



Small Packages

Curriculum Unit 83.03.04
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Too often fiction becomes the neglected component of a seventh or eighth grade English curriculum. The demands of a curriculum geared to the basics too frequently consigns literature to a secondary status behind grammar, spelling, and composition skills. The reading of literature becomes superfluous—an added little treat for the students squeezed in during short weeks and early dismissal days. To this end I have previously written two literature units both dealing with the novel—a selection of science fiction stories and a survey of the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. The student anthologies, however, which I dutifully hand out in September and meticulously collect in June, gather dust and gum droppings in the students' desks.

The major purpose of this unit is threefold. Students will first have the opportunity to read a selection of quality short fiction. Secondly, students will be directed to experience these short stories in an entirely different manner than they have been accustomed. Students will not analyze each short story with a series of observations concerning the many literary conventions such as plot, theme, setting, tone, irony, and the like. Rather, students will be urged to listen to what each story is saying and to draw a metaphorical link between the fictional tale and their own lives. Finally, this unit will attempt to strengthen student writing skills by directing the students to write compositions which elaborate on the metaphor discussed. Together these three objectives should provide a clear, simplified, and expedient method of understanding, experiencing, and appreciating the beauty of short fiction. The unit may also serve as a stratagem for the treatment of other fiction in the future.

The constraint of time for a study of literature is not the only reason such a pursuit is consistently postponed. Many of the anthologies available for seventh and eighth grade classes are severely limited by the thematic concerns of the editors. Quality short fiction is generally limited to one or two selections per anthology. The remainder of the stories are of the adolescent literature variety. These stories, some of which are entertaining, would probably never appear in any other collection of literature unless it was designed for the middle school student. Thus, after reading the one or two stories of any critical notoriety, the anthology returns to its home at the bottom of the desk unless, of course, the teacher shares the same thematic purpose as the editor of the volume.

Clearly, therein lies the first objective of this unit. I plan to introduce my students to a selection of quality short fiction without any particular regard to a single thematic purpose. If our study of short fiction is to be constrained by the amount of time the curriculum offers us, then let our students derive as wide a thematic experience as possible through a sampling of good stories rather than a series of selections somewhat narrow

and contrived.

One of the original intentions of this unit was to introduce my students to the elements of short fiction that are inherent in all fiction. I had planned to encompass as many of them as possible knowing that my students would benefit greatly in later years from this experience. I envisioned a number of classes devoted to plot, character, theme, point of view, and setting. Those elements being exhausted, I would then lead my charges on an unexpurgated rape of each story with particular regard to the author's use of symbol, instances of irony and paradox, and an in-depth examination of conflict. Steadily, the moment approached when I would have to commit my thoughts to paper. Increasingly, I began to shudder.

We teachers of literature oftentimes exist within a paradox not unlike the paradox of the literature we hope to unravel. We extol the value of reading quality fiction. We tell our students that a story can be their plane ticket to faraway places, their train ride through life's intricacies, their taxi of experience. Then, in all our academic pomposity, we peck at the story—the very object of our sustenance—in order to enlighten our students. What is left to enjoy? The plane crashes; the train derails; the taxi gets a flat. In short, the journey ends and with it so does the entertainment, the appreciation, and the experience.

When I read to my three year old, when anyone reads to a non-reader of that age, the experience is not a systematic methodology based on definitive terms but rather a true encounter with the story read. My reading is ultimately punctuated by her reaction to the story based upon her own, albeit limited, experience. She, at once, engrosses herself within the confines of the story armed with the totality of her experience. Inevitably, any judgment or critical comments she makes are with respect to her present existence. She invariably becomes kin to the story's characters, and a resident of the story's setting. Her level of enjoyment of each story depends primarily on how well she can develop the metaphorical relationship between her own character and setting and that of the story. In any event she has both appreciated and experienced literature. Long after she attends school and masters the talent of reading and falls prey to the methodology of ripping apart a story, I intend to continue reading to my daughter. Why should she have to forfeit the golden age of her literary experience?

