



The Mystery of the Undiscovered Values

Curriculum Unit 89.04.01
by Bill Coden

Fifth-grade students have an affinity for mystery and detective fiction. The fifth-graders' guiding principle of what is right and fair is satisfied by the tidy conclusion of a mystery story. Given to analyze the motives of him/herself and others, the fifth-grader is drawn to the psychological elements of mystery and detective fiction, exercising and improving his/her reasoning skills. Perhaps curiosity and a touch of paranoia add to the enjoyment of this genre, which deals with essential and urgent problems.

In my unit, I will:

- present a short history of dime novels, stressing their relationship to detective fiction and moral education;
- place the discussion of dime novels in an historical context; and
- discuss the elements of mystery and detective fiction which will foster the growth of values clarification, careful reading, active thinking, and decision-making skills. The development of personal integrity, a characteristic of detective fiction, will be stressed.

"Undiscovered Values" will be a year-long unit because I see each of my groups once a week. Our study of mystery and detective fiction will become part of the creative problem-solving/higher level thinking skills my co-teacher and I include in our curriculum.

I hope that my students will examine the lives they are living as well as the work we do in class. I believe strongly that the former is influenced by the latter, just as I believe strongly that human values can and must be taught in the classroom. Such education has strong implications for our collective future; because this is so, the importance of values/moral education must not be minimized. When I introduce my students to values/moral education, I am teaching them survival skills.

I. DIME NOVELS

The spread of literacy and the print media fed the nineteenth century desire for history, mystery, and edification. Story papers (newspapers devoted to fiction) were wildly popular in urban areas. ¹ By and large, story paper fiction was serialized, assuring the purchase of the next edition. This can be likened to the format of television series in which there are numerous short takes and multiple climaxes.

Dime novels were popular and readily available to their vast public of middle- and lower-class workers and youth roughly from 1860 to the end of the nineteenth century. The novels were about 100 pages in length, varied in price, and were issued monthly. Each novel was complete in itself; many spawned companion tales or sequels.

The world of and represented by the dime novels was distinctly different from the literary fiction of the nineteenth century (e.g ., Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*) and from the popular fiction of genteel culture (Mary Janvrin's *The Frozen Heart*). ² The term "dime novel" was used to connote sensational detective or blood-and-thunder novels in pamphlet form. Because the dime novel depended on the newly-acquired ability to read, its prose remained elementary. Dime novels never reached the rhetorical range of finely crafted novels, though often their stories were as powerful.

In 1860, the United States was close to its not-too-distant past (the Revolution, the War of 1812) and poised on the brink of calamity (the Civil War). Early numbers in dime novel series dealt with the hardships, defeats, and triumphs of frontier pioneers and fostered the growth of the strong, silent type who metamorphosed into a detective when transferred to the city. The frontier adventures make up the majority of dime novel titles.

Other titles might be referred to as "rip-offs" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . In 1860 sentiment both for and against the abolition of slavery was strong. It is difficult to know accurately the influence dime novels may have had on their readers' beliefs and values, but certainly there must have been some influence.

It is felt that in the early years of publication, the novels gave fairly accurate depictions of the daily lives, struggles, and adventures of their characters. ³ As time went on and competition in this mass cultural medium became fierce, verisimilitude suffered.

Only about ten percent of the dime novels were detective fiction, with only five percent of those titles set in urban areas. ⁴ More often than not, the detectives were portrayed as adventure heroes with a peculiar penchant for disguises and varying accents. The use of disguises and accents would occasionally resurface in later mysteries and thrillers, notably in John Buchan's *The Thirty - Nine Steps* . Such devices seem more appropriate to adventure stories rather than to tales of mystery and detection. Most of the dime novel tales required the suspension of belief and plausibility. The plots of many dime detective novels were closely associated with theatrical melodramas, or were often constructed out of the events reported in daily and weekly newspapers. These events would serve as the basis for flights of fancy; rarely were the stories narratives of what actually happened.

It is too easy—and perhaps inaccurate—to say that dime novel detective fiction is simply the Western transplanted to the city, though emphasis on incident rather than on plot is a common thread. "Mysteries of the city" was the first genre of dime novel fiction to achieve a huge success. The stories, set in small towns and large cities, told of urban squalor, elite decadence, and criminal underworlds. These "mysteries" are more

accurately viewed as narratives of exposure (of vice, of injustice) than as narratives of detection. Their appeal, based in part on their localized settings and politics, was primarily to working-class men and women. ⁵

Dime novels were considered to be “moral” publications, in the opinion of their publishers and many critics. In instructions to its authors, the proprietors of Beadle and Company, one of the largest producers of dime novels, cautioned: ⁶

We prohibit all things offensive to good taste, in expression or incident

We prohibit subjects or characters that carry an immoral taint. . . .

