



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1983 Volume III: Reading the Twentieth Century Short Story

Fiction: In and Out

Curriculum Unit 83.03.08
by Kathleen O'Neil

Overview

The short story has developed from man's earliest attempts to teach his fellow man. From the first fireside tale of the hunt and adventures of the day, to the parables of the Bible, to the myths and fables of ancient time, man instinctively related many of the happenings of his day in a story.

Today's short story shares the purpose of its forerunners. It fulfills a need within man to communicate with others, and is perpetuated because of the human being's insatiable hunger for a good story. It is appropriate, therefore, that we as teachers use this most basic method of teaching within our classrooms, for a child, too, loves nothing more than a good story.

Within the framework of a typical middle school day, each subject receives an allocated amount of time. All teachers have strained within the confines of a "period" to fit in all that is suppose to be taught. It is because of this time restraint that the short story can be used so beautifully within out time framework as teachers. The novel is a luxury that, though appreciated would have to be discussed a few chapters at a time, in between grammar phonics, spelling, vocabulary building, and reading.

The brevity of the short story not only serves well within the typical middle school schedule, it also conforms to the attention span of the middle school student. Longer works, such as the novel can be read by a middle school student, however, if the work is to be used to analyze the elements of a story, the short story is preferable because of its length. Analysis, discussion, and appreciation takes time and concentration, beginnings and ends, It is essential that the student's attention be held in the process.

The short story lends itself to interdisciplinary teaching. It is a vehicle through which so many of the above skills mentioned can be taught while introducing the students to a wide variety of good stories from master writers.

Fiction: In and Out is designed to be taught as a year-long project. The lessons are structured so that a complete lesson can be taught in two day classes with two evenings of homework. The lessons will be taught bi-weekly. This enables the teacher a week in between lectures to correct writing assignments from each lesson and prepare work for the next.

This unit is written primarily for advanced readers in the middle school. It is to be a tool for the middle school teacher to use as an interdisciplinary method of teaching the many language arts skills required of him or her. In addition, it will enable the teacher to have the students enjoy a literature experience as well. Overall, however, it is the primary goal of this unit to use the short story as a catalyst for students' creative writing.

Objectives

The short story has been the subject of years of study for many students and professors. Over and over a story is presented to a class, usually with a particular "determined" objective, and the professor realizes the students may "see" the reason this particular story was presented but more than likely they could argue the point for hours.

During our seminar, many teachers and the professor, also, reflected on the fact that a point they may have once accepted and understood in a story, became somehow changed and expanded over the years since they had first read the very same story. Some liked stories they originally found uninteresting, others found hidden treasures overlooked the first time.

When short stories are studied in order to be put into pigeonholes they defy us. For example, if a group of short stories were presented as examples of humor, they abounded in paradox or tragedy, suspense or character development. Another group of short stories may have exemplified symbolism but students may have found them funnier than the group presented previously. The reason for this seems obvious—a good short story usually has a multiple of elements presented in a superior masterful way—hence the term masterpiece.

The short story has notoriously eluded "chiseled in stone," interpretations. Why else would short stories be read and studied year after year, generation after generation? Each, now and forever, are like a treasure hunt. Each class strives and decodes the written word. It is only when, someone finds that "unthought" of treasure that the class seems to sigh, lean back and find satisfaction. Many smiles may abound, along with frowns interspersed among others. They seem to be thinking . . . "I never thought of that."

It is with this in mind, that the objectives for this unit were written. They are to give the student a kind of map to follow in order for them to unlock the treasures of the short story and the frame upon which to build their own creative writing. They are:

1. Students will read quality short stories by master writers.
2. Students will be able to discuss short stories in terms of its important elements, especially character development.
3. Students will learn to use the "character chart" as a vehicle for analyzing the short story and developing their own characters and elements of the short story in their own creative writing.
4. Students will be able to write their own short stories.

The first objective has been the hardest to achieve. It has been difficult to find stories that are within the understanding, interest, reading level of a middle school student and yet be written by a recognized master writer.

