



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

Short Stories: Finding Ourselves in the Fiction

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Rationale

The protagonist in Jesús Colón's very short story, "Little Things are Big," relates his deep anxiety about what might have happened if he, a black Puerto Rican, had offered to help a young white woman with luggage and children, struggling to get off the train in the subway, just past midnight, on Memorial Day, in New York City, many years ago. After all, he declares, "Courtesy is a characteristic of the Puerto Rican." (Au, 114) However, in spite of his culture of courtesy, anticipating her fear at the approach of a black man, and even her possible scream if he came near her, his own fear overtook him, and he brushed by her and ran up the stairs, only to be slapped in the face by the cold air, and perhaps by regret, when he reached the street above. Relating the story many years later, he confesses, "I buried my courtesy [in the subway] early on Memorial Day." (Au, 115) In telling his story, however, he exhumes his courtesy, and he makes himself a promise, to offer his help regardless of how the offer is received a promise to regain his courtesy.

This is one of four short stories that my students will read as they explore how one's sense of oneself, one's sense of his or her complex identity -- culture, subculture, race, empathy, ethics, fear, etc. -- determines how he/she interacts with others, and results in an outcome, sometimes positive, and sometimes negative. In the four stories, sometimes the protagonists reflect upon and learn from these interactions and their outcomes, and sometimes they don't. As readers, my students will observe how the protagonist interacts with the "other" based on a decision, as a result of his or her identity, and the outcome, for better or worse, and they will reflect upon the outcome. Ultimately, my students will write their own stories about themselves, or about a fictitious character that, based upon his or her identity, interacts with another character. Just as with the outcomes in the stories that the students read in class, the outcomes in the stories my students write may be definitively negative or positive, or yet unresolved.

For the past year I have been teaching English to high school students, grades nine through eleven, at Gateway Learning Academy Downtown, a transitional program for students who are highly at-risk, often short on skills, and for whom consistent attendance is a monumental challenge. These students have been sent to our program from New Haven middle and high schools, and some from various institutions of incarceration. Before I came to this new program, I helped plan and taught in another alternative program for at-risk high school students for twelve years. Because of the transient nature of our student population and because of erratic attendance, I have found that short, short stories, or novels and autobiographies that are written in

vignettes that can be read as separate entities, work well, allowing students to jump into a short piece of literature without feeling that they will never catch up if they have been absent or have just been transferred to our program in the middle of a marking period.

The four pieces of literature I have chosen to include in my unit are culturally diverse, including: one set in the Middle East in a Muslim culture, one set in New York City, but written by a black Puerto Rican, one set in Johannesburg, South Africa, and written by a white South African, and one that takes place in the basement of an abandoned house in New York City. Focusing on the characters in these stories, I plan to create a unit for students ranging from ninth to twelfth grades, covering a minimum of five weeks and possibly longer depending on student interest, that explores how decisions that the fictional characters make about how they interact with others are driven by who they are: their culture (and sometimes subculture), their personal ethics, sometimes their fears, their sense of justice, their race, and the degree of empathy they feel for others with whom they interact in the stories. These decisions and actions, based on the characters' identities, have outcomes and lessons that are sometimes, but not necessarily, obvious to the protagonists in the stories, but that are apparent to the discerning reader. Obviously, when the characters in the stories confront the "other," the outcome is not always hopeful, nor promising, nor do the protagonists necessarily learn from their actions.

Of course, the question is, "What does the *reader* learn from the actions and outcomes?" Looking through the glass at fictional characters, students, ultimately, will see themselves reflected back, as they also identify and challenge their own personal ethics and capacities for empathy, their own fears, their racial consciousness, and examine their own cultures and subcultures through decisions they make about how they interact with others, and the outcomes of these interactions.

Practicing Language Arts CAPT skills

My unit will strengthen students' skills in answering the Language Arts questions in the Connecticut Academic Performance Test. Not only will this reduce my students' anxiety at facing the test, but these Language Arts CAPT questions provide an excellent guide in exploring stories. My unit will specifically address the CAPT question, "How does the main character change from the beginning of the story to the end? And what do you think causes this change?" Obviously, to answer these questions, students need the skills to discern and discuss (both orally and in writing) who the character is at the beginning of the story, and what informs and drives his or her thoughts, emotions, and actions. Students need the skills to discern and discuss how and why the character changes as the story progresses. These changes may be the result of culture, personal ethics, one's fears, or one's capacity for empathy, one's race, or sense of justice. It is also intriguing to consider how experiences present the fictitious characters, and *us in our real lives*, with the opportunity to expand their and *our* thinking; that doesn't mean that they or *we* will. This line of thought is drawn out by another of the Language Arts CAPT questions that asks students to make connections with experiences of fictional characters in a story and with the students' own life experiences.

