Basic Principles of Creative Writing in SLA

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Introduction

We have dealt with literary works, but mostly as materials for reading and interpreting in our English classrooms in Japan. Creative writing in English has not been emphasized in Japan. In the United States, on the contrary, people in academia have paid attention to creative writing, and there are hundreds of programs available.

AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) provides a community for writers and teachers. They support over 34,000 writers, 500 college and university creative writing programs, and 100 writers' conferences and centers. According to the Executive Director David Fenza, the founders of AWP argued that the understanding and appreciation of literature could be enhanced by having practitioners of that art teach that art. In other words, we would argue that novelists who are also teaching creative writing are comparable to professors of mechanical engineering who are also building real cars by hand.

People often assume that creative writing has nothing in common with science and technology. However, we frequently encounter the same framework in all kinds of writing. It is the problem-and-solution continuum. For example, in a science paper, you will observe a phenomenon and make a hypothesis. First you will wonder why these things are happening. Then you will conduct experiments to check your hypothesis. After that, you will find the cause of the phenomenon. Finally, you will find a solution to the problem that is related with the phenomenon. When you read or write novels, what you are focusing on is also the problem-and-solution continuum. You find problems and solve them logically and emotionally. We would suggest that creative writing is potentially enables students to learn the basic framework of the problem-and-solution continuum. In the first part of this paper, we are going to elucidate the theoretical aspects of novel writing in terms of the problem-and-solution statement. Premise is the technical term for this statement. In the second part, we are going to show some practical aspects of writing stories -- the Hero's Journey and MacGuffin are pointed to as key concepts. In this paper, we are going to show readers some of the essential principles of creative writing. We are aiming at promoting creative writing in English language classrooms through our presentation of these basic principles.

1．Premise

1．1　The Theory of Premise

Dilemma, complication, crisis, conflict, and struggle: these are synonyms for the hero's problem in a story. Conflict occurs whenever a character confronts nature, other characters, the spiritual world, or themselves. When a character struggles within himself/ herself, he/she has an inner conflict.

"Don't start writing a novel until you know how to solve the hero's problems" (Koontz 116). This is a quote from Dean Koontz's book *How to Write a Best-Selling Fiction*. Koontz is an American writer who has written best-selling genre-fiction as well as mainstream literature. It is the hero's problems that have to be solved before we start writing. Koontz asserts that the hero's problems are the core of a novel. He takes the view that the hero's problems follow four steps in the classic story pattern. Dean Koontz writes:

(1) The author introduces a hero or hero-ine who has just been or is about to be plunged into terrible trouble. (2) The hero attempts to solve his problem but only slips into deeper trouble. (3) As the hero works to climb out of the hole he's in, complications arise, each more terrible than the one before, until it seems as if his situation could not possibly be blacker or more hopeless than it is -- and then one final unthinkable complication makes matter even worse. (4) At last, deeply affected and changed by his awful experiences and by his intolerable circumstances, the hero learns something about himself or about the human condition in general, a Truth of which he was previously ignorant, … . (Koontz 74)

To learn more about the hero's problems, we need to understand Aristotle's idea of unity in a drama. In *Poetics*, Aristotle explains the idea of unity as follows: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end." Here, Aristotle contends that a tragedy has to be a whole. In other words, a story has to have a unity. What principle would produce such a unity? According to William T. Price, the principle could be expressed as a "proposition" which is "the brief, logical statement or syllogism of that which has to be demonstrated by the complete action of the play"(qtd. in Frey 52). Lajos Egri called the "proposition" a "premise" or "purpose". We would be able to assume that premise is a sentence that includes a proposition that causes a consequence. The following sentence is an example of premise written by Egri: "Frugality leads to waste". "Frugality" hints a character, "leads to" hints conflict, and "waste" hints the consequence of a series of events. Therefore, the premise contends that a frugal man who is eager to save his money, refuses to pay his taxes, evokes a conflict, and ends up with paying a lot more tax money (Egri 8).

A successful novelist and teacher, James N. Frey, writes, "The premise of a story is simply a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the core conflict in the story" (Frey 54). Therefore, we can observe, the premise of a story is something like this: a character did such and such things and his action brought about a certain climactic event in the story.

Frey wrote the following as an example: "A man needed money because he wanted to elope. He wanted to elope because he was madly in love. Therefore, his being madly in love is what got him killed; 'great love leads to death' is the premise"(Frey 55).