There have been few writers who have written quality short stories specifically for the adolescent. There are stories about adolescence, but they are usually written for the adult to read and so they can shake their heads, yes in total nostalgia. It was, therefore, an important strategy of this unit to choose short stories that would hold the interest of the student.

Elements of the short story are presented as an objective because they are necessary tools and clues in the “hunt.” To continue the analogy, they allow the student to unlock the treasures of the words before them and give them the knowledge and inspiration to release the great wealth of imagination and thought within them.

The character chart is presented as an objective because it will be used extensively as a guide to understanding of characters in the short story and a structure through which the student can develop characters in their own short story writing.

Finally, it is the goal of this unit to present students with a forum in which they can express the “meanings” a short story may hold for them. These will be insights the short stories have given them. It is the students’ ability to read, write, tell, and create a short story that permeates each of the above objectives. They are not only to “see” but be able to express their thoughts both written and orally . . . as only they can.

A work of literature is not an object we understand by conceptualizing or analyzing it; it is a voice we must hear and through ‘hearing’ (rather than seeing) understand . . . Understanding a literary work, therefore, is not a scientific kind of knowing . . . it is an historical encounter which calls forth personal experience being here in the world. ¹

Strategies

The primary strategy of this unit is to present pivotal stories to the students that embody and exemplify most elements of a short story. These pivotal stories had to be by a master(s) that were written within the reading and interest level of the middle school student and one which could spark the imagination of the students’ which would help them create their own short story.

It was important, therefore, that the introductory stories used in the unit met these criterias. I decided that the first stories introduced would be written by the master himself, Edgar Allan Poe. Though some of his stories are filled with immensely sophisticated vocabularies, many were quite appropriate for the beginning lessons planned. They are, *The Black Cat* and *Tell - Tale Heart* .

Through the use of both these stories in the introductory section most of the unit’s objectives will be taught from the very first lessons. The Subsequent lessons will repeatedly use learned knowledge and broaden the reading experience of the students in the works of other master writers and short stories.

Throughout this process students will write their own short stories. Some assignments will be directly related to the readings, others will be thematic. For example, one assignment may be to change the murderer in the *Tell - Tale Heart* . . . same crime but different villain! Or a student may write on the theme of obsession . . .

real or not.

After the introductory section after which students should be familiar with the definitions and terminology used in the discussion and analyzation, in addition to these understandings, students should begin to find ease in their discussion, a series of short stories will be introduced that will expand the students reading experience. The final section of the unit will deal with the student developing their own ability to write a good short story with the understanding as to how all the elements fit into their own creation.

Other strategies deal with classroom organization. In order to achieve some of the above objectives, a classroom which facilitates the activities that this unit proposes is of the utmost importance. It will be essential to have a "library" of short stories within the classroom. Some of these stories will be presented within an anthology, but others would only be available as individual stories found in adult anthologies.

The classroom should be set up in clusters of five or six to facilitate the small group discussions that will be had. It is essential for students to get the opportunity to interpret their insights and "hear" those of others. This will be done frequently during their involvement in the unit.

Creative writing notebooks are required and should be kept in an accessible part of the classroom. These notebooks will be use in each lesson in one capacity or another. Small group records will be kept by the recorder of each group within their own creative writing book. Recorders will change periodically during the year.

Once the classroom is set up, the activities can be maintained and taught with a minimum of management preparation. A large amount of character charts should be run-off and available throughout the year. Students will fill out these charts many times and with different objectives in mind. This repetitive use of the character chart eventually lead the students to a comfortable knowledge and use of the chart in analyzing characters and developing their own.

Students will read selections from Edgar Allan Poe, an anthology, *Approaches to the Short Story* , which includes stories by Kipling, Steinbeck, Buck, Faulkner, et al. In addition, D. H. Lawrence's "Rocking Horse Winner," will be used. If a teacher does not have access to these stories mentioned, any of the lessons can be used with different stories. If the substituted are "good" these lessons should be able to be used with them.

Students' activities will involve readings, reporting, group discussions, character chart activities, and creative writing assignments. Creative writing, eventually, original short stories, is one of the main objectives of this unit. It will flow naturally from the kinds of lessons and knowledge found within this unit.

