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D. M. Baker

Grand Valley State University

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Out of the Garden

by D.M. Bakker

He was feeling refreshed and thoughtful. It was after all, Saturday — his day to read, or work around the house, or do nothing. As he showered and shaved, he planned his day, going carefully over in his mind what he would do with each morsel, savoring it. Putting toothpaste on his brush, he began applying it vigorously to his teeth.

It was a warm morning, a trace of lilac scented air. He stood on the porch surveying the front lawn. The lawn could wait. He sat down in his rocker and began idly to sway back and forth. Funny thing about getting old. It wasn’t real somehow; you never thought of it happening when you were young, and it just didn’t seem possible once it actually had happened. From within the house, he could hear the activity of Miriam’s awakening. For a moment he thought he could hear this tremendous buzzing — like a holocost of bees descending inside the house. Sometimes he had strange impressions of Miriam’s capacities.

His study was a small womblike room, dark and moist, where he could sit curled into a ball thinking or not thinking as furiously as he liked . . . it had become his shrine . . . and his last hope . . . theme is, of course, important. Yet, it should intrude itself gently on the reader’s perceptions . . . subtly, The reasoning behind this is to present an idea, a conflict, or a universal truth in as palatable form as possible. To simply sit and worry about JUSTIFICATION, or to try to JUSTIFY that sitting and worrying is simply not JUSTIFIED. Writing fic-

tion is a two-sided coin: on the one side you must satisfy the reader, on the other, the writer must JUSTIFY his life on the page . . . Nichtwahr?

He could hear her rattling and rummaging in the kitchen. Shortly, the scent of freshly brewing coffee would drift out to him. Now, Whirlwind Miriam was in the hall closet, which meant, he surmised, the inevitable entrance of the vacuum cleaner. Yes, it hummed almost immediately to life.

He followed Miriam in his mind wandering with her through the rooms, vacuum cleaner lashing sword-like before her. There had been a time when Miriam was unaccoutered with vacuums. When . . . he walked with Miriam in the cool of the night air. Their footsteps sprayed sand and left a trail for the surf to wash away. Her fresh scent drifted up to him, filling him with excitement and a sense of pride in his masculinity. She smiled up at him and he thought how wonderful it would be to share moments like these for the rest of his life.

Nodding to himself, a vague smile on his lips, he considered his wife. Her coarse grey hair stuck out here and there escaping the violent orange kerchief that labored valiantly to keep it under cover. The multi-colored striped smock she wore was wrinkled and fit her badly; it also had greasy finger prints smeared down the front. Her khaki-colored bermudas showed off her labyrinthinely veined legs. At 5' 3½” her 160 odd pounds were rather unevenly distributed: most of it circumnavigating her waist-line, the bulk of which protruded magnificently over the tops of her shorts.

“Darling,” he suggested.

“Umph,” she grunted as she dragged the vacuum across his path and on into the living room.

Too much, you think? It’s important to remember that revision is a necessary part of the writing process . . . the seasoned writer as well as the beginner must keep this in mind . . . the technical end of one’s craft is the foundation for the imaginative fabric . . . should the technical end fail — THAT IS, though time is of the essence, never be afraid to begin completely anew . . .

Out of the Garden

It was a warm morning, a trace of lilac scented the air. He stood on the porch surveying the front lawn, listening to the ever-fainter hum of the vacuum, and wondering if these were the things he had been waiting and working for. He sat down in the rocker and began to sway back and forth. At least he was tapering off. He would still have one class. He and Miriam would now be able to travel. He would have time for himself. Away from the
Familiar themes. Fiction is by nature imitative, yet pointless repetition and bring the action of the purpose; if pace is incorrect, the reader either feels hurried or as though the story dragged. Structure, because it dictates pace, is also important. The conventionally structured story begins at the beginning (or at least in close proximity) moves steadily forward (PACE) rising toward a peak (CLIMAX) and then quickly tapers off (END). When actions and characters and situations are correctly presented in this conventional format the effect can be very stimulating. The conventional structure is best for the beginning writer to begin working with.

Worthwhile? There were the children.

One must be careful in his presentation of familiar themes. Fiction is by nature imitative, yet with careful handling an old theme can be made to seem fresh . . .

