

Emotion in Fiction and Nonfiction, a Brief Introduction

Douglas Glover (VCFA Winter Residency 2020-21)

(45 minutes)

We are governed by reason and emotions, and there are a number of techniques that can be used to show emotion: physical symptoms, actions and expressions, atmosphere, descriptions of scene with weighted diction and metaphor, dramatic and expressive dialogue (comes under actions), and symbolism. But there is nothing like direct statement and analysis of emotion to get the message across to the reader, to create the emotional groundwork for action, to define relationships, and to shape the emotional arc of the narrative. In my experience, many students are reluctant to mention emotion directly or to make it a regular part of their compositional repertoire. This is often the case because they mistakenly think that the show-don't-tell rule prohibits naming emotional states.

Example texts are from James Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" and his short story "Previous Condition," Ralph Ellison's short story "Battle Royal" (the opening chapter of his novel *The Invisible Man*) and Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay "Letter to my Son" (excerpted from his book *Between the World and Me*).

Four broad categories of technique & two structural devices (there are more but these are the ones I am dealing with). You can mix these device categories together in practice. Most writers do. I have color coded the techniques so you can see roughly how they are often used together as a mixed strategy.

I. Direct reporting: emotion reported directly in character thought or reflection

a. first person or 3rd person [I was sad. Bill was sad.]

- Ralph Ellison: **I was surprised, filled with panic**, as though I had been left alone with an unknown danger.
- Ralph Ellison: But now **I felt a sudden fit of blind terror**. I was unused to darkness, it was as though I had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths.
- James Baldwin on his father: ...we shared, in our different fashions, the vice of **stubborn pride**.

- b. free indirect discourse [I'm sad, he thought. I'm sadder than sad. I have tears rolling down my cheeks inside. But you can't see it, Dad. You've never been able to see it!]
- c. complex 1st or 3rd person — direct report inflected, analyzed or elaborated [I was sad but with a special kind of sadness, not because she had left me but because she had not left me sooner and made a life for herself. It was a deeper sadness than the sadness of mere self-regard, a generous and regretful sadness.]
- Ralph Ellison: But my folks were more alarmed over his last words than over his dying. It was as though he had not died at all, his words caused so much anxiety
 - Ralph Ellison: When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did.
- d. Straightforward, authoritative report of another person's emotions
- Baldwin: He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met.
-

II. Indirect reporting: observing emotions in other people

- a. indirect as in observed or filtered through an observer; you could also call it speculative based on physical behavior, words, tone, facial expressions, context and history [Gertrude looked sad to me the way her face was downcast, the way she held the tissue to her nose. Her shoulders were shaking. But then for all I know she could have been laughing.]
- for examples see IIIb, which is functionally the same technique
- b. 3rd person self-reporting, always questionable, i.e. is the person making the report reliable? [Bill said he was sad. He said the words "I am sad."]

Baldwin on his father: "He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life."

III. physical behavior and internal symptom

a. Direct: self report 1st or 3rd person

- Ralph Ellison: I almost wet my pants. A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a magnificent blonde – stark naked. There was dead silence. I felt a blast of cold air chill me. I tried to back away, but they were behind me and around me. Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked.

b. Indirect: observing emotional expression, behavior or symptom in others (same as above IIb)

- Ralph Ellison: His face was a black blank of a face, only his eyes alive with hate of me and aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened to us all. I became anxious.
- Ta-Nehisi Coates essay: There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body.
- Ralph Ellison: They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys.

IV. actions to cause or inspire emotions in another person [I hid my face and pretended to weep so Mother would feel sorry for me]

- Baldwin "Previous Condition": After the first few times I realized that I had to play smart, to act out the role I was expected to play. I only had one head and it was too easy to get it broken. When I faced a policeman I acted like I didn't know a thing. I let my jaw drop and I let my eyes get big. I didn't give him any smart answers, none of the crap about my

rights. I figured out what answers he wanted and I gave them to him. I never let him think he wasn't king.

- Baldwin on his father: ...when he tried to help one of us with out homework the absolutely unabating tensions which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished.

V. also diction, imagery, metaphor, setting details, atmosphere.

- Baldwin: "...as though in answer to the insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet."

VI. continuous, straightforward, authoritative description of a person's character and feelings in either fiction or nonfiction often combining techniques

- Baldwin on his father: He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life. He was not a young man when we were growing up and he had already suffered many kinds of ruin; in his outrageously demanding and protective way he loved his children, who were black like him and menaced, like him; and all these things sometimes showed in his face when he tried, never to my knowledge with any success, to establish contact with any of us. When he took one of his children on his knee to play, the child always became fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our homework the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished. If it ever entered his head to bring a surprise home for his children, it was, almost unfailingly, the wrong surprise and even the big watermelons he often brought home on his back in the summertime led to the most appalling scenes. I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home. From what I was able to gather of his early life, it seemed that this inability to establish contact with other people had always marked him and had been one of the things which had driven him out of New Orleans. There was something in him, therefore, groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with

him. One saw it most clearly when he was facing new people and hoping to impress them. But he never did, not for long. We went from church to smaller and more improbable church, he found himself in less and less demand as a minister, and by the time he died none of his friends had come to see him for a long time. He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness now was mine

VII. **Thematizing emotion:** anchoring a text in a single emotion, which becomes thematic, explaining or theorizing an experiential context.