We prohibit the repetition of any occurrence which, though true, is yet better untold

We prohibit what cannot be read with satisfaction by every right-minded person—old and young alike.

The reputation for corruption, luridness, and gross sensationalism attributed to dime novels should more accurately be ascribed to pulp magazines, which signalled the end of the dime novels’ popularity in the early part of the twentieth century. The authors of many dime novels included and promulgated their moral beliefs and values in their work. Many of these authors were teachers, clergymen, and newspaper editors. William Everett, in a criticism of dime novels, found them to be morally unobjectionable, though their style and composition left much to be desired. ⁷ The publishers of dime novels could pride themselves on products which were cheap and cheaply sensational—but not immoral.

II. MORAL EDUCATION AND VALUES CLARIFICATION

The moral education offered by dime novels is more correctly called moralizing: the direct inculcation of an adult’s values upon the young. This method is less effective now than in the past, when it was easier to define “desirable” values. ⁸ I am as uncomfortable with this method of education as I am with adopting a laissez-faire attitude. I do not believe that students will make “right” and beneficial decisions if they’ve not had the opportunity or experience of determining their ideals and values, their sense of right and wrong; stating their beliefs and reasons; responding to what they’re taught; choosing. Our students are trying to find moral answers for themselves through the daily steps they take, noticing what is just, what is unjust, making their decisions. ⁹

Values clarification education offers the opportunity of choosing. Values clarification is concerned with the process of valuing rather than with the content of a person’s values. This approach, formulated by Louis Rath, holds that valuing is composed of seven sub-processes:

1. Prizing and cherishing one’s beliefs and behaviors;
2. Publicly affirming beliefs, when appropriate;

3. Choosing one's beliefs and behaviors from alternatives;
4. Choosing after consideration of consequences;
5. Choosing freely;
6. Acting on one's beliefs; and
7. Acting with a pattern, consistency, and repetition.

Students involved in this approach actively apply these processes to already-formed beliefs and behavior patterns and to those still emerging. ¹⁰ To enable my students to do this, I must offer opportunities which will help my students become aware of the beliefs and behaviors they cherish. I must help them become aware of alternatives and consequences. The work we do in class, to be of any value, must lead to action, not merely analysis and reflection. We can lay the foundation for action.

I feel there is ample opportunity to do this by incorporating the values clarification approach into our subject matter, rather than presenting it as an isolated activity. Detective fiction, centering as it does on breaches of morality, seems an ideal vehicle for employing the values clarification approach. Some of the premises which underlie the creation of detective fiction are: ¹¹

1. There is such a thing as cause and effect in the universe.
2. The human mind and computers can solve problems—provided they are fed enough correct information.
3. Much of this correct information is collected through luck, careful observation, and hard work.
4. Good detective stories attempt to minimize luck and coincidence as much as possible.
5. The human mind is fascinated by its own ability to think.

I will incorporate questions centering on values issues into our discussion of and writing about the stories of mystery, detection, and suspense in this unit. In order to get my students to become alert, active readers I must go beyond the “directed reading activity” approach and ask questions which really require students to think. Many of us learned to read—and were taught to teach reading—through involvement with the directed reading activity method. Briefly:

1. Teacher provides vocabulary and background material for the reading selection; tells students

- what the selection is about, and provides a purpose for reading;
2. The story is read;
 3. The teacher asks questions which check comprehension through literal recall, interpretation, and judgment.

When discussion begins, it is all too obvious that students are going for the “right” answer, for the important details and ideas have already been decided upon. When “thought” questions are asked to encourage divergent thinking, students may be loath to answer for they’re used to going for the one right answer. Questions formed using the values clarification approach would help circumvent this. Piquing students’ curiosity by asking them to speculate about what they might read in a story will be stressed. Students will have to think in a logical manner about possible story directions, as they try to anticipate what will happen based on the few clues they’ve been given. They will hypothesize as they continue to read, speculate, and draw on their own experiences and beliefs. Students will be encouraged to *think*, justify opinions with evidence from the text, consider alternatives. ¹²

The time structure for T.A.G. classes dictates that short stories be used in this unit. This dictate is a happy example of poetic justice, for in America the detective story began as a short story with Poe’s Dupin. Tightly-woven short stories of detection deal with the unusual rather than the commonplace and demand a more active involvement on the part of the reader, as he/she follows the “ideal reader” in the story, the detective. The detective story depends on a reader who perceives himself as a super-reader, not an ordinary or casual one, following the material details of a story or identifying with the characters. ¹³ A major drawback with using short stories is that false leads all too often cannot be followed. The reasoning process may seem too pat, for it must be compressed.

