

Making It Strange: Defamiliarization

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## HANDOUT

### Definition

*defamiliarization* or *estrangement* or *making strange* (остранение)

Presenting something familiar in a strange or unfamiliar way, to cause the reader to see it differently.

In other words, helping the reader to slow down and see—perceive—something the reader has learned not to see, through habit, familiarity, instruction, ideology, indifference, etc.

In defamiliarization, the author may address the reader **directly**, as in poetry or essays or other kinds of narrative.

In fiction the author often uses **a character** who is either having **a new experience** or having **an old experience with new eyes**. Either way, the goal is to help **the reader** see what has become too familiar to see.

### In the weeds with the Formalists

Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984) in “Art as Technique” [or Art as Device]

“The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to **increase the difficulty and length of perception** because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

“Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. . . . Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.”

Anaïs Nin in *The Novel of the Future* (1968):

“It is the function of art to renew our perception. **What we are familiar with we cease to see**. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.”

J.R.R. Tolkien in “On Fairy-Stories” (1939/1947):

“We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be **freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity**. . . . They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring **ceased to look at them**.”

### **National Punctuation Day (excerpt, about half)**

ladies and gentlemen treasured readers all it is my distinct pleasure to wish you a happy punctuation day yes its september 24 already where has the year gone when i worked as an intern in the office of us senator james mcclure of idaho one of my responsibilities was to draft responses to constituent mail when the topic or position didnt fit an existing collection of responses that could be sent automatically the first such letter was urging the senator to vote in favor of i forget the name but it was something like national cosmetics day or maybe it was a week i dont recall anyway my first draft was playful for my amusement and that of the office staff it pondered what the women of the world would look like without cosmetics i actually think most of them would look great but thats not the point this actually is not one of those stories where the joke goes in the mail by accident and causes a national embarrassment i wrote a serious draft after that which was approved so i signed it with the signature machine the senators signature and it went in the mail which is not my point in any case it wouldnt make very much sense for me to commemorate talk like a pirate day which just passed by not talking like a pirate since i dont talk like a pirate anyway but since i use punctuation all the time and im pretty good at it if i say so myself i thought it might be a reasonable tribute to national punctuation day if i posted an entire blog post without a single mark of punctuation no periods commas colons semicolons dashes which i overuse apostrophes parenthesis another thing i overuse ellipsis yet another and without any capital letters or paragraph breaks you get the idea punctuation is important to our lives in ways that i cant even illustrate without using it

### **Excerpts from *Hearts Together*: Jenny learns basketball**

Hard pick

“Nice pick!” [Dad said]

What I saw was Troy standing in the way of the player who was guarding another of our players, who had the ball. Their guy ran into Troy pretty hard, while our guy got away and scored.

“Isn’t that a foul?” I asked. “On Troy? For getting in the way? Or the other guy for running into him?”

#### Drawing a charge

Later he got run over again. He took a few seconds to get up, which worried me, but this time he smiled.

The referee gave a different signal and pointed dramatically to the other end of the court. Troy’s teammates on the floor high-fived him, and the guys on the bench stood and cheered.

“Did you see that charge?” Dad asked. “Nicely done!”

“I saw it. I didn’t like it. Why is it a good thing?”

#### Some of the basics

- POV character having new experience, reader sees through her eyes
- She doesn’t know the jargon or the meaning of actions
- She has a guide

Now we’ll add three useful details:

- She reasons but misunderstands (in thought or speech).
- She responds in the wrong way (does the wrong thing).
- She notices how her response is different from others’.

#### Jenny gets it wrong

“You guys like doing this?” I asked. “This is fun for you?”

“Some girls like it too. It’s a lot of fun. Much safer than football.”

“If you say so.” I’d never been to a football game, but I knew they wore helmets and lots of padding, and played on grass, not a hardwood floor.

<snip>

The horn sounded, and everybody in the stands and on the floor went crazy, except the other team. Some of them hung their heads.

And except me. I started to clap.

My intentions as author

- Show boy and girl are from different worlds
- Show them working to understand each other
- If going to a game is a familiar experience for the reader, I want the reader to see it differently, through Jenny's eyes
- Trying to get the reader invested in the relationship
- Not trying to show the reader the truth about basketball.

### **Excerpts from “If Only I”—Henry and the flute player**

*Boy poet likes a girl who plays flute (7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

When the band teacher announced the first song, I thought its name sounded like some kind of pasta. I listened as carefully as I could to the flutes, and I tried really hard to like them, but I didn't. They were shrill, and a weird vibration made a lot of their notes sound bad. The louder they played, the worse it got. . . . Maybe some of the flutes were broken, or they were playing the wrong notes.

. . . It sort of sounded like they were fighting.

*After concert, boy poet talks to girl flute player (7<sup>th</sup> grade)*

It was getting a little easier to talk. “I liked that band at the assembly too.”

“What band at what assembly?”

It was a strange question. It was only a few days ago, and it made her cry. She couldn't have forgotten already.

“Last week? The symphony?”

She laughed, and I didn't know whether to be devastated that she was laughing at me or awestruck at the sound. It was like the brook that bubbled through the park in my neighborhood, where I liked to write sometimes.

“That's not a band. It's an orchestra.”

I felt stupid and small. . . . “What's the difference?”

