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Assessment Title: <u>Dynamic Revision: Five ways to Enhance Meaning in Narrative</u>

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Dynamic Revision

Five Ways to Enhance Meaning in Narrative

"The first draft reveals the art, revision reveals the artist"

--Michael Lee (2006)

Abstract: Linear models for writing follow a '*first . . .then . . .finally*' approach placing revision at the end—after the creative act (Sommers, 1980). This methodology is useful when editing for grammatical errors and syntax though a more holistic and 'intra-writing' approach supports revising for meaning. Using five key elements—point of view (POV), time as structure, detail, dialog and register—revision for meaning is explored in the context of an example short story. Excerpts from a variety of novels and other works are also referenced. By being aware of these elements throughout the writing process, writers will be able to improve revision, clarifying meaning and adding weight to their narrative.

Introduction: Revision is often seen as correctional, a process of making adjustments after the work is completed (Nowacek, 2007). This approach comes from linear models that, like speech, separate writing into stages: conception—incubation—production (Sommers, 1980). Yet the writing process is not like speech—not irrevocable nor rigidly linear. By considering changes simultaneously while writing, revision becomes holistic and recursive and the writer remains open to creative inspiration throughout each draft (Olsen & Drew, 1996).

Whether the story begins with a mood—"*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times* " (Dickens, 1994) or a setting—"*The land of Gont . . . is a land famous for its wizards*" (Le Guin, 2004), revision is the heart of the creative process. (Lehr, 1995)

When seen as more than an exercise in 'polishing narrative' revision becomes an opportunity to develop ideas, expand characters and clarify meaning. With this in mind, five key elements are considered—point of view (POV), time as structure, details, dialog and register. The excerpt Witch Trackers is offered as an example followed by a critical analysis of techniques.

Witch Trackers

Archer watched as shadows advance over the ruined city of Corsanon, jagged walls turned red by the sunset. A single gas streetlamp flickered on and off, like an eye scanning for signs of life. Somewhere in the distance a door slammed.

He turned to the man behind him. Rav looked skinnier than usual in the shadows, swallowed up by the fading light.

"Well?" Archer asked.

Rav crouched, scooping up a handful of dirt from the side of the road. He crumbled it between his fingers, letting it trickle to the ground. The other men gathered around.

Archer stooped until his head was level with Rav's ear.

"Is she here?"

Rav licked his lips before tasting the sand that clung to his fingers.

"Naw." He stood up, dust falling from his hands as he brushed them on his pants. "What now?"

"We wait," Archer said.

"Ale?" Rav jerking his head towards the tavern beneath the winking light.

"Why not?"

A gust of wind swept past blowing Rav's hat, a rag tied in knots, onto the ground. Rav looked at it, shoving his hands into his pockets. The other men hesitated as well.

"What now?" Archer asked.

"She'll skin us. She'll cook us. She boil . . ."

Archer whooped with laughter slapping Rav's back, knocking him to his knees. "This again?"

His laughter vanished.

"Get it, all of you." His hands went to his hips, head cocked sidewise. "She's nothing . . . as good as dead."

He winked and pulled out a long thin dagger, twisting it in the space between them.

"You'll see. Watch for my sign."

Kali stood at the edge of the road, staring towards the heart of Corsanon. A single streetlamp shone like a beacon in the darkness, flickering with an eerie glow. She took a deep breath, pushed back her hood and smiled.

"Nothing, am I?" she whispered into the night air, her breath making puffs of mist in the rising moonlight.

She smiled, tracing the edge of a boot-print with a twig. Intricate tattoos wound across her wrists and towards her fingertips, vines and serpents wrapped in an ancient caduceus.

"Shall I accompany you?"

A young woman stepped out of the shadows leading two horses. As she spoke, one horse pushed forward, nuzzling Kali's shoulder. The woman laughed softly, holding the mare back.

"No, Jaynan. You'll have your hands full minding these two, especially if things get . . . lively." Kali stroked the mare's neck, flipping stray lengths of black mane over her crest. "I won't be long."

"There're at least five of them."

Jaynan pointed at the boot prints.

"At least." Kali said.

She rolled up her sleaves, removing silver bangles from her wrists and tucking them into her saddle bag.

Jaynan leaned forward to kiss Kali's cheek. "Be safe, my love," she said, handing her a long staff of polished wood inlayed with copper runes.

Kali flipped her hood up and headed towards the tavern. The horses nickered after her as clouds obscured the moon, sending a blanket of darkness over the deserted street.

Archer laughed. The tavern smelled of rancid meat, sweat, and sour ale. He called for beer and found a table near the back of the large room. A fire hissed, the blazing logs warming the filthy rushes and soot covered walls. The tabletop was crusted with food, ash and spilled wine. Deep gouges rent the surface, from both sword and axe. Archer leaned back in his chair taking it in.

