

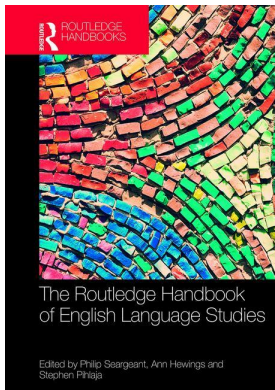
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 04 Jun 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of English Language Studies

Philip Seargeant, Ann Hewings, Stephen Pihlaja

The language of creative writing

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351001724-20>

Jeremy Scott

Published online on: 20 Jun 2018

How to cite :- Jeremy Scott. 20 Jun 2018, *The language of creative writing from: The Routledge Handbook of English Language Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 04 Jun 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351001724-20>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The language of creative writing

Jeremy Scott

Introduction: definitions and historical perspectives

The inclusion of a chapter on creative writing in a handbook of English Language Studies may raise some eyebrows. It should not. That it might, points to an important issue: that the subject and its practice are usually approached more from the context of literary studies. Further, if creative writing engages with a critical infrastructure at all, that infrastructure tends to be literary in provenance and scope. The art of composition and consideration of rhetoric have been aspects of language studies for a long time; however, these kinds of *linguistic* focus on the mechanisms that underpin the creation of a literary text have been notably absent from most creative writing discourses. This is eminently understandable, given that the primary focus of the discipline of creative writing is the creation of literary texts. However, this chapter will take what might currently be viewed as an unorthodox approach to the discussion of creative writing practice by asserting that the discipline can also be approached from the perspective of the study of language as well as, or even instead of, the context of literary studies. The argument I wish to make here could be summarised as follows: to write is to engage, inexorably, self-consciously, with language and its mechanics. Thus, a better understanding of these mechanics must be of enormous benefit to the creative writer. I will justify this assertion using a critical framework drawn from stylistics: the analysis of discourse using frameworks drawn from linguistics (Short 1996; Toolan 1998; Simpson 2004).

As a summarising justification for an approach to creative writing practice through stylistics, it will be useful to turn to Toolan (1998: ix):

[One of the] chief feature[s] of stylistics is that it persists in the attempt to understand technique, or the craft of writing. . . . Why these word-choices, clause-patterns, rhythms and intonations, contextual implications, cohesive links, choices of voice and perspective and transitivity etc. etc., and not any of the others imaginable? Conversely, can we locate the linguistic bases of some aspects of weak writing, bad poetry, the confusing and the banal? Stylistics asserts we should be able to, particularly by bringing to the close examination of the linguistic particularities of a text an understanding of the anatomy and functions of the language. . . . Stylistics is crucially concerned with excellence of technique.

Toolan's remarks refer to study and analysis of extant, completed literary texts. I am suggesting here a reversal of that paradigm. What applications might a critical and reflective stylistic awareness have in the *creation* of texts, not just in their analysis after they have been written? Stylistics, as Toolan suggests, can help identify and, crucially, account for moments of 'excellence' as well as parts of the work which are less successful. I would like to suggest that such stylistic awareness can become an integral part of creative practice itself. As Eliot (1980) acknowledges in his essay 'The Function of Criticism':

the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour, the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative.

(30)

A note of caution, though: it is in no way the intention of this chapter to suggest that creative writers *must* engage with stylistics and/or language studies in general. Such a proposition would be patently absurd. You do not need to understand complicated linguistic concepts to be an accomplished writer. My hope, though, is to point to the various ways in which a practical exploration of the mechanics of language in general and stylistics in particular through writing rather than just reading texts can benefit both the creative writer and the student of language. Rather than showing the only way to write well, combining stylistics and creative writing provides opportunities to explore how you *can* write, how to avoid certain common pitfalls and, at the very least, to consider critically the question posed by Toolan above: why *these* words, and not others?

There are two key issues which should be explored before continuing: the first is an issue of definition, the second of technique.

In a broad sense, creative writing can be characterised as writing that moves beyond the strictures of journalistic, technical, academic and other professional genres (which are analytic and pragmatic in scope), is in some sense original (it draws on the imagination to convey meaning) and is concerned with self-expression. I would like to advance a more specific, tripartite definition which, as should be expected given the orientation of this chapter, draws on linguistic concepts.

- 1 Creative writing harnesses the natural *playfulness* to be found in everyday language use: a bending of rules and norms, innovative expression, repetition, reworking and intertextuality (Carter 2004: 8–9). Swann et al. (2011: 11) support this proposal that linguistic creativity should be seen as an essential function of language itself, as inherent in every act of meaning-making and as a universal feature of everyday spoken language, accessible to all (see also Chomsky 1965).
- 2 *Creative* writing, in comparison to more instrumental discourses, is characterised by the fact that processes of writing and reading become analogous. It is possible to envisage situations where we 'just write': a shopping list, a quick email at work, a jotted-down reminder to do something. In these examples, the process of writing is in the ascendant, and reading is backgrounded. More often, though, we write and read at the same time; Oatley (2003) terms this combination of processes *writingandreading*. I have just re-read the two previous sentences and made some changes (I added the words 'at work' to the email example, and then deleted a further example of pure writing: the instructions on how to operate a coffee maker). Creative writing, then, foregrounds the act of reading – and re-reading. Morley (2011: 25) also posits this equivalence: 'reading is a kind of rewriting

but by many hands and eyes. Writing is only a more exacting form of reading, individual in its action and exactions.’ In further support of this definition, Swann et al. (2011: 9) broaden the term ‘rereading’ to capture a notion of ‘reusing’ the potentialities of language:

[A]ll reading is in some sense a form of rewriting (recasting what one reads in one’s own mind), and . . . much writing is a form of rereading (recasting the resources of the language and texts as found into what one makes of them).

