



Yale-New Haven
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume I: Women's Voices in Fiction

Mothers Represented in Short Stories by Women

Curriculum Unit 99.01.05
by Sandra Friday

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The Purpose of the Unit

This curriculum, *Mothers Represented in Short Stories by Women*, has several objectives:

first, to give students the opportunity to explore the development of women characters as mothers, specifically of daughters, and how they protect, support, neglect, inspire, and even alienate their daughters through their attitudes and actions;

second, to give students the opportunity to look at mothers as women who for better or for worse have dreams and lives, independent of their motherhood;

third, to create an opportunity for students to take a closer look at their own mothers and grandmothers, not only as women who raise children, but also as women who may have dreams and heartaches and lives as well;

fourth, to create an opportunity for students who are themselves mothers and in some cases fathers to consider how they relate to their children and what dreams and desires they may have independent of motherhood and fatherhood; and

finally, through lesson plans, to integrate throughout the curriculum skills such as the writing process, reading comprehension, gathering information and communicating findings to the class.

The lesson plans in this curriculum are designed to serve at-risk high school students who have had little or no success in getting their credit in a large urban high school. Often these students are not skillful readers; their reading vocabulary is wanting, and their writing skills are largely undeveloped. The absence of academic success has caused them to believe they will not do well in school.

At the Wilbur Cross Annex where I teach English, we spend a minimum of fifty percent of each day engaged in team teaching with teachers of other disciplines such as math or science or social studies. It is also possible to collaborate with a teacher of our own discipline during the day. One English teacher can teach the unit that I have designed or it can be taught with another teacher in conjunction with the unit titled “Daughters Come of Age in Women’s Fiction” by Dianne Marlowe. Because Dianne and I are both English teachers at the Annex, we are planning to collaborate to teach our units. We have found that with our at-risk students, both collaboration and team teaching bring extra energy and inspiration to our classrooms.

The fiction in the unit is multi-cultural; among the selections is literature by Japanese, West Indian, African American, and Puerto Rican women. The issues they write about, while they may be specific to their cultures, are at the same time universal. Students will have the opportunity for exposure to other cultures through literature and to women writers from other cultural backgrounds. They will find that mothers with daughters develop in ways that are unique to their culture but at the same time develop and live their lives like women everywhere.

A Strategy for Introducing the Unit

It is always important to stimulate interest at the beginning of a new unit, particularly with students for whom school has not been very successful. The movie *How to Make an American Quilt* will be a starting point for this unit. The story is driven by a group of women coming together for their annual quilting bee who also happen to be longtime friends. As they create the squares of the quilt, which is a wedding gift for the granddaughter of one of the women, they tell, in flashbacks, their stories of how, as young women, they met and married their husbands, had or did not have children, and how the choices they made evolved. Their stories are represented by the squares that they are creating for the quilt, hence it is a story-quilt.

While the film is a story about these women, the men and how the men treat their women can be a topic for a lively discussion. One of the men rationalizes that because he is an artist he cannot help but be attracted to women other than his wife. His wife must deal with this. Another man has the opportunity to seduce a woman, admitting up front that he is married. One woman finds out that her husband and her sister slept together and she must deal with this: what were the circumstances; were they totally wrong? Most women had children, but not all; some were by choice and some were by chance. One young, unmarried, black woman has a child by a young white man. What are her choices and circumstances?

As this unit explores the lives of women created by women writers, this film reminds us that grown women, most with grown children and grandchildren, were once young women who chose their destinies and who experienced, and, in some instances, are still experiencing, the joy and pain of these choices. Just as these women develop and gain depth of character in the film, the authors of the stories develop their women and give them depth of character. To sharpen this awareness it would be useful to assign certain students to track specific women in the film, sharing with the rest of the class what they learn about these women as the film progresses and in giving their judgment as to whether these women made good choices. Since a few of the men play significant roles in the film, students could also be assigned to track them, sharing their profiles of these men and critiquing their decisions and actions.

The granddaughter who is making up her mind whether or not to marry the young man who has proposed to her is a foil that makes the telling of the women's stories seem very natural. The granddaughter is spending the summer in the home of the woman who hosts the annual quilting bee. Thus while the women regale her with the stories of their marriages, she weighs the pros and cons of her own.

Following viewing and discussing the film, the students can engage in an art activity in which each student makes his/her own quilt square that represents the past/present/future of his/her life. This could be achieved with paper or scraps of fabric glued on fabric or paper. When finished, the squares would be joined as a class quilt and hung on a wall to represent the make up of the class. Dianne Marlowe is also suggesting this activity in her unit, because these two units can be taught together by two teachers, and each unit commences with the viewing of this same film.