Several other men where seated by the entrance. All were hooded and hunched as if in hiding, except for the barman. His chest swelled under a dirty white singlet, the hair on his back and shoulders sticking up like boar bristles.

Archer filled his pipe and took a deep drag. Before he exhaled, he froze.

In the chair beside him appeared a hooded figure.

Archer felt his heart pound.

A magician's trick, he said to himself. *Nothing to worry about.*

"Where's the witch-child?" she asked.

Beneath the table Archer fingered his dagger, sliding it from its sheath.

"Where's me gold?" he asked.

The woman lifted a coin purse from her cloak and placed it on the table.

He nodded. "It's a trade."

Idiot! He had her now. He planned to cut her, take the gold, keeping the prize for himself. Rav had said it'd be too risky, his brow beading with sweat when they'd bickered over it. Archer stood firm. Witch or not, she was only a woman, and he could handle any woman.

I might even have some fun with her before she dies, or after.

She turned to him.

"Really?"

He spat. *Demon psychic!*

He hadn't counted on that. She let her hood slide back, revealing electric blue eyes and a shock of spiky blonde hair. Archer swallowed the bile in his throat.

Now!

He sprang, blade slicing towards her neck as Rav reached for the gold.

With her left hand, the witch caught Archer's wrist, snapping the bones. His blade clanked to the floor. With her right, she pointed the staff at Rav, immobilizing him where he stood. His fingers stopped inches from the coin purse, his thick tongue sticking out of his mouth as though he'd been strangled.

The other men jumped, one leaping towards her, the rest running away.

She raised her staff again, dropping them all to their knees, her terrifying screech echoing through the tavern.

Horses trumpeted outside.

Archer stared at her, mute. His limbs were paralysed, blood flowing freely from where the bones protruded. He watched it pool across the table, filling the grooves like tributaries and dripping to the floor.

His vision blurred when she leaned over him, lifting her cloak slightly to keep it from touching his face. The bag of coins disappeared back into her robe.

"Who's the idiot now, Sunshine?" she asked, heading to the tavern door.

He let out his last breath, cursing her through pale lips.

"Damn you underworld bitches . . ."

Jaynan handed Kali the reins. The mare was becoming unmanageable, pawing the ground with alternating hooves.

"I take it there's no need to rush?" she asked, securing her staff with double ties.

Kali reached across the space between them and squeezed her companion's arm.

"No rush at all."

She got Archer? How?

Jaynan hid her surprise.

A silence built between them as they headed out of town, punctuated by the horses' hooves clipping over the cobblestones.

"Much of a fight?" Jaynan finally asked, her lips dry.

The moon came out of the clouds, lighting the road with a soft glow as it rose towards the zenith. Kali's eyes were black, glistening.

"None at all. The last of them gone." She paused. "Does that disturb you?"

Jaynan shook here head. "But one thing does."

Kali raised her brows.

"Where do we go from here?"

Kali urged her mare into an easy jog which Jaynan's horse matched.

"I'm thinking supper," she replied. "And then home."

I can't let her go back. I can't let her know.

"But . . . we have to keep moving!"

"Do we?" Kali glanced down at the sheath that held her staff.

"It isn't safe." Jaynan gestured out into the black maw of trees that lined both sides of the road.

Kali frowned. "What did you have in mind?"

"Keep hiding, of course. We can go to Lavidica. It's a big enough city. We can disappear there. If we ride through the night, we'll be . . ."

"I'm not hiding anymore," Kali replied, throwing her voice behind her as she moved ahead at a gallop.

Of course you aren't, my queen. And that's why sent me, just in case.

They sped along until the woods thinned out into a grey meadow. Kali brought

her mare to a halt, dust rising around the horses' legs like a ground fog.

"Does this look *safer* to you?" she asked, not waiting for an answer. She

dismounted and led her mare out into the field.

She looked ethereal, like she was walking on water, the grass a shallow sea

undulating beneath her feet. For an instant, Jaynan's eyes welled up and she brushed

the tears with her fists.

"Wait up," she said, swinging her leg over the saddle and dropping lightly to

the ground. "There's something I didn't mention."

Not quite all your trackers are gone, my love.

"What's that?"

Kali turned back as Jaynan's thin sword levelled at her neck.

Kali let the mare's reins slip through her fingers.

"What's this?" she asked, staring at the blade.

"You're coming to Lividica with me."

"Or?"

"Or die here."

Kali lifted her head, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm not going with you."

Without hesitation, Jaynan thrust the sword tip forward.

Kali's mare reared, iron-shod hooves pawing the air. She stepped to the side,

inches out of the line of the blade, her own dagger flashing briefly before it sunk deep

between Jaynan's ribs.