- 3 Creative writing cues up cognitive processes of world-building in the mind of the reader – worlds which may or may not have counterparts in reality. It (almost) always refers to states of affairs that are ‘not here’ and ‘not now’. If I write ‘The man sat in the armchair by the fire reading a book’, the reader builds a mental representation (the metaphor of a ‘world’ is used to describe it) based upon conceptual knowledge gathered from the real world. Pause now and examine the world this sentence builds in your imagination. What age is the man? (Elderly?) What is the armchair made of? (Leather?) What colour is it? (Red? Perhaps green?) What time of day is it? (Evening?) What type of book is it? (Hardback?) Individual answers may or may not have matched the suggestions in brackets, but I would suggest that it is highly likely that they did. Further: none of this information is given in the sentence; it is inferred by the reader from a pre-existing mental schema¹ (Bartlett 1995). This cognitive linguistic process is crucial to the effect of creative writing and a defining characteristic of it.

To summarise: creative writing draws on the playfulness inherent in spoken language, treats writing and reading as equiponderant processes and exploits the world-building properties of discourse.

The second issue to be explored concerns the relationship between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’, a technical distinction much beloved of creative writing workshops and a concept which can be greatly elucidated through a principled understanding of how language works.

There is a fundamental quality of human language that separates it from other forms of communication across the natural world. Chimpanzees have been taught to use sign language to a basic level. The sounds dolphins make have been shown to communicate specific messages: danger, food here, come this way. However, there is one crucial difference between these kinds of communication and those that are possible through human language: *the capacity of human language to refer to situations, contexts and even worlds that are ‘other’ than the here-and-now of the communicative situation*. The chimpanzee can ask for food because it is hungry *now*, but (as far as we know) it cannot reference the food it had yesterday, or the food it would prefer to have tomorrow. The clicks of dolphins can warn of an approaching killer whale in the present moment, but cannot subsequently relate what happened to friends later in the day. In short, human language creates worlds that are different to and other than the present moment in which the exchange takes place. It can build a world that does not exist in the here and now.

These worlds are created by virtue of two distinctive but complementary functions of language, which creative writing discourse refers to as *showing* and *telling* (Boulter 2007: 77). The easiest way to illustrate the difference is through an example. Which is the more effective of these two mediations of an action in the story world?

- 1 She was very angry so she left the room.
- 2 She left the room, slamming the door behind her.

The same thing ‘happens’ in the world of the story in each case. However, the way the action is mediated for the reader differs significantly. Sentence 2 is arguably more effective; the reason why should be familiar to all students of creative writing. It is (nearly) always better to aim to *show* an emotion, a reaction or a character trait than to describe it. The reasons why this is so are complex, but the insights afforded by stylistics, particularly cognitive stylistics, go a long way towards explaining them in terms of schema theory (Lakoff 1987; Bartlett 1995) and the concept of foregrounding (Harber & Hershenson 1980). Accordingly, I would suggest the terms *mimesis* and *diegesis* as a better alternative to ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ as they capture the essence of what is happening as the reader builds a world in response to the linguistic cue. The features of the world are either portrayed, objectively, or described, with inevitable slant, by the narrating voice; in the latter case, there is more mediation, more intervention, between the action in the story world and the reader’s apprehension of it. The cline between *mimesis* and *diegesis* is a fundamental paradigm of a language-based approach to writing.

The two terms are classical in origin, but their influence can be traced in the etymology of many current English words: to *mimic*, to *imitate*, to *mime* – all these words are concerned with the representation of reality. For Plato, the terms are used very specifically: *diegesis* is representation of action ‘in the poet’s voice’, while *mimesis* is representation of action in the ‘voice(s) of characters’. Their use in the context of creative writing must be more nuanced, though. Accordingly, I also want to capture their wider reference: the representation of an imaginary world through language (Auerbach 1968) uses *mimesis* to refer to the representation of reality in art, but, as Lodge (1990: 25–44) points out, it is not a straightforward matter to differentiate between them nor to distinguish between their two effects (see also Booth 1983 and Rimmon-Kenan 1989). The taxonomy which stylistics proposes to categorise literary presentation of discourse can help here. It ranges from Narration, pure *diegesis* (‘She opened the door and walked into the room, seeing him standing by the window’) to Free Direct Discourse, as close to a pure *mimesis* as written language can get (‘Here she comes’). Thus, stylistics addresses Lodge’s valid objection, mapping the distinction between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, and thus between showing and telling, more rigorously (Scott 2013: 93–94).

