

To Love a Writer, Write a Lover

Joseph Wiedmeyer

In a quiet study, that rests near the back of a freshly refurbished farmhouse, that sits in the exact middle of Billings County, that itself exists only in the ink splattered across this piece of paper, the two writers sat facing away from one another. All was quiet in the study, save for the scratching of pen on paper and the staccato beats of a typewriter. Debby scoffed as she ripped, yet another wasted page from her notebook and tossed it haphazardly into the trash can beside her desk. She was struggling, at the moment, with a particularly tricky bit of exposition. Exposition, seeks to explain the background information of a text to the reader, it provides a base that the story builds off of. Debby's struggle, which by now had lasted several moments, was in explaining the relationship between her story's two main characters. She had sought to juxtapose their physical closeness with their emotional distance, but such a technique would be difficult to get across to the reader without saying it outright.

Hamlet sensed Debby's frustration. It was a sick and warm feeling that rolled off his back like maple syrup. Hamlet paused his typing to scribble that very description down on the single sheet of paper on his desk. It was a vague attempt to 'Catch the Muse.' The muse is a Greek spirit that was said to bring divine inspiration to artists and Hamlet believed in them fervently, toasted every drink to their honor. This thought reminded Hamlet of the cup of brandy sitting next to the paper. He gripped the glass cup with a gentle reverence and took a drink, savoring the taste of fire as it burned its way to his stomach.

The ice stirred as Hamlet set his cup down, a muffled applause to him but more reminiscent of utensils scrapping ceramic plates to Debby. In reality, however, the ice was nothing more than words on paper.

Words on paper. Their marriage certificate was shoved in one of the file cabinets that lined the walls of the study, buried behind the thousands of reviews that Debby had printed out for Hamlet.

Hamlet Doberman's "Kiss me While I'm Sleeping" is a revelation. An eye-opening, intensely real portrayal of the codependent toxicity that infects so many marriages today.

Debby had left that review out on Hamlet's desk, hoping that he would be as appalled by it as she was, instead his dull brown eyes lit up as they scanned the page.

"Finally, a good review!" Hamlet had said, kissing the paper.

Reviewers are like mechanics; they make the most money when they can find something wrong with the thing they're examining. Hamlet appreciated that this one had passed up on the opportunity for a pay day.

Hamlet stretched out his tired back and ran his fingers through his quickly thinning blonde hair. As he stretched, his eyes caught one of the many awards Debby had scattered throughout the room. This award was far less extravagant than some of the others. It boasted no great inscriptions, or golden plaques, but was a simple oak board with the words *To Debra Doberman for the short story "The Great Lies of Life"* burned into its face.

Hamlet winced as he remembered the ceremony they had to attend in order for her to receive that award. The terrible steak they served on plates far too fancy for his liking, the even worse speeches they gave about Debby's piece. Woman after woman going up on stage to talk about how wonderful it was that Debby had captured society's great lie, that marriage is the road to happiness for all women. Hamlet gently rubbed the dog tags that hung around his neck, feeling the inscription of his name and remembering the oppressive heat of the Iraq desert. Who hasn't been taken up with lies?

Lies and fiction, twins battling for space in the womb of humanity's consciousness. Fiction was seen as a sinful creation by groups like the Puritans. They preferred the reliability of nonfiction, the honesty of eye-witness accounts. While Shakespeare was scoffed at for his trickery, stories about the heroism of Christopher Columbus were applauded for their honesty.

"Honey," Debby said numbly, "can you read this please?"

Hamlet felt the dull thud of Debby's notebook tap against his shoulder and slowly turned around in his chair to face her. She looked weary and worn. Her dirty blonde hair was thrown up in a messy bun and bags hung below her eyes like drapes. He took the notebook from her and began to read.

Debby watched him scan the pages, noted which sections he reread, wondered what was going on in his head. His nose looked longer now than it had when they first met. His ears also seemed to be growing away from his head, as though they were trying to seek out whatever noise they could find in their quiet home.

"I don't believe it," Hamlet said, looking up dumbly.

“What don’t you believe?” Debby responded.

There was a pause. A moment of silence, maybe several.

“I don’t believe that these people would stay together,” he said.

Hamlet couldn’t decide why that was so hard to say. The thought had come easily to him as he read the piece.

“It is missing a line, something one can say to the other to reassure them that they still love each other,” Hamlet corrected.

Debby nodded, though the comment only seemed to trouble her more.

Rising action, the intensity of the plot increases on its way to the climax. Stakes are raised, drinks are spilt, characters are forced to admit that they don’t know what love is, forced to face the fear that their love is nothing more than ink on page.

Had Debby ever felt love? In her mind, she flicked through all of the stories she ever read, tried to match them to the moments she lived, and they always seemed off, as though she were trying to watch a 3D movie without the glasses.

“What about this,” Debbie said, “You are more beautiful than all the stars in the sky,”

“What a thrill that would be if it wasn’t so cliched,” Hamlet replied.

“But why do we have to worry about cliches?” Debbie answered, “If it speaks to the truth of the moment shouldn’t that be enough? Why must we pretend to say something new when all of human history is a wheel of synonyms playing at originality?”

Hamlet nodded absentmindedly and thought about the story he was writing. How new that story was, how it was unlike anything else that had been written. What an eye opener, I mean, opener this story would be.

“Why is it that the conflict between your characters feels so real, and your love scenes ring so false?” Hamlet asked, his eyes hanging on a particularly troubling line in her story.

Debby sighed. He was pushing towards something. He was always pushing towards something, he had to be or else the plot of their lives would feel stagnant and uninteresting, or worse yet, happy. Heaven forbid someone read a story that was both happy and uninteresting.

