



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2010 Volume II: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

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## **Ellen Foster: A Character Study from the Inside Out**

Curriculum Unit 10.02.02  
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### **Introduction**

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I cannot think of the spirited and indomitable eleven-year old protagonist Ellen Foster in Kaye Gibbons' novel by the same name without thinking, at the same time, of William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1950, in which he declares that it is "the writer's duty to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice. . ." through the literature that he or she writes and through the characters he or she creates. Ellen, the narrator of her own story, is the quintessence of an indomitable spirit manifested through her inexhaustible voice, as she picks her way, singlehandedly, through a minefield of trial and error decisions and efforts, by the time she is eleven, to find a home where she feels safe from physical and psychological abuse that she has endured at the hands of her father and relatives, both before and after the death of her frail mother. Never characterizing herself as a victim, from the first sentence she utters, never asking for pity, Ellen, with remarkable candor, reacts to, responds to, and acts upon life as it is thrown at her. It is this young-in-years but old-in-perception protagonist, Ellen Foster, that my tenth-grade students at New Haven Academy will come to know from the inside out as they explore how Kaye Gibbons lets her readers in on the multi-facets of the character she has created, and how discovering the facets often depends at least as much upon the reader as on the character.

Having been both riveted and enchanted by Ellen's spunky yet heart-wrenching character, and planning to teach the novel next year to my tenth-grade classes at New Haven Academy, I knew when I read Professor Jill Campbell's description of her seminar, *The Art of Reading People: Characters, Expression, Interpretation*, and then heard her discuss this topic at the open house, I was compelled to apply for her seminar and to write my unit on the character of Ellen Foster, so deftly crafted by Kaye Gibbons.

### **Rationale**

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In large part, students will practice and hone the skill of marking short passages and discussing them, first by themselves, and then with others. Students will start with a template for this close reading which, among other things, explores how a character's outside expressions and perspectives reveal inside emotions, and

what motivates these emotions. This close reading technique is particularly effective when, as in the case of Ellen, the character is conveyed through her own "voice" in her first-person narrative. Students will try the technique on first impressions of characters other than Ellen, who divulges to the reader in her first two sentences, "When I was little I would think up ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this way or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy" (Gibbons 1). Clearly, there is a powerful motivation that the reader will want to uncover as to why Ellen passed her time, "when she was little," planning ways to kill her daddy. Also, students will be asked to consider how important these two sentences are to Ellen's character if they are the first two of her narrative.

Gibbons also uses a technique of juxtaposing Ellen's life in the present, at twelve, where she lives in comfort and safety with her "new mama," with the harrowing life of her childhood, with her family whom she describes as spinning and shaking and flying off the rail. As Ellen narrates her story, she moves seamlessly between her present family, where she feels safe and loved with her "new mama," and her past abusive father from whom she must flee on a December night. Students will discover that what Ellen chooses to tell about her present life with her "new mama" is equally revealing about the emotional and physical deprivation of her past childhood to which she refers. "Nobody yells after anybody to do this or that here. My new mama lays out the food and we all take turns to dish it out. Then we eat and have a good time" (Gibbons 4). The reader may accurately infer that Ellen's daddy yelled orders at her to prepare and dish up meals, and it was solely her task, and that eating with her daddy and mama was a very unpleasant experience; otherwise she probably would not remark on what a good time she had eating meals at her "new mama's."

Before introducing Ellen, however, I will introduce the concept of first impressions of characters through first sentences such as those of Precious who narrates her way through Sapphire's now very famous novel, *Push*; Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*; Amir in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*; and possibly Pip in Jaye Murray's novel, *Bottled Up*. I will raise the questions about each: What are the first things the author wants us to know about his or her protagonist and why? How much are we able to sleuth out about a character at the outset from the perspective they share and the actual words or thoughts they use to share that perspective? From this initial close reading through marking and discussing first sentences, we will begin to compile a list of all of the things it is possible to learn from a few initial lines, such as: the protagonist's social status, perspective of self and others, race, mood, challenges, gender, physical make up including age, prejudices, dialect, and perhaps historical and geographical context. Historical and geographical context do matter in our character, Ellen Foster, who lives in the prejudicial rural South in the 1970's. With a list of what we know from first impressions, no doubt, there will be a list of what we do not know, and to which we are seeking answers. "What in the world was motivating Ellen to think up ways to kill her daddy, from the time she was little?" "What does it feel like to wake and discover you are a huge insect?"

There is also the complex interaction between the reader and the character being "read." For example, when Ellen tells us right off the bat that when she was little, she would think up ways to kill her daddy, we might very well unconsciously fly to the relationship we have or had with our own daddies, and make an unconscious, fleeting judgment of Ellen, or her daddy, for that matter. Not only our relationship with our daddies, but our collective experiences, and our understanding of children and their fathers may color the degree of empathy or sympathy we have for this young child who must have had cause to think up multiple ways to kill her own daddy. Some might think it sounds a bit harsh, while others who weren't so lucky with their fathers in their secret hearts are feeling a certain sense of camaraderie with Ellen. I will ask my students to write down their reaction to these first two sentences: are they outraged, amused, shocked, sympathetic, or empathetic? Also, I will ask them to write what they infer from these two sentences about what in Ellen's early childhood with her father might cause her to want to plan his murder multiple times. As they share the

emotions they felt, and observe that their peers' reactions and reading of Ellen differ, they may begin to become aware that without realizing it, they bring their own multifarious characters to the "reading" of a character on a page.