To return to the example given earlier: instead of ‘She was very angry’, we prefer ‘She left the room, slamming the door behind her’ because the second mediation of the story world event is closer to the conceptual space of the character. There is no external voice of mysterious provenance explaining what the character is feeling on her behalf. Rather, her behaviour speaks for itself. To be glib for a moment: actions speak louder than words. The description of a character’s behaviour leaves space for the reader to interpret it, as he or she would in the actual world, based on everyday familiarity with the kinds of mood that slamming a door indicates (in cognitive terms, the reader has a ‘losing one’s temper’ schema which is activated by the slamming of the door; we have seen someone do this before, or, indeed, we have done it ourselves; we know why it happens, and we know what it signifies: anger). Straight diegetic description bypasses that space, enervating the reader’s processes of world-building. Rather than seeing *through* language, the reader is *looking at* the narrative voice. In short, as cognitive linguistics can demonstrate, the narrative discourse should aim (unless there are very good reasons not to – and there may well be) for proximity to the sphere of character rather than narrator. We can also argue here for a connection to the *connotative* as opposed to *denotative* functions of language; *mimesis* corresponds to the former, while *diegesis* draws upon the latter.

The lesson for creative practice is straightforward. Do not ‘lay the table’ or ‘manage the stage’ too diligently, or in too much detail. Let the reader’s imagination do its work. Much of interest can be gleaned from the gaps in texts, from ellipsis, from the unsaid, from the unexplained.

The reading experience will be richer and more nuanced – more personal, more lifelike – and thus, the opening discussion of this chapter comes full circle. Creative practice (writing) and creative engagement with the output of that practice (reading) are two sides of the same coin. Rather than simply writing or only reading, it helps to think of ourselves as writing and reading at the same time. Thus, we become both agents simultaneously, each attuned to the needs and actions of the other.

The rest of this chapter will home in on two of the many potential areas of enquiry available for this topic: the concept of language as a representative medium, and the significant insights to be gained from narratology.

Current critical issues and topics 1: seeing through language

In this section I will discuss the language of creative writing using another world-based metaphor: the text as window into an imaginary world. As already proposed, the literary text arises from two essential materials: language, and the imaginary worlds that language cues up in the mind of the reader. Of course, the worlds created will vary from reader to reader, even though the language from which they are built is identical. So, the discussion in this chapter so far has implied the presence of two ‘worlds’: the one imagined by the writer, and the one imagined by the reader.

However, it is not strictly (or not always) correct to say that the creative writer first imagines a world and then writes about it. Indeed, it is possible to argue, as Derrida (1976) did, that the text refers to nothing at all outside of itself: that its ‘meaning’ resides at the centre of an unattached web of words with no external anchoring. Prior to this, Abrams (1953) had proposed that language *can* mediate both material and interior (mental) worlds, but that this – mere representation – is not the primary purpose of art. Rather, verbal art focusses and directs attention. Unlike Hamlet’s ‘mirror held up to nature’, it should not reflect; nor should it simply ‘imitate’, a function of verbal art that Plato also disparages in *The Republic*. Instead, it should *illuminate* like a lantern.

It is easier, probably, for most writers to accept the assertions of Abrams than those of Derrida. However, while it is self-evidently useful for the creative writer to reflect upon the representational aims of the text that she or he is writing and its essential inter-relationship with the ‘real world’ (wholly fictitious, semi-autobiographical, science-fictional, fantastical, objective, subjective), it is also an interesting thought experiment – if nothing else – to dwell for a moment on Derrida’s infamous pronouncement that ‘*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.*’ The process of translating this phrase into English has (appropriately enough) proved to be a contentious process. ‘*There is nothing outside the text*’ is often used, but disputed (see, for example, Deutscher 2009). For our purposes, it will be sufficient to render it as ‘There is no such a thing as out-of-the-text’, or, more arguably: ‘There is no such thing as context.’ I introduce the notion of context to complicate the previous discussion of the ways in which creative writing uses language to mediate between an imaginary world and a reader. Creative language use need not always involve mediation or an imagined context; as the second part of the definition of creative writing which opened this chapter should make clear: *creativity can arise from within language itself*. The two processes of imagining a world and mediating it through language are not necessarily antecedent one to the other. Often, it is in the very act of writing that the imaginary world is created. This makes the act of writing an act of thought, and we think through the physical performance of it. Creative writing ‘happens’ in the interplay between language and world, but also within language itself. From the one, we gain access to the other, and the two are interdependent. *We see through language*, hence the

metaphor of text as window, into a world beyond. This happens whether we are writers or readers – and creative writers are both.

Of course, the process of seeing through language can happen in many different ways, and exploring this assertion opens the door to a range of available techniques. It will be useful now to focus on some examples. Here are two extracts through which the reader ‘sees’ in fundamentally different ways.

Text 1

No sweat, we’ll never win; other choirs sing about Love, all our songs are about cattle or death!