Frey takes the view that it is self-evident that a story can have only one premise. Incidents build up to a climax. There are many incidents and they are logically related with the single climax of the story. Therefore, there is only one premise in a dramatic story because it can have only one climax(Frey 55). A character cannot die and survive at the same time.

1.2 The Premise in *The Godfather*

In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone, the civilian son of a gang lord, becomes a Mafia Don because he loves his family. Frey writes, "The premise is 'family loyalty leads to a life of crime'" (54). The following quotation demonstrates the hero's family loyalty:

> I had to fight because I love and admire my father. I never knew a man more worthy of respect. He was a good husband and a good father and a good friend to people who were not so fortunate in life. There's another side to him, but that's not relevant to me as his son. Anyway I don't want that to happen to our kids. I want them to be influenced by you. I want them to grow up to be All-American kids, real All-American, the whole works. Maybe they or their grandchildren will go into politics (Puzo 364).

The person who is saying these words to his wife is Michael Corleone, who is the new Don in the Corleone Family. What we observe here is not Michael's love toward his gangster Family, but his love toward his own personal family. Because of his love toward his wife and children, Michael decides to transform his Family business from a criminal organization into a law-abiding company. Here is another quote from the novel that shows his love to his children.

> Yet, he thought, if I can die saying, "Life is so beautiful," then nothing else is important. If I can believe in myself that much, nothing else matters. He would follow his father. He would care for his children, his family, his world. But his children would grow in a different world. They would be doctors, artists, scientists. Governors. Presidents. Anything at all. He would see to it that they joined the general family of humanity, but he, as a powerful and prudent parent, would most certainly keep a wary eye on that general family (Puzo 410).

Because Michael is loyal to his wife and children, he makes a decision and that decision leads to a series of escalating battles against his enemies. At the end of the novel, Michael destroys his enemies in a single day and achieves his goal. In this way, the premise, "family loyalty leads to a life of crime", is fulfilled. The novel leaves us with the impression that he will become a normal businessman in the future and that the slaughter of his enemies was justified.

1.3 Predicaments

Frey says that readers will forget themselves when they read a good novel. This is called "true reader identification"(Frey 70). True reader identification happens only with a struggling character. "Character, conflict, and premise are the bricks, the mortar, and the form of a story"(Frey 67). "A story is a narrative of events involving worthy human characters who change as a result of those events"(Frey 70). First, a fiction writer depicts the situation of the *status quo*. He shows the reader the fictive world as it is before the events of the core conflict begin. Then, the characters change as a result of the

series of events.

In the following quotation, Stephen King takes the same view as James Frey and Dean Koontz. King also throws predicament after predicament at his characters to move his stories along.

> Plot is, I think, the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice. The story which results from it is apt to feel artificial and labored.
>
> I lean more heavily on intuition, and have been able to do that because my books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Some of the ideas which have produced those books are more complex than others, but the majority start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn't to help them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety-those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot-but to watch what happens and then write it down.
>
> The situation comes first. The characters -- always flat and unfeatured, to begin with -- come next. (King 160-161)

In this quotation, we can see King's use of conflict situations in which his characters struggle to survive while he is carefully watching and writing about them. As we have briefly seen, a good novel has a struggling hero and a climax. After a series of struggles, a hero survives, dies, or sometimes comes to life again. A premise plays the central role in a novel as the cause-and-effect or problem-and-solution statement to sum up the hero's behavior. When we write a novel, it is necessary to first write a premise. Then we must force the hero of the novel to undergo trials and conflicts until he or she can make a major change, for better or worse, for failure or triumph, as the case may be.

2．Components of Genre Fiction

2．1　The Anti - "Hero's Journey"

Much has been written about the "Monomyth", the archetypical "Hero's Journey" (Campbell, 1949; Shucart & Takahashi, 2012). It is the familiar story, mirroring the rite-of-passage journey from adolescence to maturity. It is the story of change and overcoming adversity and it has become the blueprint for innumerable modern tales from *Star Wars* to *The Matrix* to *The Wizard of Oz*.

Fig. 1. The Hero's Journey

But it is dangerous to read too much universality into what has almost become a stereotypical cliché. Genre is intrinsic to both discourse analysis and creative writing, but it covers too wide of a swath to even attempt to be all-inclusive. In this part of our paper we will focus on one genre -- the hard-boiled detective story, and we shall use Samuel Spade, the protagonist of the classic 1930

mystery novel *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, as an illustration of what we call the "Anti-'Hero's Journey'". Throughout the novel the protagonist appears to be the classic anti-hero, and it is only at the end of the novel that more layers of complexity are revealed. Thus we shall first compare and contrast the hero and anti-hero, and then introduce the key concepts of the "*femme fatale*" and the "MacGuffin". Finally we will show how the seemingly extraneous tale of "Flitcraft", encapsulates the "premise" of the novel. In our conclusion we shall draw together both halves of our paper to point out how creative writing in both theory and practice, can be a valuable tool for second language acquisition.

