



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and as History

Wrapped in Mystery

Curriculum Unit 99.04.03
by Sandra Nash

Objectives

Mystery may be new for some students. But when students have the opportunity to interact with different kinds of literature good things happen. Most importantly they have a better chance of becoming life-long learners. They also develop an interest. Students need to be able to read books that capture their imaginations and that appeal to their affective and cognitive needs. By using mysteries students also learn to read more critically. Involvement in this kind of literature requires active reading and necessitates that students interact with the text.

Students' responses to any work of literature are likely to be richer if they can see it in relation to other works, similar or different, as well as to their own life experiences. For this reason, it is helpful from kindergarten on for children to have many experiences with different types of literature. By helping my students to become more familiar with different genres of literature, I will help to increase both their literary understanding and appreciation.

This curriculum unit will teach mystery fiction as a genre of literature to my sixth grade students. I want to instill in my students that they too are detectives of sorts. They have to use clues and problem-solving strategies to read thoroughly. Once students learn reading cues, signals and self-monitoring techniques developed through the unit on mystery, they can apply those same skills to reading for the Connecticut Mastery Test and to real life situations.

This unit on mystery will include: teaching mystery as a genre of literature; teaching reading strategies through mystery fiction; and independently reading mystery novels. Students will be quite immersed in mystery! We will look at how everything in the story revolves around a puzzle, or an unusual problem to solve. It could be a who done it? What is it? Or How did it happen? The characteristics of mysteries are very much the same. As a class we'll look at how characters are usually involved in the basic problem to solve or in the puzzle. The setting is realistic. The writer drops clues or hints that might help the reader solve the mystery. Some things in the story are meant to distract readers, that is, to lead them away from the solution. For the plot each major event is linked in steps that make sense. At the conclusion the story usually ends with a credible, rational solution to the mystery.

This unit will be separated into three parts. In one part literature circles will be used as students read mystery

novels. This reading will mostly be done independently. The literature circle consists of a group of no more than five children who are reading the same novel. The group meets regularly to discuss the book and to respond to questions as a group. During this independent reading time students can read with a partner or read aloud. Students can readily put their reading strategies to use as they read with their peers. I have several mystery novels in mind from which children will be able to choose. For example, I would recommend *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Olive Eckerson. These are adapted versions that are appropriate for young readers. *The House of Dies Drear* or anything in the *Great Brain* series is also very good. Hopefully, students will experience the joy of reading and will come back for more. By reading with a group, students may be motivated to read and share.

In the primary part of my unit I will use short stories and reading passages, riddles and puzzles. I want to use short readings that can be easily done in class so there is time allotted for lessons and activities. The readings I will use are as follows: "The Chicken-Coop Monster" (Patricia McKissack), "The Case of the Stolen Ring" (Donald J. Sobol), "The Invisible Man" (H.G. Wells), and "Murders at the Rue Morgue" (Edgar Allan Poe). The unit will contain lessons and activities to improve reading strategies and critical thinking. I will focus on specific reading comprehension objectives that are particularly troublesome for my sixth grade students. They are:

1. Identifying or inferring the central idea, purpose, or theme within a written work.
2. Inferring important characters, settings, events, or relationships within written work.
3. Using context clues to determine meaning of unknown or multiple meaning words, or figurative language.

My intent is to teach the necessary skills through a specific genre that students can relate to and enjoy. In the process, students should take an interest in reading for enjoyment and use their newly-acquired skills to become better readers.

I will need to align my unit with the objectives for the reading comprehension component of the test. Reading passages measure three areas of comprehension: constructing meaning; applying strategies; and analyzing, elaboration and responding critically.¹ I intend to teach skills related to those areas that are measured. The lessons and activities in my unit will be directly related to these areas so students become familiar with these skills before the test.

