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Then and Now: A Study of Time Control in Scott Russell Sanders' "Under the Influence"

In her book *The Situation and the Story*, nonfiction writer and teacher Vivian Gornick claims that all works of literature contain both a situation and a story. "The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer, the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (13). Similarly, Philip Lopate addresses these distinct narrative threads as they pertain to memoir in his essay "Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story": "The trick, it seems to me, is to establish a double perspective that will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived (the child's confusions and misapprehensions, say), while benefiting from the sophisticated wisdom of the author's adult self" (26). The dual perspective that Gornick and Lopate describe allows readers to experience scenes and anecdotes within a text from two vantage points— then and now. Essential to writing in this dual perspective are indicators of time: both the time the plot events took place (what Gornick refers to as the situation and Lopate calls the visceral experience), and the time the author is writing about and reflecting on those events (for Gornick, this is called the story; for Lopate, it is the intelligent narrator). The '*then*' perspective must be clear enough in matters of chronology, expansion and concision of time, flashback and flash forward in order to keep readers firmly planted in a sequence of events. Simultaneously, the '*now*' perspective must offer insight and depth of understanding in a way that accounts for the passage of time.

In his essay “Under the Influence,” acclaimed essayist Scott Russell Sanders navigates this dual perspective with great skill. To Sanders’ credit, the 10- page, 5700-word essay reads in a straightforward manner, but on close examination it reveals an elaborate construction and brilliant array of craft techniques, particularly in terms of narrative presentation and time control. Spanning over forty years, “Under the Influence” examines Sanders’ memories and experiences growing up with an alcoholic father; from how he experienced his father’s addiction as a child, to how it affects him now, as an adult.

“Under the Influence” first appeared in Harper’s in November of 1989, but maintains popularity due largely to its inclusion in Philip Lopate’s *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Of Sanders, Lopate writes,

[He] threads his way through this minefield, so susceptible to cliché and victimized self-pity, with exemplary honesty, feeling, and willingness to take responsibility. His quiet Midwestern modesty and sense of privacy, seemingly at odds with an autobiographical genre that normally attracts flamboyant, self-dramatizing egotists, accounts for some of the essay’s tension—as though he would rather not write about himself, but the form demands it”. (732)

Sanders’ success in avoiding the common pitfalls of melodrama and self-pity is at least partially the result of his ability to write effectively from both his ‘then’ and ‘now’ narrative perspectives.

Establishing Narrative Authority: Introducing the ‘Then’ and ‘Now’ Perspectives

In “Under the Influence,” Sanders introduces the ‘now’ and ‘then’ narrators within the first lines of the essay. “My father drank,” Sanders begins, in simple past tense. “He drank as a gut punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling” (733). With these lines, we meet the ‘then’ narrative voice. Early in a text, readers

must have a general sense of time and place— when and where the plot takes place in relation to when and where the story is being told. The more time that elapses between the plot and the narration, the more disparate the ‘then’ and ‘now’ perspectives will be. Regardless of where the story goes, these initial time clues and introductions serve as anchors from which all other narrative meanderings are tethered. To achieve this, Sanders moves quickly to present tense in the very next sentence, “I use the past tense, not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father at the age of sixty-four...The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me”(733). Because Sanders’ father is now deceased, it makes sense that Sanders introduces the ‘*then*’ narrative voice and the central theme of his father’s drinking in past tense. The switch to present tense, however, marks the introduction of the ‘*now*’ perspective, but Sanders does even more than switch tenses to plant that second voice in the immediate present. With the words “I use the past tense,” Sanders draws attention to himself as the writer and in so doing allows readers to then visualize the story tellers behind each narrative thread, the child of an alcoholic and the adult sitting at his computer. With these opening lines and the change in tense, the title “Under the Influence” takes on new meaning, referring not only to Sanders’ father’s life under the influence of alcohol but now, also, to Sanders’ ongoing life story still haunted by the influence of his father.

