



The Eloquent Short Story: Teachers' Guide

By Dave King

INTRODUCTION

As Lucy Rosenthal notes in her introduction to the *The Eloquent Short Story*, this anthology is comprised primarily of stories written after the second world war. Several of the authors—Junot Diaz and Jhumpa Lahiri, for example—are younger writers who achieved significant early fame on the strength of their short fiction. A larger group, among them Ann Beattie, Denis Johnson, Tim O'Brien, and Joy Williams, includes established writers of the immediate post-war generation whose astute observations and adventures in style and form have helped to shape contemporary literary culture. Also included are several writers of an earlier era. The stories by A. A. Milne and Katherine Anne Porter, for instance, anticipate the range and dynamism of the late-twentieth-century short fiction boom.

Though many of the writers included here may be familiar to both teachers and students, the mode of their presentation in this volume suggests we consider the stories in something of a new light. Most anthologies developed for students arrange their contents in chronological order, with the result that fiction is presented as a historical continuum, each era building on the one that preceded it. While there are undoubted benefits to placing works of fiction in historical context, the beauty of Rosenthal's approach is that it encourages readers to consider a range of contemporaneous narrative strategies. As we venture through the sections of the anthology, we encounter stories as memoir, as prose poem, as fable, and so on, and we are struck by the variety of impulses by which fiction is produced. We gain increased awareness of stories as the products of idiosyncratic and personal sensibilities, and above all, we see the stories as stories, rather than as exemplars of literary movements or eras. As the discussion points listed below suggest, *The Eloquent Short Story* encourages students to notice stories at the level of their finest details—vocabulary, imagery, metaphor, and so on—and to link these details to the story's broader goals, such as character study or commentary. This movement between the concrete (or specific) and the abstract (or general) is at the heart of any academic writing program.

In considering this book as a teaching tool, two fairly straightforward assignments present themselves. The first is an essay discussing in specific terms how each story fulfills the promise of its form or category. (For example, how does Tim O'Brien use "On the Rainy River" to present readers with a commentary on the Vietnam war?) The second assignment is to compare two stories in their use of the form. (How do "The Rise and Fall of Mortimer Scrivens" and "Address Unknown" employ similar formal devices to achieve very different storytelling ends?) Such assignments can be adapted to any of the book's sections and will aid students, especially at the beginning of the term, to examine their assumptions and make connections between content and form. Understanding that such assignments are useful and will no doubt be presented, I have tried, in the "Possible Assignments" section of this guide, to provide alternatives which ask students to consider the strictures of each specific form or approaches. My hope is that by applying the tactics of, for example, the memoir, students will recognize both the limits and the potential of the first-person point of view—and also consider how an author might use and adapt personal memories in writing fiction. It is up to the instructor to decide the degree to which such assignments should become finished creative writing exercises, however; my own view is that general-studies students learn a great deal from (and generally enjoy) limited experimentation with scenes, dialogue, and so on, but that polished, workshop-ready work is more the purview of the creative writing class. For those students who are uncomfortable making up stories, I recommend drawing on pre-existing narratives, such as myths, fairy tales, and family anecdotes.

I. THE STORY AS MEMOIR OR CONFESSION

Sweet Town / The Water Faucet Vision / Demonology / Escapes

Stories often arise from the author's own experience—or they are told as if they do. In fact, one of our earliest childhood impulses is the urge to describe our experience; another is to listen to the tales of others. A goal of the story as memoir, then, is to capture this illusion of remembered experience, with the result that in such stories the narrator's character assumes special importance. Voice is a crucial craft element in these stories, and in each story in this section the writer's style becomes an essential element of the narrative voice. For this reason, stories that function as confessions or memoirs are ideal venues for considering prose style and raising the notion of the subjective narrator.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as memoir:

- What is the definition of a memoir? What other concepts are suggested by the word “memoir,” and what do they suggest about the word's etymology and meaning?
- What qualities would you expect to find in a real memoir, as opposed to a fictional one?

It might be useful to list these qualities: “memory,” “interpretation,” “reflection,” “the past,” and so on. How do the stories in this section challenge or confirm this notion of the memoir form?

- A memoir story purports to be a recounting of past events, but because the narrator is also a character in the story, this recounting may be quite subjective or even misremembered. The narrator may even be quite open about the liberties taken (on page 27 Rick Moody writes of “Demonology,” “I'm making the names up.”) How is the narrator's lack of objectivity a factor in each of the four stories included in this section?

Questions to raise in class about:

“Sweet Town”

- The events of this story could perhaps be recounted in a sentence or two; however, the author has chosen to expand them into a story of several pages. What do you think are the conventional methods of developing a complete story from such a narrative skeleton? What methods has the author of “Sweet Town” employed?
- “Sweet Town” is filled with references to works of pop and high culture. What purpose do these references serve? What do they tell readers about the character of the narrator?
- In the most literal sense, how accurate is the story (do you believe that the events happened precisely as they are described?) How important to you as a reader is this question of literalness? If you feel that Bambara has dispensed with literal truth in the service of some more subjective version of events, how would you characterize that “other truth?” How does such an approach mirror the experience of adolescence?
- Midway through the story, Kit recounts a dream. What does this suggest about the author's narrative strategy?
- Does the story have a turning point? What is it, and how can you describe the change that occurs?
- Bambara has a playful way with language, inventing new but recognizable words through the addition of prefixes and suffixes. Two examples, drawn from the first paragraph, are “monkeybardon” and “youthhood.” What other examples of this technique can you find, and what do you think it says about

the story's narrator? Why would a writer create new words, rather than using those already present in our language?

- What do you make of the story's final sentence? What key words alert us to Bambara's purpose in writing "Sweet Town"?

"The Water Faucet Vision"

- Early in the story, a grown-up Patty Creamer says that a good bureau is "a hedge against life" (p. 9). What do you think she means by this statement? How does the remark express the views, both in childhood and in adulthood, not just of Patty, but of the narrator, too? Where else in the story is this notion expressed?
- Gish Jen uses frequent foreshadowing to create resonance between two or more events in the story. An early example is the narrator's father throwing the brass vase through a kitchen window. What is being foreshadowed here, and what other examples of foreshadowing can you find? Why do you suppose an author would include two similar incidents in a story, rather than making her point with just one?
- Most of the story's events take place during the year Callie, the narrator, is in fifth grade. Very little of the plot occurs during Callie's adulthood, but we nevertheless learn a fair amount about the adult Callie. What do we learn from these adult sections of the story? Why do you suppose the author included them?
- Religion is one motif that recurs throughout the story. What roll does religion play in the narrative? How is the narrator's concept of faith different in the adult and childhood sections of the story?
- As a child Callie is deeply concerned with the production of miracles, which she sees as a practical bridge between the religious and secular worlds. In what ways does the adult Callie take a different view?