For example, students will use the character chart and change just one characteristic of the hero or heroine within the short story. They should be able to see the effect of this one change on the other elements of the story and also see that they can write a totally different story themselves just by using their own imagination.

For example, if we change Paul's obsession with his rocking horse in Lawrence's "Rocking Horse Winner," to Pac-Man might not a whole other story formulate? Each student, changing that one fact could develop that many more short stories bases on a boy's losing himself in his imagination and fear.

The character chart is an assignment I think the students will definitely enjoy. It is because of this that I showed a lesson using the character chart, though its possible uses can be endless. Its main purpose is to teach students the complexity of character development and interrelationship with the other elements of the

story. It will be through this understanding that the student will experience the intricacy of supporting that character and his movements in the story and that the expertise with which this is done separates a mediocre story from a good one.

Finally, the selection of relevant, good and appropriate short stories is essential to a good unit on the short story. It has been this writer's most difficult task, as it will be for the classroom teacher to collect enough copies of the stories for classroom use. However, those stories mentioned, will be well worth the effort of the teacher for they meet the criteria of excellence, understandability, reading levels, and interest.

Included on the following page is a copy of the character chart that has been discussed and will be used in the lessons of this unit. It can be considered a guideline in the study of character development and creation.

Possible Considerations in the Study of Character:

1. Name of Character.
2. Age.
3. Height.
4. Weight.
5. Birthplace.
6. Birthdate.
7. Color hair.
8. Color eyes.
9. Scars or handicaps (physical, mental, emotional).
10. Educational background.
11. Work experience.
12. Best Friend.
13. Other friends.
14. Enemies and why.
15. Present problem
16. How will it get worse?
17. How can it get better?

18. Strongest and weakest traits.
19. Parents.
20. Sees self as.
21. Is seen by others as.
22. Basic nature.
23. Ambitions.
24. Philosophy of life.
25. Hobbies.
26. Kinds of music, art, reading preferred.
27. Dress.
28. Favorite colors.
29. Description of home.
30. Most important thing to know about character.
31. Why is this character worth writing about?
32. Why will I remember this character?
33. Do I like this character?

Lesson Plan 1 .

Objectives :

1. To introduce Poe as a master writer.
2. To read and discuss *Tell-Tale Heart* .
3. To have students identify opposition and time.
4. To have students' identify conflict and be able to write conflict within a paragraph form.

Materials :

1. Creative writing book.
2. Copy of Poe's *Tell - Tale Heart* .
3. Biographical sketch of Poe.

Procedure :

Introduce the short story as a year long unit. Read the biographical sketch of Poe. Explain the popularity and endurance of the short story, especially of those written by Poe. Tell how the short story has been special because of its ability to express a message as no other prose seems to be able to do. Tell how old the short story is. Refer to the map and show where some of the earliest short stories came from. (Myths, parables, fables, etc.).

Show how these first short stories used "opposition" and explain that opposition sets up an important element of the story—conflict.

Hand out Poe's, *Tell - Tale Heart* . Have students read only the first paragraph, silently.

Small group discussion:

In small groups find all the opposites you can in the first paragraph of Poe's *Tell - Tale Heart* . List all the opposites you can find. Also list those words you find repeated. Recorders write down group's lists. Include any "time" words you may find.

Large group discussion .

Then put three columns on the board: opposites, time words, and repeated words. Have each recorder report to the group at large.

Put the following categories on the blackboard. Call on each group recorder to read off their lists.

Opposites	Time Words	Repetition
nervous-calm	had been and am	nervous
sharpened-destroyed		very
dulled-acute		heard
heaven-hell		mad
heaven-earth		
mad-healthily		

As we can see by our list, Poe does many things in his first paragraph. What I want you to remember is that most short stories use these same techniques. Opposites give a sense of conflict. The character must move through these opposites until the conflict is finally solved. Notice how Poe repeats many words. Have you ever seen someone who is nervous. Don't their actions repeat themselves? Elicit some examples. Yes, tapping fingers, feet, pacing back and forth!