- Ta-Nehisi Coates: That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece – a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the world out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.
- Ta-Nehisi Coates: And yet I am still afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my West Baltimore neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. They would stand on the corner of Gwynn Oak and Liberty, or Cold Spring and Park Heights, or outside Mondawmin Mall, with their hands dipped in Russell sweats. I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired.

I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana's home in Philadelphia. You never knew her. I barely knew her, but what I remember is her hard manner, her rough voice. And I knew that my father's father was dead and that

my Uncle Oscar was dead and that my Uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural. And I saw it in my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. It was said that these lost girls were sweet as honey and would not hurt a fly. It was said that these lost boys had just received a GED and had begun to turn their lives around. And now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear.

Exercise

Invent a situation with two characters. For instance, two people trapped in an elevator between floors, waiting for help. (But you can use any situation. Just follow the technical prompts below.) Can be third or first person, single character narration. Underneath each technique is an example (italicized and in brackets) that I wrote according to the prompts as a rough guide. Don't plan ahead of time. Just torque every line around an emotion.

1. physical description of inside of elevator using emotive atmospheric diction

(It stopped with a jerk, the ceiling seemed to drop an inch or two, the floor rose an inch or two, Ned Buscomb felt like a jack in the box, and it seemed to shiver, as if the cables from which it hung were unraveling. Someone had magicmarked the words CALL ME and ENDLESS on the door. There had been other words but they had been erased. The floor was filthy. It smelled of must and decay, of rot and hopelessness.)

2. person 1: direct self-report feeling & why

(Ned felt frightened, not only because they were trapped but because there was something brutal and sinister in the man's face. He had psycho blue eyes and no eye lashes.)

3. person 1: add a self-report using a simile

(It seemed like he loomed over Ned, like an avalanche, like doom itself. And there was nowhere to run.)

4. indirect report what person 2 is feeling & why he/she/they come to that conclusion

(Everything about him looked threatening, the way his face squinched up like he was in a rage and trying to act civilized, he looked like he might cry, too, like he had just lost his job and his wife had

cancer and he was going to get a gun and shoot up the place, Ned first. He didn't like Ned, that was clear.)

5. Exchange of dialogue (using all the techniques you can):

(The man's mouth twisted horribly. He seemed to be trying to speak, then he spoke.

"I have a gun." He pointed to a bulge under his jacket. He didn't look at Ned. His voice was whispery, intense but barely there. Whatever emotion he felt, and Ned didn't think it was rage so much as despair, hopelessness, it had exhausted him. "It's my wife, you see. She's dying."

I wonder how I knew that, Ned thought. How did I know he had a wife and a gun? It's so annoying when I just know things like that. It has to stop.

"I'm sorry," said Ned, feeling inadequate to the situation, reluctant to be involved, annoyed, yet still a bit frightened because the man was huge and towering and had a gun and was in some distress.

"You're SORRY," the man shouted suddenly. His blue eyes tore holes in Ned's face. "No, no, that's all right," he said, restraining his vehemence. The feelings were ripping through him. "Do you have a wife?"

"No," said Ned, not for the first time feeling foolish and ashamed for not being able to accomplish normal human things, like this maniacal behemoth even. Yes even the hulk had a wife. "I have a dachshund," he added.

The man looked at him, suddenly suspicious.

"Her name is Doris," said Ned, feeling foolish beyond words.

"My wife is up there," the man said, pointing his finger like a gun at the floors above. "She's having affair. She's dying and having an affair." He spoke now querulously, speculatively. He said the words, but they didn't seem real to him.

"I'm just going to press the alarm button," said Ned, feeling his alarm growing. "Maybe they don't know we're here."

"Don't," said the man. "Not yet. You're the first person I've talked to. And I can't do any damage here, can I? We're just hanging." He glanced at Ned. Ned realized it was a joke. The big man with the dying adulterous wife and a gun in his pocket was making jokes.

Ned was now terrified into speechlessness. He made little fish noises with his mouth instead of words. His toes began to itch, his eyelids were sweating. It wasn't that he was afraid of the man and his gun. It was that he was afraid of all this emotion, the undertow of feeling, the black hole of passion the man represented.

Finally, he said, "But you're going down. The elevator is going down. I mean before it stopped."

The man looked at him. Their eyes met. Ned somehow knew that the man had given up, that he had passed the point of murder, that now he was adjusting to bitterness and loss in some new way.

"I saw them up there," he said, his eyes lifting as if in prayer.

Then he raised the gun and, with a cheery smile, shot Ned.)