



The Short Story: A Slice of Life

Curriculum Unit 83.03.03
by Jane K. Marshall

It is very difficult to teach an English course amidst TV, video games, and other inducements to passivity which entice our students away from communication and thought. Equally distressing is the realization that many of “our children” fail to appreciate the basic freedom that literature offers. How liberating it is to be able to choose a plot, a mood, a genre; and readers are able to choose not only what they will consider, but when they will do so and how. Unfortunately many of our students feel that they have few choices in life; I have seen far too many depressed teen-agers of late. “What’s the use?!” haunts teachers in subtle and not so subtle refrains. We are not psychiatrists or social workers, and therefore cannot “treat” our students; we *are*, however, teachers, and should recognize the psycho-sociological trends of our time and place. When young people simply “give up” or fail to see choices which are available to them, they have ceased to be “students”. The acceptance of responsibility or “free will” is prerequisite to learning. It seems to me that the discovery of “freedom in reading” leads to individualism and growth potential. We must promote reading and the notion that reading fosters individualism, for if we fail or “give up”, (the futures of many individuals and/or) the future of the “student” is in jeopardy.

In an attempt to capture student imagination, I have often taught “high interest” short stories in, I must admit, a rather haphazard manner. Many students reacted positively to these stories at the time, and without a doubt learned of conflict, character, the surprise ending, etc. Yet, particularly after the last school year, I couldn’t help but admit that the stories I had taught were long forgotten; I had taken the expedient road with the use of high interest material, and my students had not learned what is really important to learn about literature after all.

I want my students to realize that literature is exciting in its more “honest” portrayal of life. It is not, at its best, shallow, phony, or tranquilizing. It demands participation. It is truly a “slice of life” which allows the reader some personal rewards. The question incessantly emerges: how do we get our students to participate long enough to “buy” all of the above? If students have forgotten all of the “high interest stuff” by the end of the school year, we, and they, have lost in a big way.

This unit proposes a thematic approach to the short story may provide students with a focal point which will ultimately enable them to see literature as something connected with their own lives. If they see this connection, and, as expected, concede that their own lives are worth thinking about, a major victory will have been won. Of course, the issues to be considered must be of particular interest to my students. I have chosen two broad, though I believe, viable themes—issues of the family, and issues of identity. I believe these themes

will be quickly accepted by my students, for they are the very themes they write of when encouraged to contribute original (creative) writings to the school literary magazine. Such writing is student-generated, for the most part. Students are not, in most cases, given guidelines or topics about which to write. Thus one can assume that the issues of “family” and “identity” are important to students, and are issues that they feel comfortable in approaching.

This teacher, too, is comfortable and excited about both themes. And perhaps this is an important realization and admission. I, for one, tend to teach more successfully when I am excited about the material I am covering. Most of us will admit that we choose materials and lesson plans with one word in mind. The word is “boring”.

We soon learn that “boring” has many meanings (“confused”, “lazy”, “scared”, etc.) but we nonetheless try our best to avoid hearing that word; and this is good. Yet, we must guard against using high interest material solely for its own sake. And we should remember that it is very important that we are not bored. It is when we are stimulated and continue to learn with our students that “miracles” happen.

I hope that the themes of the “family” and “identity” will cause students to reflect and want to read more. Hopefully they will experience personal rewards from reading about these themes. Maybe, as a result of this thematic approach, students will remember the stories read, and the experience of thinking about their own lives.

Of course, students need to learn how to read a short story. The elements of the short story: conflict, setting, tone, plot, etc. cannot be ignored. However, given the focus of this unit, I believe that these elements will be best taught within the context of particular stories.

“The Short Story: A Slice of Life” is presented in three parts. The first two provide materials and ideas for “issues of the family” and “issues of identity”. General ideas for introducing each theme are included at the outset of each section along with the titles of the stories to be taught. Teachers are then provided with a brief plot summary of each story, as well as critical material which stress particular elements of the short story. (These are elements which need to be addressed in order to insure student understanding of each story.)

Part Three features specific ideas for lesson plans. This section of the unit is itself composed of three subparts. Students will initially be exposed to each story through a tape-recording. That is, they will be “read to” and will follow along in their texts. This will provide the much needed bridge between passivity and activity. Lesson plans provided at this point will be concerned with a first level (plot) understanding of each story. The second sub-section will provide specific ideas for dealing with the elements of the short story, and students will be required to read each story a second time. With the third sub-section students will be encouraged to generate activity. They will engage in short story writing, for I am a great believer in “imitation in learning”, and feel that one cannot truly understand the complexity and beauty of any art form without some “hands on” experience. More importantly, such an experience will enable students to react to themes personally and honestly. If students are able to do this, the reading experience will not be forgotten. It will be remembered, respected, and possibly revered.

PART ONE: ISSUES OF THE FAMILY

A quick perusal of “Spectrum”, Lee High School’s literary magazine, as mentioned, acquaints the reader with the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of Lee’s student body. Often writings provide indications of the feelings and concerns of our students as regards the family. Every year I am touched by the honesty or emotional gutlessness these writers exhibit. One must realize that all of the issues addressed are occasionally frightening, often perplexing, and always “real” for those who seek understanding or simply release through writing. Clearly, pride, disappointment, and hope are reflected in the following writings.

