Creating a Short Story From an Aphorism

Every book is a quotation.

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “Plato,”

Representative Men

In his typical epigrammatic manner, Emerson is alluding to the indebtedness of an author to the literary achievements preceding his or her own. In other words, every literary work elaborates upon or advances a preexisting idea. Emerson may also be implying that every literary work delineates a central idea that can be expressed as a maxim. Take Moby-Dick, for example. Melville might have built his epic novel around a nugget of wisdom such as “The more aggressively we pursue the mysteries of nature, the more those mysteries elude us,” or more succinctly, “All truth is profound,” as the narrator Ishmael asserts in the novel itself.

Yes, I am suggesting that Herman Melville’s six-hundred-page masterpiece could have sprung from a four-word aphorism—which is not to suggest that such extrapolation is easy, but only that words of wisdom packed into a single sentence or two have a way of firing up
Where Do You Get Your Ideas? Creating a Short Story From an Aphorism

FROM WISDOM NUGGET TO NARRATIVE: A SEVEN-STEP PROCESS

A pithy quotation can suggest a story or essay to you in a flash of creative insight if you have given your imagination free reign. Alas, that’s a big if. Many a would-be writer keep too tight a leash on their creative thinking, as if it were socially unacceptable to brainstorm for ideas without restraint. In the workaday world, perhaps, such restraint makes sense; but walking the straight and narrow path of expectation when it comes to artistic creation will not get you very far.

I’ve developed the following process for those who, like myself, have spent most of their lives in the world of practical problem solving. The process has you draw from that practical experience instead of abandoning it. At the same time, it guides you through underutilized mental maneuvers that will help you perceive story possibilities in those pithy abstractions we call maxims.

Let’s begin by listing the steps themselves:

• Step 1a: Browse through a dictionary of quotations and jot down several quotations that appeal to you. 1b: Browse through anthologies of poems and jot down lines that appeal to you.
• Step 2: Reflect on each of your selections, taking notes
• Step 3: Select one of the story ideas and write spontaneously about it
• Step 4: Work out a story structure or preliminary outline
• Step 5: Create a profile sheet for each of your principal characters
• Step 6: Do background research
• Step 7: Draft the story

Step 1a: Browse through a dictionary of quotations and jot down quotations that appeal to you.

Browse in a relaxed, leisurely manner—there’s no need to hurry. Your imagination has a better chance of working its magic when it isn’t
pressed for time. Keep in mind that dictionaries of quotations organize the quotations in one of two ways: by author or by subject. If by author, there will be an index of topics; and vice versa.

When a quotation strikes your fancy, write it out (include the title of the work from which the quotation is taken, as well as the author’s name, in case you’ll want to study the quotation in its original context). Reread your five or so candidate quotations; reflect on them; consult the original sources if you can. Jot down any thoughts or questions about the quotation, as these notes may help you conjure up story ideas (Step 2).

Let’s say you come up with the following five maxims (these from The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations):

- There is no end to the violations committed by children on children, quietly talking alone.
  —Elizabeth Bowen, The House in Paris (1935)
- The distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, however persistent.
  —Albert Einstein, Letter to Michelangelo Besso
- In all labor there is profit.
  —Proverbs 14:23
- No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.
  —Eleanor Roosevelt, in Catholic Digest, August 1960.
- I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can’t stop eating peanuts.

Beside each maxim, you might jot down notes not unlike the following:

**For the Elizabeth Bowen quotation:**
Children can resort to savage behavior if left to their own devices; think of Lord of the Flies. I am also reminded of the mean pranks kids pulled (on me and others) when I was in grade school. Think of recent news stories and widespread public concerns about bullying.

**For the Albert Einstein quotation:**
Imagine a society in which past and future have no meaning; there is only the present. Dreams are like that; so are moments of pure bliss. People also lose their sense of time when fully engrossed in certain activities.

**For the Book of Proverbs quotation:**
No one should ever be ashamed of the work he or she does; all work not only is honorable, it has value (although sometimes the value is difficult to determine). Remember Bob who got laid off from his teaching job and is now driving a cab—cursing his fate until someone reminded him of all the different kinds of people he meets as a cabbie: material for stories!

**For the Eleanor Roosevelt quotation:**
If only the thousands of young people made miserable, even suicidal, from bullying, would have seared these words onto their consciousnesses . . . It takes so little to make people despise themselves; it takes just as little to reverse the damage—provided you know what to say.

**For the anonymous New York Herald Tribune quotation:**
Why are we so tolerant of bad television shows? Why do we sit through ridiculous and tedious commercials? We need to improve our mental self-discipline—but how? Think of how my neighbor Rita solved the problem by having her kids create their own ideas for TV shows and commercials.