Time words were not very easy to find. Poe used words of being to express time. This is very important

because time words give us a look at the setting of the story. They give us the first hint as to where the action is taking place. Tomorrow, s lesson will spend more time on this, but for now, remember to look for those time words in all the stories you read and eventually write.

Closure:

After the class discussion ask the students to summarize what techniques they have observed in Poe’s first paragraph of *Tell - Tale Heart* . Review definitions of time, setting, conflict, opposition, repetition, mood.

Homework:

Read Poe’s *Tell - Tale Heart* in its entirety. Using the second paragraph only, write a paragraph on the conflict you see. Explain how the first paragraph leads you into this conflict.

Lesson Plan 2.

Objectives:

1. To review time, repetition and oppositions.
2. To review setting.
3. To introduce allegory.

Materials :

Creative writing book.

Students’ homework.

Poe’s *Tell-Tale Heart* .

Procedure:

Have students take out their homework papers. Review briefly the terms introduced in Lesson

1. Tell them to break up into small groups. Have students take turns reading their homework to the group, 10 minutes. Recorder collects assignments.

Class discussion :

You have shared your ideas with your group. Many of them were different from each other. That is fine. Poe has created a memorable character in his narrator. We have seen that the narrator is stuck in time . . . “I had been and am.” He is torn between each and every opposition Poe gives him in the first paragraph. We have seen that he heightens our own suspense and anxiety through his repetitions.

You have read the whole story now. You have seen that Poe keeps moving us through this story in quite the same way he began. Can someone tell me what this story is about. You will be giving me the plot of the story. Now, can anyone tell me the setting of the story. Most students will say, the old man’s house. After accepting

the answer, ask the class if there isn't another place that Poe describes in great length and even deals with time? Elicit Poe's narrator's mind. Does Poe spend more time describing the old man's house or the narrator's state of mind? Then could there be two stories here? Two settings? Two conflicts? Two solutions?

A short story only ends once the oppositions have been resolved. Does the story end when the old man is killed? No, it ends when the narrator's insanity finally does him in with the detectives. It ends only when the conflict between the opposites of sane and insane finally do battle.

When we read a short story that seems to tell two stories it is using allegory. Many stories tell a story with the hope of teaching a lesson beyond what the short story actually is telling us. In this case, Poe tells us a story of a murder, but he is teaching us a lesson about overworked imagination, obsession, and its downfall. This is what allegory is all about.

Closure:

We have just begun to explore Poe's *Tell - Tale Heart*. We will find much more to see in this famous short story. We have learned about allegory. Can someone tell us the two in one stories of *Tell - Tale Heart*?

Homework:

Write a description in your creative writing book of what you think an obsession of yours could be. (T.V., arcade games, gum, daydreaming, etc.). Then write a short story about the conflict that may arise. Remember your use of opposition, time, repetition, setting, mood. They all build to a good short story.

Lesson Plan 3 .

Objective :

To introduce the character chart.

Materials:

Guidelines to character study.

Procedure :

In last night's homework, you took a look at yourself. You found that in each of us lies the seeds of our own obsessions. In yesterday's class you took a closer look at Poe's narrator. Today, we are going to use a tool that you will become very familiar with this year. It will be used to look at ourselves even more carefully. It is a guideline to a character . . . and each of you are real characters. I will pass out this guideline and we will have some fun with it.

Pass out guidelines. Tell students they are to break up into pairs within their small groups. They are to then take turns filling out the character chart on each other. 20 minutes.

Class discussion :

After this activity is completed discuss some of the questions students may have. Ask students to think about Poe's narrator. Did Poe fill out his character chart. What items are missing? What are present? Does the fact

that Poe is describing a “state of mind” make the physical characteristics that are lacking understandable?

Closure :

We have seen that each of us is a potential character and that most writers make their character move and live within the traits that are given them. A good story uses these traits, one that doesn't follow through on the character-s characteristics just doesn't ring true.

Homework :

You are to take another guideline home. This time you are to make up a character using this guideline. Fill out each and every item. This character must be completely imaginary. You will find out that once you have filled out the chart on your imaginary character—a short story is not far behind.

Note

1. Palmer, Richard, E. *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1969, pp. 9-10.

Books Recommended for Students

Cassill, R.V. *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction* . New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978.