The technique my students will use for practicing the skill of close reading of a piece of literature is known as marking and discussing the text. It is a technique that takes considerable practice for students to become adept at it because it is based largely on inference. I find that the more students practice this technique of inference, the more surprised they are at what they can discover about a character in a passage, especially a character whose "voice" is narrating his or her own story. Of course, as I have emphasized, students bring their own individual perspectives and life experiences to these close readings, as well.

## Marking and Discussing the Passage template

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- 1.) Copy the passage on lined paper, leaving a wide margin around the edges where you can write your ideas and associations. Copying passages gives students a tactile association with the words, phrases, and sentences, sometimes adding to their relationship to the character.
- 2.) Underline any unfamiliar words and look up their definitions.
- 3.) Circle words or phrases that seem meaningful to our study of character (meaningful to our class discussions so far, and about the issues that have surfaced in the text, or that are important to your own ideas, or that raise questions).
- 4.) Brainstorm ideas and associations for the circled words or phrases by drawing lines from the circled words and phrases out to the margins where you can write these ideas and associations, or questions.
- 5.) Write down connections to characteristics that we have identified so far in our study.
- 6.) Write down three to four sentences that discuss the meaning of this passage for exploring the character. (That is, what a character says, thinks, or does that is motivated from an inside emotion, attitude, or conviction.)

It is my plan to pick passages from the novel that reveal Ellen's character throughout the unit, but I will ask my students to begin picking their own passages, as well, for marking and discussing because learning to identify passages that reveal character is as much a skill as marking and discussing them. And through encouraging students to pick their own passages, mark and discuss them, and share their findings, we will no doubt come up with a more fully developed awareness of character. The skill of learning to choose passages that focus on character development will be of great use in the Language Arts CAPT, when my students are exploring character change and what motivates it. I address the connection to the Language Arts CAPT later in

my unit.

## First impressions of fictional characters

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Just as first impressions in real life often determine the future of a relationship with someone we are meeting or noticing for the first time, so fictional characters in literature may win us over or lose our interest in our first impression of them. Before beginning *Ellen Foster*, I plan to begin the unit by introducing my students to the first sentences of a few novels, and solicit their first impressions. We will attempt to raise our awareness of the biases and mindsets we bring with us when we "read" a fictional character.

Beginning with Clarice Precious Jones, the narrator of *Push*, students will try out the Six-step template: Marking and Discussing the Passage, and will share their findings. Obviously with our initial first impressions of characters through first lines of books, students will be meeting these characters for the first time, so they will suspend step five. Some students will be familiar with the close reading template I am asking them to use while others may be using it for the first time. Therefore we will use these first impressions of characters as an introduction, or a refresher for using the Mark and Discuss Template.

I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver . . .  
I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter  
got Down Sinder. She's retarded . . . I should be in the eleventh grade, . . .  
But I'm in the ninfe grade. I got suspended from school 'cause I'm pregnant. . . .  
(Sapphire 3).

Students will begin to share their findings: what have they observed about Precious, and what led them to these first impressions? For example, many students will have underlined and/or circled words such as fahver, ninfe, and ain', and no doubt will have written in their margin a question or an observation about "the way she talks." Most, no doubt, will underline or circle, and question in the margin the meaning of the phrase "Down Sinder." This is a perfect opportunity to explore what we can learn about a character from his or her language. And then going beyond the words to their meaning, what exactly can they observe or question in these three sentences, about Precious: her age, her history, her family, her education, her present situation, her candor, and her feelings. As students share the questions and observations they wrote in the margins of their page, they might share the word or phrase that they think is the most important, most revealing about Precious, in the passage and tell why. I guess, for me, it is the first four words, "I was left back . . ." After making our way through this exercise, I will ask a few students to share number six of the template.

And then for something completely beyond the realm of reason, we will turn to the first few sentences of Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, in which the reader is confronted with a man who wakes one morning to

find himself transformed into a giant beetle.

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin. He lay on his hard, armorlike back, . . . he could view his brown, vaulted belly partitioned by arching ridges, . . . His many legs . . . danced helplessly before his eyes (Norton 1999).

Marking and discussing this passage as they did the opening lines of *Push* is bound to elicit some very different responses and questions among the students as they share their first impressions of Gregor Samsa. I hope students will have underlined and/or circled "agitated dreams," and "monstrous vermin," and "transformed." Although they know the basic meaning of the word "transformed," it is a powerful word in light of the ramifications; a man awakes radically altered into a giant beetle. An important question will be, "How does one read the character of Gregor?" Is the reader discovering what has happened to Gregor at the same time that Gregor is discovering it? If so, what does that feel like, as a reader? What does the reader infer that it feels like to be Gregor? It might be worthwhile including the very next line of the story to rule out what students will suspect, "It was no dream." I will ask what might be inferred by the fact that Gregor awoke as a giant beetle. What do the living habits of a beetle conjure up? Would we read him differently had he awakened as a cat or an eagle? First impressions of Gregor and his rather startling transformation will no doubt pique my students' curiosity to read more. We must consider point of view because unlike *Precious* who narrates her story, Gregor's story is not told by him, but rather a third person.