(from) WE WERE SO VERY YOUNG (from) UNTITLED

We were so very young	As you believe
Less than ten	we are your future
He came into our lives	Take for granted
He took her on an escapade	that we can achieve
I asked her not to	We have our mothers
I said I would leave	and fathers by our sides
A smack on my face	And they will help us. . .
And I cried as she fled. . .	

We’ve decided for now

When she came back to keep on following
We were not there in their shadows
For two whole days
We were found no where. . . And then you’ll say
I believe they are my future
Then we came back
I knew she would learn
We taught her a lesson
She’ll never discern

Student writings might provide a starting point for discussions involving issues of the family. Students react favorably to reading works by others of their own age—as long as “safeguards” are provided; allowing anonymity of the poet(s) would probably be necessary given the often emotionally charged material. I have chosen poetry as introductory material for two reasons. First, students generate poems more easily than short stories, so they are readily available. Second, I prefer that students not read stories written by peers at this point, as these stories might provide less than helpful examples, or interfere with the writing which will be required later on in the unit. I hope the resultant discussions of poetry of the family will be free-wheeling and interesting enough to cause students to want to look at the family in depth.

The short stories to be considered reflect, I believe, those issues which are of most concern to my students. The stories are: “The Kitten”, “Bill’s Little Girl”, “Miss Cynthia”, “The Runaway”, “The Father”, “The Blanket”, and “The Blues Begin”. (The unit’s stories, in general, increase in difficulty or sophistication as the unit progresses.)

The family stories at first look seem diverse; their themes appear to be disparate. They consider: the anger which may result from alienation among family members, the pure unselfish love of a parent for a child, the celebration of the love of a child for a parent, the impact of society on the family, the child as “healer”, reversed roles of children and parents, the child as extension of the parent, etc. In a sense many of these themes fit with many of these stories. In fact, all of the above speak to the primary concern of parents and children of many times and places. That is—“Exactly who is that parent (or child) I face? What are his experiences? What did he (or will he) feel when he was (is) ___ years of age? I am speaking, of course, of the generation gap, but in the broadest sense of the often misused term.

Roles in the family may change, but communication, or an understanding of one another’s life experiences remains difficult. It is perhaps this simultaneous closeness and separateness of child and parent that has intrigued, if not troubled, many writers. I suspect that students are in some way aware of “the problem”; and I feel that discussions (during introductions or endings) of each story should in some way address this general theme. Such an approach will provide the cohesiveness this unit attempts to maintain. Ultimately, one hopes, it will provide the spark for student creative writing. Universal themes encompass us all, and I imagine that we all feel rather strongly about them—that is, when we are of a mind to do so.

The following paragraphs provide the readers (other teachers) with a brief over-view of the stories mentioned. Identification and discussion of specific elements of each short story are included.

“THE KITTEN” BY RICHARD WRIGHT

Plot Summary : This is a story of a boy who tries to get even with his father. The child resents his father’s authority for it is not based on a relationship of trust and communication. The father, a night porter, must sleep during the day, and therefore cannot spend much time with his son. The son feels impotent before his father’s (perceived) harsh discipline. The boy, therefore, devises a plan which will transfer impotence to the father. When told to “quiet” a kitten, the son takes his father’s words, “kill the damn thing!” literally. What follows is the impotence of the father with regard to this action, the mother’s take-over in the role of punisher/advisor, and the boy’s resultant experience of guilt.

Criticism. (Key Elements: point of view, conflict, setting)

“The Kitten” is not exactly a short story. It is a chapter from *Slack Boy*. Yet it works well as a short story, and is notable for its impact. Said to be autobiographical, it depicts Wright’s rage as a youngster. Wright remembers and clearly relates the anger directed toward his “remote”, “alien”, and frightening father. Yet, one must note that the story is told from a distance of time; Wright, as an adult, completes the picture. Those who read this story can understand the father’s and mother’s motivations as well as those of the son. The story is disturbing because the primary conflict between father and son is not resolved. This perhaps provides the true impact of the story. Though the setting is briefly sketched, the negative impact of society on all members of this family is clearly stated.

“BILL’S LITTLE GIRL” BY ZONA GAYLE

Plot Summary : This is a story of a thirty year old widower, Sill, who despite difficulties (the awareness of his own limitations and the constant advice/harassment of a neighbor) does his best to provide for his four year old daughter, Minna. When Minna is six Bill contracts a fatal disease, and displays what might be called the “purest love” in searching for the best adoptive parents for his daughter. Minna, too young to have understood the death of her mother, is never aware of Bill’s unselfish stance in giving her up.

Criticism: (Key Elements: Characterization, theme)

Zona Gayle manages in three pages to provide adequate characterization of the seven people who appear in this story. The major characters are revealed through their actions and dialogue. Minor characters are revealed through terse descriptions which somehow manage to speak volumes. For example, Bill's sister would not have been a suitable guardian for Minna, for she was "a tired woman". The final sentence of the story underscores the unselfish act which Sill performs, for as his daughter (unknowingly) departs with her new adoptive parents, she is so absorbed in "looking up at the blue silk (of a parasol) that she does not remember to turn and wave her hand."