A variation of this quilting activity would be an effective activity at the conclusion of each story. Following the reading, discussion and writing activities for each story, students will create a story-quilt square for the main character in the story, representing memorable images about the main character in the story. At the end of the unit, or as the unit progresses, each student can assemble his/her squares into a mini-quilt that will be an artistic expression of the unit. Ideally, students will be able to use these squares to recall the most significant aspects of each main character.

Taking a Stand in “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker

From this introduction, it is a smooth transition into the short story by Alice Walker, “Everyday Use,” where the making of quilts and their value are an important topic. The story opens with the narrator who tells of raking her yard yesterday, taking great pains to make it smooth and neat. Immediately, with the description of raking the yard, the narrator places the story in the rural South, and immediately we learn that the narrator and Maggie are waiting for a woman--Maggie’s sister; and we learn of the disparity between the two sisters, Maggie, “standing hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars, eyeing her sister with a mixture of awe and envy(1).”

The narrator, Mama, leads us into her own character by staging, in her imagination, a reunion on a TV show, where a successful young woman is surprised by a reunion with her parents; and everyone is hugging and shows how much they have all loved one another all these years. Mama goes on to say that of course the young woman is proud of her parents. Mama then shares a “real life” description of herself as something of a Sojourner Truth in physical strength and fortitude.

In real life I am a large, big boned woman with rough, man-working hands.

In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day.

I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. My fat keeps me hot in

zero weather.(2)

In the imaginary TV show Mama says, “I am the way my daughter wants me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin is like uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights(3).” It is very clear that there is a wide disparity not only between sisters Maggie and Dee but also between Mama and her daughter Dee.

In fact, this story is about disparity; it is about the pain we inflict upon one another, often unwittingly, about a mother who has no misconceptions as to who she is, and who her daughters are. Although Mama has raised Dee, Dee is really a stranger to both her mother and her sister, Maggie. It is about denying and rejecting one’s roots. It is about taking a stand, sometimes against one’s own children. Obviously there is a wealth of possibilities here for lessons and learning.

The vehicle in which these issues are couched is a visit Dee makes with her boyfriend back to Mama and Maggie in their humble, rural dwelling that has no real windows, just some holes cut in the sides.

One interesting exercise for students working independently or in groups of two or three is to cull through the story in search of incidents in which Mama, and Maggie as well, suffer psychological pain inflicted by Dee, sometimes mindlessly, and sometimes intentionally, sometimes indirectly as is the case when Mama describes how she thinks Dee would like her to look for the TV appearance, and sometimes directly, as in this account Mama gives of being read to by Dee. (Gathering these incidents also can be a natural first step in what would become a five- paragraph essay assignment.)

She used to read to us without pity, forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits,

whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice.

She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away just at the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.(4)

An instance of Dee mindlessly inflicting pain, and there are many instances, manifests itself in the scene where Dee is determined to take the quilts handmade by Grandma Dee and Big Dee that are promised to Maggie when she marries. Dee bursts out with, "Maggie can't appreciate these quilts! ... She'd probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use (5)."

Once students have compiled a list of these incidents, a discussion should ensue from making on the board, two lists from the students' findings: one titled "Mama and/or Maggie suffer pain consciously inflicted by Dee." And the other titled "Mama and/ or Maggie suffer pain unconsciously inflicted by Dee." The students' lists will vary and they will very likely not agree on some incidents as to which list to put their findings on. Of course the obvious question is, "Why does Dee do either of these?" Mama makes one telling reference to "all her [Dee's] faultfinding power." Apparently Mama and her life style including the house they live in and Maggie have all been subjected to this power by Dee.

And when Dee shows up with her boyfriend for her afternoon visit, her character is every bit as offensive as the reader has anticipated. Items and implements of everyday use in Mama's and Maggie's life such as the butter churn top and the dasher and hand sewn quilts are seen by Dee now as collector's items to be displayed in her apartment. Speaking of suffering psychological pain at the hands of Dee, it is as if she has come to pilfer her own family's belongings right before their eyes.

