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Uncloaking the Clues: Details, Daggers, and Detection

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Introduction

In my inner city high school of roughly 3,500 students who are of every ethnicity and culture, who range from the truly brilliant and pursuing an International Baccalaureate diploma to the special needs student who is hampered by autism or some other disabler, and who run the gamut from homeless or economically disadvantaged to extremely wealthy, the creative writing students in my classes are given a choice of writing a novella, a narrative poem, or a script for stage, screen, or television. Typically, this work has had to be an epic adventure and, for the most part, completing this task has been a struggle. Most of my students claim to be unfamiliar with the epic adventure when it concerns anything beyond viewing the Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings movies. This claim is made despite the fact that The Odyssey and other epic works are a requisite part of the English curriculum. Fortunately, however, my students cannot even attempt to use this as an excuse when it comes to the detective genre. If they have not read the Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys sagas, they have heard of Sherlock Holmes and been inundated with television series whose plots are steeped in the tenets of detective fiction like C.S.I., Without a Trace, Shark and the like. They have cut their eye teeth on movies such as Bad Boys, the Bourne trilogy, The Bone Collector, and The Good Shepherd, which feature the art of "detecting" as the noteworthy forte of the protagonist. Likewise to offset their tendency to avoid reading, most of their video games like the God of War series, the World of Warcraft series, the Zelda series, the Ninja Gaiden series and the Tom Clancy Splinter Cells series follow the same concept of uncovering clues and using the answers to advance to the ultimate level of the game. Therefore, it is my intent to channel these interests and the skills they have honed enjoying their chosen means of challenging entertainment into the writing of detective stories and a novella or play for their spring semester project.

The students will begin by writing segments and short stories in the various subgenres. I cannot, however, assign them these tasks without providing the formulas for this genre. Therefore, to familiarize myself with the basic tenets and formulas associated with detective fiction, I applied for admission to the 2007 "Across the Curriculum with Detective Fiction for Young People and Adults" seminar of the Yale National Initiative. The study of the materials offered in this seminar, as well as the collaboration between fellow teachers and the expertise offered by the erudite Dr. Paul Fry, provided the necessary knowledge and expertise for me to do a creditable job of creating a curriculum unit to aid in teaching this subject matter. It also offered me a means of approaching the subject in a variety of ways, through many subject areas. This is important because it has become increasingly obvious over the years that educators do not operate in a vacuum. We are, to a degree,

dependent upon the efforts and cooperation of our colleagues.

It is for this reason that I propose using the study of the detective genre to cross disciplines, asking students to devote chapters or scenes of their work to specific academic areas. In this effort, I might ask the students to uncover a clue in their work, which turns out to be a chemical formula, an equation, or even an obscure historical fact. They would then be directed to consult with those of my colleagues who are best suited to answer the queries that result and to use their replies in the writing of the short story or chapter in which this clue is embedded. And given the fact that the school at which I work, like many others, requires students to complete a multi-faceted personal project, this writing can serve as a springboard to the research for that project. Even if this writing does not hold for the student the necessary appeal to be the actual project they submit, it will still be a learning experience that highlights the fact that serious learning is not limited to the knowledge of just one subject but is, rather, comprised of an array of tidbits from many that can be interrelated. It will also make clear that the key to acquiring all of these morsels is the ability to detect the details, with skills honed like the edge of a dagger, to uncover the clues that provide understanding. This, in itself, is "the basic premise of good thriller or spy fiction . . . The unobserved detail is the important detail. [Therefore,] All detail must be observed." (Winks, Modus 49). Thus, lessons geared towards students learning to pay attention to detail meet the objectives set forth by the State of Texas and the Houston Independent School District designed to foster both the development of critical thinking skills and higher order learning.

Objectives

The basic writing objectives of the Houston I.S.D. (H.I.S.D.) Project Clear and the Texas Education Agency's Essential Skills and Knowledge (T.E.K.S.), which include the following, call for a curriculum that can motivate students to develop original works in the various subgenres of detective fiction and that encourages them to consider the questions of norms, mores, and ethics raised in their dealings with the prominent theme of good and evil in the genre. These objectives begin with the student developing the foundations of writing, then move on to the student writing for a variety of purposes and in a variety of forms (T.E.K.S. ELA.110.52.b.1.A-G). Secondly, the students' ability to use the conventions of written language to communicate clearly and effectively in writing and their application of standard grammar and usage to communicate clearly and effectively in writing is highlighted (T.E.K.S. ELA.110.52.b.3.A-D). Following this, the students must select and use recursive writing processes for self-initiated and assigned writing and demonstrate competence in evaluating their own writing and the writing of others (T.E.K.S. ELA.110.52.b.2.A-I and T.E.K.S.ELA.110.54.b.A-C). And finally, the student will interact with writers inside and outside of the classroom in ways that reflect the practical uses of writing and he/she will use writing as a tool for learning and research.

Each of these objectives lends itself well to the study and dissemination of information gained while the students familiarize themselves with a genre that wends its way through every aspect of real life, even if in an exaggerated manner, illuminating the foibles and the heroism inherent in humanity. Meeting these objectives will enable the students to write more effectively and to more accurately portray archetypes of human nature in their writings. Thus, at the end of this course of study, the student will not only be able to write according to directives and to hone that writing into clear, concise units, he/she will also be able to constructively critique the work of peers and discover insights that will help to make their own writing more incisive, a very useful skill in the writing of detective fiction.

Rationale

Why detective fiction? "Everyone, it is said, loves a mystery . . . they give us a detailed scrutiny of . . . civilization by a highly moral, and highly observant mind caught in that garrulous and unguarded mood in which we all tell most about ourselves . . . Character . . . has consequences . . . influences events; . . . creates difficulties and . . . dissolves them . . . there is a balance between necessity and freedom . . . [and] the genre features a hero, the detective, whose existence is a mere function of the mystery he is solving, while that mystery is, in fact, a patent knowledge over which a veil has been drawn at the first page that cannot extend beyond the last. [This, then, is the detective genre -] a "metaphor for life" (Winks Critical Essays 1-3).