Stories of detection and suspense, dealing as they do with violations of the social order, dovetail nicely with the values clarification approach. Stories which will be included in this unit have been chosen with particular attention paid to student interest, reader involvement, and application of the values clarification approach. I feel all the stories will help students develop better insights into themselves, their values, and the world they live in.

I’ve adapted an approach to formulating questions suggested by Leland and Mary Howe in *Personalizing Education*. After selecting the topic or theme I want to teach, I set up a grid labeled Fact, Concepts, Personal Experience, and Personal Values. Fact questions have right and wrong answers. Concept questions do not have clear-cut answers; they require thinking which results in a reasonable explanation. Personal experience questions will help the students to relate the facts and concepts to their own lives. Personal values questions and activities ask students to take positions on values issues related to the story under study. For the purposes of this unit, the questioning approach will be used primarily with mysteries. I believe it can be used with a variety of literature, and look forward to doing so.

“The Mother Goose Madman” by Betty Ren Wight is a tale of revenge. Julia Martell, an editor of children’s books, is being terrorized by a person whose threats, with allusions to Mother Goose tales, arrive in the mail. The safety of Julia’s world and apartment is violated. After some fairly elementary detection work, Julia learns the identity of her tormentor— almost too late.

In working through values-related questions for “The Mother Goose Madman,” my questionnaire would look like the grid on the following page.

In teaching this and other stories in the unit, a routine presentation would help deal with time constraints. After being told the title of the story we’re about to read, students will be asked to speculate about the story. All predictions are acceptable. Students will read until there’s a natural break in the story and will decide whether they want to stick with their predictions. Students are now asked to predict what will happen next and tell why they think so, relying on their logical reasoning. The discussion after reading would center on personal experience and values questions but not to the omission of fact and concept questions.

My fifth grade reader-detectives can participate in, think about, solve, and discuss baffling tales of mystery and suspense while discovering important aspects of their selves. The “Why?” question which unlocks the motive at the heart of a mystery can be tied in to values education. “Why?” will help students identify their values and realize their importance.

FACTS

1. What Mother Goose rhymes are mentioned in the story?
2. What is the plot of this story?
3. Who was the major character?

CONCEPTS

1. In what ways did the tormentor relate the “punishment” to each rhyme?
2. What was the cause of the desire for revenge?
3. How would you describe the kind of life she led?

EXPERIENCE

1. Have you ever been really frightened in your life? What caused this fright?
2. Have you ever wanted to seek revenge against someone? What did you do about it?
3. How would you describe the kind of life you lead?

VALUES

1. Do you think fear can bring something positive to your life? Can dealing with fear?
2. How do you feel about revenge? Does seeking revenge make sense?
3. If you could reorder or redo the life you lead, what would it be like?

The short stories we will read and discuss will follow the plan detailed in the unit. There will be a variety of activities, however, all stressing the values clarification approach.

Lesson Plan # 1

YOU ARE THE DETECTIVE

Sharpening their powers of observation and selecting something they own to represent themselves, students play detective to establish the identity of someone in class through material possessions.

One student volunteers to be the detective; he or she leaves the room.

All the other students, except one, select one recognizable item from their person, desk, or bookbag to represent them. The objects are placed in a central location.

The conceit of the game is that an alleged crime has been committed by the student who didn't leave a clue. The detective must carefully examine each of the clues, using his/her knowledge of classmates to match up belongings with owners.

As he/she returns items, he/she should explain why a specific item is being returned to a specific person.

All items should be returned to their rightful owners, thus determining the student who didn't leave a clue.

Once a mistake is made, the detective is “out.” The game begins again with a new detective and new clues.

This inventorying activity stresses choosing and prizing values and careful listening.

Lesson Plan # 2

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The class is divided into small groups (three or four students). Each group is given a list of clues (items to find). Students are to name something they *all* like and *all* dislike under each category. One point is given for each consensus reached.

In the second half of the activity, detectives search for experiences they *all* have had in common. Three points are given for each common experience listed.

A “secretary” in each group will record likes and dislikes.

Some items for the first part of the activity might include:

game (outdoor)	game (indoor)
TV show	food
chore at home	school subject
animal	day of the week

For the second part of the activity, some suggestions are:

- something they’ve done on their own about which they’re proud;
- a time when they felt left out;
- a time when they were uncomfortable in school;
- a time when their parents made them very happy;
- a time when they made their parents very happy.

When students write mysteries, they’re testing their reasoning power to some degree. They enjoy seeking out information, controlling dramatic situations, drawing conclusions, and making critical decisions.

