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Plot, Character and Setting: A Study of Mystery and Detective Fiction

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Introduction

When reading and discussing short stories with students in the sixth, seventh or eighth grades, much time is spent in figuring out the plot. Focusing on the central problem in a story forces students to understand the motivation of the characters. Why do the characters act the way they do? Amazingly, many students will read stories without ever considering the problem presented by the author, and then they end up totally confused about what they have read. After working with plot until students begin to ask themselves, what is the problem in this story, characters and setting can be discussed more clearly. The pieces make more sense once the motivation of the action is understood.

Reading mystery and detective fiction is a splendid means of accomplishing plot recognition. Detective fiction allows students to get in tune with the author, and then with the characters in a book. While reading a mystery, the young person is forced to listen to the author much more than in other types of literature. Therefore, the focus on plot brings about a clearer understanding of how an author goes about contriving his tale. While enjoying a good book the student is also learning how a good author works. Once a student's grasp of plot is firm, the further study of character and setting will make more sense.

In this unit I want to share my love for mystery and detective fiction with the students in my classes. I am also continuously striving to find different ways of improving writing skills. By reading mysteries I can show students elements of writing technique that are not so clear in other types of literature. Much of the unit will be spent reading and discussing various mysteries and detective fiction, both short stories and novels. While the length of material read will depend on reading levels, an above-average sixth grader can be a remarkably astute reader. A problem of social maturation or sophistication may arise with some adult mysteries, but this problem can be dealt with by excerpting from novels that are examples of hard-boiled detective fiction.

Students need to be reminded that the setting of a short story or novel is the place where the action occurs, and also the historical period in which the action happens. Setting can be the primary motivational factor in mysteries, forcing characters to do and say whatever is said and done. Edgar Allen Poe's gloomy and dire prison in "The Pit and the Pendulum", or the Mardi Gras in "The Cask of Amontillado" are forces that have as much to do with shaping the plot as the characters themselves. As in understanding the setting of a story, students need also learn how to study characters in a story or novel. How does the author develop his characters? Does each character speak to the reader thereby revealing his nature, or does the author describe

each character directly for the reader? Students who learn to read with these critical skills will be better readers, writers and their love of both reading and writing will be strengthened.

Background: The Formal vs. The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel

In two essays, George Grella (Winks, ed.: 1988) provides the students of mystery fiction with a marvelous historical perspective of detective and mystery writing. In the first essay, "The Formal Detective Novel", Grella lays out the elements of a very British form of writing. Typically a group of people gathered in an isolated location discover that one among them has been murdered. The police are helpless, and it takes an outsider to look again at all the facts and deduce the solution, putting the guilty person safely away. The formula is scrupulously duplicated from one novel to another and continues to amuse and amaze. According to Grella, the central puzzle may make this form of mystery writing so appealing. Matching wits against the detective provides the pleasure. Of course, two sides to the puzzle theory arise, those who maintain that the reader, "inferior" in intellect to the detective, enjoys observing the detective at work. The other side of the argument states that readers love mysteries, not because of the puzzle, but because the story provides a scapegoat for the reader to feel superior to. Finally, Grella concludes that the true appeal of mystery fiction is literally because the intricacies of a mystery plot parallel the twists and complications of a comedy plot, and so the mystery novel is seen by Grella as a comedy of manners.

The most common detective, a gentlemen amateur, is the central character in mystery fiction. Grella spends several paragraphs describing the amateur sleuth as the counterpart of the hero in comedies. The gentleman amateur of mystery fiction is usually intelligent, distinctive physically in one way or another, eccentric, overindulging, and keenly observant. A second type of detective, according to Grella, is the elf, as is Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's novels. Poirot employs his magic for the ultimate good of all, and restores the fabric of society after it has been disrupted. The third type of detective in mystery fiction is called the Wizard by Grella. An example in American mystery fiction is Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout's obese misanthrope who solves the crime from afar while tending to his orchids.