My students invariably look at characters and meaning only on the surface of a story because they have not practiced connecting stories and their lessons with a bigger picture: with themselves, with people in their lives, and with life lessons. This was demonstrated to me when my students read the story "Hide and Seek" from *The World's Shortest Stories* (55 words or less). A little boy is full of hubris about never being caught by his playmates in the game. He decides that he will really show them this time how invincible he is, and in his

zeal to “really show them,” shuts himself (we learn in the *last line*) in an abandoned refrigerator. Prior to this last line, he thinks, “How dumb can they get? They should have looked here first!” (Moss, 121), leaving the reader to wonder just who the *dumb* one is in this story and whether he has been so successful that they never will find him, until it is too late. Most of my students, at first, said that the lesson in the story is, “Don’t hide in an abandoned refrigerator.” Because some of my students understand the concept of metaphor, I pushed them to consider how the author might be using the abandoned refrigerator as a trap for the boy caught up in his own cleverness. Several students picked up on this. I then asked them to think how overconfidence has caused people they know or *themselves* to become careless and has exposed their vulnerabilities or put them in harm’s way, like the boy in the abandoned refrigerator.

Students write stories revealing their own identity

The study of the protagonists’ identities and what drives them to interact with the “other,” physically and psychologically, for better or worse, will provide a variety of perspectives and, I hope, inspiration for my students to write about their own identities and how their decisions, emotions (fear, among them), and actions emanate from those identities. Students may choose from a variety of genres for these activities, which will be woven into the unit, resulting in a portfolio of their work. Using the same graphic organizers they learned to fill out for the stories we read together, they will examine the characters in the pieces they craft, just as they have learned to examine the characters in the stories we are reading. This part of the portfolio will serve as the assessment tool for my unit. Students will be encouraged to write about themselves and/or fictional characters they may wish to create, and if they become proficient in examining, with the graphic organizers, how and why they or their fictional characters change, then they will have made considerable progress in the skills that are part of this unit.

“Little Things are Big” (The power of fear over cultural heritage) by Jesús Colón

Perhaps the best story with which to begin is “Little Things are Big,” a very short story by Jesús Colón, in which, in a version adapted by the nonprofit educational organization, Facing History and Ourselves, for Internet video, the protagonist and narrator actually begins the story by saying, “I’ve been thinking; you know, sometimes one thing happens to change your life, how you look at things, how you look at yourself.” (www.facinghumanity.org.) The narrator examines his action in the story, which leaves him profoundly disappointed in himself. He describes his Puerto Rican culture, and how it played a part in what happened to change his life that night in the New York subway.

In “Little Things are Big” the narrator, “a Negro and a Puerto Rican,” says he was faced with a dilemma on a deserted New York subway after midnight many years ago. (Colón uses the word Negro because it commonly was used in the early and middle years of the last century to refer to an African American.) A young, white mother with two small children, a baby in her arms, and a small suitcase is getting off at the same stop as he, and he is torn as to whether to help her. He reminds himself how important courtesy is to Puerto Ricans, but he also realizes that she may be prejudiced and misinterpret his approach to help her.

What would she say? What would be the first reaction of this white American woman . . . Would she say: “Yes, of course, you may help me.” Or would she think that I was just trying to get too familiar? Or would she think worse than that perhaps? What would I do if she let out a scream as I went toward her to offer my help? (Au,115)

Anticipating how he may be seen, he simply hurries past her, and runs up the long flight of stairs to the street, only to regret his lack of courtesy and rude behavior. He is humiliated and deeply disappointed in his actions, and promises himself that the next time he has an opportunity to help, he will make the offer, no matter what happens.

It is very interesting that, out of fear, the narrator in the subway changes first, in spite of his culture, and then, setting fear aside, changes again, *because* of it. His allegiance to his culture seems to be greater than his fear of how he may be perceived.

This story, adapted by Facing History and Ourselves, is also available at a Website on-line where students can read it silently while a narrator reads it aloud, or they can view it as a three minute video at the same Website. Students will also read the original story.

Graphic organizers to help answer, “How does he change in the story, and why?”

A tool that I have found to be effective in helping students answer the questions, “How does the main character change in the story, and why?” is a graphic organizer that is divided into three parts on a horizontal or landscape piece of paper. Each of the three parts is vertically divided. On the left side of the first section are the words, “ *At first ...* ” In the section beneath this, on the left side are the words, “ *But then ...* ” In the last section beneath these is the word, “ *Finally ...* ” Students will record their observations of the narrator, perhaps his thoughts, and his actions in the beginning of the story, “ *At first ...* ” Then they will do the same as they make observations of him beginning to change his thoughts or actions, “ *But then...* ” And last, they will record their observations of him, his thoughts or actions at the end of the story, “ *Finally ...* ” To the right of each of these, they will record evidence, and quotations, to support the findings they have entered on the left side of the page. They will use this graphic organizer in each of the stories that they read, and again when they examine the pieces that they themselves craft.