I have included a lesson plan for the first few sentences in *The Kite Runner* which also has a very compelling opening as told by the protagonist, Amir, whose character we can read as he describes growing up in Kabul, Afghanistan, and the guilt he has been carrying around for twenty-six years.

## First Impressions of Ellen

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While Ellen opens her narrative in the past when she was little and thinking of ways to kill her daddy, by the top of the second page she confides that she leveraged herself out of her dysfunctional family, and now lives in a clean brick house with her "new mama," where there is plenty to eat. (One of my sample lesson plans compares the juxtaposition of these two passages.) A psychologist at school who sees her routinely tells her that he thinks she is still scared, and Gibbons uses this as Ellen's segue into the past when she declares,

I used to be [scared] but I am not now is what I told him. . . Oh but I do remember when I was scared. Everything was so wrong like somebody had knocked something loose and my family was shaking itself to death. Some wild ride broke and the one in charge strolled off and let us spin and shake and fly off the rail. And they

both died . . . (Gibbons 2).

Students will mark and discuss this passage and its powerful metaphor to learn how Ellen introduces herself at ten, remembering clearly the terror of being part of a family in a mortal crisis. I hope some students will circle the phrase, "Everything was so wrong," because for Ellen to declare that everything about her family was wrong is a drastic condition for a ten year old. The metaphor of a circus ride shaking and breaking and spinning until it flies off out of control, carrying the members of her family to their death, is an image of horrific, physical violence.

Ellen, an orphan with parents

Prior to this graphic death throe, Ellen describes the ends to which she goes at ten, trying as an adult would, to nurse and run interference for a frail mother with a weak heart from her alcoholic, abusive husband.

I try not to leave her by herself with him. Not even when they are both asleep in the bed. My baby crib is still up in their bedroom so when I hear them at night I throw a fit and will not stop until I can sleep in the baby bed. He will think twice when I'm around. (Gibbons 8)

After they have marked and discussed this passages among themselves, they will share their observations and questions, and I hope that some students will identify or ask about the emotions that are driving Ellen to spend the night in her baby bed, and to be watchful of her parents whether they are awake or asleep What kind of physical and psychological toll would that degree of vigilance take on anyone, especially a child?

After her mother has taken an overdose of heart medicine and dies, Ellen says that her daddy is home less than before, if that is possible, staying away for days, never giving a thought to whether there is food in the house, or heat when it gets cold, or whether Ellen has a winter coat. Ellen does not complain about these omissions; she simply states that the daddy of her (only) friend, Starletta, took her to town and bought her a coat. It was also Starletta's daddy who "called the heat man." So it is largely through simple facts, and the juxtaposition of Starletta's daddy's care and concern for Ellen with the absence of her own daddy's care and concern, that we learn what Ellen is up against. Ellen is an orphan in her own house well before both of her parents are dead.

## Ellen's voice: her own advice and counsel

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Ellen is profoundly her only advice and counsel, and in large part her only comfort. She is profoundly alone trying to counsel herself, to figure things out, and sometimes just to pass the time. Ellen weaves many threads into the fabric that is her story. I have chosen to focus on four of these that represent her character by virtue of her clear indomitable voice and that lend themselves to a close reading to reveal her character. One of these threads that makes up the fabric is her ability to effortlessly juxtapose her present life, with her new mama, in dramatic contrasts with her past life, where she was mired in neglect and abuse. Another thread crucial to the fabric of her story and character is her initial escape from that abusive life the night she declares, "I run . . . Run . . . I run," when her drunken father tries to assault her sexually. The thread that sometimes seems about to break is Ellen's search for a home in which she portrays herself as a victim of both do-gooders and the legal system, until, out of desperation, she spots the woman whom she will pursue to be her "new mama." The fourth thread, also crucial to her character development, is the narration of her friendship with Starletta who is "colored." At first, Starletta's race draws out all of Ellen's stereotypical prejudices, only to have them gradually and subtly dispelled.

### **The juxtaposition of Ellen's families: past and present**

After startling the reader by declaring in her first sentence that she thought up ways to kill her daddy when she was little, and then declaring on that first page that killing him was not necessary, seeing as how he drank himself to death, Ellen confides to us at the beginning of page two that she now lives in a clean brick house where there is plenty to eat. Throughout her narrative she segues from her past life, in which she often had to sneak away from, and sneak back into, her house depending on whether her daddy was home, to her present life, in which she states that she is proud for the school bus to pick up her stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the green grass every morning.

There is no warning when Ellen may switch from her present to her past, but side by side, her accounts of the two shed a lot of light on the character of Ellen and what she has suffered, such as when she describes her new mama washing her hair.

Does that feel good?

Oh yes that feels very good.