A second objective of this unit is then to forego the traditional literary analysis and methodology and, instead, direct the students to listen to what each story is saying. Each student will at once become a participant in the stories and, to the extent that the stories impress upon them a metaphorical relationship, each student will have his airplane ticket validated. That is, each student will have an encounter with each story read and such encounter will result in the reader's interpretation of the work with regard to his own experience and in light of his present environment or setting. Conversely, the reader's interpretation of the story depends upon the story's character in relation to his experience in the past. At the center of this encounter is the metaphorical link between the character in the story and the reader. This connection is primarily responsible for the growth of the reader. The schematic below attempts to present this dialectic succinctly. (See Figure 1)

The impetus for this approach to the study of short fiction is derived primarily from a rudimentary introduction to phenomenology and hermeneutics. Any lengthy discussion of either of these here is prohibited by the scope and intention of this unit. Brief highlights of each will have to suffice until the reader has the leisure to peruse the literature that will be suggested in the bibliography.

Phenomenology purports that a being (i.e. the reader) is led by the phenomenon (i.e. the work). The reader does not interpret the work on the basis of his own human consciousness; rather, the reality of the work comes to meet the reader. Once the work meets the reader, the reader's own experience uses the encounter to formulate a line of interpretation. The result is that the reader increases his understanding and his

experience is heightened.

“Hermeneutics”, as defined by Richard E. Palmer in *Hermeneutics* , is the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts. Palmer, in Chapter 14 “Thirty Theses on Interpretation”, details for us that the hermeneutical experience is historical and dialectical. It is a language event that should be led by the text. True interpretation of the text can only be accomplished, however, by its application to the present. Palmer continues that literary interpretation must begin as a language event of experiencing the work itself—of hearing what the work says. The reader becomes seized by the text and is subsequently changed by the text. This is a far cry from the systematic ripping down of a story that teachers of literature so love to do!

The idea that a story of fiction can effect change in the reader may seem, at first, foreign until one is reminded of the many parables recorded in the *Bible* and the folk tales, myths, and fables handed down through the ages. These forerunners of the short story all emphasize a lesson for the reader. The reader listens to the text, becomes a participator, and experiences a change of consciousness. The work itself has not changed; its structure, tone, and mood are invariant while its lesson has been transmitted.

The general characteristics inherent in short fiction include a single aim or purpose which can be read in one sitting. A certain brevity must exist, and each word should be an integral part of the whole. This economy of expression should be filled with a variety of images allowing the reader to picture each scene. In effect, the short story is a perfect vehicle for our students to take that aforementioned journey and become a participator in the event. Clearly, the hermeneutical approach to literature allows the journey to unfold.

A primary concern of any English teacher is the improvement of writing skills. A persistent problem I have encountered in student compositions is an apparent unwillingness to elaborate with any significance or detail. Any task-oriented writing assignment such as a descriptive paragraph or an essay-type answer to a particular question generally remains flat even after three successive drafts. Students prefer to short cut these assignments and time on task becomes time too short and not well spent.

There are two areas, however, in which student writing seems less of an arduous chore for the writer and also for the instructor. Students enjoy being creative and, like the rest of mankind, students love writing about themselves. Composition assignments that thrust the student into the world of danger or incredible circumstances are among the best indications of a student’s writing ability. In assignments such as these students are able to picture themselves in situations where they are the protagonist. The result is a more fervent writing since they are the stars. Coincidentally, the plots that these students play out are generally derived from the cinema or television.

The only writing assignment that students participate in with a similar fervor to the one above is of the autobiographical nature. Students work laboriously on assignments that chronicle their lives or a segment of their lives. The result is generally a keen sense of sequence and a vast amount of personal pride. Students are also more prone to add various highlights to these completed assignments such as photographs and memorabilia.

A third objective of this unit will be the improvement of student writing skills. Students will write a series of compositions which will assert the metaphorical link between themselves and the piece of short fiction read. In an introspective manner students will compare their being to the influence transmitted by the short fictional piece and will write non-fictional papers dealing with this metaphorical relationship.