These notes can instigate a later effort to transform the maxim into a short story or essay or even a novel, so be sure to give them a conspicuous place in your writer’s notebook.
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Step 1b: Browse through anthologies of poems and jot down lines that appeal to you.

Poetry is basically aphoristic—language condensed to its essence like rose attar, a metaphor that Emily Dickinson used for one of her poems ("Essential Oils – are wrung –", adding that "It is the gift of Screws"). For that reason, a line of poetry can readily spark an idea for a story. For example, when I read the opening lines of Andrew Marvell’s famous seventeenth-century “carpe diem” poem, “To His Coy Mistress,”—

Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.

I can see myself writing a humorous story (or one-act play) in which a foolish young man tries valiantly to woo the young lady with whom he is infatuated by coming up with all sorts of seize-the-moment-before-it’s-too-late reasons for doing so (not unlike the speaker in Marvell’s poem)—and she, in turn, coming up with clever counterresponses.

Step 2: Reflect on each of your selections, taking notes.

Each of the aphorisms you’ve selected can suggest a story, maybe even several stories. Go over the notes you jotted down for Step 1, then come up with a story idea. Take your time! Sometimes an idea will strike you in a flash; other times it may take hours. If nothing comes to mind, go on to the next quotation you’ve selected. Your story possibilities for each of the above quotations might look something like this:

**Story Possibility Based on the Proverbs Quotation:** A shoe salesman, frustrated with his low-status job, comes up with a strange and audacious new way to add prestige to selling shoes.

**Story Possibility Based on the Roosevelt Quotation:** A student whose bullying leads a teenager to post a message that she is going to kill herself now struggles to locate her in order to change her mind.

**Story Possibility Based on the Herald Tribune Quotation:** Satire about a family addicted to video games that they have come to despise, yet cannot break their addictions.

Step 3: Select one of the story ideas and write spontaneously about it.

The idea you choose to work with need not be your favorite of the group, just the one that offers the greatest possibility for development at the moment. Retain the other story ideas in your writer’s notebook for later use.

Some writers feel the need to work out a structure directly; if you are so inclined, skip this step. But I recommend a freewriting session first. Writing spontaneously without worrying about structure allows your imagination to be inventive and to transcend structure. In other words, work the story structure around the content rather than vice versa.

Step 4: Work out a story structure or preliminary outline.

Start with the bare bones:

- Opening situation: What is your protagonist’s goal? What is keeping him or her from reaching that goal?
- Middle complication: What unexpected difficulties arise? How does your protagonist deal with them?
Here, Thoreau is illustrating how farmers allow themselves to be enslaved by the situations they inherit, as opposed to allowing themselves the freedom to chose their fate—such self-enslavement leading to a quiet [i.e., unconscious] desperation. The allusion to slavery, by the way, was certainly deliberate, as abolitionism was a major issue in Thoreau’s day, in the decades preceding the Civil War.

Step 7: Draft the story.

The first thing you might consider is whether to make the chosen aphorism the epigraph to your story, just as I have done with each of the chapters in this book. That way, both you and your readers are constantly reminded of the “guiding light,” as it were, of your story or essay. Next, reread the free-association exercise you prepared for Step 3, and use or adapt one of the passages for your opening sentence.

As you’re drafting, keep the following principles in mind:

1. Establish the situation and setting as quickly as possible.
2. Create dramatic immediacy by bringing characters into sharp focus.
3. Keep the reader wondering: What is going to happen?
4. Allude to or introduce the central conflict as soon as possible (sometimes the conflict is internal, sometimes it is indirect—but conflict should always become apparent).

Let me use the opening of my short story, “Corpse Delicti,” as an example of how a quotation can get a draft going. The idea for the story was triggered by a play I had written and had produced in New York’s East Village in 1969. For my epigraph, I quoted a passage from that play, the original title of which was “Anniversary Ball,” but which I fictionalized as “Corpse Delicti.” The quotation comes from the opening scene of the play, which is about a self-centered mortician who, because he refuses to take time off work to celebrate his wedding anniversary, agrees to let his wife serve their anniversary dinner in the morgue.

- Ending resolution: How does it all turn out in the end? What lasting lessons are learned?

Step 5: Create a profile sheet for each of your principal characters.

Characters make the story, as the saying goes. The best way to make your characters realistic—i.e., three-dimensional instead of stereotypical or flat is to get to know them inside and out. Writers do this by creating detailed profile sheets. Use the character profile worksheets in Chapter 5.

Step 6: Do Background Research.