"MISS CYNTHIE" BY RUDOLPH FISHER

Plot Summary : For the first time, Miss Cynthia, a seventy year old lady, visits her grandson, Dave, in New York where he has "made good". A religious woman, she has long prayed that the boy she raised would find some way to do the Lord's work. She, and we, are kept in suspense for some time regarding Dave's means of livelihood. When Dave is first revealed as the "greatest tapster of all time", Miss Cynthia is broken-hearted, for she has always thought of the theater as the antithesis of the church. Yet, Dave (onstage, alone in the final act) through a vast display of love and respect for Miss Cynthia and the audience, is able to display the true meaning of his work. Miss Cynthia ultimately understands and accepts this as another example of the truth: "The Lord moves in a mysterious way".

Criticism: (Key Elements: characterization, irony)

"Miss Cynthia" is the celebration of the love of a child for a parent. "Miss Cynthia" is also the painstaking sketch of a woman who displays the humor, honesty, and wisdom we'd all like to attain. Rudolph Fisher is able to capture the spirit of this woman through her thoughts, dialogue, action, and the way other characters respond to her. Thus, she becomes real and unforgettable for the reader. One of my favorite interactions of the story occurs at its beginning with the following conversation between Miss Cynthia and a redcap:—C: "Always like to have sump'm in my hand when I walk. Can't never tell when you'll run across a snake." C: "There aren't any snakes in the city." C: "There are snakes everywhere, chile." Fisher uses irony in a subtle way, for with the ending of the story, we realize that far from being a transgression, Dave's work is, in fact, born of his grandmother; he is the product of her upbringing. He reflects her kindness, zest for living, and "oddly enough" her interests.

"THE RUNAWAY" BY MORLEY CALLAGHAN

Plot Summary : This story considers the plight of an adolescent, Michael, who, while sensitive about his own worth with regard to peers, is at the same time embroiled in a family conflict which centers largely on issues of concern to his step-mother. (Mrs. Lount, afraid that she has not gained the love or respect of her step-child, often accuses her husband of forming an alliance with his son and against her.) The story is composed of a series of scenes where Michael at times emerges as a winner, but more often than not appears to be confused and overwhelmed. His longing to be accepted as a man is contrasted with his father's fate. Henry Lount, though loved and respected by his son, appears to have lost everything else—work, friends, position in the family. At one point it seems that he will commit suicide. Michael's reaction to this threat is one of fear; and he soon realizes that he must begin/save his own life. At the end of the story Michael decides to leave the "strangling household" and the ambivalent relationships to run away to places of " a million new faces, rumbling sounds, and beautiful names".

Criticism: (Key Elements: point of view, characterization, plot, tone)

Morley Callaghan manages to capture the ambivalence and difficulty of adolescence through a series of natural scenes. In effect, the plot is made up of everyday occurrences which are at once disparate, and yet

form a continuum in the mind of one who is beginning to think like an adult, but at the same time, often acts like a child. (Michael is aware of his father's despair, but can only run from it.) The story is told from the omniscient point of view with the focus on the reactions and thought processes of Michael. The reader then sees the world as Michael sees it, and it is a frightening place. The tone of the story, largely due to descriptions of fickle Nature (weather, descriptions of land, etc.), creates uneasiness or a sense of something impending.

"THE FATHER" BY BJORNSTJERNE BJORNSON

Plot Summary : "The Father" has the plot of a fable. A peasant, Thord Overaas, visits his priest four times during the course of twenty-one years. The first time he asks that his son, Finn, be baptized by himself. Sixteen years later Thord pays the priest ten dollars, for Finn is to stand first (among his peers) for confirmation/ communion. Next, when the bans of the son's impending marriage are to be published, Thord pays the priest three dollars; this is an excessive amount, but Finn is to marry the richest girl in the parish, and Thord "wants to do it handsomely". Soon after this, father and son are involved in a boating accident, and the son loses his life. A year later, Thord visits the priest for the last time. He (Thord) is so much changed that the priest barely recognizes him. Thord has sold his farm, and presents half of its price to be given to the poor. When asked what he will now do, Thord responds, "something better". The priest declares that the son has at last "brought a true blessing".

Criticism: (Key Elements: plot sequence, setting, symbolism, theme.)

"The Father", a story of pride and a misdirected life, is rich in meaning, for it makes much use of symbolism. Numbers are symbols when we realize that at age twenty-one (or the age when one becomes an adult) the son has died for his father, or become "father to the man". When thought of as a Christian parable, the number three is important indeed, for the reader recalls the symbolism of the trinity. Certainly the title is ambiguous, for it possesses three possible meanings: Who is "the father"? The priest? Thord? The son?

"THE BLANKET" BY FLOYD DELL

Plot Summary : When this story of an extended family opens, Petey (the only named character in the story) is dismayed with his father's decision to send Granddad off to a nursing home. Petey's father has given Granddad a blanket to take with him, and this blanket is described as warm and fine. Petey's father is to marry a younger woman, and feels it is time to leave old ties (grandfather) behind. Petey and his grandfather spend an evening together, in the vein of many past evenings: Granddad plays his fiddle, and the old songs reflect the joys and the sorrows the family have experienced together. When the father and his fiancée return, the music stops. Petey's future step-mother is angry that the old man has received such a fine gift, and goes off in a huff. Petey suggests that the blanket be cut into two parts. When his father questions such an action, Petey responds, "I'll give half of it to you when you're old, and I'm sending you away". Petey's father accepts this "lesson", and three generations are once again united.