This being said, we can see the relevance of the subject to the student, a very necessary consideration in secondary education. If it has aught to do with them, it is worthwhile. If they think it does not, we're simply banging our heads against a very hard wall in our efforts to bring about a transfer of knowledge from us and the literature to them. It is not going to happen. They will resist until the bitter end, protesting against "empty" knowledge, against learning they term boring and completely unrelated to what they deem "real life." So, we give them a mystery. We give them something into which they can sink their teeth in order to pick it apart, detect its secrets and hazard an educated guess about who, what, when, where, why, and how. We give them the strategies - the sharpened dagger — with which to dig for and unearth these answers, these details; then they can painstakingly uncloak the clues, which are comprised in these answers, the same clues needed to solve all of the problems presented and to reveal the essential truths sought. Finally, we give them the opportunity to use what they have uncovered — these details — to create something new and original. Thus they become, themselves, the authors of fate, creators.

Before they become the creators, however, they need to know those things from which such life is fashioned. They need to know the parts of a mystery and the tools available to puzzle out its solution. This is the material which must be digested so that they can get the skills necessary for problem solving. This, then, is the "meat" which will allow them to use the skills developed to problem solve in any discipline and to become proficient in the process. This is where they will whet their daggers so that they are able to dig as deeply as possible in order to detect those details they need to proceed. This is where the study of detective fiction is turned into an effective educational aid which can be used across the curriculum. This is where the study of detective fiction leads to problem solving and becomes the essential objective, one which can be used in any area of education and, indeed, life itself. And the way to start toward this goal is to read something.

Background

Again we ask, why detective fiction? My answer? It is informative, interesting, and provocative. "Detective novelists are a bookish lot. Aphorisms, lines from Shakespeare, the act of composing a report so that may order one's thoughts, the letter as clue, all abound ... [It] insists that there must be some explanation" (Winks Critical Essays 4-5). Such rationality is an ideal approach to problem solving, which fulfills the educational goal of fostering critical thinking.

In 1987, in their "Disorders of reasoning and problem-solving ability," Goldstein and Levin wrote, "Considered

the most complex of all intellectual functions, problem solving has been defined as [a] higher-order cognitive process that requires the modulation and control of more routine or fundamental skills." If a sentient being does not know how to go from Point A to a more desirable Point B, going through the process of problem solving will provide the solution. This process occurs in every walk of life — running the gamut from reading, writing, and arithmetic through political, managerial, and legal to mechanical, electrical, personal, and social contexts. It is one of the key components of detective fiction. It is the solving of the problem, the puzzle.

"A mystery must have a puzzle, just as a detective story must have a detective. A spy thriller might have both . . . The mystery should involve fair play; . . . clues - a term from Greek mythology referring to the thread by which one might hope to find one's way to the surface of the earth from a dark cave - must be fairly laid down for the reader to see, though they may be . . . made to appear to have quite a different meaning than they actually do. Agatha Christie's greatest claim to fame might well be the skill with which she misdirects readers[,] entirely fairly[,] . . . to confuse innocence and guilt" (Winks, 1998 xi). However, the different approaches to presenting the crime and the process involved in solving it have raised the question of what each approach should be called. Is all of it detective fiction? Is a mystery truly different from crime fiction? What, if anything, distinguishes the murder mystery from the thriller? Many critics and the writers of the vastly varied tales in this genre insist that there is a difference and that there are, indeed, major distinctions between the subgenres. Between them they have come up with various subgenres that include but are not limited to various types of whodunits — the private eye novel, the English Golden Age detective novels, and police procedurals.

The whodunit element is indispensable to the detective novel, but in a certain tradition it is absolutely the central feature. Writers in this mode demonstrate great ingenuity in telling their tales, in giving the details of the crime (usually a murder) and the events surrounding the investigation, and in keeping the identity of the criminal secret until the very end. It is then that they surprise the reader with not only the identity of the criminal but the unlikely way in which the crime was committed. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined Letter" are archetypes of this subgenre. These stories feature a complicated process involving intuition, logic and observation by an astute investigator to identify the culprit. Often, in these novels, this process takes precedence over the crime itself.

While Charles Dicken's Bleak House is another prototype of this genre, it is his protégé, Wilkie Collins, who is credited with having written the first great mystery novel — The Woman in White. And it is Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone, which is said to "have established the genre with several classic features of the twentieth-century detective story: a country house robbery, an "inside job," a celebrated investigator, bungling local constabulary, detective enquiries, false suspects, the 'least likely suspect,' a rudimentary 'locked room' murder, a reconstruction of the crime, and a final twist in the plot" (http: //en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Detective_fiction). Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is a prime example of the efficacy of Wilkie Collins' formula.

In England, the conventions developed by Conan Doyle evolved in the so-called "genteel" detective novels of the early twentieth century. In these "cozies," Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple and John Rhode's Dr. Priestly reside. This branch of detective fiction has a puzzle at its center and solving this puzzle is the goal of these stories. Some of the best works were written by John Dickson Carr (Carter Dickson), known as the master of the locked room mystery, and Cecil Street (John Rhode) whose hero specialized in elaborate technical devices. Rex Stout, Ellery Queen and Erle Stanley Gardner stepped into this field to more than adequately represent America, and the works generated by these and others have ensured that this subgenre has remained extremely popular today. It is the "farfetchedness" created by a layperson solving crimes that

veteran police officers cannot solve that has captured the interest of readers. This becomes even more compelling when the formal rules and conventions of the genre are flouted.

