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Literature 113: Fiction Individual and the Community

This course is a survey class that explores the world of short stories from various periods. We will read some of the greatest stories, enjoy visiting other times and places, and expand our horizons with new people and new ideas.

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Texts

Joseph F. Trimmer, Wade C. Jennings, and Annette Patterson, *eFictions* (Thomson Learning, 2003)

Anton Chekhov, “Three Years,” a novella (students are given copies to use and return to teacher)

The course’s textbook is created online using Thomson Custom Publishing—TextChoice (www.textchoice2.com). The online text, entitled *eFictions*, is edited by Joseph Trimmer, who has collected a wide range of the best-loved and most-taught short stories in English.

This collection of more than 200 classic and contemporary stories allows me to customize an anthology to fit my literary needs and teaching style. For example, my goals for this class are to read classic Great Books selections as well as contemporary selections. Many conventional texts have both, but often they are the same stories used over and over again. For instance, most conventional texts will have “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane; I prefer to use “The Blue Hotel,” and I can choose that selection by using the *eFictions* online text.

I have been using this online text for five years or more because I like the freedom to create my own text and to revise it as much or as little as I choose. For example, I may decide to review the stories I am using and eliminate some and add new ones. It is an extremely simple procedure to do this. I just go into the web site, examine the list of over 200 stories, and select the ones I want and send them to the publisher via the Internet. Within a week or two, the publisher sends me a sample copy to examine. I then confirm my final order. I generally check with the bookstore to confirm the order; however, our Thomson Publishing Company book rep is excellent, and I work closely with her to be sure the books are here on time.

The *eFictions* text is beneficial for the students because they feel they are utilizing the textbook and saving money by just having to purchase one textbook for the class. They also have access to many selections that are not always in the traditional literature books. They have a wonderful variety of short stories, from classic Great Books authors such as Edgar Allan Poe to contemporary writers such as Sherman Alexie.

The online textbook is available with a 152-page writing apparatus, which includes an introduction, questions, and paired stories in multiple themes to demonstrate fiction concepts. For example, the five basic elements of the short story are explained in these pages, and then paired short stories are used to exemplify each of the elements. Therefore, the first ten short stories are chosen by the authors of the text. Since I teach the five elements (plot, characters, point of view, setting, and theme), this feature is beneficial for me. This 152-page apparatus is excellent: it gives a concise explanation with examples of the five basic elements; and it uses a wonderful combination of classical and contemporary stories to exemplify the elements. It also gives many helpful guidelines for reading the stories, such as previewing the story, actively reading the story, and responding promptly to the story. Finally, it gives extensive guidelines and suggestions for writing essays and research papers, with appropriate samples.

The rest of the texts are short stories I have chosen from their available list of more than 200 short stories. This feature allows me to select the stories that I feel have relevance to my teaching objectives and the theme of the course. In addition, there are ample stories accessible to the students for individual research projects.

Theme: The Individual and the Community

The theme of this course is how the individual makes choices which ultimately affect not only the individual positively or negatively but also the community as well. For example, in “Barn Burning” by William Faulkner, we see how the individual’s perceived good—family loyalty—is in conflict with the good of society. Likewise, in “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” by Richard Wright, we see how the individual’s perceived good—protecting himself with a gun—becomes a danger to the good of society. Conversely, we will examine how the community (society) can positively or negatively affect the individual. For example, in “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut and “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin, we examine how society’s “perceived common good” is often in conflict with the individual’s “good” or rights. Since the theme is broad, it allows much flexibility in the choice of stories, formal papers, and class discussion.

I use short stories by Great Books authors in comparison with contemporary authors so that the students can see how the messages of the Great Books authors are relevant today. The students are able to compare how Great Books authors as well as contemporary authors deal with problems of human behavior. The students are often amazed at how words and

ideas written hundreds of years ago are relevant today in 2005. Many come to the conclusion that more is learned about human behavior from a literature book than from a psychology textbook!

For example, in discussing plot structure, the students read Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog," paired with Joyce Carol Oates's "The Lady with the Pet Dog." They can relate to Chekhov's and Oates's messages about infidelity and its consequences. So, too, in the story by Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," many students have had a "Paul" in their classrooms and can relate to those young people who do not fit in.

After completing the ten paired stories according to the five elements, we explore the short stories and a novella using various themes. We continue to explore both Great Books writers and contemporary writers.

The following are examples of the themes and some of the stories.