Though his wife worried him incessantly about getting out of his study, he never really left it. While he slept, or ate, or listened to her, the greater part of him was sitting at his desk, getting his thoughts firmly arranged and into proper form to set down on paper. He was unable to leave the study until this was done. Since . . . pace is an important device, particularly in the short story. One has a limited time in which to accomplish one's purpose; if pace is incorrect, the reader either feels hurried or as though the story dragged. Structure, because it dictates pace, is also important. The conventionally structured story begins at the beginning (or at least in close proximity) moves steadily forward (PACE) rising toward a peak (CLIMAX) and then quickly tapers off (END). When actions and characters and situations are correctly presented in this conventional format the effect can be very stimulating. The conventional structure is best for the beginning writer to begin working with.

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David Lionel Hunter, enshrined in his study but preoccupation (or at least in close proximity) moves steadily forward (PACE) rising toward a peak (CLIMAX) and then quickly tapers off (END). When actions and characters and situations are correctly presented in this conventional format the effect can be very stimulating. The conventional structure is best for the beginning writer to begin working with.
He sat down again on the porch and cast his gaze back — not too far . . . readjust . . . that’s right — to his last semester.

“It’s not your last semester,” her voice was slightly argumentative.

“I know. I know. My last full semester.”

He had long since stopped attending faculty meetings, but he knew they were busily engaged in finding his replacement.

“We need someone more specialized.”

“We need 19th Century American.”

“Yes — yes. But we need a classicist.”

“Well, but let’s not forget specialization.”

“No, we can’t do that. HE was MUCH too broad.”

“Oh, unquestionably.”

“His time is past.”

“Long since!”

“Oh, unquestionably.”

Not that he was sentimental. (Oh, unquestionably not.) He could remember when he had argued as heatedly and as pettily as they and had thought the whole process worthwhile. The man he had replaced had been a gracefully retired white-haired man who came sporadically to visit the department. He was always impeccably dressed — as though he had just come from attending the funeral of a colleague. Harry. That was it. Harry Halloway.

“You’ll take Halloway’s place.”

“Oh.”

“Things are pretty much the same here as they were at your last school. I’m sure you’ll find that so?”

Within the house he could hear Miriam rattling pots in the kitchen. A second milestone in his day would be coming up soon. Miriam was busily preparing lunch. She had come to the conclusion that the way out of his (rather delayed) midlife crisis was through his stomach.

“Daniel,” the dean beamed at Hunter.

The dean always called him Daniel; had never addressed him by any other name. Even when they had first been introduced the dean had taken him warmly by the hand and shaking it for ten minutes or so had annointed him “Daniel.”

“Welcome. We are an integrated school, you know. Always hire minorities when we can.” And beaming, smiling, and squinting the dean had left him with those profound, yet bewildering, thoughts. He wondered what minority group the dean thought he belonged to.

The dean’s secretary, however, was a different proposition altogether. His initial contact with her had left him quivering with an undefinable emotion. Mrs. Harbinger she was called; a massive woman who, when she rose from her desk, seemed to rise interminably, to tower over any adversary. When she spoke, it was in a grating husky voice. To Hunter at the time of his interview, it had seemed the voice of doom.

“The dean is engaged and cannot be disturbed,” she told him.

“Oh. Well, I received this letter, you see, telling me to come in for an interview. —I’ve already seen the Chair of the English Department and I—”

“Nevertheless, young man,” she cut him off, “the dean cannot see you today. I am empowered to conduct the interview for him, Now,” she gestured to a chair, “please sit down.”

He did so, and she did also, seeming to fold herself into sections in order to make room behind her desk. Her chair creaked lustily as she leaned forward intent upon piercing his composure with a single glance.

He parried her thrust and said calmly, “I’m ready if you are.”

“Why is it, Mr. Hunter,” she opened with a smirk, “that your other position was unacceptable?”

“I — that is. Excuse me. It was quite acceptable. But you see I was hired for a specified period of time. A terminal two-year position, you know.” It sounded like a weak excuse, even to his own ears.

“So.” She glanced down at her notes. “I see that you’ve not yet completed your doctorate?”

“No. But I shall this spring. May in fact.”

“And you have every hope of success?” she remarked doubtfully.

He assented.

“It says here,” her eyes pierced him with an unexpected thrust, “that you consider yourself a specialist in the teaching of writing — combining that with American Literature.”

“Well, yes. You see I feel that the two go well together. In order to teach writing one needs appropriate models upon which to base one’s criticisms and techniques, and so . . .” he ran down as he gazed into cold disbelieving eyes.

“Quite,” she said distastefully. “The dean will consider your qualifications in light of this interview and will be in touch.”

“Well, thank him for his time . . .”

