



Introduction

The term “storytelling” which provided the main rubric for our seminar describes a dauntingly vast area for exploration -- much of human experience, in fact, might be said to fall within its bounds. The terms that appear in our seminar’s subtitle, however, and the intriguing array of possible relations among them, suggested several more pointed, though large questions -- questions which shaped our inquiry as we first set out and which evolved, deepened, and took on new dimensions in the course of our study.

What cognitive and emotional or even moral claims does “narrative” make on us -- as an account of sequential events, sometimes (but not always) linked as cause and effect? Along with a set of questions about the features, functions, and enduring appeal of narrative, we embarked on our inquiry wondering about the powerful effects of untrue events and unreal characters on listeners and readers of stories. What do fictional narratives about imaginary people offer the reader in a world full of compelling stories of real suffering, real loss, and real survival? What cognitive, emotional, or even moral claims do *fictional* narratives, in particular, make upon us?

As we discussed novels and short fiction in the course of our study, we repeatedly asked ourselves about the impact and implications of stories about characters who may never have existed but who nonetheless inhabit a narrative world that includes features of historical reality -- such as chattel slavery, racial hatred, sexual and political violence, abject poverty, or the difficult, fraught advance of social change. In discussing Mark Twain’s classic novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, often taught in high-school and college classrooms, we encountered versions of these questions in the fierce, on-going controversies about the real-world force of Twain’s treatment of the historical institution of slavery, and of his fictionalized characterizations of that race of people who were subject to it. We struggled with related questions about readers’ readiness to extract generalizations about a human group -- to find fodder for “stereotypes” rather than imaginative experiences of other selves -- within narratives about unfamiliar people, times, or places when we discussed Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the recent best-selling novel about Afghan characters, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*.

One working premise of this seminar was that the same large questions about narrative, about fictionality, and about literature’s effects on readers may be brought to a wide spectrum of works -- ones addressed to pre-school-age readers, to elementary- and middle-school-age readers, to adolescents, and to adults. We discussed Russell Hoban’s *Bread and Jam for Frances*, Arnold Lobel’s Frog and Toad stories, and Laura Numeroff’s *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*; E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*; J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*; short stories about African American adolescents by Sharon G. Flake and the fictionalized memoir-vignettes of Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street*; stories by D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Edward P. Jones; the novels I have mentioned by Twain, Hurston, and Hosseini; and selected non-

fiction, including Richard Wright's *Black Boy* .

In pursuing this wide-ranging investigation, it was an essential resource for us that as a group, we encompassed participants who teach second-graders, fifth-graders, seventh- and eighth-graders, high-school students from freshmen to seniors, and college and graduate students. Individually, our bodies of teaching experience and the main emphases of our teaching goals are shaped by the ages, skill-levels, needs, and concerns of the students we teach, as well as by the particular institutional contexts of our classrooms; over and over again we found that our different teaching audiences provided us with a variety of perspectives. We might ask the same large questions of fictional narratives written for readers of different ages, but sometimes we found that our inquiries developed differently, and led to different conclusions, when we considered the particular developmental stages of different reader-audiences. While the wide range in age-level of participants' students repeatedly proved a source of great interest, it also at times created challenges, as it revealed gaps within the functions of teaching literature at different points in a young person's education, and exposed differences among the basic, unspoken tenets and aims we each held as teachers. These moments in which our perspectives or main concerns diverged were illuminating as well.

For example, along with the large questions that I have formulated above, we became quite interested in the questions about the function of fictionality raised by those works that violate the presumably clear boundary between fictional and non-fictional characters and events. Considering critical studies of the elements in *Black Boy* that are not strictly accurate, we discussed ways in which a kind of "truth" that cannot be reduced to individual biographical event might be conveyed in narratives that incorporate the experiences of a larger group within the story of a narrator who at times speaks for a composite self or collective life. To render the "truth" of some historical experiences, we also speculated, might require telling some un-truths; Wright repeatedly depicts, as a key truth about the racism that formed him, the severe restrictions it imposed on his ability to speak the truth about himself. The process of discerning "What is real? What is true? What is reliable?" within texts inhabiting a border zone between fiction and non-fiction is central to Ruth Chaffee's unit, designed for tenth-grade special education students and encompassing both the traditional genres of novel and memoir and newer kinds of digital media texts. Fellows in the seminar who teach younger students, however, felt that the aims appropriate to their students were instruction in storytelling, narrative structure, and literary devices, and an initial introduction of the categorical distinction between fictional and non-fictional works, which had to be established before it could be problematized at a later age.