This is a basic text that could be used within the classroom library. Most stories can be used within the classes of a middle school. Contains, D. H. Lawrence's "Rocking Horse Winner," and many other masterpieces.

Hawthorne's Short Stories . Newton Arvin, ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1946.

This book contains many of Hawthorne's best short stories. It could be used in conjunction with the social studies curriculum on Connecticut and life in early New England.

Six Great Modern Short Stories . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966.

Contains stories written by Faulkner, Joyce, Melville, Gogol, Porter, and Wescott. All are different, yet each are considered masterpieces.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *Ten Great Mysteries by Edgar Allan Poe* . Groff Conklin, ed., New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1960.

Available through the Scholastic Book Service, this text seems to be the most reasonable and accessible. It contains *Tell - Tale Heart* , and *The Black Cat* . Great book.

Books Recommended for Teachers

Aesop's and Other Fables. New York: Everyman's Library, 1971. Besides offering a well translated Aesop's tales, this book gives a good historical background to the writer and his world.

The Best American Short Stories 1982 . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1982.

Good reference for showing students the most current short stories of today. Though they may not be the "best" they are definitely considered good by modern day critics.

Black Hands on a White Face . Whit Burnett, ed., New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1971.

Selection of stories written by black and white authors which deal with significant dramatical experiences in their life.

Botkin, B.A. *A Treasury of New Engand Folklore* . New York: Bonanza Books, 1965.

A collection of short stories and folklore about people in colonial times.

Cioffi, Frank. *Formula Fiction : An Anatomy of American Science Fiction , 1930 1940* . Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982.

Presents techniques, effects, and background to modern science fiction. Most interesting is its discussion of the effect of Edgar Allan Poe on contemporary science fiction.

The Grimms ' German Folk Tales . Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

Collection of Grimms' folk tales and some interesting information on their beginnings.

Johnson, Eric. *Life Into Language* . New York: Bantam Books, 1976. Integrates observing, reading, and discussing with the purpose of increasing ability in writing.

Initiation . David Thorburn, ed., New York: Harcourt Brace Johanovich Inc., 1971.

Collection of short stories by greats: Hawthorne, Joyce, Porter, Camus, Tolstoy, etc., divided into three section or themes: initiation, outsiders, and love.

Moffet, James. *A Student - Centered Language Arts Curriculum , Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* . Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1968.

Step by step framework for student centered activities and interdisciplinary methods.

Short Story Theories . Charles E. May, ed., Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978.

Collection of essays, unique in and of themselves, on theoretical practical perspectives on form. Poe, Bader, etc.

Sloane, William. *The Craft of Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979. Simply written discussion of the elements of a story and how to write well.

Stewig, John Warren. *Read to Write : Using Children's Literature As*

A Springboard to Writing . New York: Hathorne Book, Inc.,

1975.

Shows how to use literature to stimulate children's writing. Deals with elements of a short story.

Voss, Arthur. *The American Short Story* . Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Pr-ess, 1973.

Excellent reference for background on technique, autobiographical sketches of great short story writers and examples of their use of the elements in a short story.

Women and Fiction . Susan Cahill, ed., New York: Mentor Books, 1975. An anthology of 26 women writers from Kate Chopin to Alice Walker. Good selections and all have biographical sketches.

Women Writing . Denys Val Baker, ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979. Collection of stories from women writers including Woolk, Vita Sackville West, Mansfield , McCaulay, and others.

Films

Below you will find a sampling of films available from Michigan Media. They can be rented for a very reasonable amount. A rental catalog, "Educational Films and Video 1983L A Rental Catalog," can be obtained by writing:

Michigan Media

University Media

Media Resources Center

400 Fourth Street

Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109

Telephone: (313) 764-5360

The Blue Hotel, Stephen Crane. color 57 minutes. 5215-F \$27.80.

Paul's Case, Willa Cather. color 55 minutes. 8482-F \$28.85.

Fall of the House of Usher, Edgar Allan Poe. 4121-F

Lengend of Sleepy Hollow, 540-F

Rocking Horse Winner 2321-F

Young Goodman Brown 646-F

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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