The juxtaposition of tenses allows a writer to use a reflective retrospective narrator to tell a story that took place at an earlier time, but as Lopate warns, readers must be introduced to both threads early on:

The double perspective is particularly valuable in the setup, in which the memoirist would do well to tell us or at least hint at how old he or she was at the time the story begins, where the episode was taking place geographically, and in what epoch, and

something of the protagonist's family background, class, religion and dominant mental state at the time. (28)

In fact, Sanders does insert a great deal of information about his life and family— even about his approximate age and mental state at the time of writing. We learn that Sanders' father was an alcoholic and that he is now deceased. We learn that Sanders and his siblings, now grown, continue to live in the rubble of that legacy. Thus in just a few lines, we know enough about Sanders the boy and Sanders the man to follow the story in any number of directions.

The 'Then' Narrative Thread

In writing as in life, the most ordinary moments often reveal the most about our history, our character and our interiority. Writing about the past becomes an exercise in choosing the right moments, like selecting which photographs to include in an album, so that together those images may form the story we want to tell. How we choose which moments will best tell our story and how we bring those scenes to life, gracefully moving through the days or years or decades while still maintaining our readers' sense of time and urgency, are important decisions that hinge on two understandings about time: knowing when to create distance or immediacy in a narrative and knowing when to expand or condense the passage of time. The '*then*' narrator's job is to bring those photographs of the past to life— to paint them so vividly that readers themselves feel the warmth of a summer breeze, hear the regret in a dying man's last words. When immediacy serve the story, sensory details, internal dialogue and active verbs allow the '*then*' narrator to slow the scene so that even the smallest memory offers insights into the thousand others that came before it.

Conversely and of equal importance to a narrator, is concision of time, wherein the passage of time and the unexamined moments within the scope of a story are accounted for

nonetheless. Condensing the narrative in this way allows a storyteller to move quickly from one pivotal scene or reflection to the next. This in turn varies the pacing and intensity of the narrative in a way that offers breaks in tension and in so doing creates for readers, a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past. From a nuts and bolts perspective, the ability to expand time and create immediacy on the page requires attention to tense and point of view among other elements, while techniques like segmentation, montage, and image patterning work to condense time. One of the simplest ways Sanders creates immediacy and expands time within the *'then'* narrative thread is through his use of the lyrical present tense. After a brief introduction at the start of the essay, Sanders begins his *'then'* narration in present tense, this time describing a recurring memory of his father drinking in the barn; an ordinary scene, yet one that in many ways illuminates a childhood ripe with shame and secrets. He writes, "In the perennial present of memory, I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags" (733).

The scene continues for two paragraphs of blistering description. We witness the father drinking, look into his bloodshot eyes, and even hear his thick slurred words in a brief section of dialogue. In this instance, Sanders' ability to use the present tense to describe past events hinges on the opening time indicator. The phrase 'perennial present of memory' establishes an expectation that the events we are reading about took place in the past, but they happened with such regularity that they remain fresh and vivid in Sanders' mind; so vivid in fact, that to him they could be happening at this very moment. The repetitive nature of this particular memory is only strengthened by the use of present tense. Robert Root, author of *The Nonfictionist's Guide on Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, coined the term 'lyrical present' to describe such use of the present tense when writing about past events.

I use it from time to time when I think I need the sensation of immediacy or when the past tense gives a distance to events that's detrimental to the emotion of drama or psychic confusion I am trying to convey. Occasionally an editor tells me to change present tense to past and I do and I regret it, because a certain urgency, a certain intimacy, a certain immediacy vanishes on the page, and the prose seems more remote somehow, though everything but the tense is the same. (105)

Like Root, Sanders uses the present tense to create immediacy and to revive the emotion and drama of an important moment. To understand the power the lyrical present has on this specific scene, one might consider how the lines would read in simple past tense. *I slipped into the garage or barn and saw my father tipping back the flat green bottles. His Adam's apple bobbed.* Here readers experience a scene from Sanders' childhood, but one that appears isolated and situational rather than recurring and terminal. With the lyrical present tense, Sanders' memory spans years, revealing the cyclical nature of addiction.

