ENHANCING CHARACTER EMOTION
by Mike Klaassen

In published fiction, the portrayal of character emotion may appear to be seamless, almost effortless. In reality, the finished product is the result of hard work by an author using six basic techniques for portraying emotion:

- Stating emotion
- Explaining emotion
- Dialogue
- Introspection
- Bodily reaction
- Action

In addition to using the basic techniques for portraying emotion, the author faces other issues and opportunities during the actual process of writing:

- Context
- Sacrifice
- Repetition
- Clichés/Fresh Language
- Setting
- Selection of technique
- Choice of emotion
- Range of emotion
- Intensity
- Melodrama/Sentimentality
- Emotional complexity
- Emotional consistency
- Emotional journey

CONTEXT

According to Renni Browne and David King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction-Writers*, simply telling readers about an emotion may not be the best way. A better way is to show why the character feels as he does. "You don't want to give your readers information. You want to give them experiences."[i]

Orson Scott Card, in *Characters and Viewpoint*, notes that ". . . you increase the power of suffering, not by describing the injury or loss in greater detail, but rather by showing more of its causes and effect."[ii]

Emotions usually don't just pop up in a vacuum, they require development. Successful portrayal of emotion depends on context, which requires planning for a buildup to make emotion feel genuine.

SACRIFICE

According to Card, “Pain or grief also increase a reader’s intensity in proportion to a character’s degree of choice. Self-chosen suffering for the sake of a greater good—sacrifice, in other words—is far more intense than pain alone.”[iii]

REPETITION

Also states Card, “Suffering loses effectiveness with repetition . . . the first time you mention a character’s grief, it raises his stature and makes the reader more emotionally involved. But if you keep harping on the character’s suffering, the reader begins to feel that the character is whining, and the reader’s emotional involvement decreases. By the third or fourth time, the character becomes comic, and her pain is a joke.”[iv]

CLICHÉS/FRESH LANGUAGE

Emotion, as a fiction-writing mode, is fertile ground for clichés. Examples provided by Ann Hood, in *Creating Character Emotion*, include:

- a heart pounding
- mad as a hornet
- one tear rolling down a cheek
- green with envy
- butterflies in her stomach
- a face as red as a beet
- happy as a clam

“One of the problems with this,” explains Hood, “is that clichés simply fall out of our heads and onto the paper. We don’t even know it’s happening. But,” she asks, “are they effective writing?”[v]

Far more difficult, Hood notes, is to find a fresh way to evoke an emotion. She encourages writers to be meticulous in fresh description of emotions, to search for the description that jumps out at readers, fits perfectly, and stays with them long after the story has ended.[vi]

SETTING

The setting of a story can help suggest emotion, either as props for demonstrating emotion, or as a backdrop to create a mood.

In *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby says, “The process of translating the story line into a physical story world, which then elicits certain emotions in the audience, is a difficult one. That’s because you are really speaking two languages—one of words, the other of images—and matching them exactly over the course of the story.”[vii]

An example of using a prop to suggest emotion:

> As Cisco approached the livery stable, he pulled the tin star off his shirt and slipped it into his pocket.

An example of using setting to suggest a mood or to enhance it:

> As Cisco approached the livery stable, thunder rumbled in the distance.

SELECTION OF TECHNIQUE

Just because a writer's emotion-stimulating toolbox contains many tools, doesn't mean he should use all of them for every task.

According to Ann Hood, sometimes *not saying* what is felt makes the emotion seem even stronger than dialogue. And also, "Don't fall into a big cliche trap by stating the emotion you want the reader to see, then forcing your character to act in a predictable emotional way to illustrate it."[viii]

Sometimes what is left out of a story is just as important as what is put in. Orson Scott Card provides a specific example ". . . if your characters cry, your readers won't have to; if your characters have good reason to cry, and don't, your readers will do that weeping."[ix]

CHOICE OF EMOTION

Even a partial list of emotions includes many choices: repulsion, terror, ecstasy, passion, love, hate, desire, fear, anger, disgust, spite, forgiveness, annoyance, peevishness.

