**Online Assessment Tracking Database**

**Sam Houston State University**

**MFA Program in Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing**

**2013-14**

**Rubric**

**Realist Narrative Mode**

**Instructions**: Although not all, but most, of our students will create stories in a realist narrative mode—that is to say, in brief, stories that seek to create the illusion of a close relationship between the world inside the story and the world outside of it—and because even those who break with these conventions will need to understand in some way the conventions they are breaking, it seems fitting to assess the outcomes of our workshop courses in this context. We will ask, “Are our students producing works of fiction that demonstrate mastery of the fundamentals of the realist narrative mode?” To assist in this process, the rubric below provides a set of questions in a range of categories that we might ask of any of the stories under our consideration. As a reader, you are asked to assess the relative quality—from mastery to competency to failure—of the stories in each of these areas, bearing in mind that not all stories will place an equal amount of emphasis on any one particular area, and that evaluating stories in such a way is, always, a subjective endeavor.

**Character**

* Identify the primary characters. What do we know about each of them based upon appearance, action, speech, and thoughts? What do we learn indirectly through the author’s narration?
* Consider the nature of the relationships between the characters.
* What is the desire of each significant character? How is this evidenced externally (behavior/speech/action)? Internally (thought/authorial narrative)?
* What obstacle stands in the way of the character’s achievement of that desire? What is “at stake” for the character? So what if they don’t get what they want? (Another way to look at this might be to ask what is the central conflict for each character? Or, what connection does each character attempt to make? What interferes with this attempt?)
* Do our perceptions of the characters change over the course of the story? Why? What changes do the primary characters undergo from the start of the story to the end?
* How does the author establish the credibility of his or her characters? How does the author establish the purpose of his or her characters? How does the author establish the complexity of his or her characters? Is the character flat, round, or spherical?
* Are the characters’ behaviors within the realm of who they are? When is it consistently inconsistent?

**Setting**

* Where and when does the story take place?
* What details contribute to the creation of a believable fictional world? How are the senses engaged (sight, sound, smell, touch/texture, taste)? What are the most important details about the setting? Does the author provide sufficient detail concerning the setting? Irrelevant detail concerning the setting?
* How is the setting of the story significant to its meaning? Could this story be set elsewhere with little or no impact on the meaning? Why do you think the story is set where it is? How is the setting significant to our understanding of the characters? Do the characters reflect their particular time and place?

**Action/Plot**

* What is the present action of the story? What, in short, happens in the story?
* Does the story contain the right balance between scene, summary and exposition?
* What is the initial conflict? How is the initial conflict complicated? Does each scene heighten the story’s dramatic tension?
* When does the plot reach its crisis point? How is the conflict resolved?
* Is the resolution complicated or somewhat ambiguous (i.e., not just “happily ever after” or “unhappily ever after”)?
* Is dialogue used to advance action, characterize, and/or reveal theme? Where might dialogue be summarized? Added?

**Theme**

* What themes arise from the story? Can you articulate what the story is about?
* Is there meaning and insight attached to the action and drama of the story? Does the story seem original in its approach or does it seem overly familiar?
* What does the story say about the nature of human existence, about the “mystery of personality”?

**Language**

* How would you describe the language of the story? Is it appropriate for the tone of the story? For the voice of the narrator? Is the language natural or stilted?
* Is the dialogue realistic?
* What images are most prominent to the story?
* Is the language full of concrete and specific detail? Does the writer make use of metaphors and similes? Are the metaphors and similes apt? Surprising? Original? Successful?

**Other Considerations**

* Why does the story begin where it begins? Does it immediately draw you into the story? Is the conflict quickly established? Should the story begin later? Earlier?
* Why does the story end where it ends? What’s your experience of this ending as a reader?
* Through whose point of view is the story told? Is the use of point of view consistent throughout the story?
* If the story transitions between the past and the present, are those transitions clearly understood by the reader? Are verb tenses correctly utilized in this regard?
* Does the story make efficient use of scene and summary? Are there scenes that would be better as summary? Are important moments presented in summary rather than scene? Are there scenes that could be trimmed?
* Is the story original or does it seem overly familiar? Does it tell us a new story or does it find a new way to tell an old story?
* Does the story push the art of fiction forward in some way?
* If you were an editor at a literary journal, would you publish this story? Why? Why not?
* Would you recommend it to a friend? Why? Why not?