Along with the lyrical present, Sanders makes another interesting tense choice when he infuses a number of his boyhood reflections with the modal tense. A modal verb is an auxiliary verb used to express possibility or necessity. Words like 'should', 'could', 'will', 'must', 'might' are often used to divulge the desires, fears, dreams and expectations of a narrator. Such is the case for Sanders' use of modals in "Under the Influence." Lying awake in bed upon his father's drunken return from the bars, a young Sanders recounts his racing thoughts:

I lie there hating him, loving him, fearing him, knowing I have failed him... He would not hide the green bottles in his tool box, would not sneak off to the barn with a lump under his coat, would not fall asleep in the daylight, would not roar and fume, would not drink himself to death, if only I were perfect. (734)

Sanders begins the paragraph using the present tense and a series of gerund phrases to describe his habitual and often conflicting, boyhood thoughts and feelings toward his father; but at the end of the paragraph Sanders switches to the modal tense, using past unreal conditional statements to describe his childhood logic. The tense change enhances Sanders' ability to share his childhood memories not as adult looking back, but as he experienced them as a young boy.

To close the scene, Sanders returns to the present tense: "I realize now that I did not cause my father's illness, nor could I have cured it" (734). This passage offers a nice loop back to the '*would not*' passage in the preceding paragraph. '*Would not*' as a modal verb denotes desire or lack of desire in its negative state, '*could not*' on the other hand, denotes possibility or in this case, a lack of possibility.

The lyrical present and modal verbs in this essay provide great examples of the impact tense choices can have on the presentation of scene and narration in a given text. Unlike past tense, which creates distance, both the lyrical present and modal tense create immediacy within a scene, regardless of how long ago the events being described took place. The lyrical present tense heightens the visceral experience of the action, the dialogue and even setting, while modal verbs offer insight into the '*then*' narrators mind.

Montage, Narrative Density, and Concision of Time

Sanders uses the technique of montage in three distinctly different ways—on a macro level, as a means of organizing the essay; on a paragraph level as a way of condensing and manipulating time; and on the sentence level as a way of adding density and richness to the narrative. In his essay "Everything in Life Can Be Montaged," Victor Shklovsky uses the technique itself to discuss the many forms a montage can take:

The world can be montaged. We discovered this when we started piecing together a filmstrip.

The discovery was made by outsiders (people who came from the side) doctors, sculptors, painters, actors; they saw that different feelings could be expressed through identical but differently arranged images...

The world is montagable, it's linked. Ideas don't exist in isolation. We will, therefore, frequently return to the analysis of the same thing, because human existence is unified at its core.

Spring will soon be here, it will finally arrive. The flocks of birds are preparing...

The flight of birds is a structure; it's not the flapping of just one wing. (180-181)

In this passage, Shklovsky defines montage using its physical properties—segmentation, white space, collected anecdotes and thematically linked ideas—and in so doing, demonstrates its effectiveness and universality. Where fully drawn scenes bring readers deeply into a single episode, montage takes snapshots of multiple episodes and combines them to form an equally meaningful portrait.

Given the complexity of Sanders' subject matter, and the many jumps in time and point of view that the essay requires, Sanders wisely chooses to organize "Under the Influence" in a nonlinear format, using a montage of nine multi-paragraph segments, separated by white space. Each segment links thematically to the central discussion of alcoholism, but the threads that link one segment to another are as varied as one could imagine. Moreover, the segments stand as well alone as they do in concert. I have diagramed the essay's nine sections below according to subject, tense, point of view and time to illustrate the enormous leaps Sanders makes from segment to segment.