I lay on my bed where the sun has come in the window and made it bright and warm. My hair hangs off the side so I do not leave a damp place (Gibbons 36).

Ellen's description of her new mama washing her hair takes about a page to describe in the novel, and reaches far beyond the actual physical act of washing someone's hair. These final four lines are laced with words that express Ellen's serenity from the attention and human contact that is so foreign to her former life: feel good, feels very good, lay on my bed, sun, bright, warm. I want students to consider if Ellen were used to this kind of attention whether she would describe it in her new life in such detail. My students will first mark

and discuss this passage, and then the one that follows immediately in the text.

My daddy showed up at my house less and less. He did show up on New Year's Eve. Of course I went and hid when I heard him and a pack of colored men come in the door. They came in my house and went through my refrigerator . . . They got my bread and jelly and made sandwiches. I hope they choke. I hope they choke and die (Gibbons 36).

Ellen goes on to say that she will set the house on fire and burn them all up, even her own daddy. The rage she feels at her father and the men pillaging her refrigerator is in sharp relief against the serenity she has established in the final four lines describing her new mama washing her hair. These two passages side by side in the novel represent the power of juxtaposing her two lives. My students will learn to be on the lookout for these striking and sometimes more subtle contrasts that occur without warning, and they will choose some of these pairs of passages for marking and discussing.

### **What do you take when you leave a place you never will come back to?**

The death of Ellen's mama in the autumn sets the stage for her sudden and shocking departure on New Year's Eve. Ellen describes life at home, on the very night that she and her daddy returned there after her mama's funeral. She confides that her daddy left and did not return home until the next night. It may be easy for students to speculate on what motivated her to go to school the day after her mama's funeral and why, as she says rather matter-of-factly, she wore some of her mama's clothes to school every day, thereafter.

I wore some of mama's clothes to school. Nobody would know. Just some things up under my dress. She was not that much bigger than me. . . . I enjoyed wearing my mama's clothes. Just so I am not in a wreck is all I thought. I went through her things that night. . . . I decided to wear a little something every day (Gibbons 24).

Students will do a close reading of this passage using the Mark and Discuss template. There will be no words they don't understand, but there should be any number of words or phrases they might find meaningful to our discussion of Ellen as she is revealing her character. What can be inferred that Ellen wanted to wear some of her mama's clothes, and wear them "up under her dress?" What is the significance of Ellen wearing something next to her body that was worn by her deceased mama? An important connection and then question is, "How



many people do you think do that, or something like it?" "How many of you have worn something to remember a deceased person who is dear to you, maybe not an article of clothing, but perhaps a bracelet, or pin with his or her picture on it, or a tattoo?" We will explore why Ellen says, "Nobody would know." Does she want to hide the fact that she is wearing her dead mama's clothes? Why? People who wear pins or bracelets or tattoos usually want others to know they are mourning the loss of a friend or family member. I want my students to consider what they think motivates Ellen to keep the clothes hidden.

When she says, "I enjoyed wearing my mama's clothes," what does she imply about her feelings for her mama and the comfort this brings her now that her mama is dead? Some students will question why she says she hopes to not be in a wreck. What has being in a wreck to do with wearing her mama's clothes under her own clothes? Ellen's sentence, "I went through her things that night" [the night of the funeral when she was home alone] simply states what she did, but I want my students to read the emotions that are motivating this activity.

Ellen, who passes much of the time by herself, even before her mother died and was often in the hospital and is alone even more now that she is dead, cooking and eating by herself, tells us that one of her games is "playing catalog" which means that she picks out pictures of a make-believe family in a catalog, furniture for their house, clothes they might like to wear, camping gear, and even clothes for the next season. She even makes up the father and mother's jobs. Students will mark and discuss Ellen's creation of her fabricated family that seems to be and have everything she would like in a real family. To learn more about Ellen, students will compare the choices she makes for her catalog dream family juxtaposed to the hand she is dealt in her actual dysfunctional family.

On Christmas Eve, with no visible sign of her daddy, she goes with her only friend Starletta to the "colored" store and buys a few things for herself. Ellen plays the roles of a whole family: buying, wrapping, hiding, and finding her presents.

When I got home I wrapped the presents . . . I wrapped them at the kitchen table and hid them. When I found them the next day I was surprised in the spirit of Christmas (Gibbons 28).

Marking and discussing this brief but poignant passage, will add to the profile that students are creating of Ellen: her perspective, tenacity, creativity and imagination, vulnerability, and profound solitude at the age of ten.

A trauma on New Year's Eve is the catalyst that permanently drives Ellen from her home, and hurls her nearly invisible self into the world with a box of her earthly possessions and a mission, to find a home where she can feel safe and where someone cares about her. Her drunken father mistakes her for her dead mother, and tries to rape her.

I am Ellen.

I am Ellen. (Gibbons 38)

In some ways this declaration, shouting out to her drunken father, could be the title of this novel. Ellen seems continuously trying to identify herself to the world, to fashion a place for herself, against so many odds, here against a sexual assault by her drunken father.

