

Passionate Process

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I have followed the College Standards of academic honesty in writing this essay. I have retained a copy of this paper for my files.

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William Faulkner's short story "Artist at Home" reveals a glimpse into the mind of a writer, and the writing process. Characters function as archetypes of the varied artistic influences that a writer considers in order to create inventive fiction. The story considers the needs of the artist as they create, whether it be in a community of other artists and writers, or in seclusion. The story sets up contrasts between forms of writing, most notably "Poetry and The Novel." Mr. Faulkner addresses that most troubling and inevitable roadblock to any writer's process, writer's block. He highlights the alienation of relationships with others, and possibly oneself, that might occur when a career in writing fiction is chosen. This short story delivers detailed information about the creative writing process, and the influences of different art forms and artists on that process.

Faulkner cleverly creates the characters in this story to illustrate the complex artistic influences involved in creating fiction. These archetypal artist figures, the romantic poet, the blocked novelist, and the short story writer represent the diverse artists, methods, forms, and thoughts that influence his writing. These characters offer perspectives in art that allow him to create fiction that speaks to a wider range of people. The visiting artists from New York who come to Roger and Anne's house are not named. Only The Poet, John Blair is given form and voice, showing the importance of poetry to this writer's process. Faulkner writes Roger's thoughts on the artist's visits, "He didn't go back to New York any more, but now and then New York came to visit him: the ones he used to know, the artists and poets and such he knew before he began to earn enough food to need a cupboard to put it in" (617). Notice that he doesn't say "earn enough money," he says, "earn enough food." This one word difference brings up the

issue of being paid for your art. It is likely that Roger creates art because he believes in artistic expression, not because he wants to make tons of money. He has however been successful, and made money from his writing. These “painters, the writers, that hadn’t sold a book or a picture” are his connection to his past (627). A connection to a time when he was creating art for art’s sake, before he became successful. After his success as a writer, he disengages from his artistic community, and moves into seclusion. This seclusion proves to be the cause of his writer’s block.

The writer wishes for his old artist’s community, even though he states, “He didn’t go back to New York any more” (627). He needs that community to inspire his writing process. He can’t escape his past, as much as he might try to. He has moved out of the city and into the country to get away from all those other artists and influences. This move inadvertently stymies his creative writing process, and causes him to become lazy with his writing. Faulkner portrays that laziness by describing Roger as “a little fat, a little overweight, so sometimes it would be two or three days before he would get his mail” (628). He can’t even retrieve his mail - his only connection to the world. He contradicts himself, as he tries to forget that he needs this community , while sending for them. His wife Anne says of the Poet’s sudden appearance, “So you wrote him to come, I knew you had, but I’m glad to hear you admit it of your own free will” (632).

Roger Howes realizes that he needs inspiration to clear his writing block. He requests a visit from The Poet, but isn’t sure if inspiration will come or not. Faulkner writes, “Roger hadn’t told his wife, Anne, about this poet at all, maybe because he didn’t

know himself" (629). He doesn't know if inspiration will show up all the way out here "four miles from the village," until The Poet walks into the garden. Adding to the mysterious nature of the visitors, they don't even know why they are there. One of the visitors states, "Who lives about four miles up the valley?" when the station master tells the visitors who they are looking for (628). It is very unlikely they would show up not knowing where they were going. The writer Roger sends for them in order to inspire his creativity, and clear his writer's block. This inspiration is however a double edged sword. It cuts through the writer's block, but also disrupts his household, which causes battles between 'Poetry and the Novel' that Roger attempts to write.

Poetry may be considered a more elevated or distinguished artform than the novel by many. It is certainly older than the novel form. Anne says about her skill with poetry, "No, I haven't evolved far enough yet to take my poetry straight; I won't understand it" (634). I think she is being sarcastic here, because of her comment about "being a woman" later in this paragraph, but her statement also illustrates the elevated pedestal poetry might be placed on that removes it from access to the common reader. The Poet, John Blair represents Poetry, Poetry with a capital "P." He is deep, romantic, charismatic, and as Roger says to Anne, "We haven't had a poet in the house in some time. Place losing all its mellifluous overtones and subtleties" (631). The Poet challenges Roger and "The Novel" in several ways, and ultimately frees his writer's block. Roger shows that as a writer he needs conflict and excitement to create art. He also needs the influences of poetry to compel him to create. Roger "used to write poetry

himself" (637). Since he has experience writing poetry, it influences his novel writing process. He speaks of poetry as, "Instructing, edifying, and self-effacing" (633). The Poet has revolutionary ideas - going to church, eating with, and staying with the servants. Anne says, "he prefers Pinkie's Company to ours" (633). She seems jealous of his attentions to Pinkie.