With so many alternatives, which emotion should a writer choose? It depends, of course, on the context of the story and the writer's objectives. But according to Nancy Kress, there is one emotion that stands out as the most useful in fiction: frustration. Without frustration, there is no plot. Frustration means the character isn't getting what he wants. When in doubt, she says, writers should frustrate their characters. In fiction, the default emotion is frustration.[x]

RANGE OF EMOTION

During the ebb and flow of the story, a character should experience a variety of emotions appropriate to the circumstances. Ann Hood notes that "Characters should have a range of emotion to give them depth and complexity. Otherwise, we end up with fiction filled with stereotypes, flat characters moving through an unbelievable world."[xi]

INTENSITY

Even within the context of a single emotion, or a set of related emotions, there is a range of intensity. For example:

- Mild annoyance to uncontrollable rage, or
- Amusement to hysterical laughter.

Which range of intensity is most useful? Orson Scott Card notes that "The most powerful uses of physical and emotional pain are somewhere between the trivial and the unbearable."[xii]

MELODRAMA/SENTAMENTALITY
According to an old adage, writers should "open a vein" and let the emotion flow. But there *can* be too much of a good thing. The opposite of unemotional portrayal of characters is the melodramatic or sentimental portrayal of characters.

The words *melodramatic* and *sentimental* mean different things to different people, but dictionary definitions include *exaggerated*, *overdramatic*, *excessive*, and *indulgent*. The common ground refers not so much to intensity but to appropriateness within context.

EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY
According to Ann Hood, "Perhaps the most important thing to remember when searching for emotional honesty is that emotion is not one-dimensional. Emotions are complex and often mixed together. Think of a bride on her wedding day. It would be too easy and too flat to describe her as simply happy. Instead, she is excited, apprehensive, worried, fearful, anxious, joyful, smug—so many emotions!"[xiii]

In *Writers Digest*, August 2004, Nancy Kress echoes this thought: "Frustration isn't a 'pure' emotion." It can come mixed with many others: anger, hurt, fear, self-blame, resignation, bitterness, and more.[xiv]

Sometimes these emotions feed off one another in an emotional swarm.

An example of mixed emotions:

> Cisco paused at the door. If he stepped into the street and faced Bart, he might be able to stop Bart from hurting innocent people. But Cisco also realized that his chances of surviving the fight were slim. Bart was fast with a six shooter—very fast.

EMOTIONAL CONSISTENCY
Characters are a representation of humans, and that means they are both consistent *and* inconsistent in their emotions. Ann Hood reminds writers that Aristotle observed that a character should be "consistently inconsistent," which does not mean characters jump from emotion to emotion recklessly but rather that they move believably from one emotion to the next.[xv]

Nancy Kress, in *Writers Digest*, August 2004, puts it a different way, “Not only do different people experience different mixes of emotions when frustrated, but also the same person may experience different mixes at different times.”[xvi]

EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Coincident with a story’s physical journey is the character’s emotional journey, which may appear as an emotional rollercoaster that, in turn, provides the character with internal growth.

James N. Frey in *How to Write a Damn Good Novel* says, “. . . look at your character’s emotional level at the beginning of the scene and at the end of the scene. There should be a step-by-step change in the character from, say, cool to fearful, spiteful to forgiving, cruel to passionate, or the like, in every scene.”[xvii] Regarding the story as a whole, he observes, “By the climax . . . the character is fully revealed because the reader has seen him acting and reacting at each emotional level.”[xviii]

Numerous opportunities exist to enhance emotion in written fiction.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the book at Amazon.com.

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[i] Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers.* New York: Harper Resource, 2004, 16. ISBN: 9780060545697.

[ii] Card, Orson Scott. *Characters & Viewpoint.* Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 1988, 69. ISBN: 9780898793079.

[iii] Card, 70.

[iv] Card, 69.

[v] Hood, Ann. *Creating Character Emotions.* Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 1998, 8. ISBN: 9781884910333.

[vi] Hood, 8.

[vii] Truby, John. *The Anatomy of Story*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2007, 146. ISBN: 9780865479517.

[viii] Hood, 16.

[ix] Card, 70.

[x] Kress, Nancy. *Write Great Fiction: Characters, Emotion & Viewpoint*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2005, 147. ISBN: 9781582973166.

[xi] Hood, 11.
[xii] Card, 69.
[xiii] Hood, 17-18.
[xiv] Kress, Nancy. *Writer's Digest*, August 2004, 44.
[xv] Hood, 11.
[xvi] Kress, *Writer's Digest*, August 2004, 44.
[xvii] Frey, James N. *How to Write a Damn Good Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987, 43. ISBN: 978-0312104788.
[xviii] Frey, 40.