The Contemporary American West: A Creative Writing Collection

Tess Davis Class of 2024

This summer, I began my creative writing honor's project. I am writing a series of short stories and poems about American Western culture under the direction of Professor Walton. The American West has a rich literary tradition founded on stories of independence, grit, isolation, masculinity, and "the American Dream." I am examining how historical forces, events, and themes, such as expansion, Manifest Destiny, Native American relations, the Gold Rush, land ownership, conservation, and federal reliance, interact with contemporary issues such as gender, sexuality, global warming, and migration. This summer, I focused on building my skills as a writing, which involved reading instructional creative writing books and canonical Western works. I read *ABC of Reading* by Ezra Pound*, Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular* by Rust Hills, "Guests of the Nation" by Frank O'Connor, *Reading Like a Writer* by Francine Prose, *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, *Above the River* by James Wright, *Montana 1948* by Larry Watson, *New Selected Poems* by Philip Levine, *Rock Springs* by Richard Ford, *Kindest Regards* by Ted Kooser, *Collected Poems* by Robert Hayden, *Selected Poems* by Edwin Arlington Robinson, *The Apple Tree at Olema* by Robert Hass, *Half in Love* by Maile Meloy, *A Poetry Handbook* and *Rules of the Dance* by Mary Oliver, *The Lost Pilot* by James Tate, and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell. I learned innumerable craft techniques.

I spent much of the summer learning about story structure. Rust Hills says a short story is a piece of writing where "something happens to somebody" (Hills 1). Rust Hills also claims that the "somebody" in the story must be the narrator. This does not necessarily mean they need to be the central character. Hills gives the example of Nick from *Great Gatsby.* Another example is Richard Ford's story, "Communist," where the narrator is Les, a sixteen-year-old boy who goes on a hunting trip with his mother, Aileen, and her boyfriend, Glen. Glen and Aileen conduct most of the actions in the story. Yet, Les is still the "effected" character (and thus the narrator) because he gains a new perspective on masculinity by the end. Freytag's Pyramid is a more detailed concept that encapsulates the "something happens to somebody" principle. Most stories follow Freytag's Pyramid. Freytag's Pyramid follows an exposition, rising action, complication, falling action, and denouncement pattern. Although it is not a requirement of Freytag's Pyramid, many great short stories have a vignette in the opening paragraph that encapsulates the themes. For example, in *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, there is a story about Ruth's grandfather's home, and how it confined his line of vision. This vignette aligns with the theme of *Housekeeping* (domesticity limits our worldview and personal fulfilment). After the vignette, there is the exposition, which introduces the characters and setting. Rising action occurs after the inciting incident, which is the first event in a story that introduces the story's conflict. The complication is the conflict of the story. Throughout the rising action and complication, the conflict increases in intensity until the climax, where the central character, the protagonist, makes a decision that resolves the conflict. The falling action answers any lingering questions about the characters and the complication. The denouncement reveals the "lesson" or "theme" of the short story. I used my knowledge of story structure to rewrite "Eastern Girl," a story that examines the relationship between a Montana native and an eastern visitor. I also wrote three other short stories: "What Your Mother Did for You," where a woman returns to Montana and learns about her mother's youth, "Going West," where a woman attempts to heal from a toxic relationship and the plights of consumerism and capitalism by fleeing West, and "Family Stories," where a young queer couple attends a family dinner using Freytag's Pyramid.

I also learned about poetic techniques. Ezra Pound has a few principles for writing good poems. He argues for direct treatment, melody, rhythm, and concision. Ezra Pound believes that poems do not need to follow set metrical rules or forms. In fact, he argues that poets' tendency to follow metrical rules instead of listening to the musical quality of language impedes the quality of their work. Perhaps, Pound made this argument because he was writing in the early twentieth century, during the beginning of the modernism movement, when it was in fashion to turn away from traditional forms. In more recent criticism, such as *Rules of the Dance* and *A Poetry Handbook,* Mary Oliver emphasizes the importance of using traditional patterns. Specifically, she makes an argument for iambic pentameter (a line form of ten syllables where there are five feet, with each foot following an unstressed/stressed pattern). She explains that iambic pentameter aligns poetry to our breath, and thus, it has a natural, conversational, humanistic feeling. About free verse, Mary Oliver says that free verse is not undisciplined, as some might think, but probably has rules and patterns of its own that have not yet been discovered because it is such a new form. Oliver stresses that free verse should always "feel like a poem" (Oliver 68). In essence, Pound and Oliver are concerned with the musicality of the poem and think of it as one of the highest objectives. All the poems I read this summer had a musical quality, from the surrealism of James Wright to the minimalism of Ted Kooser to the explosive power of Robert Hayden. I will use my knowledge of the musicality of poems in my own writings.

Faculty Member: Anthony Walton

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