In addition to receiving teacher-led lessons to develop their comprehension ability, students will also benefit from independent practice activities. In other words, I will first teach students about a particular area of comprehension, then I will give students seatwork assignments to be completed independently. This kind of assignment is designed to have students apply on their own the strategies, concepts, and other new information just gained from the lesson.

I look forward to sharing *Wrapped in Mystery* with my sixth graders. I sincerely feel that they would enjoy reading mysteries and become more skillful readers.

Strategies

Mystery fiction a genre of literature

Detective stories are usually referred to as cheap entertainment yet they are read and written by talented people. These stories are often grouped as "crime stories," "mystery stories," and "detective stories" as if they were all one. You might ask what distinguishes these stories from one another to satisfy one's literary taste. It is not enough that one of the characters in the story be called a detective- nor is it necessary. What is required is that the main interest of the story should consist of finding, from physical circumstances, the time order and meaning of events that have been partly disclosed and partly concealed.

This use of "mystery" can be used/seen portrayed in stories, riddles, mathematical tricks, puzzle-pictures, enigmas, acrostics and stories which make us afraid. Since so many kids love riddles, I will introduce "Wrapped in Mystery" by presenting and discussing this riddle/problem:

A boy is hurt in a bicycle accident. The ambulance driver rushes the boy to a hospital and calls the child's father, Dr. Smith. Dr. Smith meets the ambulance at the emergency room and becomes hysterical when he sees his injured son. In the operating room, where the boy is taken for surgery, Dr. Smith gazes into the child's face, then says, "I'm glad this is not my son."²

In this classic riddle the puzzle is explained by the fact that there are two Dr. Smith's: one is the father, and the other is the surgeon. Students may or may not figure this out. The important point to make is that the riddle, or mystery, for the reader is based on mistaken identity and the placement of language. Mistaken or confused identity is at the core of many mysteries.

Drawing on students previous experiences, I will invite the class to discuss mystery stories they have enjoyed recently. Students may first mention examples from television, computer games, or movies. It is important to ask:

What is the problem that had to be solved?
Who were the suspects?
What were the clues that led you to suspect more than one character?
Did you figure out the correct solution before you reached the end of the story?
Looking at the plot, does the solution make sense? Why, or why not?

Ask similar questions about mystery stories in books that students are likely to be familiar with, such as one of Donald Sobol's Encyclopedia Brown adventures. For example, in Sobol's, "The Case of the Missing Ring," clues about the typewriter and about Mr. Bevan's cane are given early-on in the story. Discuss how a reader, looking back, can see how these clues were "planted" by the writer to help identify the perpetrator; and how, unless one picked up on these clues, many other characters in the story might be suspected. Students will have to

carefully analyze what they've read in order to predict the outcome of this story. Students need to read carefully and go back to look for clues. This helps students to apply and analyze what they've read.

Elements classic to mystery fiction should be introduced at this time. Students can identify five basic elements that most mysteries contain:

- 1) Characters
- 2) Setting
- 3) Clues
- 4) Distractions
- 5) Plot

Red herrings are also important to introduce at this time. They are clues given to deliberately mislead the reader. Helping students to recognize these elements in future readings can be beneficial. Students can also use the following activity to assimilate new mysteries to their repertoire of understanding.

This activity requires a short time to complete, and can be done at home as well as at school. It can also be used as an assessment tool for future mystery stories students will read. Some other helpful suggestions for using this activity is to partner students up or if being done at home students can get family members involved.

Help students to put the elements of mystery into a graphic organizer they can follow. A web is easy to do and most students are familiar with this graphic organizer.