The settings of the formal detective novel also follow patterns that limit the suspects to a number that can be dealt with efficiently. Usually the settings are isolated and luxurious depicting an elite segment of society that is disrupted by the crime, and that has behaviors predictable by the detective so that he can solve the mystery. English society is tailor made for the formal mystery and in contrast American society is not. The transition of the formal novel into the United States does necessitate some changes, and the formal novel is not so popular because of the societal differences. Detectives such as Ellery Queen and Nero Wolfe seem silly at times because American convention does not allow them to fit in as well as they would in a society more in tune with formal rules of behavior.

The characters in a formal detective novel follow patterns as well. Grella's list includes doctors, lawyers, professors, sporting types, military men, and vicars. A beautiful girl and a handsome man are often needed to provide romance, and who provide the detective an opportunity to clean up the mess, and allow the young couple to marry and live happily. Another stock character, the obsessed philosopher, uses his hobby-like knowledge to create a bizarre method of murder. Two characters, the victim and the murderer are socially undesirables who need to be eliminated from proper society. In some way the murderer and the victim have performed in a manner that seriously disrupts things as they are or should be. There are many fatal flaws that are employed by mystery writers that necessitate the elimination of both murderer and victim, and in the end

those that impede the natural flow of things have to go. Grella states that the murderer is more appealing than the victim because the murderer has removed a societal problem. However, he has also committed the most serious of crimes against society, and in so doing he has placed other members of society under suspicion. Once the murderer is removed by the detective, things can return to normal.

Grella concludes his essay with his thoughts about why formal detective fiction was flourishing when he wrote the essay in 1976, and indeed is still flourishing today. The detective novel, Grella says, grows in popularity because it provides the reader with a means of escape from harsh realities of everyday life, and offers an opulent and luxurious life to dream about. Mystery fiction is a literary release valve for millions of people who are perfectly willing to suspend their disbelief and become a part of an intricate tale of murder, mayhem and a return to a posh, appealing order.

George Grella's second essay, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel", examines the American version of detective fiction. The differences between English and American society make the formal detective novel less understood and appreciated in the United States. The heterogeneous nature of American society makes it difficult to pigeon-hole as an author can with the more formalized British society. Beginning to appear after World War I, the hard-boiled stories were seen as an accurate portrayal of American society, a society populated by real criminals and real policemen. Grella points out that Dashiell Hammett is the most successful example of the first generation of hard-boiled detective fiction, and Raymond Chandler represents the best example of a second generation of the genre. The hard-boiled writers created the private eye and the American detective hero, dealing out and absorbing a great amount of punishment, isolating himself from normal human relationships and forming his own moral code which is usually stricter and more unbending than the rest of the population. Hammett's Sam Spade, Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Ross Macdonlad's Lew Archer, and Robert Parker's Spenser each have their own inner voice that each listens to, even when it goes against traditional laws of society. An unswerving quest for truth, and expulsion of the undesirable is the guiding principle of the detective hero. Grella points out that the moral code often means physical harm, hardship and sacrifice for the detective. The code ultimately insures the detective's loneliness, but nonetheless is strictly adhered to. He is too good for society, not perfect, but the best possible.

The hard-boiled detective invariably works in the city, the center of wickedness where every perversion seems to thrive. Grella names the setting as the urban jungle which has replaced the wilderness. The detective hero is a man of the wilderness but the wilderness has disappeared, replaced by the seaminess of the city. This is where the detective hero fights against the evils of society, and he is left cynical and disillusioned in the end, his strength remaining because of his own moral code, his own sense of truth and right and wrong. In this world of the hardboiled novel, the formal detective could never survive. The hard-boiled detective can never hope for full resolution of the crime, and restoration of society as it was before the crime because evil is too pervasive in his environment. The has only attacked a minute portion of the evil, while all around him the rest of the evil continues.