A major value in this graphic organizer is that it is set up to actually show how the character changes from the beginning of the story to the end. Often, I find, when students are asked to identify how a character changes, they focus only on how he or she is at the end of the story and fail to describe the character at the beginning of the story and as the change begins to take place. This organizer provides students with a tool for observing

the entire process of change.

Identifying how a character has changed will in some cases be challenging, but it is far more challenging to answer the question, “What *causes* the change?” For this they will also use a landscape graphic organizer like the one on which they explain how the character changes. But the second graphic organizer will ask the question, “ *Why* does he/she change?” They will rely on the information on the first graphic organizer that answers the question “How does he change?” and they will now write what they understand about the character’s culture, subculture, fears, ethics, sense of justice, empathy, race and awareness of race, etc., that might explain each phase of the first graphic organizer: “At first ... ,” “But then ... ,” “Finally ... ” How does his or her culture or sub-culture play a part in each of the three phases? How does his or her fear play a part? How does his or her ethics, empathy, or sense of justice play a part, and, so on? (See Lesson Plan # 1 for a more detailed explanation of this activity.)

Writing assignment

Just as the narrator interacts with the “other” out of fear of how he will be perceived, even when he knows that not helping her betrays his cultural identity, students may write about a time when, out of fear or anxiety, they betrayed who they perceive themselves to be, or they may create a character who reacts to another character out of fear or anxiety. The character in their story, autobiographical or fictional, may reflect upon his/her actions after the fact, just as the narrator in the story does, thinking about his own self-respect or integrity. I realize, in thinking about this writing assignment, how crucial it will be that the students track the narrator on their graphic organizers so that they understand (1) the changes that he goes through in considering what to do, (2) what he does in interacting with the woman in the subway, and (3) how he feels about his actions and the outcome when he reflects upon them.

“The Last Spin” (what price, gang loyalty) by Evan Hunter

Perhaps “The Last Spin” by Evan Hunter should be the next story the students read because it is a very gripping story about two teenage, newly recruited gang members who are picked by their respective gangs to settle a dispute between the gangs by playing Russian roulette in the cold basement of an abandoned house in New York City. Although the story is nearly ten pages long including illustrations, ninety percent of it is dialogue between the two main characters, Dave and Tigo, and once you begin reading, you can’t put it down, while they sweat it out alone in the basement.

While Dave and Tigo are equally important characters, and one could focus on either of them as the main character who undergoes a very significant change, it isn’t until the very end that the reader learns that only one of them survives the harrowing drama. The final moments are dramatic, and the reader can only speculate on whether Tigo, the survivor, actually learned anything from his tragic experience, or whether and to what extent it may have changed his life. This, of course, allows the students to engage in a discussion as to what they think happened to the survivor. If he does want to change his life, as he says, and get out of the gang, trying to get out of a gang might be tantamount to digging his own grave. Perhaps *both* boys are doomed. Perhaps the outcome of the interaction to which they initially agreed as gang members can only have a bad ending.

We don't know whether Tigo learned from his traumatic encounter, but we can assess what the *reader* is able to learn from "The Last Spin." It may have been too late for Dave and Tigo; I don't know. But, it may not be too late for some of my students to expand their own thinking. "Why do young men and women join gangs? Can one get out? Is being a member of a gang worth dying for? To what extent are gang members allowed to think for themselves? Could Dave and Tigo have said that they didn't want to play Russian roulette? Are the advantages of being in a gang greater than the disadvantages?"

It is conceivable that students could complete graphic organizers on character changes for *both* Dave and Tigo because both undergo significant changes in the basement, as they haltingly take turns, adding cartridges, spinning the cylinder, and pulling the trigger.

The opening line of the story is, "The boy sitting opposite him was his enemy." Each of the boys wore a jacket that "shrieked enemy, enemy!" (Hunter, 143) But, they are only enemies because they belong to warring gangs, and Tigo makes this clear in the first couple of pages, "You understand," Tigo said. "I got no bad blood for you. . . . I don't know you from a hole in the wall except you wear a blue and gold jacket." Dave is not so conciliatory in his response to Tigo, "And you wear a green and orange one," Dave said, "and that's enough for me." (Hunter, 144) So, it appears, at the outset, that the boys allow their identities to be determined by the gangs to which they belong. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes profoundly clear that Evan Hunter is uncovering, through the boys' conversation, the deeper layers that make up Dave and Tigo's far more complex identities.