Criticism: (Key Elements: irony, symbolism, theme)

This straight forward tale of the "golden rule" succeeds, in part, because of its simplicity of theme. Floyd Dell makes good use of irony in his choice of the blanket as symbol, for with (the timing of) the giving of this gift, the qualities of warmth and fineness are negated. (This is not a "warm" or unselfish gift, but one given to assuage the guilt that Petey's father feels.) The tone of the story changes, however, when the child becomes "teacher", for his statement (in a paradoxical way) reflects the warmth and goodness of the grandfather—and even the father with the story's end.

“THE BLUES BEGIN” BY SYLVESTER LEAKES

Plot Summary : The tone of this story of mother, father, and son, is evident with the first descriptions of a wintry morning and a poor cold family. For the most part, the story is told from the point of view of the son, Gabriel; only once does it change to his mother’s (Mrs. Coker) point of view (thoughts). This family must contend with both inner (interpersonal) and outer (societal) stress. Relationships among the three are strained, in part, because the father, Josh, gambles away what little money he is able to earn. Gabriel hates his father, and wishes he could take his place as head of the household. When he confides some of this feeling to his mother, he is slapped. Mrs. Coker appears to experience much of the stress of the family, for she is, in effect, mother to both husband and son. When Gabriel gives a gift of stolen coal to his mother, he is once again berated by her. She cannot tolerate a gambler and thief in one household, and decides that the coal must be returned. Gabriel, at this point, remembers the jailing of a youngster for the theft of a can of sardines and a loaf of bread, and is panic-stricken. All three family members, despite almost supernatural warnings of Nature, journey to the coal yard where they are promptly arrested.

Criticism: (Key Elements: foreshadowing, characterization, tone, irony, paradox)

Sylvester Leakes is able to show the negative effects of society on this family in a subtle and poignant way. All three members of the family suffer, though we are most aware of the inner conflicts of the son. Readers will occasionally point out that the father’s point of view is neglected, but this is as it should be, for it reflects his position of alienation with regard to the family. Many questions are left unanswered as to the reasons for the plight of this family; yet, interactions between family members and those of the outside world seem as sterile and cold as a winter morning. The reader feels that all three family members are doing the best they can do given the hostile environment which surrounds them. Leakes captures the strengths and weaknesses of these family members through characterization (of dialogue, action, and thought); these are people with whom we can identify, and will remember. The tone of the story, as mentioned, is reflected in descriptions of nature; Nature is both fickle and constant. Characters’ strengths become weakness. Life is a paradox; the blues have no beginning and no end.

PART TWO: ISSUES OF IDENTITY

Issues of identity are far-ranging and very personal. It would be absurd to assume that this section of my unit could cover all issues. It doesn’t purport to. Rather, various stories have been chosen in the hope that they will at least scratch the surface of a problem which has long puzzled twentieth century man. I hope the choices of stories will, in their diversity, cause students to begin to think about where they are headed, who they are, or what obstacles must be hurdled in the quest for the fulfillment of self. I hope that each student will recognize at least one of the issues of identity, and that this recognition will allow him comfort, or the beginnings of positive introspection.

The stories to be covered are “The Lie”, “The Somebody”, “The Almost White Boy”, “A Minority”, and “A Turn With the Sun”. Issues of identity include: false identity molded through social status, identity amidst an uncaring environment, racial identity and the absurdity of prejudice, integrity and identity, and changing personal values and identity. All of the stories consider the plight of the adolescent.

In introducing this segment of “The Short Story: A Slice of Life”, a teacher might simply allow discussion of the themes mentioned above. These themes might be listed, and students asked to provide examples from their

own life experiences. Such a discussion will be difficult to “pull off”, but will be well worth the effort. It might be interesting to note the similarities and differences between student-generated “stories” and the stories told by authors.

“THE LIE” BY KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

Plot Summary : When this story opens, we are quickly engaged in the world of the wealthy and powerful. Eli Remenzal, a fourteen year old, is traveling with his parents and the driver of their Rolls Royce to Whitehall, the alma mater of his father and many other members of the Remenzal family. The Remenzals have, in fact, been attending this boarding school for generations, and, as a result, have made many financial contributions to Whitehall; many buildings are named for the family. (Eli’s father, Dr. Remenzal, continues in this tradition as a benefactor of a new dorm.) The school admissions policy is equitable, however. (This is not the male counterpart of a finishing school.) The school seeks only those boys who display scholastic potential, and many are awarded scholarship funds. Eli finds himself in a terrible predicament, for he has been turned down as an applicant for the school, and, having destroyed the rejection letter, finds himself heading for Whitehall with parents who have assumed he is to be welcomed with open arms. (It is important to note at this point that Dr. Remenzal states that Eli will not be treated any differently from other boys despite the family influence.) Of course, the truth is eventually revealed to the father, and Dr. Remenzal’s true identity is seen. He displays his scorn for fairness and equality in an attempt to influence the board of directors regarding Eli’s rejection. The board does not capitulate to the doctor’s power tactics. Eli (who knows his limitations) will not be allowed to attend Whitehall. Eli chastises his father for trying to pressure the school, and expresses the shame he feels as a result of his father’s actions.

