

English 212

Ethel Morgan Smith, ENGL 212, Fall 2002, Creative Writing: Fiction

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WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Department of English

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Creative Writing-Fiction-English 212

Good writers probe themselves and their worlds; good writers laugh and cry; good writers observe; good writers don't just talk about writing, they write. Good writing demands your whole self—writing freely, without limits from your unique connections to your world.

Jewel Parker Rhodes, Free Within Ourselves

The goals of this course are for students to become more sensitive and discriminating reader, therefore, better writers. You will also sharpen skills required to communicate your ideas by learning to clearly stating your points, developing them in an organized and creative manner. You will also acquire the basic terminology for writing and reading. As a writer you have the opportunity to explore what it means to be human, to conjure through words, those passions, those spirits, which are important to you. And finally, you will learn to use writing (your own and that of others) as a tool for experiencing the world.

This course will explore the art and craft of short fiction by studying the basic elements— **character, dialogue, point of view, place and time**. This will aid you in understanding fictional techniques, which will improve both your writing and reading. Creative writing can offer an opportunity differ from other aspects of your curriculum. But that does not mean it is to be taken casually or lightly. Writing well is very difficult. It demands your full attention. Writing is a commitment. Writing serious work! I don't believe in the muse, writer's block, or other such myths.

In order to understand how fiction is put together—how the raw material of inspiration is transformed into art—we will read and discuss in class a selection of short stories. (Handouts)! We will try to understand

those works in terms of why the author made the aesthetic choices he/she made. **For example:** Why first person narration? Why third person? Why is Y the narrator rather than X? Why the present tense? Why dramatize this scene? Why narrate certain information? We all have stories to tell, in fact, most of us tell stories often. That means the story telling instinct is an intrinsic characteristic for human being, maybe even a need. It's one of the ways we organize our lives, give shape to our days, create containers for our experiences.

Therefore, what you'll be doing this semester is fundamental and vital, an essential human activity. The transition from oral history story telling and anecdotal organization . to written fiction and scenic construction is difficult. I don't want you writing just from your experience, but I'm interested in **imaginative rendering**. We know what a good story sounds like, and most of us recognize one when we read it. One of the difficult parts of writing is figuring out how to take the stories within us and translate them to the page. That causes problems. In fact, there's only one way to become a good writer or stories: **Write! Write! Write!** That's what we'll be doing the next 15 weeks.

COURSE PRODECURES

1. Reading. There are no good writers who aren't good readers. You'll learn to read as writers this semester, which means you'll be looking at stories for how they are written, not just what just the story and its meaning. And you will read a great deal in this class! I'll assign stories each week, but you'll also be reading on your own and keeping a log of stories read, as well as a collection of story analyses.

2. Exercising. To write well you have to get in writing shape. Reading is probably the best way of doing that. Writing exercises can also go a long way toward increasing your writing effectiveness. We'll begin this semester with several weeks of exercises. Then you'll be responsible for finding work on your own.

3. Writing. The activity itself cannot be learned intellectually; you must move the ink over the pages. And you must do it many many times! Consequently, your primary responsibility in this class is producing pages of prose, most of which will be revised. **Writing is rewriting!**

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Creative Writing Assignments. Your writing makes up the workshop, therefore, **you must be here for all regularly scheduled meetings**. If there is an overflow of work, I'll be happy to schedule extra meetings for students to attend on a voluntary basis.

You will write at least two new stories, most of which will be workshopped, and revised. Please feel free to show me, in conference, any other writing projects you're working on.

Please allow yourself extra time. Writing always takes more time than you can imagine. All writers deal with deadlines. It is a fact of life. Work within the deadlines for this class.

2. Reading. You will read certain assigned stories, as well read on your own. Over the course of the semester, **you'll be required to write five one-page analyses** of stories you've discovered on your own, which I will collect from time to time. You will also keep a log of these and other stories you read (title, author, and where and when the work appeared. This will be in addition to the stories I assign. Further explanations will follow

3. Exercising. We will do exercises in class and as homework. You will turn in much of which. I will expect you to find other creative exercises.

4. Final Portfolio. Your portfolio is the most important part of your grade, worth 70%. It's important that you take your time and produce your best work. If I have to give them back to you, you automatically lose a grade. They are due during the week of midterm, and again at the end of the semester. Please purchase a roomy portfolio for the class. It will contain a section for drafts, one for revisions, all of the work that is handed out to you. Work you discover on your own. A response reading section. And an Editing section in which you keep: a. all typed editorial remarks on your stories, b. all your typed editorial remarks on the stories of others. I will also bring a sample portfolio to class.