However, as Dee stands stubbornly clutching the quilts she has come to claim, quilts she refused to take to college because they were, in her estimation, old fashioned, Mama says,

I did something I had never done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open. (6)

Sometimes mothers must take a stand against their own children, or on behalf of their own children, and sometimes both, as in the case of Mama, Dee and Maggie. Arriving at this insight about the characters in the story, an obvious discussion topic and perhaps a writing assignment might be to think about times when mothers do have to take a stand against a child or on behalf of a child, to step in when she witnesses an injustice or in defense of her child.

Mama does something she has never done before: she validates Maggie with her resounding "No!" to Dee: She "hugged" Maggie to her and furthermore brought her into the room as a witness as she "snatched" the quilts out of "Miss Wangero's hands" and "dumped them into Maggie's lap." And Mama admits that this coup

d'état was almost divinely inspired. Mama simply knew she was the instrument to right the injustice Maggie had suffered, silently, all her life, at the hands of her sister. It is an epiphany for Mama when she moves on Wangero; it is a stand long overdue, not only affirming Maggie but herself as well. Dee has "cowed" them both for years. One has only to go back and reread Mama's description of what Dee would like Mama to look like and what Mama says she looks like in reality.

Minding Everybody's Business in "The Watcher" by J. California Cooper

Mama is painfully sensitive to the nature of her two very dissimilar daughters. There are also women who are so preoccupied with the world at large that they are ignorant of the needs of human beings right under their noses, in their own family nucleus. Such a woman is the narrator in J. California Cooper's "The Watcher." She too has a daughter and a son, probably in their late teens or early twenties, who live at home. But she is not only insensitive to their needs and characters; she is totally disillusioned about her relationship with them, which for all intents and purposes is non-existent.

One is suspicious of her from the outset when in sentence two she says it is part of her community duty and her duty to God to "always, always" try to do right and help people. From her moral declaration, the narrator complains that while she takes time to do for others, she gets no thanks for it. This woman who claims to fear God and white folks reveals her level of intelligence by confiding to us that she "hollers" at white people on television talk shows and tells them what they need to know but "they don't listen to nobody (7)!"

Having established the character of the narrator, Cooper reveals how the narrator "helps people" by sticking her nose into their personal lives, on the lookout for sin, to the degree that she destroys people's reputations and even their marriages, and they end up moving away. In one case, a husband shoots his wife because of the unfounded information the narrator tells him about her.

The narrator is so obsessed with what she calls doing her "religious duty" that she engages her own husband to help her keep an eye on the single woman across the street at night while the narrator sleeps because she suspects her of sinning with some man. The husband keeps an eye on her all right and ends up divorcing the narrator and marrying the single woman across the street.

While the narrator is doing her "religious duty" looking for sin in everyone in the neighborhood and even in a nearby parking lot at night, her own daughter is trying to abort a fetus in her bedroom at home, where she also got pregnant. Her son, who she says keeps to himself, overdoses on heroin and dies right in his own bedroom at home. But the mother's rationale for all this is, "You can't see everything (8)."

Instead of taking her daughter's pregnancy and attempted abortion, or her son's death from a drug overdose, or her husband's leaving her for the woman across the street as a wake up call, she further entrenches herself in what I will call her block watch. Her parting lines convey her mind set, "I'm watching the minister too! There is a sin there somewhere (9)!"

Cooper is masterful at winding the reader in with one scenario after another in which the narrator finds sin in the neighborhood, starting with a woman who used to live across the street, while in her own house she has neglected her own children and husband.

Tormented by Choices in “I Stand Here Ironing” by Tillie Olsen

Unlike the insensitive, unconscious mother in “The Watcher,” the mother who is also the narrator in Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” lets her readers know in the first sentence that she is tormented, and in the second sentence she reveals that the source of her torment is her daughter. Torment is a heavy word connoting possible guilt and regret, and the use of the present tense “stand,” in the title, indicates that it is ongoing. “I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron. ‘I wish you would manage the time to come in and talk with me about your daughter (10).’ ”

While the mother in “The Watcher” appears to the reader totally culpable in her gross negligence of her daughter and son, the mother in this story struggles to examine and, at the same time, resists sifting, weighing, estimating, and totaling the consequences surrounding the choices she made about raising her daughter, and the unavoidable circumstances that swept them both into an eddy from which there seemed to be no escape. The poignancy of the story lies in: (1) the narrator’s developing awareness that the accumulation of her choices involving Emily had a devastating effect on Emily’s character, and (2) the relevancy it bears to many of our lives and choices made, combined with circumstances endured, by the women who raised us.