And yet the collection of richly thoughtful and imaginative curriculum units that emerged from our seminar demonstrates, I think, strong continuities in the functions of both narrative and fictional experience for students -- for human beings -- of all ages, as well as beautifully displaying a variety of facets within those complicated phenomena. Katherine Massa's unit on "Storytelling as a Strategy to Increase Oral Language Proficiency of Second Language Learners" reminds us of the oral origins of all storytelling, offering a carefully sequenced series of activities to develop second-graders' abilities both to tell and to listen to stories. Grace Malangone's unit for fifth-graders turns our attention away from narrative structures to other, equally important features of compelling stories: focusing on "the use of figurative language to convey detail and character feelings in texts," the unit builds on students' previous study of personification, similes, and imagery to explore how those literary devices contribute to the larger text within which they appear. Like several other units, Malangone's unit progresses from reading to writing activities, from the examination of figurative language in *Charlotte's Web* and other texts to students' creation of their own children's books.

Mary Lou Narowski's and Deborah Boughton's units aim to develop the critical thinking skills of middle-school readers and of freshman and sophomore readers in high school. Narowski ambitiously seeks to introduce

middle-school readers to a sampling of what advanced students of literature term “critical approaches” -- historical, biographical, feminist, and formalist. Inspiring her students to “see and appreciate literature as a multi-layered construct of meaning,” Narowski begins with a literal act of “seeing” images of the Sistine Chapel, without and then with the illumination of material, historical, and biographical contexts. Combining the imaginative and the analytical, Narowski and Boughton both show that “critical thinking” and imaginative and creative engagement in fact require each other. Boughton uses coming-of-age stories, grouped under a series of rubrics emphasizing different aspects of “coming of age,” as the literary material with which her students reflect on and practice their own coming-of-age as readers and thinkers, increasingly able to think abstractly, independently, and with the recognition of complexity and contradiction.

Elizabeth K. Johnston’s and Sandra K. Friday’s units, too, encourage reflective and critical thinking through a reflective relation between reader and text. In her unit, “Reshaping our Lives with the Circular Journey of Storytelling,” Johnston aims to teach students “to see themselves somewhere in other people’s stories,” linking their experiences as intent readers with a return to memories of their own pasts, made newly available to them as stories that may be reinterpreted, reimagined, perhaps fictionalized, and shared. In her unit centered on very short stories, Friday asks students to “find” themselves “in the fiction.” She has chosen several stories that depict how powerfully characters’ interactions with others are determined by specific aspects of their own identities: their cultures, their ethics and capacities for empathy, their fears and anxieties, their race and race consciousness. As she comments, “Some of the protagonists learn from their decisions, interactions, and outcomes, and some don’t. Of course, the question is, ‘What does the *reader* learn from tracking these decisions, actions, and outcomes?’”

MarcAnthony Solli has designed a unit on the “American Gangster” which will serve as the second half of a course on mythology, moving the focus of that course from classical hero-figures to the American anti-heroes at the center of *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, *American Gangster*, and *The Sopranos*. Responding to this set of protagonists requires the maturely complex and nuanced forms of thinking and feeling that Boughton seeks to develop in her students, for these protagonists are both heroes and villains, attractive and repulsive, spectacularly successful and finally doomed. In the sophisticated critical approach that Solli develops in this unit, he guides his students towards an ability to see their responses to such anti-heroes in complex and critical ways, enabling them as well to see the complexities of freedom and determinism in their own lives.

Finally, Joan Z. Jacobson, in her unit entitled “Visualizing Myself Ten Years From Now,” boldly calls on her students to extend their depictions of themselves in visual and written journals beyond the present and into an imagined future -- insisting that “fiction,” the imaginative conception of unreal characters and events, may allow us to conceive what *might be*, what has yet to come to pass, as well as the deeper human truths of what has been.

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