Then there is the private eye novel, which was probably begun by the British author Arthur Morrison with the creation of his private eye Martin Hewitt. This style was eagerly embraced by American writers from Dashiell Hammett through Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald (Kenneth Millar) to Michael Collins (Dennis Lynds). It was virtually an all male world until Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, and Sue Grafton were published. Today, the private eyes in these works are plentiful and diverse and the one thread that weaves through them all, binding them together, is their detective, whose life we become a part of as he/she works against time to solve the case presented.

The detective's life is also important in the hardboiled novels that are one version of the private eye formula. These stories are directly related to the socio-economic circumstances of the times they depict. The characters find themselves in a world gone awry, where the law is being manipulated for profit and power. This world seems bereft of light and darkness now that night is the norm. A traumatic event has occurred and the world, as the characters know it, is changed. This world becomes unpredictable and chaotic. Mores and norms are altered and morality is at a minimum. Disaster looms. Into this mix, a detective appears who seeks to return the world to normalcy, to stop the burgeoning crime and restore balance to a world shadowed in disillusionment, where economics and politics have contrived together to deprive the populace of control over their own lives. There is little hope and the weaknesses of the characters either lead them to become criminals or make them victims. The detective, bearing (if sublimating) the traits of the criminals, uses those traits to bring about the solution to the problem, many times allowing the criminals to defeat each other and themselves. This subgenre is characterized by graphic violence and the darker side of human nature (http://www. crimeculture. com/Contents/ Hard-Boiled.html).

The next subgenre to which we are introduced is the police procedural. In this type of detective fiction, the author attempts to depict the routine of the police officer. Typical features are a squad detective who arrives after the uniformed officers, the emergency personnel and the public, and the investigator's wait for the forensic reports of the crime. Another familiar aspect is the glimpse the reader is given of the rules and regulations the detective is expected to follow. We are introduced to suspects who are arrested and kept in custody, even if some of them are innocent, and there is usually pressure from senior officers to solve the crime quickly or to show progress in the investigation. An investigative team to which the detective and his superiors give orders is another basic. And, in the effort to gather information to facilitate the gathering of evidence the detective will often visit bars or some other favorite haunt to discuss or think about the case and will "lean on" informants. Political pressure will be brought to bear if the primary suspect is a prominent figure; or, if a police officer is a suspect, internal hostility will run rampant. To round out all of this, there will be media coverage increasing the pressure the detective is under to come up with an answer. This subgenre, with all its formulaic appeal, has become a staple of American television and is, possibly, the one most likely to be used by a student in the writing of a screenplay. This type of whodunit, like all of the others mentioned, is dependent on one basic element — suspense, the core precept of detective fiction. Suspense is what ensures that readers are always titillated and come back for more. Suspense is the main ingredient.

Suspense, the core tenet of detective fiction (also called tension), is the uncertainty and interest aroused in the reader as he/she contemplates the outcome of certain actions. It depends on the audience's perception of the events in the work and is one of the most important building blocks in drama. Suspense consists of real danger, but real danger accompanied by hope. The two most common outcomes are the anxiety experienced by the audience when the danger arises, followed by joy and satisfaction when their hope is realized. "If there

is no hope, the audience will feel despair" (http:// en.wikipedia.org /wiki/Suspense). This outcome is to be avoided if the author truly wants his work to be appreciated. Though an audience can handle tension, despair is untenable. When the audience seeks to escape through reading, despair is not the refuge sought — especially today, when the audience seeks the thrill of realism but wants fantasy as the end result.

This leads, at last, to the thriller. One of the most popular suspense genres today, the thriller is "characterized by investigation, fast pacing, frequent action, and resourceful heroes who must thwart the plans of more-powerful and better-equipped villains . . . [Here] suspense, red herrings, and cliffhangers are" used extensively. Also in these works, there usually exists an exotic setting and a hero who is, more than likely, a "hard man;" however, women are becoming increasingly common as the protagonists (http:// en.wikipedia.org /wiki/ Suspense). And, in more recent works, an ordinary citizen accidentally thrown into the mix is likely to become our hero.

Though the hero may be ordinary, the thriller generally occurs on a grand scale. It is not mere murder but mass murder or, possibly, a serial killer on the loose. We won't find simple bungled burglaries but terrorism, political assassination, or governmental coup d'état attempts. "Jeopardy and violent confrontations are standard plot elements [and,] while a mystery climaxes when the mystery is solved, a thriller climaxes when the hero finally defeats the villain, saving . . . the lives of others" and, maybe, his own. In the process, it is interesting to note, "Thrillers are defined not by their subject matter but by their approach to it" (http: //en. wikipedia .org/wiki/Thriller_%28genre%29). This is a point to be emphasized in our discussions with our students, who might feel that if there is a crime, it is automatically a detective story and, if there is a vast scale involved, the story is automatically a thriller. Though relatively "loose" in the scope encompassed, the thriller must meet one very specific criterion.

The thriller, a very broad field, is defined by the mood it evokes, i.e. the aura associated with the thrill. It includes spy and political thrillers, military and conspiracy thrillers, techno- and eco-thrillers, legal and forensic thrillers, psychological and horror thrillers, disaster and action thrillers, romantic and supernatural thrillers, and the much depicted (by television and the big screen alike) crime thriller. And though all of these are thrillers and some of all of them qualify as detective novels, not all of them involve the detective as a feature. The crime thriller is the exception and has particular appeal to the student because of "its focus on the criminal(s) rather than a policeman . . . [the emphasis on] action over psychological . . . and central topics . . . [which include] murders, robberies, chases, shootouts and double-crosses" (http: //en. wikipedia .org/wiki/Thriller _%28genre%29). All of these are elements commonly found in the modes of entertainment enjoyed by our students, which are offered extensively today. Therefore, the various combinations found in detection fiction should make this genre appealing, simplifying our task as teachers.