This relevancy would be as true for the students in my classes and should be a means of raising questions about choices and circumstances with their own mothers, grandmothers or women who raised and/or are raising them. There are many opportunities for meeting oneself as either a mother or a daughter in Tillie Olson’s story.

Beginning her reflections chronologically, the mother describes her daughter, Emily, as “a beautiful baby,” and Emily’s need later to be told by her mother how beautiful she had been as a baby and would be; “...and was now to the seeing eye.” And then the mother abruptly halts the flow of the prose, admitting, “But seeing eyes were few or nonexistent. Including mine (11).”

At eight months the mother had to leave this baby who “was a miracle to me,” with a woman in the building, to look for work and for Emily’s father who had left them. The mother explains that it was the worst years of the Great Depression. After she leaves her with the woman downstairs, it doesn’t get better; it gets worse. She has to bring her baby to the family of her husband and leave her there. And then it was nursery school “...parking places for children.” Emily hated going but her pleadings were indirect, and her mother knew the teacher was evil, but she had no alternative. “It was the only way we could be together, the only way I could hold a job (12).”

The narrator adds that Emily had to get used to a new daddy. And they left her alone nights, “telling themselves she was old enough.” “Can’t you go some other time Mommy, like tomorrow?” Emily would ask. “Will it be just a little while you’ll be gone? Do you promise?” The mother remembers that one time when they came back, Emily was “rigid awake (13).”

Her mother remembers being persuaded by the clinic to send Emily away to a convalescent home when she was not recovering her health after having red measles. What her mother painfully recalls is that the home would not allow Emily to keep the letters that her mother had written to her; a seven-year-old was not allowed to keep her mother’s letters. Emily got frailer at this home. After this episode in the convalescent home, her mother recalls that Emily would push away when she tried to hold her.

At least twice in her narration, Emily's mother refers to it being "too late!" Emily's mother confides to the reader that she will never total it all. But it is apparent from the account she has so painfully rendered that Emily's mother made many choices about raising Emily that, in retrospect, she does not consider to be good ones. These choices, often informed by circumstances, had a profound effect on the young woman that Emily has become.

Emily's mother admits, "My wisdom came too late... Only help her to know --help make it so there is cause for her to know -- that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron (14)." The profound regrets of Emily's mother concerning both her choices and the circumstances surrounding those choices in raising her daughter are palpable. There is much, no doubt, that many mothers whose "wisdom came too late" would like to convey to their grown children.

There is an opportunity after reading and discussing this story to explore options for single parents today that might help prevent situations like this one. Teachers need to be aware that it may be too painful for a student to relate his/her own experiences to Emily's, or for him/ her to have a dialogue with the women who have raised or are raising him/her to learn what circumstances informed the choices they made when the student was growing up.

Making Cultural Adjustments in "Daughter of Invention" by Julia Alvarez

While the single mother, who does remarry in Tillie Olsen's story, finds herself faced with choices relative to those circumstances, the mother in the next story, "Daughter of Invention," has a very different set of circumstances and choices. This story is a study of how a mother has the added challenge of not only being a wife and mother but also serving as the cultural interpreter for her four daughters and husband as they make the transition from living in the Dominican Republic to the United States.

Laura Garcia is not only a wife and mother; she is a role model for her daughters, a curious, imaginative woman who clearly has a passion for life manifested in her zeal to invent something. The author, twice, describes her reading the New York Times, implying that while she may falter somewhat speaking English, she is highly literate and wants to be an informed woman. Mr. Garcia is a medical doctor whose practice is successful, and the family is financially comfortable. Among the stories I have chosen for my unit, this family is the only one that is portrayed as a whole functioning family.

From the minute the reader meets the mother, Laura, she is trying to be an inventor. She is passionate about inventing gadgets. This drive sometimes consumes her, and her daughters complain that they cannot even "engage" their mother when they need to talk to her. But Laura is a wily woman who does not fuss over or coddle her girls, sometimes even when they seem to need her comfort. She seems to know how to maintain a healthy balance between nurturing her daughters and forcing them to be independent; she responds when their needs are genuine.

When the eldest daughter, Yoyo, insists "We're not going to that school anymore" because "Those kids were throwing stones today," their mother comes back with, "What did you do to provoke them? It takes two to tangle, you know (15)." In essence, she is letting her daughters know that they must learn to cope.

