



Translation Into Reality

Curriculum Unit 88.04.02
by Anthony F. Franco

Two very essential skills for life that seventh and eighth grade students are often than not have difficulty with are the abilities to comprehend what they read and to communicate effectively in their writing. These skills are constantly assessed throughout years of schooling with one inevitable result—too many of our middle school and high school students need remediation in both reading comprehension and writing skills. Our response as teachers to this void in our students' academic progress is a laborious process to attempt to pique their interests in reading with quality literature that has some relevance to their lives. Moreover, we will exhaustively design a series of writing assignments that will not only hold our students' interest to the task at hand but also keep our own spirits alert by the time the overdue third draft wafts lazily upon our desk.

In some ways this present unit reflects an image very similar to all that has transpired in our prior attempts to remediate two skills so vitally important, albeit hardly recognizable, to our students. This unit will address the need for students to read quality, relevant fiction and understand that fiction. This unit will also provide a forum for which the students will write both critically and creatively.

I have elected American short fiction to be the focal point of the reading suggested for this unit. Short fiction seems best suited for my seventh and eighth grade students as the conclusion of the story is with the rap of my students once the first paragraph has been read. Short stories, with their compactness of style and without the sometimes tediousness of character and scene exposition, concentrate on thematic concerns and these notions of theme are exactly what I want my students to regard as their ultimate purpose in the reading of these stories.

The appropriateness of American fiction is another prime tenet of this unit. Fiction written by American authors and concentrating on the American experience will help substantiate the relevance of this reading for my students. To further ascertain and strengthen the bond of relevancy, I have decided that the main characters in each of the stories read will be teenagers. Hopefully, my students will enjoy reading stories that concentrate on members of their own age grouping.

The main focus of this unit will be to read these various selections of short American fiction that deal with teenage protagonists. Students will experience the major themes of each of these selections. These readings will be augmented by a series of questions for discussion designed to help students both to read more critically and to experience the tale more clearly. Students will then react to one or more suggestions or writing that will become part of a collection of writing. Particular attention will be given to what the students say in their

papers rather than the usual heavy emphasis on mechanics. All student writing will be short reactions to the reading compiled in a Log rather than following a multidraft type process. Finally, students may elect to write their own short fiction relating to the particular theme of the story read. These selections will be mandated as class assignments but will become part of the overall writing package.

A wide variety of themes will be covered in the unit through the reading of key short stories that were written in the twentieth century. Such themes will include suicide, alcohol or drug abuse, love, sexual relationships, goal orientation, maturity, and, most importantly, adult-child relationships.

Twentieth-century American short fiction has given us a number of tales that comment upon the themes mentioned above and that concern the age group that we teach. Certainly these themes have become important issues in our society and entire curricular programs have been devised to address them as they all affect our inner city students. Any of our students come to school each day from single parent homes—some where the nuclear family may not even have existed from birth. Some of our students are the target of or witness to parental abuse. Many of our students live in neighborhoods where it is not necessary to participate in fictitious games of “cops and robbers” as these neighborhoods are the substance of real life front page news reports involving drug arrests. It is no small wonder that many of our students find it difficult to spend time reading a story or writing a paper or even coming to school at all with the variety of outside influences that permeate their daily existence. It is no small wonder that critical reading and writing skills require almost continual remediation by the time that students reach the middle school level.

Five years ago I wrote a unit under the auspices of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute entitled “Small Packages.” In many ways this present effort is a continuation of its predecessor that was primarily designed to introduce quality short fiction to my students. The major thrust behind my efforts at that time was the fact that there did not seem to be much quality short fiction in the student anthologies that were available. Since that time the constraints of the seventh and eighth grade curriculum in Language Arts have become more focused through the introduction of a language arts program that has unified the city curriculum but that leaves little time for the pursuit of literature. No appreciable benefit has arisen from the introduction of a companion student anthology in this program. As in the past the publisher’s concerns with theme are basically no different from anthologies introduced thirty and forty years ago. Dad works, mom tends house, and little Jimmy and Sally try to figure out how to stop their pet dog, Buffy, from digging up Mrs. Smith’s rose garden. All’s well that ends well in these picturesque tales from suburbia that have no relevance whatsoever for our inner city students.

Whereas the previous short story unit I devised introduced quality short fiction to students with a particular regard to the genre, this present effort deals more with questions and concerns of theme. This effort can be used as a companion to the previous unit or by itself. The previous unit deals mainly with short fiction from a variety of authors and concerns all the elements of the short story; this unit deals exclusively with questions of theme that can be translated into the reality that is my students’ everyday experience.