Stereotypes are not to be scorned . . . they can be very useful in terms of plot development while not detracting from major character development . . . particularly within the confines of a short story where time and space are limited, concentration must be on the protagonist.

Presently, the fragrance of baking bread drifted
out to him. A temptation, an enticement. Norma Jean had been an enticement. That was the kind of midlife crisis he had been able to deal with. His love affair with Norma Jean had been not so much a love affair with her as with himself. He had been looking at himself all along through her eyes; had liked her perception of him; and basked in it.

"Here let me show you how to interpret this passage. He's simply using a device to capture and lead your attention in a particular direction. When you learn to recognize that device in all of its guises, you will have acquired another aid in the art of reading."

"Oh. When you explain it, it seems so easy. So obvious. Ohh. I never knew it could be like this."

Basking in the glow of her admiration, seeing, when he looked into her eyes, his own reflection, the game was very definitely on. Norma Jean followed Norma Jean. Until at last wearied — this variety of self-love feeds on itself but is insatiable — he began to pull out. That is to say, he began to realize the Norma Jeans are just another path out of his garden; the smell of freshly baking bread once again became preferable.

From his vantage point on the porch, he watched the morning sun climb ever higher. He felt the cool breeze begin to blow hot, then to blow not at all. The odor of lilac that had seemed pleasant in the cool of morning was now becoming overwhelming. He knew that he should move; the porch would be unbearable with the noon sun glaring down through the roof; but he could not move until Miriam had given the appropriate signal. If their paths crossed before a certain preordained time, his day was reduced to meaningless waiting. To him it said something about his life that he saw Miriam at very clearly designated intervals.

Within the confined security of his study, David Hunter could see an emerging pattern of their future life together. Patterns . . . are important in any fictive work. Patterns, structures, the imposing of order on chaos, is a means of coming to know and deal effectively with one's world. Why else does one find such pleasure in reading: because for a time one enters a very well-ordered place; chaos is swept tidily into corners and thus dispensed with . . .

Promptly at noon Miriam came to the porch and informed him that luncheon was ready. He followed her gratefully to the kitchen and took his place at the table. He watched her produce the warm bread, crisp salad, and frosty glasses of tea. Then she sat and smiled across the table at him.

"You do that very well," he said.

“What?”

“All of it. Preparing. Serving.” And he began to eat, feeling for the first time since the end of the semester a hint of appetite.

“David,” she gazed earnestly at him. “Isn’t this something we can talk about? You can’t just go on sitting in your study day after day —”

“Miriam, do you think it’s too late to start the garden this year?”

“Well, no. Of course I don’t. Are you really going to?”

“This salad is delicious.”

“Oh, David.”

... but, the reader wants to know, does he (the author) really sit down with such calculated artifice, these devices so clearly before him? Is the process so mechanical as to be mere craft? These, dear reader, are questions worthy of good — i.e., well thoughtout, disciplined — answers. Of course, you’ve heard all the usual crap about percentages of inspiration/perspiration. And you probably all know about Hemingway’s shit-detector advocacy. Dante on the other hand had a muse — whose merits and appeal one can certainly divine. But you’ve all heard, too, the talk-show author proclaim: My character took over! Why, I had something completely different in mind, but he/she/it/they simply wouldn’t have it! (And, he/she/it/they got the girl, too!)

David Lionel Hunter, sitting in his kitchen, staring out at his garden, listening to his wife, feels an incredible urge to join the David Lionel Hunter in his study and resolve his dilemma on paper and in fact.

“Miriam,” he said. “Do you think —”

“Do I think what?”

“Excuse me. That you could pass the salt.”

She passed the salt, but he could tell that it was not without some misgiving. For the rest of the lunch he did not look again at the garden, and salt or no salt she did not mention it again.

Once more safely on the porch. He began his careful rocking. If he rocked a certain way and counted the number of rocks he made per minute, he had time to think of nothing else. But every so often the insidious thought that, after all, it was only Tuesday, would pop into his head. He would tumble backward in time unable to catch or aid himself.

At his going away party, which he had insisted they not give him, he had been properly grateful and moved.

And he was willing to step aside:

“I know my time is past,” he said.

Lawrence smiled.

“But me no buts.”

