

Subtext in Dialogue

Excerpted from Gotham Writers at

<https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/ask-writer/in-dialogue-what-is-subtext>

Subtext is the meaning beneath the dialogue; what the speaker really means, even though he's not saying it directly. As humans, we often don't articulate our thoughts exactly. We're thinking on our feet as we talk, processing other stimuli, like body language, and struggling with our own concerns and emotions as well as those of the listener. In fiction, this kind of miscommunication can add authenticity, create dramatic tension, and even reveal deeper truths.

Dorothy Parker's short story "Here We Are" follows a newlywed couple—married two hours and twenty-six minutes—during the train ride to their honeymoon in New York. They've argued on the trip and the young bride is upset because she thought things would be different once they were married. The husband responds, his dialogue strong with subtext:

"Well, you see, sweetheart," he said, "we're not really married yet. I mean. I mean—well, things will be different afterwards. Oh, hell. I mean, we haven't been married very long."

"No," she said.

"Well, we haven't got much longer to wait now," he said. "I mean—well, we'll be in New York in about twenty minutes. Then we can have dinner, and sort of see what we feel like doing. Or I mean. Is there anything special you want to do tonight?"

"What?" she said.

"What I mean to say," he said, "would you like to go to a show or something?"

"Why, whatever you like," she said. "I sort of didn't think people went to theaters and things on their—I mean, I've got a couple of letters I simply must write. Don't let me forget."

"Oh," he said. "You're going to write letters tonight?"

On the surface, they're discussing their arrival in New York and plans for the evening—maybe a show or writing letters—but the topic they're really broaching isn't once mentioned directly. The event that *he* thinks is supposed to change everything—sex—still hasn't happened yet. His true thoughts pierce through the mundane surface topics to reveal a better understanding of his character and this couple's relationship.

Certainly the husband's dialogue gives the reader a strong indication of what he really means. In fact, he almost says it before stopping himself with the repeated phrase, "I mean."

THE CHALLENGE:

Write a scene in which the dialogue appears to be about one thing on the surface, but is really about something else.

How do you communicate that to the audience? Get them to read between the lines! Try to do this through dialogue, not relying on action or situation.