Decision and Discovery: Introduction to (non)Change
Jordan Hartt

Short stories, like lyrics, are invented new each time they're tried.
~Richard Ford

In our stories, character change can be macro or micro—or non-existent. A character can change from beginning of the story to the end, or change several times during the story, or not change at all.

Character change can further be defined as decision or discovery.

In the traditional structure of a short story: a character or characters must want something, there must be obstacles preventing the character(s) from getting whatever it is that they want (whether those obstacles are internal or external), and at some point the character must make a decision (crisis moment/ climactic scene), after which something will have changed (resolution), whether that something is internal or external.

The problem is, sometimes our characters and our stories don’t always wish to follow these rules. In Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl,” for instance—or, famously, in such James Joyce stories as “Clay” or “Two Gallants”—characters end, in the story, right where they began, experiencing no change. These stories don’t have crisis moments, and nothing necessarily changes on a “macro” level from beginning to end.

However, even within stories in which there is no overarching “macro” change in the character, each of our characters makes (or refuses to make), throughout the story, many different smaller decisions. And each of these decisions, no matter how small, leads to some kind of change. Through character action and dialogue, everything in a story is constantly changing, in constant motion, even if there is no overall major change.

In addition, even if the characters don’t change from beginning to end on a “macro” level, it is the reader who changes. We are not the same people after reading “Girl,” or the work of Joyce. We see the world differently. We have changed.

We have lived literally inside of someone else, and we therefore now have more empathy than we did before. We now see the world in a different way, through different perspectives: through eyes that are not our own, through taste that is not our own, through ears that are not our own, on skin that is not our own, through a nose that is not our own.

So any of the traditional story structure points can be played with, artistically, depending on what the story itself is trying to do.

A character goes into a store: external change; a character exits a store: external change. And all of these changes offer the possibility of moments of internal change.
Janet Burroway, citing Claudia Johnson, writes that the concept of “change” breaks down into two parts: decision and discovery.

“All human turning points are moments of either discovery or decision,” Burroway writes. “Deeds and accidents are necessary to both drama and fiction, but the moment of change for the characters involved is the moment at which she decides to do something, or he discovers that the accident has occurred. […] Likewise, revelation is a stunning moment of drama, but the change in the characters occurs when one decides to reveal and the other discovers whatever has been revealed.”

Chapter 10 of the novel “White Dog Fell from the Sky,” by Eleanor Morse, shows this interplay between decision and discovery, as two characters—in this very short chapter—make a number of decisions and discoveries about one another, from which there can be no return.

Chapter 10 takes place between Alice and her husband: here it is in its entirety (the novel itself takes place, mostly, in Botswana during the era of South-African apartheid, and concerns the intertwined lives of the major characters.)


Near the beginning of this chapter: “Putting his arms around her in bed, Lawrence said that they’d be stronger for this. He seemed more animated, more present than he’d been in months. ‘Will we?’ she asked.”

We have four decisions (four changes, four actions) here.

1. Lawrence puts his arms around her (a decision on his part).
2. Lawrence tells her that they’ll be “stronger for this” (a decision on his part).
3. Lawrence seems more animated, more present, to the narrator (a discovery on her part).
4. She asks, “will we?” (a decision on her part).

Each and every one of these four changes between the two, these decisions or discoveries (whether action or dialogue), reveals and advances character.

Indeed, very often one character’s decision leads to another character’s discovery. When one character acts, the other learns something new: and may or may not respond, as we see in this next section:

“Once she’d loved his face, the penetrating aqua eyes, shyness in their depths, the scar under the left one that he’d gotten as a boy, running pell-mell into the branch of a tree. She’d loved his mouth. She’d loved his bashful uncommunicativeness, how she’d had to tease words out of him, the way he neglected his socks until the holes grew so large, three toes came through. She’d loved his old-fashioned sense of honor, at least she did when she believed he possessed it. Now, she didn’t know who he was.”
This is a major moment of discovery for the character. She is discovering how her feelings for him have changed. She isn’t making decisions, in this moment, but the change inside her is coming from the discoveries she’s making.

(Sorry about all of the italics!)

In the following dialogue exchange between the two, each makes a decision in how they talk to the other person, which results in continued change between them:

“He began again. ‘What I mean is I’m not stopping you from seeing someone yourself—if you wanted to.’

“I don’t need your permission,” she said coldly. “It’s already been offered, and I turned it down.”

She’s making a decision (her reaction through speech) in reaction to his decision: and both of them make discoveries about not only the other person, but about themselves.

“Who was it?”

She wouldn’t tell him. What she found unforgiveable was the way his eyes dilated with excitement when she threw out that piece of information. How dare he? She picked up her pillow and moved into the spare room.”

A moment of discovery, here, for her: “What she found unforgiveable,” leading to a moment of decision: “She picked up her pillow and moved into the spare room.”

Her decisions (actions) continue, as do his:

“She hunted around for sheets and dragged them out of the closet. When she lay down on the bed, the sheet felt cool for a moment, and then it turned hot. Out the window was a remote sliver of light, a wedge of new moon shining in all its blank indifference.

She heard Lawrence get up, and then the sound of truck wheels crunching over gravel.

She was stunned, humiliated. Until now she’d told her herself, okay. This is normal, this is modern. But now, sobs erupted that couldn’t be stopped.”

Character change, in this slim chapter, is obviously very overt. But notice the number of decisions that each makes, and the number of discoveries that each makes. Also notice the macro change that takes place from beginning of the chapter to the end: they have split up.

This macro change is precipitated by the number of micro changes (decisions and discoveries) throughout the chapter.

Eleven Writing Exercises

a) Write a 55-word scene in which a character simply changes geographical location.
b) Write a 55-word scene in which the main character discovers something about themself in the process.

c) Write a 55-word story in which the main character decides to do something.

d) Write a 55-word story in which one character decides to do something, leading a second character to make a discovery of some kind.

e) Write a 101-word story in which the main character does not change. What gives this story significance? Has the reader changed, through reading it? Consider using Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” as a model.

f) Write a 55-word story in which one character’s decision leads to another character not discovering something.

g) Write a 101-word scene in which one neighbor discovers something about another neighbor.

h) Write a 101-word scene in which a police officer makes a decision.

i) Write a 101-word scene in which a grocery clerk makes a discovery.

j) Write a 300-word story in which a police officer and a grocery clerk each make a decision and/or a discovery about the other.

k) Write a 500-word story in which an employer makes a decision to hire an employee, only to discover something new through the process.