Segment	Subject	Tense	Point of View ('Then/ Now')	Time Frame/ Setting
1.	Introduction to father and narrator	Simple Present and Modal/ Conditional Tense	First Person, 'Then' and 'Now' Narrator	Early Childhood to Present
2.	Alcoholism in society	Simple Present	Second Person 'Now' Narrator	Present
3.	Alcoholism as a family secret	Simple Past/ Brief section of Present	First and Second Person 'Then' Narrator	Non-specific Past
4.	The family's battle to keep father sober	Simple Past/ Brief section of Present	First person 'Then' Narrator	Childhood/years on military reservation In Ohio
5.	Alcohol and Religion	Simple Past	First Person 'Then' Narrator	Childhood/ years in rural Ohio and Tennessee
6.	Cycle of Abuse	Simple Past/ Brief section of Present	First Person	Non-specific Past
7.	Timeline of father's struggle for sobriety	Simple Past/ Modal Conditional Tense	First Person 'Then' and 'Now' Narrator	Father's youth to Father's retirement
8.	Father's decline, death and legacy.	Simple Past/ Simple Present	First Person 'Now' Narrator	Recent Past in Mississippi and Present
9.	Narrator as father, thoughts on addiction	Simple Present	First Person 'Now' Narrator	Present

Considering the wide range of topics, tenses, narrative point of views, and settings present in these segments, it is hard to imagine Sanders telling the story in a linear/ chronological fashion without writing a book-length memoir. In order to include such detail about such a large piece of personal

history and concerning a topic familiar so to many, Sanders needed to find a way to include all of the threads of the story he wanted to tell, not just those that fit within a linear continuum. In his essay, “Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment,” Robert Root speaks of the dilemmas writers face in matters of organization:

The more complex the story is—that is, the more interwoven with other subjects, ideas, incidents, experiences it is— the harder it is to make it all connect in a linear way that doesn’t expend the narrative or the development beyond the patience of writer and reader alike. Moreover, the connections and associations that come so readily in memory and in the imagination, often defy simple linearity, easy transition from one subtopic to the next, when the writer has to force them into words on a page. (66)

The scope of “Under the Influence” reaches far and wide, from Sanders’ parents’ early courtship before he was born to his life as a husband and father himself, and from his childhood experiences with an alcoholic parent to a second person conversation with his reader. To account for these related yet non-chronological discussions of alcoholism, Sanders uses white space, which Root describes as “fade outs/ fade ins... visual cues that we have ended one sequence and gone on to another” (68). Montage on this macro-level affords Sanders the ability to delve as deeply into the present moment as he does into the past all within the span of a few paragraphs. It also allows him to change focus or point of view quickly without losing his audience.

On the segment level, Sanders uses image patterns and extended metaphors to link brief glimpses of his childhood. This method of montage works well for some of Sanders’ smaller anecdotes, which are too slim to carry an entire scene, yet add density to the overall narrative when they are grouped together. Since many of these glimpses of life are only loosely related, the image pattern serves as an organizing thread that holds them together in a meaningful way.

The fourth segment, in particular, offers a great example of this type of montage. Here Sanders writes in past tense, using an image pattern of military concealment/ exposure to describe the extended, but nonspecific period of time that his family lived on a military reservation. In this instance, the hiding and spying in question occurs not on a battlefield, but within Sanders' childhood home:

For a long stretch of my childhood we lived on a military reservation in Ohio, an arsenal where bombs were stored underground in bunkers, vintage airplanes burst into flames, and unstable artillery shells boomed nightly at the dump. We had the feeling, as children, that we played in a mine field, where a heedless footfall could trigger an explosion.

When Father was drinking, the house, too, became a mine field. The least bump could set off either parent" (736).

The unsettled imagery of that first sentence then serves as the metaphor and connective tissue that carries the entire segment.