Fionnula (the Cooler) spoke that way, last words pitched a little bit lower with a sexyish sideways look at none of the others. The fifth-year choir all laughed.

Orla, still so thin she had her legs crossed to cover up her skinniness, keeked along the line and says, When they from the Fort, Hoors of the Sacred Heart, won the competition last year, they got kept down the whole night and put up in a big posh hotel and ... everything, no that I want that! Sooner be snogged in the Mantrap.

Know what the Hoor’s school motto is? Fionnula spoke again, from the longest-legs-position on the wall. She spoke louder this time, in that blurred, smoked voice, It’s ‘Noses up ... knickers DOWN’!

The Sopranos all chortled and hootsied; the Seconds and Thirds mostly smiled in perusal admiration.

Text 2

It was when she ate that Lin was most alien, and their shared meals were a challenge and an affirmation. As he watched her, Isaac felt the familiar trill of emotion: disgust immediately stamped out, pride at the stamping out, guilt, desire.

Light glinted in Lin’s compound eyes. Her headlegs quivered. She picked up half a tomato and gripped it with her mandibles. She lowered her hands while her inner mouthparts picked at the food her outer jaw held steady.

Isaac watched the huge iridescent scarab that was his lover’s head devour her breakfast.

These two extracts² illustrate two fundamentally different ways in which readers see through language. The stylistically-aware writer should be considering the following questions:

- Who is ‘witnessing’ the imagined story world (i.e. from what perspective does the reader see the world)?
- Whose voice is telling the reader about the story world? Does it have any foregrounded (linguistically deviant)³ qualities?
- What is the effect of foregrounded narrative voice on the way the reader sees through language into the story world?

When reading Text 1, the reader will ‘see’ a quotidian situation: a group of schoolgirls sitting on a wall, talking together. Note, however, that this information is not ‘told’ to the reader directly. There is no description of the wall; it is introduced with a definite article, ‘the’,

signalling that the story begins *in medias res*. ‘The’ does not refer anaphorically back to a previous indefinite article and thus its use, deictic in this instance, assumes a shared mental space (compare the effect if ‘a’ is substituted for ‘the’) – a world in common. The reader pictures schoolgirls because of the character names, the references to the ‘Hours of the Sacred Heart’ (another school) and the phrase ‘fifth-year choir’; the term ‘fifth year’ is culturally specific to the UK and, as it happens, now obsolete, positioning the scene within a particular time period. A reader familiar with this cultural context will also be able to infer that the school is a Catholic one (from its name, and, perhaps, from the Irish-origin girls’ names: Fionnula, Orla), and the use of ‘hoors’ (whores) signals an all-girls school. In terms of setting: the names signal Ireland, but the language signals Scotland (the use of dialect terms such as ‘keeked’, ‘hootsied’ and ‘hoors’). Thus, we as readers also infer a particular place, culture and time, from very sparse textual cues.

The narrative voice of Text 1 is clearly not standard English; neither does it follow the conventions for presenting direct speech (inverted commas). It is third-person, but uses a spoken register more akin to a first-person voice (as well as the dialect words, notice the deviant compound adjectives ‘longest-legs’ and ‘per-usual’). The narrator exists, both ontologically and linguistically, on the same plane as the characters rather than speaking on their behalf from an omniscient perspective. We see through the language to a world beyond, but at the same time both the particular detail of that world and our view into it are conditioned fundamentally by the distinct attributes of the narrative voice, which is linguistically ‘other’ than standard English, and thus foregrounded. It is also ‘other’ when compared to the ‘mainstream’ third-person voice of English literature, which tends to be in standard English (Scott 2009: 145–148). The world being described by it, however, is familiar.

By comparison, the narrative voice of Text 2 is standard English. There is nothing deviant about its use of words or grammatical structures, although the syntax of the opening sentence does bear examination. Compare ‘It was when she ate that Lin was most alien’ to the (arguably) more usual ‘Lin was most alien when she ate.’ The act of eating, expressed by the verb phrase in subject position, is the focus in the original, rather than the fact that Lin is non-human. The syntax has the dual effect of drawing the reader’s attention to the act (which is the focus of the rest of the paragraph), and also of maintaining suspense. We engage with the everyday act of eating food *before* we come to the realisation that Lin is ‘other’ than Isaac. The form of the sentence used in the extract is more effective in expressive terms than its more ‘normalised’ version – another example of the advantages to the creative writer of a keen stylistic awareness. The narrative situation is also third-person, as in Text 1, but, in this instance, is more ‘transparent’: we see through the discourse into the world of the story without becoming unduly interested in or distracted by the language use itself (in opposition to the situation in Text 1, where the demotic cadences, lack of speech marks and slang words drew attention to themselves; they *foreground* the narrative discourse). However, the scenes and characters described are anything but matter-of-fact: a human character, Isaac, sharing food with his alien lover, Lin, who has a scarab – complete with mandibles – for a head. In Text 1, the discourse is foregrounded while the story world is quotidian. In Text 2, the discourse is quotidian but the story world is fantastical, and foregrounded.