The story culminates in a crisis brought about when Yoyo, in the ninth grade, is chosen to deliver the

Teachers' Day address at her school. As someone who experiments with writing poetry, she is looking through a book of poems by Walt Whitman and is "shocked and thrilled" by his the somewhat irreverent, unconventional poetry which includes the line, "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher (16)." Her creativity inspired, Yoyo found her voice as she wrote a five-page speech, which she promptly read to her mother who recognized its brilliance. But when Laura practices her speech before her father, he reacts violently to the rebellious tone in the speech, recalling his fear of rebellion and why he fled the dictator in the Dominican Republic. He knows all too well what happens to people who dissent and rebel against their leaders. He grabs the speech and rips it into shreds while Laura and her mother try desperately to rescue the bits and pieces. This is not the computer age and Yoyo has only the one copy, which is now shredded, the night before the assembly.

The family has the great fortune of having a woman of profound understanding. When Yoyo genuinely needs her mother, she helps her concoct a speech for the next day's assembly. It is her mother who types it up for her once it is drafted. While it is not the speech inspired by Whitman, it is well received, and Yoyo gains recognition throughout the school. Yoyo's father makes peace with Yoyo and buys her her own electric typewriter because both her mother and her father recognize that she has a gift for writing. Through her writing, she will create inventions of her own.

As Yoyo's speech gains her school-wide recognition, and she begins to come into her own, her mother gives up trying to invent things. Perhaps it is the passion for invention that Laura modeled for her daughters. Yoyo is the eldest, and she is developing her passion.

This story is subject to another interpretation which is that the mother finally recognized that she had been so caught up in her own obsession to invent something that she had been somewhat negligent of her daughters. The reason I am less likely to agree with this interpretation is that the daughters, and even the husband, do not seem to suffer any psychological damage as the result of the mother's fetish for inventing. In fact, the family seems to thrive as the result of it. Another observation that can be made is that because the family is so comfortable, financially, Laura can have the luxury of playing around with her inventions. Unlike the women in most of the other stories, there is no need for her to help support the family financially. A topic for discussion and one that could be developed into an essay assignment is, "Where in the story can evidence be found that would indicate whether Laura's obsession or passion for invention was a positive or a negative influence on the family?"

Defying cultural stereotypes in "Seventeen Syllables" by Hiyase Yamamoto

Another mother with a newly developed passion for "inventing" is Tome Hayashi, the Japanese born woman who now lives in a farming community outside Los Angeles with her Japanese born husband and their teenage Japanese-American daughter, Rosie, where, for a living, they pick tomatoes for a commercial grower. This mother, however, is not bent on inventing gadgets but rather on writing haiku.

So Rosie and her father lived for a while with two women, her mother and Ume Hanazono. Her mother (Tome Hayashi by name) kept house, cooked, washed, and, along with her husband and the Carrascos, the Mexican family hired for the harvest, did her ample share of picking

tomatoes out in the sweltering fields and boxing them in tidy strata in the cool packing shed. Ume Hanazono, who came to life after the dinner dishes were done, was an earnest, muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper or carefully copying characters on good paper with her fat, pale green Parker. (17)

But, the first line of this quote and two lines on this same page in the story foreshadow the life span of this woman's newly found voice. "So Rosie and her father lived for a while. . ." "The new interest had some repercussions on the household routine." "But Ume Hanazono's life span, even for a poet's, was very brief --- perhaps three months at most (18)." It is the all too familiar story of a woman trying to liberate herself from her cultural bondage. While high school students may read this story today and think that women no longer experience this kind of resistance to their autonomy, it would be illuminating for them to look into women's rights in the world in the present.

In this story the woman who is a wife and mother is developing an identity outside of both of these roles. There are signals all along the way that her husband is discontented with this second identity. As Ume Hanazono comes more and more to life, the husband becomes gradually more and more frustrated, jealous, threatened and angry. An interesting question to raise is, could she have given him more attention, recognizing that he was growing more and more frustrated? Or are the circumstances surrounding her marriage that we learn near the end of the story simply too much for her. It would be interesting to look at the rather horrifying scene in which the husband runs into the house and seems to throw out the magazine editor of haiku who has brought an award to Rosie's mother. He then takes the award, a delicately framed painting, and chops it up and burns it. This scene is followed by the poignant conversation between Rosie and her mother, culminating in this desperate plea. "Suddenly, her mother knelt on the floor and took her by the wrists. 'Rosie,' she said urgently, 'Promise me you will never marry (19).'"

Some students may stick up for the husband, defending his reaction given his cultural mindset. This would give the teacher an opportunity to look with the students at the Japanese culture on the topic of women's roles. This story was written in 1949, although the role of women in the household may not have changed very much.