The second paragraph picks up thematically where the first ends—revealing that what began as his father's rage soon became his mother's:

The more he drank, the more obsessed Mother became with stopping him. She hunted for bottles, counted the cash in his wallet, sniffed at his breath. Without meaning to snoop, we children blundered left and right into damning evidence. On afternoons when he came home from work sober, we flung ourselves at him for hugs, and felt against our ribs the telltale lump in his coat. In the barn we tumbled on the hay and heard beneath our sneakers the crunch of buried glass. We tugged open a drawer in his workbench, looking for screwdrivers or crescent wrenches, and spied a gleaming six-pack among the tools. Playing tag, we darted around the house just in time to see him sway on the rear stoop and heave a finished bottle into the woods. In his goodnight kiss

we smelled the cloying sweetness of Clorets the mints he chewed to camouflage his dragon's breath. (735; emphasis added)

Again and again Sanders hits us with images and language reminiscent of battle field— language of concealment and retreat, with words such as ‘mine field,’ ‘buried,’ ‘darted’ and ‘camouflage’ as well as language of attack and exposure, with words such as ‘hunted,’ ‘counted,’ ‘sniffed,’ ‘snoop’ and ‘spied.’

In then final lines of the segment, Sanders departs from the military image pattern, linking the “good night kisses” mentioned in the last sentence of the previous passage to the famous lines from Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” which also describes a child’s fearful relationship with his alcoholic father. Playing off of the title of the same poem, Sanders goes on to describe the “waltz” he learned to dance with his own drunken father, a dance he describes as “terribly hard, for with a boy’s scrawny arms I was trying to hold my tipsy father upright” (736).

The segment thus moves from the physical mine field to the metaphorical mine field, from the mother’s spying to the father’s hiding, from the Roethke poem “My Papa’s Waltz” to Sanders’ waltz with his own drunken father. Neither the content nor the image patterning in this segment is chronological or situated on a specific timeline. Instead, the glimpses of life are stitched together by the image pattern alone creating a nonlinear segment that is greater than the sum of its anecdotes.

Much the way a filmmaker uses a montage of related clips (often set to music) to account for the passage of time, Sanders employs a similar montage technique on the sentence and paragraph level. This time he uses image patterns, not as metaphors linking isolated or unrelated memories, but as visual time indicators that help to anchor the narrative in history and account for the passage of time. Toward the end of the first segment, Sanders presents a great example of this technique when he describes the many cars his father owned throughout his lifetime. The detail is

well placed, here, at the beginning of the essay as it offers readers a clear timeline for the rest of the essay:

In memory, his white 1951 Pontiac with the stripes down the hood and the Indian head on the snout jounces to a stop in the driveway; or it is the 1956 Ford station wagon, or the 1963 Rambler shaped like a toad, or the sleek 1969 Bonneville that will do 120 miles per hour on the straightaways; or it is the robin's-egg blue pick up, new in 1980, battered in 1981, the year of his death. (733)

Sanders begins the passage in question with “In memory,” a continuation of the preceding paragraph’s reference to perennial memory, then moves on to a familiar scene of his father pulling in the driveway. This time, the recurring image of the car is not used metaphorically, but as a physical representation of the passage of time. The embedded details of the year model and make of his father’s various cars offer a visual montage of history. Sanders shows us in just one sentence that though the cars came and went, his father’s struggles with alcohol remained the same; spanning at least thirty years, from 1951 to his death in 1981. The end result is a concision of narrative and an understanding of the author’s childhood found in the subtle details of everyday life.

Sanders offers a variation of this technique later in the essay. Here, Sanders explores the history of his parent’s courtship anchoring each milestone of their relationship to an historical reference of war:

Soon after she met him in a Chicago delicatessen on the eve of World War II, and fell for his butter-melting Mississippi drawl and his wavy red hair, she learned that he drank heavily...The shock of fatherhood sobered him, and he remained sober through my birth at the end of the war and right on through until we moved in 1951 to the Ohio arsenal, that paradise of bombs... He sobered up again for most of a year at the height

of the Korean War, to celebrate the birth of my brother... Then during the fall of my senior year—when it seemed that the nightly explosions at the munitions dump and the nightly rages in our household might spread to engulf the globe—Father collapsed.
(741; emphasis added)

The timeline of war provides the scaffolding for this montage. And given what we know about Sanders' troubled father, the structure works quite well both as a metaphor of conflict and as a practical device for keeping time. Furthermore, using montage in this instance allows Sanders to dispense important details, dates and backfill, in an artful and efficient way.