Implementation

My students will write a work of short fiction. As Tony Hillerman and Otto Penzler point out, "Most classic detective stories rely on a single clue, or gimmick, or bit of legerdemain, or realization (the "aha" moment); the rest is embellishment" (ix). A good, old-fashioned, detective novel creates a world and a populace for which the reader cares. Into this world a crime against society is introduced. This crime disrupts life and the ensuing story is concerned with the ramifications of the crime and the efforts made to thwart and apprehend the perpetrator. Inevitably order will be restored because, despite the villain's brilliance, he/she will make at

least one small mistake upon which the "detective hero" will capitalize to bring about both the culprit's capture and a return to peace for the citizenry of this world. And, "because the entire denouement [of our story] relie[s] on the uncovering of that single element to complete the jigsaw puzzle, it is clear that many of those novels could . . . [be] told in short story form with no loss of cleverness by the protagonist" (Hillerman and Penzler ix - x). In the short story form, all of these features are retained but compressed. The short story, then, becomes the format that best lends itself to the initial efforts of my students.

Because the short story does not appear to be too daunting due to its length (my students tend to equate length with level of difficulty), the students will not be immediately intimidated by the task. But before they can be turned loose to try their collective hand, they must be provided with prime specimens of the genre to read, discuss, study and mimic. This is where the teacher — as facilitator — must nudge them in the desired direction. The point of departure will be a selection from an anthology of short stories that will serve as their reference and guide through the assigned subgenre. Some short story anthologies which meet this objective are Hardboiled: An Anthology of American Crime Stories, Death by Pen: The Longman Anthology of Detective Fiction from Poe to Paretzky, The Mammoth Book of Private Eye Stories, The Mammoth Book of Roaring Twenties Whodunnits: Murder Mysteries from the Age of Bright Young Things, The Mammoth Book of Short Spy Novels: Twelve Espionage Masterpieces, Mystery & Detective Fiction, and The World's Finest Mystery and Crime Stories, (First and Third Annual Collection. The first anthology to which I will direct my students, however, will be Tony Hillerman's and Otto Pennzler's The Best American Mystery Stories of the Century. This anthology opens with O. Henry's "A Retrieved Reformation," a sort of redemptive story, which is a nice place to begin on the edge of a genre filled with the worst aspects of humanity.

Using "Reformation," the basic elements of a short story - setting, conflict, character, and theme — can be reviewed as a starting point to the unit. Particular attention will be given to emphasizing the difference between the subject and the theme. Ethnicity, gender, status, and social ills are common subjects for short stories. Students must be made to know that "these subjects allow the writer to comment upon the larger theme which is the heart of the fictional work" and include such universals as isolation and alienation, as well as anxiety, love/hate, relationships, family, initiation, friendship/brotherhood, illusion vs. reality, self-delusion/self-discovery, the individual vs. society, mortality, and spirituality. Once the distinction between subject and theme is made, the student is ready to consider the "Art of the Short Story" (http://encarta.msn.com/text761559304___O/ Short_Story.html).

And as they consider the art of the short story, if the students see "themselves" in some of these examples, it is a bonus. For this reason, I will direct them to a sampling of texts concerning identity which include Alex Ferrera's and Jose Levy's Collateral Man; Paco Taibo's Frontera Dreams, Some Clouds, An Easy Thing, No Happy Ending, and Return to the Same City; Rex Burn's The Alvarez Journal, The Farnsworth Score, The Avenging Angel, and The Killing Zone; Elizabeth George's A Moment on the Edge: 100 Years of Crime Stories by Women; Barbara Neely's Blanche series; and Mystery Midrash: An Anthology of Jewish Mystery & Detective Fiction. They will then see that, in America, the "art" of detective fiction is eclectic and all-inclusive. "Diversity in America is everywhere," especially in the contemporary American crime novel (Pepper 1). The pages of these novels reflect America and our students. Therefore, the opportunity to study a genre that reflects those things our students find familiar is worthy of their consideration.

Further, when contemplating the art of the short story, the student needs to consider the writer's choice and employment of certain techniques. They must be reminded that these techniques include but are not limited to point of view, style, plot and structure, and a wealth of devices that serve to stimulate the senses, emotions, imagination, and intellect of the reader. They must be made to understand that the writer's

wielding of these tools "determines the reader's overall experience" (http://encarta.msn.com/text761559304___O/Short_Story .html). They must be made to know that one of the chief elements in insuring that the reading experience is enjoyable is the writer's style.

Our students know that diction is the choice and arrangement of words on a page. What they might not remember is that diction is one of the chief components of style. And, in detective fiction, style is all important. What stands out most in readers' memories is the voice of the narrator setting the tone of the story, painting a picture of the various characters and the prominent places in the story, and leading them from madness to method down Plot's path. Our students need to know that style is what makes readers willing to travel this path; it is the tether of words which is used to draw them along. Style is what keeps the reader biddable, agreeable, compelled and most pleasantly captive. It is what the student writer must master in order to make his/her stories not only readable and bearable, but also pleasurable. Its establishment is the student's penultimate goal. Though their ultimate goal is to complete the writings assigned; but if these writings do not "capture" the reader, it is all for naught. Therefore, the goal to develop interesting and recognizable styles is most important.

