

Speaking of the "gladiatorial view of fiction," Ursula Le Guin writes:

People are cross-grained, aggressive, and full of trouble, the storytellers tell us; people fight themselves and one another, and their stories are full of their struggles. But to say that that is the story is to use one aspect of existence, conflict, to subsume all other aspects, many of which it does not include and does not comprehend.

*Romeo and Juliet* is a story of the conflict between two families, and its plot involves the conflict of two individuals with those families. Is that all it involves? Isn't *Romeo and Juliet* about something else, and isn't it the something else that makes the otherwise trivial tale of a feud into a tragedy?

I'm indebted to dramatist Claudia Johnson for this further—and, it seems to me, crucial—insight about that "something else": Whereas the dynamic of the power struggle has long been acknowledged, narrative is also driven by a pattern of connection and disconnection between characters that is the main source of its emotional effect. Over the course a story, and within the smaller scale of a scene, characters make and break emotional bonds of trust, love, understanding, or compassion with one another. A connection may be as obvious as a kiss or as subtle as a glance; a connection may be broken with an action as obvious as a slap or as subtle as an arched eyebrow.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the Montague and Capulet families are fiercely disconnected, but the young lovers manage to connect in spite of that. Throughout the play they meet and part, disconnect from their families in order to connect with each other, finally part from life in order to be with each other eternally. Their ultimate departure in death reconnects the feuding families.

Johnson puts it this way:

... underlying any good story, fictitious or true—is a deeper pattern of change, a pattern of connection and disconnection. The conflict and the surface events are like waves, but underneath is an emotional tide, the ebb and flow of human connection. . . .

Patterns of conflict and connection occur in every story, and sometimes they are evident in much smaller compass, as in this scene from Leslee Becker's story "The Personals." The story takes place shortly after the Loma Prieta earthquake, a catastrophe that has united the community, in the eyes of bookstore owner Alice, while reminding her how cut off from others she actually is. The story centers around her nervous first date with Warren, a shoe salesman and widower still grieving his wife Doris. Described by one reviewer as "factory irregulars," the lonely couple end their date with an after-hours visit to Warren's shoe store.

Suddenly, music began, and Warren emerged from the back room, holding liquor, glasses, shoe boxes, and stockings. "For you," he said, spreading the things at her feet. He opened a box and removed shoes with dramatic high heels. "I've got hand bags, too," he said. "For you, Doris."

She knew he had not realized his mistake, and she said nothing as he sat on the floor in front of her. She felt his hand on her heel, her shoe sliding off effortlessly. She watched the back of him in the mirror and did not want to look at herself as he lifted her foot and pressed it against his chest.

"I don't want to be alone anymore," he said.

She felt her foot slipping out of his hand, the stocking rasping under his fingers. He got to his feet immediately and sat next to her. She looked to the mirror and saw him touch his toupee and wince.

"It's all right," she said. "Warren . . ."

"I'll take you home," he said.

The moment she reached for his hand he got up and began replacing the shoes in the box. "Please," she said. "I know what you're feeling."

"How can you? I don't even know. I'll take you back."

He went into the back room, and the music stopped. While she slipped her shoe on, she felt small and dishonest.

As soon as they returned to the car, she told him what she had done after the earthquake. "I was in a huge department store. Nobody was paying attention to me. I stole things."

"Promise me," he said, "you won't tell anyone about tonight."

"But nothing happened."

"Yeah," he said.

In this short excerpt, Warren tries to connect with Alice through a generous display of shoes, only to blunder and break the fragile connection by calling her by his dead wife's name. When he presses further, Alice withdraws, then tries to ease his humiliation by first offering common emotional experience and then admitting a secret. But it is too late, at least for the present, and Warren refuses to reconnect, perhaps ashamed of the neediness he has revealed.

While the pattern of either conflict or connection may dominate in a given work, "stories are about both conflict and connection," says novelist and poet Robert Morgan.

A story which is only about conflict will be shallow. There must be some deepening of our understanding of the characters. Stories are rarely just about conflicts between good and bad. They are more often about conflicts of loyalty, one good versus another: does a man join up to serve his country, or stay home to help protect and raise his children? The writer strives to bring art to a level where a story is not so much a plot as about human connection, and not just about the conflict of good versus bad, but about the conflict of loyalty with loyalty.

Human wills clash; human belonging is necessary. In discussing human behavior, psychologists speak in terms of "tower" and "network" patterns, the need to climb (which implies conflict) and the need for community, the need to win out over others and the need to belong to others; and these two forces also drive fiction. Like conflict and its complications, connection and its complications can produce a pattern of change, and both inform the process of change recorded in scene and story.