Theme: Initiation and Maturation

Great Books: William Faulkner, "Barn Burning"; Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"

Contemporary: Sandra Cisneros, "One Holy Night"; Carson McCullers, "Sucker"; W. D. Wetherell, "The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant"; Andre Dubus, "Fat Girl"

Theme: Relationships—Men and Women

Great Books: Anton Chekhov, "Three Years" (a novella); Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"; Edith Wharton, "Roman Fever"

Contemporary: Dorothy Parker, "Big Blonde"; Sherman Alexie, "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor"

Theme: Parents and Children

Great Books: D. H. Lawrence, "The Rocking-Horse Winner"; James Joyce, "Counterparts"

Contemporary: Raymond Carver, "A Small Good Thing"; Henry Lawson, "The Drover's Wife"

Theme: Bias and Discrimination

Great Books: Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation"

Contemporary: Nadine Gordimer, "Town and Country Lovers"; Chinua Achebe, "Vengeful Creditor"

Theme: The Ordeal of Nature

Great Books: Jack London, "To Build a Fire"

Contemporary: Annie Proulx, "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water"

Course Overview

Course Requirements

There is a midterm exam and a final exam in the course. These are short essay exams in which the students are asked to discuss certain stories, or discuss certain quotes from stories that were assigned in class. Students are also asked to write two short critical papers on the stories or on particular themes. In addition, four or five short quizzes are given during the course, to make sure students are reading the stories. And finally, classroom discussions play an important role in facilitating students' understanding and appreciation of the texts.

Student Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students should be able to do the following:

1. Use critical reading and critical thinking skills to understand and enjoy stories and novels.
2. Recognize basic story elements such as plot, characterization, setting, point of view, and theme.
3. Understand literary terms such as conflict, climax, irony, symbol, tone, etc.
4. Appreciate and interpret historical backgrounds and biographical information as they relate to the fiction assigned.
5. Enjoy reading stories, including the difficult and the unfamiliar, and appreciate the insights into human behavior that fiction provides.
6. Write effective essay-type answers for quizzes and examinations, as well as critical papers about fiction.

Grading Criteria

Essay-type quizzes in response to assigned readings	25%
Journal writing and class participation	15%
Critical papers	30%
Midterm and final examinations	30%

Syllabus

Note: All reading selections and page numbers listed below are for *eFictions* (except for "Three Years" by Chekhov).

Week 1 Introduction to course

Handout: Journal writing

eFictions text, pp. 3–13

"The Story of an Hour," 14+

Discussion of critical paper no. 1

Assign: Plot, 49–76

Basic Elements of the Short Story

Week 2 Quiz/discussion of the paired short stories focusing on plot
“The Lady with the Dog” and “The Lady with the Pet Dog”
Assign: Character, 77–100
“Paul’s Case” and “Among the Mourners”

Week 3 Quiz/discussion of the paired short stories focusing on character
Assign: Setting, 100–115
“Her First Ball” and “His First Ball”
Quiz/discussion of the paired short stories on setting
Assign: Point of View, 115–136
“The Yellow Wallpaper” and “A Rose for Emily”

Week 4 Quiz/discussion of the paired short stories focusing on point of view
Assign: Theme, 138–144
“Harrison Bergeron” and “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”
Quiz/discussion of the paired short stories focusing on theme
Assign: “One Holy Night” and “The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant,”
673+

Theme: Initiation and Maturation

Week 5 Quiz/discussion of “One Holy Night” and “The Bass . . .”
Assign: “The Endless Streetcar Ride into the Night,” 625+, and “The
Fat Girl,” 269+
Quiz/discussion of “The Endless Streetcar . . .” and “The Fat Girl”
Assign: “Sucker,” 529+, and “The Man Who Was Almost a Man,” 699+

Theme: Relationships—Men and Women

Week 6 Quiz/discussion of “Sucker” and “The Man Who Was Almost a Man”
Assign: “Roman Fever,” 679+, and “The Approximate Size of My
Favorite Tumor,” 165+
Quiz/discussion of “Roman Fever” and “The Approximate Size . . .”
Assign: “Big Blonde,” 587+

Week 7 Quiz/discussion of “Big Blonde”
Film: *The Lottery*
CRITICAL PAPER NO. 1 DUE
Assign: “The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” 397+

Week 8 Quiz/discussion of “The Short, Happy Life . . .”
Assign: “The Red Convertible,” 293+
MIDTERM EXAM
Assign: Chekhov, “Three Years,” part I

