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ENG 504/505
Prof. Kennedy
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Genre Study: Exploring the Short Story

“For some reason, I remembered the time, a few years before, when my mother had taken me to see a psychiatrist. One of the more obvious questions he had asked was, “Debby, do you ever have the sensation of being outside yourself, almost as if you can actually watch yourself from another place?” I hadn’t at the time, but I did now. And it wasn’t such a bad feeling at all.” –Mary Gaitskill, from “Secretary”

At this point in the semester, my tenth-grade students have read the plays *A Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*, and the full length novels *Alas, Babylon!*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Frankenstein*, each fitting into a broader theme of the “narrative of power”.¹ Using the longer texts first allows me the opportunity to teach the students about such concepts as “narrative arc,” and how writers can use this arc to tell one or many stories over the course of the novel or play. With regard to writing assignments, they have completed a memoir, a descriptive essay using irony, an argumentative essay, and weekly one-page responses to that week’s reading assignment.

As a point of personal preference, multiple choice quizzes and tests are not given, in order to encourage the students to come up with their own interpretation of the works we are reading- the model of a “writing-intensive class”. This particular unit keys to ELA Standards 2, 3 and 4 for Reading, as well as Writing Standards 2 and 3, and the students began using a writer’s notebook with the Memoir assignment.

A Brief Note on Methods

Students will come to this unit having learned “writing with voice” in the memoir assignment, and I begin the school year with longer forms (such as the play and novel) in order to teach concepts like “narrative arc” and literary analysis in context. In this class, I use synchronous education; students are expected to read assigned texts outside of the classroom so that they may be integrated into the writing instruction itself.

The First Class: Models, Features, Topics

As we begin the short story unit, I post the Gaitskill quote on the whiteboard and hand out copies of the major text we will be working from: *Where I’m Calling From*, by Raymond Carver. Given the frank and adult nature of Gaitskill’s stories, I would not have the students read from *Bad Behavior*, but I use the quote to set up the intellectual project of the unit. The class will then discuss their interpretation of the Gaitskill quote and they take notes in their

¹ See Appendix A for the course syllabus.

journals as to when or how they may have felt as Debby did, sharing their responses in the smaller discussion groups. I also assign a major project for the end of the unit, wherein they will write their own short story- after researching and bringing in examples of their own to share with the class. To that end, the students and I brainstorm at the whiteboard the different “features” of what a short story is, or is not. As an author, Carver represents one of the foremost short story writers of the mid to late 20th century, and as such, his texts can be used to represent the features of the short story.

What Is a Short Story?

While there are many variations in narrative form within the short story, there are certain features that commonly distinguish them all:

- They are short. While this point may seem obvious, there are textual and narrative differences between a “short story” and other forms.
- They have a brief, and sometimes incomplete narrative arc. When an author only has *x* amount of pages or lines to work with, not every aspect of the plot may be tied up with a neat little bow.
- The language style can be seen as brief, to the point of laconic – Carver was a genius at this.
- The short story will always have a direct reflection of the writer’s voice, likely because it requires the style and voice to be concentrated: the old joke goes, “I am sorry that I wrote you a five page letter, I didn’t have time to write a three page letter.”

What Isn’t A Short Story?

- An essay: The narrative must be fictional and/or creative.
- A novella: Novellas require a larger dramatic arc, and are generally divided into multiple chapters.
- A memoir: Like the essay, the narrative must be fictional within the construct of autobiography.

After sharing their thoughts on the quote, and discussing the features of a short story, the students write down potential topics in their notebooks and then share them in the class-wide discussion group. During this time, I put some of my own topics on the whiteboard and mingle with the students answering questions. The only parameters that I have set are that they cannot involve illegal activity, nor can the topic be anything they would not want to either read or have read aloud in front of the school – *“If you’re not sure you want to say it, don’t write it. Words come and go, print is forever.”* After the students brainstorm their topics, I have them narrow down the field by engaging them in a discussion; encouraging them to think through their topic and simultaneously gauge if they have enough to put into a full-length short story. Laconic is one thing, a paragraph is something else entirely. By the end of the first class, students have selected a topic that they are more or less comfortable with and go out to find mentor texts in the library or the Internet, together with their assigned readings from Carver.

