

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

SESSION ONE—Transcript

Vivian Gornick Transcript

Some years ago, I wrote a book called “The Situation and the Story” and it grew out of about fifteen years of reading, writing, thinking about nonfiction. About the personal narrative actually. But kind of non-fiction that I do is called the personal narrative. Which is different from literary journalism and many other kinds of non-fiction. It’s the closest to story-telling. So, the personal essay, the memoir as I conceive it, is like any other piece of writing, like poetry and like a novel writing. It is essentially the shaping of a piece of experience, the question is where is the experience and who is doing the shaping? So, as I see it, the situation is the raw material. It’s the subject. Any kind of subject. The story is the emotional wisdom behind it. It’s the thing that the writer has actually come to say. A novelist says it through a whole cast of characters who are put in motion, a world is created, the characters are put in motion. And the characters create the conflict which will eventually generate the drama that will tell the story. In non-fiction, there is only the single narrator, who is obviously the writer. That narrator though is what the non-fiction writer calls a persona. Because that story is told only by a certain part of one’s self that one pulls out of one’s self in order to tell the particular story that one is telling. Let me give you an example of my own: more than 20 years ago, I wrote a memoir called “Fierce Attachments,” it was a story I was telling about my mother, myself, and a woman who lived next door to us when I was a child. It took me a long time to figure out exactly how to position the “I” who was telling the story. I was a grown woman by now, and there were many ways in which I could have tapped into myself to tell the story. But the one way which was necessary and finally useful was to simply tap into myself as the daughter. The narrator in this story is simply me as the daughter. There are many other parts of me that could have been put into motion, but that was the one who was there to tell the story. In order to tell it fully, I did what any writer would do, which was to spend my time struggling to isolate that narrator. And finally, when I had her on the page, I had this voice, I had this one piece of me who was me. I then could write this memoir. That is what every non-fiction writer must do. And it’s very much not easier than writing a fully imagined story as a fiction writer would because to pull from one’s self, something so familiar to think that you know yourself so well and that you are able to put yourself on the page so easily is a complete misconception. It’s one of the hardest things in the world to do, to gain the proper distance so that the non-fiction writer becomes devoted only to that piece of one’s self that is, as I say again and again, telling the story. It’s what’s called a point of view, but more than a point of view, it is the way in which you come as a non-fiction writer to inhabit that narrator, that narrating self, in order to tell just this one particular story. Another example I can give you is when I was a young woman, when I was a college student, I worked every summer, I grew up in the Bronx in New York City and we were working class, and every summer I went to work in the Catskill Mountains as a waitress. That was a world unto itself, those hotels. And the way in which we all lived in those hotels, working 60 hours a week, young people who had endless energy. Working 60 hours a week, all locked up together in this little hothouse world. Composed of the hotel, the guests, and the help. And there, a number of things happened to me. One of the things that happened is that one July, or 4th of July, I had my money stolen from me. We would work these big holidays and then we would send our money home to our parents, and they would

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put them in, we'd send money orders home, and they'd put them in the bank for us, for what we were working for, which was the college year. And one 4th of July, my tips were stolen. Right. So, everybody knew that it was someone among us because it was stolen from this barracks that we all lived in. Now, how to tell, that's the situation, right? What was the story that I was wanting to tell? Which part of it? How would I look at it? What was I making of it? What would be the story? There were 50 different ways I could have told this story, depending upon what I myself was making of it. What exactly was the experience? Now, you can imagine how six different people could have told that story right? Depending on what persona they developed in order to tell it. I could go on and on. Now, the personal essay is derived from Muntane form the 14th century. When Muntane said to himself, "All that is in me is in everyone else, so I am not writing narcissistically, I'm not writing about myself, I'm using myself to write about something else. I'm using myself to write about friendship, morality, children, books..." the millions of things that he wrote about. He had no trouble developing the Muntane persona since he believed that whatever came to him was easily shaped. It isn't true, his essays are actually shapeless, but what they are important is that you see the development of the world. It's very much more like poetry than it's like novel-writing, you see the personal narrative developing from that part of one's self that is experiencing books, children, morality, etc. Just as a poet would look at a butterfly and know that he or she pulls something from himself, some persona from himself that will engage with the butterfly so that a piece of experience is shaped. That is exactly how the personal narrative goes forward. Have I said enough? Ask me a question.

