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The Short Story -- A Unit in Creative Writing
By Joseph Schmidt

Original short stories are useful in getting young people to realize the value of their own experience. But the decision on the part of the student to use his own life and world as a basis for a story is not enough to insure either a new insight or a decent literary product. He must be taught to extract the real drama from his own experience rather than to impose upon it a contrived and artificial drama. If he can be taught that, almost any marginally imaginative student can write an acceptable short story.

Our unit in original short stories came about as a result of our study of the short stories in the eleventh grade text. During the study I had tried to get across the idea that literature was an escape into and not from life, that literature was a means of capturing, holding, and controlling life to our greater satisfaction. The more I talked about it the more obvious it became to me that the only read way for students to “experience” the idea was for them to capture their own experience in story form. So I formulated the objectives and began.

There were only two objectives: (1) the reclamation by the student of the value of his own experience, (2) the reclamation that fiction it is of any value, is life controlled and understood. (For our definition of fiction we used Thomas Wolfe’s statement that

“fiction is fact, rearranged and charged with a purpose.”) The actual work of the unit was done mostly in class and involved five major steps: (1) finding material and utilizing experience, (2) exploring the experience, (3) analyzing the experience and fictionalizing, (4) rewriting, and (5) judging the stories.

It is very important for the teacher to be involved in the decision regarding the subject matter for the story; everything is lost if the student is allowed to “make-up” a story. He must start with his own experience. To insure this I used a kind of psychoanalyst’s method with the students on the couch. They were supplied with paper and instructed to write down by a kind of free association method whatever feelings, people, ideas, moods, situations came into their minds when I asked questions. I started with early childhood and worked up to their present life. The questions were of this general type: “what friends do you particularly remember from this period of your life?” “What did he or she look like?” “In what setting do you see him?” “Do you remember any particular incident involving him and you?” The questions continued in this vein for a couple of days and touched on room, house, relatives, friends, enemies, trips unhappy moments, and happy moments. Throughout I emphasized the importance of people and settings and details, no matter how unimportant they seemed.

The students then selected the experience they were to write about and were set to writing—in class. They were constantly reminded during this time to ignore completely the story idea and simply to relate the particular experience with attention to details of setting and character. Whatever pleasure they might derived from this literary abandon

somewhat vitiated by constant warnings for them to plan on complete revision and rewriting.

After allowing them some time to get a little involved in the material, I began to business of individual consultations and the analysis of the material for story possibilities. To facilitate this almighty labor, I first had them summarize in very few sentences the experiences they were going to relate. This enabled me to consult with people before they had finished their first draft. The material was varied and frequently interesting; discovering a structure for it was not as difficult as I had imagined. A few simple tricks of the fiction writer did great service. Flashback techniques served to unify many of the stories and to point up some main theme; simple rearrangement of events, the withholding of information here and putting it in there, snapped many of the experiences into form. For some of the travel material I suggested the intrusion—very lightly—of a member of the opposite sex, drawn, of course, from life. Changing the point of view in the story from one character to the other occasionally helped the writer to objectify his experiences. Sometimes the crossing out of needless explanation made way for the more subtle expression of moods and ideas through descriptions and dialogue.

During these conferences, the question method again proved useful. Often I asked the student to forget the story for a moment and simply to tell me about this person or event. I asked for details about this or that. Frequently, under such questioning, a colorless incident became more and more vivid to the student, and he began to see the dramatic value of the situation. Since the material was often obviously autobiographical, some of the writers were a little embarrassed when I asked questions about the experience

involved. After several conferences, I discovered that I was partly to blame for their embarrassment. In talking about the main character in a story, I would refer to him as “you,” unconsciously identifying him with the author. When I realized this I made it a point always to refer to the people in the stories by their fictional names or the third-person pronoun. This helped both to objectify the writer’s experiences and to relieve his embarrassment.

Fictionalizing the material was the most difficult problem. I tried, for instance, to get some of the authors to combine two different incidents into one, to leave out people and events or to include characters not present in the actual experience. It was difficult for some of them to do—it meant abstracting an experience—but those who did it learned something about fiction.

