and her sister would not return until the summer evening had faded.

Eilis's bookkeeping classes were almost ended now; she had a manual on her lap about systems of accounting, and on the table behind her was a ledger where she had entered, as her homework, on the debit and credit sides, the daily business of a company whose details she had taken down in notes in the Vocational School the week before.

As soon as she heard the front door open, Eilis went downstairs. Rose, in the hall, was holding her pocket mirror in front of her face. She was studying herself closely as she applied lipstick and eye make-up before glancing at her overall appearance in the large hall mirror, settling her hair. Eilis looked on silently as her sister moistened her lips and then checked herself one more time in the pocket mirror before putting it away."

So here I think it's indirect but you can hear Eilis' yearning for her sister - you know, the way she watches her come in, she's paying such close attention to what she's wearing. And then the moment she hears the front door open, she comes downstairs to silently watch her put on her lipstick. So her desire - her admiration - for her sister, and her desire to somehow be like her I think is very evident, even though indirect, in that first opening passage.

Finally, I'll just, again, make a quick comment about the "Reader/Protagonist," I don't think I have an example about this, it's less common using second-person. But it operates in a very similar fashion to the other two examples I just gave you, the first-person or close third, where we are aligned with basically a single character, it's just that the reader is... it's a little more in-your-face, it's asking the reader, kind of pulling them by the necktie or whatever and saying: "You be this character."

Okay, so now we move on to the second category which is this narrator and protagonist, and here we have two desire threads usually that we're following. And *The Great Gatsby* is the classic example here.

[Text on screen] Managing Multiple Desire Threads: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

We have Gatsby, who wants Daisy, but the novel is told from the perspective of Nick, the narrator. And Nick is an observer of Gatsby, but he's not just that; he also has a desire, which is that he wants to understand Gatsby and maybe even somehow sort of touch the essence of him - he's fascinated

by this man. And here's a passage from the beginning of the novel that gives you a glimpse of Nick's kind of strange obsession with Gatsby:

"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of "creative temperament," - it was an extraordinary gift for hope a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No - Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." So I think in that passage you can really hear his fascination with Gatsby and his ultimate horror at what happened to him, and that holds a desire at the heart of it. And I think it's worth mentioning here too that sometimes a character's desire is actually a kind of negative desire, it's what we might call an aversion. It's sort of the opposite of wanting, a strong not wanting, a strong desire to be rid of something. And that can also power a novel.

So a similar point of view structure to this - to Gatsby and this narrator/protagonist - is also a firstperson novel with a distance-remembering narrator. So like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, although in that book, as I said, we don't really get a whole lot of the older narrator - we understand her as a storyteller and that she has a much more advanced diction and understanding than the child, Scout, but we don't get a lot about her life or her current desires.

[Text on screen] Desire and Distance Narrator: *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson.

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* is another example - and I think maybe a little bit of a better example for this case - where the narrator is telling the events - the primary events of the story - from a great distance. And in that novel, the narrator, who is a much older Ruthie - Ruthie is the young protagonist and the older Ruth is telling the story. The older Ruth seems to be fueled by a

desire to sort of set the record straight about what happened in her youth, and to tell the story of her escape from Fingerbone with Sylvie, who is her aunt, and of Sylvie's essential nature, which was really to embrace impermanence. The younger Ruthie seems to want to find where she fits in the landscape of her shifting family, where it seems that people are always dying or leaving. So even though it's the same Ruthie, the elder narrator Ruthie has a very different agenda from the younger character Ruthie, and therefore we're tracking kind of two separate desires - but really the primary one is the younger Ruthie.

So now we move on to the third category, which is the novel that tracks multiple desire threads, multiple characters. And first I'll talk a little bit about the omniscient point of view in this case. An omniscient narrator ranges more widely than a close third perspective and can dip into the heads of multiple characters, and in this case does follow the desire threads of multiple characters. As a rule, the more characters - the more of these desire threads you're following - the bigger a novel you have, a larger scope you're dealing with. The example that's closest to mind here for me is my own most recent novel called *After the Dam*, where I have one clear protagonist, but three other important characters whose desires become apparent as the novel proceeds.