“I’ll work on it,” Debby said, “What are you writing?”

“The same thing I’ve been trying to write for the past year,” Hamlet scoffed, swiveling back around in his chair, “That stupid *Teardrop*.”

A Teardrop in April. The title of a piece of writing is meant to both hook the reader’s interest and portray the main themes of the writing. Or is it? It is largely agreed that it is far more important for the title to grab reader interest than it is to portray any deeper truth about the story. Of course, the title has to be related to the story, at least close enough for the reader to craft their own explanation for the title. Of course, you don’t really need an invitation to do that, do you? Find meaning, I mean.

Debby, of course, didn’t have to fabricate the title’s meaning. She knew exactly what Hamlet was referring to. The two of them had met in April when she had found Hamlet sitting on a park bench, crying over a copy of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

“Do you remember Central Park?” Debby asked him.

Hamlet was already typing away, absorbed in his own world, imagining the clicking of his typewriter to be the chirps of birds in the artificial world he was arranging.

“The issue is relatability,” Hamlet said.

“I wonder if we’re relatable?” Debby questioned.

Relatability. It is commonly believed that characters designed to be likable must have a sense of relatability to allow the reader to empathize with the character. A sense of humor, fashion choice, hobbies, experiences, trials, backgrounds. Every aspect of a character can be twisted with the hope of crafting someone relatable, someone readers like as much as the writer likes them.

“The woman is fine,” Hamlet replied, “It’s the man I’m struggling with.”

The woman was always fine. Debbie was always fine. Neither were fantastic, neither felt real, neither were real. Hamlet was always worried about the man. What would people think of him?

Debbie held out her hand. Wordless, practically breathless, Hamlet didn’t have to see her to understand what she expected of him. This feeling, how could he write this feeling? This understanding. The type of communication that reeks of truth because it evades all arbitration of sound or symbol and can only be understood by him. With a slight shudder, he scanned through his pages and handed her a selection to read over, silently grateful for her help.

Debbie scanned through the pages, most of the words were unsurprising. Every conman has their stable of tricks they employ over and over again, Hamlet was no different. The girl was a *'modern day Athena,'* her voice *'lingered in the air like mist.'* It was funny, Debby had been a *'modern day Aphrodite'* when they first met, and her voice had *'lingered in the air like dew.'* It was amazing to her that Hamlet still refused to admit that every heroine and every protagonist in all of his stories was the two of them.

“She doesn’t seem real,” Debby commented.

“She isn’t,” Hamlet replied, “She’s better than real. Real people are contradictory, they clash with their essential truth. Fiction lets us ignore those contradictions and distracting traits to focus on who those characters actually are. In that way fiction characters, when done well, are realer than realer. Truer than true.”

“How can something be truer than true? That’s like saying a color can be whiter than white.”

Debbie was standing now. She didn’t know how long she had been standing, but she was standing now. Her outburst had scared Hamlet, made him drop his drink. Debbie thought she could almost see a tear as he watched the cup shatter onto the floor.

Climax. The head of events. Tensions are at an all-time high. This is the critical moment in a story, what we’ve been building towards. Hold your breath, this is the scary part.

“Honey, sit down,” Hamlet said.

He was standing now, looking at her for what felt like the first time in ages. She had dropped the papers, dropped the pen, but she could still feel the papers clinging to her skin. They covered her body, twisted what she said, made it impossible for Hamlet to see her. He saw Aphrodite, he saw Athena, he saw every fiction that wasn't her and was content to pretend that those characters and her were one and the same.

“Call me by my name,” she said, cupping his face, “Don't call me Aphrodite, or Athena. Don't see Ophelia when you look at me and I won't see Hamlet. Say you want me, not the fiction you've turned me into.”

Hamlet opened his mouth, her hands were hot against his cheeks, wet. Her fingers still smelled of fresh nail polish, the first smell he'd ever attached to her.

“Debra,” Hamlet replied, “I don't understand? You are all of those things.”

His heart sank along with Debby's face. Her bright blue eyes now looked sullen and brown or had they always been brown? He scanned her features, but couldn't make out what was true through his teary haze.

“You covered me in symbols,” she said, crying, “Buried me until I could not breathe.”

Hamlet spun around quickly, grabbing the loose piece of paper from his desk. He turned the paper over to its back and grabbed a pen from his desk drawer. When he turned back around Debby was sitting, no longer crying, but simply staring at an empty spot on the wall.

“Write,” he said, pushing the paper and pen into her hands, “Write who you are. Let me see it. The pen will be your shovel.”

Falling action. The beginning of the end. This is where we draft the story's will, set everything in place before ending it all.

The wide expanse of white, write. How do we fill this void, why do we feel so compelled to bury ourselves under this avalanche of narratives? Isn't the paper perfect how it is? Empty.

No, Debbie and Hamlet's whole life had been indoctrination into the narrative, she realized. Hamlet only started drinking after reading Earnest Hemingway, only called her baby because he heard Sinatra say it in a song, only loved her because she reminded him of Sally from *When Harry Met Sally*. Not Meg Ryan. Sally, the character. He had built his life around fictions; therefore, he was fiction, he just didn't know it. If someone lies, but believes that they are telling the truth, does God still judge them?

Debbie wrote and awaited her judgment. She wrote a story about a man named Shakespeare who married a paper wife. All the time he wondered about how a paper person could come to exist, until he looked down and realized that he was made of ink.

Resolution, the end of the story. Everything's wrapped up neatly, or not so neatly. More snow on the pile, more lenses on the rose-colored glasses.

"What do you get when something's realer than real?" Debbie asked numbly.

"What?" Hamlet replied, already back to writing.

"Two lies in a trench coat,"