

Other Voices, Other Moods

You may have picked up a novel at random and after reading a few passages thought: how curious that I can recognize this author by his or her voice. It's true that we each of us have a unique and individual voice, not just in speaking but also in writing. We all use the same letters and words but somehow while organizing the pieces into something bigger we end up with our own personal representation, a unique part of ourselves. Through the pages of a book authors speak to us and no matter how convoluted the narrative or how impersonal a story, we can always hear the writer's voice. Sometimes we can even figure out an author's intentions or frustrations, sometimes the personal voice is so loud that it drowns out the story we're supposed to be reading. Perhaps *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* or any work by Ayn Rand or Chuck Palanhiuk work well as examples.

Now I could go on and on about writing styles and how we can identify an author by their writing and I could even show fragments of text and show why that particular piece is exemplary for that particular author. But what interests me more is how a certain style can help communication. Certain voices lend themselves very well for certain types of fiction. Mark Helprin's voice is extremely suitable for magical realism whereas Michael Crichton can do fast paced science-action as if it was his conversational voice. Immediately we think that it would have been quite difficult for Truman Capote to write something like *Atlas Shrugged*, or for Ayn Rand to write *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. But there might lie a twist because most authors have practiced their craft for so long that they know intimately how other voices work. Ayn Rand started working as a script writer and editor in Hollywood where she had to imitate all the different narrative styles in vogue at the time. Both H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe made their basic income by writing pieces they would never have dreamed of creating in their own voices.

How does it work? Can it be done? Writing in different voices that is. How would it read? How would it change the way a story is communicated and does each voice make a piece of text better in a particular way? Let's take a somewhat neutral paragraph, a story fragment, and see what happens when we cast it in the mold of authors with very recognizable voices. Please, for your pleasure, examine the following paragraph first.

Agatha Christie:

Roger opened the flap of his tent and grinned out into the blistering sunlight. He couldn't be more excited knowing that after so many months of searching and digging they would open King Ahknaten's tomb that morning. He would have been up early for a change if he hadn't found a couple of bottles of Glenlivet that evening, which the old fox had unsuccessfully stashed away in the base of a record player. Hastily he dressed himself performed an act somewhat resembling shaving and hurried out to the dig site stomping his feet into his boots. "Hullo!" he yelled, "everything ready?" "You're late again", Roger heard from the square black hole carved out of the rock thousands of years ago. "Am I? Did you open it yet?" Roger said. "And a good morning

to you as well", replied Mary jostling with a bunch of rolled up documents past him. Roger had heard her but only barely. Still, he managed to perform a mock tip of the hat as he grinned and hustled past her into the dark passageway. "Anything?" he asked to nobody in particular since his eyes had not adjusted to the darkness yet. "Anything what?" he heard from somewhere in front of him, an annoyed voice he recognized to belong to Dr. Ballard. "Anything happen yet? Did you open the tomb? What was in it?" "You'd know if you had arrived about half an hour earlier" Disappointed Roger skulked against the wall. "Nothing then?" "Well it wasn't a complete waste, we did find a bunch of scrolls. Mary just took them outside for examination." "Really? Any idea what's on them?" "Yes, in fact the text is quite well preserved. Apparently it was a resignation letter by one of the workers who built this tomb, a rare thing to have happened back then. Ironically when we translated the name of the author it turned out that even back then the name Roger was quite common."



Let's assume for a second that the paragraph above was in a fairly neutral voice. It most likely is since I don't have one for myself yet. Alas. If you were scratching your head and thought: that's pretty much how Agatha Christie would have written it, then yes I think you are right in saying it's fairly Agathaesque, but it's not entirely her voice I would argue as we shall see. Now that we have a baseline text we can start to play around and reform the sentences with the help of some favorable muses from the past. Perhaps the opposite of any author living or dead was the writing by solipsistic misanthrope H.P. Lovecraft. So how would he have written this piece?

H.P.Lovecraft:

Through closed eyelids, the pallid young man could see the morning's bright sun's announcement beaming and penetrating directly into his weary skull. He forced himself to rise through the dense fog surrounding his head, his arms, legs and entire torso, slumbering still from the forces of inebriation spurned on by ever filling glasses of Scottish distillations the evening prior. A quick rake of the razor only dragged him inches further back into civilization and he felt himself forced to wade towards the tomb's opening with boots only partially put on. A vague felted and flapping shape waved past him clutching several ancient rolled scrolls of papyri "Please gather your step and report to the Doctor", the woman said as she hurried on out of the gaping prehistoric man-made wound, carved directly into the ancient granite. Head bowed down, avoiding the low rocks and granite beams recently uncovered, he stumbled further into the ever stretching darkness hoping for a glimpse of that which lies behind the long covered doors. "You might begin to see your way back out of this realm young Mr. Marston, if you would be so kind." A dark voice beamed out of the pit and blew past the man's face as if an elder God smote his wrath out over his body. He heard more: "You are late and missed the uncovering of the critically important central key stone a few hours past. But never you mind, it seems those who came before us, those many thousands of years ago understood your predicament better than I can comprehend in these dark hours. Mary there is taking what we found in for examination. Count yourself lucky, your predecessor, judging from those documents was embalmed and mummified on the spot when he failed to show up for his duties."