Faulkner highlights how The Poet contrasts with the Novelist in one important aspect - their use of language. An example of this is the quote, "Freedom. Equality. In words of one syllable" (634). While these are not "one syllable" words, the point is made. The simplicity of language found in poetry reveals the message without any extra or unnecessary words, like a novel or short story might. The words are clear and concise. These two words are also an example of Faulkner's recurrent themes and ideals often portrayed in his novels. He contrasts between single, simple words you might find in a poem and a more complex work of writing, like a story or novel, that still considers those same vitally important issues.

Roger's writer's block is compared to impotence, and caused by his alienation of the relationships in his life. He is divided from the rest of the world, including Anne, The Poet, and even himself. Faulkner writes, "Now get this. This is where it starts" (634). The writer's process leaks through again with this note to himself and the reader, as he composes the story. The real story is here. He's getting to the meat of it. Up till now, he has been trying out ideas and creating a story as he goes, but now he has gotten to what he really wants to talk about. His inspiration, The Poet is all romance as he is

found “kneeling outside Anne’s door” (638). The drama and conflict created by the love triangle between the writer, the poet, and Anne - the wife, sparks Roger’s blocked creativity.

Before he begins writing again, he meets with the Poet in his office. Faulkner writes, “Roger sucks at the pipe. He seems to be having a little trouble making it burn right. Maybe that is why he slams the pipe down on the desk, or maybe he is human too, like a poet” (637). This passage could be seen to represent his impotence in his relationships, and his blocked writing. Anne comes on to the Poet. She wants Romance and poetry, not impotence, novels, and writer’s block. Roger is also not happy with himself and distances himself from everyone. After he “makes up” with his wife, the flow of writing is restored, and as Roger says, “And so the typewriting market picked up again” (640).

Faulkner addresses the Artist’s perception of self in relation to the creative writing process. He gives Roger’s thoughts about Anne as she brushes her hair in the mirror while he lays on the bed watching her. He writes, “her probably watching him in the mirror and him not knowing it, what with being an artist and all” (631). He has a hard time knowing what others think of him, or “see”, when they read his work. He is showing distance from himself, and a confusion about his own process in creating art. He worries that she is watching him without his knowledge. In order to create characters he may step back from himself, and allow the characters to take over, like the Poet

does. He is confused by having all these artistic “characters” around influencing who he is, and not being able to express himself to those who are closest to him.

When a character in a story is a writer, it may indicate the author is writing about their own writing, and their writing process. Invention, editing, and submission are all found here. There are confusing statements in the text that don’t make sense until viewed as a writer editing their work. After Anne’s dialogue he writes, “Except she didn’t say exactly that” (630). He shows the process of trying new things to see if they work, then discarding or changing them later. He doesn’t put the poem in his novel. Faulkner writes, “At first he wanted to put the poem in too, … but he didn’t. Conscience, maybe he called it” (644). A clue to his relationship with the Poet and Anne (she also inspires his work), is when Roger asks, “And what was it he had been writing? Him, and Anne, and the poet (lowercase now). Word for word, between the waiting spells to find out what to write down next, with a few changes here and there …” (644). This passage shows his deep connection to Anne, and the poet, who have helped him create.

“Artist at Home” proves to be highly detailed, as might be expected from a writer of Mr. Faulkner’s caliber. He manages to reveal so much about the inner workings of the writer’s mind as they create art. Faulkner evokes the passionate emotions involved in creating. These range from disillusionment and distress, to acceptance and possibly joy. The last sentence sums it up, “Sure. That was all right. Because it was Christmas soon, and then spring; and then summer, the long summer, the long days” (646).