INTROSPECTION AS A FICTION-WRITING MODE

By Mike Klaassen

“One of the great gifts of literature is that it allows for the expression of unexpressed thoughts . . .,” say Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*.

The fiction-writing mode used to share a character’s thoughts is called *introspection*. As a means of developing character, plot, and theme, introspection is potentially one of the most powerful of fiction-writing modes.

Of the fiction-writing modes, introspection also appears to be one of the least understood. Even a casual review of fiction-writing books and articles reveals a confusing mix of terminology and issues regarding introspection, if the subject is addressed at all.

Sometimes a character’s thinking is referred to as *internal dialogue, interior monologue,* or even *self-talk*. Such terms are inappropriate since thinking and speaking are distinctly different acts. Furthermore, the writing conventions for dialogue and thinking are quite different.

Some writing coaches lump *thinking*, *emotions,* and *sensation* into one category. Certainly, each is linked to the mind of the character, but thinking, emotions, and sensation are also quite different, in real life and in fiction. Given their importance and the differences in how they are conveyed, each warrants its own analysis and treatment.

Sometimes introspection is included in broader categories, such as *narration*, *description*, or *summary*. Of course, introspection could be considered a subset of these writing modes when they are defined in their broadest terms. But lumping introspection into such wide topics does little to clarify its use; in fact, it adds to the confusion.

Dictionary definitions of introspection refer to an examination of one’s own thoughts, a self-study. The author of a story, on the other hand, looks within his fictional character to examine and then convey that person’s thoughts.

Other arguments can be made as to what introspection should include and which label should be applied to it, but writers profess to value *specific* words. For writing and instructional purposes, the most appropriate term for the fiction-writing mode used to convey a character’s thoughts is *introspection*.

As a fiction-writing mode, *introspection* is a powerful tool for adding depth and texture to a story. Nancy Kress, in *Writer’s Digest* of August 2003, states “There are times when telling us a character’s thoughts can greatly enhance a story. It can deepen characterization, increase tension, and widen the scope of the story.”[[1]](#endnote-1) In each of the five elements of a story (character, plot, setting, theme, style),[[2]](#endnote-2) a character’s thinking can make major contributions.

CHARACTERIZATION. Nancy Kress has obviously put a lot of thought into this subject. In *Dynamic Characters,* she observes that “*What* your character thinks about helps to create his personality for the reader. So does *how* he thinks: in what words, with what sentence structure, with what level of grammatical correctness.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Kress also notes that “You can even extend this technique to include reproducing regional or ethnic dialect in a character’s thoughts, not just in her dialogue.”[[4]](#endnote-4) And “Your character thinks about certain things, in a certain way, because of who he is.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This includes attitudes and beliefs.

According to Kress, in *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, “To deepen your characters, ask yourself what your character is likely to think about whatever he is doing or whatever is going on around him. Then include those thoughts whenever you want to sharpen your reader’s awareness of what this person is really like.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Repetition throughout the story of what the character thinks and how he thinks and solves problems confirms the character and provides consistency of characterization. Observes Kress in *Writer’s Digest* of March 2005, “Throughout your story, you need to keep in mind how your character sees the world and translate that point of view consistently . . .”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Introspection may also be used to validate a character change that occurs within the story. According to Kress, “One good way to convey this is to have your character talk to himself differently after his change than he did before it.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

PLOT. Introspection may occur anywhere in a story, from action scenes to quiet reflection. A scene may include lots of physical fireworks, but it may also include much more. First of all, for a scene to be believable, the character must be properly motivated. And what better means of understanding a character’s *motivation* than through his own thoughts?

The smallest structural component of plot is stimulus and effect. Action leads to reaction. But as Jack M. Bickham explains in *Scene & Structure*, “If you stop to think about it, even the most obvious stimulus-response transaction requires some internal messaging in the mind and body of the receiver of the stimulus.” Except in the most knee-jerk reactions, stimulus is followed by an act of mental processing, or *internalization*. Often a character’s reaction is immediate and apparently without thought. But in other situations, even in the heat of battle, the character can and should think before acting. As stated by Bickham, “. . . the internalization process always takes place, and when things are complicated, you may need to remember that the pattern of every stimulus-response transaction—in deepest reality—is STIMULUS—INTERNALIZATION—RESPONSE.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Introspection may also be used to increase tension. As stated by Nancy Kress in *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, “It does this when the thoughts you depict directly contrast with that character’s actions or dialogue. The two pull in opposite directions. We then wonder which will ultimately prevail . . . and read on to find out.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In fact, as explained by Kress, “Without her thoughts, we would not be so aware of her internal conflict, and her subsequent action might seem murky or unmotivated.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Kress also notes that “Another way that thoughts can up the tension is by letting readers learn something that the protagonist doesn’t know. This only works for multiple points of view, but it can be very potent.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

While scenes are mainly physical and external to the character, *sequels* are mostly internal, in the head. As outlined by Bickham, a sequel consists of the following phases:

* Emotion
* Thought (including review, analysis, and planning)
* Decision[[13]](#endnote-13)

Each phase provides ample opportunity for the use of introspection. In fact, sequels written without introspection fall far below their potential.

SETTING. We often learn about the world around the character through the narrator’s description or through the character’s sensory perception. But the character’s thoughts about the setting are also important. What a character thinks about the world around him adds depth and texture to the story.

THEME. Peter Selgin, in *By Cunning & Craft*, describes a story’s *theme* as “. . . an organizing principle, something to bind its disparate parts together, a central notion or idea.” Nancy Kress, in *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, recommends that thoughts be confined to two types:

* something happening at the moment
* those that form the grand theme of the story

She also notes that “. . . letting us in on your character’s thoughts can widen the scope of your story, adding complexity and depth.” And “What expands the scope of the book, gives it purpose and coherence and fervor . . .”[[14]](#endnote-14)

STYLE The style of a story is the sum of the multitude of choices made by the author, either consciously or subconsciously, as he composes a story. Style is a reflection of the author’s personality and attitudes, as well as the craft applied. An important aspect of fiction-writing style is the skill with which an author presents the thoughts of his character.

Full and skillful use of introspection provides a great opportunity to enhance the reader’s experience.

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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1. Kress, Nancy. *Writer’s Digest*, “Make’m Think,” August 2003, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Klaassen, *Fiction-Writing Modes*, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kress, Nancy. *Dynamic Characters*. 95-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kress. *Dynamic Characters*. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kress, *Dynamic Characters*, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Kress, *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kress, Nancy. *Writers’ Digest*, “The Inner Voice.” March 2005, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kress, Kress, *Writers’ Digest*, March 2005, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Bickham, Jack M. *Scene & Structure*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer’s Digest Books, 1993, 17. ISBN: 9780898795516. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kress, *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kress, *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Kress, *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Bickham, 53-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Kress, *Writer’s Digest*, August 2003, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)