The Psychology of Subtext

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Workshop Handout

What is subtext?

Subtext is the underlying message that is not shown on the page. It's the famous "read between the lines" expression. The words they speak may be saying one thing, but the meaning behind them says something else entirely.

What are the benefits of subtext?

Interactive: It adds an element of mystery. Turning reading into a scavenger hunt for the reader. The moment you hide information from a reader, they have an intellectual itch that needs to be scratched.

Foreshadowing: Although readers like being surprised, what will keep them from putting your book down is anticipation. But how do you build anticipation without actually telling the reader what's going to happen?

Use subtext to foreshadow what's to come. Like when a character says or does something that hints at what will come later, at an even bigger scale, it builds anticipation. Hence, gluing readers to the page because they want to see the bigger scale.

Misdirection: Misdirection is often used to lead the reader into believing one thing, only for its deeper meaning to be revealed later.

My personal favorite is the use of double meaning. Like when a character is replying to a question, but they're answering something else entirely. Or when characters are talking to each other, but yet having two entirely different conversations.

Complexity: Subtext adds layers of complexity to your story. It adds depth to your plot, world building, and characters.

My personal favorite is the use of symbolism, which creates different dimensions to your story that are not readily seen by the reader unless they look deeper. Think of readers as mini-detectives. The more hidden meanings they unveil, the more satisfactory their reading experience will be.

6 Rain Hacks:

Sadness: Rain makes days grayer and darker. When a character is sad or moody, rainy weather is often employed as a way of showing how the world is empathizing with the character.

Trouble Ahead: Rain here indicates that there are no good prospects to come. Perhaps a secret that is impossible to keep, and its reveal will have heart-wrenching consequences.

Cleansing: The rain may wash away blood or even the sins of a character. The true metaphor is of washing away the sins of the past.

Restoration: Rain is a requirement for plants to grow and it can be seen as a life giving source. The use of rain as a symbol of renewal is most commonly used at the end of a long reign of terror.

Endurance: Characters will often struggle through rain. In such instances, rain is used to highlight the fact that nothing will stand in the way of what needs to happen.

Desire: Rain is frequently used to depict a couple's desire to be together against all odds.

4 Sun Hacks:

Sunset: Sunsets are most commonly used during a calm moment in a story. Sunsets are also used to signify a pleasant conclusion. It doesn't have to be the conclusion of the story itself. It could be the conclusion of a phase in their lives.

Sunrise: Sunrise can sometimes be used to reflect a character's new beginning or the foreshadow of a brighter future.

Sunlight: If a character is dealing with a dilemma, and a choice has to be made, a ray of sunlight might illustrate his glimmer of hope.

Sunshine: If the clouds clear and the sunshine is so blindly bright, then that means something good is about to happen.

9 Dialogue Hacks:

Changing or evading subject: A character usually changes the subject or evades a question when something is at stake. Most often it's their feelings, and they don't want to open up. Or a secret they can't afford to reveal.

Double question: This is when a character answers a question with another question.

Sarcasm: Sarcasm is the use of irony to mock or convey contempt.

Symbolic language: Metaphorical language is any form of language that makes use of metaphor.

Masking: Masking is when a character is trying to hide their feelings.

Double meaning: Double meaning in dialogue can be (1) a single line that has two different meanings, or (2) an entire conversation that contains two messages.

Silence: Silence is commonly used when a character doesn't want to answer a question or agree to a statement.

Implied zinger: An implied conclusion is when a character implies something without explicitly stating it.

Echo: Echo in this context is when a character says the same thing in different parts of the book, sometimes even in different scenarios.

For more techniques and examples, get "The Psychology of Subtext" book today!