Criticism: (Key Elements : point of view, irony, characterization)

Vonnegut chooses the omniscient point of view in the telling of this story. This affords the reader an “honest” appraisal of all characters. Though characters may try to hide from themselves, they cannot hide from the reader. The characters’ interactions are most interesting, for within these interactions most of the story’s irony may be found. For example, during the journey to the school Eli’s mother, who is not of a wealthy background, states what her husband thinks, but will not admit to. That is, Eli is part of a powerful continuum,; he is of the elite, and will be afforded the rewards of being born into wealth. The irony occurs when we note that Eli’s mother holds her son’s feelings foremost, while his father would sacrifice him to the image of the Remenzal family. There are many ironies in this story. The lie is not the son’s denial of the rejection letter; it is the lie his father perpetuates in holding onto a limited societal identity; the son knows who he is while the father does not. Though we feel empathy for the shame Eli feels with his father’s “rejection” of him, we are most keenly aware of a mask of power, and the impotent soul who desperately hides behind it.

“THE SOMEBODY” BY DANNY SANTIAGO

Plot Summary : This story takes place in a decaying neighborhood of the East Side of Los Angeles. Chato awakes to a dreary day of too many babies in the household, parents who seemingly care little for him, and the loneliness of the deserted neighborhood where all have left save his family. When Chato leaves the house “for good”, he is soon accosted by the graffiti of a once rival gang. This is a disturbing reminder for Chato as his long-disbanded gang had allowed him to feel part of something, and this is what he desperately needs now. Chato spends the day writing his name on various buildings and streets. He does stop for a while at the Boys Club, but soon leaves because the place is “boring” and an adult there talks “at him”. He is soon back on the street, and only once runs into someone he knows. Although he momentarily thinks of spending some time with her, he thinks his image would be destroyed in doing this, for she is unattractive. With the story’s end, Chato is making plans to write his name all over Los Angeles. At this point he believes that he doesn’t

have to be a sports figure or anything else to be known; all will know “Chato de Shamrock”.

Criticism: (Key Elements: point of view, setting, symbolism)

This disturbing view of a confused and lonely adolescent derives much of its impact from its first person point of view. We are privy to Chato’s thoughts which are often based on fantasy rather than reality. Chato desperately wants to “be somebody”, and often misreads others’ reactions to him. For example, a teacher’s simple act of kindness becomes (for Chato) proof that she wishes to adopt him. Though Chato must take some responsibility for his life in choices which will enhance or destroy him, the reader comes to understand his reactions to the remote uncaring environment which surrounds him. Once in a while he is correct in his assessment of others. For example, Chato recalls that a doctor callously told him that his handwriting showed that something was wrong with him; having seen the doctor’s handwriting, he correctly diagnoses this callousness in describing the doctor’s writing as “ugly like a barb wire fence with little chickens stuck on the points”. Though Chato is confused, it would be less than fair to say that those around him are any more sane. The signature, “Chato de Shamrock”, symbolizes the alienating affects of society, and Chato’s own special needs. “Chato” is a self-given nickname which means “cat” in Spanish. “de Shamrock” names the street that once comprised a neighborhood for Chato. He is, in effect, a stray cat who has no “family”, and society has “forgotten” that he exists. At the end of the story Chato finally describes his signature which has rays “shooting out of it like from the Holy Cross”. This description, saved for the end of the story, reminds; us that “loving thy neighbor” is difficult in a neighborhood of neglect and alienation.

“THE ALMOST WHITE BOY” BY WILLARD MOTLEY

Plot Summary : This story’s first lines state its primary conflict; “By birth he was half white. Socially he was all Negro.” Jim, the son of a white father and a black mother, is described as grey-eyed, blonde-haired, and white-skinned. The author then relates one of Jim’s memories of early childhood; he and his parents stared into a mirror, and Jim’s father having asked Jim to note the color of each member of the family, states that Jim must remember that “people are just people”. A series of brief memories follow as Jim recalls the various problems he and his family have experienced: the hatred of blacks, the condescension of whites, loneliness, (Jim’s) denial of his heritage, etc. The author then turns to present time to fully exemplify the pain this adolescent will suffer. Jim falls in love with a white girl, Cora. The remembrance of his father’s statement, “people are just people”, enables him to tell Cora right away of his background. Though she professes acceptance, many hints are given as to her true feelings about Jim. She does not allow him to walk her to her door, she halfheartedly accepts an invitation to meet Jim’s parents, and then vows never to return, etc. We are also given a glimpse of her bigoted father. Yet, for four months she will not leave Jim. With the story’s end, we learn of her motivation; she wishes to “use” Jim sexually. Jim responds to her overtures with a statement of his love for her, and a proposal of marriage. She retaliates with a series of racial slurs, and runs from Jim in an ultimate betrayal. Jim, alone and devastated, once again states the now chilling phrase, “People are *just* people”.

