
It is the saddest night, for I am leaving and not coming back. Tomorrow morning, when the woman I have lived with for six years has gone to work on her bicycle, and our children have been taken to the park with their ball, I will pack some things into a suitcase, slip out of my house, and take the tube to Victor's place. There I will sleep on the floor in a tiny room next to the kitchen. Each morning I will heave a thin single mattress back into the airing cupboard and stuff the musty duvet into a box and replace the cushions on the sofa.

I will not be returning to this life. I cannot. Perhaps I should leave a note. "Dear Susan, I am not coming back..." Perhaps it would be better to ring tomorrow afternoon. Or I could visit at the weekend. The details I haven't decided. I will not tell her this evening. I will put it off. Why? Because words make things happen. Once they are out, you cannot put them back. I am trembling, and have been all afternoon, all day.

This, then, could be our last evening as an innocent, complete family; my last night with a woman I know almost everything about and want no more of. Soon we will be strangers. No, we can never be that. Hurting someone is an act of reluctant intimacy. We will be dangerous acquaintances with a history.

I perch on the edge of the bath and watch my sons, aged five and three. Their toys float on the surface, and they chatter. They are ebullient and fierce, and people say what happy and affectionate children they are. This morning, before I set out for the day, the elder boy, insisting on another kiss before I closed the door, said, "Daddy, I love everyone."
Tomorrow I will damage and scar them.

The younger boy was wearing chinos, a gray shirt, blue braces, and a policeman's helmet. As I toss the clothes in the washing basket, I am disturbed by a sound outside. I hold my breath.

Already!

She is pushing her bicycle into the hall. She is removing the shopping bags from the basket.

During the last few days, I have been trying to convince myself that leaving someone isn't the worst thing you can do to a person. It doesn't have to be a tragedy. If you have never left anything or anyone, there would be no room for the new. Naturally, to move on is an act of infidelity - to others, to the past, to old notions of yourself. Perhaps every day should contain at least one essential infidelity. It would be an optimistic, hopeful act, guaranteeing belief in the future - a declaration that things can be not only different but better.

Eight years ago my friend Victor left his wife. Since then he has had only unsatisfactory loves, including a Chinese prostitute who played piano naked and brought all her belongings to their assignations. If the phone rings he does a kind of panicky dance, wondering what new opprobrium may be on the way. Victor has always given women hope, if not satisfaction

Susan is in the room now.

She says, "Why don't you ever shut the bathroom door?"
"What?"
"Why don't you?"

I can't think of a reason.

She kisses the children. When we really talk, it is about them - something they said or did.

She presents her cheek a few inches from my lips, so that to kiss her I must lean forward. She smells of perfume and the street. She goes to change and returns in jeans and sweatshirt with a glass of wine for each of us.

"Hallo. How are you?"

She looks at me hard, in order to have me notice her. I feel my body contract. I smile. Does she notice anything different in my face today? Usually, before seeing her, I prepare two or three possible subjects, as if our conversation were examinations. Today I am too feverish to rehearse. She accuses me of being silent. But silence, like darkness, can be an act of kindness; it, too, is a language.

The boy's bathwater drains away slowly - their toys impede the plughole. They won't move until the water is gone, and then they sit there making mustaches and hats with the remaining bubbles. Eventually I lift out the younger one out. Susan takes the other.

We wrap them in thick hooded towels. With damp hair and beads of water on their necks, the boys look like diminutive boxers after a fight. They argue about what pajamas they want to wear. The younger one will only wear a Batman T-shirt. They seem to have become self-conscious at an early age. They must have gotten it from us.

This is the opening of Hanif Kureishi's story about a man about to leave his wife and children. Another version of the story was expanded and
Someone once described writing as "deep listening". I wanted to ask people to note their reaction when they read a piece for the first time. Was there a place that you were moved? Or irritated? You might not have been, we all have different reactions but one of the things we want to do as we learn to read as writers is to note when things work, because sometimes it isn't necessarily the content but the craft that makes it effective. Make a mark in the margin then come back and look at the section. Maybe that narrator did something you could steal.

Now let's break this narrator down. Let's begin by asking why Kureishi chose this particular narrator to handle this particular story. But even more basic than that, what is a Persona Narrator. For the majority of you this is a continuation of that discussion. We all know the Writers Studio puts tremendous emphasis on the concept. A persona narrator is like a persona you create to help you write a story or poem. It might help to think of putting on a mask or hiring a ghost writer. It's a device used to keep you separate from the characters so they don't become autobiographical (without you knowing it).

Of course, the first choice in choosing a Persona Narrator is first or third person. Without question you can get more narrative distance with third, but then first person possesses a degree of "intimacy" that third doesn't. Often with first person we are in the mind of the character, but another choice is what tense to write in.

Even though it's just the first couple of pages of Kureishi's story I hope you can begin to see how much the choice of the narrator is the story. The structure and aesthetic of the story comes from the technique of a first person persona narrator.

What does that mean? Well, the first difference between using past and present tenses (in first person) is that in the past tense we know the character survives. Things have been resolved, they have either worked out or they haven't but the events are over and we are looking back. What Kureishi does with this story is put us in the mind of his character before the main dramatic action of the story takes place, so that the whole story becomes about his decision and the war within himself about what he is about to do.

Think of this - whenever you write in the past tense you eliminate a lot of material that might contradict the inevitability of the events in the story,
whereas here what Kureishi is doing is making the whole story about both sides - whether he should go or not. Clearly his character is deeply divided and clearly his character is in a lot of pain. He is guilty, he feels the loss, hopelessness, dread etc. His narrator alternates between the very intimate almost confessional thoughts of the character and the very loving domesticated descriptions of the children.