5. Visiting Writers/Literary Events: Note: This syllabus, like writing, is fluid. If a writer is in town and if he/she can come to our class, we'll gladly take advantage of that opportunity. Another example would be if a noted writer dies or wins a major prize.

The Literary Events are not only, inspiring and entertaining, but they offer students an opportunity to see writers work with their work. I strongly encourage students to attend all readings, particularly the visiting writers' series, and student readings sponsored by the English Club. I hope some of you will read from your own work. Please submit your work to *Calliope* and the Waitman Barbe content. And of course all events are free with refreshments. This is what we have so far for literary events:

Sept 10th _ Tuesday Reading by Lee Martin from Ohio University

Oct 2nd_ Wednesday Reception for English Majors 11-2:30 Stansbury Hall

Oct 7th--Monday Reading by Dean Young

Nov 2nd_ Saturday Reading by Meredith Sue Willis

I will also be making announcements as during the semester about these and other event If you know of such events, please announce to the class as well.

6. Grades. Seventy percent (70%) of your grade will be based on your portfolio; that is your writing, reading and exercising are assessed collectively. This is the best evidence for me to know that you've consistently worked hard. The other portion of your grade will come from your performance in your general involvement with class on a day to day, basis. **For example** regular attendance is a must! Other than your portfolio, your grade will be determined from your performance by your general involvement with the process of the class. More than 3 absences will lower your grade automatically. There will be inclass writing almost every section; if you're not present you can't do the assignment.

Inclass assignments and journal entries will be, of course, handwritten, but everything else must be typed, double spaced and in story form. We will discuss in class. Stories should also be proofed before they are duplicated for class members—don't expect your peers to copy-edit for you. Spell check is not enough. This is a creative writing class. However, if you have trouble with concepts of grammar, please raise the issue with me in conference.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week of

Aug 19th Introduction. Review Syllabus. Discussion- "Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin

Aug 25th Role Call. Discussion of journals and expectations of class. Handout

"Cathedral" by Raymond Carver

Sept 2nd **Labor Day**

Sept 4th Discussion-Basic Elements of Fiction—Character Development, Time,

Place, Narrative Voice, Dialogue

Sept 7th **Rosh Hashanah (Day of Special Concern)**

Sept 11th Discussion-Building a Character (handout provided)

Sept 16th **Yom Kippur (Day of Special Concern)**

Oct 4th Midterm Examination Week- Portfolios Due

Oct 11th **Students First Story Due.** Discussion-Character Development continued

Oct 18th Professor's Response to Student's Stories. Discussion-Narrative

Voice/Point of View-Handout provided

Oct 25th Last Day to Drop a Class

Nov 4th Continued Discussion-Point of View

Nov 5th **Election Day**

Nov 11th Discussion–Time/Place (handout provided)

Nov 18th Discussion of Handout

Nov 23rd **Thanksgiving Recess**

Nov 30th Discussion-Dialogue (handout provided)

Dec 5th Last Day to Withdraw

Dec 6th Last Day of Class

Dec 9th Final Examination Week-Portfolios Due

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY IS COMMITTED TO SOCIAL JUSTICE. THE

INSTRUCTOR OF THIS COURSE, WITH WVU'S COMMITMENT, EXPECTS

TO MAINTAIN A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT BASED UPON

OPEN COMMUNICATION AND MUTUAL RESPECT. ANY SUGGESTIONS AS HOW

TO FURTHER SUCII AN ENVIRONMENT WILL BE APPRECIATED.

"Building" a Character

What kind of person is your main character? One way to find out is to "build" a personality for this person by choosing, at random, certain traits and quirks that are completely idiosyncratic--traits that SHOW this person to have certain attributes. Try to have these traits echo each other in some way, or build off each other. For example, the fact that her favorite food is steak, nearly raw, may metaphorically suggest that one of her personal weaknesses is an attraction toward violence.

From the following list, choose ones that seem interesting to you, or that you sense might have some bearing on what you've already written. Then write a short, but detailed, passage for each trait that shows how your character exhibits these personality characteristics. What illustrations, anecdotes, or specific bits of evidence will show these traits to readers? What other bits of evidence or details might complicate our sense of, say, the character's nickname (e.g., "People called him Stinky, but not for the reason you'd think. He was Stinky as in Unpleasant, But Not Terrible--a lout who always managed to redeem himself at the end. The best example is what happened with his girlfriend, after she broke her foot....") Real life is complicated; we're almost never purely one way or the other. In what way is your character "a little of this and a little of that"?