Week 9 Discussion of midterm exams and critical papers no. 1
Quiz: Novel, part I

Discussion of critical paper no. 2
Assign: Completion of Chekhov, "Three Years"

Theme: Parents and Children

- Week 10 Quiz: Novel, final part
Reports on critical papers no. 1
Assign: "A Small Good Thing," 211+, "The Ransom of Red Chief," 421+, and "The Red-Backed Spiders," 239+
- Week 11 Quiz/discussion: "A Small Good Thing," "The Ransom of Red Chief," and "The Red-Backed Spiders"
Assign: "The Rocking-Horse Winner," 497+, and "The Drover's Wife," 509+
- Week 12 Quiz/discussion: "The Rocking-Horse Winner" and "The Drover's Wife"
Assign: "Counterparts" (James Joyce; handout)
Discussion of "Counterparts"
Assign: "To Build a Fire," 517+

Theme: The Ordeal of Nature

- Week 13 Quiz/discussion: "To Build a Fire"
CRITICAL PAPER NO. 2 DUE
Assign: "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water," 613+

Theme: Bias and Discrimination

- Week 14 Quiz/discussion of "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water"
Assign: "Town and Country Lovers," 355+
Assign: "Vengeful Creditor," 153+, and "The Wall Reader," 193+
- Week 15 Quiz/discussion of "Vengeful Creditor" and "The Wall Reader"
Assign: "Revelation," 571+
FINAL EXAM
Assign: "The Things They Carried," 557+
- Week 16 Result of exams; discussion of critical paper no. 2
Discussion of "The Things They Carried"

Shared Inquiry and Discussion

The classes are generally conducted in large group discussions. We sit in one large circle; I sit anywhere in the circle and purposely move around. There is no "teacher's seat" in our discussion circle. I want the students to realize that in shared inquiry the teacher should not be the only one with the answers and the ultimate authority, but we all search for the truth,

the reality in the stories, and their application to our lives. Together we share our knowledge and intellectual curiosity; together we explore the complexities of the text, and the complexities of the human condition. An important role of the teacher in promoting shared inquiry is to create a climate of acceptance and respect for all students so they feel comfortable in expressing their views. In an atmosphere of academic freedom, I want them to look at the actual texts for evidence to support their theories, understanding, and interpretations. Always cognizant of the text, I want them to apply their understanding of the readings to the real problems of human behavior and man's existence. Lastly, I want the students to have fun! I want them to enjoy the class, to enjoy the readings and the discussions so that they will love learning and the acquisition of knowledge through reading and discussion.

Furthermore, in keeping with the theme of "the individual and the community," the students as individuals interact with the community in this classroom. The classroom should be a community of learners who explore problems and examine solutions together. It starts with a belief in our abilities to think as freely as we wish, and in so doing to exercise the mental faculties that most obviously distinguish us from other creatures. Doing this necessarily requires respect for the freedom of others to think as they wish and to respect their ideas, especially those who may think differently from us. In fact, real discussion or inquiry cannot take place without respect for others and an ability to listen to them. (Sometimes we need to teach the students how to listen!) I believe that the students' interactions with one another enrich them both intellectually and socially; they share and understand a diversity of opinions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds.

Since the major focus of the class is shared inquiry, it is essential that the students come prepared for discussion having read the stories. It is crucial for them to realize that active participation in the discussion requires a serious reading of and reflection on the text before their ideas and opinions can be respected and validated.

Before reading the stories for homework, we briefly discuss some points about the author that will help them in their reading. Also, in a somewhat guided reading lesson, I give them guidelines to help them. For example, I might give them a question or two to keep in mind as they read the story; I might discuss some problems they might have with language, especially for selections written a long time ago; I might find it helpful to give them a reading vocabulary before they begin the story; or I might alert them to pay attention to a surprise ending. In conclusion, my preparation will depend on the type or difficulty of the story; but I never have them read the stories without some pre-reading comments or suggestions.

To prepare for discussion, students write in a journal after reading each story. These journal entries encourage them to personally reflect on each story: to write comments, questions, or important quotes that will prepare them for class discussion. (A handout on journal writing is included at the end of this module.)