There are certainly numerous stories that should be used within the context of this unit. Anyone using this unit can feel free to substitute favorite stories for the ones I am suggesting below. The particular stories I am choosing were all written in the twentieth century although none are very recent. These are stories that have passed the test of time. The tone of most of them is quite subtle and sedate when compared to more modern short stories of the last ten to fifteen years. None of my selections include what might be considered particularly offensive language or even street vernacular. This is done purposefully as my reading audience is seventh and eighth grade. High school teachers may readily use stories that include such language as their

audience would be necessarily more mature. In any event, the themes of my stories are controversial enough and contribute to the overall purpose of the unit sufficiently to allow for high interest reading, spirited discussion, and thematic ideas for writing.

The plan of the unit is quite simple. Students will read a particular story, participate in a class discussion, and write in response to a specific writing suggestion. My intention is to assign one short story per week for a period of ten weeks. More capable classes may be able to read and react to two or even three stories within a week's time although the demands of the seventh and eighth grade language arts curriculum may inhibit teachers at that level from doubling the assignments.

The questions for discussion will not only attempt to highlight the specific theme offered in the story but will also emphasize a particular focus of the element of a short story. The elements of short fiction that will be concentrated upon will include those that are closely aligned to the general tenet of the unit. Elements such as character, setting, and point of view will be the keys that unlock the story for my students. These, it seems, are conventions that not only could be more easily understood by the novice reader of short fiction but also are readily translated into the reality I hope my students can sense as they read these fictional accounts. I hope that my students (character) in their particular environment (setting) can appreciate their being (point of view) based upon the stories read. The end result will be an understanding of fiction as that fiction becomes the reality of their own existence,

The suggestions for writing that follow the discussion questions are designed to concentrate solely on the theme embodied within the story. Students will have a choice in the selection of these writing assignments which can be classified as reaction papers. No particular length will be specified for these responses to the reading although it is hoped that each student will attempt to write at least one page for each assignment. All student writing will be kept in individual writing folders throughout the course of the unit.

LESSON PLANS

Synopses of Stories/Discussion Questions/Writing Suggestions

I have chosen ten stories as the core reading matter of this unit although they are in no way to be regarded as the only examples of short fiction which would work well in such a unit. Interestingly enough, five of the stories have as at least a partial backdrop the school environment. I list each of the stories below with a very brief synopsis that in no way is intended to be complete. Anyone wishing to use this unit should read the stories first before deciding which ones to use or which ones to eliminate.

“Paul’s Case” by Willa Cather

This story is a classic example of the type of short story for which this unit was designed. The story centers on Paul, a boy in his upper teens, who dislikes the authority of a school environment that is permeated by discipline. Paul knows how to play the game when it comes to dealing with school personnel, but he really has no interest in anything but the arts and the good life. Paul's theft of funds for an excursion to New York and his subsequent suicide upon his return to Pittsburgh certainly provide an enormous amount of material for class discussion and short reaction papers. To begin our study of short fiction key questions for discussion should be submitted to our students. Cather concentrates heavily on the development of her character, Paul. While the

themes of alienation and suicide are central to our study here, it is only appropriate that an examination of character be undertaken so as to broaden our study of short fiction. Discussion questions should thus be geared to an examination of the character that Paul represents. Samples of these questions follow:

1. What type of young person is Paul?
2. Why do you suppose Paul was so moody?
3. Did Paul make friends easily?
4. What was Paul's chief aim in life?
5. Did you discover anything in Paul's character that would make you like him?
6. Do we find out more about Paul from what the author tells us, or do we understand him by what he says?
7. Do you agree with Paul's course of action at the end of the story?
8. Have you ever known anyone that resembled Paul?
9. Are there any other characters in the story that are important?

Writing Suggestions

1. Comment upon a person you know that reminds you of Paul.
2. Write about a time you felt like Paul.
3. If you knew Paul what would you say to him in order to help him?

“The Promise” by Ramona Stewart

Stewart's story focuses on a teenage girl who wants to attend public school rather than remain enrolled in a private school environment. The girl's wishes are complicated by the fact that she comes from a home with divorced parents. Her mother drinks and does not make decisions without the input of her estranged husband who still very much dominates the household. The underlying themes of life in a broken home and a parent's abuse of alcohol should spur some lively discussion.

As with “Paul's Case” this story makes great use of character and this element should be emphasized in the

questions for discussion.