1. character's nickname
2. age
3. looks
4. education
5. vocation/occupation
6. social status
7. marital status
8. ethnicity
9. speech patterns
10. relationships
11. hangouts, living quarters
12. favorite possession
13. hobbies
14. obsessions
15. beliefs
16. politics
17. sexual history
18. ambitions
19. superstitions
20. religion
21. fears
22. attitudes
23. flaws
24. strengths
25. pets
26. tastes in books, music, etc.
27. recent journal entries
28. correspondence (with who?)
29. food preferences
30. handwriting
31. talents
32. others??

-----SOME EXAMPLES-----

Looks (#3)

He looks a little like a young, blond Abraham Lincoln. He doesn't really resemble Lincoln--it's just that he's tall and thin and has craggy features that look handsome from one angle and homely from another. Also, his expression is usually serious and thoughtful, the way Lincoln's usually is in his photographs.

Possessions (#12)

His most treasured object is the collection of ties his former fiancée gave him. Besides a serious present, she would always give him a novelty tie for Christmas and his birthday—a Picasso tie, a tie with palm trees on it and a woman doing a hula dance, a tie that plays "Happy Birthday" when you press a button on it. Jack can't bear to throw out the ties, though he knows he should. He'll never be able to get involved with anyone else as long as he keeps them—the ties are as intimate a reminder of Nancy as a collection of photographs of her.

Ambitions (#18)

He wants more than anything else to have Nancy back, even though he knows that if she walked through the door right now, they would get into an argument in about three seconds flat.

Character flaws (#23)

Jack's capable of lying about a lot of things—usually small, unimportant things. For example, the understanding he has with his landlady is that he'll stay in his basement apartment and leave the rest of the house—her house—alone. He's agreed to this, but in fact when she's not there he snoops around a lot, and he watches her television set and borrows her books. He eats her food, too—canned foods, and things he thinks she won't notice are missing. Because of his Abraham-Lincoln look, people tend to trust Jack—he's found that they tend to believe him whether he's telling the truth or a lie.

Characters and Their Objects

The poet William Carlos Williams once said, "No ideas but in things." In other words, when ideas aren't connected to anything concrete, the stuff of our world, the things we can touch and smell, they're just vague opinions, fantasy thoughts without any real value. For example, let's say your character is depressed. As a writer, you want to show this--just telling us he/she is depressed isn't going to convince us or make us care. One way to show this depression is to get your character involved with food, furniture, tools, office items, etc.--all the things that exist in the character's world. So instead of saying,

"Joline was depressed" (Prove it! says the reader), you might write a scene in which we see that Joline no longer finds pleasure in her favorite foods, no longer looks forward to sitting in that big green easy chair in the corner, no longer takes care when operating her table saw, no longer writes with only her favorite Flintstones pen, etc., etc.

Objects have meanings for people. We attach value to beloved things (or hated things), we express our personalities through things (i.e., the clothes we wear, the cars we drive), and we express feelings for others through objects (presents, hate mail, "favorite" shoes and hats, "sentimental" baseball hats from Little League).

One way to reveal your character's personality (leading to "character development" in stories) is to show what meanings and stories and symbolic/metaphoric importance he or she places upon certain things.

EXERCISE: from this pile o' junk, and from your own imagination, select some objects (or one object) that has meaning for your main character. Write a scene in which your character has some contact with the object(s). Preferably, this scene will relate to your draft-in-progress.

Some questions to ask yourself: Where is this object? How did it get there? What's it mean to your character? Is some other person associated with this object? What's your character's state of mind right now, and how might this object change it or make it more pronounced? Does this object have value for someone else?

Try to make the scene reveal the importance of the object(s) to the narrator, but try not to use vague descriptions that say something is true without showing it to be true. So, instead of saying, "Mary felt better when she sat in the basement," show us through her interactions with basement objects that she's feeling better.

E.g., "When Mary sat on the collapsed boxes in the basement, her body felt light and fluid. She thought of birds, of clouds, of her spine as a burrowed root. She put her hands in the cracked flower pots and smiled at their plastic coolness; she rolled the spare washer-hose up and down her forehead, her own masseuse, delighting in its touch, its soft, rubbery smell; she looked into each corner, into the piles of newspaper, the old Girl Scout magazines, her collection of salt-and-pepper shakers, and she almost cried out in happiness. She was free, she was beautiful, she could do anything she wanted. The world outside--a hateful, savage place!--receded into nothing, a mere bleating of horns and murmured voices, puny as a dream."