In order to assure reading of the text, the students are subject to a quiz on any readings. I give short quizzes of four to five questions randomly. These reading quizzes are valuable for the following reasons: they give me an opportunity to see the students' ability to comprehend the basic ideas in the stories, and the quizzes motivate the students to read the assignments! They also give me an idea of the participation grade, since students who aren't there for quizzes or are continually failing them are not actively participating in the discussions. I am convinced that we have good discussions because these quizzes are motivating the students to read the assignments.

In addition to the large group, we occasionally have small group discussions. In the small groups students are often asked to generate questions for discussion on stories read,

questions that can be answered by other small groups, or by the large group. Obviously, the ability to ask good questions implies some comprehension of the story.

I also encourage students to lead the discussion for one story. Two students volunteer to lead a discussion, and they are asked to come prepared with discussion questions and any relevant handouts they feel are necessary to help in the discussion of their assigned story. This technique has been successful, and the students always tell me they have a greater appreciation of the difficulty of getting students to participate. They generally become better participators themselves in subsequent discussions.

Midterm and Final Exams

As stated previously, there are a midterm exam and a final exam in the course. These are short essay exams in which the students are asked to discuss certain stories and/or discuss quotes from stories that were assigned in class. The following are sample exam questions.

Sample Questions for Midterm Exam

1. A common theme in literature is growth and maturity through conflict resolution. (a) Select *one* of the protagonists from the following stories and show how growth took place by identifying the conflict and the resolution. (b) Select *one* of the protagonists from the following stories and show how growth did *not* take place by identifying the conflict and the resolution.

“Among the Mourners”

“His First Ball”

“Paul’s Case”

“One Holy Night”

“The Bass, the River, and Sheila Mant”

“Barn Burning”

“Her First Ball”

“The Man Who Was Almost a Man”

“Fat Girl”

“Sucker”

2. The protagonists in “The Lady with the Pet Dog,” “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and “A Rose for Emily” all exhibit mental or emotional instability. Select one of the three protagonists and describe the mental or emotional instability and the cause of it. Be specific.
3. Relating to our theme, “the individual and the community,” discuss how the community or society positively or negatively affect the rights of the individual. Select one of the following stories: “Harrison Bergeron” “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” “The Lottery,” or “In The Penal Colony.” Be specific

Sample Questions for Final Exam

1. How are “Town and Country Lovers,” “Vengeful Creditor,” “Revelation,” and “His First Ball” similar? What message is conveyed in each of these stories about the “individual versus the community”? Use specific examples from each story to show similarities.
2. Select one of the quotes below and discuss its meaning in the context of the story.
 - a. “My God, Hester, you’re eight-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad. But, poor devil, poor devil, he’s best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner.” (“The Rocking-Horse Winner”)

b. "And [Laptev] kept asking himself: 'What keeps me here?' And he felt angry with himself and with the black dog, which still lay stretched on the stone yard, instead of running off to the open country, to the woods . . . It was clear that that dog and he were prevented from leaving the yard by the same thing: the habit of bondage, of servitude." ("Three Years")

Papers

In addition to the midterm and final exams, the students must write two short papers to complete the course requirements. (Since this course is a survey class taken by freshmen and sophomores in college, the written papers are minimal. My major focuses in this class are to expose them to as many short stories as possible, improve their reading and critical thinking skills, and hopefully inspire in them a love of literature and the Great Books.)

Students do two short papers. The first paper analyzes one short story according to one of the five elements. The students select the story from a list of ten or more stories. The second paper explores a couple of short stories by one author, or else is a theme paper.

Since some students have little background in writing papers, I guide them by selecting or recommending the stories they use in their second papers when they select a particular author or a particular theme. This frees them from many hours of searching, and it also helps them to better analyze the stories and recognize similarities in the theme, style, or structures of a particular author.

Critical Paper No. 1

The purpose of this short paper is to give you the opportunity to read and analyze a story of your own choosing from the following list.

Crane, "The Blue Hotel"
Banks, "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story"
Chekhov, "The Darling"
Ellison, "Battle Royal"
Faulkner, "Barn Burning"
Fitzgerald, "Babylon Revisited"
Glaspell, "A Jury of Her Peers"
Hardy, "The Three Strangers"
Kafka, "In the Penal Colony"
O'Brien, "A Scandalous Woman"
James, "The Pupil"
Trevor, "The Ballroom of Romance"
Silko, "Storyteller"
Canin, "We Are Nighttime Travelers"

You may analyze the story according to one or more of the basic elements: plot, character, setting, point of view, and/or theme. *The paper's thesis must be supported by specific references or quotes from the story.* The quality of the paper will depend on its ability to make a point (thesis), its in-depth analysis, and its critical insights and interpretations, not on its length. The paper should be typed, double-spaced, and approximately two pages. If you have

any questions or concerns, please contact me and I will be happy to clarify any problems with the assignment.