２.２　Hero versus Anti-Hero

While a traditional hero might endure trials and dangers for the common good, the anti-hero responds to every situation by examining what he himself stands to gain. A classic example comes from the American Western. John Wayne, wearing a white hat, risks his life and freedom to save the stagecoach passengers from the Indian attack, whereas Clint Eastwood, as "the man with no name", coldly encourages rival gangs to kill each other so he can collect the bounty on them.

Fig. 2. John Wayne

Fig. 3. Clint Eastwood as the "man with no name"

In *The Maltese Falcon* Sam Spade's relationship with every other character in the book is based on how he can gain the advantage. Spade is willing to betray his friends, and he has an affair with Iva Archer, his partner's wife. He does not work within the law, but checks in with his lawyer regularly to see how far outside of the law he can go. And he is an untrusting lover, accusing Brigid O'Shaughnessy of duplicity the moment that the falcon is discovered to be fake.

What separates Sam Spade, the anti-hero, from a true villain is his code of honor. He is tempted by his love of Brigid and the lure of wealth. When it is revealed that it was the *femme fatale*, not the young gunman, who really killed his partner he turns her over to the police. His code of honor is summed up as a rule of conduct he can't bring himself to break, not even for love:

"When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it.
It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away

with it. It's bad all around -- bad for that one organization, bad for every detective everywhere." (Hammett 581-582)

2．3　*Femme Fatale*

The *femme fatale* -- French for "deadly woman" -- is an archetype in literature and art, a mysterious woman whose charms ensnare her lovers in bonds of irresistible desire so she can manipulate them into doing her bidding. Ancient mythical and historical archetypes include Lilith, Delilah, Salome, Aphrodite, Medea, and Cleopatra. In hard-boiled detective fiction she is memorably portrayed by Cora Papadakis in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Carman Sternwood in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), and, of course, Brigid O'Shaughnessy in Dashiell Hammett's The *Maltese Falcon* (1930).
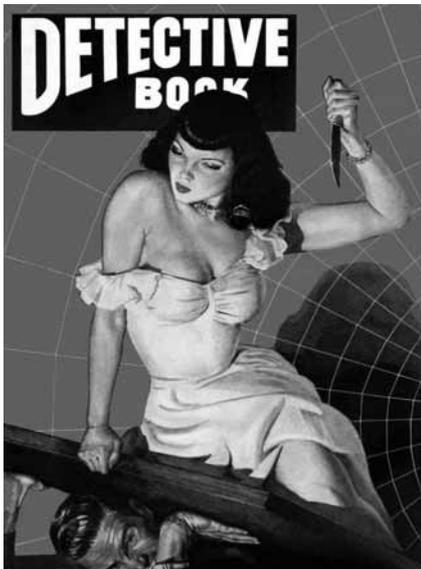

Fig. 4. The *femme fatale*

She pursues the gem-encrusted statue of a Maltese Falcon, a treasure she and her co-conspirators -- Joel Cairo, Kaspar Gutman and Wilber, their young hired gun -- have chased around the world, and which she has stolen from them. Brigid O'Shaughnessy, under the pseudonym of Miss Wonderly, hires the detectives Miles Archer and Sam

Spade to scare off Floyd Thursby, the gangster/protector she has seduced into helping her. When that scheme fails she kills Archer and blames it on Thursby. She then turns to Spade for protection when Gutman *et al*, arrive in San Francisco before the Falcon. In the end, the statue turns out to be a fake and the police need someone to blame for Archer's murder. The *femme fatale* is counting on Sam Spade to sacrifice himself because of his love for her. Much to her surprise, Spade, a true anti-hero, informs her that he "won't play the sap for her." He resists the woman's siren call, even though he does love her, as shown by the following lines from the novel:

"I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out again in twenty years. You're an angel. I'll wait for you." He cleared his throat. "If they hang you I'll always remember you." (Hammett 579)

In the classic Monomyth the hero, transformed, would have sacrificed himself for an ideal. Not so the anti-hero. His strength is to resist temptation, resist change, and remain true to his moral code even in the face of losing his true love.