The 'Now' Perspective

At its core, the '*now*' narrative voice offers understanding and perspective unavailable to the '*then*' narrator as reflection and retrospection arrive only through the passage of time. Too much reflection can derail a story's momentum, while too little can send a reader's expectations careening in the wrong direction. The well crafted '*now*' narrator interjects a scene or passage only when called upon to articulate the meaning of her experiences, but her voice, when well crafted, permeates the entire text, presenting what Vivian Gornick calls "the truth speaking personae... the one we can trust will take us on a journey, make the piece arrive, bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before" (24). Despite its generally smaller presence on the page, the '*now*' narrative perspective is of equal if not greater importance to its sister. For even the most incredible life stories would fall flat without an answer to the rhetorical question all readers eventually ask, 'So what?'

In an interview with Robert Root in *Fourth Genre*, Scott Russell Sanders describes his own beliefs about the importance of such a reflective voice:

As a reader, I'm not interested in the events of other people's lives, no matter how colorful or traumatic they may be, unless those events are illuminated in the telling by insight and beauty and meaning. Without that transforming vision, the events themselves are merely gossip. Nothing in my experience deserves the attention of readers merely because it's my experience. I don't write in order to win sympathy or praise; I write to share understanding about the human struggle, and to share delight in the power of language. (Sanders)

What Sanders calls the transforming vision is actually the heart of the '*now*' narrative voice. Each story is as unique as the insight of its '*now*' narrator, but the qualities and craft choices that make a reflective voice come to life are quite specific.

To establish a '*now*' narrator with a "transformative vision," as Sanders calls it, a writer must create distance, panning out from the pine needle or the blade of grass so as to capture the entire landscape of his story. Reflections must be astute and convincing so as to allow readers to experience a change in perspective for themselves. And the emotional arch of story must be believable and authentic, so that within the '*now*' narrator's joys and sorrows, we may hear the echoes of our own.

Given the interruptive nature of the '*now*' narrator's voice in "Under the Influence," Sanders is wise to punctuate his older wiser voice with time stamps. These short phrases reintroduce the '*now*' narrator and remind readers of Sanders' older self sitting at his computer and making sense of the past. In the fifth paragraph he states,

I am forty-two as I write these words, and I know full well now that my father was an alcoholic, a man consumed by disease rather than by disappointment... Yet for all this grown up knowledge, I am still ten years old, my own son's age, and as that boy I struggle in guilt and confusion to save my father from pain. (734)

This passage offers a great deal of perspective. We learn Sanders' age and his son's age at the time the essay is written, and we observe his intelligent narrator's understanding that alcoholism is a disease. But much of the insight we gain from the lines come from the two underlined time indicators (emphasis added). Despite all of the adult wisdom Sanders has gained over the years, he admits that in some ways he is still a young boy struggling to save his father. The passage thus leads readers to the central focus of the essay—an overlapping conversation between the '*then*' and '*now*' perspectives. The convergence of these narrative threads is essential to Sander's thesis that children of alcoholics grow up to be children of alcoholics.

Appropriately, the final narrative indicator arrives in the last segment of the essay when Sanders writes, "I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father" (744). Like closing arguments from a trial attorney, the '*now*' narrator returns to the page, leaving readers with one final reflection. This time Sanders aims his critical lens, not on his father, but on himself, observing the legacy he is passing on to his own son, a legacy, which despite his best efforts, isn't so different from the one he fought hard to escape.