Criticism: (Key Elements: plot, irony, foreshadowing, characterization)

Willard Motley leaves no room for misunderstanding this tragic story, for the story’s structure: initial statement of conflict, brief examples of the ramifications of this conflict, and the final “story” of Jim, will not allow the reader to turn away. This story is powerful and chilling, for the statement, “People are just people”, haunts us with its original and ironic meanings. The author deftly uses elements of foreshadowing so that Cora’s final betrayal, though shocking in its intensity, is really no surprise. His characterization of Cora, with descriptions of her family background, is full. She is not merely a stereotyped bigot, but the product of a family and a society which promote the horrifying absurdity of racism.

“A MINORITY” BY FRANK O’CONNOR

Plot Summary : This story, which takes place in Ireland during World War II, contrasts two boys’ reactions to being in the minority, or non-Catholic, while attending a Catholic boarding school. Denis Halligan is gregarious and a born leader. He ultimately converts to Catholicism, for he wants to be part of the group (so as to be able to exercise his leadership abilities). Willy Stein is a loner and a juvenile delinquent of sorts. He is often annoyed by the proselytizing of the school, and reacts by shooting spitballs during Mass. Though he believes he is a Protestant, and remembers little of his Jewish parents who were killed in a concentration camp, he will not relinquish what he perceives to be his background. Denis admires Willy, at first without realizing why. Not willing to give up his relationship with Willy, Denis at one point tries to convert him. Denis’ argument (for conversion) is, “They’re only two of us and hundreds of them. And they’re right”. Willy responds by saying, “And if there were hundreds of us and two of them, we’d be right, I suppose”. What Denis finally learns is that in converting to Catholicism he has rejected his father. (Denis had not thought long or hard enough to realize that his father, estranged by divorce, would have no recourse in a custody battle for Denis once Denis had become Catholic.) Though Denis initially reacts to this information with a rage that is directed at Willy, he soon admits that Willy, “a dirty little delinquent whom everybody despised and pitied, (was) transfigured by a glory that he (Denis) would never know.”

Criticism: (Key Elements: characterization, setting, theme, allegory)

“A Minority” is a parable of sorts. In a sense, each boy represents a particular stance one might adopt when confronting one’s own identity. This is a story of nonconformity—and conformity as well. The author relates the problem all men must face, but wisely avoids providing a definitive answer. Frank O’Connor, in fact, sees a place for both boys in society. Though the reader may admire one more than the other, O’Connor is careful to present each character in a sympathetic way. Perhaps realizing that many readers would idealize Willy, the author is careful to make important statements about Denis: “He was brought up to respect every form of religion.” “...he was a born officer and he would never have deserted his men.” Though Willy is brighter than Denis, and perhaps represents what we’d all like to be, both characters, with the story’s end, have proven their worth, for both have integrity. (Willy—with his stance, Denis—in his honesty with regard to self-appraisal.)

This story can also be seen as an allegory. Denis then stands for those who refused to think, and therefore allowed fascism free rein. Willy then stands for those who thought, and were punished for it.

“A TURN WITH THE SUN” BY JOHN KNOWLES

Plot Summary : Lawrence, a student at Devon, a New England boarding school, is the subject of this story of changing values and identity. The story opens on an April afternoon with a triumphant moment for Lawrence: he has just scored his first goal at lacrosse. (This is an important feat, for the school’s highest rewards go to its athletes.) The author then turns to the past in a series of flashback scenes which indicate the metamorphosis Lawrence has undergone since his first days at Devon. What the reader learns is that Lawrence has suffered in his quest for acceptance and identity; he has tried many methods in the pursuit of acceptance, and found little compensation for his trouble. Early on, Lawrence had been ignored by classmates because of an “uncool” or immature scene at a country inn. He then perceived popularity to be found in the realm of the athlete, and, at this point, regarded the school’s trophy room as sacrosanct. The cups revealed past heroes in their glory; Lawrence desperately wanted the same recognition. Having failed socially with his peers, Lawrence vowed to better himself through self-discipline. He also distanced himself from others in a feigned superior stance. His grades improved, and he also became a promising swimmer for the school team. Still, he had no friends, and was not one of the school’s more confident athletes. When the author turns back to the present, we realize

that Lawrence has, in fact, “grown”. He now sees the trophy room for what it is—a crypt of faded memories. His values have changed; he is beginning to realize that recognition, or others’ opinions, have little to do with identity. However, with this realization comes the accidental drowning of Lawrence. (The evening of his first goal, he and two classmates swim in a cold river; with an air of happiness and infinite trust, Lawrence dives into the water and dies without uttering a sound.)

Criticism: (Key Elements: setting, characterization theme, flashback , symbol)

John Knowles is able to capture the pain of adolescence amidst the stilted background of the preparatory school. This environment appears to magnify peer pressure, and the perceived need for conformity among students. Recognition is doled out only to those who display prowess on the sports field; there seems to be little room for the individual in this environment where “one-up-man-ship” reigns. Yet, we must remember that other boys cope with being “second”; Lawrence at the outset is confused, for he is looking for values in society. With the ending of the story, he has begun to look inward; he has attained at least a limited identity. (Of course, it is unfortunate that his environment could offer little guidance for Lawrence. Knowles seems to underscore this point.) The author makes good use of symbolism in his choice of the trophy room. When the “chapel” becomes a “crypt” in Lawrence’s mind, we realize that he has begun to come to a true understanding of his environment and himself. The use of flashback scenes allows the reader a dramatic view of this metamorphosis.