What a bleak prospect for reading with young people! Yet through all the bleakness there is that sense of morality that the hero never loses sight of. The students of today watch television. They know the vastness of evil quite well, even if they cannot easily express it. Surely one cannot argue with an attempt to provide another route out from the abyss that seemingly engulfs modern city life. After all, the detective/hero does succeed in his single minded quest to right one wrong, and this heroic deed does teach us all that rather than give up, it is better to deal with one problem at a time. As Grella points out, the private detective starts out as a sleuth, and then becomes a true hero in a more romantic than realistic sense, but Grella stops short of calling detective fiction escapist. I find myself in disagreement because I think that hardboiled detective

fiction can be escapist, but more importantly today's young people can enjoy the heroic aspects of detective fiction. When Robert Parker's Spenser defies conventions and does what needs to be done, who does not let out a cheer, when all around us in real life we feel hopelessly constricted by society? While not proposing lawlessness in any way, in our literature it does us well to be able to escape convention once in a while.

Mystery Fiction: Plots

Throughout several years I have successfully used an outline explaining plots in short stories. In *How to Read a Short Story* by Marjorie L. Burns plot is discussed as having four elements. First the author reveals the situation that the characters find themselves in. The problem or conflict is exposed either by narrative or immediate action. Second, events and actions grow out of the conflict if it was fully revealed at the outset of the story. If the conflict is not immediately revealed because the author starts with action rather than narrative, then the students must discover the conflict by carefully reading and observing what the characters do and say. This part of the plot is called rising action. Students identify opposing forces in the story, perhaps two characters, a character and a force of nature (a storm), or a character and the problem he faces. Third is the turning point or climax in which the action reaches its acme and one opposing force wins and the other loses. In mystery or detective fiction the crime is solved. Fourth, the author shows the results of whatever was decided or revealed at the climax. The resolution in mysteries can be the explanation of the crime as only the detective or private eye could have determined it. This formula has worked well in helping students understand short stories, and though novels are more complex, generally it has worked in helping students get a good understanding of the plot.

For this unit I plan to use two short stories that will help me teach the students several things. Both stories can be classified as an American version of the formal detective novel as described in an earlier section of this paper. Both stories are heavily reliant on plot, and they should be quite useful in teaching students the four elements of plot outlined above. Finally, both stories are about baseball (albeit baseball some 30 to 50 years ago), always a motivating factor for me and my students.

The first story, "Man Bites Dog" by Ellery Queen is a good example of plot for analysis by students. The setting is the seventh game of the world series between the New York Yankees and the New York Giants. The characters include Ellery Queen, his date, gossip columnist Paula Paris, Inspector Queen and Sargeant Velie in one box behind the Yankee dugout. Below them are two boxes occupied by one couple each Big Bill Tree, ex-pitcher and Lotus Verne, shapely movie star, in one. In the other box were Big Bill's estranged wife Judy Starr, Broadway celebrity and her escort Jimmy Connor, song-and-dance man.

The exposition is in the introduction of the characters and the tension between the two couples, who are being closely scrutinized by Ellery Queen.

To define "rising action", one would examine all of the characters' by-play. Big Bill and Judy each put the unfinished portion of their hot dog on the unoccupied seat between them while signing autographs on scorecards for their fans. Judy was willing to sign an unlimited number, while Big Bill told the usher to allow only six cards and pencils to be brought to him. Judy licked her pencil tip nervously before each autograph; Big Bill licked his pencil tips with great deliberation before each one. As the game started and the autograph hounds left, Judy reached for the wrong hot dog and Big Bill ate the rest of hers. He collapsed in a dead faint and shortly died.

At first the hot dog was suspected, with Judy as the murderess, but Ellery felt that it was impossible for her to have tampered with it, as so many eyes were on her. Ellery stood and loudly offered \$5.00 for each scorecard

autographed by Big Bill. The climax is the buying back of five of the six cards. It is then obvious that Ellery was on the right track in pursuing his pencil-lead-as-poison theory.

The story is resolved when a young boy comes forward with the sixth autograph and tells his story of a man, obviously in disguise, asking him to get Judy's autograph on the scorecard with the pencil he provided. Seeing his chance at an autograph of his hero, Big Bill, he grasped it and succeeded. The denouement, generally not very long in detective fiction, ties up the loose ends. In "Man Bite Dog" the loose ends include finding the disguise Big Bill used when offering the boy money to get Judy's autograph, the opportunity to steal the poison from Bill and Judy's doctor (both had access), and the fact that Big Bill had hay fever, and so could not smell the almond odor himself when using the pencil he had prepared for the murder of his wife.