The Second Class: Inventing, Researching, Planning

When the students come in for the second day of the unit (having read selected Carver shorts the night before), they have brought their examples with them, and I ask them to take out their pens and notebooks. To assess where they are in their process (as well as their comprehension of the reading), I give them a “quickwrite”; a twenty minute exercise in writing:

“Many people have attempted to emulate Carver’s style of writing short fiction - small words, brief phrases. Most end up imitating him badly without trying to. For this quickwrite, I want you to do it intentionally: try to imitate Carver’s style, badly to the best of your ability. In twenty minutes, I will ask you to share a section of what you have written.”²

Once the students and I have written and shared excerpts, we once again discuss and compare the various features of the short story in contradictions to other forms. This exercise is intended to serve as a germ in the students’ minds for the concepts of form and brevity. The students are then given the opportunity to share from the mentor texts that they brought in from home (see Appendix B for the best examples), with a lively discussion about each text among everyone – who brought in a solid example, if the author conformed to the features, et cetera.

After the large group discussion, I pass out a handout with the actual short story assignment and model on it. Compared to the previous assignments, I am a day behind – there is “a method to my madness.” While the due dates are the same, I will have them use their “quickwrites” as a “Zero Draft” from which they can either expand their initial ideas, or use to draw inspiration for a new idea. The handout here follows:

Short Story Assignment

We have been looking at the short story as a specific style of writing (or “genre,” to use the ten-dollar SAT word), identifying features of what it is, or what it is not. Your assignment is to write a short story using the topic that you selected on Monday for a classroom literary journal, and have it match up to the features that we listed; you can use the quickwrite as a template. To refresh your memories, a short story:

- Is short- Please limit your stories to 550 words (two typed pages).
- Has a brief narrative arc – This is not an opportunity to retell the Civil War.
- Has a short style of “speaking” to the reader, there is no need to engage in overly flowery descriptions of the color of your carpet in the living room – there will be time for that when we read Oscar Wilde next year.
- Uses your “writer’s voice”, but in a concentrated way. The story needs to sound like *you* wrote it. The hardest part of any piece of short writing is figuring out what *not* to say... Much like your weekly one page journals?
- Is fictional. Even if you are telling your own story, change the name or the place or something – you never know who might see it.

² This was an actual exercise for ETS 360 (Post-1945 American Fiction) at Syracuse University, David Yaffe, Ph.D., professor.

When is this due?

The first draft (10%) will be due to your writing partner on Wednesday by the beginning of class. The draft with peer comments (20%) will be due to me by the end of class on Thursday. We will have mini-conferences during Friday's class to discuss both your thoughts and your partner's comments. You will have the weekend to make your final revisions, and the final copy (70%) will be due on my desk at the beginning of class Monday. Please refer to the syllabus for my lateness policy.

How will you be grading this?

Truthfully, I will most likely be in pajama pants and bunny slippers, having a cup of coffee... Not what you meant? The rubric will consist of four factors, scaled from 1-4: Voice, narrative arc, language use, and grammatical conventions.

Peer Review Questions:

1. Length – How long is the story? If it is too long, where could the author make revisions?
2. Narrative Arc – Does the story have a direction that makes sense?
3. Language – Does the story feel weighed down with its own words?
4. Voice – Do you see the author's voice in the story? If not, how would you bring it in?
5. Conventions – Are there common spelling or grammatical errors?
6. What are your overall impressions of the story? Does the author fit the guidelines for a short story?

The Third Class: Comments and Mini-Lessons, Revising

Once the students have given their copies away for peer review, it becomes clear that some of the students have more of a clear eye towards concise narrative arcs than others – some have no narrative arc at all, wandering like Moses in the deserts. To that end, I use an example from “Cathedral” to show them what I am looking for:

“The blind man said, ‘We’re drawing a cathedral. Me and him are working on it. Press hard,’ he said to me. ‘That’s right, that’s good,’ he said. ‘Sure. You got it, bub. I can tell. You didn’t think you could. But you can, can’t you? You’re cooking with gas now. You know what I’m saying? We’re really going to have us something here in a minute. How’s the old arm?’ he said. ‘Put some people in there now. What’s a cathedral without people?’”
(Carver, 374)

In that short paragraph of an excerpt, we meet two of the three main characters, establish their relationship with each other, and get a very real sense of where the story has been and intends to go. Once that parameter is established, the writing partners continue to review the short stories based on the four criteria set out in the assignment handout. I also offer mini-lessons on revising for detail in the small discussion groups. Randy Bomer says in *Time for Meaning* that “[ownership]...preserves the motivation of the writer to write and preserves the authenticity of the literacy event, but I do try to keep a balance in my mind and work between ownership and my clear and explicit ambition for the writer’s growth.” (Bomer, 78)

Considering that we the teachers comprise at least one audience for our students, I offer Mr. Bomer my thanks on the point, that in order to get to students to think beyond “writing for the teacher” we may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