Gradually, between spins, and probably prompted by fear and anxiety, they begin talking to one another, at first about the basic facts about where they're from and how many brothers and sisters they each have. Of course as they take turns with the gun, the tension builds, as they keep adding cartridges, increasing the chances that one of them will kill himself. From revealing to one another that they are both from Puerto Rico, and that each has siblings, they begin talking about their mothers, both of whom were born "on the island," and then they move on to their girlfriends. It happens that Dave knows Tigo's girlfriend, and he agrees with Tigo that his girlfriend is "Nice!"

As the story and the turns progress, they begin talking about the guys in their gangs, and they admit that they don't really "dig" any of them. "None of them really send me, but that's the club on my block, so what're you gonna do, huh?" (Hunter, 150) Hunter is artful in the way he brings the two boys to the point where they agree to one more spin and then they're going to quit. They have taken several turns each. They finally get to the point where they agree when this is over they will rent a boat and take their girls out on the nearby lake, after the "last spin." Many subtle and substantial changes take place in the characters of the boys from the beginning of the story when they first confront each other, impersonally, in the basement, to the final moments. Perhaps there in the basement, confronted with their mortality, they discover their humanity; maybe for the first time each glimpses the possibility of friendship, maybe simply a glimpse at individuality.

As the students undertake filling out the graphic organizers on the character changes in Dave and Tigo, and why they changed, I am excited to anticipate what we may learn about their identities that brought them to the basement, and then the revelations that each experienced that nearly freed them to become friends. Yet, there remained an allegiance to the code of the gangs that kept them in that basement one spin too long. Once they decided that they were going to take their girls out on the lake together, why didn't they just jump up and leave the place? Would that have been as realistic as the actual outcome? Taking their girls out together is, practically speaking, as unrealistic as walking away from their respective gangs . . . more a vision of what might have been if neither was imprisoned in a gang sub-culture.

My students should have an interesting time making connections with many aspects of the characters of Dave and Tigo. It reminds me of the sign with big print over my classroom door, “CAN I CHANGE MY MIND IF I WANT TO? I WANT TO!” How easy is it to change one’s mind when the stakes are high?

Writing assignment

There is a wide range of possibilities to which the students may gravitate for their writing activity following this story. Truly, the possibilities will emerge only when they have made their way through the story, the graphic organizers, and discussion of the crisis and characters of Dave and Tigo, as well as reflect on what, as readers, they saw and learned as these young men gradually changed their minds about how they thought about and interacted with each other. Topics might range from: Why do people join gangs; is it for personal friendships? How does one choose which gang to join; is it just a matter of location as it was with Dave and Tigo? What if one decides he wants out of a gang? What might make someone decide he wants out? Have you known anyone who wanted out? Why did he want out? What happened?

Another topic for discussion that prominently figures as a result of reading Hunter’s story is, “Seeing how the characters of Dave and Tigo develop *beyond* being merely members of gangs, does gang membership liberate one to be him or her self, or does it limit these possibilities?” This consideration will undoubtedly generate discussion, and stimulate thinking as students bring their own life experiences and observations to this writing activity.

“A Greedy Friend” (exacting justice) anonymous

Unlike Dave and Tigo who are members of rival gangs and who gradually discover, under dire circumstances, that they rather like each other as individuals, the two young men, Anpu and Bata, in “A Greedy Friend” had *been* friends, until the incident that occurs in the story, making friendship impossible. And, unlike “The Last Spin,” this story, whose author is anonymous, is set in a city in the Middle East, in a Muslim culture. The boys had moved to the city to start a shoe repair business, and with no explanation, the narrator reports that Anpu fears that Bata may be a thief. Unfortunately Anpu must make a journey home and not wanting to carry his money on the road with him, under cover of darkness, he digs a hole in the back yard and buries it. Upon his return, he finds his money missing and goes straight away to a *cadi*, addressing him, “Most honorable judge, my false friend Bata has dug up my money while I was gone. You must chop off his hands, for that is the punishment given to thieves.” (Hartford Courant) It is clear that Anpu identifies with the laws of his culture, and he is intent on exacting what he has been taught is justice for the crime of stealing.

Anpu admits to the questioning judge that he did not actually see Bata take the money, even though he is sure that he did it. And so begins the real conflict in the story as the wise *cadi*, the judge, gradually wrestles with Anpu about the difference between simply executing the law, and exacting justice. In fact, Bata, who did steal the money, never enters on the stage in the story except anecdotally. The judge sets Bata up so that in the end, Bata returns Anpu’s money to the hole in the backyard and adds some of his own to it. Anpu gets his own money back and some of Bata’s as well. The *cadi* points out that now it is not necessary to cut off Bata’s hands because Anpu has lost nothing and in fact gained some of Bata’s money.