In the second short story, "This Won't Kill You" by Rex Stout, the obese Nero Wolfe and his sidekick Archie Goodwin are at the deciding game of a world series. There are early signs of a problem arising, a rookie player, Nick Ferrone, is out of the lineup much to everyone's amazement in light of the fact Ferrone has been having a spectacular season. To make matters worse the Giants are not only being soundly beaten by the Red Sox, but several Giant players are playing like bush leaguers. With the evident bad play, Archie's attention wanders to an extremely attractive young lady seated several rows away, a fact that is meaningful later. Suddenly Nero and Archie are summoned to the office of their host, Emil Chisolm, part owner of the Giants. Then what appears to be the problem is revealed, several players have been drugged and Chisolm suspects the missing player, Ferrone. At this point the action centers on locating the missing rookie and on Wolfe's advice the police are called. In the meantime, Goodwin conducts his own search of the clubhouse, and discovers Ferrone's body with his skull crushed, and thus the true problem of the story is revealed.

Once the true problem is exposed the primary action is to solve the murder, but Nero soon suspects that the drugging of the players is connected to the killing. Here we have a semblance of the formal detective novel with definite American overtones. All the suspects are contained in the clubhouse of a baseball team rather than in a country manor house, but the essential ingredient of confinement is present. We also see the plot unfold, step by step, as all action leads up to the point where the mystery is solved, which students will recognize as the climax of the story. Various clues that were dropped almost coincidentally along the way, such as Archie's "glomming" the pretty girl in the stands become important to solving both the secondary and primary problems in the story. While Nero Wolfe is supposedly solving the drugging mystery, he is indeed solving the murder mystery. The climax occurs when Wolfe discloses that one person who should have been somewhere was not, and thereby falls under suspicion and subsequently the accusation of both the drugging and the murder to cover up the drugging. In the resolution of the story the reader gets the motive explained and Nero Wolfe, with Archie's able assistance wraps up yet another case.

In both stories cited several purposes are served. The formal detective novel is ably demonstrated as it exists in its American form. This is a good lesson in itself for the young reader of mystery fiction since both stories are linked to British mysteries by their formats. Such a connection is necessary if the young reader is to have an understanding of the historical perspective of mystery fiction. Plot as an effective means of both clear writing and reading with understanding is also clearly shown in both stories. Each tale has just enough complicating factors to keep the reader on his toes, but not so many as to confuse the neophyte. Both stories are examples of good clear writing that is not watered down for children as so many mysteries for the young are, and yet neither contains objectionable language or situations. Finally, the door may be opened for those young readers newly introduced to mystery fiction by good examples rather than by a book expressly written for children.

Setting

In his book, *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story*, Erik Routley has a special section titled "The Americans." He spends some time talking about Ellery Queen (two cousins, actually, Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee). Routley credits Queen with primary importance in getting American detective fiction started, and marvels at the remarkable sales Ellery Queen had as a writer. Routley writes about a Queen novel titled *The Glass Village* in which the character Ellery Queen does not appear. Routley's mention of the book induced me to read it and I was pleasantly surprised by what a wonderfully tight story it is. As I read the book I was also impressed by how important the setting was to understanding the plot. Shinn Corners is a tiny farming community of about three dozen inhabitants, almost all of whom are strongly imbedded in the Puritan religion. Here we see the links to British mystery in that the story takes place in an isolated community away from other people. One individual, Judge Shinn, represents the only clear thinking around, except for that of an outsider, Johnny Shinn. These two have gone beyond the strict Puritanical philosophy and recognize other forces at work in the world. Johnny Shinn in particular has been in two wars, World War II and Korea, and brings to the New England setting the thinking of a man who has seen the horrors of the world and is left cynical by them. What occurs in the community after one of its number is murdered could not have happened easily if the setting were different. The mood of the story is molded by the buildings, the weather and by what people observe around them. Even the people themselves sometimes appear to be props in the setting rather than characters in the plot. In this sense the novel again demonstrates the formal detective novel's use of stock characters who add to the mood of the surroundings.