Though this goal of reaching a pinnacle where their style is uniquely theirs is often hard to attain, it is not impossible. The authentic register of the student's voice is made easier through form and structure, through plot. Plot can be simple and straightforward - the introduction, development, and resolution of a problem - or it can be enhanced and made less predictable through the use of episodes and frame stories, flashbacks and leaps into the future, or through subplots and double plots. Students must be taught that there are various devices like these available to complicate the story, and they must be directed in such a way that their prior knowledge of foreshadowing, abrupt transition, and surprise is brought to the forefront even as the knowledge of other methods like ambiguity, digression and juxtaposition is made available. In the wake of these lessons, it is incumbent upon us - the teachers - to see that our students recognize the need to use other literary devices, especially those of rhetoric, for contrast and emphasis. Paradox, metaphor, imagery, repetitive motifs, symbolism and irony are all powerful tools in the hands of writers and are no less so in the hands of our students. We, as teachers, should endeavor to ensure that they are used. In fact, in the detective genre, these devices become essential in the maintenance of a peculiar form of reality that keeps the reader from believing the tale is too farfetched or too far outside the realm of real life.

To capitalize on this precept, I will read excerpts from various novels, which highlight some of these devices, as a prelude to classroom discussions on the various subgenres of detective fiction. These novels will include, among others, the readings from the seminar: Margery Allingham's The Tiger in the Smoke, Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Franklin Dixon's The Hardy Boys: The Shore Road Mystery, Tony Hillerman's A Thief of Time, Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew Mystery Stories: The Secret in the Old Attic, Henning Mankell's The White Lioness, Walter Mosley's Devil in a Blue Dress, Barbara Neely's Blanche Among the Talented Tenth, Sara Paretsky's Hard Time, and Dorothy Sayers' Gaudy Night. The students will be directed to make notes of the details they hear in the readings and to use the details to decide which device is being used in the excerpt. This will hone their listening skills and give them practice in both detecting details and using these details to solve the mystery of "Which device is it?" to support their choices.

To reinforce these lessons, the class will read Christie's Roger Ackroyd — basically as an out of class assignment — in three "chunks" of nine (9) chapters each. For each chunk, the student will prepare a S.P.R.E.A.D.S. sheet in order to pick to pieces the assigned segment. They will first **S**kim to deduce why the title was chosen, to pick out any obviously unfamiliar words and define them, and to determine the significance of the chapter headings. Then they will **P**redict what the novel is about and what will happen in it.

Finally they will actively **R**ead, taking notes of people and events they find of interest in the story. Following the reading of the story, students will **E**valuate what they have read by asking three to five questions which indicate those things they found unclear as well as those things about which they would like to know more. Once they have asked their questions (which are to be answered in class discussions), they will **A**uthenticate what they have read by **A**nalyzing the assigned reading for author's purpose, subject(s), and theme(s). And, because it is unacceptable that these premises be based on air, the students will then provide specific **D**etails (with page numbers) from the text which support the conclusions they have drawn. These S.P.R.E.A.D.S. will culminate with a mini-summary of the segments, which simply answers the questions Who(m)?; What?; When?; Where?; Why?; and How?, in an enumerated manner. The final products will serve to facilitate class discussions on the novel.

Classroom Strategies

Scripted Lessons

Materials

Different colored post-its numbered one through five, matching-colored dry-erase markers, unlined white paper, a class set of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, pencils, paper, Literary Elements Study Guide handouts, and list of conventions for the English Golden Age detective novel. Students are each to be handed a novel and one of the post-it notes, the color of which indicates their group, and the number on which indicates their function in the group: one serving as the facilitator, two the scribe, three the presenter, four the time-keeper, and five the juggler or the person who can authorize the change of functions within the group.

Focus

On the board there is a picture of a bloody dagger lying on the floor. There is a caption which reads, "Did the butler do it?" above and to the side of it, and underneath it a table entitled "Portrait of a Murderer" with two columns labeled ***Character Traits*** and ***Opportunity***. Students are asked to make a prediction as to what they think the lesson will cover and to give reasons for their decisions.

Overview

The key to any story is its characters. In order to portray them vividly so that they are memorable, the writer has to make the reader know them personally. In our reading, writing, and discussing of Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, please consider Dr. Sheppard. As we read the story, we believed we knew him because, after all, he is the narrator of the tale. And, by the next to the last chapter of the novel, we accept that he is an integral part of the story but feel there is nothing about him that truly stands out and makes him interesting. To us, he is a period or a comma, necessary but unworthy of our undivided attention. He appears to be an insignificant dullard. This belief is what makes the last chapter of the novel extremely important, for it is here that we get a complete picture of Dr. Sheppard, the villain. Until Poirot tells us, we never consider that Dr. Sheppard may be the murderer. This is Christie's greatest strength as a mystery writer, the unexpected twist at the end of her stories.

Modeling

Perhaps attributing delusions of grandeur to Dr. Sheppard is a bit too strong; however the very name of the last chapter, "Apologia," - the only one not written in English, seems to bear out this conclusion. So when the doctor says, "A strange end to my manuscript. I meant it to be published some day as the history of one of Poirot's failures," we are meant to know that he has pitted himself against the great Poirot and found the latter wanting, that is until Poirot pins the murder on him. Hubris has definitely had a hand here! So, under ***Character Traits***, write in excessive pride for the good Dr. Sheppard.

Now, let's look at another passage. "I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance than the following:

> "*The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten* minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone." . . . All true, you see. But suppose I had put in a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes . . . When I looked round the room from the door, I was quite satisfied. Nothing had been left undone."

There is not the slightest bit of remorse in this musing. And there is a definite self-satisfaction in the phrasing, which reeks of self-importance. So, in the ***Character Traits*** column, add remorseless, smug, and arrogant. Our preconceived picture of Dr. Sheppard is beginning to change, isn't it?

Guided Practice

Now, let's identify some other traits of Dr. Sheppard which are uncovered in this chapter. With your assigned color group, you are to find a passage which highlights an assigned trait and pick out key elements which typify this trait in this chapter. The traits we are seeking are paranoid, cunning, manipulative, judgmental, petty, and caring. Before you begin work in your groups, the class will find the passage that shows Dr. Sheppard is capable of caring for another person. After we have done this, each of your groups will work to find the passage that demonstrates the character trait assigned to it. As you collaborate, bear in mind that each determination will need to be supported by the evidence Ms. Christie provides. So please take notes.

