

The Possibility of Change: Emotionally Resonant Endings, With or Without Plot Resolution

Shelley Senai

“With a pile of stories on my lap I sat with this question, early on, and tried to divine for myself why was it that I loved a piece of fiction when I did, and the answer came to me quite clearly; I love it for what it tells me about life. I love fiction, strangely enough, for how true it is. If it can tell me something I didn’t already know, or maybe suspected but never framed quite that way, or never before had sock me so divinely in the solar plexus, that was a story worth the read.”

—Barbara Kingsolver, on guest editing *The Best American Short Stories* (2000)

Excerpts from “All Aunt Hagar’s Children” by Edward P. Jones



“It came to me over the next few days that I would never find gold in Alaska, not even if my life depended on it.” (Jones 131)

“Then she sat across from me with her cup, two-thirds milk and one-third coffee. She held the cup with both hands and sipped and fought back the tears. I rose to go to her, but she held me back.” (131)

“I went upstairs, where I had never been, to Dvera’s back office. The door was open. From the hallway, it seemed like a very small room. But, once I was inside, it felt very large indeed...” (132)

[A] “I raised my eyes from the photograph of Miriam and saw a group of six little colored girls going down 8th Street toward E, all of them in bright colors. My eyes settled on a girl in a yellow dress. She was in the middle of the group and she alone twirled as they walked, her arms out, her head held back, so that the sun was full upon her face. Her long plaits swung with her in an almost miraculous way. It was good to watch her, because I had never seen anything like that in Washington in my whole life. I followed her until she disappeared. It would have been nice to know what was on her mind.” (132)

Excerpts from “Dimension” by Alice Munro

“Doree had to take three buses—one to Kincardine, where she waited for one to London, where she waited again, for the city bus out to the facility. She started the trip on a Sunday at nine in the morning. Because of the waiting times between buses, it took her until about two in the afternoon to travel the hundred-odd miles. All that sitting, either on buses or in the depots, was not a thing she should have minded. Her daily work was not of the sitting-down kind. (Munro 69)

“So was that what she had been thinking—that she could make him see, finally, who it was that was crazy? When she realized what was in her head, she should have got off the bus.” (74)



[B] “Now where do I start? Heaven exists. That is one way but not right because I never believed in Heaven and Hell, etc. As far as I was concerned that was always a pile of crap. So it must sound pretty weird of me to bring up the subject now. I will just say then: I have seen the children. I have seen them and talked to them.” (77)

[C] “She still did not have that spontaneous sense of happiness, exactly, but she had a reminder of what it was like. It had nothing to do with the weather or flowers. It was the idea of the children in what he had called their Dimension that came sneaking up on her in this way, and for the first time brought a light feeling to her, not pain.” (77-78)

[D] “Be quiet, be quiet, she wanted to tell them. It seemed to her that silence was necessary, that everything in the world outside the boy’s body had to concentrate, help it not to lose track of its duty to breathe.

Shy but steady whiffs now, a sweet obedience in the chest. Keep on, keep on.

“You hear that? This guy says he’ll stay and watch out for him,” the driver said. “Ambulance is coming as fast as they can.”

“Go on,” Doree said. “I’ll hitch a ride to town with them and catch you on your way back tonight.”

He had to bend to hear her. She spoke dismissively, without raising her head, as if she were the one whose breath was precious.

“You sure?” he said.

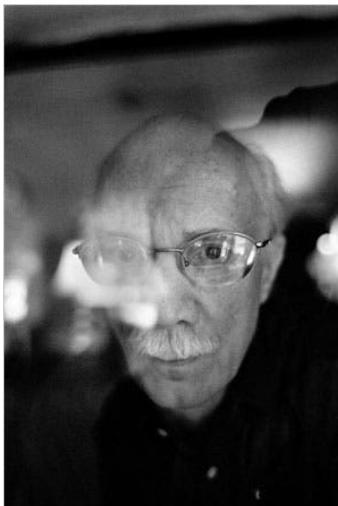
Sure.

“You don’t have to get to London?”

No. (79)

“Aren’t I just as cut off by what happened as he is? Nobody who knew about it would want me around. All I can do is remind people of what nobody can stand to be reminded of. ... Who but Lloyd would remember the children’s names now, or the color of their eyes?” (78).

Excerpts from “The Slap” by Steven Millhauser



“One September evening when Walter Lasher returned from the city after a hard day’s work and was walking to his car in the station parking lot, a man stepped out from between two cars, walked up to him, and slapped him hard in the face.” (3)

[E] “We realized that we’d taken a kind of comfort in thinking of the attacks as confined to the station parking lot after sunset, when commuters in expensive suits were coming home for dinner; suddenly our anger, our anxiety, which had been confined to narrow bounds, burst free with a rush of energy. Where would the stranger strike next?” (12)

[F] “What had he wanted from us? What had we done? In certain respects, the end of the attacks was more disturbing than the attacks themselves, since the attacks held a continual promise of capture and revelation, whereas the end of the attacks was also an end of the hope that had always accompanied them. (29)

“Our sense of relief, when the attacks appeared to have ended, was also a sense of unrelief; our feeling of success was also a feeling of failure.” (31)

[G] “And so we wonder: What have we learned from it all? We know only that something has happened in our town that can never unhappen. On a fine spring day, when all this is far behind us, we may be walking down a street, under branches of budding maples and lindens. On the porches, reflections of porch posts and tree branches show in the glass front doors, which haven’t yet been changed to screens. The thought comes: He could be standing behind that tree. Then we look more carefully at the root rippling toward the sidewalk, at the place where the bark-edge stands clear against the background of grass, street, and distant houses, and where, at any moment, a shoulder might emerge, an arm rise, a hand swing violently toward our faces, as we walk along, under the budding branches, with their yellow-green flowers against the blue sky.” (31)

[H] “The physical evidence of the slap—a redness in the cheek—conveys its meaning perfectly: it is the sign of blood, without the blood. In the same way, the pain of a slap is a sign of the greater pain not inflicted. But looked at another way, the slap doesn’t merely withhold: the slap imparts. What it imparts is precisely the knowledge of greater power withheld. In that knowledge lies the genius of the slap, the deep humiliation it imposes. It invites the victim to accept a punishment that might have been worse—that will in fact be worse if the slap isn’t accepted. The slap requires in the victim an unwavering submission, an utter abnegation. The victim bends in spirit before a lord. In this sense the slap is internal. It is closer to a word than to a blow. The sting passes, the redness fades, but the wound lingers, invisible. Therein lies the deepest meaning of the slap: its real work takes place secretly, out of sight, on the inside. (18)

Takeaway Questions

- How can I leave my readers with a complicated parting emotion?
- What level of plot resolution is appropriate for the thematic intentions of my story?
- How can I bring about a sense of thematic resolution, with or without plot resolution?

Works Cited

- Baxter, Charles. “On Defamiliarization.” *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, Graywolf Press, pp. 21-40.
- Casey, Maud. *The Art of Mystery: The Search for Questions*. Graywolf Press, 2018.
- Jones, Edward P. “All Aunt Hagar’s Children.” *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*, HarperCollins, 2006. pp. 103-132.
- Millhauser, Steven. *We Others: New and Selected Stories*. Vintage, 2011.
- Munro, Alice. “Dimension.” *The New Yorker*, 5 June 2006, pp. 68-79.