"Demonology"

- Consider Moody's first paragraph. What is unique about it? How do the technical mannerisms of Moody's style affect our reading of the story?
- Though paragraphs one and two begin with the same three words, the author appears to change the subject at the start of paragraph two. What comparison is he making? Most beginning writers are told to vary their vocabulary, but Moody deliberately avoids this throughout the story, often repeating words or phrases in sequence. How does word repetition serve to propel the narrative in "Demonology"?
- Moody does not name the holiday until paragraph two, but we know from the outset what is happening. How do we know? What specific details contribute to our understanding of the event? Are there other areas where he avoids stating the obvious?
- "Demonology" opens with secular images of Halloween, but Moody increasingly addresses the more historical and religious aspects of the holiday. Besides referring to All Saints Day and The Day of the Dead, what else does the author do to move between the playful and forbidding aspects of Halloween? Why do you suppose he does this?
- Early in the story, the narrator describes his sister's snapshot hobby, and later in the story he returns to the notion. In what way does the story's formal structure—especially in its early sections—reflect the sister's preoccupation with photography? Why are snapshots an especially useful image when dealing with the tale of a family.

- How are names used in this story? (At what point do we first learn the name of the main character?) What is the effect on the reader?
- Consider the last paragraph. What is the author saying about the memoir story as a form? What do we learn here that we do not learn elsewhere in the story? How does the author use this paragraph to blur the line between memoir and story?

“Escapes”

- “Escapes” begins with a series of mysteries: the mystery of death, the magic realm of reading, and several others. How does Joy Williams capture Lizzie’s particular perspective on such mysteries? What larger mystery is also being evoked?
- What parallels exist between the disappearance of the elephant, Houdini’s daring escapes, and the departure of Lizzie’s father? What differences? To what extent is Lizzie aware of the differences?
- In some memoir stories the narrator is unreliable, but in this one Lizzie seems to be doing her best to be straightforward and true to her experience. Who is unreliable in this story? How do we know?
- Early in “Escapes,” Lizzie describes reading as a place. Later in the story, she uses the same term to describe her mother’s drunkenness. What can you say about the narrator’s notion of place? How does this relate to the title of the story?
- After the father’s departure, Lizzie and her mother lead increasingly isolated lives. Lizzie dreams that “my mother and I were alone together as we always were, linked in our hopeless and incomprehending love of one another...” (p. 35). What is Lizzie’s attitude toward the world beyond her home? (How is this attitude made manifest by the episode with the usher?) What similarities between Lizzie and her mother are suggested by this passage, and by other events of the story?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

[The teacher might begin by recounting several anecdotes from his or her family’s past. Note that all family histories include such real-life stories, which may be tragic or comic, romantic or eerie, just as with any story an author might make up. Discuss the notion of oral history, and note that in preliterate societies oral history was the primary mode for keeping tribal and family heritage alive. Even in the modern world, the telling of tales and anecdotes serves to reinforce family bonds and mythologies.]

Consider a story from your own family’s past. In the United States, unless we are Native American, each family has at least one tale of migration (whether voluntary or not), but there are other archetypal stories, too: how our grandparents fell in love; how uncle so-and-so came of age; the funny or preposterous thing that happened to Mom when she was a girl. If you cannot think of any anecdotes, you may interview a relative.

Now turn the anecdote into a story told in the first person. Choose any character in the story and present the events from that person’s point of view, considering only the narrator’s emotions and biases, only the narrator’s experience. What specific difficulties are inherent in telling a story from the point of view of a participant? What are the gains? What can you discover about this story that you might have overlooked before?

II. THE STORY AS COMPRESSED NOVEL

Playing with Dynamite / Pendergast’s Daughter

In these two stories, compression is the operative word. Time, a general preoccupation in any story, is of central importance here because of the way it is distorted and contained within quite a small package. For this reason, it's useful to think carefully about scale when assessing such stories and to remember that no work of fiction acquires its shape by accident or default. The stories in this section have two quite specific shapes and relate to time in different ways. Nevertheless, both suggest a fuller, unstated world beyond the boundaries of the text.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as compressed novel:

- What is the difference between a story and a novel? What different qualities would you expect to find in each of the two genres? Why would an author choose to write a story rather than a novel, and vice versa?
- The most common way to tell a story is to begin at a certain point and move forward until the end. Sometimes, though, stories move back and forward in time, even making sudden leaps at particularly dramatic points. What do you suppose are the differences between these two methods of storytelling?
- Think about the ways flashbacks are typically presented in movies. What clichés or formulae do we associate with the flashback? How is this different from the way such devices are used in fiction? How might the effect on the reader differ from the effect on someone viewing a film?

Questions to raise in class about:

“Playing with Dynamite”

- Fanshawe has used reason as a coping method throughout his adult life, yet as he nears death he finds comfort in relinquishing reason in favor of what Updike terms “the supernatural” (p. 47). Why do you suppose the supernatural has greater appeal at this point in Fanshawe’s life?
- Of the episode on the stairs, Updike writes, “He knew that the incident would live in his wife’s head as if he had in fact pushed her, and thus he might as well remember it also, for the sake of marital harmony” (p. 49). How is this passage exemplary of the kinds of concessions Fanshawe is making often in his old age? Where, exactly, is the irony?
- Fanshawe is embracing a subjective and idiosyncratic view of the world, and he feels this represents a personal shift. However, the flashback to the skating scene suggests that even in “those middle years” Fanshawe’s world view was egocentric. In what ways do his present circumstances represent a continuation, rather than a break, with his lifelong attitudes?
- Fanshawe’s antagonist in this story is his wife, whom he describes as less sentimental than himself. How does his wife’s lack of sentimentality reflect Fanshawe’s own take on reality? If Fanshawe’s wife were the protagonist of “Playing with Dynamite,” what do you think she would say about her husband?
- More than most stories, “Playing with Dynamite” meanders through time, plucking incidents apparently at random from the long years of Fanshawe’s life. In fact, how random are these incidents? What lines can be drawn between the incidents with the birds, the deaths of the mother and the neighbor, and Fanshawe’s views of his life and marriage?
- In the final paragraph, we learn something new about Fanshawe’s marriage. What do we learn? Why do you suppose the author waited so long to reveal the identity of Fanshawe’s wife? How is Fanshawe’s own reticence and passivity evident in this withholding of information? How are they integral to his approach to life?

“Pendergast’s Daughter”

- “Pendergast’s Daughter” is described in this volume as a “compressed novel.” If the story were decompressed, what other material might be included? What is suggested, but not stated, in the eight short paragraphs of “Pendergast’s Daughter”?
- Pendergast himself plays a brief though central role in the action, but the story opens with Leann describing her father to the narrator. What is the difference between the Pendergast we (and the narrator) are led to expect and the Pendergast we actually see a few paragraphs later?
- The narrator is meeting Leann’s family for the first time, and he’s obviously surprised by what he finds. Given this fact, what is the significance of the story’s title? To what extent, beyond the obvious, is Leann her father’s daughter? Is the narrator aware of the title’s implications?
- Toward the end of the story, the narrator berates himself for failing to step in; evidently Leann also blames him for her mother’s injuries. What do you think? How responsible is the narrator for the end of his relationship? What were his obligations, under the circumstances? What were the obligations of the story’s other characters?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Each of these stories involves a turning point in an individual’s life, with some suggestion of the consequences. Situating yourself in the present but drawing on the past, write an essay in which you discuss a point when your own choices or actions set your life moving in one direction, rather than another. Try to look beyond the barest outlines of the incident to include other material which suggests—even obliquely—the degree of change (examples drawn from the two stories might be the nesting warblers in the Updike and the tractor and Zest in the Williford). Give some thought to whether your essay will form a labyrinth through time, like “Playing with Dynamite,” or move primarily forward, like “Pendergast’s Daughter.”