The Fourth and Fifth Classes: Revising, Publishing and Reflecting

After the peer-review comments are returned, I meet with each student individually to discuss their concerns with what they are writing. Our school computer lab has individual carrels, so all I need to do is wheel a chair over and we have privacy. I let the student begin the conference by expressing his or her thoughts on what they are doing, and their reactions to the peer comments. As the standard for civility has been set out in the syllabus,³ neither the reviewer nor the review-ee reacts personally to the comments. Once the student is finished with his or her concerns, I offer feedback of my own in the form of what I call “laser lessons”: mini-lessons directed at a specific issue for an individual student that may not have been frequent enough to present as a class-wide lesson. For example, if the student had difficulty with a particular phrase structure or sentence structure that was unique to their story.

Monday morning arrives, as it usually does, and the students submit their final drafts for review and publication. I collate the copies into clear plastic book-report folios, and each student reads aloud the story that they created for the book. Tangentially, there are no other readings due

³ Cf. Appendix A

for that week of class sessions, we will begin *The Trial* after the Thanksgiving Break. After the readings are complete, I hand each student back a copy of their original final draft with grades according to the rubric:

Assessment Rubric

4 – Exceptional Writing

- There is a clear narrative arc, and the story fits for length guidelines.
- Language is used effectively, conveying detail with economy.
- The student’s voice comes through clearly.
- There are virtually no grammatical errors.

3 – Strong Writing

- The narrative arc is less clear, or may go slightly over the length guideline.
- Language is used well, but there may not be the same sense of economy.
- The voice is there, but may be muted among other elements.
- There are a few grammatical/spelling errors.

2 – Developing Writing

- There is a narrative present, but it lacks the flow necessary for an arc.
- The student attempts to use language, but may not grasp the conventions fully.
- There is not a clear sense of voice
- There are several grammatical errors.

1 – Emergent Writing

- There is no attempt at a narrative arc, or does not conform at all to length.
- Language use is minimal; rambling without detail.
- There is no voice – student may as well have plagiarized it.
- There are errors in basic spelling and grammar.

The final task I have the students do is a 2 paragraph reflection on their experience with this assignment – I ask them to think about the process they used, as well as how their attitudes towards creative writing as a “craft” have changed as a result of this assignment. Generally, this will take about 30 minutes to complete, and they share their responses with the class, often to the relief of everyone else – there are times when misery really does love company.

The reflection piece may seem like busywork to the student, but I cannot overemphasize its importance to the educator. I trust my students to be honest and perceptive, and if some part of this assignment didn’t work for them creatively, they will share that with me. The only thing I ask is that if they had a problem, to be specific: paraphrasing Mark Twain, “Everybody complains about the assignment, nobody does anything about it.” I can use my students’ comments to improve the assignment for the next semester, or even to clarify my goals for their next assignment this semester.

In conclusion, the classroom-wide genre study is a critical piece pedagogically because it allows the students to internalize the features of a specific literary form, which can then translate into the literary analysis of a text in that genre.⁴ Furthermore, it allows the students to express themselves creatively and share that creativity with their peers. Remembering that we too are writers, we can share with our students the joy and excitement of “being published.” Even if the student has no aspirations toward a career in professional writing, this assignment will give them the chance to have their name in print.

⁴ Cf. Appendix C.

Works Cited and Professional Resources

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- Louie, Belinda. "Development of Empathetic Responses With Multicultural Literature." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48.7 (2005): 566-78. Print.
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Appendix A: Course Syllabus

English 10
 Mr. Ferguson
 Fall Semester 2011, Block 2
 E-mail: aferguson@schooldistrict.org

English 10R: Narratives of Power and Alienation

Over the course of this semester, we will be examining works of literature that investigate power structures in human society – those who have power, and those who lack or desire power. To make this investigation possible, we will be using many different styles of “texts”: plays, poetry, novels, short stories and graphic novels.

How This Course is Structured

This will be a “writing intensive” class, which is to say that there will be very little in the way of traditional multiple-choice quizzes and tests; instead we will have weekly one double-spaced page “Reading Response,” in addition to a Writer’s/Reader’s Journal that will be collected randomly throughout the semester for review. The responses will not be letter-graded, but will receive a check for average work, a check-minus for below average, and a check-plus for superior work. The other assignments will be weighted as follows:

- Memoir Project – 10%
- Descriptive Essay - 10%
- Argumentative Essay – 10%
- Short Story/Literature project 20%
- Class Participation – 5%
- In-class Presentation – 10%
- Final Paper and Portfolio – 35%

Homework Policy

The timely completion of homework is *crucial* to any hope of a passing grade in this class. As such, all assignments will be submitted on my desk at the beginning of the period, any late assignments will have one letter grade deducted per day of being late, unless extenuating circumstances are brought to my attention by 9 P.M. the previous evening.