- (a) While enjoying a mystery story, critique it carefully, using the web as guide. Take notes.
- (b) The mystery can be one you listen to via radio or oral reading, one that you see on television or on film, or one read independently.
- (c) Be ready to tell the class
 - *the title of the mystery;
 - *the medium in which it was presented (i.e., book, T.V. show, radio drama);
 - *the basic situation in the mystery;
 - *how the mystery does, or does not, fulfill each of the criteria on the web

The mystery story has the components of other realistic fiction, but with a vital change of emphasis: everything in the story revolves around a puzzle or an unusual problem to solve. Students will read "The Chicken-Coop Monster" by Patricia C. McKissack (taken from the book, *The Dark-Thirty*). Although McKissack's short mystery story doesn't deal with crimes, detectives, and nefarious perpetrators, it has the essential characteristics of a mystery. For learning and instructional purposes the story provides a doable model for young readers tackling the mystery genre. Well-wrought mystery stories share literary elements with other good fiction which students can draw on: vivid characterization, descriptions of the setting, and events that grab the reader's interest.³

"The Chicken-Coop Monster" is full of suspense. It is the story of a girl named Melissa who is living on her grandparents farm because her parents are getting divorced. She is afraid of the chicken coop because she thinks there is a monster in it. She has many close encounters with the chicken coop until finally her loving grandfather helps her to conquer her fears. It's an enjoyable story that lends itself well to extended activities.

Reading strategies through mystery fiction

As more and more of my students fall in to the remedial category of the Connecticut Mastery Test for reading comprehension, I feel a need to align my teaching and particularly this unit with the test's goals and objectives. The reading comprehension component of the test seeks to measure how well students construct meaning with a variety of types of text; how students apply strategies in order to construct meaning; and students ability to analyze, elaborate, and respond critically to written works.⁴ Since this unit is based on mystery fiction, one of the goals is for students to be able to apply reading strategies in order to be better readers and in turn, meet the Connecticut Mastery Test standards.

Reading passages on the CMT are usually narrative and expository. Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" will adapt well to this format. Poe's story is laid out in true mystery fashion. It gives great detail to characters and events in quite sequential order. The story ties the reader into solving the mystery.

This story, originally published in 1841 is a classic deductive mystery story with a famous genius as a detective. Dupin is similar to the ever famous Sherlock Holmes, as well as other series detectives. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" helps students to generate "good questions" that can help them solve the story. Many meaningful lessons and activities can be created from this particular reading, lessons on chronological order, context clues and characterization are just a few.

The lessons provided give students the opportunity to construct meaning after reading Poe's short story. Students need to identify or infer the central idea in the short story, as well as identify important characters, settings, events, relationships and details within the story. The students also use relevant information to summarize and draw conclusions about the author's purpose.

Students will apply reading strategies in order to make meaning of the text. Poe can be somewhat difficult for young readers, but I think they are at the stage where they can appreciate a classic piece of literature and understand its significance. Students will get experience using and creating graphic organizers to follow the story. Using context clues to determine meanings of unknown or multiple meaning words, or figurative language is also an intricate part of constructing meaning from what is read. Students will be given the opportunity to analyze, elaborate on and respond critically to Poe's short story. The questions used in the

activities will set purposes so that students will reconsider or reread certain sections of the story. With each rereading, students develop a more in-depth understanding of the story. The lessons and activities in this unit are just a cross-section of what can be done with mystery fiction in the classroom, and is by no means complete. This genre of literature can lend itself so well to many higher order thinking skills.

Another short reading passage to be used in the unit is "The Invisible Man". Before television, families used to gather around the radio for nightly entertainment. Creepy shows like "Lights Out" kept thousands trembling on the edge of their chairs.⁵ In 1938, one story threw America into a panic. It was H.G. Wells's "The War of the Worlds." When Americans heard the radio broadcast of the story, many thought martians were really invading the Earth.

Today, Wells's stories still have the power to terrify us. "The Invisible Man" has been terrifying readers for years. I selected this story for my students because it is a classic. Wells also gives a timeless issue on which to ponder- What would you do with the ability to become invisible? This story also deals with the realization that great discoveries and inventions can be a two-edged sword. The character in the story uses nuclear energy to his own advantage. Before reading "The Invisible Man," I will have to ask students to think of significant discoveries and inventions. Then we can discuss their positive and negative implications, because Wells tells the story of a bitter man who uses his scientific discovery to terrorize others. Students will have to read carefully, and look at the causes of his behavior and the effects of his behavior to make meaning of this timeless classic.