The last line in the story, “‘Now go your way and live in happiness,’ the *cadi* finished.” (Hartford Courant)

leads the reader to believe that the outcome of the *cadi's* strategy satisfies Anpu, who has come to see a better way than chopping off Bata's hands. After all, if the *cadi* had ordered that Bata's hands be chopped off, Anpu would not necessarily have gotten his money back.

It is easy, at first glance, to think that the conflict is between Anpu and Bata, but in fact, the players are the *cadi* and Anpu. That is where the tension lies. There are even more twists and turns to the story, and the reader discovers that the highest order of justice is served through the *cadi's* very creative thinking. Sometimes there is a higher order of justice than simply following the strict order of the law.

Anpu, who in his anger at Bata, just wants to punish him according to his culture, allows the judge to show him another way to render justice and to feel satisfied. The way Anpu would have handled Bata and the way the judge handled Bata had entirely different outcomes. Once students have completed their graphic organizers that show how Anpu changes and why, they will discuss the advantages of going with the strict law or following the creative strategy of the *cadi*.

Writing Assignment

Their writing might emanate from their own experiences or those of people they know who rushed to get justice, or those who have been on the receiving end of strict law. Using a technique called *chalk talk*, is a way to get everyone to share what comes to mind when they think of justice and/or the law, imagining oneself as the victim and as the perpetrator. *Chalk talk* is meant to generate discussion and it always seems to be successful. (See Lesson Plan # 2 for a more detailed explanation of this activity.)

Further, students might consider what Anpu and Bata each learned from the outcome that the *cadi* orchestrated. Bata, the perpetrator, had to return all of Anpu's money and lost some of his own, but he did not lose his hands. Anpu, the victim, had the satisfaction of getting his own money back, along with some of Bata's. And the *Cadi*, through his wise and clever thinking, was able to challenge Anpu with an opportunity to expand his thinking about the law and justice. Bata, as well, may have learned something from the loss of his money.

“Once Upon a Time” (death by xenophobia) by Nadine Gordimer

The title of this story and the beginning of the first paragraph, with the exception of the setting in a suburb, lead the reader to believe it could be a children's modern fairytale: "In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much." (Gordimer, 25) But farther down in the first paragraph the reader learns that "the local Neighborhood Watch supplied the family with a plaque for their gate lettered YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED over the silhouette of a would-be intruder." And the beginning of the second paragraph reiterates that this is no children's story: "It was not possible to insure the house, the swimming pool or the car against riot damage." (Gordimer, 25)

The setting is Johannesburg, South Africa, during the struggle against apartheid. The family who "loves each other very much" is a white family living in the suburbs of the city. And the black South Africans who are desperate for jobs and food have abandoned their assigned townships and begun living in squatters' camps just outside the city, and sometimes rioting, and hanging around in the suburbs outside white people's gates,

soliciting for work, or food for their starving families. Because apartheid had been built into the South African culture when the country was colonized by the Dutch and British, and out of fear, the husband and wife do not hire these squatters, nor do they feed them, which they think would encourage them to stay and become more threatening.

The story reveals, layer by layer, that this white family who lives in their suburb gradually builds a fortress around them, in their growing desperation to protect their young son, themselves, and their possessions from these *outsiders* who have even begun, out of *their* own growing desperation, breaking into homes in the neighborhood. Unwittingly, the man and his wife gradually imprison themselves, and ultimately bring about the gruesome death of what they love most, their young son, who, while acting out the role of the prince rescuing the princess in the fairytale, “Sleeping Beauty,” becomes entangled in the coiled tunnel of razor wire that has been mounted, ironically, to protect him, on the high walls that surround their property.

The graphic organizers that ask the questions, “How does the main character change and why?” will focus on the husband and/or the wife who were “living happily ever after,” when the story begins in South Africa. It is a time when black South Africans are challenging apartheid, and the husband and wife seem to make their decisions about the “others” based on concern only for their own well-being and their possessions, rather than on any concern for the hungry, jobless, and increasingly desperate black South Africans. Ironically, the husband and wife destroy the one thing they love most without any actual intervention from the black South Africans. The husband and especially the wife who were “living happily” gradually become increasingly fearful, and each time their fear increases, they add more barriers around their house, until the degree of danger they have created within, far outweighs the danger that they fear without. They shut out the “other,” thereby imprisoning themselves, and they inadvertently execute their own son. With each physical barrier they put up, they seem to further confine their compassion and empathy for the “other.”

While the outcome of their decisions and interactions with the black South Africans is horrifying, Nadine Gordimer gives us no indication as to whether they ever come to the realization that they, single-handedly, brought about this nightmare. It seems that the realization of what they did out of their own cultural prejudices and fear is lost on them, or at least left unexplored by Gordimer, because the story ends as they carry the mangled mass of their son’s body, referred to as “it,” into the house. But perhaps it is not lost on the reader who is left to speculate on alternative responses that might have created a different outcome, and not have been life-threatening.