2．4　The MacGuffin

The next trope that needs discussion is the engine that drives the narrative. The Holy Grail of medieval romance; the Ark of the Covenant, of the Indy Jones tale; the Ruby Slippers in the *Wizard of Oz*; the microfilm of the secret documents of Spy fiction, the Ring of Middle-earth. The Death Star Plans from *Star Wars*; and the gold and jewel encrusted Maltese Falcon is at the center of this story, and with a unique history that makes its value inestimable. Readers never see the real Maltese falcon in the story, but its importance drives the plot ahead. It is a metaphor

for Gutman's obsession, Cairo's greed, O'Shaughnessy's duplicity, and Spade's curiosity.

Fig. 5. Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*

It was the film director Alfred Hitchcock who is said to have first coined the term "MacGuffin" to represent the mysterious object in a film or novel that all of the characters are desperately seeking. Sometimes, as in the movie *Pulp Fiction*, the viewer never even knows what is in the briefcase, which is why the irreverent term MacGuffin is used for the desired object, as its only real importance to the story is when it is interpreted as a metaphor for the character's desires and motives.

Interviewed in 1966 by Francois Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock illustrated the term "MacGuffin" with this story:

It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says "What's that package up there in the baggage rack?", and the other answers "Oh, that's a MacGuffin". The first one asks "What's a MacGuffin?". "Well", the other man says, "It's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands. The first man says "But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands", and the other one answers "Well, then that's no MacGuffin!". So you see, a MacGuffin is nothing at all." (Truffaut 98-99)

2.4 Premise -- the Parable of Mr. Flitcraft

As was mentioned in the first part of this paper, James N. Frey, writes, "the premise of a story is simply a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the core conflict in the story." (Frey 54) Early in the mystery, while waiting for Joel Cairo to arrive at his apartment, Spade tells Brigid about a case he once solved. It involved a missing person named Flitcraft who went out to lunch one day and never returned. Spade found Flitcraft five years later, living in the Northwest with another wife, and a baby son -- the same kind of woman and the same kind of life. What had happened to him? On the way to lunch one day Flitcraft was almost hit by a beam falling from an office building under construction. The near escape from death showed him that the life he was living, "a clean, orderly, sane, responsible affair," was really a foolish one. "Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away." So he left, but after a couple of years he duplicated his previous existence. "That's the part of it I always liked," Spade says. "He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling." (Hammett 445)

This innocuous little tale was not even considered important enough to be included in the 1943 movie version, yet it encapsulates the premise of the novel. At the beginning of the story Sam Spade is having an affair with Iva Archer, his partner's wife, but he is not in love with her. Then Brigid O'Shaughnessy and the mystery of the "Maltese MacGuffin" falls like a random beam right into the middle of his life. His partner is murdered, he

falls in love with Brigid, he chases the phantom treasure -- "...the stuff that dreams are made of..." as it was described in the film, and, in the end, turns his true love over to the police, as befits his code of honor. In the final scene, he returns to his office and who is waiting for him? Iva Archer, and, with a shudder, he is pulled back into the sordid little affair and his life the way it was before the Maltese falcon entered the picture. Thus the premise: Even in an irrational cosmos in which all the rules can be overturned in a moment, in the end a man will readjust to the new "normal" and his life will go on as before. Most critics agree that it was such tiny details as the tale of Flitcraft foreshadowing the later developments and convolutions of what should have been a simple pulp fiction detective story that elevated the *Maltese Falcon* into the realm of true literature.

Conclusion

So what is the "premise" of this paper? Simply that literature, in the form of a creative writing course, can do much to improve the acquisition of English for intermediate and advanced level students. Current theories as to the "best" method to facilitate language acquisition point to a combination of Stephen Krashen's "Input Hypothesis" and Merrill Swain's "Output Hypothesis". Extensive reading has been one of the major tools we have been employing in our content-based learning classes, and this can be considered as an example of literary "comprehensible input" in the terminology of Stephen Krashen. But what about output? That's where creative writing enters the picture. A creative writing class can give students a chance to produce comprehensible literary output. By deconstructing the act of creative writing into such simple components as "premise", the "Hero's Journey", the "Anti-

hero's Journey", the "*femme fatale*", and the "MacGuffin", we can provide students with simple tools to empower their efforts at creative writing. Then, when combined with the extensive reading provided at the early stages of language acquisition, creative writing can balance the equation and lead to increased English fluency and improve their critical thinking as well as their scientific writing skills in both English and their native language.

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