



ON CRAFT: CHARLES BAXTER ON THE REQUEST MOMENT

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The latest in our On Craft series features an exclusive excerpt from Charles Baxter's lecture at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

From "The Request Moment: or, 'There's Something I Want You to Do'"

Many of our models for writing and for thinking about plot and plot-construction go back to a common workshop question: "What does this character want?" Or: "What is this character afraid of?" According to the conventional wisdom, if we know what the protagonist wants or desires or fears, we know what's at stake in the story—that is, what stands to be gained or lost: status, a love object, riches, or whatever it may be. Those desires and fears provide us with the emotional logic of the story. This is standard fiction workshop orthodoxy. I have used it myself. It's not wrong, but it's like getting only one-half of the full picture.

Partial truths can turn into orthodoxy. Literature doesn't always work through simple desires and fears because *life* doesn't always work that way. Much of the time in our lives, we aren't doing what *we* want to do; we're performing actions that *other people* want us to do. We are acting on the basis of a *transferred* desire, a desire that has been unhoused from its owner and sutured on to us. We lose ownership over our desires; someone or something else may be the absentee landlord of our actions. Sometimes we lose control of our lives by trying to fulfill all the requests that others have placed on us. Your spouse or partner wants you to do something small or large; your children want you to do other things; your boss has various demands or requests; and, oh, have I mentioned God? God has plenty of requests and commands for us, and if his commands are sometimes hard to live up to, well, that's life. We often fail, and the Bible is an inventory of humanity's failures to do what God asks. Nietzsche says somewhere that you can tell from the faces of Christians that they're all members of the servant class, following orders. The story of Adam's fall is the story of how Adam and Eve fail at the first request that God makes of them. And that's the *ur*-story, the original story at the beginning of time, that request moment.

Go figure.

Imperatives fall into three general categories: advice, requests, and commands. Advice is dramatically boring and can often be ignored because it involves no obligation on our part to follow it. In *Hamlet*, the character of Polonius is famously long-winded and dull in Act One, Scene 3, as he dishes out advice to Laertes. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be,” he says, and so on. His advice has no urgency. What’s true about advice is that, to quote my friend Duffy, it just sits there.

Orders or commands presuppose no real choice on our part unless we choose to disobey or violate them. Dramatic interest, and dramatic structure (which Aristotle said was the last thing that young writers learn during their apprenticeship)—dramatic interest usually involves a character’s *choice*. That’s a big difference: requests contain a certain obligation but also presuppose a choice on your part, whereas commands assume that you have no choice. The Ten Commandments are not requests; they’re orders. They’re not The Ten Suggestions. The Absolute has issued the order, and you follow it, or else. You’re not supposed to have a better idea about how to behave.

What is the dramatic usefulness of request moments? They have many, but I’ve narrowed their uses down to three. First of all, request moments *happen in a social world*, between two or more characters. They often reveal the particular society or subculture in which the characters are living, the nature of obligations in that world. In this way, a request takes on *social* consequences. For example, *The Godfather* begins with an Italian undertaker making a request of Don Vito Corleone. The request reveals the complex nature of the particular social world that the two men and their families inhabit, and Don Vito refuses the request as out-of-proportion and unjust. The request has to be scaled down, or he won’t do it. Don Vito tells the undertaker that he himself may have a request someday—that is, requests are by nature often reciprocal. For the reader of *The Godfather*, the request shows us the inner workings, the dynamics, of this social structure, on this day, which is also the wedding day of Don Vito Corleone’s daughter.

What if someone with power over you asks you to perform an unethical action? That’s part of Hamlet’s problem, and Macbeth’s, but also Don Vito Corleone’s: they’ve all been asked to perform violent acts that may be unjust.

Another reason that request moments function so well in stories is that *they may reveal power relationships*: they reveal who’s got the power, and who has less power, and what people do, or *think* they can do, when in the *grip* of such power. Can a person resist power? Can Hamlet resist the request his father makes of him? Let’s not kid ourselves: power can flow in weird ways. Power sometimes moves in unexpected directions. One is not always the master, and the other is not always the servant.

Until you’re a parent, for example, you may not realize how much power infants may have; or how much power our children may have over us as they grow up. We always

assume that power goes in the other direction, from parents to children, but it's not always so. Romantic relationships involve a shifting of power between one person and another—the power of sex, of attraction, of money, of charm. The stories of request moments reveal the bizarre ways power can sometimes displace our best intentions and make us into people we didn't think we were. But the point is that *the revelations don't arrive on the scene until after the request has been made*. First the request, then the revelation.

A third reason that request moments are revelatory is that they expose the ethical obligations that we feel we owe toward others. What can we give to someone by fulfilling a request, and what is their claim on us? Thus, they force choices on us, choices that reveal our character.

Let's go back to *Hamlet*, for a moment. One of the most common statements you hear in writing workshops is that this-or-that character is "passive." The passive protagonist is regularly thought to be dull and uninteresting. But Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, is *the* passive protagonist *par excellence*, and he is absolutely compelling, and as a result people have talked about him for a few centuries now. How come? One reason, one among many, is that if there has been a request moment in a story or a play, as there is in *Hamlet*, *the situation remains dramatically charged whether the recipient of the request does anything or not*. Hamlet's inactivity is fascinating because his dead father has asked him to do something terrible, i.e., commit a murder, perform regicide. Suddenly, inaction becomes really, really significant; it starts to signify in a big way. And it creates suspense. Do the dead have power over us? Good question. Is Hamlet obligated to do what his father asks? Do the dead tell the truth? Well, maybe. What is their hold over us? Hamlet says he doesn't know. Hamlet may be mad. He temporizes. If he follows the request, he may be only a "rogue or peasant slave." But as long as he does nothing, the request hangs in suspension; the obligation remains open.

I'm not saying that all stories *need* request moments. They don't. But I *am* saying that sometimes stories and plays and poems stall out and go flat because the request *hasn't been clarified*. There may be a request in the air, or an obligation, but the obligation hasn't been articulated properly. We don't quite know what the request is. But if the request is uttered, the story may be saved, its power relationships revealed.

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Charles Baxter is the author of fourteen books, most recently the novel *The Sun Collective*. His stories have appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, the Pushcart Prize anthology, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. He lives in Minneapolis.