Writing Assignment

Much can be done with the fairytale motif, and my students might enjoy setting their own stories in this genre. In the case of “Once Upon a Time” the husband and wife are reacting to the “other” as they have learned from their culture: black South Africans must stay in their place, literally; they must not travel without their identification cards; they must obey the curfews; they must not leave their townships; they certainly must not cause disruptions regardless of whether they need jobs and money to buy food for their starving families.

Students will have considered and, I hope, talked about what we learn from our culture that may not embody compassion nor be ethical, such as when our own culture sanctioned slavery, or when the Indiana Legislature, recently, passed a law barring people without a government authorized photo ID from voting. Students might explore whether this new law (said to deter voter fraud) is in the best interests of voters, or a law that intentionally obstructs one’s freedom to vote. They may have their own personal experiences and observations as to whether our culture practices equal rights and civil liberties.

Students might consider writing about a time when out of fear, a character or a group of people reacted to “others” in such a way that they jeopardized their own safety, just as the husband and wife, in their fearful reaction to the “other” ironically jeopardized the safety of their son. The outcome of this story might stimulate students to think about decisions and actions in which they have engaged that have resulted in ironic outcomes.

It is important here to consider the concept of irony. It is present in “The Last Spin,” and in “A Greedy Friend” which the students will have read at this point. Revisiting these stories specifically to identify the irony, and the magnitude of the irony, and then brainstorming other examples of irony that students have experienced or read about in another story or seen in a movie, will help clarify the challenging concept of irony. This will also present students with an understanding that irony runs the gambit from being relatively superficial to having profound moral and ethical implications.

Perhaps students could rewrite “Once Upon a Time,” bringing about a different outcome.

Lesson Plan # 1 Students practice answering the CAPT question, “Why does the protagonist change in “Little Things are Big?”

Students will have completed a graphic organizer answering the question, “*How* does the protagonist change during the course of “Little Things are Big?” They will have made observations about his character “At First,” as he appears in the story; they will have observed “But then” how he begins to change; and “Finally,” they will have observed his attitude and thoughts near the end of the story. For each of these observations, they will find and copy evidence on their graphic organizer to support their findings.

Objective: Then, on another graphic organizer, more or less superimposed over the first one, or lying next to it, students working together as a group, will attempt to answer the question, “*Why* does the protagonist change? The answer to this question requires close and multiple readings. I will facilitate this activity on an overhead projector while each student completes his or her graphic organizer. It is here that students will look for what the protagonist tells them about his culture, his empathy, his fear, and race, and his awareness and anxiety about being a black man in New York City, half a century ago. Students will be practicing the skill of discerning *why* a character changes from the beginning of a story to the end, what about that character’s identity brings about the change, and, to the extent possible, how the *author* has crafted the character’s identity.

Of course, in order to take on this challenge, students must have a clear understanding of the character “At first,” that is, why he is thinking and acting the way he is in the beginning of the story. Students will see that he is immediately concerned with the physical struggle of the woman trying to make her way onto the subway train with children and baggage, “managing to push herself in with a baby on her right arm, a valise in her left hand and two children, a boy and girl about three and five years old, trailing after her.” (Au, 113) Because they will be familiar with the story at this point, they will be aware that he remarks no fewer than four times about her struggle with the baby, valise and children, in the course of the story. Students might consider what his observations about the woman’s struggle indicate about *him* ; he certainly has an eye for the details of her plight, even the ages of the children. He notes in the very next sentence that she is a “nice looking young white lady.” (Au, 113) They might consider why he mentions that she is white. Would a white man remark that

a woman on the train is white? What clue is the author sharing with the reader here?

In the next paragraph the protagonist notes that she is preparing to get off at the next stop which is also *his* stop, and he anticipates that it will be as much a problem for her to get off as it was to get on. Here he repeats his description of her with the baby in arms, the valise, and the two children in tow, etc. What insight might this repetition give the reader about his identity?

He remarks in the very next paragraph that he has no packages, not even his customary book tucked under his arm, disclosing that there is nothing, really, to prevent him from helping her, disclosing also that he is well-read. He notes that a white man helps her out of the train and onto the platform. As he did with the woman, he is noting the man's race.

Up to this point, it might appear that, of course, he will help the white woman with the baby on her arm . . . , because clearly he empathizes with her, and he is a very observant man, noting every detail of her struggle, noting, however, that she is a *white* woman.