The focus of concern for these papers will be in three areas: character, setting, and plot. The area of focus will

be determined by the piece of short fiction read. A story with a particularly good character development will generate a paper with a focus dealing with a metaphorical relationship between the story's protagonist and the student himself. The value of this procedure is two-fold. Since we are treating stories as phenomena and studying the story's effect upon the reader, a paper of this sort is a logical extension. Secondly, since we know that students enjoy writing about themselves, there seemingly will be no lack of concern for the task on the student's part. Occasionally, this assignment will be broadened to include metaphorical relationships between story characters and characters in real life familiar to the students.

The second area of concern also dependent upon the relative piece of short fiction is the setting. Perhaps, a more definitive term to use here would be environment. In assignments such as these, students will concentrate on the metaphorical relationship between the environment in the story and their own environment. Students are generally very conscious of their environment and are also very quick to point out setting (time and place) in any literature read. It is hoped that these papers concentrating on the metaphor of environment will greatly increase the students' own understanding and appreciation of their environment.

Finally, the third area of concern as substance for a metaphorical relationship will be plot. A more appropriate term here is experience. Students will compare experiences in short fiction to experiences they have encountered or will encounter in the future. Perhaps assignments such as these will generate some of the more insightful examples of writing by the students. It is anticipated that the area of values clarification will be central to these discussions. This focus will also provide the basis for lively discussion since the differences in character and environment among the students will necessarily develop differing points of view concerning the fictional experiences encountered.

A further consequence of a series of papers dealing with the metaphorical relationship between fictional and real life is the exposure to the different styles of writing inherent or suggested by each assignment. The writings dealing with character will be primarily narrative and descriptive. The papers concentrating on environment will be descriptive. The assignments with a focus on situation will be good examples of the expository nature of writing.

Several years ago a colleague and I wrote a unit in the Institute that proved very successful. In it we discussed Dr. Jules Prown's method of reading objects and used this method as a basis for student writing. This present effort is an attempt to use quality pieces of short fiction as phenomena performing an encounter with students. In our previous unit the student was directed to dissect various material objects in an attempt to clarify observations and hone the creative experience. In this unit the objects—short fiction—are influencing the students and affecting change. I feel the two units presented to the same class would be of immense benefit and constitute the majority of a good student writing program which doesn't leave students at a loss for words.

When I began this seminar, I had hoped to introduce students to quality short fiction. I believe the suggested stories for use which will follow will achieve this objective. I feel that by taking a phenomenological treatment of these stories and nurturing this experience with an emphasis on hermeneutics will result in a maturation process for the students. I know that the suggested writing assignments will increase student writing skills. All of this will be accomplished by reading short stories which are glimpses of character, environment, and experience. All of this develops logically and easily from these small packages of literature.

Sequence of Lessons

The availability of classroom materials is a primary concern of every public school educator. Generally it becomes easier to use what one has rather than to seek out what one needs. A benefit of this unit is that it can easily be adapted to use what materials a teacher has or can obtain. The stories I will suggest in my student bibliography are the result of my own subjective choice based upon my preferences. They constitute neither the greatest nor the poorest examples of stories which can be used for this unit. The most important factor to remember in using this unit is the method of study, the hermeneutic, rather than what is studied.

I can offer several suggestions here to those teachers who, like me, can never find adequate materials in their own book closet. One solution is to search your school for literature anthologies. Oftentimes, if you look hard enough, you can find several anthologies that are not being used and pull the best stories from each. Another method of gaining materials is to photocopy the stories. Remember that these are short stories and photocopying costs will not be that expensive. If you should choose to photocopy, make only eight to ten copies of each story. There is no reason that the entire class must be reading the same story at precisely the same time. Those who wish to borrow the materials for this unit will find that this is a method in which I totally believe.

A final suggestion for obtaining materials for the teaching of this unit is to secure one copy of a short story you wish to use and read that selection to the class. I do not recommend this method as your only stratagem, but it will do very nicely when the story is one that can be read comfortably in a class period. This procedure could even possibly be delegated to a student in the class, but I caution you to use only superior readers as this is a unit of literature and not one of reading improvement.

I plan to use the unit within the confines of a marking period or two depending on the class being instructed. Thus, if we say that two marking periods represent twenty weeks in time, I should have twenty or so stories at my disposal. Each story may be introduced on a Monday, for instance, discussed on a Tuesday (or even Monday if it were read in class), and the writing assignment would be due on Thursday or Friday. Total class time used during the week would be approximately one and a half periods although this could be extended to two periods or shortened to just a half period of discussion. The unit is such, however, that it could be used throughout the year on a more irregular basis or compressed to a daily routine for a much shorter period of time.