### **How a Master Did It**

Natasha at the opera *from Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace*

The floor of the stage consisted of smooth boards, at the sides was some painted cardboard representing trees, and at the back was a cloth stretched over boards. In the center of the stage sat some girls in red bodices and white skirts. One very fat girl in a white silk dress sat apart on a low bench, to the back of which a piece of green cardboard was glued. They all sang something. When they had finished their song the girl in white went up to the prompter's box. A man with tight silk trousers over his stout legs, and holding a plume and a dagger, went up to her and began singing, waving his arms about.

First the man in the tight trousers sang alone, then she sang, then they both paused while the orchestra played and the man fingered the hand of the girl in white, obviously awaiting the beat to start singing with her. . . .

After her life in the country, and in her present serious mood, all this seemed grotesque and amazing to Natasha. She could not follow the opera nor even listen to the music; she saw only the painted cardboard and the queerly dressed men and women who moved, spoke, and sang so strangely in that brilliant light. She knew what it was all meant to represent, but it was so pretentiously false and unnatural that she first felt ashamed for the actors and then amused at them.

She looked at the faces of the audience, seeking in them the same sense of ridicule and perplexity she herself experienced, but they all seemed attentive to what was happening on the stage, and expressed delight which to Natasha seemed feigned. (Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*. Tr. Aylmer Maude. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 1966. Book 8, Chapter 9. P. 620.)

#### My interpretation

- Tolstoy's point is about the audience, not the opera. The urban nobility are detached from reality, attached to illusion, and they prefer it that way.
- Natasha herself was this way, until her time in the country began to ground her in reality – that is, in truth.

In the handout: Communion at the Prison Church from Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection*

*POV: Maslova, a prisoner, has decided everything she was taught about God is "trickery and deception," and none of the people who seem to believe really do.)*

The priest, robed in a peculiar and very inconvenient garment made of cloth and gold, cut and arranged small pieces of bread on a saucer; these he put into a cup filled with wine, at the same time uttering various names and prayers. . . .

The essence of the service lay in the assumption that the small pieces of bread cut by the priest and dipped in the wine to the accompaniment of certain manipulations and prayers, became the body and blood of God. . . . The principal act came when the priest, having taken a napkin in both hands, slowly and rhythmically waved it over the saucer and the golden cup. This was supposed to be the moment when bread and wine were transformed into flesh and blood, and therefore this part of the service was performed with special solemnity.

“To the holy, pure, and blessed Mother of God!” the priest cried loudly from behind the partition, and the choir solemnly chanted. . . . Then the transformation was considered accomplished, and the priest, having removed the napkin from the saucer, cut the middle piece of bread into four parts and placed it first in the wine and next in his own mouth. He was supposed to have swallowed a piece of the body of God and to have drunk a portion of his blood. Then the priest . . . stood before the people, inviting those who wished to come and partake the body and blood of God, which were in that cup.

. . . The priest stood in front of an image . . . which was meant to represent the same God he had been eating [and half-sang, half-spoke]. . . .

Of course, the priest did not really believe that bread and wine could become human flesh and blood . . . or that he had indeed swallowed a piece of God – no one could believe this – but he believed that it was his duty to believe this belief. (Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*. Tr. Vera Traill. New York: New American Library, 1984, pp. 134-38)

#### My interpretation

- Tolstoy’s point is that the church, both institutionally and in the persons of particular priests, has hidden true religion under a thick layer of ritual which cannot possibly mean what the people are expected to believe it means.
- There’s a layer of hypocrisy too, because the clergy don’t believe it themselves. They merely pretend to believe it because it’s their job.

#### Other books known for defamiliarization

- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
- Tolstoy, *Kholstomer* (narrator is a horse)
- Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
- George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

## In which you practice on us

Things to know before you begin

- What do you want your readers to see? (Something hidden behind routine, convention, cliché, tired symbolism.)
- Why don't they see it now? (Too familiar, taught/learned not to see it, vested interest, etc.)
- Will you show it to the reader directly or through a character's eyes and mind?
- How do you want the reader to feel and act as a result?

You'll need **outsiders**

- Probably the **narrator**
- Likely also a **character**—who may be having the experience and becomes a proxy for the reader

The goal is to take the reader outside to look in with new eyes.

Your tools include . . .

- Unusual, unexpected, unceremonious, or unconventional language
- Stripping away symbolism, convention, even euphemism
- Unusual metaphors or comparisons
- Change in POV
- Time travel, space travel, fantasy, etc.
- Unconventional narrative structure (e.g. static in *Godot*)
- In poetry especially, unusual arrangement of words & lines
- Anything that slows down perception and gives the reader time to perceive

Exercise: 50-100 words

Pick one of these (or try your own idea)

- Help a homeowner see a child's view of dandelions (or vice versa).
- Help someone who loves the dolphin show at Sea World see an animal rights activist's view (or vice versa).
- Give us a nineteenth century time traveler's view of social media.
- Describe an off-planet, non-humanoid alien's view of two humans kissing.

## Weird, nearly final note

Russian Formalists talked about . . .

. . . how art transforms ordinary language into poultry.

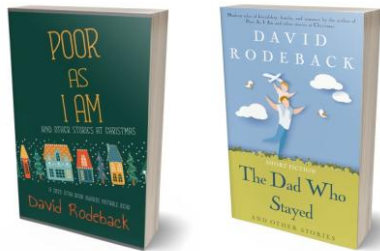
Typo: coincidence or not?

## Worthy final note (If you want to change the world)

“Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.”

—Camille Pissaro

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