The tracker's eyes went wild, searching for comprehension as her sword fell from her grip.

"They'll send more," she said, dropping to he knees. "You'll never be free."

"Ah, but I will, sweet Jaynan. And you would have too, if you'd only trusted me.

Kali bent to kiss the other woman as she slid to the ground.

The mare's nose whiffled over the blood as it seeped into the grass. The moon went behind a billow of clouds, sucking light from the meadow as Jaynan died.

"Now we can go home."

Critical Discussion

The Point of View (POV):

POV shows who is telling the story. It determines not only voice but influences how main characters are developed (Backes, 2001). Choices in POV include omniscient—the 'author as God'—exemplified by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's <u>Love in the Time of Cholera</u>, the 'first person'—using the word 'I'—seen in Arthur Golden's <u>Memoirs of a Geisha</u>, and third person—using the words 'she' or 'he'—as in Tom Robbin's <u>Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates.</u> The latter two are more popular in contemporary fiction and the second person—using the word 'you'—is rare. An example is <u>Bright Lights, Big City</u> by Jay McInerney.

<u>Witch Trackers</u> is written in the third person, allowing for POV shifts between Kali, Archer and Jaynan. To avoid confusion of meaning, the alternating POV's are

denoted by larger line-space formatting and key identifying words, modelled after

Merle Hodge's <u>Inez</u> (1990, p.647-650). These indications alert readers to the shift

without disrupting the narrative flow.

A lapse in POV means jumping from one character to another out of context with the

established consistency. This can distort meaning as seen in an early example of

<u>Witch Trackers</u>. The POV is Jaynan's:

> *"Wait up," Jaynan said, swinging her leg over the saddle and jumping down.*
>
> *Kali kept her eyes ahead, hiding her trembling hands.*

From Jaynan's POV she is unable to see Kali's hands trembling, unless she

has x-ray vision. **Questions to ask:** 1) Can the character know this? 2) Are the

shifting POVs clear, seamless and easy to follow? 3) Is meaning enhanced by the

POV of confused?

Time as Structure:

A sense of time gives structure to a story, supporting changes in POV and

contributing to meaning through detail and tempo. It is an area sometimes overlooked

by writers and is included in Gross's (1996) list of '*most common mistakes in fiction*

manuscripts'. He points out that readers can be confused by lack of indication of time,

locale or chronology of events. Sometimes these lapses can be corrected by inserting a

transitional phrase—*The next day . . .* though a more subtle approach may enhance

reader immersion and hone meaning through symbolism (Holland, 2002).

This technique is seen in David Malouf's short story, <u>The Empty Lunch Tin</u> where nature elements (shadows, the angle of the sun), keep the reader aware of how much time has passed with each POV change.

> *"Originally the shadow of the house had been at his feet, but it had drawn back before him as the morning advanced and he stood now in a wide sunlit space casting his own shadow."* (Malouf 1985, p. 36)

<u>Witch Trackers</u> follows the course of one night, opening with Archer at sunset. The full moon is rising when Kali arrives not long after. She and Jaynan are galloping away with the moon in front of them, and the story ends with it at the zenith.

Back story, the history of the characters or their situation, is also part of 'time as structure' in fiction. The question is what to tell and when. Too much will slow the pace and bore the reader, but too little may leave the reader confused (Milton, 2007). In <u>Witch Trackers</u> snippets of the characters' backgrounds are revealed through dialog and action only:

> *Archer whooped with laughter slapping Rav's back, knocking him to his knees.*
>
> *"This again?"*

Here the action shows that Archer has an aggressive, bullying personality. "This again?" says the relationship has developed over time. **Questions to ask:** 1) How can a sense of time enhance meaning? 2) How much time has elapsed? 3) Does this time sequence make sense?

Detail:

The fine details of the story help situate the reader and convey deep layers of meaning. Urusla Le Guin (2005) discusses the use of detailed language, history and culture:

> *"The more realistic, exact, "factual" detail in a fantasy story, the more sensually things and acts are imagined and described, the more plausible the world will be. After all, it is a world made entirely of words. Exact and vivid words make an exact and vivid world."* (Le Guin, 2005)

Raymond Carver (1992) uses details and a 'compare and contrast' technique to reveal meaning. In his short story *Fat* the protagonist describes a fat man, decent and well dressed—the antithesis of her husband. Through details of both men, the reader sees how empty and meaningless her marriage is without it ever being directly mentioned (Dermott, 2003). Particularly the fat man's fingers are described, depicting more than 'what the hands are like.' They become a phallus, referencing the lack of power in her marriage.

