

## Emblems of Anti-Hope



One technique I've found useful in revising is coming up with one word that my story is about in an effort to find a center. For instance, say I finally realize that the story I've been trying to wrangle for months is about "hope." Great. Then I ask myself, Does the main

character lose hope or gain hope? (Normally, they will abandon all hope in my stories.) Then, I have some sort of idea that the story begins with a scene that demonstrates hope, then contains more scenes with emblems or messages of "anti-hope," and finally ends with a loss of hope. Thinking in really simple terms like this helps me see where I'm going more clearly. "How does this scene communicate 'anti-hope'?" I can ask myself. "Is the half-eaten donut an emblem of anti-hope?" You get the idea.

This might seem somewhat simplistic, but when I'm writing around in circles, unsure of what I want to say or why I'm writing the story or what the story even is, this has helped. I find if I just try to write something that I hope my audience finds interesting, sometimes it devolves into something scandalous or shocking, and then, after a while, it just feels like *US Weekly* (which has its delights, but that's not the effect I'm going for). It also, generally, gets me nowhere, because I am really concerned with plot and quirkiness and cleverness and not concerned with what the story means. In a story, infidelity for the sake of titillation is boring, but infidelity as "anti-hope," or whatever, just might work.

I also wanted to share this passage from Louis Menand's essay "True Story" in *The New Yorker* a few years ago. I think it's quite nice.

*A short story is not as restrictive as a sonnet but, of all the literary forms, it is possibly the most single-minded. Its aim, as it was identified by the modern genre's first theorist, Edgar Allan Poe, is to create "an effect"--*

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*by which Poe meant something almost physical, like a sensation or...a frission. Every word in a story, Poe said, is in the service of this effect. It's all about...getting the ball in the hole with the fewest strokes possible. Sometimes the fewest strokes can be a lot, but at the end there has to be the literary equivalent of the magician's puff of smoke, an outcome that is both startling and anticipated. The reader of a story expects an effect, and expects to be surprised by it, too. If you try to name the sensations that stories deliver, you find yourself with the sort of terms that (if you were a college teacher) you would write "vague" and "ugh" next to when you saw them in a paper: a pang, a shiver, a mental click, or what you might call (if you were a college student) a general sense of "Whoa." Whoa is not exactly a term of art. You know it when you feel it, though.*

In that same article, Menard also wrote that a good story will provide "a sudden apprehension of the way the world unmediatedly is." Kind of like Mamet's uninflected scene obsession (for those in screenwriting). Fine goals, I think, to uncover "the way the world unmediatedly is," to create frission and smoke. All very cool. All very difficult.