He pulls the evil back into his self and Lord I run. Run down the road to Starletta.  
Now to the smoke coming out of the chimney against the night sky I run. Down the  
path in the darkness I gather my head and all that is spinning and flying out from  
me and wonder oh you just have to wonder what the world has come to (Gibbons  
38).

Students will mark and discuss both of these passages, even though the first one is only the repetition of three words. They can infer from the repetition of these words the emotions that are driving them. There is also the repetition in the second highly charged passage of the word run: ". . . I run," "Run . . .," ". . . I run." Students will observe that she runs out into the night and last but by no means least, she exclaims, "and wonder oh you just have to wonder what the world has come to." This crisis is one of the more revelatory about Ellen's inside emotions from what she says and from her body language.

In marking and discussing this and the following passage, students will begin to identify the emotions that motivated Ellen to sneak back into the house and pack her few personal possessions in a box and take flight.

I went on home and waited on the edge of the woods until I saw them leave . . .  
I went in the house and then loaded up everything I damn well please in a box. . .  
And what else do you take when you leave a place you never will come back to  
not even if you forget something very precious to you? Then there is where to go?  
(Gibbons 40)

## **Searching for home**

Not having given any thought to where she will go prior to packing her box reveals the irrevocability of Ellen's decision. And so begins her journey, her search for a family where she will feel safe and wanted. The way is strewn with potholes and boulders, downed power lines and tree limbs, miscommunications and misjudgments, and obstacles that would discourage an adult with far more experience and survival skills at navigating the world alone. Ellen begins by abandoning what is left of her dysfunctional family after the death of her mother, and lives through home placements that are made on her behalf; an art teacher takes her in

and then her mean-spirited, vindictive grandmother whom she refers to as "mama's mama" demands that the court turn Ellen over to her because she is legally her grandmother, and it turns out, because she wants to punish Ellen for the death of her mama. Finally after being bounced around among relatives, she spots the woman at church whom she will choose as her new family, hence her "new mama."

Ellen starts out on her journey with at least the hope that she has some control over her choice of a family. Her first abortive effort to stay with her Aunt Betsy appears to be a mutual fit until Sunday afternoon when Ellen discovers that Aunt Betsy means only to keep her for the week end.

She must return home where she locks herself in the closet when she hears her daddy coming. If she forgets to lock herself in, she might have to push him down and run. I want my students to mark and discuss Ellen's comment that follows when she says, "You live with something long enough and you get used to it" (Gibbons 44).

Ellen is so relieved when her art teacher takes her in because somebody has "decided what to do with me" (Gibbons 45). But, this placement is short-lived, and the law sends Ellen to live with her mama's mama, who sends Ellen to work in her cotton fields as if she were hired "colored" help, and not her ten-year-old granddaughter. Ellen finds a perfect family in, of all places, the "colored" family of Mavis who teaches Ellen how to pick cotton. In the following passage that students will mark and discuss, she refers to this perfect family as a commodity that one procures, "I thought I would bust open if I did not get one of them soon" (Gibbons 67). What might this exclamation reveal about the way Ellen thinks about her search for a family?

While I was eavesdropping at the colored house I started a list of all that a family should have. . . . While I watched Mavis and her family I thought I would bust open if I did not get one of them for my own self soon (Gibbons 67).

Ellen endures physical and psychological abuse at the hands of mama's mama, but eventually the mean old lady dies. Once again, Ellen puts her things in her box, the metaphor for her transience. Shortly, however, she decides that she needs to take matters into her own hands to find a family, and as it turns out she spots a lady at church with all the girls lined up next to her, and decides that this will be her new mama. Students will mark and discuss juxtaposition of these two passages, one in which she is packing her box and asking Jesus to "please settle up with me," and the other in sharp contrast, in which she states, "I am somebody now . . ."

And as I laid out my clothes and folded them to leave I reminded Jesus that this is not the way a girl needs to be. I told him again to please settle up with me so I could be a pure girl again and somebody good could love me (Gibbons 93).

And that is what I did. That is why I think I am somebody now because I said by damn this is how it is going to be and before I knew it I had a new mama (Gibbons 95).

And it is this new mama's clean brick house where she is safely settled in the present, on page two, of Ellen's narrative. It is her life in the present in this house with this woman who seems to care deeply about Ellen that is woven seamlessly into the tapestry of Ellen's narrative of her physical and emotional struggle for survival. The juxtaposition of these two interwoven lives, the telling of one serving as relief from the telling of the other that is almost too cruel to read about, much less to have lived. So much of Ellen's present life with her new mama is influenced and informed as a result of life as an invisible, abused child picking her way, with her box of possessions, through a minefield in search of a home.

Students will more passages for marking and discussing, and among them they can include Ellen's present life juxtaposed with her "invisible" past life.

### **Starletta's friendship dispels stereotypes**

In Ellen's perilous journey to find a home where she feels safe and loved, she is engaged on another journey of which she gradually becomes aware, and fully realizes at the end of her narrative. It is her journey to peel away her prejudices against black people, a mindset that was her legacy as a child of the rural south in the 1970's. Gibbons crafts this second journey seamlessly alongside Ellen's more urgent and conscious campaign to find a home, but it is in many ways as much a revelation for the reader as her primary journey.