1. Describe briefly the characters in “The Promise.”
2. Are the characters “flat” (possessing only one or two traits) or “round” (multi-dimensional)?
3. How would you say Ann resembles Paul from the last story? How are they different?
4. Do we know why Ann’s parents are divorced?
5. What role does the divorce play in the story?
6. Is Ann’s mother strong or weak character in the story?
7. Does Louise’s drinking add or detract from the story’s purpose?

Writing Suggestions

1. Comment upon the problem of alcohol abuse and its effect upon families,
2. Write about single parent families and the problems they face.
3. Tell how you would react if you were Ann.

“One With Shakespeare” by Martha Foley

This story concentrates on a young schoolgirl named Elizabeth who lives in Boston. Elizabeth receives ultimate praise from her English teacher and immediately focuses on becoming a writer. This almost exclusive future goal is wholeheartedly supported by her peers but is received rather ambivalently by her mother when Elizabeth returns home. The importance of goal setting and a discussion of parental support and involvement in teenage decision making should contribute much to the unit. Foley’s story highlights the character of Elizabeth. A further emphasis on character is needed here and questions for discussion should reflect this.

1. How do we learn about Elizabeth? What role does her dialogue play in the story? How important are her thoughts?
2. How important is Elizabeth’s English teacher in the story?
3. How would you describe Elizabeth’s friends?
4. Although we do not meet Elizabeth’s mother until the end of the story, how important is her appearance?
5. In what ways is Elizabeth like Paul from “Paul’s Case”?

6. Are Elizabeth and Ann from “The Promise” similar in any way?

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell about whether you have ever had a goal or a dream.
2. Write about what you consider to be a family’s responsibilities to its members.
3. What role should a teacher take in the education of a student?

“Too Early Spring” by Stephen Vincent Benet

Benet’s story which is told in the first person by his teenage protagonist, Charles Peters, deals with first love. Charles, a sophomore on the high school basketball team, meets a classmate by the name of Helen Sharon one summer. Their relationship progresses through the school year and seems platonic until one fateful evening when Helen invites Charles into her home and they are discovered the next morning by her parents. I trust my students as well as yours will have much to say regarding the interpretation of events as very artistically portrayed by Benet in this story. This story has several important scenes: the summer vacation spot, school, the abandoned house in the country, and Helen’s house. Beginning with this story an emphasis on setting should prevail in the questions for discussion. Certainly, questions concerning character as evidenced in the earlier stories read are just as important here; I only wish to transfer the emphasis to questions involving setting so as to introduce another important element of short fiction.

1. Describe the importance of the lake, the school, the abandoned house, and Helen’s house as each relates to the story.
 2. Would Charles and Helen have had a relationship if they had not been at the lake during the summer?
 3. How important is the fact that Charles played basketball in relation to the story?
 4. Are Charles and Helen like any of the characters we have met thus far? How are they different?
 5. Briefly discuss the other characters in the story. How are they important to the story?

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell whether you have a favorite place where you go and in where you are happy.
2. Comment upon whether you have ever felt toward another person as Charles and Helen did.
3. State briefly what you would have done if you were Helen's mother.

“Silent Snow, Secret Snow” by Conrad Forter Aiken

This particularly intriguing story by Aiken deals with the imaginative meanderings of a twelve year old boy, Paul Hasleman. Paul is engulfed by a blizzard with his mind; all he thinks about is the presence of snow. Paul's obsession with his fantasy reaches a startling climax in the story's last scene when he voices his hatred for his mother after she intrudes upon his space and following a grueling session with her, his father, and the family doctor. The story is rich in symbolism and should prove a worthy selection for my students' interpretations. Aiken's story provides our students with their biggest reading challenge thus far in the unit due to its complexities and symbolism. Teachers of more mature or capable students might want to expand upon the series of questions listed below by delving into an in-depth analysis of the story. I will concentrate on setting and character for my students as is reflected in the questions for discussion.

1. This story has four sections and four major scenes: the classroom, the neighborhood, Paul's home, and Paul's bedroom. What is the significance of each and how does the author use each scene to further his story?
 2. Is Paul Hasleman similar to any of the characters we have met thus far?
 3. How is the snow similar to the idea of the symphony in “Paul's Case”?
 4. In which setting does Paul feel most comfortable? Why?

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell whether you have ever felt like Paul and why.
2. Describe the sounds you hear and the feelings you have when you go to sleep or wake up.
3. State how you would deal with Paul if you were his parent.