Critical Paper No. 2

Write a 1,000-word essay about two (or three) stories from the same author or three stories with the same theme. The purpose of this paper is to explore the works of one author or to explore a common theme developed in three different stories. (One of the stories used in your paper may be one we have covered in class, but *the other stories chosen must be new.*)

If you decide to do a theme paper, please see me about your theme and the stories you plan to use; you may use any stories in the *eFictions* text. Other stories not in the text may also be used.

If you decide to explore the work of one author, please select your author from the following list. Then read at least two short stories (at least one must be new) by this author, plus relevant material about the author.

Some stories are found in your text; also, I have other sources and handouts.

Raymond Carver	Sandra Cisneros	William Faulkner
Nathaniel Hawthorne	Shirley Jackson	James Joyce
D. H. Lawrence	Flannery O'Connor	Katherine Mansfield
Edgar Allan Poe	Louise Erdrich	Alice Walker
Joyce Carol Oates	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	John Updike
Edith Wharton	Nadine Gordimer	Jack London
Sherman Alexie	Carson McCullers	Anton Chekhov
Ellen Gilchrist	Chinua Achebe	O. Henry
Gabriel Garcia Marquez	Franz Kafka	Ernest Hemingway

The following are suggestions for topics to explore in the second paper.

1. Discuss the similarities or differences in the stories according to overall structure or one basic element the author uses, such as theme, setting, tone, point of view, conflicts, characterization, or plot.
2. Discuss some aspect of the author's life which influenced the development of specific short stories.
3. Discuss how the author uses a common theme in two or three different stories.
4. Using the theme of "the individual and the community," explore how the author uses the community to influence the individual positively or negatively. Conversely, you may want to discuss how individual choice influences the community negatively or positively.
5. If writing about a theme in three stories, show how this particular theme is developed in all three stories by different authors.

Remember that you must make a point about the author and his stories or about a particular theme developed in selected stories. This point should be stated in a thesis sentence, and it should be

developed with details and quotations (with parenthetical page numbers) from the stories you are discussing. *A paper that does not directly discuss and quote from the stories is not acceptable.*

The minimum length is about 1,000 words (three or four pages). The paper must be typed and double-spaced. Hand in or discuss with me your thesis statement and an explanation of your topic; this way you can be steered away from unsuitable or impossible approaches to the assignment. You may also get some helpful suggestions for your paper.

Keeping a Journal or Reading Log

Writing is not just a vehicle for creative self-expression or a way of exhibiting your knowledge. Writing can also promote thinking and learning for class discussions, quizzes, and tests. Therefore, you are asked to keep a journal-notebook or reading log this semester.

Each time you read a story or any other literature assignment, write something about it. There is no special form to follow, and there is no assigned length; write your reaction immediately so that you will be able to review it later for class discussions and possible quizzes. Here are some suggestions for writing journal entries about readings.

1. Always begin by writing the date when you did the reading, the title of the work, and the name of the author.

2. Write your opinion or your reaction to what you have read. Did you enjoy reading it? Did you understand it? Why or why not? If you did not understand it, what did you find confusing or difficult? Did you make any personal connections between the literary work and your own life experiences?

3. Make a note of what you would especially like to discuss or ask about in class. If you are using a book with questions after the selections or if you have been given study questions, try your best to think of answers to these questions. Even though written answers are usually not required, jot down answers for your own use in discussions and quizzes.

4. Look up any words you do not understand and list any words you had to look up, with their page numbers and the definitions you found in the dictionary. Did any particular words or sentences seem unusual or difficult to understand? Why? Is there anything unusual about the vocabulary, writing style, sentence structure, etc., of the story?

5. Write a few sentences summarizing what you think is the main idea or theme of the story. If you aren't sure, write down some possibilities. Write a longer summary if you think it will be useful.

6. Write or note quotations (or page numbers) from stories that you find especially relevant or confusing, so that you can discuss them in class.

7. You may also want to use your journal to write down ideas for future writing and problems you want to discuss with your teacher and your classmates.

(Class discussion notes should follow your journal entry on the stories being discussed.)