How Multi-Leveled is Your Character's Personality?

We are the stories we tell. The myths, assumptions, lies, justifications, and codes of honor that are at the foundations of our personalities are often revealed not only in what we say, but in how we say it. In other words, we often shape stories according to who our listeners are.

If you can see how your character would talk to different people--even to people who may not appear in the story--then you'll discover things about your character that might help flesh out his/her psyche (ways of speaking, concerns, secrets, lies, and so on). Your characters, after all, reveal different sides to their personalities to different people, just as we do.

EXERCISE: Focus on some event in your story that forces your character into an emotional response (or make one up now). Then imagine your character telling the story of this event to three different people:

1. his/her boyfriend or girlfriend or husband or wife
2. a therapist
3. his/her mother, or someone who used to be "caretaker"

For example, let's say your main female character just came out of a movie around 7 p.m. and gotten mugged--a person asked for money, then knocked your character to the ground and ran. How might she tell the story to these three people listed above?

Telling her mother:

So I'd been to the bathroom because I knew I wouldn't get to go before I made it home and no, I wasn't wearing my black mini! You don't wear leather in early Autumn. Anyway, I'd asked this guy--some kid from school--what time it was and he told me 7:10. Don't worry. He wasn't the mugger. I did not ask the mugger the time. It was Johnny Something Or Other from my morning lit class. Anyway, I'm just walking down the sidewalk, headed for the car, and it happened. Johnny What's His Name must have heard it. He's a big kid, probably a football player or something, and that's all I could think about there, sitting sprawled all over the ground. That kid could've helped me out.

Telling her boyfriend:

Listen, I have never, not once, taken anything so hard. They found me sitting on the sidewalk in front of the Tivoli. My dress was up around my bottom. I was crying, you know. Just out of my head. The cop told me I was going to have to calm down, tell him some facts. But I couldn't even remember what film I'd

been to. It was Hairspray--yeah, for the third time. I know you think that's silly, but I've got this thing about John Waters movies. I don't remember a thing past losing my pocketbook. You'd think we were in New York City or something.

Telling her therapist:

I have this thing about smells, Dirty smells. Like for instance, my mom tells me the story how I'd whip off my diapers the very second they filled up, and well, that's sort of the way I am today. And you can imagine how I felt when this dirty, stinking body--that's all I can recall about it--pulls into my personal space and attacks. All I could think was: I am going to get sick, right here, right in front of all of Broad Street.

Guidelines for Short Fiction (English 114)

You will be expected to work hard on your stories for this class, meaning you should feel obligated to give each piece discussed in class the attention and respect you would like if it were yours. Hand in work on time; when you receive the work of others, read each piece at least twice, and make comments in the margins.

Below are some questions to think about when reading creative work, from The Writer as Insider by Kit Reed:

1. What worked well in the piece?
2. What didn't work as well as it might have? What changes would make it work better?
3. Were you confused at any point? Did the author lose you? Where?
4. Has the writer done what he/she set out to do? Does the work have gaps?
5. Is the work too long or too short? What needs to be cut or expanded?
6. Where in the piece is language used well? Where is it weak, or unclear?
7. Does the piece progress at a consistent rate? Do you feel bogged down in places, or rushed in others?
8. What is the point of the piece?
9. Are grammar and usage precise? Does it suppose to be? 10. Is the dialogue convincing? If not, why not?

11. Does the piece really begin where the author begins it?

12. Is the imagery vivid? Do you have a clear picture from words? 13. Are you satisfied with the work as it stands, or do you have questions?

14. If the story leaves you with unanswered questions, what are they?

15. Is the point of view consistent? Does the writer remain faithful to the vantage point he/she took at the start of the story? If not, does the change work?

Begin generally, then move on to specific points and details; statements should be supported with quotes from the piece. Be sure you are reading the piece as close as possible to what it is just now--not as it could be in the future. Telling the author that you like something can be helpful, but you must expand your discussion. Remember that silence may be interpreted as displeasure or boredom.

Every member of the class must comment on every piece we do. Remember, only constructive criticism is valid. If that is not being offered, I will tell you. The class is not meant to measure the writer as a person, it is meant to improve the current piece, and pieces written in the future.

The author may not enter into the discussion of their piece, but may ask questions at the end of the discussion explanations, defenses, clarifications, or justifications--unless I ask the person to.

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