But "then" the protagonist lets the reader in on his dilemma: "Should I offer my help as the American white man did at the subway door placing the two children outside the subway car? Should I take care of the girl and the boy, take them by their hands until they reached . . .?" "Courtesy," he says, "is a characteristic of the Puerto Rican. And here I was a Puerto Rican hours past midnight, a valise, two white children and a white lady with a baby on her arm palpably needing somebody to help her . . ." (Au, 114) It is important to note that again, in this paragraph, the protagonist repeats "white" in his reference to the American man, the children, and the woman.

He immediately answers his own question with a question, "But how could I, a Negro and a Puerto Rican approach this white lady who very likely might have preconceived prejudices against Negroes and everybody with foreign accents, in a deserted subway station very late at night?" (Au, 114) This is followed with a brief litany of everything he knows and has experienced about prejudice against blacks, and, as he says, "everybody with foreign accents." Then he wonders, ". . . would she say, 'Yes, of course . . . ' or would she let out a scream as I went toward her to offer my help?" (Au, 114) He recalls slanders written every day in the newspapers about Negroes and Puerto Ricans. He anticipates how he may be perceived by this white woman.

Admitting, that "ancestral manners" were struggling inside him, as he stood face to face with a situation that could explode into a racial confrontation, he paused and then brushed on by her as if he did not see her. "Like a rude animal walking on two legs, I just moved on half running on the long subway platform, leaving the children and the valise and her with the baby on her arm." (Au, 115) Students might consider what this repetition confirms about the identity of the protagonist. They might also get some insight into his identity by his use of the phrase "ancestral manners."

"This is what racism and prejudice and chauvinism and official artificial divisions can do to people and to a nation!" (Au, 115) he declares almost in his next breath. I will ask students to consider how this declaration lends insight into why he abandoned his courtesy and the white woman and children there on the platform. We will consider what we have learned from him, and about him, that explains how he decides to deal with the "other," and what's more, what this poignant observation about racism and prejudice that expands from the individual to a whole nation further reveals about his identity.

Not only does the outcome leave the woman stranded on the platform, it leaves the protagonist humiliated as a result of his choice. Finally he admits, "If you were not prejudiced, I failed you, dear lady. I failed you,

children. I failed myself to myself.” (Au, 115) He admits that he buried his courtesy on that Memorial Day. But he makes “a promise to himself here and now; if I am ever faced with an occasion like that again, I am going to offer to help regardless of how the offer is going to be received.” (Au, 115) He says that this will restore his buried courtesy. Students will need to consider why he chastised himself for his inaction. What do they learn about his identity from his reflections? Is his most powerful form of identity that of a victim of racism, or that of a Puerto Rican?

Once students have completed this second graphic organizer with their observations and evidence as to *why* the protagonist made his decisions and interacted with the woman as he did, and in this case, gained something positive from his negligent interaction with her, they will embark on their creative writing activity.

Lesson Plan # 2 Students clarify *justice* and *the law* , to prepare for a writing activity, after reading “A Greedy Friend”

Objective: Using a technique called *chalk talk* , students will write on the board and share with their peers what comes to mind when they think of definitions or examples of justice and/or the law, imagining themselves as the victim and/or as the perpetrator, or for that matter, as the judge. The purpose of this activity is to prompt some thinking about justice and the law after their encounter with “A Greedy Friend,” in preparation for their writing activity.

I might pose the question, “What have you, or someone you know, learned from an encounter with justice, or with the law? Or, what is the difference between justice and the law?” Students will write and initial their answers with felt tip markers on a wide roll of white paper taped to the blackboard so their answers can be saved and revisited if necessary. The only rule is that no one may talk while students are writing on the paper (usually two or three at a time, and more than once if they wish.)

Once everyone has had a chance to write on the paper, we randomly will read what students have written, and it will undoubtedly stir up discussion. This should inspire students to begin thinking about their writing activity.

I give points for those who participate in *chalk talk* : 20 points for the first entry on the paper and 5 or 10 points for each following entry. The point system is very successful, and most students choose to participate.

Lesson Plan # 3 Students track how a sequence of decisions and actions leads to an ironic and fatal outcome in “Once Upon a Time”

The sequence of decisions that the protagonists make as to how they will progressively interact with the “other” in the story, “Once Upon a Time,” are of particular interest because they result in an outcome that is the antithesis of their objective; instead of protecting themselves and what they love most, their young son, unwittingly, they set up a progression of *safeguards* that prove fatal for him.

Objective: Using the second graphic organizer, that asks the question, “Why does the protagonist change from the beginning of the story to the end?” students will read the text closely to discern what it is about the identity of the white South African husband and/or wife that precipitates each decision and subsequent interaction with the black South Africans, leading to the final, fatal outcome. I briefly explain apartheid and its dire consequences in the narrative of my unit.