III. THE STORY AS PROSE POEM

Snow / The Grave

Compression is at play in these two stories also, though here compression is used not to suggest the breadth and expansiveness of a novel, but to highlight gemlike, carefully orchestrated details. In this respect, the name is apt: we can expect these stories to display all the sensitivity to language, play of metaphor and symbolism, and heightened awareness of the passing moment that characterizes much poetry.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as prose poem:

- What is the difference between poetry and prose? The two appear to be competing forms, but are they in fact? It’s clear from riffling the pages what element of prose has been incorporated into these stories, but what elements of poetry would you expect to find in something called a prose poem?
- Much contemporary poetry is lyric poetry which, as its name suggests, treats the poem as a kind of song. Many early poems, however, were narrative epics of some length. Which of these epic poems are still read and studied today? In what way is poetry particularly suited (or not suited) to the recounting of

stories, especially heroic stories?

Questions to raise in class about :

“Snow”

- “Snow” takes the form of a direct address to an unseen partner; the narrator, employing the unlikely second person, addresses herself to “you.” But who is this “you”? What do we know about “you”? In what ways does the personality of “you” inflect the story the narrator is trying to tell? How would you describe the two characters’ differing outlooks?
- Midway through the story, the narrator recalls her lover stating that “any life will seem dramatic if you omit mention of most of it” (p. 62). Is “Snow” a confirmation or a refutation of this idea?
- In contrast to the stories we looked at in the previous chapter, Beattie makes little attempt here to suggest the broader outlines of the characters’ lives. Rather, her story is narrow, revolving around its setting and a handful of very small-scale events that occur at that setting. What does this narrowed scope suggest about the world beyond the house? Is it implicit? Is it negligible? What do we assume about the characters’ lives after they depart the house?
- Early on, the narrator mentions the miraculous stories told by friends visiting the house. Later, it’s suggested that the stories were not miraculous, and that the friends never had much faith in the relationship. What do you think is the narrator’s own opinion? What does she mean when she says, “It was as hopeless as giving a child a matched cup and saucer” (p. 62)?
- Beattie employs a limited palette and tends to reuse, reconfigure and reexamine her material, rather than generating new imagery. What do you think is the purpose of such a method? How does it relate to Beattie’s use of setting, and even to the experience of a couple in the country, in the snow?
- Most stories have some form of climax, in which the conflict and tension reach their highest points. Does “Snow” have such a climax? If so, does the climax happen onstage or off?
- In what way does Beattie seem to be addressing the very nature of story, even as she tells one herself? (How does her approach compare with the similar strategy used by Rick Moody in “Demonology”?) How is the story’s final paragraph an element of this critique?

“The Grave”

- Imagery is formally defined as the inclusion of material relating to one of the five senses, whether the sense is visual, as the name suggests, or tactile or auditory, or related to the senses of taste or smell. What specific imagery has Katherine Anne Porter employed to enrich the narrative of “The Grave”? How is this similar to techniques used by poets you may be familiar with?
- The primary action of this story describes a pair of events that occur on the same day. What do these two incidents have in common? What large idea is Miranda confronting in both cases?
- Porter says that in peering into the grave, Miranda experienced “a small disappointment at the entire commonplaceness of the actual spectacle” (p. 65). How do you explain this statement? How does this compare with Miranda’s experience on discovering the litter of unborn rabbits?
- Midway through the story, Porter moves away from the primary action to discuss how Miranda’s boyish attire is viewed by her conservative community. Why do you suppose the author does this? How is Miranda’s private dream of gentility related to the horror she experiences when looking at the dead

rabbit?

- In the story's final paragraph, we see Miranda as a grown woman, twenty years later. How do you compare (or contrast) this picture with the adulthood imagined by Miranda earlier in the story? How has Miranda accommodated "the mingled sweetness and corruption" (p. 70) she experienced while hunting with her brother?
- In comparison with some other stories in this volume, "The Grave" moves at quite a leisurely pace, frequently pausing to examine one moment or another in depth. How is this pace a reflection of the story's content? In what way is Porter's attention to detail similar to what we might expect from a poem?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Rewrite one of the stories as a poem, using a common, easy-to-handle form. For example, "Snow" might be recast as a linked series of haikus. "The Grave" might be reduced to a pair of ten-to fifteen-line stanzas. As you write, think about the notion of compression; given limited space, what details will you choose to preserve? Which will you jettison? You have probably been told on more than one occasion to develop or lengthen your work through the addition of concrete information, specific examples, and details. How does your writing change when the reverse is assigned?

Alternatively, revisit a finished essay or story of your own, and reduce it to a third of its original length. Think carefully about what you will keep and what you will remove. What, exactly, does the reader need to know? What elements may be inessential to the narrative, but nevertheless serve the reader's pleasure?

IV. THE STORY AS ESSAY OR COMMENTARY

Nilda / Laws Concerning Food and Drink; Household Principles; Lamentations of the Father / On the Rainy River / How to Become a Writer

The stories in this category tend to open outward, the narratives leading us not to the contemplation of gorgeous minutiae but towards broader worlds that lie beyond the boundaries of the texts. But though the authors are clearly using plot to examine these broader worlds, the stories themselves avoid being didactic. Each one sustains some elements (strong characters, vivid language, interesting plot lines) of any good story. And, as is also true of essays, stories that provide commentary can be funny as well as serious.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as essay or commentary:

- How important is it that a story contain a central message or social point? What is your previous experience with stories that comment on the state of the world? Do you feel that after finishing such a story readers should be moved to right social injustice, take political action, or even improve their own habits in some way? Do you feel it is the obligation of the writers and artists to use their gifts to effect social change?
- Why do you suppose a writer might choose to make a point through fiction, rather than simply writing an essay or article? What are the aspects of fiction that make it a useful vehicle for commenting on the world around us?

- Have you ever read a story that seemed to exist simply to entertain? Do you feel this is a valid goal for a writer?