Second Person

Second person point of view is rarely used in narrative writing, but Sanders makes this leap gracefully in the second segment of the essay. By addressing the reader directly, Sanders creates the illusion of a conversation between the '*now*' narrator and the reader, which allows Sanders to depart entirely from his personal story and turn his focus instead to a cultural discussion of alcoholism. He begins: "Consider a few of our synonyms for drunk: tipsy, tight, pickled, soused and plowed." Then later in the same section, "It is all great fun. But if in the audience you notice a few laughing faces turn grim with the drunk lurches on stage, don't be surprised, for these are the

children of alcoholics” (734-35). Such a departure from Sanders’ own history and the anticipated first person narration, allows readers to consider their own experiences with alcoholism. Later, Sanders makes another brief return to second person, this time when referring to the way children of alcoholics often hide their shame. He writes, “The secret bores under the skin, gets in the blood, into the bone and stays there. Long after you have supposedly been cured of malaria, the fever can flare up, the tremors can shake you” (735). Here, Sanders assumes a reader without direct experience with alcoholism. The quick dose of second person uses the analogy of malaria to uncover the trauma hiding just beneath the surface of a person touched by alcoholism.

The switch in point of view, like Sanders’ initial references to himself as writer, not only brings readers closer to the narrative, but also closer to the man behind the narrative. In his essay “From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction,” David Jauss discusses this seldom used form of narration:

Just as we feel closer to a character in a play who breaks through the “fourth wall” that imaginary wall that separates us from the actors— and speaks directly to us, so we feel closer to narrators who are conscious of addressing audience. Both Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* are first-person novels that focus on the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of their narrators, but we feel closer to Huck, whose very first word is “You” and who addresses us throughout the narration, than we do to Frederic Henry, who tells his story as if the fourth wall were reality, not metaphor. (58)

Under Jauss’ lens, Sanders’ jump to second person can be viewed as an extension of his first person narrative voice, one that enables him to reveal his feelings and experiences without the distance or distraction of an artificial fourth wall.

Final Thoughts and a Word from Scott Russell Sanders

Now retired after thirty-eight years of teaching, Scott Russell Sanders maintains a website with links to his latest interviews and publications. Considering the personal email address I found under contact information to be an invitation for correspondence, I sent Sanders an email to thank him personally for teaching me, through, this essay, so much about the craft of writing. On the slim hope he would write back, I included my most pressing craft questions about the essay and his writing process. It was Sanders' ability to jump in time, place and point of view so many times within the essay that compelled me to choose it for study. Given my interest in time and narration, I wondered what principals guided him in telling such a complex and nonlinear story. To my surprise, Sanders replied with a kind and thoughtful note the very next day, answering my pressing craft questions with great eloquence. What follows is an excerpt of his response:

I'm glad that you found "Under the Influence" worthy of study. I didn't begin the essay with "a clear sense of order or organization"; in fact, I never begin an essay with an outline. Instead, I make extensive notes, often over a period of months or even years. I might list a few prominent ideas or scenes, and then I look for a place that feels like a beginning, and feel my way forward through the material, considering (and often discarding) memories, ideas, images, insights, and hunches as they arise. Because "Under the Influence" explored the continuing impact of childhood experiences on a remembering adult, it seemed natural that the narrative move around in time, linking present and past. It also seemed natural to layer a later, more mature narrative perspective over the younger child's impressions. By "natural," I simply mean that it felt right, felt appropriate; these formal choices were not premeditated, but arose in the composing process.

Sanders' words reinforced what I had always suspected and in many ways feared— that the intricacies of great writing evolve intuitively through the process of composing and the laborious yet loving act of gathering and eliminating and refining the stories we want to tell. In “Under the Influence,” Sanders’ craft choices in matters of tense, point of view, montage, scene and reflection grew organically out of the desire to tell a story about the interplay between his past and present. Thus the strength of the *‘then’* and *‘now’* narrative voices and dazzling array of time control techniques within the essay are evidence not only of Sanders’ skill as a writer, but also of his integrity as a story teller committed to allowing form to follow function.

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