When your group has outlined the details which give evidence of your assigned trait, please come to the board and write, in the color assigned to you, the page and paragraph numbers of the passage where evidence supporting your choice is given. When each group has written their evidentiary detail on the board, we will discuss them to ascertain if the class agrees with the conclusions drawn. But, before we get to that, let's look for the passage which shows Dr. Sheppard cares for someone besides himself. When you believe you have found it, raise your hand and we'll discuss it, highlighting the details that have led you to your conclusion and, as a class, determining if this is indeed the passage for which we are searching. Are you ready? Then let's see who will win this race to uncover the evidence. Find the passage which shows Dr. Sheppard is a caring person. Readers take your mark. Get set. Go!

Very good! The evidence bears out your selection. It is the passage in which the doctor refers to his sister having her pride and having to live in the town. This passage shows that he is — even if only for a bare moment — concerned with someone else's welfare. It demonstrates a measure of compassion.

Group Writing #1

Now, since you have completed this class activity, let's look at the group assignment. As you can see written

on the board, each group has been assigned a trait. It is written in the group's designated color. Your task is to find the evidence which highlights this trait in the chapter, to write it on the board in your group's color and to present it to the class after each group has completed the task. Are there any questions? Are you ready to start? Good! Happy hunting! Go!

Independent Practice #1

You guys have done a simply wonderful job! You've hit the mark each time. Now, let's take it a little higher. Let's go to another level. Let's untie the "group apron string" and work individually for a bit. Though you'll be working by yourself, you should have a bit of fun with this assignment. You are going to give Christie another villain. You are going to take the good Dr. Sheppard off of the hook and allow him to be the insipid character he appears to be for most of the novel. You are going to do this by making another member of the cast culpable. You are going to change the last two chapters in such a way that another character becomes the villain, the despicable murderer. You are going to write an alternate ending to Ackroyd! Please remember that this is still Ms. Christie's novel and you are not to change it too much. That is why you are to focus your writing on the two final chapters. You are to show your knowledge of the setting she's provided in terms of time and place, as well as the economic and moral climate. Lastly, you are to demonstrate your understanding of the novel's plot. You will, in essence, change the novel's resolution and conclusion, using everything that Ms. Christie has provided up to this point. Are there any questions? If you need further clarification, please do not hesitate to raise your hand for my help. Now, let's create something! Start writing and have fun doing it. Make your ending exactly what you want it to be. Be creative!

Independent Practice #2

It's time for another solo flight. I have yet another assignment I'd like you to complete, which deals with this story. However, I don't want you to use the book to complete this assignment. Please put them away. Thanks. Now, since we've spent so much time on the ending of Christie's novel, I thought it might be fun to work on the other end, not just the beginning but the very first sentence. And what I'd like you to do is play a variation of an old parlor game called First Sentences. In this game, you are to write what you feel would be the best first sentence for this novel. After everyone has written their sentence and submitted it, the class will vote on which is best, with bonus points being given for the top vote getters. So, with the thought of a chance to earn bonus points in mind, begin writing. You have three minutes to complete this task. As you finish, please write your name, period and the date on your paper and bring it to me. At the end of the allotted time, I will collect all papers not already turned in and the vote will begin. Now, start creating!

Class Writing #1

That was interesting! Did you enjoy the exercise? Good! Let's take it up another notch. Take out your "Detective Fiction Conventions" handout and let's look at another subgenre of detective fiction. Golden Age detective stories can be interesting but, let's face it; they're another time, another culture and another country. Let's bring our studies a little closer to home. Let's take a look at hardboiled detective fiction. You have the conventions of the subgenre at hand, so I would like you to take a moment to read them. We'll go over them in detail a bit later. But, for now, I want you to read the conventions silently as I read them aloud. Then we will do a little exercise which should show what your take is on this subgenre.

Okay. Now you that you have an idea of what makes up hardboiled detective fiction, let's put the knowledge to work. Let's play a spin-off of the "First Sentences" parlor game. I am going to read the blurb from the jacket of a classic hardboiled novel, Red Harvest by Dashiell Hammett. After I finish reading the blurb, I want each of

you to write a sentence which you feel will be simply great as the beginning of this novel; however, this time, you are not going to vote on which sentence you think is the best way to start the novel. This time, when I say time, you are going to pass your paper to the person behind you who will continue the writing by adding another sentence. If you are at the end of the row, bring your paper to the person sitting in the first seat in the row to your left. If you are in the last seat in the last row, bring your paper to the person sitting in the first seat in the first row. This will continue until you receive back your original sheet of paper the third time. Are there any questions? Good. Let's get to the fun. This is the blurb.

> "When the last honest citizen of Poisonville was murdered, the Continental Op stayed on to punish the guilty - even if that meant taking on an entire town. Red Harvest is more than a superb crime novel: it is a classic exploration of corruption and violence in the American grain."

That's it! That's the blurb. I'll read it again and, then, I want you to start writing the novel as you see it in your mind's eye. You've read the conventions of the subgenre. You've heard the sales pitch of the novel, the blurb, which I will read once again. Now it's your turn. Begin to write the novel described by this blurb, one sentence at a time, as a class. You will begin at the beginning. For the first sentence, you will have two minutes to write. As the passages get longer and you need to read them to continue the writing, you will be given more time. We should almost have a short story by the time we finish writing. So, let's start, please.