“Down in the Reeds by the Hiver” by Victoria Lincoln

Victoria Lincoln’s story written in the first person through her character, Connie, details an incident of adult-child sexual contact. Although the story is not told in an urban setting as most of our other selections, the theme of an almost fifteen year old girl approaching womanhood is poignant and necessary for inclusion in the unit. Lincoln’s very tasteful rendering of the incident which features an older man placing his hands on the teenager and her subsequent emotions and feelings throughout the remainder of the story should prove to keep discussion heated. Moral behavior and the question of adult-child relationships should spur a good number of interpretative writing reactions. It is interesting that this story that focuses on a form of first sexual experience for its main character, Connie, is told in the first person just as “Too Early Spring” was told in its treatment of first love. Since this is our first experience in a rural setting, the discussion questions will emphasize this fact as well as examine the story’s characters.

1. What is a shanty town?
2. Could this story have happened in an urban area?
3. What kind of people lived in the village?
4. Is Connie a static character (unchanged from the beginning of the story to the end) or a dynamic character (changes from the beginning to the end)? What kind of man is Mr. deRocca?
5. Of what significance is the river in the story?

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell how you would have reacted if you were Connie.
2. State what you feel is an adult’s responsibility toward a teenager.
3. Comment on an experience that you might have had from which you learned something about life?

“The Apprentice” by Dorothy Canfield Fisher

This story deals with the imaginative injustices of Peg’s parents toward her. Essentially, the tale is about Peg’s search for her lost dog, Rollie. Underlying this action, however, is the girl’s feelings of alienation toward her parents as exhibited by her stream of consciousness thoughts throughout the story. In many ways Peg is very typical of how many teenagers feel toward their parents. Hopefully, some of my students can see themselves in this story and realize that their relationship with their own parents need not be so strained. After having concentrated on character development in the first three stories read and coupling character with the

importance of setting in the next three stories, it is important to discuss a third element apparent in short fiction—point of view. “The Apprentice” offers a perfect story by which to examine point of view with its constant stream of consciousness exhibited by its main character, Peg. Of course, questions of character and setting will also be discussed.

1. Who tells the story? (Here several terms such as omniscient, limited omniscient, first person, and objective will be introduced to the students and their differences will be explained.)

2. How is this point of view effective for developing the theme of the story?
3. Is Peg a flat or round character? Static or developing?
4. How important is the setting in the story?
5. Describe Peg’s relationship with her other.

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell whether you have ever felt toward your parents as Peg felt toward hers.
2. Describe how you feel toward your pet.
3. State whether you agree or disagree with Peg and how she felt in the story.

“The Downward Path to Wisdom” by Katherine Anne Porter

Katherine Anne Porter’s story is another example of how children perceive their family. This story deals with a very young child but is important for inclusion here since it may remind my students of how feelings get started and could assist them in helping their siblings to avoid the same mishaps, Porter’s story featuring young Stephen highlights the sometimes insensitive meanderings of grownups and illustrates what could happen to a child emotionally in that type of environment. This story lends itself very easily to our continuing examination of point of view. The richness of Porter’s dialogue enhances the story and affirms the problems that little Stephen has in his perceptions of his family.

1. From what point of view is this story told?

2. Is this point of view effective in developing the theme of the story?
- 3-We met many characters in this story. Which ones do you like and why? Which characters are not so likable? Why?
4. Is the setting of the story an effective tool in the story’s development?

5. How is Stephen like some of the other characters we have met?

Writing Suggestion

1. Tell whether you have ever felt like Stephen either now or when you were younger.
2. Describe how you feel toward a younger brother or sister.
3. State whether you have ever been helpless in dealing with adults.

“Thus I Refute Ceelzy” by John Collier

Collier’s fantasy may on the surface not seem appropriate for this unit because of its fantastic final scene but, after all, I am entitled to my fun, too. Needless to say, this classic concentrates on parent-child relationships and offers a new twist. Perhaps I can have my students’ parents read the tale as well and elicit their comments for classroom discussion. The alternative to reading Collier, or perhaps the sequel to reading Collier would be Ray Bradbury’s “The Veldt”. Throughout the unit we have read and discussed fiction that, for the most part, is believable and can easily cross over into reality. It should be relatively easy for my students to see themselves or others in all the previous stories. Collier’s story works in much the same way until its final scene. Here fantasy takes over and, as much as the translation of that final scene into reality might be an impossibility, it offers the student a new element heretofore not discussed in relation to short fiction.

1. Why do you think Collier chose to end this story the way he did? Is it effective?
2. Who are the main characters in the story? How does Collier develop them?
3. What is the setting of the story? Is it effective?
4. Through whose point of view is the story told?

