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Short Story Unit
Final Assessment

Introducing the Anthology

Abstract:

This assignment requires students to write an introduction to a “pretend” anthology of short stories. Given at the beginning of the short story unit so as to focus their reading, the prompt directs them to examine several introductions to anthologies in the library in order to see what it is that anthologizers talk about; to determine the principle on which to choose stories; to find the right voice; and to critique three stories from the faux anthology to demonstrate their aptness for the collection as well as the students’ own understanding of the characteristics of good short story writing.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings, analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meaning or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Procedure:

This assessment was developed for a one-semester course in short fiction, and not every school has the luxury of such thorough study. It is adaptable, however, to any unit on short fiction in which at least 12 or 15 short stories are read.

At the beginning of the unit (or semester, in our case) the assignment is given to the students in order to focus their reading. Advance notice also encourages them to consider each story with care, as a potential candidate for their “anthology,” to categorize and weigh each one, paying attention to what does or does not appeal to them as readers. In other words, they are developing taste that can be articulated.

The first step is to read a variety of introductions to short story collections, available in any library, or on amazon.com in books in which the reader can sample the opening pages. Students will thus discover what it is that the editor of an anthology talks about: essentially, the reasons for including these particular stories. The voices of these editors can vary widely; some are academic and cool, and some are folksy and intimate. Students will consider how to match their ‘editor voice’ to the purpose of their collection of stories.

Students will then decide on the principle governing their choice of anthologized stories. Stories by new authors that the editor feels will stand the test of time? Stories of a peculiarly American character? Stories of hope or despair? Stories that illuminate a particular time and place? Stories that irritate, like a grain of sand in an oyster? Stories of a particular ethnic character? Stories that baffle? Stories of irony or satire? Stories that make the reader laugh? Students can choose any principle of selection, but they must explain that principle to the reader.

From the stories studied in the unit (see list below for a sample), students will choose three for close analysis in the introduction. They will explain to the reader what sets these stories apart, using all of the critical criteria that they have learned to apply. They will give the reader a good sense of each story—plot, setting, tone, character, theme—thereby indicating why it is included in the anthology. They will advocate for these stories as exemplars of their principle of selection.

In a recent semester, students had these stories from which to select three:

- “We Didn’t” by Stuart Dybek
- “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway
- “Guests of the Nation” by Frank O’Connor
- “Nadine at 35” by Jo Sapp
- “The Chrysanthemums” by John Steinbeck
- “The Worn Path” by Eudora Welty
- “Silver Water” by Amy Bloom
- “Wedding Night” by Tom Hawkins
- “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber
- “Nativity, Caucasian” by Allan Gurganus
- “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid
- “Gimpel the Fool” by Isaac Bashevis Singer
- “The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez
- “The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster
- “Bliss” by Katherine Mansfield
- “Signs and Symbols” by Vladimir Nabokov
- “Los Vendidos” by Luis Valdez
- “Why I Live at the Post Office” by Eudora Welty
- “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker
- “She Has No Place in Paradise” by Nawaal el Saadawi
- “My Father’s Chinese Wives” by Sandra Loh
- “Rules of the Game” by Amy Tan

- “The Pugilist at Rest” by Thom Jones
- “Babylon Revisited” by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- “Ship Fever” by Andrea Barrett
- “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula LeGuin
- “The Aleph” by Jorge Luis Borges
- “Dreams” by Thomas Findley
- “The Veldt” by Ray Bradbury
- “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson
- “A & P” by John Updike
- “The Lady with the Dog” by Anton Chekov
- “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane
- “Araby” by James Joyce
- “Kew Gardens” by Virginia Woolf
- “The Conversion of the Jews” by Philip Roth
- “The Use of Force” by William Carlos Williams
- “The Hunger Artist” by Franz Kafka

Materials:

An ample supply of short stories and access to a library.