Fanny Adams, famous artist and popular matriarch of the community, is murdered and soon afterwards a tramp is captured carrying a sum of money exactly the same as that missing from Fanny's spice jar. The People of Shinn Corners immediately descend upon the hapless stranger ready to exact just retribution in the tradition of quick Puritan justice. The Puritan nature that cherishes privacy demands that the stranger be punished by the people of Shinn Corners alone, and when representatives of the county seat come to investigate and take over, the Puritan code fights them off. The people of Shinn Corners have a confrontation with the county representatives and win the right to prosecute the tramp mostly due to the clear thinking of Judge Shinn. The Judge stands apart and serves as the clear-thinking link between the Puritan ethic and pure justice. Worldly-wise Johnny Shinn becomes the cool-headed cynical assessor of facts and finally discovers the clue that solves the mystery and seals the fate of the murderer.

When reading *The Glass Village* with young people, discussion of the setting will enable them to both comprehend the story and recognize the importance of setting to mystery and detective fiction. Although it is certainly an adult book and as such can be read on many different levels, the novel contains no overtly objectionable language or situations. It is written in a marvelously clear fashion with several build-ups in the plot as it reaches the climax. The only characters generously described are Johnny and Judge Shinn, so that students can understand that the rest of the cast serves to emphasize the setting and its impact on the outcome. Much of the feel for the setting comes from the dialogue which is always helpful when reading a longer work with young people. The Puritan philosophy necessary to understand its impact on the setting is adequately explained early in the book, so that research into Puritanism, while naturally beneficial, is not necessary. Most importantly I anticipate animated discussion about the moral questions raised by the clash between the Puritans of Shinn Corners, and Johnny Shinn. The closed society, slowly dying, ensures that only a place like Shinn Corners could be the setting for the events of the novel.

Character

Robert B. Parker's Spenser novels have long been among my favorite reading. Parker has created a character

in Spenser so rich in detail that he lives above the plot and setting of the books. Throughout each book Parker gives us long looks into the soul of his detective hero both directly through forceful narrative, and indirectly through fast-paced witty, urbane and down-right smartaleck dialogue. The Spenser series is among the best examples of the hard-boiled detective novels. There are, however, some problems connected with using Parker's books in a classroom. Primarily, the language is often peppered with four-letter words that might be offensive to some young readers. I believe that my purpose, reading an example of hard-boiled detective fiction that demonstrates careful crafting of a character, can be achieved by carefully choosing sections of a Parker novel to read to students in a classroom. Since Parker does not use profanity gratuitously, rather it is a part of the dialogue that flows naturally, it will not be difficult to do very minor editing and substituting for a younger audience. As the age of the student increases, the need for caution decreases. (My own son began reading Spenser in the seventh grade with no great shock to his morality.) Nevertheless, one needs to be aware of the possibility of offending someone. However, the vitality of Parker's characters is worth the risk.

The novel chosen for this section of the unit is *Mortal Stakes*, a story about baseball and blackmail. In this novel Spenser is hired by the management of the Boston Red Sox to investigate suspicions that a star pitcher, Marty Rabb, is being influenced to alter outcomes of games by purposely pitching ineffectually. As a cover for the investigation Spenser poses as a writer, allowing him free access to the ballplayers. In his initial interview with Marty Rabb and his wife, Linda, Spenser finds a happy young family, who appear to have everything going well, but as he digs deeper, he discovers an incident in Linda Rabb's past that is a source for blackmail. Spenser then proceeds to make things right. In typical hard-boiled detective fiction fashion, this does not necessarily mean that Spenser turns Rabb over to the authorities. The code of the detective will not allow him to do that because it will not serve the ultimate good, but merely satisfy society's laws. To make things right, Spenser must eliminate the evil doer and rescue the Rabbs from the clutches of evil.