Group Reading/Writing #2

That was great, guys! Your story beginnings are fantastic! Some are hilarious! Let's keep this thing going! We are going to read a short story, now, that falls in the hardboiled realm. If you are the timekeeper for your group, please come forward and take your place on the panel. You will be reading aloud Norbert Davis' short story, "Who Said I Was Dead," which is in Hard-Boiled: An Anthology of American Crime Stories. This story provides a deeper look into this subgenre of detective fiction. While it is read round robin by the panel, the rest of you will make note of those things you find significant. Please focus on character development, the setting, and the use of dialogue, as well as the events of the plot which will unfold before you. After the first reading has been completed, the timekeepers will exchange places with the juggler from each group. The jugglers will then read the story a second time and the rest of you will continue to take notes and gather further information. When this has been done, each group will discuss the notes taken and from them, as a group, outline and then write a sequel to the story. As you write, please bear in mind that you will be enacting -not reading — this story for the class. Therefore, it must have sufficient dialogue and enough characters for each member in the group to be able to participate. The group's presenter will serve as the narrator, and each group member must have his/her own copy of the story. This will ensure that you will not have to pass around and "share" the script. Okay? Now, do you have questions? Let's get busy! Timekeepers begin!

Jugglers please exchange places with the timekeepers. Begin!

Now, with your group members, discuss the notes you've made. When you feel each person in your group understands the story sufficiently, outline a sequel to the story. Be sure to include plot and character development based on the genre conventions and do use the Literary Elements Study Guide handout provided. Don't stress. We'll discuss "Who Said I Was Dead" and your sequels following completion of the assignment. Your writing grade will either be a 100 or a zero. You must complete the assignment, developing an outline and writing the story, for the high grade. Your presentation grade, however, will depend on the amount of realism you bring to your role when your group presents it. The grading range will be from 60 to 100, with 70 being the lowest grade given for participation in the tableau. So, since the threat of penalty has been removed, you should feel free to allow your imaginations to reign and run free. Go right ahead and do

so! Please begin now.

Independent Practice #3

Now, let's take a brief solo flight as you continue your writing. Since you've have done so well demonstrating your understanding of the tenets of the hardboiled detective story, I would like you to practice a bit more now that we have discussed "Who Said I Was Dead?" and your sequels. Your next assignment is to create your own personal detective using the conventions of this genre. You are to "birth" this detective and the world in which he lives. You will have the remainder of the class period to develop a web of the traits your detective embodies, the setting in which he lives, and possible situations in which he will find himself embroiled. Use your Literary Elements Study Guide as a reference for the basics to include when you create your character and setting. Remember, if you need direction, all you have to do is beckon. That's why I'm here. Good writing to you! Go for it!

Conclusion

By using those things which I have endeavored to add to their writing repertoire, along with the knowledge they garner from utilizing the Literary Elements Study Guide (Appendix A) and perusing the website article entitled "Anatomy of a Murder," as well as the short how-to book called Write Your Own Mystery Story, it is my hope that — by the end of the first 6-weeks grading cycle, — my students will have a collection of original short stories that include at least one from each of the subgenres in detective fiction to which I have spoken in this unit. It is my further hope that the practice they get from using the Writer's Guide to Critiquing (Appendix B), which I have compiled so that they can critique the work of their classmates, will serve to sharpen their writing. I want them to hone their abilities by using the detective fiction conventions they've been provided during this course of study, in addition to sharpening the grammatical skills - conventions and mechanics — called for in any writing course. Lastly, my greatest wish is that this 6-weeks study, coupled with a second 6-weeks cycle devoted to turning their stories into one-act plays, will facilitate their third 6-weeks cycle assignment of writing a novella or 3-Act play in the subgenre of Detective Fiction to which they've most gained an affinity.

Each of the broad tasks assigned will be assessed at regular intervals (more than likely each week but, at the least, every two weeks) during the 6-weeks cycle in which they are assigned. The assessments will be based on the students' use of the conventions presented for each subgenre, the inclusion of the essential literary elements of a short story and the tenets provided in their critiquing rubric, the written presentation of their work, and their adherence to the directives given for each assignment. The result will be a body of works deserving of their pride and my praise. It will tell them and their audience that they are, indeed, masters of details and detection who have whetted the edge of their chosen tool — their dagger, the pen. It will enable them to say, "Writing is my forte and detective fiction is my venue. I have the work to prove it."

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Appendix A

Student Reference Handout

Essential Literary Elements Study Guide

(Two-Column Notes)

Literary Elements

I. Setting

A. Time

- 1. Year/Date
- 2. Time of day
- 3. Season

B. Place

- 1. Country
- 2. City
- 3. Urban/Rural.

- a. Size.
- b. Appearance.
- c. Significant Factors.

C. Climate

- 1. Weather
- 2. Political
- 3. Economic
- 4. Moral

II. Characterization (For each major character)

A. Name

- 1. Proper
- 2. Title (Dr., Mrs., Mr., Ms., etc.)
- 3. Diminutive (nickname).

B. Description

1. Physical Appearance

- a. Age
- b. Gender
- c. Ethnicity
- d. Distinguishing Characteristics

C. Personal History

- 1. Intellectual Capacity & Education
- 2. Economic Status & Occupation
- 3. Mental Disposition/Frame of Mind

Story Title

I. Setting

A. Time

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B. Place

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

- a.
- b.
- c.

C. Climate

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

II. Characterization

A. Name

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B. Description

1.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

C. Personal History

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Essential Literary Elements Study Guide

(2-Column Notes)

Literary Elements

III. Perspective

A. Point of View

- 1. Person & Number
- 2. Specific

IV. Plot

A. Exposition [Background].

B. Conflict(s)/Problem(s).

- 1. Type
- 2. Specific

C. Climax/Turning or Highest Point

D. Resolution

V. Diction

A. Irony.

- 1. Situational
- 2. Verbal

- a. Understatement
- b. Hyperbole
- c. Sarcasm

B. Imagery

C. Formal/Informal

D. Figurative Language

- 1 Simile
- 2 Metaphor
- 3. Personification
- 4 Sound Devices

Story Title

III. Perspective

A. Point of View

- 1.
- 2.