Lesson Plan # 3

CRIMEBUSTER

You enter a room (Where? What room? Why are you there?) just in time to see an unidentified person fleeing.

In the room you find indications of a crime (What is it?)

Suddenly you notice something that the criminal may have left behind. You know who the owner of the object is. You think you know who the criminal is! (What is the object? To whom does it belong, and how do you know? If he/she is the criminal, what might his/her motive be?)

You may decide to give your information to the police or you may decide to confront him/her with the clue.

Write a dialogue between you and him/her. (What story are you told?)

NOTES

1. Larry N. Landrum, *et al.*, *Dimensions of Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1976), p. 3.
2. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 4.
3. Albert Johannsen, *The House of Beadle and Adams* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), p. 5.
4. Landrum, *op. cit.*
5. Denning, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-117.
6. Edmund Pearson, *Dime Novels* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1929), p. 96.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
8. Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe, Howard Kirschenbaum, *Values Clarification* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, Inc., 1972), p. 16.
9. Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), pp. 3-15.
10. Simon, pp. 19-20.
11. Louis Phillips, "The Oddly Colored Thread: Logic in Detective Fiction," *The Armchair Detective*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer '83, pp. 310-13.
12. Denise Nessel, "Do Your Students Think When They Read?," *Learning* 89, April, pp. 55-58.
13. Charles E. May, "Why Did Detective Fiction Make Its Debut in the Short Story Format?," *The Armchair Detective*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Winter '87, pp. 77-81.

Student Reading List

Bradbury, Ray. "The Town Where No One Got Off."

A tale of suspense, centering on the desire to commit the "perfect crime."

Doyle, Arthur Conan. "The Adventure of the Blue Diamond."

An exercise in deduction assumes importance as connections with a crime are made. The lesson: forgive and forget.

____. "The Adventures of the Speckled Band."

A locked room mystery which hinges on "detecting" rather than on "seeing."

Jackson, Shirley. "Louisa, Please Come Home."

A mysterious tale, rather than a tale of mystery. Again, seeing/not seeing is a theme.

Saki. "The Open Window."

An expert young "storyteller," *i.e.*, liar, creates havoc.

Tellez, Hernando. "Lather and Nothing Else."

A suspense tale centering on a revolutionary's thoughts as he considers committing murder. Surprise ending.

Wright, Betty Ren. "The Mother Goose Madman."

All stories listed above are widely anthologized. I will add other stories to the unit once I am teaching it.

Teacher Bibliography

Coles, Robert. *The Moral Life of Children*. Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

A child psychiatrist's attempt to uncover the psychology of the everyday lives of children, following Anna Freud's lead in devising a "methodology" of observing ordinary children. Most helpful in its discussion of character formation.

Denning, Michael. *Mechanic Accents : Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*. London: Verso, 1987.

An examination of one of the first mass media and its place in the culture of American working people, arguing that the concerns and "accents" of workers are paramount in the stories.

Johannsen, Albert. *The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950.

An entertaining account of the phenomenon of dime novels: their history and production; their creators, artistic and commercial; their hayday and their demise.

Lambert, Gavin. *The Dangerous Edge* . New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976.

An examination of the creative approach, along with biographical material, of several writers of mystery.

Landrum, Larry N., Pat Brown, Ray B. Browne, eds. *Dimension s of Detective Fiction* . Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1976.

A collection of essays which examines and explains the genre and its extensions (alienation; experimental fiction) and style.

May, Charles E. "Why Did Detective Fiction Make Its Debut in the Short Story Format?," in *The Armchair Detective* , Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter '87), pp. 77-81.

An interesting discussion of the role of the reader in and of detective fiction. Reinforces the place of careful reading.

Nessel, Denise. "Do Your Students Think When They Read?," in *Learning 89* , April, pp. 55-58.

An explication of the "directed reading activity" and how it can be improved so that students become more actively involved in reading and thinking.

Pearson, Edmund A. *Dime Novels ; or , Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* . Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929.

A breezy examination of dime novels: their times, their readership, their morality. There are several extended excerpts from dime novels which can be better sampled at Beinecke.

Phillips, Louis. "The Oddly Colored Thread: Logic in Detective Fiction," in *The Armchair Detective* , Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 310-13.

An exploration of logic and reasoning (some of it faulty) in short detective fiction.

Simon, Sidney B., Leland W. Howe, Howard Kirschenbaum, *Values Clarification : A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* , New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1972.

A manual which presents a philosophy and offers a large number of ways to practice what you preach. Suggested activities are easily adaptable to a variety of subject areas and age and grade levels. Invaluable.

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