I see Ellen's unconscious journey to dispel prejudice as a profound learning experience for my students, an opportunity to study how Ellen's prejudice unwittingly informs her attitudes and behavior, and ultimately how her experiences gradually bring her to full awareness of them. Just as Ellen brings the innocence of a ten-year old to many of her insights, she brings this same innocence to her observations and illuminations about black people in the characters of Starletta, her only young friend, and Starletta's mother and father; and Mavis, the woman who teaches her how to pick cotton and whose family Ellen deems just about perfect.

It is Starletta's family down the road who takes Ellen in on various occasions when she has no place to go to escape her drunken father or her loneliness. It is Starletta's mother who invites her to stay the night on New Year's Eve when her father and his drinking buddies invade her house and her drunken father, mistaking her for her mother, tries to rape her. But this is the same family of which Ellen says:

As fond as I am of all three of them I do not think I could drink after them. I try to see what Starletta leaves on the lip of a bottle but I have never seen anything with the naked eye. If something is that small it is bound to get into your system and do some damage (Gibbons 30).

This is the same family of whom Ellen says when they invite her to have Christmas dinner with them:

She came at me with a biscuit in her hand and held it to my face. No matter how good it looks to you it is still a colored biscuit (Gibbons 32).

Yet, when Ellen opens her Christmas present from Starletta's family, she says:

Oh my God it is a sweater. I like it so much. I do not tell a story when I say it does not look colored at all (Gibbons 32).

After Ellen has worked in the cotton field a while and has had many conversations with Mavis, the black woman who teaches her to pick cotton, she shares this thought with the reader:

I thought while I chopped from one field to the next how I could pass for colored now. . . . But that was O.K. now I thought to myself of how it did not make much of a difference anymore (Gibbons 66).

Ellen recognizes her own gradual transformation out of her prejudice and her growing awareness a year or two later when she and Starletta are slightly more grown and she reflects on her past attitudes about drinking and eating "colored" food:

I wonder to myself am I the same girl who would not drink after Starletta two years ago or eat a colored biscuit when I was starved? It is the same girl but I am old now and I know it is not the germs you cannot see that slide off her lips and on to a glass then to your white lips that will hurt you or turn you colored ( Gibbons 85).

Ellen's final transformation from racial prejudice is set when she brings Starletta home to meet her new mama and spend the week end. It makes up the final five pages of her narrative, and I have chosen these final pages

for my Lesson plan #3 because Ellen's recognition that her racial prejudice has vanished provides a powerful study of how a character can change. Also students will have engaged in close readings of Ellen's racial prejudice as early as page one when she refers to "two colored boys," and on several other occasions throughout the novel. Now in the final five pages, using the Mark and Discuss template, students will analyze how she expresses changes in her prejudice, and use their previous close readings in which she voices her prejudice to observe the extent of her change.

Up to this point, students will have engaged in close reading individual passages, and in close reading, and comparing and contrasting adjacent passages; but in this Lesson #3, students will be referring back to various passages throughout the novel that they marked and discussed on the topic of racial prejudice, and contrasting them with the passages that they mark and discuss in these final five pages.

## A writing project

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Our reading of the novel and character study of Ellen will culminate in a writing project focusing on a choice of questions, such as: "What does it mean to be rejected by, and/or to reject, your blood relatives as your family, as Ellen does? (Consider Ellen's question on page 56, "What do you do when the judge talks about the family society's cornerstone but you know yours was never a Roman pillar but is and always has been a crumbly old brick?"); "How does Ellen work through her inherited, stereotypical, southern prejudice toward her only friend Starletta, and Starletta's family who is her only port-in-a-storm from her father's abuse?"; "What is the significance of Ralph Waldo Emerson's inscription to "Self-Reliance" that Gibbons used as an epigraph for her book?"

Cast the bantling on the rocks,  
Suckle him with she-wolf's teat,  
Wintered with the hawk and fox,  
Power and speed be hands and feet.

## My assessment tool: a Language Arts CAPT question

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My tenth grade students take the Connecticut Academic Performance Language Arts Test in the spring, and one of the four questions invariably asked on the test is, "How does a character change, and what causes this change?" Students answer this CAPT question based on a story they read in the test. Based on our close reading of character in the novel *Ellen Foster*, my students will practice answering this Language Arts CAPT question as an assessment tool for this unit that I will teach in the first semester, well before the CAPT in the

spring. Answering this question will sharpen their skills in preparation for the CAPT.

## **Lesson plan #1 Using the Mark and Discuss template for first impressions of Amir, the protagonist, in *The Kite Runner***

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This lesson introduces my students to a close reading of the first sentences narrated by the protagonist in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. They will use this technique known as marking and discussing the passage to establish their first impressions of the protagonist and narrator, Amir. It is my intention to raise my students' awareness of how an author introduces readers to his protagonist, and through this first impression, he hopes to pique the readers interest and curiosity. For this close reading exercise which is the central tool for my unit, I have laid out the six-step template near the end of my Rationale, the second section of my unit.