Questions to raise in class about:

“Nilda”

- One of the first things we notice about “Nilda” is the language. How would you characterize Diaz’s vocabulary? Looking beyond the question of mere words, what can you say about the cadence of the sentences? How does the writing evoke Yunior’s background and environment? Stylistically speaking, is Diaz’s writing different from that of other writers in this volume? What do you think is the author’s goal in using language this way?
- Early in the story, the author describes Nilda’s transformation from a particular type of child to a particular type of woman. Why does he do this, rather than simply providing a description of Nilda at the time of the story? How does our knowledge of Nilda’s girlhood inform our vision of her as the story continues? Why do you think authors use flashbacks in their work?
- What other transformations occur over the course of the story? How do Nilda’s experiences mirror those of our narrator, Yunior? In what way is Nilda’s life reflected in the lives of the supporting characters? What is Diaz saying about the chances for survival in this environment?
- At what point do Nilda’s and Yunior’s lives diverge? Does Diaz suggest why the two characters found such different fates?
- Midway through the story, Diaz writes, “That was the summer when everything we would become was hovering just over our heads” (p. 81). How do you explain this statement? Is it significant that this is also where we learn of Rafa’s illness?
- What do you make of the “black ice” image that completes that paragraph mentioned above? How does this image conform to what we learn about Yunior at the end of the story?
- Setting is an especially important element in this story, though very little actual description of the setting is employed. Based on your reading of the story, what can you say about the setting of “Nilda”? How is setting important to understanding this story as a commentary? What kind of a statement is Junot Diaz making?
- Through most of the story, Yunior expresses quite a lot of sympathy toward Nilda; in fact, he is the one character who does. How do you square this sympathy with the apparent rudeness and indifference of the story’s final sentence? How does this shift of attitude complicate the “commentary” that is at the heart of this story?

“Laws Concerning Food and Drink”

- How would you characterize the language used in this story? What type of work is being evoked or parodied? What specific vocabulary and stylistic choices point you to such a work? How is this evident in the story’s title as well as its text?
- To whom are the laws in this story addressed? How do you reconcile the style of the language with the probable verbal skills of the addressees? Why do you think Frazier chose to write the story this way?
- “Laws Concerning Food and Drink” is primarily a comic piece. What is funny about it? How do you think an author achieves humor in writing? Is there also a serious message concealed within the humor?

What is that message? What is the advantage of using humor to convey such a message, rather than taking a more straightforward approach?

- “Laws Concerning Food and Drink” minimizes some traditional aspects of the conventional short story. For example, there’s no plot to speak of, and the characters are not particularly defined. At the same time, the element of imagination clearly suggests that this is fiction. How does the author compensate for the diminished importance of plot and character? What do you think is the difference between a story and a humorous essay? Where do the two categories overlap?

“On the Rainy River”

- Here is a story by a writer named Tim O’Brien, about a character also named Tim O’Brien. How does this choice of a protagonist’s name color our understanding of the story? Does the fact that the first paragraph includes the term “confession” alter your sense of the relation between author and character? How does O’Brien the author use this device to enhance the essayistic qualities of the tale? What role does the question of identity play in “On the Rainy River”? Is it significant that at the end of the story, on page 105, the narrator asks “What would you do?”

- More than the other stories in this section, “On the Rainy River” actually includes passages that identify and discuss a broad social and political issue. Which passages are these? The protagonist also says that in college he composed “a few tedious, uninspired editorials for the campus newspaper” (p. 92). What does this say about his engagement with the politics of the Vietnam war? Do you think protagonist O’Brien and character O’Brien have identical attitudes toward the war? If not, where do they differ?

- How is the narrator’s work in the meat-packing plant significant in this story? Considering that the story does not contain scenes dramatizing the war itself, how does the author use the factory as a stand-in or a foreshadowing of O’Brien’s Vietnam experience?

- The narrator describes the story as a “confession,” as noted above, but later he calls it “a gesture of gratitude” (p. 98). How are these two terms related? What does this say about the narrator’s understanding of the events of the story?

- The text of “On the Rainy River” is highly analytical at the outset, when O’Brien is still sorting things out in his home town. However, it becomes much more metaphoric once he sets out on his journey north: the main lodge building is described as “like a cripple” (p. 98); the old man’s eyes are compared to razor blades, and so on. What do you think the author is suggesting by this shift in language? What can be understood about the protagonist’s state of mind?

- Like many exercises in rhetoric, “On the Rainy River” has the structure of a syllogism: it links a global problem (Vietnam) to a much narrower individual issue (courage) and attempts to deduce an answer from that intersection. However, late in the story the protagonist states that “it was no longer a question that could be decided by an act of pure reason” (p. 101). Why does he say this? What does this remark contribute to our notion of “On the Rainy River” as a kind of essay or commentary?

- This story is told primarily in exposition (the straight narration of events without full-scale dramatization). However, there is one scene where the author breaks into dialogue. Where is this scene, and why does the author choose to dramatize it? Why does the author refrain from dramatizing the rest of the story?

- Courage is a primary theme of this story, from the opening notion that it involves a finite amount of “moral capital” to the protagonist’s thought on bravery as he sits in the motorboat twenty yards from the Canadian shore. But how is the notion of courage as articulated in this later scene different from what we expect? How does O’Brien’s definition of courage contradict our traditional definition as it applies to

soldiers and patriots? How would you define “moral capital” (p. 91)?

“How to Become a Writer”

- Though “How to Become a Writer,” like “Laws Concerning Food and Drink,” is written in the style of another type of text, it has more of the conventional story elements than that story. Why would a writer decide to recast a traditional story as a chapter from a self-help guide? For the reader, what is gained by this decision? What is gained by using the second person?
- Throughout the story, Francie is criticized for her “sense of plot” (p. 110). What do you think this means? In what ways does the story address this criticism, either by refuting or confirming it?
- Another of this story’s preoccupations is humor. What is the difference between humor and wit, and how do you think the two interact here? How does Moore use humor to address the story’s most serious concerns?
- One of this story’s ongoing metaphors involves the blank faces of Francie’s family and colleagues. Why do you suppose this metaphor is repeated so often? What is Moore saying about the writer’s relationship to her family, friends and readers? Since the story involves advice, what advice can the aspiring writer draw from such characterizations?
- Several passages in “How to Become a Writer” examine the relationship between a writer’s life and her work. At one point, Moore provides three examples of life experiences and explains how Francie transformed these experiences in her work. Do you believe she is being satiric? If so, who or what is being satirized? How do you resolve the fact that in the next section the roommate says that Francie’s subject is always her “dumb boyfriend” (p. 115)?
- In what ways does “How to Become a Writer” deliver or not deliver on the promise of its title? If Moore were writing a treatise on creativity, rather than a story, what do you think she would say?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Think of an opinion you once held, but about which you have changed your mind. Your opinion can be silly or profound, but be sure to choose a topic which is truly an *opinion*, not simply a situation that changed. As a preliminary exercise, try phrasing your topic as a single sentence, for example: “I used to believe security guards in public schools were a good idea, but now I think the situation could cause more problems than it solves.”

Write a brief paragraph in which you explain your initial opinion. Why did you feel as you did about this issue? What was your experience of it, and what kind of information did you have at that point? Try to think of all the factors that contributed to this opinion. Do the same thing with your revised opinion.

Reread your two paragraphs, then write a story that expresses this change of opinion in narrative terms. Think carefully about how you will use (or not use) the material from your two sample paragraphs. How much of this support material needs to be included in your story? How much will remain implicit? Be aware of the ways in which your story grows away from your originating message. How comfortable are you with allowing it to do so?

