

STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT I · FICTION



Session 4

Character & Desire — What Pulls a Story Forward

Sunday, June 7, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

Student handout · reading · in-class practice · discussion questions · homework · worksheet

The Art of Telling

A free creative-writing salon for residents of 2601

Led by James F. Mulhern · Silver Current Press

Welcome to the Session 4 companion handout for *Character & Desire — What Pulls a Story Forward*. This is your take-home guide for today's salon — it gathers the main points of the lesson, the reading for class, the in-class practice, the discussion questions with room to write your own thoughts, this week's homework, and the Character & Desire Worksheet for your private notebook. For the full session materials, reading companions, and course updates, visit companion.art-of-telling.com.

Main Points of the Lesson

A character is not a description of a person. A character is a *want with a body around it*.

Without desire, you have a portrait. Without obstacle, you have wish fulfillment. Without consequence, you have anecdote.

The want can be *hidden from the character*. The story is often the process of finding out.

The want can be *opposed by another want in the same character*. This is the source of nearly all interior fiction.

The smallest want, taken seriously, can carry a story.

Reading for Class

- Anton Chekhov, *The Lady with the Dog* (trans. Constance Garnett) — [Project Gutenberg \(public domain\)](#)

Critical Reception (after our discussion)

- [Dana Gioia on Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog"](#) — a working writer's appreciation of Chekhov's most famous story.

In-Class Practice

From the live site

Write a single paragraph — right now, in your notebook — in which a character wants something small and ordinary, and cannot get it. The character can be invented or drawn from someone you know. We'll discuss how desire shows itself through behavior, not declaration.

What happens with this: stays in your notebook. Two or three volunteers may read their paragraph aloud after the writing. Nothing collected.

Discussion Questions

Use the space below each question to write your own thoughts before or during our discussion. Nothing here is collected.

Q1. What does Gurov want in *The Lady with the Dog*? Does he know?

Q2. Where does desire show itself through behavior rather than declaration?

Q3. For a character you have written about in this course, or one you are thinking about writing: what does that character want? What stands in the way? (If no character comes to mind, try the question on Gurov.)

Q4. Is the want opposed by another want in the same character? What is that interior conflict?

Homework

The read

Read all four poems in the Session 5 box: Elizabeth Bishop's *One Art* — [Poetry Foundation](#), Robert Frost's *Birches* — [Poetry Foundation](#), William Carlos Williams's *The Red Wheelbarrow* — [Poetry Foundation](#), and Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day* — [Library of Congress · Poetry 180](#). Together they total maybe ten minutes of reading. Read each one twice.

The optional exercise

Optional: answer the Character & Desire Worksheet at the end of this handout for a character of your own or for Gurov.

Before Next Sunday — Session 5 · Unit II opens

Image & the Poetic Line. We turn to poetry. We will look at how images carry meaning (more than statement can) and at the work the line break does (more than the comma can). You do not need to think of yourself as a poet to do the work.

Character & Desire Worksheet — for your private notebook

From the live site

Copy into a Word document. Fill in for a character of your own — from this course or from anywhere — or for a character from one of our readings. This stays in your private notebook — never collected, never read aloud unless you choose.

1. Character's name: _____
2. The want they would name aloud: _____
3. The deeper want underneath (perhaps unknown to them): _____
4. The obstacle — external: _____
5. The obstacle — internal: _____
6. The opposing want inside the same character: _____
7. What will they lose if they fail? _____
8. One small behavior that shows the want without naming it:

Closing Note

Because there wasn't time to tell everything, the companion site — companion.art-of-telling.com — gathers session materials, reading companions, and course updates so residents can follow along and review after each Sunday.