

Cultural Daily

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Writing Prompt: Liar Liar

Charity Hume · Wednesday, May 7th, 2014

Liar Liar! Another productive and useful writing prompt from Charity Hume.

The lies we tell can reveal character and motivation. In *Casablanca*, Ilse Lund evades Rick's offer to pick her up on the way to the train, by saying lightly that she has errands to run. Only later do we realize she was trying to save his life by getting him out of Paris before the Nazis arrest him. Her lies covered enormous pain at the reality she could not go with him, and in the dramatic scene between them, a subtext of her conflict gives the scene poetic depth — “Kiss me as if it were the last time...”

But lies can also be layered and hold the darkest of secrets. Most of *Betrayal*, the great play by Harold Pinter, involves scenes where two characters gradually uncover the lies that have kept the illusion of a marriage in place over decades. It is in the subtext of these scenes we experience what Roland Barthes has called *Le Plaisir du Texte*, that mysterious pleasure when a writer knows what to leave unsaid, asking more of the reader, awakening the desire to know more.

In this exercise, write a dialogue between two people, where one of them is lying to the other. Give them a setting: a kitchen, a diner, a waiting room in a doctor's office. They can be talking about the weather, or the food, but one character is covering up a secret with little lies. Plot is the art of withholding information, so there's no need to reveal the secret at the end of the scene. Just give one of your characters something important to hide, and explore the ways you can tap into that subtext throughout their conversation.

As a way to get started, as always, your best material is hiding within your memory. When have you had to cover up a secret with a lie?



Confidence, (1897) by Pierre Auguste Renoir, Courtesy of Wikipaintings

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