"Seventeen Syllables" also lends itself to an essay discussing whether it has the basic elements of good literature which is one of the lesson plans in this unit. Because this requirement to recognize good literature is one of the tasks on the CAPT, I try to make my students aware of it every time we read a story. I have developed with my students three criteria for determining whether a story is good literature: There must be a conflict that reaches some kind of resolution, not necessarily a positive resolution; a character must develop beyond what he/she is when we first meet him/her, and the story must contain some kind of universal theme or lesson for the reader.

Another CAPT question which often shows up in the Language Arts part of the test is what effect the characters have on one another. Clearly, there is much to say and write about the effect Rosie's mother and her father have on one another.

Rules to Live by in “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid

I am concluding the unit with the very short story “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid from her collection titled *At the Bottom of the River*. This story is a letter in which a mother gives to a young woman a detailed list of rules to instruct her in how to act now that she is no longer a child. While this letter is, with its many details, specific to growing up in the West Indies where Kincaid was raised, it is also universal in its advice to young women. The parent or elder woman writing the letter conveys the kind of person she wants the young woman to be.

It would be an engaging activity to ask the students, after looking at some of the specific advice, just what kind of woman the mother or elder woman wants the young woman to be. The advice ranges from the highly practical and literal, regarding the washing of clothes, to the rather abstract, how to love a man, and when to give up on loving a man.

Of course from reading the letter, the reader learns a great deal about the hierarchy of values held by the mother or elder woman writing the letter. One way to manage the density of the rules is to have the students, working in small groups, first make lists of rules and then to try to put them in categories. Once they have completed this process, categories could be listed on the black board and each group could recommend which rules go into which categories. This should make for a lively discussion, as, no doubt, there will be some differences.

Once they have read and discussed the letter that makes up “Girl,” students could write a letter, now that they are no longer children, that they think their mothers or women, (or their fathers for that matter), who have raised them would write to them with its set of rules. Students who have children of their own could actually write a letter to their young children with rules by which to grow up, or, pretending that these children are grown and are about to go out into the world, write a letter to them containing important advice for life.. rules to live by. Students who don’t have children could imagine themselves as parents and write rules to an imaginary child of their own. These activities are developed into Lesson Plan III.

LESSON PLAN I

Rosie’s mother in “Seventeen Syllables” has a profound effect upon Rosie’s father as she explores her new-found identity as a writer of haiku. The more independent she grows in her new identity, the more he reacts, and subsequently, he precipitates a dramatic reaction from Rosie’s mother. Examining the interaction between these characters is an effective CAPT practice activity.

OBJECTIVE:

A pair of the questions typically asked on the Language Arts CAPT (Connecticut Academic Performance Test) following the reading of the story is: “How do the characters affect one another?” and “How do you know?” This story offers an excellent opportunity for students:

- to observe the effect these two characters have upon each other,
- to practice recording, on a Graphic Organizer, their observations from the story,

to practice gathering evidence, on a Graphic Organizer, from the story to support their observations.

to use the information on the Graphic Organizer to write a paragraph discussing how Rosie's mother's actions, as Ume Hanazono the haiku writer, affected Rosie's father. The discussion will include observations and evidence from the story for support.

The Graphic Organizer that is included on the following page is a very effective tool for helping students organize and use material.

Prior to reading the story, introduce the pair of questions as the task students will be working on either individually or in small groups. The students at the Cross Annex like to read stories out loud. Therefore, once the task has been introduced, have the students read the story aloud, listening and watching for how and why Rosie's mother, as Ume Hanazono the haiku writer, has an effect on her father, how he reacts, and ultimately, how her mother is affected by his reaction. Encourage students to hi-light sentences and dialogue that seem significant. Explain that hi-lighting and jotting notes regarding the task will make it unnecessary to reread the entire story.

Once students have finished reading the story, ask them to fill in the columns of the Graphic Organizer, following. If students plan to show how Rosie's mother, the emerging haiku writer, affected Rosie's father, students must observe what they are like, initially, so they can make a comparison as to how they change, as the story progresses.

After the class has had time to complete this task, ask students to write a paragraph sharing their observations on how Rosie's mother, the emerging haiku writer, affected her father, using evidence from their Graphic Organizers to support their observations.