The various linguistic features of these two texts and the contrasts between them demonstrate one of the central paradigms justifying this chapter’s assertion that critical linguistic awareness sits at the heart of reflective creative writing practice. It is helpful to envisage a cline between ‘standard’ discourse, which aspires towards transparency, and more linguistically deviant modes of expression which draw attention to themselves as well as the world they mediate. In the former, we are seeing as if through a clear, flawless window pane to a

world beyond (as in Text 2, say); in the latter, the pane is cracked, or stained, or distorted (as in Text 1). The creative writer may situate his or her narrative discourse at either end of this cline, at a point somewhere along it, or even as fluctuating back and forth across it. The choice is a crucial one, though, and consideration of these methodological options should automatically become an aspect of creative practice.

Current critical issues and topics 2: narrative and structure

Narrative is a substantial subject within both language and literary studies. It lies at the core of many literary texts, be they fiction or poetry. Narratives surround us in our daily lives, and in our daily language use. They are crucial to the structure of media discourse, for example, and so shape the way that we understand the world beyond our immediate experience. Narratives can also be continuous or serial, and, indeed, very long and complex, such as serialised TV dramas or soap operas. They may also be mini-narratives, or narrative ‘snapshots’, limited or single narrative events which leave the viewer to fill in the gaps. News stories in particular are shaped and mediated by the wider ‘meta-narratives’ into which they are situated (think ‘national decline’, ‘economic catastrophe’, ‘social breakdown’, ‘environmental collapse’). We cannot avoid *storying* our lives. It is what human beings do in order to make sense of a highly complex and confusing world.

Prototypical narratives begin with the presentation of an initial stable situation which is in some way disturbed, disordered or upset due to a particular obstacle or problem. This is often set up by a particular desire or wish that a character will have, and an obstacle that stands in the way of them achieving that goal. The particular nature of the obstacle and how it is overcome is a key feature of genre: finding the killer, solving the mystery, giving the villain his comeuppance or obtaining the sought-after thing or person. As should be predictable from the assertions made so far in this chapter, this universal narrative form is by no means unique to literary texts; it can also be found in the ways in which newspapers and the media in general present the news (who is to blame for this problem which has disrupted our lives? how will it be resolved?) The same structure may be found in TV quiz shows (who will win the cash prize?) or in sport (who will win the match?). Even advertisements make use of this fundamental structure. This is the problem you have (less-than-white teeth), or this thing is lacking in your life (a sexual partner). Here is how you solve the problem (whitening toothpaste), or fill the gap (perhaps the same product). The achievement (or otherwise) of this goal is what brings about some sort of *change* or *transformation* in the initial situation – a fundamental attribute of narrative. Narratives, in short, have to be about change, disturbance, transformation and/or disorder.

Burroway (2014) models this basic structure as made up of *conflict* (between characters, between a character and her inner self, between a character and something she desires), *crisis* (the situation comes to a head in some way, and the tension peaks) and *resolution* (the crisis is resolved, as is the conflict). Baldwin (1987) describes a similar approach, what he calls the ‘angel cake’ approach to crafting fiction, but preferring the terms *exposition*, followed by *complication* and ending in *resolution*. Other models add a fourth stage, *climax*, which comes in between the complication and the resolution. To define these terms in more detail:

- 1 *Exposition*: the part of the story which sets the scene and introduces the character.
- 2 *Complication*: the part of the story where the lives of the character(s) are complicated in some way.
- 3 *Climax*: the point where suspense is highest and matters are at their most threatening.
- 4 *Resolution*: a solution to the complication is introduced (it need not be a happy one).

According to structuralist narratology, *all* narratives have these essential structures (some models are more complex but advance the same kinds of arguments). The sociolinguist Labov (1972) found that similar patterns naturally occurred in oral narratives in everyday speech. The structure is universal, and can be found in texts ranging from the Bible to Medieval mystery plays, the Koran to *The Hobbit*, and soap operas to *The Arabian Nights*. If structuralist approaches to narratology are correct, narrative has a grammar or syntax of its own, just like the language of which it is made up, and that structure is universal: it applies across cultures and in all situations. Just as a sentence will have a subject and a verb, and perhaps an object (no matter how these are represented orthographically or phonologically), so narrative, which, like the sentence, is an attempt to mediate between humans and the world, has a beginning, a middle and an end. So, from the stories we tell each other every day to novel sequences to the highly-crafted narratives of video games, the same essential pattern can be discerned. All involve the transformation and mediation of experience via the syntax of narrative, no matter whether they are presented orally, via text or via a screen.

An essential methodological choice must be made with regard to the many ways in which the elements of a narrative can be presented. An aspect of the successful mediation of a story world comes (although this is certainly not true of all narratives) through the use of tension and momentum, most obviously in narrative fiction. Thus, the plot begins with the exposition, moves up a slope where suspense and tension gradually increase in response to the complication (or series of complications), reaches a point of climax, and then quickly descends and ends in the resolution. The concept is often presented as an inverted tick shape, with the climax at the ‘point’ of the tick. This pattern of suspense need not, of course, be as neat as the inverted tick image would suggest. In a novel or longer piece of writing, it may well resemble a staircase up until the point of the climax, with tension rising and falling at different stages of the story.