Literature circles

School and classroom libraries should contain various types of books to suit the interests of children. On hand should also be multiple copies of books for shared reading among students and teachers. I have used literature circles in my classroom before and find them most encouraging for independent thought. It provides a forum for students to share and voice their opinions without being judged. Groups of students read the same book and get to share their thoughts and experiences about the book. The group meets regularly to keep everyone on track and is kept small (perhaps four to five students) to encourage participation by all. Students are free to choose their own titles in the mystery fiction genre.

Students also share in group activities involving the novel they are reading. It is important to model expected behavior in a literature circle. Eventually, the group is independent of any teacher direction. Students then take responsibility for their reading and input to the group. Students will likely meet once a week to share their thoughts on what they've read and engage in literary activities as a group. Listed are suggested questions for discussion in a literature circle. Groups need not answer them all in a single session, but rather discuss one or two.

Suggested Questions

1. Which part of the book stands out in your mind the most?
2. Picture a part of the book in your mind. Which part of the book did you picture? Why?
3. Was there anything in the book that surprised you?

4. Does this book make you think of anything that happened in your life?
5. If the author were here, what would you say to him/her? What questions would you ask?

Suggested Activities

1. Make a sequential time chart of the ten most important plot events.
2. Write a new ending for the story.
3. Make a large web of the novel's characters, events and themes.
4. Discuss any clues the author gave that helped you to anticipate the outcome of the story.
5. Discuss how the author creates suspense to keep you reading the novel. Chart the suspects and draw a description of each.

As in the past I am looking forward to this being very successful. Just look at the number of book clubs sprouting around the country as people read along with others and are able to share their thoughts and experiences with an intimate group. This approach really appeals to middle-grade students because it is different from and more sophisticated than the approaches used in primary grades. As students participate in the literature circles they call upon and develop their metacognitive abilities. They look not only at the "what"-the written products- but also at the "why's" and "how's," that is, at a writer's goals and strategies. In doing so, students become more insightful as readers and more concise as critics. Focusing on mystery fiction, students will increase their literary understanding and appreciation of this genre, read more critically, and be "Wrapped in Mystery."

Notes

1The Psychological Corporation. "Connecticut Mastery Test Second Generation.

(Connecticut : State of Connecticut, 1993), 11.

2Jack Silbert. Math Mysteries. (New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 1995), 13. 3Tara McCarthy. Teaching Genre. (New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 1995), 82. 5Scholastic Scope. Mystery in the Spotlight. (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1994), 37.

Lesson

This lesson is based on "The Case of the Missing Ring." This story is taken from Donald Sobel's Encyclopedia Brown Keeps The Peace.

Objective - to identify elements of a mystery story

- to analyze information in a mystery

Materials- copies of "The Case of the Missing Ring."

- Highlighters

Procedure- Read the story aloud to students. This gives them the chance to listen to the mystery without distraction. Then, with highlighters in hand, have students reread the story independently. Students should highlight the following information directly on their copy of the story.

What is the problem that had to be solved?

Who were the suspects?

What were the clues that led you to suspect the character(s)?

Have students write out their solution to the mystery. Make sure students use their highlighted clues to explain their solution. Read the solution to the story that is found in the back of the book. Discuss the clues and their relation to one another. Students will need to recheck their highlighted information with the solution.

Lesson

This lesson is based on Patricia C. McKissack's, "The Chicken-Coop Monster," Taken from the book, The Dark-Thirty.

Objective- identify the central idea, purpose, or theme.