The first few sentences that my students will explore from *The Kite Runner* are:

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling wall, peeking into the alley . . . That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out (Hosseini 1).

First students will copy the passage in the center of a piece of unlined paper laid out landscape-style, leaving a wide margin around the edges, perhaps even double spacing the lines for easy access. Copying the passage gives students a tactile association with the words, phrases, and sentences.

Next they will underline unfamiliar words and look up their definitions. In this case there may be no words they do not know.

Then, they will circle words or phrases that seem meaningful to our study of character; in this case we will not have studied Amir, so they will simply circle words and phrases that seem important to the passage, such as: "I became what I am today at the age of twelve." I will add to the passage in class the next sentence in which Amir admits that he has been "peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years," making him presently thirty-eight years old when he is narrating his story. Some may circle words that seem to set a somber, almost confessional tone for the passage: frigid, overcast, winter, crouching, crumbling, peeking, wrong, bury, claws, and with the extra sentence, twenty-six years.

Whether they circle phrases or words, it seems inevitable that they will arrive somewhere near the same place. In step four they will draw lines out to the margins of their paper and brainstorm ideas, associations, and questions they have for the circled words or phrases. For example, at the end of a line drawn out from the

words crouching and peeking students might associate these with being secretive. At the end of the line from the phrase, it's wrong they might infer that Amir did something he should not have done when he was twelve. In the margin from they say you can bury it, and claws its way out, they might infer that you cannot bury things you have done in the past no matter how long ago it was. Some students no doubt will circle the words it and its, and at the end of those lines out in the margins, question what it is and why Amir doesn't tell the reader what it is. This raises a good question, "Why do you think Hosseini does not tell the reader in the first paragraph what it is that Amir has seen in the alley, and done as a result?" The number of lines and notes in the margins will expand as students sharpen their close reading skills.

Because this is a first impression of a character, they will not be able to do step number five, making connections to characteristics we have identified so far in our study.

In the final step number six, students are expected to write three or four sentences that discuss the meaning of the passage, exploring the character. For example, what does the character say and think or do that is motivated from an inside emotion, attitude, or conviction? In the case of Amir, students may discern from what he says about being who he is today as a result of something that happened when he was twelve when he crouched in an alley and peeked at something, that his efforts to bury its memory have not worked, and twenty-six years later, it has clawed its way back to a prominent place in his consciousness and awakened feelings of guilt, because of the nature of what he saw when he crouched and peeked. Some will observe that this semi-confession must be very significant to the narrator's story because it is prominently crafted into the first paragraph. They will share their sentences with their peers. This sixth step will allow me to assess how effective students have been in close reading the passage.

Another step that is not on the Template but that has come up every time I have taught *The Kite Runner* is to invite students to make connections to their own lives and things they have tried to bury that may have permanently influenced who they are, just as Amir's life has been shaped by something that happened when he was twelve. Students do not necessarily want to share these personal connections, but there usually is a shared aura of understanding.

## **Lesson plan #2 First impressions of Ellen: juxtaposing her past life with her present**

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Throughout the novel Ellen narrates two stories side by side, the story of her daunting past, trying to survive her dysfunctional family, and the story of her present where she lives in comfort with her new mama whom, she tells us, "I looked over plenty good before I decided she was a keeper" (Gibbons 95). Gibbons crafts this juxtaposition of Ellen's past and present to great advantage. Ellen's perspective and description of things she values in her present family serves to give the reader insight into the nightmare that was her past family.

My students will mark and discuss and then compare and contrast Gibbons' first juxtaposition of Ellen's past and present because it is a key element in the way the novel is crafted. Once they are alerted to the technique, they will begin to observe how one plays off of the other; much of what Ellen tells us about her present home with her new mama is in stark contrast to life as she knew it in the past.

Ellen begins her narration with a rather startling revelation:



When I was little I would think up ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy. The way I liked best was letting go a poisonous spider in his bed. It would bite him and he'd be dead and swollen up and I would shudder to find him so. Of course I would call the rescue . . . (Gibbons 1).

My students will have their own books and will mark and discuss the whole paragraph, not just the first lines. As they work their way through the six steps, there are probably no words they will not know, but there will be plenty to circle and make notes in the margins; for example, Ellen obviously played her father's death over and over in her head, even down to her body language when she finds him dead, and when the rescue squad comes. "I would shudder to find him so." "When they come in the house I'm all in a state of shock . . . I stand by the door and look like I'm shaking all over." How bad does one's daddy have to be for a child to think up multiple ways to kill him when one is little?

Ellen also introduces in this paragraph about her death-plan for her daddy that the rescue squad is "two colored boys heaving her dead daddy onto a roller cot." And as a result of there being "colored boys," she says she will not know how to act. Some students will pick up on her describing them as "colored" and "boys" and her reaction. Students will want to consider how significant this information is since Ellen has chosen to include it. She does not say simply that the rescue squad comes and throws her daddy onto a cot.

She wraps up this first half-page scenario by saying that her daddy "drank his own self to death, and "I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive."