Spenser is indeed the classic detective hero, with his own moral code, and a healthy disregard for society's laws. He is not quite a loner; he has Susan Silverman to share his inner feelings, and Hawk to discuss his ideas, philosophies and plans to rescue the innocents. Throughout a Spenser novel we have Robert Parker exposing Spenser's character through narrative and dialogue. In the first several chapters we hear the classic Spenser repartee as he discusses issues with Erskine, and we have Parker telling us about Spenser as we learn about Spenser's habits, activities, and the observations he makes. I believe that students can respond to the straightforward writing as the plot unfolds, and that they can also respond to the heroic aspects of Spenser. In one class we now read *Shane*, and parallels between Shane and Spenser would make for a very lively discussion.

Lesson Plans

The following descriptions are meant to be samples of lessons that can be taught through the use of mystery fiction. The lessons will concentrate on three areas of fiction: plot, character and setting. While all the reading selections discussed previously in this paper contain all three elements, the lesson plans will take one selection and concentrate on one element at a time. The order used in this paper in no way implies the only sequence to be used. Indeed, a teacher using this outline should feel quite free to use whatever order (or for that matter, whatever reading selections), he/she feels comfortable with.

Plot

For this unit plot will be defined as consisting of four parts, exposition of the problem, rising action, climax and resolution. As previously stated in the unit, I have used this breakdown successfully when discussing short stories, and it is a method that allows young readers to get at the literal meaning of a story. Briefly, students first need to recognize the author's method of revealing the problem. Does the author state the problem in several opening paragraphs of narrative, or does he start with the action immediately and let the problem emerge? If the problem is revealed in narrative, then the students next must recognize the action that grows out of the problem. What do the characters do to try to resolve the problem? What are the forces in the story that are against each other? As the action progresses, students must see the action building to a final showdown between the opposite sides. In our study of mystery fiction, the climax will come with the solution of the mystery. Finally, students must recognize what happens after the problem is solved. What has resulted from the resolution of the problem? The characters are forever locked in place, unlike real life where variables are ever present.

As an aid for students when they are working on plot recognition, I have used the following outline as an initial writing exercise:

I. Title and Author

II. *Principal Characters* : Here students must concentrate on those characters whose actions are primary to the resolution of the problem, and students should also be able to recognize one or two of the most important characters out of the principal characters.

III. *Setting* : Students should concentrate on how the setting affects the action of the story. This is a study of plot, so a brief description of the setting is all that is necessary.

IV. *Rising Action* : This is the most important section since students will actually describe the story using the actions of the characters, and therein lies the plot in the stories being read. Students should use brief sentences to describe the important action in some sort of order, perhaps chronological. This part of the activity lends itself particularly well to small group discussion, and then, when the whole class is brought back together, a large group discussion where some ideas of important actions might be considered unimportant. A final list of sentences describing the action can then be produced.

V. *Climax* : Here students will describe how the mystery was solved. When did the detective know who the guilty party was? When was that person confronted? There may indeed be more than one climax. In "This Won't Kill You", by Rex Stout, the first problem, where is Nick Ferrone, is solved rather quickly and leads to the next problem. The second problem is also solved (who drugged the drinks), but, of course, this leads the reader to the final climax, who killed Nick Ferrone.

VI. *Resolution* : Students describe the states of the primary characters after the mystery is solved, and then the students discuss why the author chose the resolution he did. A follow-up writing exercise would have the students changing an element in the action, and thereby causing a different resolution to occur.

Setting

Ask students to tell what they think the term setting means and the immediate response is, the place the story happens. The teacher's job in developing analytical reading skills is to take that germ of an idea and develop it into a fuller understanding of the term itself, and then to help students understand the significance

of setting in fully comprehending an author's intent. Each beginning discussion in a classroom on setting starts with place and time of a story. Then discussion must move to historical context, political context, social context or maybe psychological context. Each time a new set of conditions is discussed, students' understanding of setting as an essential element of fiction is broadened and strengthened, and eventually students' acuity in recognizing the importance of setting is honed. The teacher must first get over that initial hump of setting being merely where the story takes place. After that, students enjoy their newly acquired insight into fiction, and as a result enjoy the fiction more.