What are extenuating circumstances?

- A death in the family necessitating your absence.
- A severe illness (depending on your history, this may require a doctor's note)
- A similarly catastrophic event.

What aren't they?

- "I hate my... (topic, thesis, etc.)" This is why we have writing partners and in-class conferences: if you have concerns about your piece, that is the time to address them.
- "I'm just not feeling it." Just as every good writer has had writer's block, every good writer has also had deadlines.
- "The weather outside was just too gorgeous to miss!" Unless you intend to rewrite *Walden*, your homework still takes precedence.

Class Participation

Active participation in lecture is equal to the completion of homework for a passing grade. As the teacher, I put a great deal of work into preparing for class, I expect the same of you. Similarly, I also will treat you with respect, please treat me and your classmates accordingly. Any signs of disrespect toward me or a classmate will be reflected by a decrease in your participation grade.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Introduction, *Persepolis*- Marjane Satrapi, Memoir Assignment

Week 2: *The Tempest*- William Shakespeare

Week 3: *A Tempest*- Aimé Césaire

Week 4: *Maus*- Art Spiegelman

Week 5: *The Merchant of Venice*- William Shakespeare

Week 6: *Alas, Babylon!*- Pat Frank; Descriptive Essay

Week 7: *Jane Eyre*- Charlotte Brontë

Week 8: *Frankenstein*- Mary Shelley, Argumentative Essay

Week 9: *Julius Caesar*- William Shakespeare

Week 10: *Things Fall Apart*- Chinua Achebe

Week 11: *Where I'm Calling From*- Raymond Carver; Short Story project

Week 12: In-class presentation of projects

Week 13: *Thanksgiving Break*

Week 14: *The Trial*- Franz Kafka

Week 15: *To Kill A Mockingbird*- Harper Lee

Week 16: *Macbeth*- William Shakespeare

Week 17: *Christmas Break*

Week 18 - 20: Final Papers and Portfolio Assembly

Appendix B – Touchstone Texts from the Students

“Her, Him, and the Receptionist” <http://www.teenink.com/fiction/romance/article/78756/Her-Him-and-the-Receptionist/>

“Can You Hear Me?” <http://www.teenink.com/fiction/all/article/97177/Can-You-Hear-Me/>

“I Don’t Know How I Got Here in the Gay Pride Parade”
http://www.teenink.com/fiction/realistic_fiction/article/184683/I-Dont-Know-How-I-Got-Here-in-the-Gay-Pride-Parade/

“Just Friends” <http://www.teenink.com/fiction/all/article/17104/Just-Friends/>

“P.S. Don’t Save Me” http://www.teenink.com/fiction/realistic_fiction/article/86069/PS-Don39t-Save-Me

Appendix C: Literary Analysis Assignment

Up to this point, we have been looking at “literature” through a fairly wide lens – reading and interpreting texts on an individual basis. By contrast, we have been looking at the short story as a specific style of writing (or “genre,” to use the ten-dollar SAT word), identifying features of what it is, or what it is not. Now that you have written a short story of your own, use the skills you developed to analyze one of the stories we have read from Carver in a 2 page essay. To refresh your memories, a short story:

- Is short- Does the story succeed at this?
- Has a brief narrative arc – Do you feel like you know the characters well enough?
- Has a short style of “speaking” to the reader- did it say too much, or too little?
- Uses the “writer’s voice”, but in a concentrated way. The hardest part of any piece of short writing is figuring out what *not* to say... Does the story succeed?
- Is fictional. Does this seem like a story or a magazine article?

When is this due?

The first draft (10%) will be due to your writing partner on Wednesday by the beginning of class. Their comments (20%) to you will be due by the beginning of class on Friday. We will have mini-conferences during Friday’s class to discuss both your thoughts and your partner’s comments. You will have the weekend to make your final revisions, and the final copy (70%) will be due on my desk at the beginning of class Monday. Please refer to the syllabus for my lateness policy.

How will you be grading this?

Truthfully, I will most likely still be in pajama pants and bunny slippers, having a cup of coffee... Not what you meant? The rubric will consist of four factors, scaled from 1-4: Analysis, details and comprehension, language use, and grammatical conventions.