It's the same story but feels completely different. The content is the same for the most part and the plot is identical, but which works better? Perhaps a miserly Victorian hermit wasn't the right voice for this story. Perhaps a more contemporary voice can shed some light into the tomb's darkness. How about someone like J.K. Rowling, how would she have handled this piece?

J.K. Rowling:

"Roger!" Shouted Mary, "Roger!".

Bounding out of the narrow square entrance of the tomb Mary tried to hold a bundle of old looking scrolls in her arms.

"Roger, you'll never believe what we found!" she yelled panting and hurrying through the jumble of tents. Roger could barely open his eyes, he still felt sleepy from having consumed perhaps a little too much alcohol the previous evening. Mary had so warned him about that, but here he was anyway, completely exhausted still and perhaps a little under the influence of last night's feast. "Roger Roger, you must see this!" Mary shouted practically rolling into Roger's tent spilling the old papyri bits all over his bed. Mary had been very excited the last couple of days as they knew they had started to get closer and closer to the Pharaoh's tomb.

"Look Roger, it has your name on it", she said holding up one of the pieces of parchment.

"My name? How silly that would be, of course it doesn't have my name on it."

"No seriously, it says it right here. Look, the Ibis with the two staffs on either side." Mary sighed and wondered how much attention Roger had been paying during the last series of lectures back at the institute. The flap to Roger's tent was folded open again this time to reveal an old gentleman with a white beard, round glasses and a mischievous smile on his face. "Mary's right", he said, "it does have your name on it and apparently the Roger back then was also fired."



So there, we now have three completely different pieces of story each with a different voice. Do they work for the mini stories? What's in there, what makes them unique and recognizable? Ironically Agatha Christie novels tend to have extremely neutral language. Each sentence is in a way a play on facts. Christie wasn't an unemotional person at all, even though thinking of her writing might make it appear such. Her character's emotional life did not spring however from the minute ebbs and eddies of feelings that occur minute by minute. Christie's characters were impacted by big events such as a loved one being murdered or gross injustice wreaking havoc on a family for years and years. This opposed to J.K. Rowling's writing, which is a subtle yet continuous flow of hyperboles. Lovecraft in that sense has more in common with Agatha Christie although you would get a Lovecraft story if you took out all human elements.

Rowling uses smaller more basic words and sentences. You may get the feeling that a narrator is telling the story to you and that would explain why the Harry Potter audiobooks are so incredibly popular. Lovecraft is the complete opposite and only those with a math or science background

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seem to enjoy his writing. Christie falls somewhere in the middle again. She never really wrote action pieces and you will not see any people hastily running from here to there. Rowling does that everywhere. Lovecraft tended to use run-on sentences and some of those could even span entire paragraphs. By the end of it you've read so many long nocturnal words that you're convinced the contents must be scary as hell.

You probably noticed that some of the content has been adjusted to suit the authors. For example Lovecraft only incorporated women only extremely rarely in his books. Chances are you would have rejected the narrative altogether if the stories were strict translations, perhaps they would not even have been recognizable as coming from those authors. For example J.R. Rowling would never have ended the story on a bad note without having given lots and lots of proof that the bad guys really are the bad guys. There is no ambiguity in Harry Potter. Quite the opposite is true for Agathe Christie. After the current ending the story could go in various different directions. But was that due to the voice or the contents?

If we stick to the definition that an author's voice is a preference for certain sentence structures, certain word orderings let's say then it becomes difficult to assume that the voice drives the story. Perhaps it is better to say that the voice enhances the topics chosen by authors and their voices fit their favorite themes. We're back at corroborative detail, those wonderful little pieces of information sprinkled all throughout a story that establish the reality of a story. Maybe an author's voice is another means by which writers can convey the validity of the internal rules of their fictional world? Perhaps I used the word 'rules' too lightly. Rules can restrict a creative work tremendously, so instead let's use the word 'consistency'. Being consistent is also perhaps a better way to describe an author's voice. It is not the specific choice of sentence arrangements but also being consistent throughout a novel.