This unit is designed primarily for eighth grade students of average to above average ability. I would not hesitate to use the unit with a good seventh grade class. The method of instruction is one that I feel can be used for grades seven through twelve inclusive. As students gain years they gain experience and maturity. Their frame of reference expands, and their character becomes more rounded. Since the writing assignments are geared toward establishing a metaphor between the fictional experience and the student's own experience, students in the higher grades should have even an easier task when instructed with the unit than their middle school counterparts.

The actual implementation of this unit including story selection and class time allotments should, as I have mentioned above, be up to each teacher's judgment. I should like, however, to make several suggestions regarding the sequence of the unit—suggestions which I feel are important to the implementation of the unit. My first recommendation is that the unit begin with the reading of fables. I state this for several reasons. First, fables are very short and several can be discussed with justice in a single class period. Second, fables are readily available in most anthologies thus minimizing the teacher's efforts to locate materials. Thirdly, the

fable is the classic forerunner (along with the *Bible*) of the short story, and what better way to begin than at the beginning. Lastly, and most importantly, fables spell out their purpose, their lesson, their moral for the reader thus making it relatively simple for the student to both experience the literature and substantiate the metaphor.

Sample Activities

The following activities are representative of this unit's intentions. They are offered here as a guide to the use of the unit and the achievement of its objectives. Each activity illustrates one of the metaphors mentioned above and illustrated in Figure

1. Each activity should be viewed as a stratagem for teaching the unit since it provides the necessary information to guide the students into the metaphor. The preliminary discussion notes characterize what should be stated to the students and expanded upon each time a story is read until the students have mastered these ideas. The story notes, of course, will vary as each story is read. These should be recorded as the teacher previews the pieces of short fiction to be read. The topics for discussion are the main points which the teacher should make sure are covered in any class discussion. It is essential that these topics are not in any great numbers; a lengthy list will invariably cloud the intended metaphor. Finally, the writing suggestions provide the impetus for the student writing program. Since each student will react individually to each story, it is cautioned that a wide range of variation be allowed. Here, the teacher may use a variety of key suggestions to elicit student response.

I have chosen a rather compact piece of short fiction to illustrate these sample activities—"The Office" by Alice Munro—to simplify this discussion. It is not necessary to treat each story read in terms of all three metaphors. Many of the stories suggested in the student reading list below can be used easily in relation to the metaphors of environment, character, and experience. Some translate better in terms of character or environment. Others work better with two of the three metaphors. Each user of the unit should decide how to use each story when previewing that story. Perhaps all three elements can be discussed and the writing can be keyed to just one metaphor. This decision rests with the user who is aware of how much time can be afforded.

Sample Activity #1. *Metaphor of Environment*

Preliminary discussion notes: Environment or setting in any story is the combination of space, time, and place. Environment plays a central role in fiction as it often dictates the behavior of characters and influences their experience. Our own environment, the space, time, and place we occupy, influences us in much the same way.

Story notes on environment: The environment of "The Office" by Alice Munro is a rented space in a building owned by a Mr. Malley. The story's main character, the narrator, envisions that this space will provide for her the privacy and freedom necessary to foster her work as an author.

Topics for discussion:

1. Does our protagonist feel that her new-found office is adequate?

2. Describe the office according to the story.

3. Is there a problem with the office?

Writing suggestions:

Describe a place that is your private domain.

Possibly you look forward to being in a place where you are free to be yourself. Describe this environment.

Did you once have a private place that is no more? Describe this environment of the past.

Sample Activity #2. Metaphor of Character

Preliminary discussion notes: The central character of a story—the hero or heroine—is known as the protagonist. Any character that offers a conflict or challenge to this character is the antagonist. Aside from major characters, stories often have minor characters. We come to know all characters in fiction by what the author tells us, what the character says, and by what the character does. In our own lives we judge another individual and express our feelings accordingly by what that individual says and does. We, too, are judged by others in the same way.