PART THREE: LESSON PLANS

This section of the unit is composed of three parts which roughly correlate to the way the short story should be read. The first part promotes a “good” first reading which will enable students to feel the impact of each story. The next part is concerned with a second reading, and encourages students to perceive the “way” or structure of the short story, and thus, its art. The third section seeks to involve students in a personal reaction to reading and thinking. It seems to me that this step-by-step approach to experiencing the short story will encourage understanding, appreciation, and possibly a personal interest in the form.

LEVEL I (FIRST READING)—for all stories

Many of us have assigned short story reading for homework, and have been disappointed with the results the next day. Some students refuse to read at all. “Nonreaders” who are concerned about their grades often skim or “get through” the reading missing the point of the assignment and/or the story. Out of frustration, the teacher sometimes does the student’s assignment (for him) in explaining the basic plot of the story. This, in fact, kills the story for the student. Important details of a story should emerge from the story itself; they should not be simplified in a teacher’s explanation. The student apathy problem as regards reading has long been frustrating for me, but I believe I have found a solution.

Thanks to Karl Marsh, Sandy Reynolds, and the Reading for the Blind Program of the Branford Public Library, students will be initially exposed to a tape-recorded reading of each story. They will listen and also read along in their texts. This will provide the much needed bridge between student passivity and activity. I believe that the tapes will “hook” students in a way that nothing else could. I hope they will remember this experience as an enjoyable one, and somewhere along the line will pick up a book on their own.

Following the taped first reading of each story, the teacher should encourage students to recall the story’s plot

and its impact. This will insure student understanding of each story as well as provide a starting point for discussion. I have provided sample questions below

(Level I Questions)

1. Who is involved? (list of characters)
2. Where/when does this happen? (description of setting)
3. What happens? (major action of the plot)
4. Why does this happen? (motivation)
5. What is the final result? (outcome or denouement)

Students can be asked to recall the plot of each story either orally or in a written assignment in response to the above questions. (Such an assignment might also provide a means of teaching students the basics of summary writing, as the questions provide an outline of sorts.)

LEVEL II (ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY) —to follow the second reading of each story

By this point, the impact of the story has reached students. It is time to provide “distance” for two reasons. First, students may need psychological distancing if a particular story happens to “hit too close to home”. Second, students need to step back and take notice of the writer’s craft in order to fully understand and appreciate the art form (and the story itself). The following questions are concerned with the elements of the short story. Students should be provided with a list of key elements and their definitions beforehand.

(Level II Questions) Sample: from “The Almost

White Boy”

1. State the primary conflict of the story. When is the reader made aware of this conflict?
2. List the flashback memories of the first three pages of the story. What purpose do they serve?
3. What is the author “saying” through his story of Jim and Cora?
4. Why does Cora behave the way she does?
5. Were you surprised when Cora left Jim?
Why/why not? Explain.
6. How does the meaning of “people are just people” change during the course of the story?
Explain.

LEVEL III (CREATIVE WRITING)—to follow short story readings of both themes

I initially thought that students could be guided through the writing of a short story through exercises involving the elements of the short story. I soon realized, however, that such an overt method (which I would be orchestrating) would destroy students' spontaneous creative impulses, and possibly the emergence of feelings that they might want to get down on paper. It seems to me that writing which affords the writer pleasure must simply "happen". A single thought, memory, or insight, might provide the impetus to write. Often, for me, this leads to the creation of something I didn't realize I "knew". The final product seems to have come from nowhere or everywhere; in a sense, it has a life of its own.

The writing process, then, teaches the writer something about himself; or, quite simply, through writing we are often able to communicate with ourselves. This communication may be comforting or instructive.

Therefore, given all of the above, I must step way back and allow my students to "discover" this experience in their own way. (After all, this is supposed to be the student-generated portion of the unit.) The following ideas provide possible ways for getting students to start writing. They are warm-up exercises which will serve to lessen student anxiety as regards writing. (Students should not be graded on these attempts.)

(Level III Projects)

A. "Stream of Consciousness Writing"

Simply ask students to write about anything that pops into their heads for a ten minute writing period. Caution them not to stop, reread or rewrite.

B. "Conversation Writing"

Ask students to make up a conversation between two or more people. This writing should consist of direct dialogue only. They should not stop to correct or rewrite.

C. "Memory Writing"

Ask students to recall a particularly vivid memory of the past. Encourage them to describe this memory fully. Then ask them to figure out (and write down) the reason for their "choosing" to remember this particular occurrence. At this point students may be encouraged to correct or rewrite should they feel this is necessary.