- predict outcomes

Materials- copy of "The Chicken-Coop Monster" and the response sheet

Procedure- Give students time to read the first three pages in the story. Using the response sheet, students pencil-in their individual responses. Bring students together as a whole group to discuss their responses to the beginning of McKissack's story. Responses to question number four may vary. Ask students to explain why they felt the words and phrases they circled were particularly descriptive. Set up a chart to record the different responses to the prediction questions. Students might discuss their different predictions and how their exposure to different predictions adds to the enjoyment of the story. Students can discuss and compare

responses and change theirs if they wish to do so. Enjoy the rest of the story.

Response sheet

- 1) Where is Melissa living as the story begins? Why is she living there?
- 2) Why is Melissa afraid of the chicken-coop? What reasons does she give for her fear?
- 3) What is Melissa upset about? List at least two examples.
- 4) Circle words and phrases in the story that describe Melissa's feelings well.
- 5) What do you think the chicken-coop monster is? Why do you think so?
- 6) In your opinion, how can Melissa solve the mystery of the chicken-coop monster?

After the story

- 7) Tell how Melissa solved the mystery of the chicken-coop monster.

Lesson

This lesson is based on "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Edgar Allan Poe, taken from the book *The Ten Great Mysteries* by Edgar Allan Poe.

Objective- identify important characters, settings, events, relationships and details within the story

Materials- copy of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

Procedure- As a class read the story. This may take more than one class period. Students will take turns reading aloud. Periodically stop to check for understanding. Ask students to predict what will happen next. This keeps the reader engaged in the text. It also will help generate ideas based on their understanding of the story. Also ask students to summarize and to retell events in the story.

Read the story up to the point where the witnesses give their testimony (pp. 22).

Students will make a list of the witnesses and generate a list of questions to ask each witness.

Complete a story map by listing at least four significant events in the order they happened.

After reading up to page 41

Explain whether or not you think Dupin's plan to trap the Frenchman will work?

What advice can you give Dupin to help him solve the murder mystery?

Use pages 20-21

Identify the following words on pages 20 and 21, then, in your own words, write a definition for each.

garrets expostulating

corroborates deposes

excoriated chafed

throttled corpse

Lesson

This lesson is based on the story, "The Invisible Man."

Objective- understand the plot, character

- read for comprehension
- understand cause and effect

Materials- copy of "The Invisible Man"

- copy of the questions and worksheet

Procedure- Have students read the story independently. Then go back, having different students take on the various characters' role.

Questions

What are some of the explanations that the village people give for the behavior of the stranger? What explanation did you, as a reader, have early in the story?

If you discovered a way to become invisible, what would you do with that ability? Are there ways in which this discovery could work for the good of mankind?

What might a day in the life of an invisible person be like?

Why does Griffin ask Kemp to be his accomplice? Why does the author wait until this point to reveal that Griffin is someone that Kemp once knew?

At the end of the story, Kemp remarks, "It's a waste that such a brilliant discovery was made by such a twisted mind." What does he mean?

Explain to students the reason someone does something. The "why" of what a person does- is called his or her motivation. There is a cause for everything a character does (the effect).

Write cause or effect for each pair of statements.

___ Griffin was cold. ___ Griffin took off his bathrobe.

___ Mrs. Hall lit a fire. ___ Griffin became invisible.

___ Millie ran downstairs. ___ Kemp betrayed Griffin.

___ Griffin frightened Millie. ___ Griffin planned to kill Kemp.

Materials for classroom use

McKissack, Patricia. *The Dark-Thirty*. This book contains the short story, "The Chicken-Coop Monster."

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Ten Great Mysteries by Edgar Allan Poe*. This book contains the story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Any anthology of Poe is likely to have this favorite.

Sobel, Donald J. *Encyclopedia Brown Keeps the Peace*. This book contains "The Case of the Stolen Ring."

Wells, H.G. "The Invisible Man". This story was in *Mystery in the Spotlight*, which is a skills book put out by Scholastic.

Suggested mystery titles for conducting literature circles. Five or six copies of each title should be on hand for group use.