> *"This fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat-appearing and well dressed enough. Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best. When I stop at the table near his to see to the old couple, I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers—long, thick, creamy fingers.*" (Carver, 1992)

Witch Trackers uses detail in this way to impart specific meaning. From the shape of Kali's tattoos to the grooves on the table in the tavern, the reader is guided to notice

the 'little things.' These fine points do not tell the reader what is happening in the action level of the story but allow for individual interpretation (Beal, 2005). For example, Kali's tattoos may suggest a pagan or magic tradition. The grooves in the tables could speak of past violence. **Questions to ask:** 1) Do the details enhance the meaning of the story? 2) Are they used to move the story forward? 3) Do the details seed other parts of the story adding to plot, hooks or twists?

Dialog:

Good dialog sounds like real conversation but it has different structures and features (Jenke, 1999). An actual conversation can be stilted, confusing, repetitive, fragmentary, and 'unreal' because the mind is not used to converting pure speech into text (Cheney, 2006). Spoken conversations are spontaneous and full of incomplete sentences and verbal fillers. Often they do not impart much information at all. Dialog in narrative needs to be tightly structured, and it needs a purpose.

As seen in Ionesco's *Rhinoceroses,* dialog can be used to demonstrate the characters' views and orientation and also to clarify the action and meaning.

> **"DAISY:** I feel a bit ashamed of what you call love – this morbid feeling, this male weakness. And female, too. It just doesn't compare with the ardour and the tremendous energy emanating from all these creatures around us.
>
> **BERENGER:** Energy! You want some energy, do you? I can let you have some energy! [*He slaps her face.]*
>
> **DAISY:** Oh! I never would have believed it possible . . . [*She sinks into the armchair.*]

BERENGER: Oh forgive me, my darling, please forgive me! [*He tries to embrace her, she evades him.]"* (Ionesco 1962, p. 120)

Dialog revision can eliminate wordiness, clichés and unnecessary tags, checking for movement, meaning and pace. In <u>Witch Trackers</u> the internal dialog (italic) also plays a role in developing conflict and suspense between the characters. Here it hints at the covert nature of Jaynan

> Kali reached across the space between them and squeezed her companion's arm.
>
> "No rush."
>
> *She got Archer? How?*
>
> Jaynan hid her surprise.

In Narayan's *Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961, p.20) the dialog between Nataraj and Vasu demonstrates how internal dialog can move a story forward and further develop characterization and setting:

> 'Tell me what type you like."
>
> That paralysed him . . .
>
> 'I'm damned if I know what I want. They all look alike to me. What is the difference anyway?'
>
> This was a triumph for me. 'Vasu, printing is and intricate business.'
>
> 'Oh. Please do something and print me my cards,' he cried, exasperated.
>
> 'All right,' I said. 'I'll do it for you, if you trust me.'

Questions to ask: 1) Can the dialog be shorter and say the same thing? 2) Does it reveal character? Plot? Action? 3) Is it conversational when read aloud?

Register:

Halliday and Hasan (1985 p. 39) define register as "*a configuration of meanings that . . . includes the expressions, lexico-grammatical and phonological features that typically accompany or REALISE meanings.*" Simply put, register describes the way language is used in different situations. Awareness of this can allow the writer to reveal meaning in a particularly subtle way—through vocalization, the nature of the characters and their idiosyncrasies. As in Dickens' *Bleak House,* (1996) words can be used to establish the readers' relationship with each character. Here he depicts first the environment:

> *Fog everywhere . . .Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; . . . fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little prentice boy on deck.* (Dickens, 1996)

Once the ambiance is set, Dickens goes on to introduce the Lord High Chancellor, supplying a 'configuration of meaning' for the reader:

> *The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.*

In <u>Witch Trackers</u>, Register is also used to influence the relationship between the reader and characters. In Archer's POV, the smells are rancid, the language remedial and the imagery coarse. He speaks in grunts and shouts. He spits, sweats and Rav licks dirt from his fingers. When Kali appears, the world softens. She smiles, whispers and traces. Words like *nuzzling*, *kissing*, *heart* and *moonlight* replace the harsher depictions of Archer's scenes. Through register, empathy is created for Kali in hopes that the reader will cheer her, not condemning her, especially at the end. **Questions to ask** 1) Are scenes depicted in ways that support the meaning of the character or conflict? 2) Is the tone of the dialog consistent with the background of the speaker? 3) How can environment and action support characterization further?

Conclusions:

Revision involves more than correcting errors. Applied holistically and throughout the work it can be part of the creative process, evolving ideas and strengthening meaning. Giving more thought to POV, time as structure, detail, dialog and register assists in dynamic revision, improving the story and adding credence to the narrative. When approached in the present tense, as opposed to the latter of '*first . . . then . . . finally*', this methodology becomes, as Lehr (1995) states, the heart of the creative process.

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