V. THE STORY AS CHARACTER STUDY

About Boston / Mrs. Sen's / The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Character is one of the signal buttresses of the traditional short story: in most stories strong characters, with clearly articulated needs, conflicts, and desires, are the means by which authors secure readers' interest in the plot. Though the development of character most commonly exists to serve the needs of the greater narrative, sometimes the issue of character itself assumes a central role, and narrative drive becomes a secondary concern. In the three stories that comprise this section, storylines are clear and compelling, but also somewhat secondary to the broader task of defining character.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as character study:

- What is character? How do we use the word in ordinary conversation? Do you think it has a different meaning when applied to literature?
- Thinking of someone you know well, what do you think are the elements that make up his or her character? How do external qualities like race or nationality, appearance, dress, habits, manner of walking or speaking, and so on, reflect a person's inner life, the realm of psychology, faith, values, imagination and dreams? How reliable are these external indicators?
- How do you suppose an author articulates a character in a story? What are some general attributes by which a character might be defined? How might these general areas change if the character is speaking directly to the reader, in the first person? Do you tend to assume first-person narrators are telling the truth?
- Do you feel it's possible to understand a person externally, by looking at his appearance, speech and actions? Or is it necessary to look inside at his psychology and emotions? What do you think is the minimum information an author might provide and still present a fully realized character? How might understanding a character in a story be different from making an actual friend, in real life?

Questions to raise in class about:

“About Boston”

- The first section of “About Boston” offers numerous clues regarding Beth and her business with the narrator. Though it's clear that both characters understand why they are meeting, the dialogue and the narration are elliptical from the reader's point of view; we're excluded from the characters' knowledge, and therefore we're left guessing about some aspects of the story. What do you suppose is the author's intention in keeping the reader in the dark? What later scene is foreshadowed by this device?
- After the first scene in his office with Beth, the narrator provides a kind of mini-autobiography which tells us how he got to that point in his professional life. What does he *not* talk about? What do you make of the fact that he dismisses his break-up with Beth in a phrase (“the usual reasons,” p. 123), but later suggests that she maligned him out of bitterness. What does this suggest about the narrator's character?
- One of the narrator's complaints about Boston is its pervasive clubbishness, which uses but excludes him. How is this sense of an insider/outsider dialectic perpetuated throughout the story? Is there any irony in the fact that the narrator becomes a divorce attorney, privy to “the view from the bedroom,” as he puts it on page 127? Can this sense of inclusion and exclusion also apply to the reader?
- The narrator is the character we learn the most about; it is his character the author has chosen to study. But what about Beth? What do we learn about her quirks and motivations over the course of the story? Why is she angry at the end?
- Over dinner, Beth and the narrator argue about their past, and she calls him “secretive” (pp. 145 &

147). In what way is he secretive? The narrator, though, may disagree, since he interrupts the scene repeatedly to provide private justifications, explanations, and memories. What do you think he's feeling? What is the difference between "secrecy" and "discretion"? Is the narrator's profession significant in considering this question?

- Toward the end of the story, the narrator walks the streets of Boston and pauses at a monument commemorating the use of ether. What is the statue's significance to the narrator? What do you make of the inscription on the plinth?
- What do you think Beth represents to the narrator? How does his experience with her parallel his vision of Boston?

"Mrs. Sen's"

- If a character study involves the reader's gradually getting to know and understand a character, how is this mirrored in the structure of this story? What does Lahiri do to ensure that the reader shares and understands Eliot's vision of Mrs. Sen's life, but no more?
- What does the description of the apartment suggest about Mrs. Sen's attitude toward her life in the U.S.? Is her reluctance to drive also a factor in this attitude?
- What, exactly, do we learn about Mrs. Sen? It might be useful to make a list. Of all the information the reader is given, which describes Mrs. Sen as a product of her home culture? What do we learn about Mrs. Sen as an individual, regardless of culture?
- Early in the story, Lahiri implicitly contrasts Mrs. Sen with Eliot's mother. What are some of the ways they are different? Are they at all alike? Do you think the author is asking us to see the two women as somehow typical of their respective cultures, or is she simply creating variety among her characters? Though Eliot himself never renders judgment with regard to this contrast, do you think readers are expected to abide by this same neutrality?
- As Eliot gets to know Mrs. Sen better, it's clear he feels some identification or empathy with her. Probably most readers experience the same empathy. Is this a necessary aspect of a character study? Do you feel that in order to understand a character it's necessary to empathize with him or her?
- Though this story is largely a character study of Mrs. Sen, it is also a portrait of the Sens' marriage. How would you characterize the couple's romantic life? What clues are you given in the story? How are Mr. and Mrs. Sen's assumptions regarding romance different from Eliot's, or his mother's?
- How is Eliot's own situation mirrored in the view he has of Mrs. Sen? In what ways do both main characters find themselves coping with environments that fail to nurture? How do the others in their lives—Eliot's mother, Mrs. Sen's husband—relieve or contribute to their isolation?

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"

- One of the delights of this story is the skill with which Thurber interweaves Walter Mitty's inner and outer lives. How does he do this? How does he notify the reader each time the story shifts between the "real" world of Mitty's shopping day to the "fantasy" world of dramatic plots and exploits?
- How does the language of the fantasy sequences differ from that which describes Walter Mitty's actual life? What specialized terms or jargon does Thurber employ to give the fantasy sequences validity and vividness? Would it surprise you to learn that some of this jargon—the medical terms, for example—consists of made-up words? What do these sequences remind you of?

- If this is a character study, then Walter Mitty seems to have two rather different characters. How would you describe these individual characters? Do they have anything in common? How does combining the two sides of Mitty's character lead to a fuller, richer definition of Mitty himself? In what ways is this composite Mitty different from either of the separate versions?
- In his fantasies, Walter Mitty is not only heroic but also debonair and quick with the repartee. How does this contrast with the Mitty we see parking his car and shopping for puppy biscuit? If Mitty is able to concoct such elegant dialogue for his fantasies, why do you suppose he doesn't do so in real life?
- How does Walter Mitty's final fantasy evoke his real life situation? To what degree do you think Thurber is being humorous here?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Choose one of the stories in this section (or any story with which you are familiar). Read the story carefully, then rewrite the story (or a single scene) from the point of view of another character. For example, "About Boston" might be retold from Beth's point of view and "Mrs. Sen's" might focus on Mrs. Sen's understanding of Eliot, rather than the other way around, as in the original. With "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," try considering the wife's inner life. Do you think she also has an ongoing inner melodrama running through the "remote, intimate airways" (p. 176) of her own mind?

Use your rewritten scene as a vehicle for elucidating character. Think carefully about the character you want to reveal, and give the reader plenty of information about that character's appearance, emotions, speech patterns, and inner life. If the original author has not provided much information, feel free to invent. Notice how this shift of character serves to move the entire story in another direction.