The first stage of your library and/or Internet research should include studying the aphorism in its larger context. For example, if you choose a wise saying of Thoreau’s (e.g., “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (Walden, Chapter 1), it is important to read Thoreau’s reflections leading up to that assertion to better appreciate his point:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? . . . Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? . . . How many a poor immortal should have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleaned?, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, and woodland! . . . But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost . . . What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate.
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ALMA (Staring at the CORPSE, then glancing around fearfully): Honey, I prepared the meat just the way you wanted it: medium well.
DICK: Medium well? Did you say medium well? For chrissake, I said extremely well. Extremely goddamned well done!

So—even before the story gets underway, I’ve hinted at the conflict situation via the epigraph.

Now here is the opening paragraph of the story itself. Note how I hint at the conflict between the narrator and Lester Doyle, the actor who will be playing the part of the Corpse in the narrator’s play—and who also happens to be a struggling playwright whose day job is tending bar:

March 29, 1969
Went to visit Lester Doyle, my Corpse, who worked evenings at Maury’s Deli-Bar on West 47th Street, where actors and playwrights mingled. “When ya mingle ya tingle and ya gotta tingle to jingle!” he exclaimed, afflicting all within hearing range with his god-awful Jimmy Durante imitation. Lester slapped down my beer hard enough for the foam to cascade over the counter and my hands. Then, squeezing tight his lips Rod Serling fashion, he told me what a frigging thrill it was to play a stiff in a morgue. “This has got to be the peak o’ me bleedin’ career! So what if I was a last-minute replacement? So what if the playwright is some hicky-pricky from backwoods Minnesotee who’s never been to N.Y. City before?” He grabbed a rag and wiped up the puddle. “Remind me to tell BK that I’m gettin’ myself another agent.”
(Confrontation #76/77; Fall/Winter 2001-2002)

Perhaps the best advice I can give for drafting your story is to let your subconscious do most of the work. This is not quite the same as spontaneous freewriting, which helps you generate basic content on which to build an idea. When writing a first draft, by comparison, you are subconsciously (or semiconsciously) drawing from the preliminary planning—the background research, the outlining, and the free-associating—which you would do well to review before getting the draft underway.

For Your Writer’s Notebook

1. Some writers throughout history are best known for their clever sayings. One of the most famous is the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, a seventeenth-century Parisian aristocrat involved in the tumultuous court of Louis XIII, where he was able to observe at close range the foibles of human nature. He recorded what he observed over the years, finally publishing them (as Maxims) in several editions between 1665 and 1678. Choose one or more of the following maxims of La Rochefoucauld and suggest a story premise based on each one.
   a. The man who lives without folly is not as wise as he thinks.
   b. Desire to appear clever often prevents our becoming so.
   c. The passions are the only orators who always convince. They have a kind of natural art with infallible rules; and the most untutored man filled with passion is more persuasive than the most eloquent without.
   d. The passions set aside justice and work for their own ends, and it is therefore dangerous to follow them and necessary to treat them with caution even when they seem most reasonable.
   e. Chance and caprice rule the world.
   f. Quarrels would not last long if the fault were on one side only.
   g. Our enemies are nearer the truth in their opinion of us than we are ourselves.

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2. Another fine source of aphorisms is, of course, the Bible. Use one or more of the following verses and suggest a story premise:

a. The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground (Genesis 4:10)
b. I have been a stranger in a strange land. (Exodus 2:22)
c. Canst thou by searching find out God? (Job 11:7)
d. The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. (Ezekiel 18:2)
e. Beware false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing. (Matthew 7:15)
f. Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke: 14:11)
g. What must I do to be saved? (Acts 16:30)
h. Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? (Revelation 5:2)

3. Three philosophers whose works are richly aphoristic are Blaise Pascal, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Try your hand at fashioning a story idea based on one of the following passages:

- Pascal:
  a. Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects. (Pensees)
  b. Experience makes us see an enormous difference between piety and goodness. (Pensees)

- Schopenhauer
  a. Belief is like love: It cannot be compelled; and as any attempt to compel love produces hate, so it is the attempt to compel belief which first produces real unbelief. (“On Religion”)  

- Nietzsche
  a. He whom the flames of jealousy surround will, at last, like a scorpion, aim the poisonous sting against himself. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)
  b. To create—that is the great redemption from suffering and the easing of life. However, much suffering and much change are needed to produce the creator. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

4. Write out ideas for stories based on the following lines of poetry:

a. Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing (Shakespeare, Sonnet 87)
b. Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so (John Donne, Holy Sonnet x) X
c. Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”)
d. Of all the causes which conspire to blind Man’s erring judgment, and misguide the mind, What the weak head with strongest bias rules Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools. (Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism”)
e. He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence. (William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”)
f. We sew, we prick our fingers, dull our sight,
   Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh)

g. Te fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
   These and ore I dress with impassive hand (yet deep in my breast
   a fire, a burning flame)
   (Walt Whitman, “The Wound Dresser”)

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR IDEAS?