Once they have written their paragraphs, students will share and compare their findings, which can lead to a discussion about how the two characters affected each other and whether Rosie's father was right to react so violently when her mother received the haiku award, or whether Rosie's mother was right to pursue writing haiku in the first place. There is also the question, "Is Rosie's mother right to make Rosie promise her that she would never marry? And, given Rosie's romantic interest with the young man, is she likely to keep the promise?"

Graphic Organizer # 1 - A Character Study of "Seventeen Syllables"

Write down your observations, and evidence that supports these observations, indicating how the actions of Rosie's mother as Ume Hanazono the haiku writer affect Rosie's father, from the beginning to the end of the story.

OSERVATIONS

Tell in your own words what Rosie's mother, Ume Hanazono the haiku writer, does that causes Rosie's father to react? (action)

OBSERVATIONS

Tell in your own words how Rosie's father reacts to the actions of Rosie's mother, Ume Hanazono the haiku writer (reaction)

EVIDENCE

Record evidence from the story to support your observations. Copy these quotes directly from the story. Include page #'s (evidence)

Lesson Plan II

Using "Seventeen Syllables" it is possible also to practice number six that always appears on the Language Arts section of the CAPT, that is, "Give your definition of good literature and then evaluate whether, given your definition, the story you just read is good literature."

OBJECTIVE:

Working with our at-risk high school students at the Cross Annex, we have come up with a basic definition of good literature which, in combination with the Graphic Organizer, students can use to assess most stories. This definition is: a story that is considered good literature must have:

- a conflict that gets resolved (not always to the satisfaction of the reader),
- a character who develops or changes in some way, and
- a universal theme or lesson

Lesson Plan I addresses the second part of this definition, having to do with characters changing or developing in some way. Students will learn to identify the conflict in stories and to identify the universal theme or lesson, making observations and gathering evidence on Graphic Organizers.

As for the issue of conflict, it is easy to make a Graphic Organizer that allows students to identify what they see as the conflict. On the left side of the Organizer students would write, in their own words, their observations of how the conflict they have identified unfolds as the story progresses, and on the right side of the Organizer they would copy evidence from the story to support their observations.

This same system can be used once students have identified the universal theme or lesson. On the left side of the Organizer students would write, in their own words, how the story conveys the universal theme or lesson, and on the right side of the Organizer they would copy evidence from the story to support their observations.

From the observations and evidence on these Organizers, students can write a five-paragraph essay discussing whether the story they have read is good literature:

Paragraph one would contain their thesis and one sentence for each criterion.
Paragraphs two, three, and four would discuss the three criteria.
Paragraph five would contain the conclusion.

Lesson Plan III

Jamaica Kincaid's short, short story "Girl," in which a mother writes to her daughter, who is going out into the world, a list of rules that she wants her to live by, offers an ideal opportunity for students to consider the kind of advice their mothers or elder women, or fathers for that matter, who have raised them would give to them as they prepare to go out into the world. This activity can be further developed by asking students to imagine themselves as the mothers, fathers, or caregivers who are writing the letter to their own imaginary children.

OBJECTIVE:

Ideally, literature turns us upon ourselves and invites us to reflect upon our own humanity, growth, struggles, pain, choices, etc. "Girl" is such a story, inviting students to:

examine the rules by which the young woman is asked, by her mother, to live,
become aware of the rules by which they themselves are asked to live and perhaps discuss
whether they are reasonable, and
role play that they are mothers or fathers, writing an imaginary letter of rules to their own
children who are about to go out into the world.

Introduce the story "Girl" by asking students how many of them have been told by a parent or an elder, "Now that you are man, or now that you are a woman, you must behave as an adult, and there are responsibilities that come with being grown?" Ask what some of the rules or expectations are that parents or elders or teachers, for that matter, have articulated to the students. Write some of these rules and expectations on the board to raise consciousness and to spark interest.

Then explain that parents all over the world seem to follow this general tradition. Explain that the letter they are about to read was written by a mother in the West Indies to her daughter who is about to leave home. Read aloud the letter that comprises "Girl," and then ask students in small groups to come up with a list of rules from the letter and to try to put them into categories such as: rules regarding daily cleanliness, rules regarding social behavior, rules regarding matters of the heart, etc.

Once groups have had time to come up with a list and categories, ask each group to share the categories. Write these on the board. Then ask each group, to report what from their lists they would put in each

category. This should generate a discussion as to which rules fit into which categories and may necessitate adding categories. It will also generate a discussion regarding what the rules are and to what extent they are specific or non-specific to the West Indies culture.

