

Jonathan Liebson

THE MONSTER IN THE ATTIC

EVEN LESS EXPERIENCED FICTION WRITERS SEEM TO KNOW that the use of description depends largely on an individual writer's style. Anyone who's dabbled with Hemingway recognizes easily enough his flatter, more straightforward descriptions and how they differ, for example, from the elaborate landscapes of such writers as Annie Proulx or Cormac McCarthy. To illustrate, just compare the beginning of Hemingway's classic story "Big Two-Hearted River" with the opening of Proulx's "The Unclouded Day":

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. [Hemingway]

It was a rare thing, a dry, warm spring that swelled into summer so ripe and full that gleaming seed bent the grass low a month before its time; a good year for grouse. When the season opened halfway through September, the heat of summer still held, dust lay like yellow flour on the roads, and the perfume

of decay came from the thorned mazes where blackberries fell and rotted on the ground. [Proulx]

What's immediately apparent here is the greater simplicity of Hemingway—his lack of extra words to describe—as compared with Proulx's plentiful adjectives and her use of figures of speech ("dust lay like yellow flour"). But if younger writers are capable of identifying these distinctions, they may not as readily notice an all-important similarity. In each passage, despite their differing styles, the role of description still serves a common purpose. The external landscape acts as a mirror for the internal life of the characters in the story. Take Hemingway's Nick Adams, a young man returned from war and trying his best to shut out all emotions and memories that might be painful or complicated. Thus the stripped-down descriptions of northern Michigan, which seem perfectly suited to someone who finds little or no meaning left in the world. By contrast, in the above as well as in other of Proulx's stories, the wilder, more exotic impulses of her characters always seem to correspond with—if not get fed by—the exotic surroundings they constantly inhabit.

Here's another way to think about it: every character has a lens through which he looks at the world. That lens is a two-way viewfinder: to the outside world itself—but also to their inner soul. Thus, to the degree to which a writer understands those emotions, he'll not just identify *what* his character sees but *how* those things actually look to him (simple and unadorned for Hemingway, lush and untamed for Proulx).

THE EXERCISE

To appreciate this concept, describe your least favorite room in your childhood home. Take about ten minutes and write a good paragraph's worth. After you've finished, read on.

The trick of this exercise is that you're already starting with an emotion. The words "least favorite room" should provoke dislike, or remind you of some place you find distasteful, and the fact that it is in your childhood home should put you in touch with feelings your adult self might not admit to. When I ask my students to perform this exercise, here's what usually happens: regardless of what room they choose, they tend to put down on paper their impressions of this room—that is, their feelings toward it, as opposed to what the room actually looks like. I have no doubt that, in their own minds, my students have a vivid picture of that room; probably, they have at least three or four crucial details tattooed on their brains. However, what they write most often looks like this:

I never liked going down to the basement. It was a creepy place, cold and dark and awful. Every time I walked down the stairs a shiver ran down my spine, and I always dreaded whenever I was forced to run some errand for my mother. . . .

Perhaps this is a reflex in the young writer. It is easier to convey how they feel in that basement than to show us the basement itself. But think about yourselves as readers: it's one thing to believe a character you read about is creeped out; it's another thing for you, the reader, to be creeped out as well. As writers, the latter is what we aspire to. We want our readers to experience what our characters are experiencing; we want them to feel as if they're looking right over our characters' shoulders, as if they're right there in the basement with them.

Look back at your own paragraph now. Try to identify how much of it is dedicated to your feelings about the room versus what actually reveals the room itself. In the above passage, the only physical words are *cold* and *dark*. Clichéd or not, they still give the

writer a starting point. Consider the rest of the paragraph a throat clearing. In your own paragraph, try to highlight whatever words appeal to the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Then put a line through all nonsensory (nonphysical) words. You may be left with only a couple of sentences, or even just a few descriptions, but it still may surprise you how much work these sensory words actually get done by themselves.

If, however, you have only one or two words, as in the example above, start a new paragraph entirely. This time, don't use the first-person "I." Think of yourself as the camera operator now, not the narrator. No voice-over; no direct thoughts. All you're allowed to do is describe what the lens sees, or what the microphone (or your nose) picks up. Do this, then come back again and read on.

This time you probably came up with a greater physical sense of the place itself. For myself, remembering my own childhood basement, I picture the island of brown water stains on the ceiling tiles. Between the washer and dryer there's an inch of dust impossible to sweep out with a broom; in the corner sits an old charcoal sofa with loud springs, while the closet door opens forbiddingly upon a row of weathered old coats, guarding the pull chain to an out-of-reach fluorescent light.

Just for fun, I also tried this exercise with my childhood attic, but it turns out I had less to say about it. And it's no wonder: I was always too afraid to go up there.