Interviewer: How would this apply to fiction writers, particularly especially if they're not drawing from personal experience, but are making stuff up, how would the designation between the situation, the story play out for a totally fictionalized account for a novel writer? Vivian: Well for a novel writer, well let's put it this way. Novel writing has a different agenda. It's hard to explain that exactly, but it's a different agenda, so that, for instance, a first-person narrator in fiction can be an unreliable narrator, right? That's not possible in non-fiction. In non-fiction, the narrator must be reliable. The reader must believe that this writer is struggling to come to the bottom of the truth, to get to the bottom of the matter honestly. Whether he or she does or not, the truth-speaker must be self-evident in non-fiction writing. In memoir and in the personal essay. Otherwise, the reader feels like games are being played and that they're being played and that's unforgivable, if you feel in the end that the narrator is dishonest or is self-serving, even in fiction. If you feel that the narrator or that the writer is writing in order to call attention to himself or herself through beautiful sentences, you're immediately turned off. You no longer believe. One way or another the reader must believe, even if the fiction writer is playing games, that in its own way, it's an honest piece of work if you know what I mean, right? So that is one big difference. Now, the other big difference, or they're related, is in fiction, a world is set in motion. The author, the writer, has many many surrogates in the characters who are created. The characters can be set in motion against each other, right? Some speak for the writer, some speak against the writer. But all are speaking to the story. All are there in order to tell the story. And you have, therefore, a means of built-in drama, right? In the personal narrative, you only have yourself. You've only got yourself. Therefore, one of the ways that is comparable to fiction writing for the non-fiction writer is to sort of split yourself in half. In other worlds, you implicate

HIDDEN MEANINGS: CREATIVE FICTION, NON-FICTION, AND FACTS

yourself, you write against yourself. You find your puzzling out, you are part in the story. How are you responsible for what happened? How did you make what happened to the good or to the bad? What is going on here that I can investigate my own self in order to dramatize the situation? You see what I mean? That's the way in which the personal narrative makes a story. There has to be narrative drive, there has to be a conflict in order for the drama to go forward. That story I started to tell you about the Catskill Mountains and the waitress, well I told another version of that story. And in that version, what I was doing there was making me, the 18-year old narrator, I tell the story, I'm 18 years old, I'm up in the mountains. I'm 18 years old and I feel like I can do nothing. I feel incompetent any which way, no matter which way I turn, I'm no good. I'm no good as a friend, I'm no good as a student, I'm no good as a girlfriend. Everything I do is wrong, I don't know who I am, where I am, I feel incompetent anywhere, except when I pick up a tray in the Catskills, I'm not incompetent. This, I know how to do. So, I put myself into this terrible atmosphere, this predatory atmosphere, not really for the money which of course we needed very badly, I was a working-class kid. But it was really because I felt competent picking up that tray and doing that work. And that leads in different ways to the bad things that happened. Got it? So, I am putting myself squarely into it to show how my own split personality is responsible for the situation out of which comes the story. And that is, I believe, how, I believe how to teach non-fiction writing, so that I teach my students, "Your job is to find the persona, your job is to find the narrator of this particular story. And the meaning of that is to find that part of yourself that engages with the situation." A piece that I teach repeatedly and is illustrated in this little book, "The Situation and the Story" is Joan Didion's essay, very famous essay, on migraine headache, it's called "In Bed." And it's easy to use because it's a brilliant illustration and very easy, very quick, of exactly what a non-fiction writer does at her best. And in this little essay, Didion says to the reader: "I suffer from migraine." And she wrote it at a time where everybody believed that migraine was a psychological condition and if you had migraine you were a malingerer, you just didn't have the courage to face life, so you got a migraine. And she tells this story starting in her own inimitable style with her extraordinary vocabulary, to say "I am not guilty at all. I am not responsible for these migraine headaches." And she says it very intellectually so you think "Who could ever accuse this intellectual woman of having a hysterical headache?" But as the piece goes on, you see slowly, slowly, "Well maybe I am a little guilty, and maybe I am really guilty." And it's beautifully done and it shows how she uses migraine to break, she says herself, "To break the fuses of everyday anxiety." That she sees, that her migraine comes when she really needs a break from everyday anxiety. And it's a beautiful illustration of the meaning of the non-fiction writer implicating herself. That implication creates the drama, creates the conflict within one's self. And I learned a lot from that. I've learned how to make great use myself of that recognition. I always start with no matter what I'm writing, I start with "what's my part in this? How did I make this come about? And what exactly is this?" And that's, you could call that autobiographical, but it's not, it's, I mean, it is and it isn't. Almost every great writer has been recused repeatedly of writing autobiographical novels from Jean Rhys to Philip Ross. And they are. They are doing what we are doing in on-fiction. They are shaping the raw material of their biographies, of their own autobiographies into fictions and we, people like me, are shaping the same thing into what I call a personal narrative.