Next, using these categories, ask each student to brainstorm the rules and expectations by which he or she is asked to live, now that he or she is growing up. A Graphic Organizer can be used for this prewriting activity. Completing the Graphic Organizer can lead to the students writing a letter they might expect to receive from their parent or the elder who has raised them. They can use “Girl” as their model; however, their letters may vary from the model.

Finally, students will consider the rules and expectations they would put in a letter to a young adult if they themselves were parents. This could be done as a group brainstorm or individual activity. Some students may have young children of their own. They could pretend that these young children are young adults and write their letter to them.

Lesson Plan IV

Since this unit begins with the film *How to Make An American Quilt*, followed by the short story by Alice Walker, “Everyday Use,” both of which have quilt-making as part of their themes, there is a natural activity that binds the entire unit together. Quilt making can be an on-going, integral activity following the film and each story that actually will give students another way to relate to and remember the stories.

OBJECTIVE:

Using as a model, the story quilt in the film, *How to Make an American Quilt*, students will create their own story quilt. The students’ squares will be combined and the quilt displayed in the room as a representation of the class during the unit. Students will then create a story quilt square for the mother in each story throughout the unit. Each student will make one square for each main character in the six stories. These connected squares may serve as a final project at the end of the unit. They can be used to generate a writing activity or an oral presentation, or both.

This art project is another expression of what the students have learned from the film and the literature. In this case, using as a model the story quilt in the film, students will begin with their own lives and then transfer the process to the characters in the stories they read. After watching the film, ask the students to create a story quilt square that represents their lives: past, present and future, or a variation of this. Students can use any medium available including: magic markers, colored pencils, pieces of fabric, construction paper, cut outs from magazines, water colors etc. Squares representing students’ lives should be uniform in size so that when completed they can be combined into a story quilt that can be displayed in the classroom.

Following this activity, after reading each story, ask the students to do a story quilt square that represents the life or characteristics of each of the mothers. Each student can combine his or her own squares as they are completed or wait until all six squares have been completed and then combine them.

Using the squares representing the lives of the mothers, students should be able to tell or write the story of, or compare, any of these characters. The art activity and the writing activity make an effective final exam project.

End Notes

Walker 1140. 2. Walker 1140. Walker 1140. Walker 1141. Walker 1144. Walker 1145. Cooper 93.

Cooper, 97.

Cooper, 98.

Olsen 978. Olsen 979. Olsen 979. Olsen 980. Olsen 984. Alvarez 4 – 5. Alvarez 10. Yamamoto 9. Yamamoto 9. Yamamoto 19.

Bibliography

Alvarez, Julia. "Daughter of Invention." *Growing Up Latino, Memoirs and Stories*. Ed. Harold Augenbraum and Ilan Stavans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993. 3-15. This is the study of how a mother has the added challenge of not only being a wife and mother but also serving as the cultural interpreter for her four daughters and her husband, as they make the transition from living in the Dominican Republic to the United States.

Cooper, J. California. "The Watcher." *Homemade Love*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. 93-98. A woman, in the name of God and community, is so obsessed with minding the business of her neighbors that she, not only ruins many of their lives and drives them away, but she grossly neglects her own children and drives her own husband away.

Olsen, Tillie. "I Stand Here Ironing." *Fictions*. 2nd ed. Ed. Joseph F. Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1989. 978-984. A mother literally stands ironing, while she struggles to examine, with considerable guilt, the consequences for her teen-age daughter, resulting from decisions and choices she, a single mother, had to make regarding raising her, from the time her daughter was born.

Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *Fictions*. 2nd ed. Ed. Joseph F. Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1989.

A poor, Southern, rural, black woman narrates the story of the spiritual pain she and her daughter, Maggie, suffer resulting from the disparity between her two daughters, Maggie, a homely, reclusive, illiterate, young woman who lives with her mother, and Dee, the daughter who pushed her way out, went to college, and has, for all intents and purposes, left her mother and sister behind, spiritually and geographically.

Yamaoto, Hisaye. "Seventeen Syllables." *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*. Latham, New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1998. 8-19. The mother and wife of a very traditional Japanese man finds another identity in writing and publishing haiku. But to her horror, her traditional husband gradually is driven to rage by her commitment to her new career.

How to Make an American Quilt, dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse, with, Universal City Studios, 1995. A group of women come together for their annual quilting bee to sew a wedding quilt for the granddaughter of one of the women. As they create

the squares for the quilt, they tell, in flashbacks, their stories of how, as young women, they met and married their husbands, and how their marriages evolved.

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