Byers, Betsy. *Tarot Says Beware: A Herculeah Jones Mystery*

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (adapted by Olive Eckerson)

Duncan, Lois. *I Know What You Did Last Summer*

Fitzgerald, John D. *The Great Brain* (series book, all are appropriate)

Hamilton, Virginia. *The House of Dies Dreer*

Nixon, Joan Lowery. *The Name of the Game was Murder*

Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*

Spinelli, Jerry. *Goosebumps* (series book, most are appropriate)

Vivelo, Jackie. *Chills Run Down My Spine*

Student Reading List and Bibliography

Conklin, Groff, ed. Ten Great Mysteries by Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1989. A neat collection of famous Poe unabridged tales. Great for the students interested in "the first horror writer." Eckerson, Olive. The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. New York: Globe Book Company, 1967. Contains most of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries This book has been adapted for children and is easy to read. Children get a sense of the classic without missing out on the reading. Laycock, George. Strange Monsters & Great Searches. Connecticut: Xerox Education Publications, 1973. True-life mysteries for students to learn about. The book has chapters on bigfoot, the lochness monster and Komodo dragons to name a few. Good book for the serious reader. McKissack, Patricia C. The Dark-Thirty Southern Tales of the Supernatural. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1992. This collection of short stories is great for read-a-louds. Many of the stories are about ghosts and stories passed on through oral tradition. Each story also contains a theme or moral. Simon, Seymour. Strange Mysteries from Around The World, New York: Scholastic Inc., 1997. This book has great pictures. Super for the nonfiction reader. Can also be used as a teacher resource for expository reading text. Sobol, Donald J. Encyclopedia Brown Keeps The Peace. New York: Penguin , 1969. This series is a great read for the child detective. It comes in a series so students can pick from other favorites as well.

Teacher Bibliography

Conklin, Groff, ed. Ten Great Mysteries by Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1989. An unabridged collection of Poe's favorites. Excellent for introducing Poe to young readers. I would recommend this for the avid Edgar Allan Poe fan. Freeman, Judy. The Best New Children's Books. Washington: Bureau of Education & Research, 1997. This is an excellent source for teachers and librarians. Freeman herself is a children's librarian and writes a column for Instructor magazine on children's books. Not only does this book critique children's novels, but it has an annotated bibliography. It also gives related titles for interdisciplinary teaching. Johnson, Jennifer. "It's a Mystery! Cross-curricular investigations for 'detectives' of All grade levels," Creative Classroom, v. 12, 1997. Creative Classroom is a good professional publication for teachers to get ideas for their classrooms. The mystery article involved integrating the topic into all disciplines in the classroom. Mason, Jana M. and Kathryn H. Au. Reading Instruction For Today. U.S.A.: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990. A textbook for teachers that discusses reading comprehension and useful classroom strategies. It's also a reference for various kinds of Language Arts activities. McCarthy, Tara. Teaching Genre. New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 1996. This publication examines various genres of literature, fantasy, nonfiction, legends, etc. It also gives some great hands-on activities for use with students. The Psychological Corporation. Connecticut Mastery Test Second Generation. Connecticut, 1993. This book comes from the state of Connecticut and is given to teachers to help them understand the Connecticut Mastery Test. It also gives sample questions from the test and student responses. It is mainly used by teachers to prepare students for the test. Scholastic, Inc. Literature and Writing Workshop . Investigating Mysteries. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1992. A mini textbook for classroom use. This series has many other titles available also. Many of the stories in this book are clue-laden and draw the reader into solving the mystery by its unique questioning within the story. Scholastic Scope. Mysteries in the Spotlight. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1994. This skills booklet features short mystery plays from some classic stories, including Arthur Conan Doyle and Saki. They are good for incorporating drama into the mystery genre. Class sets are fairly inexpensive. Silbert, Jack. Math Mysteries and Activities to Build Problem-Solving Skills. New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 1995. This is a wonderful source and can be used interdisciplinary. It integrates Math and problem solving skills across the curriculum. Each activity begins with a page of teacher tips.

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