D. "Short Story Writing"

Ask students to read through their preliminary writings (A, B, C) to find something they want to write about in short story form. Give only one "pointer"; suggest that they think of endings to their stories first. (They will then know where they are headed, and hopefully will write toward the ending.) Provide class time to enable students to "get started". Encourage students to share their work with you, particularly if they seem "stuck". Have the class share finished stories with one another. Students might look for elements of the short story in one another's writing. (Many will be surprised to learn that they have, in fact, written short stories.) Submit all of the stories to the school literary magazine.

RETROSPECTION

At this point I think it is important to admit to readers of this unit that I chose the short story seminar for one particular reason: I knew I was not a short story reader by choice. Though I taught short stories, and

appreciated the form intellectually, I rarely read short stories for recreation. I preferred the novel for many reasons. Well, that has changed. Through the seminar, and interactions with Professor Snead and my colleagues, I have come to accept the short story as something with which I can become immersed. The English teacher *has* to teach the short story. It will be a relief (for me) to be able to do so more “honestly”. The Institute program provides time and an opportunity for communication with professors who are committed to their subjects. The excitement “rubs off”. The (public school) teacher’s growth may often be of a personal nature, and therefore intangible for others. Yet, it is the realization of this growth that enables one to enter the classroom *happily* in the fall. Perhaps that is what this whole thing is all about.

STUDENT READINGS

“THE KITTEN” BY RICHARD WRIGHT

“BILL’S LITTLE GIRL” BY ZONA GAYLE

“MISS CYNTHIE” BY RUDOLPH FISHER

“THE FATHER” BY BJORNSTJERNE BJORNSON “THE RUNAWAY” BY MORLEY CALLAGHAN “THE BLANKET” BY FLOYD DELL

“THE BLUES BEGIN” BY SYLVESTER LEAKES

“THE LIE” BY KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

“THE SOMEBODY” BY DANNY SANTIAGO

“THE ALMOST WHITE BOY” BY WILLARD MOTLEY “A MINORITY” BY FRANK O’CONNER

“A TURN WITH THE SUN” BY JOHN KNOWLES

(All of the above are recorded on cassette tape.)

TEACHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES FOR THIS UNIT

Caletri, Charles J., Jennings, Frank G., ed., *Stories*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1957.

(Source of: “Bill’s Little Girl”, “The Blanket”, “The Father”, This fine short story collection provides stories of varying levels of sophistication.)

Farrell, Edmund J., ed., *To Be*, Scott Foresman and Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1976.

(Source of: “The Lie”. This is a fine textbook of stories, poetry, and non-fiction. Arranged thematically.)

Farrell, Edmund J., ed., *Realities in Conflict* , Scott foresman, and Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1976.

(Source of: "The Somebody", "A Turn With the Sun", "A Minority". This textbook is second in the "Fountainhead" series, and follows *To Be* . Arranged in a similar manner.)

Hughes, Langston, ed., *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* , Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1967.

(Source of: "Miss Cynthie", "The Almost White Boy", "The Blues Begin". This excellent collection of stories by black authors includes stories from the 1860s to the 1960s.)

Kneer, Leo B., ed., *Focus* , Scott Foresman and Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1969.)

(Source of: "The Kitten". This book is first in a series prepared for high school students with reading problems.)

Pritchett. V.S., ed., *The Oxford Book of Short Stories* , Oxford University Press, New York, 1981.

(Source of: "The Runaway". This excellent collection of stories includes various works by superb writers of many times and places.)

II. SELECTIONS FROM THE SHORT STORY SEMINAR (from Professor Snead's annotated reading list)

Boynton, Robert, *Introduction to the Short Story* , Hayden Book Co., New York, 1965.

(Boynton and Mack analyze a number of famous and not-so-famous works along the lines of plot, character, point of view, tone, setting, and theme. A valuable guide to interpretative categories.)

Brooks, Cleanth, Warren, Robert Penn, *The Scope of Fiction* , Loisiaana State Press, Baton Rouge, 1936.

(Similar to Boynton and Mack's book, with, however, more pertinent and incisive comparisons between stories discussed. Stories from several countries.)

Burns, Elizabeth and Tom, *The Sociology of Literature* , Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1973.

(Suggests interesting ways to broaden the concept of the short story into an appreciation of its function within society. Thirty-three essays on the interrelation of art to economics and social action. May help answer the basic student question: 'what does this have to do with me?')

Gibson, Donald, ed., *Black and White : Stories in American Life* , Washington Square Press, New York, 1971,

(Rich anthology, drawing on notable black and white writers.)

Hersey, John, *The Writer's Craft* , Knopf, New York, 1973.

(Excellent collection of essays, interviews, and lectures by writers on style, theme, the process of writing, and the aim of fiction. Particularly recommended for teachers of creative writing.)

Lubbock, Percy, *The Craft of Fiction* , The Viking Press, New York, 1957.

(Published in 1921, Lubbock's was a landmark book on the analysis of literature as an art form, paying close attention to matters of 'omniscience', 'story', and 'audience'.)

Voss, Arthur, *The American Short Story* , University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.

(Probably the best and the most intelligent of these here listed works, (period studies of the American short story), with chapters on Irving, Hawthorne and Melville, Poe, Hart and Twain, Crane, Anderson, and regional writers, among other chapters, all of them lucidly described and evaluated.)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>