



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

Introduction

Interpretive skills are the key to our existence in this, or any other culture. The ability to interpret signs on many levels gauges one's integration into the dominant culture. Benjamin Whorf found that those who live in the Arctic conceive of over a dozen distinct words for 'snow' specifying all possible gradations from 'soft' snow to 'icy' snow to 'morning snow' and so on. We also recall the lush variety of 'greens' distinguishable by Claude Levi-Strauss' Amazon forest dwellers, and their 'reading' of forest paths invisible to the untutored eye, as well as their ability to avoid the protective band of *min*, concealed spikes deployed around the Tupi-Kavahib villages, as well as other possibly fatal traps both natural and man-made.

In our own society, there is a motley overgrowth of signs to interpret, too, and even more important than merely interpreting them is the ability to discover the relations between different levels of interpretation. Normal highway driving provides a good example of interpretation on different levels. On Interstate 91, let us say, the ability to gauge the speed at which you will be able to overtake another car; the knowledge that the traffic's sluggishness a mile ahead is due to the presence of the blue car with its rack of red blinking lights, even before one reads 'State Police' on its trunk; the meaning of the various dashboard gauges and their relation both to that blue car and to your chances of overtaking another car within that mile or so, or before you run out of gas; finally the meaning of that police car's flashing turn signal, combined with reading a sign announcing a highway exit in two miles: these are but some of the ways that we have been trained as drivers to interpret and interrelate the often bewildering sign systems of driving.

Reading, and the understanding of the signs, symbols, and conventions of the written text, are perhaps the first taught and yet least vividly grasped of all our society's interpretive skills. The immediate pertinence of reading and interpreting written texts to 'survival, in our own society is clearer to perhaps no other group of people in society than it is to teachers, as represented by the Fellows of my seminar on "Reading the Twentieth Century Short Story" given in the spring and summer of 1983. For many of these Fellows experience daily the task of introducing literature to people who, either through cultural or even purely endocrinal hindrance, have felt themselves to be excluded from the dominant culture, a culture whose entrance fee is a dexterity with written language that they have been, for whatever reason, denied. Overcoming the feelings of segregation and alienation caused by a strange written culture has proven to be the first major obstacle to learning that some of these units, in ways fascinatingly inventive, have set out to address.

A further task of our seminar was more general. The sixty 'professional' and seven 'student' short stories that we encountered in our seminar all traced the often perplexing byways of consciousness, the Freudian landscape, constituted by that densest of all forests, the human mind. If interpretation is difficult where one

group holds the key for which others must grope and flounder, it is all the more thorny when no one, not even the source of a series of actions, seems to understand why they act in the way that they do. So interpretation within the short story engages us in an enterprise of making conjectures concerning a dense fabric of motivations, motivations however, that even the most fastidious author cannot define in any absolute or unequivocal way. For the complement to interpreting the mysteries of the text is exploring the mysteries of the self; external signs are read, but also must be 'read into', and this supplementary aim is that point of juncture where, as we read, we too seem to make our debuts of the printed page.

Therefore our seminar discovered a solution to interpretive problems in seeing the written text as an intersection of writer and reader whose main advantage over other symbolic forms is the access it gives to the often 'written' way that life itself poses its problems to us. Literary interpretation as the interpretation of the self gives no final or absolute meaning to any knotty passage or quandary. But learning how we think about beginning to solve these problems may enhance our ability to survive within that thicket of semiotic leafage that is America today. Many of the best units, then, are informed and lucid inquiries into that symbolic relationship between reader and text, tending finally to confirm that "you are what you read" or perhaps even more "you are *how* you read."

The final goal, to which all units address themselves in one way or another, is historical: to train the mind to recognize and evaluate sequenced sub-units of literary traditions that combine and recombine to form the seemingly integral text. In the seminar we saw how strands of literary usage from the earliest Biblical parables and mythic narratives go into the warp and woof of even the stories of modernists such as Joyce, Kafka, Chekhov, and Lawrence. A reader, once vocabulary and syntax are no longer a problem, and once the barriers between 'reader' and 'text' have softened somewhat, still faces the level of analysis that might be termed 'stylistic'—what are the historical functions of those rhetorics by which the author tailors his or her work: point of view; tone; setting; character; symbolism; allegory; and most importantly, the structuring of a plot. In discussing the history as well as specific contemporary instances of the uses (and misuses) of these devices, we scanned the problems of advanced interpretation, seeing that they are themselves so formidable as to make one think of oneself, once more, as just a beginner.

It is this sense of freshness, this feeling that we have just begun even after we have just ended the last class, that the members of this seminar take away from these months of dedicated and even intensive interaction. These units all exude some of that spirit of discovery, and brim over with useful practical suggestions for actual classroom procedures. These units express a hope that many students and teachers alike will not only learn to find their ways through even the thickest forests of understanding, but also that along the way they will learn to recognize and savor some of those luscious and life-sustaining flowers and plants that they have been overlooking all the time.

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