VI. THE STORY AS REPORTED EXPERIENCE

Car Crash While Hitchhiking / Brownies

Stories that report employ the conventions of journalism to develop their narratives. In the two stories in this section, the authors pay close attention to facts, applying the "who, what, when, where, why," that is a staple of responsible reporting. What separates these stories from actual journalism is, of course, the use of imagination to shape and edit reported experience, as well as the subjectivity of the reporter. In this sense, stories that report bear some resemblance to other categories discussed in this volume, such as memoirs and character studies. If, as in "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," the prose sustains the appearance of objective reporting, the strangeness of the narrative will lead readers to wonder just who, exactly, is doing the reporting.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as reported experience:

- What does it mean to provide an objective report of something? What exactly is "objectivity"? Do you think it's possible to be truly objective?
- How do you think an author transforms his or her experience into fiction? What kind of exaggeration or editorializing is required? What does the phrase "roman à clef" mean? Do you believe that fiction should ideally be based on real events? How important a factor is plausibility in your enjoyment of a story?
- Since we know in advance that stories are fiction, why do you suppose a writer might adopt a

reportorial pose or a pose of pose of objectivity? How is a story that seems rooted in real events and problems different from one that is more openly imaginary, such as a fairy tale, a romance, or a science fiction story?

Questions to raise in class about:

“Car Crash While Hitchhiking”

- Denis Johnson summarizes the events of this story—and also responds to the questions inherent in the story’s title—in the first two paragraphs of “Car Crash While Hitchhiking.” Such tactics might ordinarily be expected to drain the story of its suspense; why and how is that not the case here? How does such an opening reinforce our notion of this story as a piece of reportage?

- What do you think is the purpose of the ellipses (...) in the early sections of the story?

- Early in the story, the narrator says he knew in advance that the Oldsmobile would stop for him, and that it would crash. Is this clairvoyance in the customary sense? What is the nature of the narrator’s foresight?

- The narrator of “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” can be almost comically precise when it comes to noting small details, but he often seems unsure of the larger context or meaning of his experiences. An example of this is his description of the crash itself: “I commenced bouncing back and forth. A liquid which I knew was human blood flew around the car and rained down on my head” (p. 185). Why do you think Johnson isolates the details in such a way? What does it say about the nature of his report?

- Denis Johnson is known to be a writer who breaks many of the rules of conventional storytelling; he does things writers are told not to do, but his stories nevertheless maintain their command over the reader. Comparing “Car Crash While Hitchhiking” to some of the other stories in this volume, how do you think this story is unconventional? What rules are being broken? How does Johnson compensate for taking convention so lightly?

- The narrator is very much concerned with power and hierarchies among groups of people. Early on, he seems to derive power from his foreknowledge of the crash, but later he describes himself as having “gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck” (p. 187). How is this so? Where else in the story does Johnson relate knowledge to power?

- Midway through the story, the baby—in fact, the entire Marshalltown family—disappears from the story. Assuming that most readers would like to know what happens to them, why do you suppose Johnson withholds this information? What does the author want the reader to care about?

- Through an office door, the narrator hears a wife scream upon learning that her husband has died in the crash. The narrator compares the cries to those of an eagle and says it felt wonderful to be alive. How do you explain this? What do you think he means when he says “I’ve gone looking for the feeling everywhere” (p. 188)?

- At the very end of the story, the narrator recounts an incident that occurs several years later. What do you think is the relationship between this story and the story of the crash? How do you explain the final sentence? What does it say about the narrator’s own view of the relationship between reporter and reader?

“Brownies”

- Packer lets readers know immediately that race and racial identity are central elements of this story. How does she do this? How does her description of the white girls arriving at camp reveal not simply

the race, but the self image and priorities of the girls in the narrator's own troop?

- Later in the story, "Caucasian" is used as a kind of fourth-grade buzzword or taunt. How does this detail—and the commentary that follows—increase our sense that to these children race is still something of an abstraction? How do the narrator's later descriptions of the white girls alter or reinforce our sense of race as an abstract concept?
- One thing "Brownies" does extremely well is capture the complex web of loyalties and rivalries among a group of children. What are some ways the author accomplishes this? How does she demonstrate the power that certain children wield within a group?
- Why do you suppose the girls follow Arnetta's lead? What qualities or expertise does she use to win them over? Though Arnetta is in many ways the villain of this piece, how does she demonstrate that she is also sharper and perhaps more worldly than her fellow fourth-graders? Do you think Arnetta gains anything from the encounter with the white girls?
- How are adults portrayed in this story? Do the women and children of the narrator's troop view each other as members of shared or conflicting cultures? How is Packer's portrait of this summer camp experience at odds with what we might understand to be the traditional Brownie or Girl Scout "mission"?
- How do the narrator's age and experience limit her reliability as a reporter? Are there other factors which add to the subjectivity of her account? To what extent does her age also grant her clarity, insight or wisdom which the adult characters lack?
- What assumptions do we as readers make about the white girls at the beginning of the story? If one thread that runs through "Brownies" is the hierarchy of power, where do we place the two Brownie troops at the outset of the story? How does this relationship change—and change again—once we gain more information about the white troop?
- Of the girl who is echolalic, Packer writes that she "violently withdrew herself from the center of attention, sensing she was being sacrificed for the village sins" (p. 209). Compare this to the description of Arnetta that appears a few sentences earlier. How do the notions of village and sacrifice play out in our narrator's own troop, as well as elsewhere in the story?
- At the end of the story, the narrator relates an anecdote about her father and a Mennonite family. How do this anecdote and the main story express similar notions of community bonding and identity?
- Throughout the story the narrator, Laurel, is mesmerized by a phrase from Daphne's poem. Why do you suppose the words "my father, the veteran" have such power for her? How does Laurel's vision of her father change as she recounts the Mennonite incident? Can you compare her father's actions toward the Mennonites with the behavior of any of the young Brownies earlier in the story?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Look through a daily newspaper until you find a news story that interests you. This might be a crime story or a report of a disaster or major local incident, or it may simply be a human interest story. Reread the story carefully, making note of all the specific details the reporter includes. Then write a fictional story which incorporates this event, making special use of the noteworthy details.

One approach might be to develop the story through the eyes of a single character. Think carefully about the individuals involved in the original news story, and choose one as your protagonist. Employing the elements of fiction, develop a story around this character's experience of the event. What does he or she

know, and when? How do the character's own biases color his or her experience? Does your character change or learn anything from these experiences? Is such change necessary for good fiction?

Think also about the use of description as employed by Johnson and Packer. As you write, focus on carefully honed details as means of increasing the immediacy of your story.

VII. THE STORY AS LETTERS

The Rise and Fall of Mortimer Scrivens / Address Unknown

Letters hold a particular place in our lives. Though even the most casual note is more formal, more carefully considered, than day-to-day speech, letters can nevertheless be far more intimate and revealing than conversation. Epistolary stories—those which consist entirely of an exchange of letters—share this interesting blend of formality and unguardedness, and it is this combination which gives them their special music. Furthermore, epistolary stories tap into our societal prohibition against snooping, allowing us a narrow but specific window through which to peek. It is the narrowness of this window, in contrast to the broad canvas of more conventional stories, which gives us a heightened awareness of listening in unnoticed on the characters' lives.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as letters:

- Why is it interesting to read other people's letters? What, exactly, do we hope to find? Why do we sometimes feel we are doing something wrong in reading letters not addressed to us?
- When we write a personal letter ourselves, we have certain expectations. What are these expectations? What happens when our expectations (for example, of privacy, or of having our jokes understood and our complaints taken in the spirit in which they're intended) are not met? What is the customary human response to such a misunderstanding?
- How do different types of letters employ different styles? How might a letter requesting a loan sound different from an email to a classmate? How would the email to a classmate sound different from an email to a teacher, requesting clarification of an assignment? How do you think written communication is fundamentally different from verbal communication?