Her very next sentence introduces the reader to her present life:

I live in a clean brick house and mostly I am left to myself. When I start to carry an odor I take a bath and folks tell me how sweet I look. There is plenty to eat here and if we run out of something we just go to the store and get some more. I had me a egg sandwich for breakfast, mayonnaise on both sides. And I may fix me another one for lunch (Gibbons 2).

Again, because my students will have their own books, they will include the next few sentences in their close reading activity. Ellen confides that "Two years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now, but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. . . ."

Some students may also pick up on and question her dialect: "He drank his own self to death." "I had me a egg sandwich . . . I may fix me another one . . ." At one point when Ellen is forced by law to live with her mama's mama, she tells us that she has practically stopped going to school. Students will gradually come to discover that the challenges she faces and the role models she has had in what is at least a rural, if not a backwoods, southern setting make her substandard grammar rather incidental.

Students will close read each of these passages that Ellen narrates to introduce herself, and then put them side-by-side to play off of one another. They will be able to discern the words and phrases she uses set a clear tone in each passage. We will do this compare/contrast activity as a class because it is their first reading of the novel.

### **Lesson plan #3 Ellen affirms her humanity in bringing Starletta home**

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The last five pages of the novel focus on Ellen's determination to bring Starletta to her new home and to meet her new mama because she has come to realize how much Starletta's friendship means to her and that, as she says, "her being colored is just the way she is" (Gibbons 85). There is nothing she wants more than to have Starletta stay overnight and sleep in her bed. Ellen has come full circle in dispelling her prejudice from the time when, in a crisis, she stayed with Starletta's family and said she had not really slept in a "colored" house because she did not take her coat off and she slept on top of the covers.

In this lesson my students will choose passages to mark and discuss that express Ellen's transformation from racial prejudice. It is Ellen's same clear, candid, innocent yet wise voice they will hear in these passages, as she asks Starletta's forgiveness for thinking God chose her over Starletta because of her color.

All I know now is that I want Starletta in my house and if she tells me to I will lick the glass she uses just to show that I love her and her being colored is just the way she is. That is all (Gibbons 85).

This is the same Ellen who, on page 30, confided, "As fond as I am of all three of them I do not think I could drink after them . . ." Students will make connections between this Ellen and the Ellen on page 85.

I already told my "new mama" I would like her to make a fuss over how pretty Starletta is. But not the kind of fuss that says you sure are pretty to be colored. The kind that says you sure are pretty and that is all (Gibbons 123).

My students will mark and discuss these passages and others they will choose that document Ellen's humanity towards Starletta. Marking and discussing these passages will necessitate that we look at Ellen's perspective and how it has changed, and it will give my students and me an opportunity to look at and try to examine our own perspective about prejudice.

To explore Ellen's transformation, students might choose some of the following passages when she and Starletta are resting on the bed, before dinner. Ellen thinks to herself:

And I will lay here too and wait for supper beside a girl that every rule in the book says I should not have in my house much less laid still and sleeping by me (Gibbons 124).

I came a long way to get here but when I think about it real hard you will see that old Starletta came even farther. . . . (Gibbons 126).

And I hope some of my students choose to mark and discuss Ellen's last lines about Starletta and herself, which are also the last lines of the novel:

And all the time I thought I had the hardest row to hoe. That will always amaze me (Gibbons 126).

Underneath Ellen's final narrative with Starletta, and her liberation from prejudice, is an invitation for my students and me to explore the presence of prejudice and our own personal prejudices.

## **Appendix: Implementing the Language Arts Standards**

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Language Arts English Standard 1.0 Reading

Performance Standard 1.1

Students will make inferences based on implicit information from the text and provide justification.

Performance Standard 1.2

Students will construct an interpretation and/or explanation of the text.

Language Arts English Standard 2.0 Writing

Performance Standard 2.1

Students will demonstrate effective use of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

Performance Standard 2.2

Students will participate in CAPT related writing activities.

Students will view themselves as effective writers.

Students will explain the goals in writing a text, and indicate the extent to which they were achieved.

Language Arts English Standard 3.0

Performance Standard 3.1

Students will demonstrate use of acceptable, Standard English in daily discussions.

## Working Bibliography

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Foster, Thomas C. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

A general discussion, light-hearted but provocative, of strategies and techniques for reading fictional characters in literature, with a section especially focusing on narrative devices.

Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

A story, told by the protagonist, a ten-year-old orphan growing up in the rural South of the '70's where circumstances necessitate that she assume the role of her own advice and counsel in a world indifferent and hostile to her.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2003.

A story set in Afghanistan and California, told by the protagonist who seeks redemption as a result of guilt he has borne for over twenty-five years.

Kafka, Franz. "The Metamorphosis." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature, The Twentieth Century, Second Edition, Volume F*. Ed. Sarah Lawall. W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. 1999-2030.

The bizarre story of a young man, Gregor Samsa, who wakes to find himself transformed into a giant insect, and the alienation he suffers in his struggle to adapt to his new anatomy.

Sapphire. *Push*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

The harrowing story, narrated by Precious Jones, of an illiterate sixteen-year-old who has been raped by her father and beaten by her mother, but who encounters a woman who refuses to allow Precious to give up on herself.

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