IV. Plot

A. Exposition [Background].

B. Conflict(s)/Problem(s).

- 1.
- 2.

C. Climax/Turning or Highest Point

D. Resolution

V. Diction

A. Irony.

- 1.
- 2.

- a.
- b.
- c.

B. Imagery

C. Formal/Informal

D. Figurative Language

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Appendix B

Student Reference Handout

A Writer's Rubric to Critiquing

This is a writer's rubric - one designed to help you pick a work to pieces so that you will readily learn how to put one together; therefore, it is much longer than a normal rubric.

1. What is implied/stated main idea? Provide supporting ideas and paraphrase
2. hat you gained from the reading.
3. Using reasoning and what you read, predict where the story is going. Draw
4. onclusions and generalizations about what you think will happen.
5. Are there any cultural characteristics related which could be developed to make
6. he story more interesting and unique?
7. What do you know about the story? What else would you like to learn?
8. Who is the best audience for the story? Will this audience find the logic in the
9. tory credible? Or are there errors which need to be addressed?
10. Conventions: Appropriate word choice. Correct sentence structure, transition.
11. Mechanics: Correct capitalization, punctuation, spelling
12. Does the passage capture your interest?
13. Is the speaker's voice and stance established?
14. Is at least one central matter revealed?
15. Is the first sentence memorable?
16. What elements of (*insert appropriate literary element*) are covered?
17. Is the writing lively, neither to casual or too stiff?
18. Is the work concise, or are more words than necessary used to make a point?
19. Is the writing redundant or are there expressions that repeatedly say the same
20. hing?
21. Is figurative language in place to add vividness?
22. Has sensory language been put in place to help reader become a part of the
23. tory?
24. Have intensifiers been excised or pruned?
25. To make a character more real the writer uses certain tools. As you critique your
26. lassmates' scenario, make note of whether or not they, to help the reader better
27. see" and "know" the characters, they've used::
28. escription Problems Examples
29. ause Effect Comparisons
30. ontrasts
31. Expound on the diction used in the scene. What literary tools/devices are used?
32. Personal comments/observations.

Appendix C

Student Reference Handout

Detective Fiction Conventions

The Whodunit

The writers in this genre demonstrate great ingenuity in telling their tales, in giving the details of the crime (usually a murder) and the events surrounding the investigation and in keeping the identity of the criminal secret until the very end. It is then that they surprise the reader with not only the identity of the criminal but the unlikely way in which the crime was perpetrated. These stories feature a complicated process involving intuition, logic and observation by an astute investigator to identify the culprit. Usually, this process takes precedence over the crime itself. There are several classic features often found in these stories. They include a country house robbery, an "inside job," a celebrated investigator, bungling local constabulary, detective enquiries, false suspects, the "least likely suspect," a rudimentary "locked room" murder, a reconstruction of the crime, and a final twist in the plot.

The English Golden Age Whodunit

This branch of detective fiction has a puzzle at its center and solving this puzzle is the main goal of these stories. In this subgenre there is usually a layperson that solves crimes that veteran police officers cannot. Typically, social class plays a very important part in these tales and a member of the aristocracy or one of the wealthiest citizens is the hapless victim

The Police Procedural

The author attempts to depict the routine of the police officer. Typical features are a detective who arrives after the uniformed officers, the emergency personnel and the public, and the investigator's wait for the forensic reports of the crime. The reader is also given of the rules and regulations the detective is expected to follow and is introduced to suspects who are arrested and kept in custody, even if some of them are innocent and there is usually pressure from senior officers to solve the crime quickly or to show progress in the investigation. An investigative team to which the detective and his superiors give orders is another basic. The detective will often visit bars to discuss or think about the case and will "lean on" informants. There will be political pressure brought to bear if the primary suspect is a prominent figure or, if a police officer is a suspect, internal hostility will run rampant. Also, there will be media coverage increasing the pressure the detective is under to come up with an answer.

The Hardboiled Detective Whodunit

These stories are directly related to the socio-economic circumstances of the times they depict. The characters find themselves in a world gone awry where the law is being manipulated for profit and power. This world seems bereft of light and is cloaked in a darkness that has nothing to do with night, which is the result of the actions of a nefarious villain. These actions cause a traumatic event .to occur and the world, as the characters know it, is changed. It becomes unpredictable and chaotic. The mores and norms are altered. Morality is at a minimum and disaster looms. Into this morass, a detective appears who seeks to return the world to normalcy, to stop the burgeoning crime, to bring peace and prosperity for the citizenry to the

forefront of a world where disillusionment reigns and economics and politics have contrived together to deprive the populace of control over their own lives. There is little hope for the characters in these stories and their weaknesses either lead them to commit crimes or make them the victims of others. The detective,

Detective Fiction Conventions

who bears the traits of the criminal element or understands them to a great degree, uses the methods employed by these same criminals to bring about their destruction and a solution to the problems which plague the populace. This subgenre is characterized by graphic violence and the darker side of human nature.

The Thriller Whodunit

It is "characterized by investigation, fast pacing, frequent action, and resourceful heroes who must thwart the plans of more-powerful and better-equipped villains . . . [Here] suspense, red herrings, and cliffhangers are" used extensively. Also, there usually exists an exotic setting and a hero who is, more than likely, a "hard man;" however, women are becoming increasingly common as the protagonists and an ordinary citizen accidentally thrown into the mix is likely to become our hero The thriller generally occurs on a

"grand" scale: mass murder or, possibly, a serial killer on the loose, terrorism, political assassination, or governmental coup d'état attempts. There will be jeopardy and violent confrontations and a thriller climaxes when the hero finally defeats the villain, saving the lives of others" and, maybe, his own. The stories are defined by the mood evoked, i.e. the aura associated with the thrill. It focuses on the criminal(s) rather than a policeman.