

# THE CASE FOR STRUCTURE IN 21ST-CENTURY FICTION

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THE LATE SAUL BELLOW, noting a sense of vacuum of meaning and purpose as early as the 1970s, remarked in his Nobel Laureate Speech: "We do not think well of ourselves; we do not think amply about what we are" (qtd. in Smith 96). If contemporary fiction is an extension of contemporary sensibility, then perhaps we may conclude, as readers of contemporary fiction ourselves, what has become a bearing out of Saul Bellow's statement: No purposeful narrative, no comic sensibility, informs our world of the 21st-century.

Instead, the chief feature of contemporary thinking as reflected in contemporary fiction is its acceptance of reality as unstructured. Contemporary fiction rides on the concept of fiction as a series of events, rather than as a planned progression of events, moving towards a defined end. Contemporary fictionists tend to explore rather than organize; and if they do organize at all, their method is random rather than sequential.

The world of contemporary fiction does not resemble the world of the past where our questions were answered. Contemporary writing defies clear and coherent exegesis. Devoid of sense and paradoxical, these worlds are worlds where protagonists are thrown into without trace as to the "why." Previous fiction was written against a backdrop of a frame of objective values that the writer shared with the reader. Contemporary fiction has no such framework standing at the back of it.

In the previous tradition, fiction was a formal structure of actions and reactions that were finished at the end of the story. Contemporary fiction has no such finality.

Unfortunately, this loss of meaning and purpose comes at a time when society is prepared to hear what the fictionists have to say. According to Saul Bellow: "The intelligent public is waiting to hear from Art what it does not hear from Theology, Philosophy, Social Theory, and what it cannot hear from pure science: a broader, fuller, more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what this life is for" (qtd. by Huston Smith, 2).

Does it mean that the fictionist's time has come at last? I am inclined to believe so. The intelligent public has given all the approaches enumerated above by Bellow, a chance, and has found them wanting. It is left with no choice but to try the artists for a change. I suspect the public knows, deep within, art's unique way of approaching the issues. Let me amplify:

If I met a beautiful girl with a slight blemish, say a wart or two on her face, the slight affliction would mean almost nothing to me. After all, what person is entirely without blemish? But if I met that same girl in a work of fiction, my response would be different. The blemish, which would be insignificant in real life, would acquire meaning by virtue of its being mentioned in the story. For example, I may show my indignation at the writer over her mockery of beauty even if the writer argued that beautiful girls do grow warts on their faces, too. But I won't buy that.

My reaction illustrates one important difference between a real life beautiful girl and one such girl in fiction. The former will attract my attention but may not draw an abstraction; the latter is an abstraction that claims universality.

I hasten to quash the impression, however, that I am only for the inclusion of the beautiful and sublime in art. That would be going back to pre-Cubism or pre-Surrealism. The traditional distinction between the sublime and the banal has disappeared. Slippers, garbage cans, *tocino*, *longganisa*, lawn mowers, are appropriate subjects too for even the most important writings and must be treated with the same attention as liturgical vestments, cathedrals, and human destiny.

The argument I want to introduce is in the nature of a defense of the narrative sensibility at the core of fiction. This sensibility is not something that exists in addition to art, but rather as the essence of the narrative instinct itself, the basis by which the discipline articulates and codifies itself. I contend that this sensibility rests on two solid foundations:

First, the narrative instinct is structured: Fiction, as Wilson R. Thornley defines it very well, is a series of reported scenes in which a causative situation arises, requiring a deciding character with a governing characteristic to try solving some kind of problem along lines of action which he decides on as best for his purposes and which suffer interruptions or intensifications until he comes to the result of his final decisions (Thornley 4). I stand by this definition to the point of saying that any other definition that does not resonate with this one is definitely not fiction.

Second, the narrative instinct is comic: It believes in happy endings.

Admittedly, the idea of imposing structure on fiction when real life apparently has no structure, might seem arbitrary and simplistic. Even a cursory reading of the daily horror stories in the dailies is enough to convince us that real life is more tragic than comic, that real life does not have happy endings.

Tragedies like these, I suspect, are probably what drove Frank Kermode to remark that happy-ending stories are "intellectually and epistemologically dishonest" (qtd. by Greeley in *Myths of Religion*, 126). Bruno Bettelheim, for his part, remarked that stories with happy endings concede to the weak-willed, who engage in wishful thinking because they like to find meaning where there is no meaning, purpose where there is no purpose (Greeley 126).

The intent in my insistence on structure, however, is not to oversimplify the human experience, but to enhance it. An established structural framework provides us with a frame of reference, without which the majority of experiences will pass us by. Structure begets efficiency.