To further develop this idea of tension through structure above: it is crucial to grasp that the relentless progression of the plot *need not necessarily be matched by the ordering of the mediating discourse of the text*. The language of the text can mediate the story in any order that the writer wishes it to, including by starting at the beginning and simply following it through to the end. It would equally be possible, of course, to begin with the climax, move to the beginning, and then come back to the end – or, indeed, start at the end. Genette (1983: 33–35) called this aspect of narrative *order*, and it concerns structure at the level of story. For example, imagine the event sequence that makes up a murder mystery. Someone is murdered (call this Event A). The corpse is discovered (Event B). A series of clues revealing the identity of the murderer are uncovered by the detective (Event C). Finally, the sleuth identifies the murderer and brings him or her to justice (Event D). Assuming the story is to be narrated chronologically, it would be notated as follows: A, B, C, D. First comes the murder, then its discovery, then the investigation, then the revelation of the killer’s identity. However, these events could be mediated in a different order as follows: B (discovery), A (flashback), C (investigation) and finally D (the revelation). The disjunction between story (what happened) and discourse (how it is represented) is full of creative potential, heightening suspense, causing the reader to ask questions and to want to read on. It is helpful to the creative writer, then, to envisage a separation between narrative discourse itself and the story being mediated by that discourse; this idea of the story or plot as distinct from the discourse which mediates it was termed the *fabula* by formalists such as Propp (1968). Order can play a crucial role in how a story works. It can even function as an actor in the story itself – a kind of ‘plot’ in its own right, running alongside that of the story. Interest occurs in the way in which (when and how) the details of the *fabula* are revealed to the reader.

These structures can be even more complex, particularly in longer novels which often contain several different, interlocking narrative structures. To facilitate illustration of this point, the various narratives of a complex structure will be labelled with letters (A, B, C and so on) and the order in which they are mediated by the discourse (the point at which they are revealed to the reader in discourse time) will be indicated by a numerical value. So, if the narrative discourse simply follows the chronological order of the narrative in the story world (in *fabula* time), it would run as follows: A1, A2, A3 and so on. The structure of Book Two of *The Lord of the Rings* ('The Two Towers') contains at least three such narratives: the story of Frodo and Sam and their journey to Mount Doom (A), the fate of Merry and Pippin after they are kidnapped by orcs (B) and the tribulations of Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas and later Gandalf, who are pursuing them in a rescue attempt (C). The discourse of the novel mediates each stage of each narrative in series. This relatively simple structure would be notated as follows: A1, B1, C1, A2, B2, C2, A3, B3, C3 and so on. Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*, on the other hand, makes use of a structure which is highly complex. For illustrative purposes, it will be assumed that there are three principal narrative threads (there are more, in fact): A (the story of two hired assassins), B (the story about a boxer who refuses to 'fix' a fight for a gang leader) and C (the story of two robbers holding up a diner). Approximately, the structure looks like this: C1, B2, A1, A2, A3, B1, B3, C3. This is complex, and very effective. The viewer will engage in significant cognitive work in putting the various narrative strands 'back together' from their broken-down sections. At one point, a character appears in the film who has already been killed *in the world of the fabula* (in story time). In the narrative discourse, though, he is alive and well, but his character is leant a tragic air by the fact that the viewer knows what will eventually happen to him. This ironic effect (a kind of reverse foreshadowing) would be impossible without the complex structure. Another example from fiction: in Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow* (2003) the discourse runs backwards, from the protagonist's death to his birth, while the *fabula* itself runs forwards. Characters walk backwards, speak backwards, and eat backwards. There are intriguing ideological reasons for this, connected to the book's subject matter: the Holocaust. In one sense, this novel is an attempt to 'un-write' a horrific chapter of European history and this effect is entirely due to Amis's creative manipulation of the relationship between discourse and *fabula* (story).

As a final word on the subject of narrative, Genette's (1983: 86–88) concept of *duration* should also be mentioned. As noted, narratives involve a discourse time and a story (or *fabula*) time – which may or may not coincide. Genette called the relationship between them *duration*. 'Twenty years passed' is a long time in story world terms, but is a short piece of language which takes only a second to write or read. Conversely, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is set in a relatively short story period of twenty-four hours; however, it takes a great deal longer than that to read. In short, it has a long discourse time. Again, duration can be exploited by creative writers to great effect in terms of creating suspense, ironic distance, and in summarising lengthy information which is important in plot terms but need not be represented in detail by the discourse. *Time's Arrow* also exploits this facet of narrative discourse and the tension it creates between discourse and *fabula* in terms of compression and reversal.

Understanding and exploiting the relationship between 'discourse' and 'fabula' leads to reflection on the concept of *mediation*: the fact that there is an inevitable intercession in any act of communication between an object of representation and its representation, be that an image, a film or, in this case, discourse. Every utterance entails that linguistic choices be made from the (to all intents and purposes) infinite resources of the language. Transmitting experience through narrative form is an everyday facet of human communication (as the work

of Labov 1972, makes clear) as well as a key aspect of writing poetry or stories. Thus, a fundamental linguistic insight drawn from everyday language use can be brought to bear on the practice of creative writing.

