Psychic Distance in Creative Writing
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In creative writing, how involved the reader feels with a story can strengthen the clarity, pacing, suspense, and drama of a story or alternatively draw a reader out of a scene that is critical to understanding a narrative. Often, stories depend on the perspectives of particular characters to lend meaning and detail throughout the story’s structure, plot, and other ambitions.

In his work, *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner describes “psychic distance” as the “distance that the reader feels between himself and the events of the story” (Gardner 111). In terms of point of view, larger psychic distance can present broad contexts or greater arcs that do not need to be as detailed, while closer psychic distance is useful to bring the reader closer to scenes where specific details are important to engage with the story.

Psychic distance can be thought of as occurring at different levels of distance, with the largest distance between the reader and the events of the story being represented as the beginning “level” at level 1. As the psychic distance between the reader and the story narrows, psychic distance progresses through levels 2-5, with level 5 representing the closest distance between the reader and the events of the story. This progression of psychic distance is demonstrated in the following example:

**Level 1:**

*It was summer in Los Angeles, 1979. A slender woman rode up to the café on a bicycle.*

The example sentence at this level presents broad details and setting, with the reader at a greater distance from the events of the story. Even though the woman in this sentence rides up to a café on a bicycle, there aren’t many details to engage the reader. The audience is presented with where and when this scene is taking place, but we don’t know about the deeper narrative at play here. In order to engage with the story, the reader must be brought in closer to the events of the story.

**Level 2:**

*Jane Richards preferred riding her bike around town.*

At level 2, the psychic distance draws closer in and shows the audience more about the character, providing a name (Jane Richards) and a view into the character’s preferences (riding her bike around town). Even though we understand more about this character now and the reader is closer to the events in the story, we can still be brought closer.

**Level 3:**

*Jane despised the LA traffic.*

At level 3, the key verb of “despised” gives us a greater sense of how Jane reacts emotionally to traffic. Additionally, we get a sense of why Jane rides her bike and how that may relate to her inner character.
and motivations. As readers, we begin to ask questions: why does Jane despise LA traffic?

**Level 4:**

*Goodness, how she despised this horrendous LA traffic.*

At level 4, Jane’s emotional motivations are emphasized and the reader is brought closer to the events of the story itself. At this point, the reader is also given a stronger sense of Jane’s “voice” through the use of words like “Goodness” and “horrendous.”

**Level 5:**

*Traffic. Horns blaring from everywhere for no reason, the stuttering procession ultimately going nowhere, exhaust strangling your nostrils and slipping down into your heart…*

Finally, at level 5, the audience is given reasons and details as to why Jane feels this way about LA traffic. The audience has an opportunity to relate to this character’s feelings and they can get an idea of specific details to flesh out the scene. At this point, the reader is brought so closely into the character’s state of mind and point of view that they feel as if they are involved in the events of the story. Unlike the first sentence at level 1 that simply established the broad characteristics of the story’s setting, this sentence at level 5 provides unique details that are dependent on how the character presents themselves to the audience.

Psychic distance can be an effective tool in guiding the reader through different points of view, but shifts in psychic distance need to be carefully managed. Jumping into close detail from a broad psychic distance may be a jarring experience for your reader, and it can ruin the effect that you are attempting to accomplish in your narrative. As rule of thumb, it is often helpful to transition between levels one at a time, so the process of closing the distance between the reader and the events of the story is smooth and gradual.

**Works Cited**