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Horace W. Morelock

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TEACHING BEGINNERS TO WRITE THE SHORT-STORY

HORACE W. MORELOCK
West Texas State Normal College

A few of our colleges and universities offer courses whose purpose is to assist students in the writing of short-stories. But these courses are usually intended only for such students as have previously shown considerable talent for this particular form of composition. This condition of admission has led teachers for the most part to confine their instruction largely to the technique of the short-story as exemplified in the masterpieces of a few well-known authors. This practice is good, but it serves too few students.

Several years' experience in teaching the short-story have convinced me that the student's appreciation of this form of writing and his knowledge of its technical requirements will be sharpened by having him plan and write a few short-stories. This assumption does not presuppose that those students who take such a course will ever write a story worthy a place in our leading magazines, though a few may attain this enviable distinction. However, this is not its purpose, any more than our purpose in teaching Shakespeare's dramas is to make playwrights of our students.

In this paper I shall explain a method of teaching the short-story which I have followed for several years with rather good results. Two quarters of college Freshman English are a prerequisite to this course. It presupposes the ability to write clear and forceful English which is practically free from mechanical errors. The third quarter of Freshman English in this institution is optional between the short-story course and description and narration as usually taught. I have been gratified at the large numbers who have elected the short-story course in preference to the other. Few of the students who take the course in the short-story ever get very far into "The Domain of Arnheim," but they

enjoy the work, and the majority of them write stories that meet the mechanical requirements of a good story.

The first assignment in this course is the reading of ten short-stories whose distinguishing merit is their technical excellence. Three or four of these stories we study somewhat in detail in class, emphasizing methods of plot development, character delineation, and central theme. We next study a few of Hawthorne's developed themes (taken from his *American Note-Book*) as related to the finished stories. The aim of this exercise is to emphasize the possibilities of seemingly unpromising material for purposes of the short-story.

The class now begins plans for the first written story. The groundwork of this story is one of Hawthorne's undeveloped themes, and all members of the class use the same theme. I have found the following very good material for this first story: "A rich man left by will his mansion and estate to a poor couple. They remove into it, and find there a darksome servant, whom they are forbidden by will to turn away. He becomes a torment to them; and, in the finale, he turns out to be the former master of the estate."

The first exercise is a class discussion of the possibilities of this material for the purpose of a short-story. Nor is it necessary to confine the discussion to the limitations prescribed by Hawthorne. Such a method of procedure would forestall originality. Since the appropriateness of all material finally selected is to be determined by its ability to function well in the climax, we discuss whether it would be better to have the poor people fulfil the conditions of the will or to disappoint the donor. The next problem is, What could prompt a rich man to make such a will? The following are typical answers to this question: "This old man desired some one to care for him in his old age, and this was his method of testing character." "He may have owed a debt of gratitude, which he wished to pay." "Perhaps it is a question of family pride." "He may have been the rejected suitor of the mother of one of these poor people."

A suitable character for this kind of a story next demands consideration. What kind of a man would likely make such a will?

The class is given an exercise in finding adjectives that appropriately characterize the kind of man they think most suitable for such a story. After a brief discussion of these adjectives, the class selects two or three of the most appropriate ones for use in the story. The next problem is to provide a suitable background for the story. What about the old servant's personal appearance? How would he be likely to keep his premises? Suggest a suitable location. What about the interior of the mansion? We have a class discussion as to the amount and kind of description we are to use in the story. All the discussions are informal, and precede any definite plan for the story. The purpose of these discussions is to stimulate students to think constructively in the direction of a well-planned story.

The class is now ready to select a few incidents, not more than three, which shall test character. Shall the old servant provoke the clash, or shall the poor people play this rôle? For the next exercise the class should find appropriate incidents and be prepared to explain and defend their possibilities for the purpose in hand. We give attention to the time, place, and nature of the incidents we are to use in the story. In the end, all students use the same number, the same kind, and the same order of incidents. All these points are determined by a majority vote of the students. The only real problem for students in this first story is to find appropriate language for the development of predetermined subject-matter.