Future directions

The intersections between the practice of creative writing and the study of language are numerous and fascinating, but rigorous and principled research into the field is still in its infancy. Notable early work in this area includes *The Language of Fiction* by Lodge (1966), himself a successful novelist; his collection of essays explicitly engages in detailed analysis of narrative methodology from a linguistic perspective. Subsequently, the work of Nash (1980), Carter and Nash (1990) and Pope (1995, 2005) has explored the notion of creativity in terms of linguistic theory, including, as in this chapter, consideration of the interchange between language as it is used in quotidian contexts and the processes involved in crafting prose and poetry. My own *Creative Writing and Stylistics* (2013) contains specific discussion of the insights stylistics and linguistics might bring to creative practice. All of this work has attempted to broaden the usual academic and, indeed, pedagogical contexts of creative writing and argues for its status as a significant part of English Language Studies, and not just a branch line from the main track through literary studies. This is not to dismiss or in any way diminish the self-evident importance of the attentive, critical reading and study of literature that any creative writer should undergo in furtherance of the understanding of their art, be that of ‘the canon’ of poetry, plays and fiction, the postcolonial, the ‘popular’, world literature, and literary theory.⁴ Rather, it is to assert that, at its most fundamental level, creative writing is *verbal* art, built from language. Accordingly, it will benefit those interested in its practice to engage with disciplines that explore and account for language in a principled and rigorous manner. It will be useful now to speculate on the kinds of future directions that research and practice in this area could take. I have identified three for brief discussion here: cognitive poetics, texts in performance and ‘anatomising inspiration’.

Cognitive poetics draws on both cognitive linguistics and traditional poetics, and its ambition is to provide a rigorous account of the mechanics of reading. The field makes use of cognitive concepts from Gestalt psychology (Kohler 1992), such as figures and grounds,⁵ and schema theory to develop rigorous models of what happens when we read literary texts (Stockwell 2002; Gavins and Steen 2003). One of the most relevant branches of cognitive poetics in terms of creative practice is Text World Theory (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007). In its delineation of the various conceptual spaces which a reader creates as she or he engages with a literary text, as well as the myriad of ways in which these spaces (text worlds) interact, Text World Theory gives the writer the tools to devise an invaluable conceptual map, depicting both the ways in which his or her text might be read (or, more precisely, imagined, conceptualised and envisaged) and, from the point of view of craft, the position of a narrative or poetic voice in relation to this text-world: within it or without it, integral to the story or removed from it and so on, thus keeping the writer attuned to the epistemological status of that voice (see Scott 2016 for further discussion).

A second area deserving of exploration is that of the text in performance. Plenty of work has been done on the stylistics of play texts, especially on how they create character (Culpeper 2001) and in terms of the use of pragmatics-based frameworks to analyse dialogue (Short 1996), but little from the perspective of the playwright (however, see Castagno 2001). To what extent could an understanding of pragmatics (for example, politeness frameworks and conversational maxims) aid and inform the writing of authentic-sounding dialogue, rather

than just its analysis? Also of potential relevance here is the ways in which modern stylistic approaches and, indeed, studies of linguistic creativity in general, are embracing analysis of non-textual media, for example film, TV, plays and poetry in performance (Swann et al. 2011). This could certainly inform creative practice, for example in devised approaches to theatre and in other forms of improvisation.

Third, and perhaps most speculatively, it would be interesting to investigate what stylistics, especially its cognitive branches, has to say about the process of ‘poetic inspiration’ – or perhaps, to put it less contentiously, about the relationships between language and creativity. As should be clear by now, it has long been my ambition to inculcate stylistic awareness into creative practice, not only as a post-composition editorial facility but as part of the process of writing. The most promising route for this investigation would appear to be through research into language and creativity. One example can be found in the process referred to by Keith Oatley (Gavins and Steen 2003) as *writingandreading*. When reading a text, we perform it, and thus we mentally ‘write’ it. In what ways can this experience of *writingandreading* be mined for insights into the processes involved in creating texts?

Conclusion

The central proposition of this chapter is simple, and syllogistic. Creative writing is made from language. Stylistics is the principled study of this language. Therefore, an understanding of stylistics should be of benefit to creative writers. Among the vast number of potential topics, this chapter has focussed on the notion of ‘seeing through language’, on mimesis and diegesis, on narrative structure and on linguistic mediation. As an attempt to summarise the discussion: usually, we think of a context or reference coming first, and the language to mediate it second. This may well be the case, but the purpose of this chapter has been to consider that in creative writing, the opposite can also be true. Words flow, and ideas come. Thus, the usual paradigm can be reversed, so that a context or reference is mapped onto language. By emphasising the ‘language’ side of this equation, it is hoped that this chapter will have done at least a small part of the work required in arguing for the study of language as key to the study of creative writing.