[Text on screen] Desire and Omniscient Third Person: *After the Dam* by Amy Hassinger.

Rachel, my protagonist, wants to rediscover - and even re-inhabit - her previous self, which she tries to do by returning to her grandmother's lake house, which is a place she loved and spent a great deal of time at as a child. Joe, her former boyfriend, wants Rachel. Diane, Joe's mother, wants to keep Rachel away from Joe, so she's an antagonist to Rachel. And Maddy, Rachel's grandmother, wants both Diane and Rachel to be happy, which is of course impossible in this scenario. So the novel uses an omniscient narrator who dips deeply into the heads of each of these four characters and tracks each of these desires.

Another option here in tracking multiple desires is to have a rotating first-person or limited third perspective.

[Text on screen] Desire and Rotating First Person or Limited Third Person.

And a couple examples of novels that do this are Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, or Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. And in these cases each writer uses the first-person point of view for several different characters, moving from voice to voice and head to head in different sections of the novel. So as each section begins, we're kind of in the voice or in the head of one of these alternating perspectives. Usually each of these desires will either be complimentary or sort of opposed to the other characters in the book, just as I was saying about my own novel *After the Dam*. So it creates a greater sense of depth and complexity to the novel as a whole.

Another way to think about this - which is maybe self-evident by now - is that if you have a character with a desire, you have a plot. And the more desires you have, the more plots and subplots or multi-plots you're dealing with.

[Text on screen] Changing Desire Tracks: *After the Dam* by Amy Hassinger.

So sometimes a character will be on a desire track and there may be a certain... you know, I guess I would think of that as sort of an obstacle or a conflict or some kind of resistance that pushes against their desire and sends them off onto another track, and they decide, "Well that's not going to work out, I'm going to have to take this route." And again, I guess because it's so close to me, the example that comes to my mind is my own novel *After the Dam*, where my protagonist Rachel starts the book going to her grandmother's lake house in the middle of the night - she leaves kind of impulsively with her baby - because she thinks she wants to introduce her baby to her grandmother, who's dying. But then she also wants to be back in that place that's so important to her. And when she gets there, she discovers that what she remembers, what she holds in her mind, is completely different than what she encounters, and so she has to kind of recalibrate her - Diane, who's her grandmother - her grandmother's nurse is kind of in charge now, and this Rachel experiences as a kind of resistance to what she wants. She wants to go back and find everything just as it was and that, of

course, is not the case. So then she has to find another desire, so she thinks, "Well, I'll go back to Joe because, you know, he used to be this way." Well, that's not going to work out either, so it sort of progresses from, you know... and these are very concrete desires but they each... each of them kind of gets foiled in a certain way, and she's desperately trying to find the thing that she ultimately wants, which by the end it becomes clear really what it is - it's that she needs to kind of come to terms with her new identity as a mother, and that's going to be an entirely new process, and she becomes aware of that.

So in conclusion, as you draft, ask yourself: What does my protagonist want? What small 'd' desire does he or she have at the book's outset? And that may change as the book goes on, they may get or not get that small desire, but then have another one. How is the small 'd' desire related to a deeper yearning that fuels his or her behavior? Also, is the protagonist aware of his or her desire? Is it a conscious desire? Or is it unconscious? Or perhaps they have both - perhaps there's a desire they're conscious of, and then another deeper desire that they're unconscious of that the book will gradually reveal. And how will you present that desire? Will you do it directly, through your narrator or protagonist stating it outright? Or will you do it through implication, through structural choices in the novel or through the language that you use? And finally, which point of view? Will you have the "Narrator/Protagonist" where you track one primary desire? Will you have the narrator and protagonist, where you have two primary desires? Or will you have multiple character desires to track? Thank you, and good luck with your novel!