Students will read the story specifically looking for clues as to how the husband and wife might perceive the black South Africans. For example, in the first two paragraphs, “ ... they were warned, by the wise old witch, the husband’s mother, not to take on anyone off the street.” “They ... subscribed to a local Neighborhood Watch ... ” (Gordimer, 25) “Yet she [the wife] was afraid that some day such people might come up the street ... and open the gates and stream in ... ” “ ... there are police and soldiers and tear-gas and guns to keep them away.” (Gordimer, 25-26)

Students need to ask the question, “How do the husband and wife’s culture, empathy, sense of ethics, race and racial bias and consciousness affect each of their decisions and interactions with these people who are growing increasingly more desperate for jobs and food?”

While the wife seems to be the driving force in the couple’s decisions and actions, the husband is complicit, first installing electronically-controlled gates, to assuage his wife’s initial fears that the black South Africans will just stream in unannounced. Then, when the housemaid and wife informed him that thieves were breaking into houses in the suburb, the husband installed burglar bars to all the doors and windows of the house, and installed an alarm system. His wife convinced the husband that the wall around their property should be higher because, now, black South Africans were hanging around outside their driveway, importuning for jobs when they drove their car out of the electronically-opened gates. With bricks that the husband’s mother pays for as a Christmas present, they build the walls higher. Finally when they learn that a house was ransacked while a family was at home, and that armed robberies are occurring, they peruse the neighborhood, scouting for the most effective protection from these *intruders* .

They settle on “the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration camp style, no frills, all evident efficacy. Placed the length of the walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs.” (Gordimer, 29)

Students will consider how each decision and action further clarifies the identity of the husband and wife with their culture, their ethics, their sense of social justice, their empathy, their racial biases, and their personal fears. They will also be asked to consider how the husband and wife’s decisions and interactions led to the fatal and *ironic* outcome, the death of their young son. Please refer to my discussion of irony in the “Writing Assignment” section for “Once Upon a Time.”

It might be of great interest to discuss whether the husband and wife could have made different decisions, given their identities. This activity leads into the writing activity that I discuss in the narrative section of the unit.

Appendix: Implementing Language Arts Standards in my unit

Language Arts English Standard 1.0 Reading

Performance Standard 1.2

Students will use graphic organizers, and note-taking techniques to organize information. They will interpret the text.

Language Arts English Standard 2.0 Writing

Performance Standard 2.2

Students will participate in CAPT related writing activities. They will view themselves as effective writers. They will explain the goals in writing a text, and indicate the extent to which they were achieved.

Language Arts English Standard 6.0 English/ Integrated Language Arts

Performance Standard 6.1

Students will create narratives and original stories.

Website

www.facinghistory.org/video/little-things-are-big

An online video of the story “Little Things are Big” by Jesús Colón, adapted for the Internet by Facing History and Ourselves, 1998. Brookline, Mass.

The adapted story was part of an exhibit called *Choosing to Participate*, hosted by the Boston Public Library, spring 2008.

Working Bibliography

“A Greedy Friend” an anonymous story that appeared in *The Hartford Courant* approximately ten to twelve years ago.

Set in the Middle East in a Muslim culture, it is the story of two young men who had been friends until one steals the other’s money and a judge, a *cadi*, must decide whether to punish the alleged thief traditionally by chopping off his hands, or whether to be creative, and teach *both* the perpetrator and the victim a lesson.

Au, Wayne. and Bill Bigelow, and Stan Karp. Eds. *Rethinking Our Classrooms Vol. 1- Revised*. Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools Ltd., 2007.

This anthology contains the short story “Little Things are Big” by Jesús Colón on

page 113-115. Many years ago a black Puerto Rican in the New York subway, at midnight, struggled with whether to try to help a white woman with luggage and children off the train and up the stairs to the street, or whether, anticipating that she may be prejudiced and scream if he comes near, he should leave her stranded there on the platform.

Gordimer, Nadine. *Jump and Other Stories* . New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1991.

This collection of stories contains “Once Upon a Time” pages 23-30. It is a story that presents itself as a fairy tale, but it takes place in South Africa during apartheid and turns into more a horror story than a fairy tale.

Hunter, Evan. *The Last Spin: and Other Stories* . London: Constable and Company, 1960.

This collection of stories contains “The Last Spin,” pages 143 - 153.

This is a story about gang loyalty and the tragic price one pays to be part of a gang.

Moss, Steve. Ed. *The World's Shortest Stories* . Philadelphia: Running Press, 1995.

This collection of stories contains “Hide and Seek” by Douglas L. Haskins on page 121.

This fifty-five word story seems innocent enough, set around a game of hide and seek, but the protagonist, in his effort to find the most clever hiding place, shuts himself in an abandoned refrigerator.

Nussbaum, Martha. “The Narrative Imagination” *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical*

Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1997.

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