Lawrence smiled.
“Liver sausage is the thought for the day.”
Lawrence smiled.
“And I’m sure whoever fills it will be properly dressed.”
Lawrence smiled.
His rocking slowed. Stopped. The heat was intense. If he concentrated on the heat all thought was forced aside. “Why, I remember when it was so hot —”

. . . point of view is very important. In allowing the reader to see things from a particular angle he sees only as much or as little as the writer wishes him to see. Experiment with your fiction; first tell it from one character’s point of view then another. This will allow you to gain a clearer understanding of the characters and a sharper awareness of the situation you are trying to present . . .

She finished cleaning the kitchen, then sat down at the table letting her gaze fall on David’s untended garden. She really didn’t know how to cope with this. In all their years together, she had never seen him quite like this. Why, he hadn’t spoken more than ten sentences to her in the last two weeks. He just sat day after day locked up in that study, staring at blank sheets of paper.

Or maybe this!
He was being his usual petulant self. She sighed, sitting down with her glass of tea, gazing out at his untended garden. Just like a child. He had to be coaxed into everything. Although she had to admit, this little storm was lasting longer than most. Oh, well, maybe a nice roast for dinner. And she’d call the kids. Maybe Diane could stop in and help cheer him up. MEN. She shook her head ruefully.

As the afternoon sun moved ever westward, it became hotter and hotter on the front porch. Gone was the fresh coolness of morning. Gone, too, was his clear understanding of why Tuesday was so bad. Now he was more immediately concerned with staying cool. But he could not leave the porch. —If he rocked fairly rapidly, he could simulate a bit of breeze.

“It gets awfully warm in that office,” said the smiling Lawrence.
“Yes, but it gets warm in all the offices. And if there’s any breeze, he gets it.”
“Well, is he moved out yet?”
“Who knows. Just start moving in.”
He had spent the greater part of the last 25 years in that office. He’s always thought he’d do his best work there. Not that he’d produce THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL. But certainly something more than HOW TO WRITE FICTION or HOW I AVOIDED BECOMING AN AUTHOR. It wasn’t, after all, that he didn’t know HOW to write.

A VOID blanket words that identify vaguely: Be Precise.

The evergreen needles stared malevolently at him as he rocked; the pine floor boards creaked under him. He lifted a hand (the terminal part of the human arm below the wrist consisting of the palm, four fingers, and an opposable thumb) and considered his abilities as a writer. He waved such thoughts away; they dispersed, floated away on the stillness of mid-afternoon. A feeling of drowsiness overcame him. The chair slowed its pace: sometimes he had dozed in his office; making sure his door was closed, he had simply put his head down, pillowed by the freshman papers he seemed always to be correcting, and slept. Sometimes for 10 minutes or 20 or had it ever been that long?

When he awoke, the white-hot heat of a summer afternoon enveloped him. It clutched his throat until his eyes popped and his ears rang. The hammering of his heart frightened him, and he prayed to the pine trees, to his unfinished garden, to David Lionel Hunter in the study: Prolong it. I need more time.

“David?” came Miriam’s questing, questioning voice. “David, can I talk to you a minute?”

He breathed deeply, relief coursing through him. He licked the salty water from his lips.

“Here, Miriam. I’m here.” Was there a note of triumph in that statement?

“I just spoke with Diane on the phone. She’s coming for dinner tonight. I hope that’s all right.”

“Diane? —Yes. Sure. Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. She said she’s sick of McDonald’s and wants to eat real food for a change. She says to tell you she’s reading a new author. Who’s marvelous.”

“Okay. Yes. Fine.”

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. Miriam faded, trailing Diane, the vacuum cleaner and loose strands of his life behind her.

In his lair, his cave, his shrine, David sat amid the wreckage and rubbed gleeful hands. Take that, he thought. You want to go on with it. You don’t care that today is Tuesday. Your heart murmurs
with heat and the blood freezes in your veins. Oh, Art! Oh Life! Oh! ... Ah, Significance rears its ugly head. One must learn to use symbol and metaphor and allusion to give greater Significance to a Work. Perhaps, a story is working toward a single significant climactic event. Or, it could be a story filled with little significances. Or the FULL significance may not be revealed until the very last WORD. Does one go out with a Bang? or does one really not go out at all, but rather on and on and on and on . . .

At length. When the sickening feeling of heat abated, he seemed to gather himself with determination. In his thoughts were visions of himself digging in the soft cool earth of his garden, sprinkling his seed with care and resolution, feeling a nagging worry that there was something he was not doing quite right. It must all be done perfectly. If his seed was to bear fruit.

"All our tomorrows," he thought.

And with such visions and these words, he went into his study with a real need to reread Don Quixote.