Notes

- 1 *Schema* are ‘packets’ of pre-existing contextual information which we bring to bear when processing language. The concept was originally developed in connection with research into artificial intelligence in order to overcome the barrier of conceptual dependency. In other words, when we process language, we do not rely solely on a series of dictionary-like definitions and denotations of words, but rather on a pre-learned set of associations with a particular term or concept. Good examples are ‘pub’ and ‘restaurant’; both words come with a set of associations and expectations that do not need to be fleshed out in discourse (see Stockwell 2002: 76–77).
- 2 The provenances of these two texts were omitted deliberately. This was to encourage analytical focus on the texts’ language in complete isolation from any knowledge of the respective author or novel. For the curious: Text A is from Warner’s (1999) novel *The Sopranos* whilst Text B is taken from *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville (2000).
- 3 Linguistic deviation as it occurs in literary discourse is defined by Carter and Nash (1990: 31) as follows:

According to deviation theory literariness or poeticity inheres in the degrees to which language use departs or deviates from expected configurations and normal patterns of language, and thus defamiliarises the reader. Language use in literature is therefore

different because it makes strange, disturbs, upsets our routinised normal view of things, and thus generates new or renewed perceptions.

- 4 See Boulter 2007 for an excellent exploration of the relevance of literary theory to creative writers.
- 5 *Figure* refers to that which is foregrounded against a static *background*, such as a moving object in an otherwise stationary scene. In discourse, this could be non-standard linguistic usage which foregrounds itself (stands out) against the background of standard linguistic norms (see Stockwell 2002: 14–18).

Further reading

- Carter, R. and W. Nash (1990) *Seeing Through Language: A Guide to Styles of English Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell. A comprehensive discussion of how linguistics and language studies shed light on the creation of texts, and a corrective to these disciplines' main focus on spoken language.
- Scott, J. (2013) *Creative Writing and Stylistics: Critical and Creative Approaches*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. An exploration of how an understanding of stylistics and its related concepts can aid and influence creative writing practice.
- Scott, J. (2016) 'Worlds from words: Theories of world-building as creative writing toolbox', in J. Gavins and E. Lahey (eds), *World Building: Discourse in the Mind*. London: Bloomsbury. This chapter speculates on the ways in which an understanding of cognitive poetics could be relevant to fictional methodology.

Related topics

- Literature and the English language
- Stylistics: studying literary and everyday style in English
- Discourse analysis: studying and critiquing language in use.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. (1953) *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Auerbach, E. (1968) *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Baldwin, M. (1987) *The Way to Write Short Stories*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Bartlett, F. C. (1995) *Remembering: A Study in Experiential and Social Psychology*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Booth, W. C. (1983) *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Boulter, A. (2007) *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burroway, J. (2014) *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. 9th edn. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Carter, R. (2004) *Language and Creativity: The Art of Common Talk*. London: Routledge.
- Carter, R. and W. Nash (1990) *Seeing Through Language: A Guide to Styles of English Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castagno, P. C. (2001) *New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting*. London: Routledge.
- Chomsky, N. (1965) *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Culpeper, J. (2001) *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and Other Texts*. Harlow: Longman.
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press.
- Deutscher, M. (2009) 'Some friendly words for the postmodern', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics* 4 (1): 5–12.
- Eliot, T. S. (1980) 'The Function of Criticism', in *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gavins, J. (2007) *Text World Theory: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gavins, J. and G. Steen (eds) (2003) *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*. London: Routledge.

- Genette, G. (1983) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Harber, R. and M. Hershenson (1980) *The Psychology of Visual Perception*. 2nd edn. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kohler, W. (1992) *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology*. 2nd edn. New York: Liveright Publishing Company.
- Labov, W. (1972) *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987) *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lodge, D. (1966) *The Language of Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Lodge, D. (1990) *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge.
- Miéville, C. (2000) *Perdido Street Station*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Morley, D. (2011) *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nash, W. (1980) *Designs in Prose*. London: Longman.
- Oatley, K. (2003) 'Writing and reading: The future of cognitive poetics', in J. Gavins and G. Steen (eds), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*. London: Routledge. 161–171.
- Pope, R. (1995) *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Pope, R. (2005) *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Propp, V. (1968) *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (1989) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge.
- Scott, J. (2009) *The Demotic Voice in Contemporary British Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, J. (2013) *Creative Writing and Stylistics: Creative and Critical Approaches*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, J. (2016) 'Worlds from words: Theories of world-building as creative writing toolbox', in J. Gavins and E. Lahey (eds), *World-Building: Discourse in the Mind*. London: Bloomsbury. 127–145.
- Short, M. (1996) *Exploring the Language of Poetry, Plays and Prose*. Harlow: Longman Pearson.
- Simpson, P. (2004) *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students*. London: Routledge.
- Stockwell, P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Swann, J., R. Pope and R. Carter. (2011) *Creativity in Language and Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Toolan, M. (1998) *Language in Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics*. London: Arnold.
- Warner, A. (1999) *The Sopranos*. London: Vintage.
- Werth, P. (1999) *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. London: Longman.