



Introduction

by Dudley Andrew, Professor of Film and Comparative Literature

For many, perhaps most, children, public education begins before they can talk, when they are taken to the local library for "story hour." Many experiences adults look back on nostalgically no longer attract young people, but stories and story-telling seem to be holding up just fine. We tell children stories at bedtime; later they will pride themselves on being good storytellers. Storytelling grabs and holds the attention of those who come in earshot. No wonder it is often used to carry a message (as in allegory, homily, or parable) and it always carries a point of view. For every story may concern characters in a sequence of events (what is narrated) but only as organized and related, presumably by someone (the narrator). All of us in the Yale seminar agreed on the value of getting students to recognize, and begin to control narrative. Such understanding makes for active participation in listening to or viewing stories, and it surely helps anyone trying to tell a story just right. Unlike many other school topics, it shouldn't be so difficult to cajole students into putting effort into acquiring a sense of how stories work. Identifying the elements of a story must be more gratifying than analyzing other kinds of structures, because stories are so common. Students may not leap at the chance to learn, for instance, to speak correctly (ask anyone who teaches syntax or diction), but most would love to be skilled storytellers. And this counts for students of all ages and abilities. Teachers can get them to look for stories everywhere: in family histories told at the table, in playground bragging, in newspaper accounts of events, as well as tucked inside sermons they are forced to hear when delivered by parents or preachers. Discovering stories all around them, students can be taught to identify their prominent features: characters, settings, a sequence of related events that rises to a climax and concludes consequentially. We customarily categorize stories that have similar styles or subject matter. In our seminar we enjoyed cataloguing such types as myth, legend, epic, satire, folktale, short story, novel, and so on. Each of these can be further broken down, each category implying a different function that stories serve in a culture.

In fact it was those "different functions" that took up most of our attention, as we went looking for types of stories in cultures far-flung from the urban USA. Our students need to know that their neighborhood is not the only world on the globe. What kinds of stories are told in Ireland, West Africa, Japan, France, China, or Iran? Learning this does more than help decenter the USA; it encourages looking at the world from very different perspectives. For stories populate worlds and do so from perspectives. What are the concerns of children in Iran, for instance, and how are those concerns treated and valued? Stories open up different worlds as well as different ways of valuing the world. What we found, of course, was that these differences are often not so far-reaching after all. There are plenty of universals in the way stories are told because so much of human experience is common to us all. The interplay between similarities and differences in the stories we encountered makes for powerful teaching material.

Most of the stories we took up came to us through foreign films. It's not always an easy matter to locate appropriate stories in prose from other cultures; but the industry of foreign film distribution through film

festivals and DVDs makes for a fantastic reservoir of stories that are available and about which one can learn a great deal. So our seminar became a forum for film analysis and criticism. In the units written for the seminar, most Fellows took up the challenge of incorporating films into their strategies and often into their objectives. Even those whose units focus on written or spoken tales were able to clarify their ideas about narratives and narration in our discussion of the films. It seems that films can be both attractive to students and can serve as terrific tools in helping them locate elements of stories. Even better, they provide images of those "worlds" that are laid out in filmed stories coming from elsewhere. We chose films that involved the lives of children, distinguishing those that seem told from a child's viewpoint, from others that were told by an adult narrator. And we looked into the special status of certain kinds of storytellers that some of our films either depicted literally or imitated. The African griot served as the example we spent most time on, in part because griots still tell (or sing) stories in contemporary Africa, and in part because their attitude toward the entire function of storytelling differs so markedly from the novelist we are used to in American culture, and in the West generally.

The units written for this seminar all combined questions about the nature of narrative with questions about the nature of other cultures. It's a great way to pair social inquiry and language arts making students travel to a world beyond their neighborhood and doing so in a vehicle (stories) that they live with all the time. This can only expand them. The cinema is a wonderful metaphor for this entire process for it projects stories for us while projecting us into the stories and the lives of the characters who make them up. It also lets us glimpse the source of light that makes this possible, the narrator or storyteller behind what we see. Language arts, as a subject, expands in the process. As happened in our seminar, everyone gains from attention to foreign stories. The results can be seen in units dealing not just with novels but also with art and social studies as subjects. More important the Fellows of this seminar were able to find new ways to engage their students in what counts more than subjects: the "expression" of language arts, the "creativity and freedom" of art, and the issues of "equality and respect" of social studies.

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