Story notes on character: There are two main characters in “The Office”—the narrator and Mr. Malley. The narrator is a wife and mother who writes and who is in need of a place to work. Mr. Malley owns a building and rents rooms to people. A minor character, Mrs. Malley, also makes an appearance.

Topics for discussion:

1. What type of person is the narrator?

2. What qualities does Mr. Malley possess?

Writing suggestions:

Tell about a task you had to perform that required a certain element of privacy and quiet.

Tell about any serious hobbies you have.

Tell about any acquaintance you have who reminds you of Mr. Malley.

Sample Activity #3. Metaphor of Experience

Preliminary discussion notes: The experience of a story is the character within his environment and all that happens—the sequence of events in the story. This is usually called “the plot”. Each of us lives through experiences each day which both propel us forward and issue us momentary setbacks. Each experience we encounter helps us to grow. We are the product of a continual chain of events.

Story notes on experience: In the short story, “The Office”, a woman who is pursuing a career in writing rents a space from a kindly gentleman for an office. The gentleman continually visits this woman and either brings her things which he considers useful for the room or delves in chitchat. The woman regards this attention as a nuisance, an inconvenience, and a violation of her privacy. The tension increases for the woman, and she finally surrenders the office.

Topics for discussion:

1. Do you feel the narrator was patient enough with Mr. Malley?
2. Do you feel Mr. Malley was acting properly?
3. Is the narrator justified in her feelings and actions?

Writing suggestions:

Explain about a time when you lost all your patience.

Explain an experience you have had when your kindness was not wanted.

Explain an occurrence where your privacy was continually interrupted.

(figure available in print form)

Figure 1

Suggested Student Readings

Aesop,	Fables
Sherwood Anderson,	“The Egg”
Ray Bradbury,	“The Veldt”
Willa Cather,	“Paul’s Case”
John Collier,	“De Mortuis”
	“The Chaser”
	“Thus I Refute Beelzy”
Stephen Crane,	“The Open Boat”
	“The Blue Hotel”
F. Scott Fitzgerald,	“Babylon Revisited”
O. Henry,	“The Furnished Room”
Shirley Jackson,	“The Lottery”
D. H. Lawrence,	“The Rocking-Horse Winner”
Katherine Mansfield,	“The Garden Party”
Guy de Maupassant,	“The Necklace”
Alice Munro,	“The Office”
“Saki” (H. H. Munro),	“The Open Window”
Frank O’Connor,	“First Confession”
	“The Man of the House”
Luigi Pirandello,	“War”
John Steinbeck,	“Flight”
James Thurber,	“The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”

John Updike, "A. & P"

Teacher Bibliography

Aesop. *Aesop's Fables* . Retold by Ann McGovern. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1963.

A very appropriate retelling of Aesop for young students.

Aesop. *The Fables of Aesop* . Walter L. Parker, ed. New York: Little & Ives, 1931.

One of the many fine collections of the ancient teller of fables and promoter of wisdom.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space* . Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

A work by the famous French phenomenologist. Although intended to aid in the study of poetry, it can be applied to all modes of literature. Essential for understanding the phenomenological point of view.

Franco, Anthony and Gorman, Benjamin A. "VIEW: Visual Inquiry/Experience in Writing." New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers' Institute, 1980.

A teaching unit recommended to those interested in the teaching of writing. The unit reflects a view of teaching totally opposite to the present unit.

Loban, Walter, et al, ed. *Teaching Language and Literature* . New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1969.

Useful for several key chapters expounding upon the appreciation of literature and an extensive bibliography of short stories.

Palmer, Richard E. *Hermeneutics* . Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969.

A work that is central to this unit as well as a key to any study of literature. I heartily recommend Chapter 1. "Introduction", Chapter 13. "Toward Reopening the Question: What is Interpretation?" and Chapter 14. "Thirty Theses on Interpretation" to anyone interested in using this unit or understanding hermeneutics.

Perrine, Laurence. *Story and Structure* . New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1966.

A solid cookbook of traditional terminology and definitions used in the study of short fiction. Perrine presents the terminology and reinforces understanding with a selection of appropriate stories.

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