Questions to raise in class about:

“The Rise and Fall of Mortimer Scrivens”

- Part of the fun of any story comprised of letters involves discovering how the letter-writer varies his or her approach depending on the addressee. How would you characterize the very first exchange of letters between Henry Winters and Brian Haverhill? How does Haverhill's tone change when he is writing to his wife?
- Milne gets comic mileage out of quite a small incident—a borrowed book—by letting his characters blow it completely out of proportion. How do Brian and Sally Haverhill turn this simple event into a saga of persecution?
- As the story progresses, we get glimpses of the various characters through the styles of their letters. For example, Brian likes to make lists. What else do we learn about Brian and the other characters by reading their letters? What types of things do we *not* learn?

- “The Rise and Fall of Mortimer Scrivens” can be described as a comedy of manners because it deals so much with social niceties and conventions. How is the difference between the Haverhills’ outward, or social, demeanor and their private manners evident in this exchange of letters? What do you think Brian means when he writes of “the gentlemanly lies you *can* tell and the other sort” (p. 224)? How does the story turn on his wife’s taking this statement literally?
- About half the letters in this story are formal or business letters. The others are personal letters between husband and wife or siblings. What different qualities do you notice in the two types of letters? How do the personal letters between the Haverhills differ from those between the Winterses? How does the series of letters between Brian Haverhill and Henry Winters demonstrate to readers that relations between the two men are growing increasingly strained?
- As is often (but not always) the case with comic stories, the characterizations tend to be rather broad. Milne is satirizing a number of standard social “types” by exaggerating their behavior. Though some of the satire may be more recognizable to English readers than American ones, the characters can probably be said to be somewhat universal. What familiar human types are being satirized in “The Rise and Fall of Mortimer Scrivens”?
- One of the delights of any story told through the medium of letters is the notion of two letters crossing in the mail. In general, the letters in this story follow each other sequentially, but they are written ever more furiously and more hastily as the story progresses. How does this flurry of letters finally reveal the shallow self-interest of one of the parties?
- Why do you suppose Milne began the story with the “Reader’s Query”? How does this add an extra layer of farce to the narrative?

“Address Unknown”

- One of the challenges an author faces by any author who sets out to write an epistolary story is the question of background information, or back-story. Because the story begins essentially with one character’s voice, there is no place for the customary setting of the scene through description and exposition. How does Kathrine Kressman Taylor address that problem in “Address Unknown”? How does Max’s first letter set the stage and introduce major characters? Of what significance is the date at the very beginning of the story?
- As politics moves increasingly to the forefront of these letters, readers will experience an uneasy foreboding of things to come. However, it’s important to note that this story was first published in 1938, making it contemporaneous with the events it portrays. How do you square this notion with what you know of that era?
- When do we first see Martin being drawn into the politics of his new home? Are readers meant to view these early moves as those of an opportunist or a political naïve? Why?
- Midway through the story, Martin expresses the rejection he only hinted at in his earlier letters. What justification does he give for his behavior? How does he construct the argument so that it is he, rather than Max, who appears to be the injured and blameless party? What later event is foreshadowed here?
- How does seeing himself as a representative of German nationhood—and Max as a representative of Judaism—allow Martin to slip out of the debts and bonds of friendship? Where else does he take refuge in group, rather than individual, identity? How does Max respond to such arguments? Looking back at the earliest letters between the two, do you see the seeds of two quite different attitudes toward friendship?
- In his castigation of liberals, Martin claims that they are passive talkers and describes himself as a

convert to single-mindedness and action. "I am not just swept along by a current," he writes (p. 246). What do you make of this? Why do you think he protests so much?

- At the beginning of "Address Unknown," each letter from Max is followed by a letter from Martin. How does the author use three letters in a row from Max to increase narrative tension? How does relinquishing the elaborate courtesies of the exchange allow her to provide a full and very direct account of the terrible events occurring in Berlin?
- What is the reader's reaction on reading Max's "coded" cablegram? How does this mirror the impression made on the letter's recipient, and possibly on the censors? At what point do Max's motives become clearer, and how do we know he has had his revenge? How is the punch-line foreshadowed by the use of graphic devices throughout?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Think of a well-known fairy tale, legend, or myth. Rewrite it as an epistolary story, taking special care that events that are not dramatized are nevertheless clear to the reader. Think about the characters of your chosen letter-writers. How do you think they might express themselves in print? How will you use this device to express their individuality and varying points of view?

Alternatively, use an exchange of letters to describe a well-known historical event or a contemporary social or political issue. Consider how the privacy of a letter allows the writer to form a bridge between the public and the personal.

VIII. THE STORY AS FANTASY OR FABLE

Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot / Miriam / The Shawl / Spunk

Fantasies and fables are among the oldest and most enduring of narrative forms. Whereas most of this book's other stories—even those where exaggeration has been used for comic effect—might generally be described as realistic, the stories in this section employ imaginative leaps that draw us (to varying degrees) *away* from the material world. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the most imaginative of such impulses formed the foundation of magic realism, the enormously influential flowering of mostly Latin American fictions of which Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is particularly well known. However, the impulse to recast objective reality in fantastic, strange, or magical terms goes back to ancient myths and legends. Folklorists believe that the fable is an exemplar of one of man's most basic cognitive functions; the leap from the concrete (a specific story, containing characters and plot) to the abstract (the broader lesson, or moral, which can be drawn away and applied to a variety of other situations). Despite their sometimes tenuous relationship to the world of our experience, all the stories in this section demonstrate that more general and abstract understanding of the human experience.

General questions to raise in discussing the story as fantasy or fable:

- If myths and legends are our earliest forms of storytelling, what place do they have in our lives today? Do you feel that stories that involve magical or spiritual occurrences are still valid to contemporary readers?
- Everyone's familiar with fairy tales involving magical transformations, talking animals, and so on. How might adult stories draw on similar material? What common genres employ such elements? Do

you believe we put away our faith in magic when we grow to adulthood? How might tales of myth, magic and transformation be relevant to a prosaic world in which magic can be hard to come by?

- How do you think stories that stay very close to objective experience differ from those where the author can call on the supernatural? What special kinds of problems might the latter category present for authors?