The setting in *The Glass Village* is an ominous and essential factor in fully enjoying and understanding the story. This importance is foreshadowed by the author immediately upon opening the book: a map of Shinn Corners is the first image the reader finds. The parochial look of the place is instantly apparent, and the closeness of the place is striking. The town is totally surrounded by woods and looks on the page like a completely isolated community. The physical nature is apparent, and as the students begin reading, the narrative bears out that first impression. The drive from Cudburry to Shinn Corners is an increasingly deeper trip away from what looks like normal civilization. The main character, Johnny Shinn, becomes more depressed as he nears Shinn Corners. The foreboding feeling about the place is that time stands still there, and nothing productive is going to happen in the decaying society. Early on in the narrative, another group of setting contextual clues is introduced. Judge Shinn talks about the social shortcomings of the Puritan thought of Shinn Corners residents, and how impossible this philosophy is in modern times. The Judge proves how firmly set Puritanism is in town with an anecdote about the one time the citizens allowed the outside community to intrude, and the disastrous results that occurred. A third group of setting context clues is introduced through the character of Johnny Shinn. He is an army officer who has recently returned from the Korean War, in which he was an intelligence officer, and he represents the outside world, its philosophies, societies and forward thinking. The ultimate use of setting is how the murder is solved. A painting by the victim, Fanny Adams, provides the final clue. Students, finally, will get a good sense of an author's use of setting in mystery fiction from reading *The Glass Village*.

After reading and discussing the book, paying particular attention to setting as an essential factor, students will be better ready to write their own versions of settings. Initially a class brainstorming session for ideas for possible settings will encourage all students to participate in the early stages of writing. After ideas presented by the class are put on the chalkboard, students will select a setting that they feel comfortable and familiar with. The next step will involve discussion of what the audience is going to be for the written work. Since the focus is on mystery, writing about a setting should be intentionally mysterious, eerie or ominous. Perhaps a student's choice will be a covered bridge that he or she has visited. In that case he/she should be encouraged to remember the dark corners and the shadows rather than the bright sunshine. Each student will be told to make a detail chart consisting of brief phrases listing who, what, when, where, and why to help him/her organize ideas. Topic sentences are next, and emphasis must be placed here to make certain that students set the tone early in the paragraphs. Using the detail charts students will then write good sentences for the details, decide on a logical order for their description, and write a first draft. After completing first drafts students will share them with small groups to help students clarify ideas. A final draft based on discussions with classmates and the teacher should produce some particularly mysterious paragraphs.

Character

This unit has several purposes. One of them was to demonstrate a difference between formal detective fiction and hard-boiled detective fiction. Finding an example of the detective implies hard-drinking, hard-talking and easy women, topics not easily handled in a middle-school classroom. If the unit is used in high school, the

problems cited become diminished as the age of the students increases.

A decision had to be made, and rather than search out a book of lesser literary value it was decided to excerpt portions of Robert B. Parker's Spenser novel. As stated earlier in this paper, the novel chosen is *Mortal Stakes*. Ultimately, it would have to be left up to the individual teacher assessing his/her particular class to decide whether to read the entire book, or to select portions to read to students.

A second purpose of this unit is to help students better understand the use of character in fiction. Does the author tell the reader directly who the characters are, or does the reader learn about the characters through what each one does or says? Robert Parker uses both methods, of course, but the reader learns most about Spenser, Parker's detective, through dialogue, action, and a narrative that lets the reader in on Spenser's thought processes. In each novel, the reader gets a fuller understanding of who Spenser is, and what his strengths and shortcomings are: the picture drawn is in the classic tough guy tradition, a detective with a code by which to live his life, regardless, at times, of how society views him. Spenser is John Wayne, Shane, and every other hero who ever had to help someone in distress, someone who could not rely on traditional support services.