After a conference, the student decide on the structure of his story and started to reconstruct it. Most of the rewriting was done outside of class, and I was gratified to see how much time and care many of them put into their stories. (One boy, noted for his easy standards of achievement, completely rewrote his story for the second time after I had expressed willingness to accept it the way it was.) At this point I stressed the fact that the stories were to be written for the other people in the class and that the stories would be read and graded by them. The class was to be divided into groups and each story was to be graded and commented on by at least ten students. If the grades proved too disparate, I, of course, would decide finally. (The grades were, in general, satisfactory to me.) The best stories were to be read to the class unless the author objected.

When the stories all were in, an extra sheet was attached to each one for student grades and comments, the groups were formed, and the reading was begun. I had, in the meantime, listed on the board a number of words that I hoped would prove useful in channeling their comments: characterization, unity, tension, conflict, setting, dialogue, theme, selection, artificial, contrived, subtle, obvious. The natural interest of the students in the stories of the others made it unnecessary for me to speak to them about irrelevant chattering. (Several times during this unit I witnessed the reality of “natural” discipline.)

We then ended the unit with my reading the best stories to the classes. Although I gave them the opportunity to comment if they wished, I did not, at this point, try to stimulate criticism or discussion. Instead, I talked a little about each story, pointing up the elements I wanted them to notice, and then simply read the story. I felt that they had reached the point of diminishing returns in regard to criticism and that their listening to the stories best achieve the end for which stories are actually written.

The success of the unit was, of course, relative. The stories, judged by professional or adult standards, fall short. Imperfectly realized climax, partially conveyed character, thinly intensified conflict, and inadequately illuminating language were common. There were individual failures: one girl, who had talent and should have written a good story, rejected her material in favor of a story about a teen-age dope addict. Character, theme, action—all stereotyped. Because she had relaxed into imitation, she was my worst disappointment. Her original story would have been saved had there been far more individual conferences. The student criticisms did not always reveal progress: some people were still impressed by the artificial, the contrived or the melodramatic.

Several, for instance, were impressed by the dope-addict story. Subtler forms of conflict were not always recognized, and some stories in which conflict was definite but psychological were criticized for lack of conflict. The method of recording the criticisms might be improved: the fact that all the criticisms were written on the same page was a temptation for a few to copy or repeat previous statements.

The unit is hardly adaptable to a heavy teaching schedule, the key instruments being the personal conference, heated by the teacher's enthusiasm. I run the unit in three classes simultaneously, and needless to say, found it easier to be enthusiastic over the first than the ninetieth story. The amount of amorphous material to be and analyzed—yes diagnosed—and the number of decisions to be made regarding form and structure took less time than I expected—but more energy. The unit is best applied in only one class or, at least, in one class at a time.

In terms of objectives achieved, however, the short stories were worth the effort. Students explored their own experience and, almost without exception, found values—dramatic, esthetic, moral—which they really tried to illuminate through literary form. A monotonous and impersonal narrative about an automobile accident became a climactic moment of flashing chrome and headlights; a simply hunting experience grew into ten pages of increasing tensions climaxed by the weird sound of an unseen snowplow heard through the white blindness of a snowstorm. One boy, who had sat for three days unable to write anything, had only a character from a carnival and a set of conventional judgements to start with. He never found a story but drew a “B” from his fellow students for a characterization which revealed diverse elements of threat, fear, danger, and

ostracism. The best of the stories, by a girl, caught a moment of childhood with real delicacy and charm, avoiding all the pitfalls of cuteness and sentimentality.

If what the students did is any criterion of what they learned, then they learned something about the nature of fiction. They became involved in their material; they expressed attitudes and ideas about people and the world; they found and captured values in experiencing; they explored and better understood incident and character—all in the attempt to write stories. Incidentally, they wrote more, revised more, needed less prodding, and revealed a greater sense of achievement in this than in any other unit all year.

These stories by high school juniors demonstrated to my own satisfaction that there is no ineradicable compulsion which drives young people to write artificial, trivial, melodramatic or sentimental stories. They do so because they do not know what stories are, because they are allowed to imitate, and because they have not really discovered their own lives, with which they are, oddly enough, so desperately preoccupied. When they are somewhat forcibly thrust into their own experience, when they are given direction in exploring and arranging it, they can write stories which, though imperfect, reflect reality lit with some degree of insight. That my eleventh graders did just that proved also, at least to me, that the most direct way of showing a student that literature is life, as the textbook titles say, is to show that his life is literature.