Writing Suggestions

1. Tell whether you have ever invented a secret friend.
2. State whether you have ever tried to convince your parents of something and were unsuccessful.
3. Describe how you feel parents should deal with their children’s imagination.

“I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen

No matter what stories are read in the implementation of this unit, no matter what deletions or substitutions of stories find their way to my students, this particular story will culminate our study. Olsen’s story is told from a mother’s point of view regarding her child. It is a warm and sometimes frightening portrayal of the hardships a family may have to face in the day to day existence of living. It remains a favorite tale of many that needs to be read by students and adults whenever possible. With Olsen’s story we come to the culmination of this unit. This is the time at which we can wrap up our discussion of the various elements of the short story and how they contribute to the theme. Because this story is written so differently from the rest, we can reflect upon what has developed throughout the course of the unit and what each of the stories mean to each of us. Since this story concerns the remembrances of a mother, it may be more purposeful to allow the teacher to read the story to the class and then reflect upon its meaning.

1. Who is the main character in the story?
2. How does Olsen develop the character of the mother?
3. Is the daughter in the story similar to any of the characters we have met?
4. What is the setting of the story? Does the setting ever change? If so, how?
5. From whose point of view is the story told? How effective is the point of view in the development of the theme?

Writing Suggestions

1. Compare the mother in the story to someone you know.
2. Describe the person you care for the most.
3. Tell about what you consider to be a child’s chief responsibilities to a parent.

Culminating Writing Assignment

1. Choose your favorite story from the unit. Tell why it is your choice. What did you like most about it? Would you like to read other stories like it? Would you like to read other stories by the same author?

2. Choose your favorite character from the stories in the unit. Why do you like this character? Does the character remind you of yourself or of someone else? The ultimate goal of this unit has been multidimensional. First, quality short fiction has been introduced to my students. Secondly, various elements of the short story have been discussed including character, setting, and point of view. Thirdly, and most importantly, stories with specific themes that are part of my students' everyday existence have been read with the hope that the students will become more resolved in their efforts to confront these problems and conquer whatever challenges face them. If reading a story concerning fictional characters and events can assist a student in meeting a similar challenge in real life and help that student fully realize his or her potential despite that challenge, then this unit will be a success. If my students can translate these fictional episodes into their own reality and benefit by it, then the experience afforded by this unit will be worthwhile. A translation into reality can be a transfusion of hope and promise into a bloodstream that is troubled by a negativeness and hopelessness that often clots one's existence and very being. I feel this unit will serve its purpose by initiating this transfusion.

Bibliography

Student Headings

"Paul's Case" by Willa Cather

(Story and Structure/Two and Twenty)

"The Promise" by Amona Stewart

(Two and Twenty)

"One With Shakespeare" by Martha Foley

(Two and Twenty)

"Too Early Spring" by Stephen Vincent Benet

(Two and Twenty)

"Silent Snow, Secret Snow" by Conrad Porter Aiken

(Two and Twenty)

"Down in the Heeds by the River" by Victoria Lincoln

(Two and Twenty)

"The Apprentice" by Dorothy Canfield Fisher

(Two and Twenty)

"The Downward Path to Wisdom" by Katherine Anne Porter

(Story and Structure)

“Thus I Refute Beelzy” by John Collier

(Story and Structure)

“I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen

(Women and Fiction)

Note: Xerox copies of all stories are available from the Teachers Institute library of materials.

Teacher Bibliography

Cahill, Susan, ed. *Women and Fiction*. New York: Mentor Books, 1975. An excellent collection of quality short fiction written by women.

Cassill, J., ed. *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978. An excellent collection of short stories that can provide alternative story choices for the ser of this unit.

Franco, Anthony F. “Small Packages”. Vol. III, *Reading the Twentieth Century Short Story*. New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers’ Institute, 1983. The forerunner of this particular effort which encompasses a very different strategy for the introduction of short fiction to students. Users of the current unit are advised to scan this unit for possible implementation also.

Loban, Walter, et al, ed. *Teaching Language arid Literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1969. Contains an extensive bibliography of short stories and numerous ideas for the teaching of literature.

Perrine, Laurence. *Story and Structure*. New York: Harcourt, B race, & World, Inc., 1966. Very useful for its clear and concise descriptions of the various elements of the short story as well as a fine selection of quality short fiction.

Singleton, Ralph H., ed. *Two and Twenty—A Collection of Short tories*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1962. One of the first anthologies of short fiction that deals with form and genre in a brilliantly written introduction. Many of the stories in the unit are contained in this anthology.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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