Put another way, the narrator seems to give the character two sides. Look at the first paragraph. After revealing right away in the first sentence what the whole story is about (and hooking us) by the end of the paragraph we have: There I will sleep on the floor in a tiny room next to the kitchen. Each morning I will heave a thin single mattress back into the airing cupboard and stuff the musty duvet into a box and replace the cushions on the sofa.

Look at how grounded that is in the physical world. The specific details of the "musty duvet". In other words, we have a narrator who is capable of excruciating examination of their inner world - "Soon we will be strangers. No, we can never be that. Hurting someone is an act of reluctant intimacy. We will be dangerous acquaintances with a history." And then who can go the other direction to: "The boy's bathwater drains away slowly - their toys impede the plughole. They won't move until the water is gone, and then they sit there making mustaches and hats with the remaining bubbles. Eventually I lift out the younger one out. Susan takes the other."

In the process Kureishi creates a thoroughly modern character who withholds, who is melodramatic, tortured, uncertain and, again, deeply divided. The story is about someone pulled in two directions and the narrator with painstaking care wants to paint both sides of this person as clearly as he can, with the dramatic tension coming from the fact the internal opposition. If the story was told by a character looking back at the past, some of the divisions would be reconciled, the agony would be less raw.

But what other tension does the narrator create? Well, he gets tremendous power from the idea that one of the characters, the "I" knows what is about to happen and the other doesn't. Can you see how that deepens the drama and makes it all the more heartbreaking? Throughout the class we will look at how tension is created by who knows what. The character might be on their way to an understanding, but the narrator always knows what that is. Bookmark this concept, we will come back to it.

What about the distance? Where is the narrator relative to the character? The narrator is right there, right next to the character. Over the
course of the class we will look at a number of narrators who employ different styles. In a way there are two different styles in Kureishi's piece, one consists of the voice in the head, the one analyzing "Soon we will be strangers etc." the other turns to the scene and the analytic voice drops out, this is more show versus tell where we are with the boys in the bath and they look like fighters. A lot has been made, and you have probably heard it - Show don't tell. In general, I don't believe in these "laws" of fiction or poetry, just as soon as you create them someone comes along and breaks them, doing something we supposedly shouldn't do but with surprising power and feeling. However, I did want you to notice how the narrator Kureishi has chosen alternates. When he has killed us with something using one style, he can jump to the other. We'll see that many writers do this and we want to be aware of the benefit.

Sometimes it is difficult to get our minds around the idea of a Persona Narrator in first person. Why is it needed? How can there be a Persona Narrator, all I'm hearing is the voice of the character? Believe me these questions are normal and everybody asks them. It is important to keep in mind that some authors intentionally choose to keep the narrator (and their needs and contributions) hidden. If you think about the development of fiction, it was popular in the beginning - I'm thinking of Dafoe and Fielding - for chapters to begin with a description like - our hero finds love to be etc - in other words the narrator was free to intrude at any time to remind us that a story was being told. In modern fiction particularly in realism, it is fashionable instead to turn the story over to the character so that we are immersed in the story from their perspective, but that doesn't mean there isn't a narrator, its just that narrative choices - what to emphasize, how to get the mood in, even where its going - are muted. Kureishi has chosen a character who is struggling to decide what to do, but the narrator isn't. The narrator knows where this is going and how its going to end. While it's a testimony to his skill that he can create suspense, don't mistake it for the absence of the storytelling voice.

Over the next ten weeks we will talk alot about mood and tone. The Writers Studio uses these terms with great particularity. Mood refers to the overall feeling in the piece and also to what you are writing out of. I will ask you to include mood in your preambles. Mood is a term meant to describe only the deepest levels of feeling and in this story clearly the mood is loss, I don't any of us would be confused as to what the mood is. But mood always plays against tone in great writing. In this piece the tone is what we would describe as matter of fact. So there is enormous contrast between the mood of loss and the matter of fact tone.
Lastly, I want to point out the extraordinary compression with which Kureishi gives us this relationship. Notice again how grounded in the physical scene it is and how nothing is wasted not even the kiss. The dialog is wonderful and it follows the main thing that we must understand about dialog which is that it is there to reveal character, not for exposition. If you write dialog that doesn't reveal, it won't work and will feel klunky. I think we have all been in those dreadful moments in a relationship in which you seem to be reading over and over from the same bad script and you already know what the other person is going to say and I think he nailed it. So much tension and little more than a paragraph.

Whenever we are working with a first person Persona Narrator we find the writer accomplishing three objectives (through the narrator). They are creating a quirky entertaining voice, one who engages us and wants us to read on (a personality) and secondly they are giving us a character who is always revealing themselves. Lastly, they are giving us the character's vulnerability.

Kurieshi’s piece accomplishes both. We very clearly feel the personality that is talking to us and then, as well, look at how much you know about him in only three pages. I will come back to this point over and over.

Exercise: I want you to write a first person persona narrator using present tense in which the character is about to do something very dramatic, and where there is a lot at stake. I want you to put them in this situation where they (the "I") knows what is about to happen but the other people (who will be effected) do not.

You want to use a confessional style, slightly conversational as if the PN is explaining this to us, but one where the Pn is very grounded in the physical. You want to be doing scenes, not just having the PN talk. The tone is matter of fact and the mood is clearly loss. You get to show a character who is tortured by their decision so that they can have, if you want, conflicted feelings.

Now, remember, this is an exercise, we are more interested in trying something out than trying to complete a whole story so I want you to feel free to experiment and try things out. If you only manage a paragraph that is fine by me, the main thing is to concentrate on working with this kind of narrator to see how this technique allows you to handle your story.