Questions to raise in class about:

“Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot”

- Though the title reveals this story’s great imaginative leap, the first sentence appears to present a familiar human dilemma. How does Butler exploit this ordinary complaint to bring us very quickly into the mind of a parrot?
- One way that animals are different from humans is in their reliance on instinct. How does the author emphasize the narrator’s “parrotness” by playing up these instinctive urges and tics? When he describes his life as a man, how does he manage to shift from parrot to human qualities without disrupting the story’s flow?
- The initial incident with the sliding glass door demonstrates that the narrator has not carried all his human knowledge with him to the animal kingdom. What does this suggest about the human condition? Does Butler suggest what parts of the man has been reincarnated in the bird and what parts have been shed in transition?
- In describing his former physical relationship with his wife, the narrator uses terms like “I entered as a chick” (p. 263) and “it was only her I would fluff for” (p. 264). What does this suggest about his character, or about the gap between human and animal behavior? How is this moment related to his sight of his wife in the nude?
- Is the narrator’s final act one of acceptance or rebellion? Or is it something else entirely? What emotions do you suppose the narrator is feeling at the end of the story? How has his relationship to his former wife changed since his days as a human? How has it remained the same?

“Miriam”

- This story does an especially good job of laying out the initial situation, the background against which the story unfolds. What specific details does Capote employ to sketch the picture of a solitary, highly structured life just waiting to be disrupted?
- How does the author create an impression of Miriam as a kind of unearthly visitation? When do we first witness her effect on Mrs. Miller?
- When Miriam first arrives at Mrs. Miller’s apartment, it is she who seems to be at home and Mrs. Miller who’s ill at ease. What do you suppose this says about Mrs. Miller? Why is Mrs. Miller so rapidly undone by Miriam’s presence? What qualities does Miriam exemplify that Mrs. Miller lacks?
- How is the description of the second snowfall more dismal than the first? How do the two walks in the snow bookmark the phases of Mrs. Miller’s life in the story? What other incidents tell us that Mrs. Miller has moved beyond the realm of ordinary people?
- When Mrs. Miller returns to her apartment after crying and then seeking help from the neighbors, she finds it frighteningly empty. Assuming she wanted Miriam gone, how do you explain her response? When she feels she has “found again the person who lived in this room” (p. 279), is this an illusion?

What point does Capote seem to be making about the individual's attachment to the real world?

- In her introduction to this volume, editor Lucy Rosenthal states, "The language provides clues to Miriam's identity" (p. xvi). Bearing mind that a symbol is any element that represents both itself and some broader, more abstract concept, what do you think Miriam symbolizes here? Is there a single, concrete explanation that tells us who or what Miriam is? Or do you feel that Capote left this question open-ended?

"The Shawl"

- Louise Erdrich has written widely about Native Americans, often focusing on extended families whose members shift uneasily between a traditional tribal existence and the more conventional town life of the northern plains. "The Shawl," however, begins with a tale that is not at all contemporary, but the events of a shadowy, almost legendary long ago. How do the first several lines evoke an oral tradition, by which storytelling is a primary means of passing down history? How does Erdrich's language in this early passage suggest the stateliness of a myth and the grandeur of a saga?

- At the outset of the story, Aanakwad is described as changeable, like a cloud. How does this image follow her all through the story? What related images—of air and flight and the heavens—appear in this tale?

- Of the father's discovery by the lake, the narrator says, "Perhaps as with all frightful dreams, *amaniso*, he had to talk about it to destroy its power" (p. 283). Does this statement hold true for all storytelling, or just for tales of myth and the supernatural? Do you think the narrator experiences a similar catharsis discussing his childhood with his brother and sister? How else does he destroy the power of his memories? How does his father accomplish the same goal?

- The narrator experiences extremely complex and contradictory emotions while fighting with his father; in fact, he says, "I stood apart from myself" (p. 286). How does this passage relate to the young son's experience running after the sled in the earlier legend? How is sheer determination a crucial factor for both boys? Do you think those two boys ever repaired the damage done in those moments of determination?

- This story takes place in three time periods: the narrator's father's childhood; the narrator's own childhood; and the present. However, it's not clear until almost the end of the story how the sections fit together. What do you think Erdrich gains by leaving the family ties a mystery for most of the story? Would you have thought differently of the story if Aanakwad had been identified from the start as the narrator's grandmother?

- How does this story function both as a celebration of an earlier way of living, and as a caution against over-sentimentalizing that lifestyle? What is the narrator referring to when he says the tribemembers "have sorrows that are passed to us from early generations" (pp. 287-8)?

- How do the events of the interlocking stories parallel three stages in the spiritual health of the Anishinaabeg tribe? How does Erdrich use of metaphor and symbol change after part one? Are there symbolic connections between parts one and two? What is the narrator suggesting about the legacy of selflessness among his people?

"Spunk"

- Perhaps the first thing we notice about “Spunk” is the use of dialect. How do the spelling and grammar locate the characters and setting of this story? When a story consists of as much dialogue as this one, do you think it’s important to capture regional phrasing and spelling? How would you characterize the language Zora Neale Hurston uses to describe the action of the story?
- The group around the general store functions as a kind of Greek chorus in this story, commenting on, and sometimes even advancing, the action. How does Hurston use this device to introduce not just the individuals involved in the central conflict, but community attitudes and standards as well?
- Why do the men glare at Elijah when they hear of Joe’s death? A few sentences later, Hurston suggests that the entire group shares responsibility for what goes on in the community. Do you agree with this? Why do the men and women of the community take such a sanguine view of Spunk’s ultimate demise?
- Midway through the story, Walter says Joe was a braver man than Spunk. Why does he believe this? Later, however, the men imagine a brawl between Spunk and Joe in hell and say that Joe is no longer afraid. Why is this?

POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENT:

Spend a day or two thinking about the stories in this section. How do these ideas relate to your own life? As you go about your daily life, take note of small moments of grace or magic: coincidences, unexpected luck, even times of heightened insight or inspiration. Listen to people on the street; note how often they speak of the unexpected. Create a written list of such moments.

Choose one or more of these notes and develop it into a story. Rather than ironing out the coincidences in the interests of plausibility, make a virtue out of what is odd or unexpected. Expand the coincidences; make the strange even more strange. Allow yourself to invent implausible explanations, or to rely on myth or magic or bolts of lightning to drive your story. How far can you go?

Consider the stories in other sections of this book. Which of them, with a slight stretch of the term, might be said to employ just such moments of magic and miracle?

OTHER POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS:

- Both “Demonology” and “Playing with Dynamite” use serial vignettes of the past to illuminate the present action. Write an essay comparing the methods by which Rick Moody and John Updike put the past to work in their stories. Consider the formal techniques used by each author and discuss how these formal methods illuminate emotional and dramatic content.
- Choose a well-known form and write a story that conforms to the same structure and format. Examples might be the fairy tale or the Harlequin romance, the crime report, the advice letters column, or almost anything else that constitutes a recognizable form. Refer to Ian Frazier’s “Laws Concerning Food and Drink” and Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer” for examples of this type of exercise.
- Both Junot Diaz’s “Nilda” and Louise Erdrich’s “The Shawl” are set within minority cultures, where specific attitudes, mythologies, customs and moral codes set the characters apart from the broader America where many of the stories in this volume are set. Write an essay comparing the methods these two authors use to capture these cultures. Consider overt methods like the use of foreign terms, but also think of what lies below the surface: how do these authors express the constraints culture places on their protagonists? How do they capture the empowerment of life within tightly knit social groups?

Alternatively, take any story in this volume and discuss how the author places his or her characters against the broader setting of time and place.

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