Attempting to excerpt a tightly written novel is perhaps presumptuous. The teacher must keep in mind what the purpose is at all times. Spenser's character and the basic plot of the story must somehow be kept intact, while trying to avoid anything that might be offensive to younger readers. On pages 9-25 of *Mortal Stakes* the reader meets Spenser and the motivating factor in the plot. These pages give glimpses into the self-assured detective that will be developed throughout the novel, as well as tell the reader why Spenser is on the case. When Spenser meets Marty and Linda Rabb, and the chief antagonist, Frank Doerr, (pp. 53-81) would be essential to understanding the plot. These pages also develop Spenser's character. He begins to see holes in the Rabb's story that begin to bother him, and we see him in action as tough guy detective, meeting tough guy gangster, Frank Doerr. The reader also begins to see the detective at work tracing leads and gathering evidence. On pages 101-115 Spenser follows leads to Chicago to investigate Linda Rabb's background. Spenser's subsequent visit to New York can be omitted due to his encounter with a colorful pimp named Violet, whose language might be too much for young readers. However, that section is rich in character development, which the teacher might want to discuss with the class. There is a scene where Spenser turns on his charm with a social services worker, and falls on his face revealing the more human side of our hero. Also, Spenser's meeting Patricia Utley, a very high-class New York madam, is a wonderfully written section, but once again perhaps too mature for middle school. The conferences between Quirk, the Boston police officer, and Spenser (pp. 201-209), and Doerr and Spenser, (pp. 211-222) are important to the character development of Spenser.

In the first meeting the reader sees the detective dealing with society's laws, and how carefully he remains parallel, but not directly in line with the police. Spenser stays within the law only if it doesn't betray his code. The second meeting with Doerr, is a classic confrontation with the evil of the story. Once again Spenser appears to be almost a part of that aspect of society, particularly in his methods of coercion, but he never steps in line with the evil. The hard-boiled detective at his finest, straddling both worlds, equally comfortable or uncomfortable in both.

There are many sections of the novel that can be dealt with in a middle school classroom, and ultimate discretion must be left up to the teacher. There are several other sections that can be used, for example, the gun battle between Spenser and Doerr in the park, where Spenser takes the only action possible if he is to stay within his code. There is also the hard decision for Linda Rabb to make, and Parker writes the scene with

dignity and humaneness. By listening to the above excerpts read to them, middle-schoolers will gain understanding of what the hard-boiled detective is. In classroom discussions of the Rex Stout, Ellery Queen and Robert Parker stories, the difference between the formal and hard-boiled detectives will become apparent. A writing assignment to look forward to is a contrast paper on the two forms of detective fiction. After discussion of the two types based on background presented in this paper earlier, students will be prepared to write about these two forms with greater understanding.

In addition to writing about the two types of detectives, students will write short pieces creating their own characters. Using narrative and dialogue, students will create their own detectives. Dialogue is something that middle-schoolers love to do, although their skill in it is many times questionable. Using mystery fiction as an impetus, an excellent opportunity to motivate the study of the mechanics of writing dialogue will be presented. As in other lessons above, oral presentation will be used to get classmates to assist each other in refining writing. Perhaps an interchange of dialogues between students presented in play form could be done, if the class discussion is led in that direction.

Putting It Together

The unit has attempted to study mystery and detective fiction with middle-school children and then to improve writing skills using the fiction as a motivation force. The successful completion of the unit should provide young readers with a rich area for future reading, an increase of analytical reading skills as they read with deeper understanding of plot, setting and character in fiction, and, most importantly, means by which to inspire young people to write clearly, for a particular audience and for a specific purpose. The smaller parts of writing spoken of in the three previous sections should develop into a larger culminating project bringing all aspects of the unit together. Three possibilities exist for the final project. First, individual students can bring together their own writings on plot, character and setting and create their own mystery or detective story. Second, the group can create a class mystery by pulling together various sections discussed in small groups. Third, each small group could create a mystery composed of parts discussed and written within their group. Whatever method chosen, final projects will be typed and duplicated to be shared by students in other classes. Elements of good writing will be strengthened, from the conception of the idea, through initial organization and writing, through proofreading, editing, and re-writing, and through peer support and guidance as the final product is produced.

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