For the second story the class should search daily newspapers for incidents that have in them the possibilities of a short-story, or relate some incident that has come under their observation. They make a collection of these incidents, bring them to the class, and we devote a brief discussion to those that seem most worth while. The following are typical examples of their findings: "Miss Brackenridge of San Antonio, Texas, offers to educate some country girl at the College of Industrial Arts. The condition of this scholarship is that the young lady who accepts it must agree to return to the farm after graduation and give to country life the benefit of her training." The possibilities of this situation for a good short-story are very patent. No discussion is had of the

number, kind, or order of incidents to be used; nor is there any discussion of the kind or amount of description to be used in support of these incidents. However, we ask such general, suggestive questions as the following: "What would probably be the most interesting theme of a story based upon this situation?" "Suggest some complicating forces." The following are representative answers to these questions: "The story should be a test of the girl's honor. Of course, she must return to the country, in spite of some compelling force urging her to the contrary." Complicating forces: "She might fall in love with some boy from the city." "Her new outlook upon life might make her dissatisfied with country life; she might even try to satisfy her conscience on the score that she could be more useful elsewhere."

One young man gave the following incident, which had come under his own observation. In his community an ambitious young school-teacher became dissatisfied with his salary. After school hours and of Saturdays he stayed in the village post-office, of which his brother was postmaster. One evening in late November he mysteriously disappeared. Four years later he notified the government authorities at Washington, D.C., that he wanted to surrender to them. He stated that he had robbed the post-office in the little village where he taught of five hundred dollars. The post-office department at Washington at once sent an inspector to investigate. The inspector could find no irregularities in the management of this office. It later developed that the young man's brother knew of the theft at the time of its occurrence, and quietly replaced the money. The young man who thought this good material for a short-story tagged it thus: "Good material for a conscience story."

These are but a few of the numerous illustrations I could give in explanation of our method of procedure in writing the second story. Often students will suggest a theme which has been developed by some well-known author. After a discussion of this theme, I usually refer the class to this story for reading. Considerable interest is usually manifested in the search for suitable material, and often there are animated discussions as to the appropriateness of subjects. Two important reasons, it seems to

me, argue strongly in support of such exercises. In the first place, they develop in students the ability to give proper values to life's experiences. But perhaps the most practical lesson they will learn is a newer and fuller meaning of Wordsworth's well-known lines,

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.

Nothing will stimulate in students a heartier or a more wholesome enthusiasm for literature than a conscious realization that the seemingly most ordinary occurrences are often good subject-matter for excellent stories. This valuable lesson once learned, they will the more readily and easily function literature in life. Too much of our teaching is divorced from that throbbing life which appeals to students most strongly.

The third, and last, story required for the quarter, must be an original story in all particulars. I insist upon the fulfilment of only one condition—that the story shall function in some industrial, political, social, etc. problem or condition with which the students are intimately acquainted. The purpose of this condition is to compel students to apply the information they have learned to new situations. For this third assignment a young lady wrote a very interesting and amusing story entitled "A Search for a Husband." She took the position that the world-war would naturally produce a scarcity of material for matrimonial purposes; that it had already changed conditions and, consequently, the social relations of the sexes. Her story opened in Puritan Boston. The heroine of the story shocks her mother by revealing her intentions of going in search of a husband. The mother pleads that "woman must wait to be wooed"; but her daughter insists that her mother's ideas of social proprieties belong to a by-gone age. The young lady is not sentimental, but rather a modern woman with business instincts. However, her determination to succeed betrays her into a number of amusing incidents. She finds conditions in all sections of the country about the same, and competition strong.

I have selected for the purpose of my brief discussion perhaps the simplest form of all stories, the story of incident. But the

method I have followed will apply equally well to all other forms of stories, and Hawthorne's *American Note-Book* will furnish abundant material for the purpose. Poe and O. Henry also have a few undeveloped themes.

I do not claim that this method of teaching the short-story will make authors of all who take such a course. But I believe that the training they will derive from such a method of procedure will enhance their appreciation of this form of literature and consequently give them a new interest in it. I am convinced, also, that most students who take such a course learn to write mechanically correct stories. The short-story is a difficult and exacting form of art, and we cannot hope that students will learn even its fundamental principles unless we give them definite, concrete assistance in studying stories "from the inside out."